

## **Team at American Way -- Coach's gambit paid off royally with this court of believers**

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### **Editor's note**

*In January, Zack McMillin showed up at the afternoon chess practice at American Way Middle School to watch the Lennox Lewis Chess Team, winner of the 2003 elementary school national championship. He wanted to see how they did it and soon realized he had stumbled upon a most remarkable story.*

*McMillin followed the team throughout its season, visiting the students in their classrooms, at chess tournaments and in their homes and apartment complexes. As he points out in the series, "Coach (Jeff) Bulington's kids are the West African sons of casino workers in Tunica, the mixed-race sons of a Mexican mother and self-made black father, the fiercely proud boys of single mothers and the sensitive and striving soul nurtured by blue collar parents climbing into the middle class."*

*McMillin, who won first place in 2003 Associated Press Sports Editors writing contest for an eight-part series on the 1972-73 Memphis State basketball team, follows the team from that January day to the junior high national championship in Tucson and beyond.*

*It is a unique Memphis narrative, one that will connect with readers from every corner of our growing and diverse community.*

*It is the kind of story we like to tell this time of year. A story about giving. A story about sacrifice. A story about hope.*

*We think you'll enjoy it.*

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## **PART ONE**

On a warm spring day last May, outside American Way Middle School, girls shrieked and boys cheered and waved signs as a big brown GMC van passed in front of the newest public school in Memphis.

Inside the van were champions.

They were not NBA or NFL stars come to grace the school with their aura.

They were their classmates.

They were, of all things, chess players.

Five members of the Lennox Lewis Chess Team, the group sponsored by the former heavyweight champ, were bound for Tucson, Ariz., to compete for the U.S. Chess Federation's K-8 national championship.

They were getting a hero's sendoff.

"I felt like we was rock stars," Abou Anne, a fierce sixth-grade player born in Senegal, would say later when the van hurtled down I-40.

"Really, I felt like we was rap stars."

For Jeff Bulington, the chess coach and math teacher driving the van, the man they call Mr. B, it was another astonishing moment in the improbable life of the chess team he assembled from scratch four years earlier.

At a Memphis City School that needed barely half a year to develop a reputation for unruly kids, on a stretch of road bordering Interstate 40 and not far from the abandoned Mall of Memphis, chess players had become celebrities.

In a city where public education often generates more controversy than hope, how did an unlikely mix of Memphis city school kids defy the odds and the stereotypes and coalesce into one of the best chess teams in the country?

How did they go from seeing the game for the first time in 2000 to winning the elementary school national title in 2003?

For all the attention the Memphis City Schools receive when things go wrong, the story of the Lennox Lewis Chess Team serves as a reminder of what can happen when a dedicated teacher meets eager young minds.

Mr. B used an ancient game to connect with kids from an array of cultures and persuade them that chess is magic.

He did it by doing what great teachers do - engaging kids, hooking them on learning and the sweet, addictive taste of success.

By showing them a world filled with possibility.

By giving them hope, that most potent of all teaching tools.

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In Jeff Bulington's first year in Memphis, at Oakhaven Elementary in 1996, another

teacher passed him in the hall, shaking her head.

"Wouldn't they all be better off as abortions?" she said.

Bulington had come to Memphis from West Lafayette, Ind., where he had pursued a doctorate in philosophy at Purdue. The comment shocked the idealism out of him.

"No," was all he could think to say.

In that first year, Bulington sometimes would go home, go to his bedroom and cry.

But Bulington would adapt. He would develop an approach to teaching he calls his "Noah's Ark Theory of Education."

You build your ark, take in who you can take in and weather the storm.

Bulington constructed his ark out of a grid of 64 squares, populated by knights and pawns and rooks. Chess may be known as the game of royalty, but for Mr. B's kids from some of the city's grittiest areas, chess became an ark-like vessel.

In 2003, when his Lennox Lewis Chess Team won the elementary school national championship in Nashville, it stunned the chess world.

"What did they have - four grandmasters?" the author James Traub wrote in a column about the tournament.

