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Columbus Chess Students Win National Awards

NEW ROCHELLE, N.Y. (May 15, 2019) – Members of the Columbus Elementary School Chess Club are now national champions after taking first place in their division in the U.S. Chess Federation’s National Elementary Championship in Nashville, Tennessee.

The prize was one of six national awards – including two individual first-place wins – that the team members won in the competition, which took place from May 9 to 12. Eleven Columbus students participated.

The championship games brought together 2,252 chess players from 46 states. They competed on 700 teams in 16 sections.

Columbus earned first place in the K-6 Under 1000 section with five team members participating. They played seven rounds over three days to win the hard-fought prize. The team members were Constantine Zelatis, Dylan Minchez, Ignacio Valencia, Dylan Solovyev, and Aidan Rodriguez.

Zelatis won an individual award, coming in fifth place, winning six of the seven rounds. Minchez also won an individual award, coming in 25th place after winning five of the seven rounds. All of the Columbus students on this section of the team were awarded wall plaques for coming in first place, in addition to their team trophy.

“This was huge,” said Mark Hegenauer, the chess team faculty coordinator. “It’s one of the moments you always dream of.”

In the first event on Thursday, the Columbus chess players competed in 11 rounds of Blitz (speed chess). Zelatis won first place for chess players rated under 1000 and Minchez also came

in first place for chess players rated under 800. The Columbus team earned seventh place in the nation for Blitz chess.

Four students competed in the K-5 Under 900 section. They were Naolin Concha, Joel Salick, Giovanna Murgia and Gianna Murgia. They came in 29th place in their section.

Giulianna Murgia and Ashley Corazao competed in the K-3 Under 700 section.

Hegenauer said the chess club is “a grassroots program” that went up against teams from 46 states, including some with much larger numbers of players to give them an edge in sections in which the top performers are chosen. Traveling to Nashville and emerging with such success was a testament to the chess players, and the immense support system around them, he said.

“We have a great group of students, we have parents coming out who are dedicated and willing to contribute their resources,” Hegenauer said. “We have a principal, Michael Galland, who appreciates and understands chess, and we have a supportive PTA. Everyone came together and supported us.”

Even aside from prizes and awards, Hegenauer said, the devotion to chess and the trip to the nationals helps students in all aspects of life.

“Chess really teaches you that when you feel you have a good move, look for a better move,” he said. “When you think there’s only one solution in life, there’s not.”

Former members of the team have told him that they now are better able to handle potentially stressful situations, such as major tests.

“They don’t get as nervous because they have sat in that tournament hall and they have played the best kids in the country,” he said. “They have learned how to handle a high-pressure situation.”

Galland said the devotion of many people were reflected in the victory.

“This championship is the kids’, to be sure, but it is also the culmination of almost twenty years of effort and energy that so many Columbus families have poured into the chess program, with Mark’s guidance and leadership,” the Principal said. “Since the late 1990s, many tight-knit Columbus families have worked together, supported those who couldn’t afford to travel or pay for tournaments and kept the culture of chess alive. This championship is a collective triumph that includes so many wonderful people over many years.”

CUTLINES:

CHESS1:

Front row, from left: Ashley Corazao, Aidan Rodriguez, Constantine Zelatis, Ignacio Valencia, Dylan Solovyev, Dylan Minchez, Naolin Concha

Back row, from left: Giulianna Murgia, Gianna Murgia, Giovanna Murgia, Joel Salick

CHES 2:

The winners of the national K-6 Under 1000 trophy. From left: Dylan Minchez, Aidan Rodriguez, Dylan Solovyev, Constantine Zelatis, Ignacio Valencia

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