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EDUCATION

# Chicago high school chess player starts online tutoring to diversify the growing popularity of the game

By Robert McCoppin  
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Whitney Young High School junior Chetan Cherukuri, right, shakes hands with classmate and friend Angelo Schiciano after a game of chess during a free period on May 9, 2023. Chetan developed a website to promote chess and tutor young people in how to play the game. (John J. Kim/Chicago Tribune)

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In the midst of an ongoing national chess boom, a Whitney Young Magnet High School student started tutoring other students on how to play the game in his apartment courtyard.

Then struck by the traditionally limited diversity in the chess world, Chetan Cherukuri began his own website, [CourtyardChess.club](https://www.courtyardchess.club), to help attract

underrepresented players.

“All over my school, people are playing chess during breaks and lunch – it’s like the new popular game,” Chetan said. “I realized a lot of kids would love to learn but maybe don’t have access to how to play or get better. So I started a platform that connects disadvantaged kids to tutors.”

Chess has undergone a huge resurgence since COVID and the Netflix series “The Queen’s Gambit,” as new players looked to learn and play online during the pandemic. The website [chess.com](https://www.chess.com) blew up to 12 million active users in April, up from 2 million before the pandemic, occasionally overwhelming its servers along the way.



Whitney Young High School junior Chetan Cherukuri, right, waits for classmate and friend Angelo Schiciano to make his next move in a game of chess during a free period on May 9, 2023. (John J. Kim/Chicago Tribune)

The recent victory of Chinese-born Ding Liren in the World Chess Championship attracted attention, since he is the first Chinese man to hold the world title.

And the chess world has its own scandal, with Norway’s Magnus Carlsen and [Chess.com](https://www.chess.com) accusing 19-year-old American Hans Niemann of repeatedly cheating, prompting Niemann to file a defamation lawsuit against them.

And a huge social meme last year featured soccer stars Lionel Messi and Cristiano Ronaldo playing chess.

Since the pandemic, with the resumption and expansion of school clubs, in-person or “over the board” playing has taken off too. In February, the [U.S. Chess Federation](https://www.uschess.org) cracked 100,000 members for the first time in its 83-year history, communications director Dan Lucas said. Some 60% of those players are under the age of 18.

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“During COVID, we were unable to keep chess sets in stock because so many families were playing,” he said.

Diversity has improved significantly in recent years, he said, though only 14% of members were female, a ratio the group keeps working to improve.

The Chicago Chess Center recently drew one of its biggest crowds ever, attracting some 150 players to a tournament, board member Jonathan Silverstein said. This weekend, the U.S. Chess Federation will hold perhaps the largest annual tournament in the Chicago area. It is expected to draw more than 600 players to the Westin Chicago North Shore Hotel in Wheeling.

Louis Cedeno, a 28-year-old of Puerto Rican and Mexican descent, recently helped hold two chess tournaments in his Latino neighborhood of Pilsen, and hopes to do more outreach for Black and Latino players.



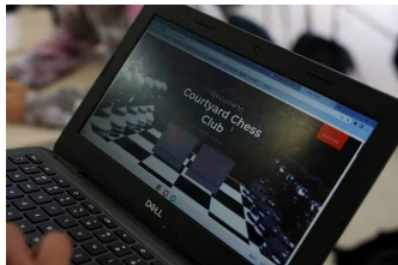
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“We need to reach out to neighborhoods on the South and West sides where Blacks and Latinos live,” he said.



A laptop computer displays Chetan Cherukuri's website, "Courtyard Chess Club." Chetan, 16, developed the website to promote chess and tutor young people on how to play the game. (John J. Kim/Chicago Tribune)

On his local tutoring website, Cherukuri, a junior at Whitney Young, has about 30 students from all around Chicago, including some Black and Latino players from the South and West sides, and one girl. He hopes to attract more minority and female players to what is sometimes called the Game of Kings,

which originated in India.

One of his students is a third grader from Palos Hills named Rohan. His father taught him to play, and Rohan plays at the [Chicago Chess Center](#), which last year opened its new home in Dearborn Station downtown.

Chicago Chess also provides instruction, and Rohan met Chetan at a tournament. Now Chetan gives him lessons every Sunday for a half-hour. Rohan said he likes playing and learning new tricks, like a “fork” — attacking two pieces at once, forcing the opponent to give up one.



Whitney Young High School junior Chetan Cherukuri plays chess against classmate Angelo Schiciano on May 9, 2023. (John J. Kim/Chicago Tribune)

“He enjoys it,” said his mother, Cindy Barretto. “He gets social interaction — that’s the most important thing. The second thing is thinking through your decisions. And how to play nicely, and how to lose.”

Chetan recently won first place in his division at a tournament in Washington and his school, Whitney Young, has won several state championships. Students can learn on their own from books and videos, but Chetan hopes eventually to tutor multiple students at a time.

“With a tutor, it’s a lot more personal,” he said, “and a lot more fun.”

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