No. Something even more remarkable: A stew of kids whose lives tell a larger story about what Memphis has become and what its children can achieve.

Bulington's kids are West African sons of casino workers in Tunica, mixed-race sons of a Mexican mother and an African-American father, fiercely proud boys of single mothers, and a sensitive, striving soul nurtured by blue collar black parents climbing into the middle class.

They speak Spanish and French and tribal Fulani, proper English and country English and hip-hop.

They are COGIC and Catholic and Muslim and atheist.

They are Memphis.

Orchestrating this symphony of cultures is Bulington, a punk-rock philosophy major from rural Indiana who is so tall strangers in restaurants ask if that's a basketball team he's coaching.

In 2003, Mr. B's ark carried the team to the elementary national title and then third place at the junior high nationals.

Though 2004 held immense promise, in many ways it would become the toughest season of all for Mr. B.

It would also be his last chess season in Memphis.

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Jeff Bulington discovered chess as a first-grader in Toledo, Ohio, where his father worked at a trailer factory. It was 1972, the year the world watched Bobby Fischer take down the Soviet world champion, Boris Spassky.

Chess was all the rage. Jeff took to it immediately.

By the time the family moved to Monon, a small Indiana town 100 miles southeast of Chicago, Jeff could beat most adults who dared to challenge him. One day at the Monon United Methodist Church, a kind man named Earl Raver offered to teach him.

"I figured I'd go whack him" Jeff remembered. "He destroyed me."

Raver became his mentor, his "chess Yoda." Years later, when people asked why he dedicated himself to these Memphis kids, he would say: "I'm trying to repay a debt."

As a tall, gangly teenager in the early '80s, Jeff turned to chess - and music - for escape from the intellectual claustrophobia he felt in Monon.

In the summertime, he'd spend his days in the Orville Redenbacher fields detassling corn, a boom box strapped to his back blasting bands like The Who, The Sex Pistols and The Clash. By night, he'd hole up in his room, studying the great chess masters.

"Chess was a positive step away from saying, 'I am not this and I'm not that,' to saying, 'I am this,'" Bulington said.

He would carry that with him long after leaving Monon.

Bulington graduated high school, married his high school sweetheart and went to Air Force boot camp, all in a three-week span. He got a medical discharge, got divorced and began pursuing a new passion - philosophy.

He settled into the life of a student with a full-time job managing a record store. As a graduate student, he met Susanne and they were married in 1991.

About the time Susanne got pregnant with son Carter, Jeff began hearing the call to teach

math to children. At a teacher recruiting fair at Purdue, in 1996, a woman from the Memphis City Schools interviewed him.

Bulington will never forget one of her questions: "How would you feel if you walked into a classroom and discovered all your students were black?"

Fine, Jeff told her.

Bulington began teaching math at Oakhaven in 1996. The chess project began in the fall of 2000.

Studies show a link between the cognitive processes in math and those that guide the chess player.

If the chess Bulington would teach in his regular chess class was like arithmetic, then what happened in his team's after-school coaching sessions was like trigonometry. It required a much higher order of thinking.

Sometimes, it would be about history, like the day Bulington used Sherman, the Civil War general, to illustrate a point about destroying an enemy's lines of attack on the middle of the board.

"If your enemy is using his railroad to get all his troops to the front, what should you do? Blow up the railroad tracks," Bulington said.

Sometimes it would be about sociology, like the day Bulington asked the kids to describe Malcolm X as a chess player.

"A good one," said Kenneth Hall, an eighth-grader who wrote raps into a notebook and was reading Malcolm X's autobiography.

"No," Bulington said. "Would he be an attacker or what?"

"Yeah," Kenneth said. "But he'd be smart."

How would he differ from Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.?

That interested the team's most talented player, Abdoulaye Diallo from Mauritania. As a ninth-grader in 2003, Abdoulaye had tied for second in the nation at the junior high nationals.

"Nonviolence," Abdoulaye said. "I would love to play someone like that: 'I cannot take your pawn, I cannot take your queen.'"

In January, during the first week of practice, Bulington showed them a game played long ago by Vasily Smyslov, the seventh world champion. Bulington wanted to connect them

to Soviet chess champions and civil rights heroes.

