SPOTLIGHT

Marathon of the mind

STORY BY KAREN CHADRA • PHOTOS BY SCOTT HARDESTY

The U.S. Open Chess Tournament drew more than 500 players of all ages from across the country to Oak Brook last month. The event lasted nine days, with some games lasting as long as six hours. The winner was Yury Schulman, a grand master from Barrington.

A contingent of more than 500 warriors silently rolled into Oak Brook last month for an unimaginable battle of intellect.

They set up at the Doubletree Hotel, across the street from bustling Oakbrook Center. Yet passersby — and even hotel guests — were hardly aware of the nine-day war about to ensue in the conference room off the lobby.

This prestigious battle, the U.S. Open Chess Tournament, is not for the weak minded, said Kurt Stein, a veteran of hundreds of chess contests.

Ranked among the top competitors in the state, Stein, now in his 40s, has been playing since the age of 4.

"Being in good physical condition will always help," the Clarendon Hills resident said. "You have to be able to lock in and concentrate for about six hours without a break. It's a logical endeavor — sort of like crossword puzzles on steroids."

No one speaks in the tournament room. Cell phones don't ring. The silence is broken only by the click of the timing clocks and the shuffle of voyeurs' shoes on the hotel carpet as they wander from board to board.

Players block out potential distractions by holding their head in their hands, or wearing visors, sunglasses or headphones. The boards at the front of the room are for the top players, their games projected on an overhead screen and in real time on the Internet.

The U.S. Open pits novice players against grand masters — a virtual bloodbath in the early rounds — and provides a glimpse into the genius minds of some of the country's chess icons: Yuri Shulman, Zviad Izoria, Dmitry Gurevich, Joel Benjamin.

Never heard of them?

Those on the inside know them all too well.

Stein had a winning position against Izoria, a strong grand master from the Republic of Georgia, in the fourth round.

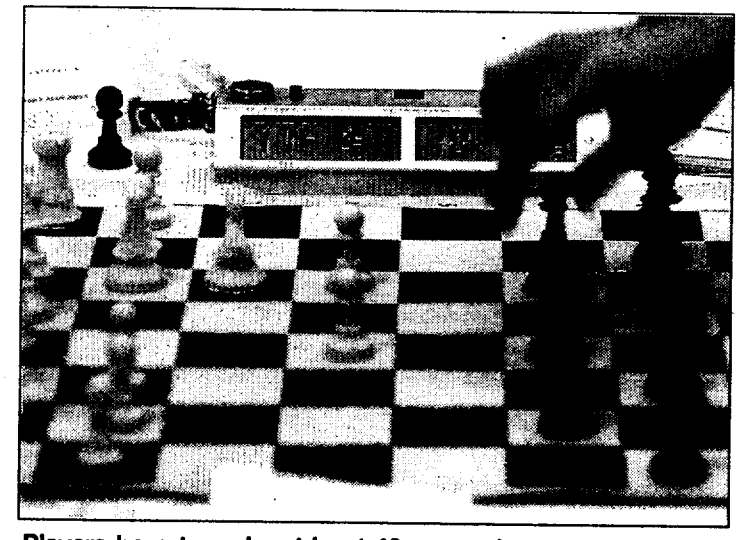
Stein still laments the fateful move that led to his demise.

"I managed not to execute properly," said Stein, who had met Izoria a couple of years ago. "He's 20 years old, plays for a living. Most of the best players are Russian."

Izoria went on to finish third in the Open. He also fought off a field of 50 grand masters at the HB Global Chess Challenge in Minneapolis last year to claim a $50,000 prize, the largest in the U.S., Stein said.

"He's rated 50th in the world, No. 2 by U.S. ratings," Stein said. "It was a hard-fought game. I was slightly outplayed."

The fourth round brought Stein face to face with a familiar local opponent, Jim Edgerton, who has made a career out of teaching and promoting chess at Elmhurst, Oak Brook and Indian Prairie libraries, and at local corporate functions.



