

Story and photos by DWIGHT CASWELL

A crowning achievement

Sage Park, 12, surpasses grandfather, heads to state chess championship

Sage Park played her first chess match at the age of 4, losing to her grandfather. The game fired her imagination, and this weekend, eight years later, Sage will square off against some of the best young chess players in Oregon, at the Oregon Scholastic Chess Federation State Championship, held since 2008 in Seaside, her hometown.

Over 300 K-12 students from all over Oregon will compete for the chance to go on to the National Championship Tournament. Sage will be the second Clatsop County student, and the first female, as well as the first from Seaside to qualify for the state tourney.

A tall 12 year old with blue eyes and a quick smile, Sage does not fit the stereotype of the young chess geek. But when she places her tournament board and pieces on the table, sets the competition clock and looks you in the eye, she is all business. You realize that you are in the presence of someone special.

Eddie Park has continued to provide practice for his granddaughter — and incentive as well. When she was 8, Sage fell in love with a “fairy” chess set. Her grandfather told her he would buy it for her as soon as she could beat him. Two years later she had her chess set. “Now I usually beat my grandfather,” she says.

He smiles. “I haven’t won a game in a long time.”

Her grandfather hasn’t been Sage’s only teacher. Seth Goldstein, a Cannon Beach chiropractor and self-described “low level master” spends an hour each week with her. “We’ve gone through a couple of books,” his student says. “We’re working on openings, winning strategies and the endgame.”

Sage Park doesn’t play only to win. “It’s fun to play,” she says. “I like to strategize, and I like that the board is always set up the same way, but I get to do a lot of different things.”

Today, chess isn’t as difficult for Sage as when she first started and, “had to memorize a lot of things.” Now her chief problem is that which faces every chess player:



Photo by Dwight Caswell

Sage Park, right, declares checkmate in a chess game with her grandfather, Eddie Park.

The competition

The Oregon Scholastic Chess Federation State Championship takes place Friday and Saturday, April 24 and 25 at the Seaside Convention Center. Before the main event on Saturday, the participants get a chance to unwind with blitz and bughouse tournaments late Friday afternoon. Saturday morning, players are divided into 16 different playing sections defined by age and skill level to compete for large trophy cups filled with salt-water taffy made in Seaside.

“keeping track of all the pieces and keeping them protected.”

To be eligible for the state championship Sage has played in six qualifying tournaments, all held in Portland; she has enough games under her belt to have established a respectable rating for a beginner. “You start with a 400,” Sage explains, “then every time you play your rating goes up or down, depending on if you win or lose, and on how good your opponent is.” The highest classic chess rating ever attained is 2863, by the current world champion, Magnus Carlsen.

About her tournament experience she says, “Those kids in Portland are so good. Their whole lives are chess. They play on

line between games.”

“They eat, sleep and dream chess,” her grandfather adds.

Sage Park’s accomplishments are all the more remarkable because there isn’t much of a culture of chess in Clatsop County, and no local tournaments, a handicap for would-be chess masters.

That may be changing, though. Eddie Park will soon qualify as a tournament director, which means that qualifying tournaments can be held in Clatsop County. He hopes that parents will, “recognize the real value of chess for their children as a gymnasium of the mind,” he says. “Studies support the value of chess in the academic efforts of every age group, and what



Photo by Dwight Caswell

Sage Park, 12 of Seaside, checks her grandfather’s king in a game of chess. This weekend, Sage will compete in the Oregon Scholastic Chess Federation State Championship at the Seaside Convention Center.

better place than the developing mind of a child?” He knows that the two-hour chess games he plays with his granddaughter have, “contributed to Sage’s ability to stay focused on a project.”

At this time there are only two informal student chess clubs near the Parks’ home, at Gearhart Elementary (with teacher/coach Dan King) and Broadway Middle School (with coach and retired Cannon Beach Chief of Police David Rouse). The Parks want to increase local awareness of chess and increase the number of students playing the game. Chess clubs at more Clatsop County schools would make a big difference.

Sage Park’s first-time participation in the state tournament may start other students thinking about chess. This could be the start of something big.

For information on student chess clubs and tournaments contact Eddie Park at epark9@gmail.com