

Turning the 'brain gears'

Hermiston chess players look forward to upcoming regional tournament

By ERICK PETERSON
Hermiston Herald

At the end of school Thursday, Feb. 17, around a dozen Hermiston High School students gathered in the back of their school's library for games of chess.

The members of the Hermiston High School Chess Club were preparing for an upcoming competition, the Region 23 Chess Tournament.

The tournament is Feb. 26, 8:45 a.m. to 2 p.m. at the Hermiston High School library. Sponsored by Chess for Success, the event brings together kindergartners through high school students from several local counties.

Ernest Kincaid, in his first year as the advisor of the club, said this will be his first competition.

"I love it," he said of the chess club and about the excitement he feels for the tournament.

A math and special education teacher, Kincaid said he enjoys seeing his students get their "brain gears" turning. Chess club, he said, is a good opportunity for students to think. And right now, as they prepare for the competition, they are pushing their brains as hard as ever, he said.

They are not the only ones straining their minds, though, as he said he also is struggling to his limits. He said he started advising the club because he wanted to improve his playing skills. At the club, he goes head to head with his students, who are sometimes as good as he is — or better.

Kincaid said he intends to go to the regional tournament with 10 students, and one in particular is exceptionally talented. Luke Gray is one of at least three students who should advance to state competition.

Kincaid said he has beaten



Luke Gray makes a move Thursday, Feb. 17, 2022, while playing a chess match at Hermiston High School.



Lyndsay Egerer, 15, moves a pawn Thursday, Feb. 17, 2022, while playing practice matches with fellow members of the Hermiston High School Chess Club in the school's library.



Luke Gray, left, and Lyndsay Egerer participate in a chess match Thursday, Feb. 17, 2022, in the Hermiston High School library.

Gray only once.

"I couldn't believe it, and I don't think Luke could believe it, either," Kincaid said.

But he doubted he could beat the student again. Gray said he has seen Kincaid play multiple times and knows him too well for that to happen.

Other chess club members expressed their admiration of Gray's skills, his friendliness and his positivity. One student laughed at the suggestion that Gray was something of a cult leader.

"Yeah," she said. "That's about right."

Gray was more modest. He said he may be the school's best player, however, there are several good players on the team, and he does sometimes lose to them.

Although he has been to state a couple of times, he said he has never done very well there. He said he has achieved a better understanding of the game in recent months, though, and he has gained confidence.

"I think I can do better now," he said.

Elijah Robinson, 15, a

sophomore is another top player at the school, and he competes for the fun of it.

He said when he was in the sixth grade he learned chess from his grandfather and when he plays, he often thinks of his grandfather, who died three years ago.

Having appeared at state twice with teams, Robinson said his goal is to compete at state as an individual, but added he is less confident he could win a state competition.

"I'd have to get pretty lucky, but I'll try my best," he said.

Sophomore Lyndsay Egerer, 15, said she also was putting forth her top effort. Like some of the other students at the club, she said she first learned it from Gray.

Egerer said she is a competitive person and also takes part in karate and softball. She said it would be fun to earn a chess trophy she could treasure alongside her sports trophies. But she shrugged at whether she could win a title yet.

"I'm getting better," she said. "I practice a lot and learn from that, but I have

never been in a (chess) competition before, and I don't know what to expect."

Several of the other chess players at the club meeting also are athletes. For example, Trey Ditchen, 15, sophomore, plays basketball and baseball.

"I'm not amazing, but I'm alright," he said.

He added he would like to be a great chess player, and that he hopes he can be at the regional competition.

He said that he enjoys chess because of his competitive nature but also because he likes spending time with his friends. And, he said, he enjoys watching himself get increasingly better as he practices.

Enrique Garcia, 15, freshman, said he has fun improving his skills, too. Also, he said, he enjoys chess because he likes problem solving. It would be a lot of fun to win at regionals, he said, but he expressed mixed feelings about state competition.

"I'd be nervous," he said.

Having come to the U.S. from Mexico this year, Garcia speaks little English. Getting around in this country, and navigating his English-language classes is difficult, he said. Chess club, too, is hard, he said, because of the language barrier.