Players have to make at least 40 moves in two hours or they lose. In addition to clock rules, there are pairing rules, rules about how long a player can be away from the board and the "I-think-my-opponent-is-cheating" rules.

"He was expected to win," Edgerton said of his match with Stein. "I had the advantage and he offered me a draw. That set me up with stronger players through the rest of the tournament, which is what I wanted."

For Stein, however, trying to run his software company by day and playing marathon chess tournaments by night proved to be too much.

"I drew with Edgerton," Stein said. "It's like kissing my sister to draw with him — ever.

"I was so out of practice. I was getting great positions

and losing them. I was just so tired."

He withdrew after the fourth round.

Edgerton's next contest proved humbling.

"Jerry Hanken has been to so many U.S. Opens," Edgerton said. "I was honored to play against him."

Hanken, a California resident, was tired from the night before, Edgerton said.

"He actually fell asleep two or three times during the game," he said. "His clock was running. He'd wake up, think for 30 seconds and make this awesome move. It was a very depressing game psychologically."

They got into a scramble at the end and Edgerton wound up beating him, launching him into very strong competition for the next three rounds.

"I drew one game and lost two, and fell back into my own bracket," he said.

Not everyone is fortunate enough to have an opponent who falls asleep. Competition often is about more than making the right move. It's confrontational, adversarial, psychological.

"Players will do speculative things they know their opponent won't like because they've looked at their games," Edgerton said. "That's what really breaks down the ability of the players. I may know moves 15 to 20 deep, my opponent may know moves 20 to 30 deep."

Players also will study any previous patterns their opponents have played.

"If you play French defense, I might go back and look up theory on the French defense to get an advantage," Edgerton said.

And then there's Garry Kasparov, arguably the strongest chess player in history, who likes to suck the energy out of a room so there's none left for his opponents.

Edgerton recalled Kasparov's recent trip to Chicago.

"He plays 40 people at once and wipes them all out," he said. "Gary has an incredible energy level. He walked into that room and he was just like a train going right down the track. That can be upsetting to players who might want a quiet opponent who isn't so squirmy. You wonder what's going on in there. He's like a furnace."

Chess used to be a nerd's game, and probably deservedly so at some points in American history, Stein said.

"There are a lot of people who fit the stereotype, but most of the time they're pretty socially acceptable people who just happen to be good at chess," he said.

Kasparov and other chess heroes haven't totally stripped the nerdy image from chess. In fact, only Bobby Fischer in the 1970s was truly able to bring chess out of the shadows.

Big companies still avoid sponsoring events here, unlike in Europe, where chess tournaments are played on television and winners net hundreds of thousands of dollars.

The U.S. Open Chess Tournament grand prize for nine nights — up to 54 hours of chess — was just $6,000.

