

The Problem with Trophies

by Robert Musicant

For a number of years, the USCF focused its membership recruitment efforts among the young. In one sense, the policy was a huge success. Total USCF membership went from 54,000 in 1988 to 90,000 this year. Overwhelmingly, growth came in the form of low-priced Scholastic memberships. Scholastic membership increased ten-fold during the 1990s, becoming (at 35,000 presently) the largest single membership category.

Unfortunately, it seemed that, just as quickly as the young members poured in, their older brothers and sisters were pouring out. Retention rates for the youngest members are deplorable. Of more than 18,000 players under age 19 in 1995, only 1200 or so remain members today. Far from the Scholastic and Youth categories being feeders into the Adult category, as was initially envisioned as the point of the Scholastic membership program, Adult memberships have stagnated and actually declined during the period in question.

Certainly attrition will take place no matter what policies and programs we adopt, but I would like to call attention to one aspect of the scholastic chess experience which undoubtedly acts as a deterrent to lifelong commitment to over-the-board, organized play.

Eight years of involvement in scholastic chess have taught me that to a great extent, for both children and their parents, the whole point of the enterprise is the chance to win a trophy. Those who

have never seen this may find it hard to believe, but those who have seen will know well the excitement that accompanies the initial display of the trophies available to be won during that tournament. No later than the third round of a five-round event, the players come up in a steady stream to the directors' table. "Will three points be enough to get a trophy?" "If I win the next round, will I get a trophy?" "I won my first game; will I get a trophy?"

The joy that children derive from winning trophies has thus brought us into the era of the 12th-place award, and, for those who might otherwise have to live with the pain of not winning anything, the chance for parents to purchase a "memento trophy" on the way out.

What's wrong with promoting chess through trophies? Kids like them, and if it brings them into the world of tournament play, what's the problem? The problem is that *there is undoubtedly a connection between the high rate of trophy distribution and the dropout rate.* In the quietly spoken words of one well-known chess coach as he looked over a classroom of the 30 players in an after-school chess program, "Of course, 90% of them will stop playing when the trophies stop flowing."

Educational psychologists recognize a phenomenon they refer to as "overjusti-

fication." An activity is said to be over-justified when an extrinsic reward is provided for taking part in an activity in which participants would initially have participated spontaneously, *i.e.*, one which, like chess, we would call intrinsically rewarding.

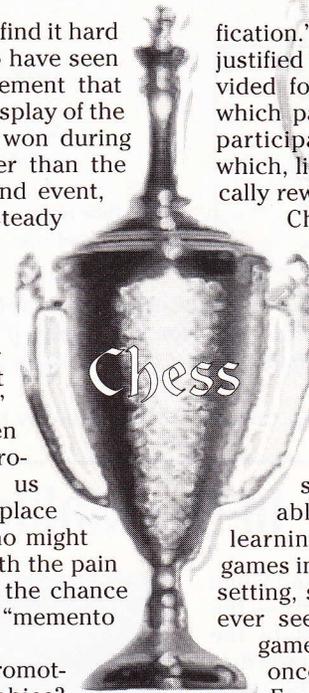
Children subsequently show lower rates of spontaneous participation in activities which were over-justified. Thus, we should expect that the side effect of over-justification-through trophies is that for many children, to the extent that they play chess at all, it is only in the tournament setting where trophies are available. Without the practice and learning that comes from frequent games in an informal, no-reward-at-stake setting, such players have little hope of ever seeing any improvement in their game, and no reason to keep playing once "the trophies stop flowing."

Exactly the predicament our Federation finds itself in today.

The conflict between what might be best for maintaining children's interest in chess and hence lessening revolving-door membership by junior players, on the one hand, and organizers' self-interest on the other will not be easy to resolve. Organizers who take a financial risk by staging an event are not apt to be too receptive to the idea that they virtually guarantee themselves a poorer turnout by reducing the trophy count.

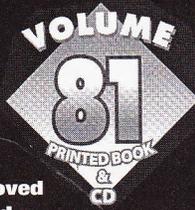
At the very least, it seems incumbent on parents and volunteers to build commitment to chess by providing opportunities for play in which there is no reward but the joy of participating, winning, and learning, whether it be in after-school programs, community clubs, and in the most old-fashioned setting of all, one another's homes. When the primary chess-playing opportunity is the occasional tournament in which the main point of participating is the chance of winning a trophy, we guarantee a future of weak commitment to chess, and an ever-declining adult membership base for our Federation.

When the deeper satisfaction of learning and doing becomes the real point, then, perhaps, children will be inoculated against the more evanescent pleasure brought by possession of chess' golden calf.



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