"When opportunities come along," Bulington said, imploring his kids to find the right move, "you have to see them or they are no use to anybody."

The kids peered at their boards, studying the position.

Searching for opportunity.

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For the 2003-2004 school year, Bulington followed his principal at Oakhaven to American Way.

Bulington taught four sections of chess and one section of math at American Way. After school, he coached the Lennox Lewis Chess Team's core group - four players from Wooddale, five from American Way.

There is a Chinese proverb Bulington would quote while explaining how he came to love chess : When the student is ready, the teacher will appear.

It does not say what happens when the teacher departs.

For months, Bulington hid the news from his kids. This would be his final year of teaching in Memphis, his final year of coaching the chess team.

He would not miss the long hours without so much as a stipend. He would not miss the long treks from his home in High Point Terrace to the apartments and houses in the neighborhoods near the Memphis airport.

He would miss the kids, and he dreaded telling them.

He waited until after the individual state championships, when everyone was gathered for practice after school.

"I have something important we need to discuss," he said.

He told them he was headed back to West Lafayette, Ind., to finish his PhD in philosophy at Purdue. He told them he wanted his children, 10-year-old Carter and 6-year-old Ellen, to grow up near their grandparents.

He assured the players they would do fine without him.

"You can coach yourselves," Bulington said. "You're better than me now."

They saw through this, immediately. Someone else could organize them, but nobody else could be as devoted as Mr. B, nobody else could believe in them so genuinely.

Latreze Townsend, a big eighth-grader with the big heart and big ambitions, spoke for the team.

"I guess we need to win the national championship," Latreze said, referring to the nationals in May. "Because there is no next year."

**COMING TOMORROW:** The team faces its first big challenge of the season.

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*The Lennox Lewis Chess Team, 2004*

*Kevin Prier, 5th grade, Getwell Elementary  
Carter Bulington, 6th grade, Campus School  
Abou Anne, 6th grade, American Way Middle  
Falilou Keita, 7th grade, American Way Middle  
Latreze Townsend, 8th grade, American Way Middle  
Kenneth Hall, 8th grade, American Way Middle  
Chris Harbert, 8th grade, American Way Middle  
Carlos Harbert, 9th grade, Wooddale High  
Cedric Prier, 9th grade, Wooddale High  
Adama Diallo, 9th grade, Wooddale High  
Abdoulaye Diallo, 9th grade, Wooddale High*

#### *Team's History*

*After winning the Tennessee junior high state championship, in 2002, Jeff Bulington's chess team, then based at Oakhaven, received a visit from Memphis Mayor Willie Herenton.*

*When one of his students challenged Herenton, himself a former boxer, the mayor took an interest in the team.*

*And when Herenton discovered that heavyweight champion Lennox Lewis, who would fight Mike Tyson in the summer of 2002 at The Pyramid, was a chess aficionado, the mayor made sure the Lewis camp connected with Bulington and his kids.*

*Bulington loves to tell stories of that week - of Carlos Harbert playing a brief game with Lewis at a prefight press conference; of the team's participation in the parade; of an interview he gave to BBC radio.*

*But nothing compared to the night of the fight. The champ provided 12 tickets for the kids, and Bulington and his then-assistant coach, Charles Harbert, used the fight to teach lessons about chess .*

*The day after the fight, the kids met Lewis at the National Civil Rights Museum, and Lewis offered to help the team financially.*

*Henceforth, the team, which had previously received support from the Memphis-Shelby County Airport Authority and the Ewing Moving Co. among others, had itself a fitting new name: The Lennox Lewis Chess Team out of Memphis, Tenn.*

*In 2004, Lewis provided \$19,000, which allowed the team to travel, take lessons and purchase supplies.*

## **PART TWO**

### **Board of success -- West African youth excel in thinking game**

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*About this series*

*From January through May of 2004, Zack McMillin spent hundreds of hours with the Lennox Lewis Chess team, a remarkable collection of kids in the Memphis City Schools who compete with the best scholastic chess players in the country.*

***TODAY:*** *The promising 2004 chess season begins at the individual state championships in Cookeville, where a boy born in Guinea tries to win Tennessee's junior high title.*

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There was Falilou Keita, leaning over his chess board, squirming and bobbing in his seat but betraying nothing with his eyes.

