

THE PLAIN DEALER

Five Minutes With . . .



chess champion Rebecca Leiko, 16, who makes it pay

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Leah Boyd
Plain Dealer Reporter

For Rebecca Leiko, a tournament chess match earlier this year ended with a check. But not because she lost the game.

The 16-year-old Chardon resident won a \$36,000 scholarship to Texas Tech University in June after taking first place in her age group at the Susan Polgar International Tournament for girls in Las Vegas.

Rebecca, who is a junior at Notre Dame-Cathedral Latin School, is also ranked as one of the country's top 65 female chess players younger than 21, according to the United States Chess Federation.

How did you start playing chess?

My mom taught my older brother and [me] how to play when I was 4. My brother joined the chess club when he was in elementary school, so of course I wanted to join, too. I started competing in tournaments in third grade to see if I liked it, and I did. My first competition, I didn't really know much. I didn't place, but I did pretty well. So I kept at it.

Why do you find the game appealing?

Sports have never appealed to me. I'm not an athlete, so chess is a way for me to compete. It can get addicting. I like critical-thinking activities, such as reading and puzzles. Math is my favorite subject because it's a lot like chess. They both involve deep thinking.

Did you ever think playing chess would pay your way to college?

No! I was really excited when I found out I was one of the three girls to win a scholarship at the tournament. I found out Texas Tech is really developing its chess program, but I hadn't thought about attending there. I am now! I can't wait to check it out.

How do you prepare for tournaments?

I play some aspect of chess every day. There are three parts: the opening, middle and end games. I usually just focus on one part at a time. I have a coach, and I take lessons every Sunday.

What are your long-term plans with chess?

I plan to play in college. I'm thinking about being a teacher just so I can be involved in a school chess club and keep myself in the chess scene.

Do you have any advice for beginners?

For anyone who's never played before, I'd just say try it to see if you like it. The main ideas are to first make sure your opponent can't beat you. But also, look at your opponent's weaknesses and try to take advantage of them.

To reach this Plain Dealer reporter:

lboyd@plaind.com, 216-999-4659

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