Still, he said he likes to play the game, as it was something he did while in his home country that he also can do here.

Alexander Corona, 15, freshman, said the game is a stress reliever for him. When classwork becomes too hard, he said, he can turn to chess and have a breather.

Conner Burselon, 14, expressed that sentiment as well and offered some advice.

"If you don't know how to play chess, start," he said. "You will like it."

To register, players may visit the website www.chessforsuccess.org/play/registration. For more information, contact Delia Fields, tournament director, at 541-667-6144 or 541-571-4219.

All hail the jalapeno popper queen

Hermiston pub draws crowd for jalapeno popper contest

By ERICK PETERSON
Hermiston Herald

Three guys entered a bar could be the start of a joke. But in this case, it is the beginning of what could be an annual tradition at a local pub.

Neighbor Dudes, the taphouse at 405 N. First St., Hermiston, on Saturday, Feb. 19, held its first Pop-off, a contest to find out what local resident has the best jalapeno poppers.

Tammy Speelman, manager, and Renee McCoy, server, explained the contest and its history.

They said three regulars were at the bar a few weeks ago. The guys were chatting, and their conversation drifted to jalapeno poppers. Each of the three men argued their poppers were the best.

To test their poppers, they agreed to bring their foods to the bar to try one another's poppers and decide who was the popper king.

"They put their money where their mouths were, and it went well," McCoy said.

Management at Neighbor Dudes took notice of the private contest and decided to hold a competition of their own.

"What we did was charge a \$5 entry fee," Speelman said, speaking of the contest. "They could make a popper at home, bring it in, and it would be judged on three categories — best flavor, presentation and most unusual."

Thirteen popper dishes were entered into the contest, and the bar was filled. McCoy said it was unusual for there to be so many customers in the place. Ordinarily, she said, there might be around 15-20 people there on a Saturday afternoon. On the day of the popper contest, there were around 50. The bar had to bring in another server to help.

"Everyone loves poppers," Speelman said.



Casidy Blair holds up her prize-winning jalapeno poppers Saturday, Feb. 19, 2022, at the Pop-off contest at Neighbor Dudes, Hermiston.

Though Neighbor Dudes does not usually serve poppers or other foods, she said she was confident people would take to this contest — just not this much. The large crowd was more than what even she expected.

At least one of the three original popper makers were at the contest. Buzz around the bar was that he was the "popper king." Looking around at his competition, though, Jeff Kraupp, of Hermiston, said he might not win this particular contest.

"I don't think I'm going to win today, but I think I'm going to learn a lot," he said.

Other competitors expressed a little more confidence. Mena Dudley, Ryan Stant, Jennifer Sword and Allen Sword spoke excitedly about their poppers, which were the result of a collaboration. Their dish was made with homemade pork sausage.



Tammy Speelman, manager of Neighbor Dudes, Hermiston takes a bite of a jalapeno popper Saturday, Feb. 19, 2022, during the establishment's jalapeno popper competition.

"We've been making these for a couple of years now," Allen Sword said, "but we haven't done a competition before."

It was Casidy Blair who won the contest, though. The new popper queen took home \$55 cash as a prize.



Erick Peterson/Hermiston Herald
Jeff Kraupp, of Hermiston, shows off his jalapeno poppers Saturday, Feb. 19, 2022, at Neighbor Dudes, Hermiston, for the taphouse's Pop-off to determine which local has the best poppers.



Erick Peterson/Hermiston Herald
Jalapeno poppers sit on a plate during the Pop-off contest Saturday, Feb. 19, 2022, at Neighbor Dudes, Hermiston.

"I love jalapeno poppers, so I've been making them for a while," she said.

Her husband, Ben Blair, stepped in to say that she has been cooking poppers for around 15 years.

She made her poppers with candied jalapenos, cream cheese, various other cheeses and bacon.

McCoy said Neighbor Dudes is likely to host another contest in the near future.

"I think we'll do wings next," she said. She and the manager said they would talk more and decide on a date.