His ripped and faded San Francisco 49ers Starter jacket draped over the back of his chair, his opponent across from him oozing confidence, Falilou faced a pivotal moment in the final game of the day at the Tennessee Chess Association's individual state championships on Valentine's Day.

Falilou, a seventh-grader from American Way Middle School, represented the Lennox Lewis Chess Team's last chance for a state championship. Most of the games at Tennessee Tech's vast auditorium were finishing up, but Falilou's battle with Mirko Remec, son of a Serbian nuclear engineer in Oak Ridge, was just getting interesting.

Falilou needed a win to force a speed- chess playoff for the championship.

His coach, Jeff Bulington, was torn. He wanted to give Falilou a chance to win the title. He wanted to see if Falilou had the stuff to contend for the junior high national title in

May. But Bulington had agonized over whether to let the game begin at all and if he should stop it.

The next morning, Falilou's family - the eight of them - were conducting a baby-naming ceremony for his new sister at their cramped apartment near the airport in Memphis.

That is an important ritual in the growing West African community in Memphis. Falilou's father, Boubacar, signed the permission slip for the chess trip only when Mr. B promised to have Falilou home by midnight.

Even if he left Cookeville now, at 7 p.m., Bulington might not make the deadline.

Bulington often lamented the divide between his team's West African players and their parents when it came to chess. Their sons' trophies and plaques stand like shrines in their \$450-a-month apartments, but they rarely showed more than passing interest in their sons' passion.

Bulington could not predict what might happen if Falilou was late getting home. Boubacar could ban chess altogether or not care at all.

"I've ceased trying to understand," Bulington said.

Falilou wrote his autobiography in the sixth grade. He called it "The Life of a True Chess Master" - 17 pieces of notebook paper covered in Falilou's multi-colored cursive writing, bound together by two pieces of cardboard.

The front cover features a computer rendering of two men playing chess, with stickers saying WOW and SUPER and TERRIFIC dancing around the illustration.

The first chapter is titled, "Meeting My Dad for the First Time."

*My Dad left Africa when I was a baby. I didn't see him for at least eight years. So my dad decided to take my mom to America. I wasn't happy that my mom is going to America and leave my sister and I. The day she left Guinea, I cried and cried, but I got used to it. I cried every day I remembered her.*

Falilou was eight when he and his older sister finally made the trip to America, flying the big plane to New York and taking the long Greyhound ride to Memphis. He did not speak English. His family had little money, spending much of it on the \$465-a-month two-bedroom apartment off Winchester, near the airport. His strict Muslim father forbade many of the things American kids coveted.

*I didn't speak English but I kinda figured it out. I was also wondering why the teacher didn't hit them with the belt for talking. In Africa, they do that, because they want us to learn. I don't think they should do that, because we can learn without being beat. But I don't make up the rules.*

At Oakhaven Elementary, Falilou learned words can sting as sharply as any belt.

*You will not like this, but now some students are being mean to me. I don't know why, because I didn't do anything to them. Adama told me what they said to me. I wasn't happy about that because I didn't do anything to them. So I told Adama (my only African friend in the classroom) to tell Mrs. Rich what they said to me. But when Mrs. Rich told them to stop, they didn't so they got into a lot of trouble and I mean a lot. I didn't mean for them to get in trouble. I just want them to stop.*

One day at school, a tall white man everyone called Mr. B brought chess boards to Mrs. Rich's class. Thus began the career of a true chess master.

*I started learning how to play chess . I was learning a lot because I was paying attention and listening.*

*I learn that chess is about thinking.*

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When Bulington started the chess program, he met some resistance from parents who were West African Muslims. They had never heard of this game of queens and kings and rooks, and they wondered about Muhammed's prohibition against gambling and denunciation of images.

Bulington explained. Not only had Islam dropped strictures against chess many centuries ago, but the history of chess credits Muslims with spreading the game to the Western world.

