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## Rookies

At chess camp, beginners begin to find their way across the board and beyond

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By [Story by Todd Jones](#) [Photos by Fred Squillante](#)

THE COLUMBUS DISPATCH



F. Leon Wilson instructs the campers, using a computer program and a projector to demonstrate openings and various aspects of chess strategy.



FRED SQUILLANTE DISPATCH PHOTOS

Eight-year-old Maddy Weaver of Westerville studies the board before making a move. She was one of 20 youths who learned to play chess in the camp.



Chess camper Riya Annamraju, 6, is eager to answer one of the questions posed by F. Leon Wilson. Wilson is an internationally certified chess instructor and coach of the KnightMare Chess Club, a scholastic club. This camp is only one of his efforts to bring chess to children across central Ohio.



Aneesh Ganga, 5, of Pickerington works with student assistant Brianna Conley, 14. After instruction, campers end the week with a tournament.



Michaea Abdus-Sami, 10, carefully thinks about her next move. The campers are a diverse mix, including kids ranging in age from 5 to 17.



Trey Abner, 7, of Columbus receives his trophy on the last day of chess camp. Students receive medals and trophies for their work and achievements throughout the instructional sessions.

## The opening

Hints of morning sun filter through drawn shades, providing enough light to turn the room into a shadow.

Twenty children look around, look at their light and dark faces, look at their boards with light and dark squares, and look at light and dark chess pieces.

Some see more than others.

"The king is you," F. Leon Wilson says. "The king is the game. That should be your favorite unit."

"A boy," blurts out a child.

"Girls, the king is you," Wilson responds. "If you're a girl, the king is a girl. Don't let anybody tell you ladies that the king is a boy. Be proud. The king is you. Protect yourself. Protect the king."

The children have come from throughout central Ohio to attend Wilson's summer chess camp on the East Side for beginning players.

"To be a good chess player, you have to be able to visualize," Wilson tells them. "You have to see things in your head."

Wilson looks at the children, ages 5 to 17. There are eight girls, 12 boys, two sets of twins, and a racial and ethnic mix.

They are his chess pieces. They are light and dark, not black and white. Wilson doesn't want children to see the game pieces, squares on the board or themselves with racial overtones.

This week, the camp is his board for five days from 8:30 a.m. to 4:30 p.m.

As in the opening phase of a chess game, he must choose the best way to develop the board as a whole by first seeing which campers know more than others.

Wilson, 53, is owner and project manager of Code 1 Communications, a software company, but chess is in his soul. He remembers being a beginner, sitting across from his father on Sunday evenings, mesmerized by the knights on the board, popcorn in hand and Walt Disney on TV.

Educational and psychological studies have shown that chess teaches children to plan, concentrate, solve problems and think critically, logically and abstractly.

All that the campers care about is the chessboard projected onto a grease board in a classroom at the Columbus Montessori Education Center on S. James Road.

"Now, we can see the different patterns," says Wilson. "Look for columns, rows and patterns."

He tells them to look beyond squares D4, E4, D5 and E5.

"Are there really four squares here? No," Wilson says. "There's four squares, and this whole thing is a fifth square. If you control the sweet spot, you can control the opening."

## **The middle game**

Two days in, the arrangement of children on Wilson's proverbial board makes sense. Some have advanced and some are behind. It's time for a decisive move.

"OK, we're going to break into groups," Wilson says.

Chess players use a game's second phase -- the middle game -- to assess positions, form tactical plans and push the game forward with combinations. So Wilson has the younger children move to the other side of the room to work individually with three student assistants.

Wilson understands how different groups can work at different paces and still pull together as one. He was a junior varsity running back at Ohio State in 1971 and '72, stuck behind Archie Griffin, yet he went to the Rose Bowl with the two-time Heisman Trophy winner.

Wilson understands children, too, though he has none and is single. He traveled the nation as a consumer marketer for Tonka Toys and Mattel.

He's an internationally certified chess instructor and coach of the KnightMare Chess Club, a scholastic club in central Ohio. He teaches chess at local schools as creator of the Chess Learning Center, which offers camps, seminars, and private and group lessons.

"Set the position up," Wilson tells all 20 students on the fourth day of camp. "Write the move down on your board, and show it to me."

They scribble answers on white grease boards. They help one another. Hands shoot up excitedly.

"That's perfect for a first move, but what about the second and third move?" Wilson asks.

## The endgame

Spectacular afternoon sunlight pours through the open shades, just as the children are seeing chess more clearly. Camp ends today with a tournament.

Wilson split the students into three teams -- Bishops, Knights, Rooks -- based on ability. Children ask questions, squirm in anticipation and tape the backs of game clocks to make certain the batteries don't fall out.

Although separated into teams, the 20 children are really one entity now, bonded by a common desire: victory. It is time for the camp's endgame.

"Please shake hands and let the games begin," Wilson says.

*Thump, thump, thump* goes the sound of moving pieces and slapped clock buttons.

Samantha Taylor, 6, dramatically acts out kills. Bret Weaver, 17, contemplates moves with his legs bouncing up and down. Lance Thomas Jr., 6, chews on his thumbnail and kneels on the brown metal chair. Miranda Caudle is poker-faced, carefully notating moves in her small notebook.

"I beat you," 5-year-old Joe Kleban yells out and jumps up and down, pumping his fist.

"Joe, win with dignity and grace," Wilson says. "You feel good about it, but you don't have to do that."

Games go on for six rounds, the final checkmates played out before parents arrive.

"What did you learn?" he asks.

"To look at all the possibilities of defense," Miranda says.

"To play the board, not the person," says Michael Abdus-Sami, 10.

"Lance, what did you learn?" Wilson asks.

"That you need to stay focused on the game. Don't worry about anything else. Just worry about playing."

"You don't lose; you only gain experience," says Michael Weaver, repeating Wilson's mantra.

"What's the purpose of chess?" Wilson asks.

"To have fun," the children answer.

"What's the goal of chess?"

"To check and mate," they say in unison.

There are smiles and laughter as medals are awarded and every child receives a trophy. The pawns have been promoted.

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F. Leon Wilson

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