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COACHING CHAMPS

Art teacher and chess coach Webber J. Charles awaits a move by 11-year-old Joanne Pierre during practice at Edison Park Elementary School. The school's team, the Rooks, recently won a state championship. **PAGE 3**

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EDISON PARK ELEMENTARY SCHOOL

CHESS CHAMPIONS

THE CHESS TEAM AT EDISON PARK ELEMENTARY SCHOOL, FORMED TWO YEARS AGO, PULLED OFF A STUNNING WIN BY CAPTURING THE STATE CHAMPIONSHIP FOR TEAMS FROM K-5 SCHOOLS

BY RODOLFO R. ROMAN
Special To The Miami Herald

Webber J. Charles, an art teacher at Edison Park Elementary School, seemed an unlikely choice to coach the chess team when it was started two years ago.

For starters, he didn't know how to play chess, as he explained to assistant principal Joe Rubio when he was first approached about the position.

But Rubio persisted, so Charles finally said yes and decided it was time to learn how to play chess.

"I love challenges," Charles said. "They motivate me. I bought computer chess games and started to practice on my own and with the kids."

Today Charles is a chess player and champion coach. In Cinderella-like fashion, the Rooks pulled off a stunning victory in state championships, held in March, placing first among teams in the K-5 category. Four players on team finished in the Top 20 at the championships, held at the Sheraton Miami Mart Hotel. In all, more than 1,500 students participated in the championships.

"I was in shock," Rubio says, describing his reaction to the news that the team had won the championship. "We faced schools that have had the chess program for more than 15 years. I knew they would do well."

It was vindication for Rubio, who decided to start a chess team after arriving at Edison Park two years ago. His previous job had been at Paul W. Bell Middle School in the Fontainebleau area, and his experiences there made him believe in the powers of chess.

"I introduced the game" at the middle school, he said, and "all of a sudden, I saw these kids who were hyper calm down.



EMILY HARRIS/FOR THE MIAMI HERALD

TEAMWORK: Milton Canton, 11, back left, and Monique Patterson, 11, back right, pair up while Eleanor Mezinord, 10, front left, and Jazmine James, 10, practice chess at Edison Park Elementary School on a recent afternoon.

"They started to do better in school, and their way of thinking changed."

At Edison Park Elementary, 500 NW 67th St., practice takes place several afternoons and some mornings in Charles' classroom. Students play among themselves and sometimes against Rubio and Charles. As they play, they jot down notes to learn from their mistakes.

Among the team's 18 members is 11-year-old Monique Patterson, who started playing at age 4.

"My grandpa taught me, and I learned a lot of different strategies," she said. "I play with him every weekend."

Monique, a fifth-grader, credits the game with making

her smart.

"I sometimes [help] do my brothers' sixth-grade homework," she notes.

Jacqueline Cordova, also 11, echoes the sentiment. "The game helps me in math," she says.

Chess helps her in other ways, she notes.

"I'd rather be here in school playing chess because there's a lot of violence in my neighborhood," she said.

Charles makes sure his players are ready to play. It's a lesson he says he learned early on, after the team had been beaten badly in its first tournaments.

"I felt bad when they lost, so I took it upon myself to teach them," he said.

Charles says he asked other chess coaches for advice, read journals and studied harder himself.

His practices are nonstop and feature not only games but also computer training, lectures and brain teasers to keep their minds flexible.

"I tell these guys that we play hard," Charles said.

The championship has not gone unnoticed. The Florida Leadership Council, a privately owned tutoring company in Miami, recently provided the team with T-shirts, new playing boards, clocks and carrying cases for chess boards.

"Our company decided to invest in these kids' enthusiasm," said company CEO

Manny Riera. "We wanted to be a part of the team and community."

Charles is proud of his players' accomplishments.

"This is really a success story," he said. "Nobody gave these kids a chance, but now they are respected wherever they go."

Jacqueline says that respect starts at home.

"My parents are proud of me," she said. "I plan to play it all my life if I can."

"At first it was tough because I did illegal moves, but I got used to it. This game makes me think and challenges me, which I like."

For information about the Edison Park Rooks, call Charles at 786-269-4337.