The parents relented. One of his West African players, Abdoulaye Diallo, even took his Internet chess screen name, as-Suli, from a legendary 10th Century Muslim champion.

Abdoulaye's father, Bou Bou, arrived in Memphis in the mid-90s, an exile from Mauritania. Then, Bou Bou knew of fewer than 20 West Africans living in the city. Now, he estimates the number exceeds 1,000.

Bou Bou requires both his sons to attend mosque on Saturdays and Sundays. They worship and learn to read and write Arabic. The mosque, Massid Attaowa, is a converted Krystal restaurant near Winchester and Airways.

Abdoulaye's parents have had mixed feelings about his chess .

After he won the junior high state title in 2003 - and just before he finished tied for second at the junior high nationals - a TV station asked his mother what she wanted him to gain from chess . She said she wanted him to play chess so well he would not need to

depend on the game.

When Bou Bou, a blackjack dealer in Tunica, accompanied Mr. B and the team to the 2002 nationals in Milwaukee, it was a revelation. He entered a large auditorium, saw his sons playing chess among thousands of American kids and became overwhelmed with emotion.

"Before, I had minimized it," Bou Bou said.

"In my heart, I am crying. I ask God what have I done so my children deserve this."

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Carolyn Rich, Falilou's teacher since he arrived in third grade, saw his focus in his first week in class. He wrote down everything on the board, even if he couldn't understand it.

"He's such an intense student," Mrs. Rich said. "Kids can be making noise all around him, and do you know it doesn't mess up his focus. He is a phenomenon."

At the individual state championships in Cookeville, that relentless concentration would make all the difference in the final round game. Bulington had decided to let him finish the game, after all.

Watching the game from the steps of the auditorium stage, Bulington saw Mirko, rated 329 points ahead of Falilou, try a brash strategy with his knight.

Bulington knew Falilou needed to take Mirko's knight with his own knight, but doing so would require enormous confidence. It could be a trap, especially against someone as strong as Mirko. After a few hesitations, Falilou made the right move, taking the knight.

"It's a very bold thing Falilou just did," Bulington said.

Falilou, who looks like a miniature version of a long-distance runner, had punctured Mirko's defense and taken control of the game. Mirko, an imposing ninth-grader, looked like someone just slugged him in the gut.

After Mirko responded with a meek move advancing a pawn, Falilou brought the queen into play, attacking. Mirko rubbed his eyes, looking for an escape.

"It's like watching two boxers," Bulington said. "Which one is more tired? Not Falilou."

Finally, two hours after the game began and 11 hours since the start of the tournament, Falilou cornered the enemy king. Mirko toppled it, resigning.

Bulington tried to reach Falilou's family, but the phone had been busy for hours. He leaves the decision to Falilou. Stay and play in the speed- chess playoff for the junior high state title? Or head home?

"If I do not play, I cannot win?" Falilou asked.

Bulington nodded.

"Then," Falilou said, "I will play."

The four players tied for the championship moved to a small room above the auditorium. Falilou and Mirko each dispatched their opponents, forcing a speed- chess rematch.

"Gentleman," a tournament director said before beginning play, "this is for state championship."

They made the opening moves rapidly before the rhythm settled into a hurried ponder. Mirko moved his pieces confidently, Falilou with hesitation. Mirko would not underestimate Falilou a second time, and soon enough had gained an advantage.

When Mirko's queen began gobbling Falilou's pieces, it was over. Falilou danced his king from harbor to harbor before facing the inevitable, flicking over his king and resigning.

It ended a grueling day.

Maybe Falilou had lost the championship, but he had shown his strength. He had shown the stuff of a true chess master.

As they collected trophies and headed out into the chilly winter night, Bulington reached over and wrapped his arm around Falilou.

"You just did a hard thing," he said.

When they arrived at the Bent Tree apartments, past 2 in the morning, it looked as if it had rained all day. When Bulington's Hyundai stopped outside Falilou's apartment, on Providence Drive, Falilou hopped out, hurdled a large puddle and headed upstairs.

