

Vellotti's Student is a Bonner County Standout

Wednesday, May 11, 2011 --- By CAMERON RASMUSSEN



Chess Champion

Chess champion Savanna Naccarato contemplates her strategy at the Sandpoint Library, one of her favorite places to practice.

SANDPOINT — Vellotti's Chess Kids student, Savanna Naccarato, formulates her strategy and carries out her moves in a split second.

At just 13 years old, Savanna trains under one of the nation's most respected chess master, and by his estimation, she is one of the best female players in the country.

Although she has obtained that status in only a few years, Savanna has put a lot of work into her game. And she started out small, training on computer programs. Before long, she entered her first tournament at age nine.

"I lost miserably, but I started looking at other people's moves," she said.

Around that time, she started becoming a formidable opponent for her father. The defeats in her early days of chess slowly reversed until Chris Naccarato could no longer beat her. Savanna's second attempt at a chess tournament landed her in fifth place.

When Naccarato realized that his daughter possessed an exceptional talent for the game, he began seeking a coach to help Savanna hone her skills. While she played against local chess enthusiasts, Naccarato eventually found Savanna a mentor in one of the Northwest's most accomplished masters, Boise instructor Daniel Vellotti owner of Vellotti's Chess School.

“Outside of my family, Savanna ranks in the top two most talented players I’ve ever worked with,” Vellotti, who estimates that he’s coached more than 10,500 students, said. “There is a list of the top 100 players in America, and I think she has a chance to break into that list very soon.”

Vellotti helped incentivize Savanna’s training by sending her small rewards for consistent practice and significant accomplishments.

“At one point, I sent her some ring pops and told her, ‘You can have these after you beat an opponent with a rating of 2,000 or higher,’” he said.

Savanna and Vellotti practice primarily over the phone and Internet. Using chess computer programs, the two analyze various tactics and strategies while conversing over speaker phone.

Savanna certainly seems keen on pursuing chess as far as it will take her. She practices constantly regardless of tournament scheduling. While she’s put a lot of hard work into her game, it helps that chess is also a great source of fun for her.

“The best thing about chess is that no game is the same,” she said. “Every move is a mystery.”

Outside of chess, Savanna is a normal young teenager. Whenever she collects prize money in chess tournaments, her first stop is J.C. Penney. The oldest of the three Naccarato kids, she’s had a strong influence on her siblings. Her 10-year-old brother Garrett has won four chess tournaments himself, while two-year-old Adaline already knows all her chess pieces.

Thus far, Savanna has won 19 trophies and four medals. In February, the Idaho Forest Group sponsored her at the 2011 Idaho Scholarship Girls Championship, where she ranked in a three-way tie for first place.

Although she isn’t even in high school yet, Savanna has big plans for her future.

“I’m hoping to use chess to get a scholarship so I can go to a good school,” she said.

Her ambitions don’t stop at education. Savanna hopes to become Idaho’s first female grandmaster.

In the short term, however, Savanna has been invited to represent Idaho at the Susan Polgar National Open Championship in Texas. As for her chances in the tournament, Savanna is keeping her expectations grounded.

“There will be girls there that have been playing much longer than I have,” she said.

“Even if I win just one game, I’ll be pleased.”

And her instructor? He’s betting a little more ambitiously.

“I wouldn’t put it past her to beat all of them,” Vellotti said.

