

\$36,000 scholarship? Check

■ Ohio girls chess champ, NDCL senior wins international tournament, money for college in Texas

FYI

Jean Bonchak

JBonchak@News-Herald.com

Chess master Aleksandr Kitsis trains his students how to make such tactical moves as capturing the opponent's king. He also teaches them that anyone can make a mistake.

The latter lesson turned out to be an exceedingly valuable one for Rebecca Lelko, a Notre Dame-Cathedral Latin School senior and Ohio girls state chess champion.

Acting on it during a game at the 2008 Susan Polgar International Tournament for girls helped her claim a second straight win at the competition and another \$36,000 scholarship to Texas Tech University.

In 2007, she earned her victory after a series of games that necessitated a tiebreaker. The triumph in 2008 was cleanly decided.

Rebecca, who is ranked among the top 100 girl players in the United States, participated in the division for girls under age 19. Her opponent, a Utah resident, was considered a favorite to win the event.

"Last year's win certainly gave her more confidence," Kitsis said. "When she came this year, she was very eager to prove that last year was not just an accident."

Describing her recently profitable experience, the Chardon resident said, "It was actually a really exciting game. She (the opponent) started attacking really, really early. She started this big pawn storm against me. Basically, it didn't work right away. It gave me a chance to attack her. She missed something and she made a mistake. ... She was really low on time. She overlooked that."

A Russian native and owner of Vivacity School of Chess in Mayfield Heights, Kitsis said, "I try to tell the students from day one — everyone can make mistakes. I can make a mistake. It's our job to challenge me. They realize, if my teacher can make a mistake, then my opponent can, too."

Rebecca maintained that another life lesson she learned from her time at the chess board is the importance of patience.

"Sometimes your opponent takes a long time and you have to sit there quietly. You have to look ahead and think of all the options," she said. "I've learned how to think of all the possible variations and take my time."

While a student at Notre Dame Elementary School in Munson Township,



Michael Blair/MBlair@News-Herald.com

Rebecca Lelko, Ohio girls state chess champion, recently added another international tournament win to her résumé while earning significant college scholarship funds. The Chardon resident will continue to exercise her strategic skills at an invitational event in Lubbock, Texas, in late July.

Rebecca played in tournaments against other schools. By fourth grade, she was designated as the "first board," or best player.

With sufficient scholarship money to provide her with an education at Texas Tech, Rebecca said she's still college hunting.

However, she added, "It's such a relief knowing that I have the option of going there free for four years."

Though not planning to play chess professionally, Rebecca said she wants to keep it as part of her life.

"If I have a family I can teach my kids chess. I've really enjoyed it," she said.

What is it that draws her to the classic game?

"I guess it's the challenge," Rebecca said.

"When you figure out a really good combination, it's a good feeling because you've kind of outsmarted your opponent a little bit."

In late July, Rebecca will be attending an invitational event in Lubbock, Texas, where the top-rated girls in the United States will compete.

Claiming he doesn't anticipate any specific results for his student, Kitsis said, "My expectation is that she will do the best she can. It's an invitational, it (adds) a lot of pressure."

Handling pressure is another lesson many champions in their field have learned well.