His father, Boubacar, was up late after his swing shift at Technicolor, where he stuffs videotapes into boxes. He was making final preparations for his daughter's babynaming ceremony.

Falilou showed his father the tall trophy, but it was not Boubacar's nature to ponder this remarkable feat: his son, not four years removed from living in Guinea, the second best junior high chess player in Tennessee.

In his native Fulani, Boubacar told his son: "Good job."

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*The Lennox Lewis Chess Team, 2004*

*Kevin Prier, 5th grade, Getwell Elementary  
Carter Bulington, 6th grade, Campus School  
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Abdoulaye Diallo, 9th grade, Wooddale High*

*In the world of chess , strength is very important concept.*

*It is why some argue that chess is a sport. At its highest levels, even in scholastic chess , there is an athleticism of the mind that determines who wins and loses.*

*Some players are strong and bold. Some are naturally insecure and deferential. Some aggressive, some passive. Some agile and smooth when an opponent unveils a new attack, others inflexible and flustered when presented with an unfamiliar strategy.*

*Chess has devised a formula to determine a player's strength relative to every other chess player in the world, and these chess ratings define the level at which a player can compete.*

*Beat a stronger player - i.e., one with a higher rating - and a player's rating will go up. Lose to a weaker player, and it will go down.*

*The players on the Lennox Lewis Chess Team all have ratings between 1,200 and 1,900; as a comparison, the average adult rating is around 1,450, and a player is considered "Expert" when achieving a rating of 2,000 or higher (2,200 -2,399 is a master, 2,400 and above is a senior master).*

*At tournaments, players, coaches and spectators consult the ratings systems much as sports fans look to an oddsmaker's points spread, to determine the contenders and the up-and-coming players who could pull off upsets.*

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## **PART THREE**

## **Death of a champ -- As sons persevere in matches, father shows power in his ultimate battle**

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**TODAY:** *After Falilou Keita comes up just short at the individual state championships, the story now turns to Carlos and Chris Harbert. As they play for the state team championships in Cookeville, Tenn., their father clings to life at their house back in Memphis.*

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Members of the team sat on the motel floor listening to their coach as he tried to get their minds ready to play championship chess the next morning.

"We need to muster all the strength we have," said Jeff Bulington, sitting on his king-size bed back in March at the Comfort Inn in Cookeville, Tenn.

"Who knows what next year is going to bring?"

The Lennox Lewis Chess Team's coach avoided looking at two members of the team, Chris and Carlos Harbert. He knew the Harbert brothers had more on their minds than competing in Saturday's Tennessee state team championships.

Their father, Charles Harbert, the team's unofficial assistant coach, was at home in Memphis, dying of pancreatic cancer.

Charles Harbert had been a boxer in his younger days, learning the craft in the gyms of St. Louis. But his wife, Maria, the Mexican beauty he married when he moved to Memphis, did not want their two sons to become boxers.

So, when Carlos began bringing home chess lessons from this new teacher at Oakhaven Elementary, Charles encouraged it. Chris began playing, too, and before Charles knew it, he was helping shuttle the kids to tournaments all over the country and serving as Bulington's assistant coach.

The last time Charles attended a chess tournament with his sons was in January. He

carried his IV in a fanny pack, but the pain medication attached to his stomach was insufficient. The boys could see him grimace. Now he was so rotted with cancer, he looked decades older than his 60 years.

"Your impulse is to close his eyes," Bulington said.

Bulington wondered whether the team should make the trip to Cookeville. But Charles had enough strength left to indicate two final wishes.

He did not want to die on March 18, the Thursday before the tournament and Carlos's 15th birthday.

And no matter what happened, he wanted the boys to go to Cookeville to compete for the state championship and \$96,000 in scholarships. More than anything, he wanted Carlos and his Wooddale High teammates to win those scholarships.

In the hotel room, Bulington took a deep breath. He scanned the room, and the nine kids from the Lennox Lewis Chess Team of Memphis, Tennessee, waited for the coach's final instructions.