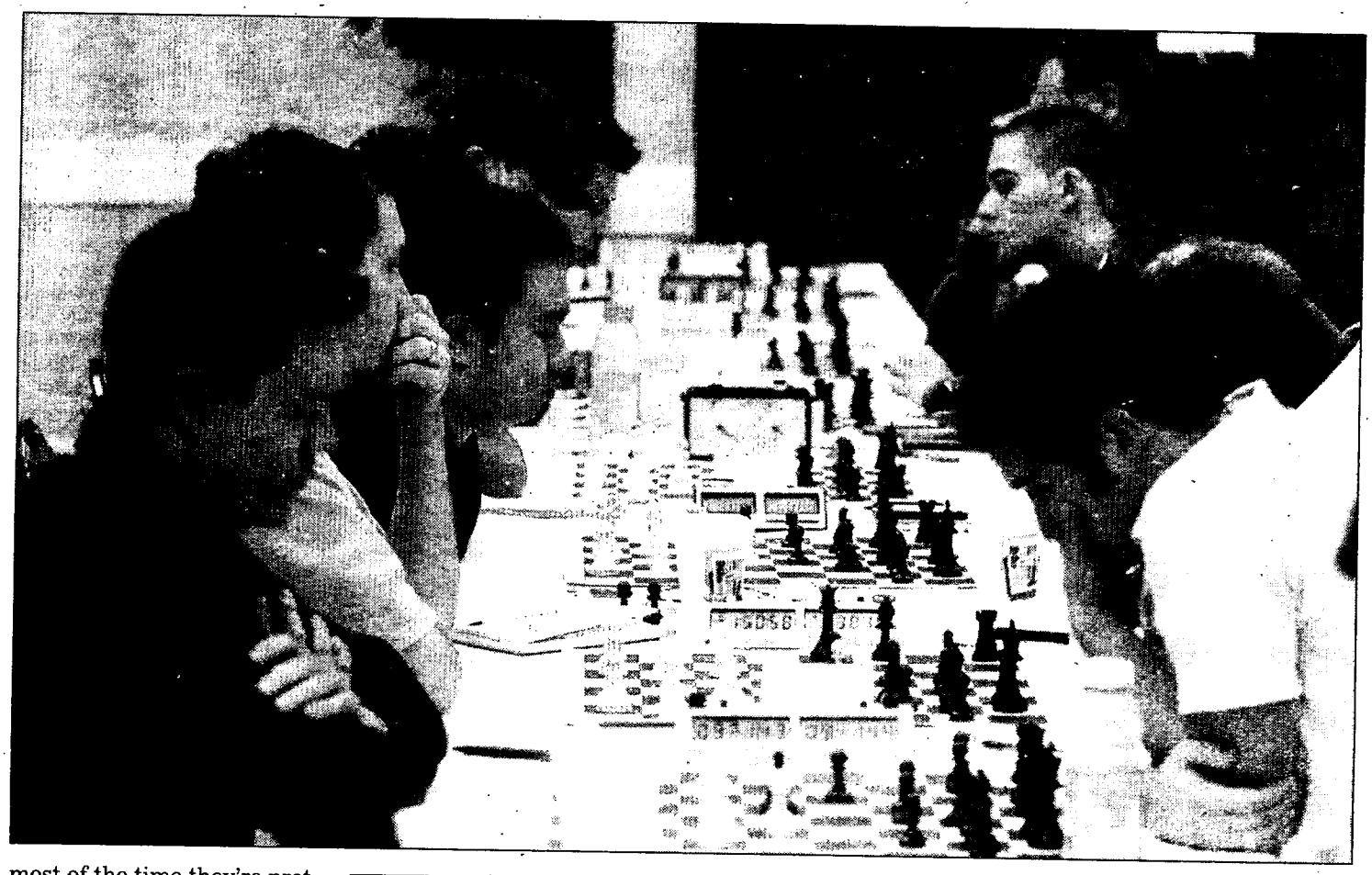
The future of chess lies at the scholastic levels, said U.S. Chess Federation Executive Director Bill Hall. American parents recognize its benefits for concentration, sportsmanship, math skills and even reading.

