

Scholastics



Three-peat! The Catalina Foothills team: Front row (all rows left to right): Sangeetha Pugazhendhi, Vaishnav Aradhyula, Leland Sanson. Second row: Coach FM Robby Adamson, Eli Alster (wearing ball cap). Third row: Jenelle Wallace, Victor Yee, Matt David (knit hat); Back row: Landon Brownell (glasses) and Stephen Brown.

nav Aradhyula, a senior on the team from Tucson, put it bluntly: "We had a very bad Saturday." Prior to the tournament, Adamson reluctantly agreed with predictions that his team was favored. They were coming off titles in 2005 and 2007 (they lost in 2006 by a half-point) and they were the only team to furnish two masters, but they lost three strong players to graduation that accounted for more than 6,000 rating points. "We have very little depth this year, relatively speaking," he said, conceding, "Most teams would die to have it." Still, their nemesis Murrow High School had now graduated both of their international masters, so it was hard to pinpoint where the challenge would come from (Adamson called those Murrow teams' strength "almost criminal").

As the tournament wore on, his anxiety became visible as he paced the aisles. The team needed a four-point result in round six just to catch up to Thomas Jefferson. "We've never had to come from behind before," Adamson said. "We have to dig deep. This will be our biggest challenge."

After his third and fourth top scorers lost early in the final round, top-rated team member Landon Brownell could only muster a draw. Aradhyula won his game, so the title came down to the usually inconspicuous result of board 44. Catalina Foothill's expert-rated Kevin

Zhang, underperforming thus far, broke through the ignominy with a win to clinch his team's third title in four years. Adamson looked relieved for the first time all week. Though not impressed with his team's overall performance (their score of 19½ was their lowest winning score of the three titles), he was proud of their determination in the final round. "Champions don't always have to be at their best," he said. "They just have to come through when it counts."

"Winning three out of four puts you in extremely elite company in this day and age," he said of his team's place in history. "But it is a product of so many things. It's a year-long process. We put a lot of effort into it. We attend adult tournaments together in Los Angeles and Las Vegas. Most schools don't do that together. It's a big help to have them face master-level competition. We don't have IMs growing on trees. This is a culmination of four years with a group."

An avid sports fan, Adamson often draws parallels to athletics. He equated his past rivalry with Murrow to "Lakers versus Celtics." He gives his team pre-round pep talks when needed and furiously prepares them for specific opponents when possible. His instructions regarding draw offers were followed precisely by his players; he has clearly earned their trust. Adamson said any one of

them would have been willing to play out a worse position in the final round for the good of the team. "The kids are willing to sacrifice themselves," he said. The coach insists his team's bonding has come organically—more than any other team; members clad in school paraphernalia could be seen congregating and valuing their shared experience. And like any championship winner, he expects reporters to be waiting for his team at the airport when they return to Tucson.

Attendance was down slightly this year. The 1,221 players represented about a ten percent decrease from 2007. USCF scholastic council chair Mike Nietman attributed the lower turnout to a lack of local support and rising gas prices. He also noted that Passover began the same weekend. Despite this, most coaches' consensus was that the tournament is only getting stronger. Though the USCF raised the rating ceiling to 1600 for the second section, the championship section remained the largest with 338 competitors. Players rated 1850 actually missed the cut in the first round.

One state making the journey and making it count was Wisconsin. The Badger State provided three section winners: co-champions Derek Sachs and Alex Hanke in the Under 1600 and Under 800 sections, respectively, and Tyler Thomas in the Unrated section. Hanke said he planned to celebrate by going swimming. "We might not even go to sleep," he said.

Other section winners included Jacob Maneth in Under 1600, John Kennedy in Under 1200 and Anoop Gangireddy in Under 800. Kennedy and Thomas also went 7-0. Tiny Gangireddy is in third grade but represented the only individual winner from the tournament's home state. "Today he was just seeing things really well," said his coach, Ben Vinyard.

Maneth, playing in his seventh nationals, said he looks forward to playing in the championship section next year. He said Atlanta was his second favorite chess city. His favorite is Nashville, and he'll likely be back there next year for the fourth installment of the Supernationals. He has 348 days to prepare for the masters that await. ■

2008 National High School At A Glance

Date: April 18-20, 2008

Location: Hyatt Regency, Atlanta, Georgia

Top Finishers: 1: Daniel Yeager, 7.0. 2-5: Warren Harper, Edward Lu, Michael Thaler, Ilan Meerovich, 6.0.

Chief TD: Walter Brown

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