"The last thing I want to talk about is touchy," he said. "I want everyone to know Mr. Harbert is here with us this weekend. He has shown us what it's like to fight to the end."

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In the picture , Charles Harbert is standing next to Lennox Lewis, the heavyweight champion of the world. Even at 58, Charles looked strapping enough to step back in the ring himself.

The photo was taken the day after Lewis fought Mike Tyson at The Pyramid in 2002. Lewis, a chess player, had given the team tickets to the fight, and wanted to tour the National Civil Rights Museum with the chess team that had so enchanted him.

The kids, then at Oakhaven, had become the first all-black team to win the state team title. Lewis, an avid chess player, involved the team in prefight events. At the prefight press conference, Lewis even played a short, unfinished game against Carlos.

That was something Charles didn't mind telling you about - his son squaring off with the heavyweight champ. Even better, after getting to know the team through Memphis Mayor Willie Herenton, the champ began giving money to the program. The check was for \$19,000 for 2003-2004.

Charles eventually learned to play - one of the few parents to do so - but, more often than not, he would use boxing to teach the kids about chess. After the Lewis-Tyson fight, Charles told the kids that Tyson was like a knight, powerful only in tight quarters, but

Lewis was like a rook, able to impose his punishment from any distance.

In January, Bulington asked Lewis's assistant to get the champ to call Charles to lift his spirits.

"I was sitting down in pain and ... before I knew it, I was standing up in the middle of the floor," Charles recalled later.

They talked for 15 minutes, and Charles remembered how deeply the champ expressed his love and appreciation for his own mother. It comforted Charles to hear Lewis talk about a parent's impact.

"It just kind of helped me to know, to reassure, like I'm behind my boys all the time, giving them that encouragement," Charles said in January, when he could still hold a conversation.

"It doesn't sound like much, but being there does a lot. It just reassures my way of thinking that it helps and I think, 'Well, I got that right.' "

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At the front table of Tennessee Tech's vast auditorium, in the third round of the team state championships, Carlos Harbert was trying to deliver a clinching performance.

Wooddale High was leading Page High, its rival from Franklin, by a 2-1 score, and if Carlos could deliver a half-point with a draw, Wooddale would win the round.

Barring a collapse against a lower-rated team in the final round, it would give Wooddale, with three freshmen and a sophomore, the state championship and \$64,000 in scholarships to Tennessee Tech.

But Carlos was down one pawn, a slight disadvantage. Worse, he had only 11:34 of time remaining on his clock. His opponent had more than 30.

It was the very scenario Sam Palatnik, a former Soviet chess champ, had warned them about in one of his weekly teaching sessions before the tournament. On the chalkboard, Palatnik had written "E > MC<sup>2</sup>."

"This is Einstein's genius formula," Palatnik said in his Russian accent. "This explain all our life right now. Time is mass and energy. We can make an equivalent in chess. Fifteen minutes difference and you do not have energy. You make mistakes because you not have enough time."

As Carlos's clock dripped below 10 minutes, a crowd began gathering around the table. Chris sat nearby on the steps of a stage, watching nervously.

Under relentless pressure, with no time to contemplate a proper defense, Carlos let his opponent find a line of attack.

Two moves from checkmate, with seconds remaining on his clock, Carlos swiped the crown of his king with his index finger, toppling it.

Wooddale and Page were tied 2-2. Both teams won their final-round matches and had to face each other in a speed chess playoff. That put Wooddale at a serious disadvantage.

Page had won two speed-chess national titles the previous fall. Wooddale, because of Bulington's devotion to classic, positional chess, almost never practiced speed.

Before the playoff began, Chris Harbert and his American Way teammates walked back into the room carrying their trophies and plaques for winning the junior-high state title with a perfect 4-0 mark. Chris won two of the games.

Dozens of people gathered for the high school showdown, but there was little drama.

Page swept all four matches.

It wasn't a total loss. Wooddale placed second and its four players divided \$32,000 in scholarships.

If Charles had been there, he might have told them about some loss in the ring he suffered long ago, and he might have reminded them that losing teaches the most valuable lessons.

"Your losses are sometimes your best asset," he said on that day he talked to Lennox Lewis.