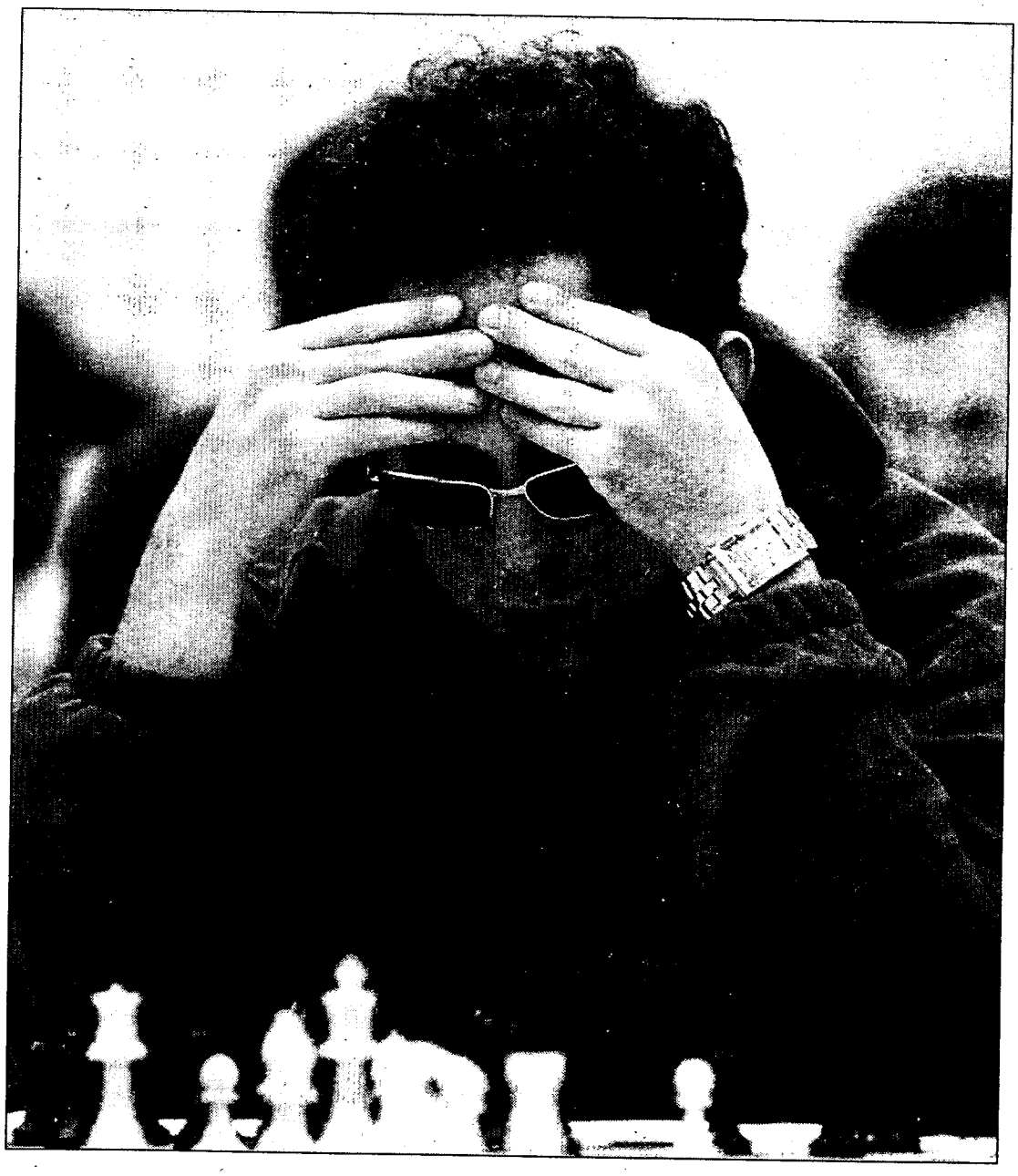
"At the elementary nationals, you'll see 400 5- to 7-year-olds sitting for an hour and a half playing chess," he said.

And pre-kindergarteners are competing for national titles, he said. Add the Internet Chess Club, where some 200,000 games are played online each day, and it's no wonder young kids are excelling.

A number of them sat bright-eyed at U.S. Open boards, comfortably beating their middle-aged opponents.

"This kid's good," said one 50-year-old gentleman of his 10-year-old opponent during a short break. "He's killing me."





Matthew Fischler of New York City blocks out all distractions during the U.S. Open Chess Tournament. One wrong move can cost the tournament. Younger players have somewhat of an advantage over older players when it comes to stamina and ability to improve their game. "The best chess players usually peak between 22 and 23," said Kurt Stein, a high master from Clarendon Hills. "After that, it's kind of a fade."