"You lose, big deal. You ain't gonna win every day. The sun don't shine every day."

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When they returned from Cookeville, Chris and Carlos found their father still lying on the living room couch, still breathing, still wearing the pajamas with all the chess figurines.

They showed him their plaques - Chris had one for playing on American Way Middle's junior-high championship team, Carlos had one for playing on Wooddale High's state runner-up squad. They told him about the scholarship Carlos won.

Two days later, on Tuesday, March 23, Charles Harbert died at his home. He was 60.

"Charles had a colorful and adventurous life before settling down with his wonderful

wife, Maria," it said in the funeral program.

"He was a devoted father who dedicated the last 15 years to teaching and preparing his two younger sons for life's expectations.

"His love for his sons was so evident - they were always by his side."

Charles was buried the following Friday at New Park Cemetery in South Memphis. In a gazebo teeming with wasps, friends and family gathered for a few final words.

Chris and Charles sat on either side of their mother, holding her hands. Chris, the gregarious younger brother, wore a dark pinstriped suit, and Carlos, the laconic older brother, wore plain black.

As the funeral director started to prepare the casket for burial, Maria stood and beckoned to the ministers.

"Mr. B," she said, turning to Bulington, who was standing behind the family.

In the center of the gazebo, the tall chess coach, wearing a suit for the first time in years, stood between the family and the casket. He took a deep breath.

"I am a teacher," he said, "and Mr. Harbert was one of the finest teachers I've ever known. He celebrated children, not only his own children, which he did so obviously, but those others he came to care for.

"He followed his two boys into this crazy game of chess. He took up the game himself. He showed his boys what it is to be a man and live life fully.

"He never stopped trying. He never stopped living. He never stopped loving. I am a much better man for having known Charles Harbert, and you boys were the glue between myself and your father."

He swiveled to face Chris and Carlos.

"You boys continue to bring your father honor and show with great dignity what your father stood for and meant."

Finished, Bulington walked out of the gazebo and down a small rise, near Charles's freshly dug grave. He looked out toward the trees not yet in bloom and wept.

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*The Lennox Lewis Chess Team, 2004*

*Kevin Prier, 5th grade, Getwell Elementary  
Carter Bulington, 6th grade, Campus School*

*Abou Anne, 6th grade, American Way Middle*  
*Falilou Keita, 7th grade, American Way Middle*  
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*Cedric Prier, 9th grade, Wooddale High*  
*Adama Diallo, 9th grade, Wooddale High*  
*Abdoulaye Diallo, 9th grade, Wooddale High*

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## **PART FOUR**

### **All the right moves -- Tourney emotions tough to keep in check**

Commercial Appeal, The (Memphis, TN) - Tuesday, December 28, 2004  
Author/Byline: Zack McMillin zmcmillin@commercialappeal.com  
Edition: Final  
Section: Sports  
Page: C1

#### **About this series**

*From January through May of 2005, Zack McMillin spent hundreds of hours with the Lennox Lewis Chess team, a remarkable collection of kids in the Memphis City Schools who compete against the best scholastic chess players in the country.*

**TODAY:** *They have played for state championships. They have said goodbye to their teammates' father and assistant coach. Now the kids on the Lennox Lewis Chess Team head west in search of a national championship.*

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The coach stops the van. Five kids from Memphis grab snow discs they bought at a gift shop, tumble out of the van and head for the towering dunes that dance across New Mexico's early May horizon.

The Lennox Lewis Chess Team has arrived at the White Sands National Monument, and it is time for some frolic.

Falilou Keita, with the lean body of a young runner, hikes to the top of the 50-foot sand cliffs without getting winded. Chris Harbert shims the bottom of the discs with blocks of wax. Kenneth Hall takes pictures. Abou Anne and Latreze Townsend stay up top, the climb so grueling they refuse to ride back down.

The kids, all students at American Way Middle School, are on their way to Tucson, Ariz.,

to compete in the U.S. Chess Federation's junior high national championships.

The team's coach, Jeff Bulington, didn't want to travel from the Memphis airport to the Tucson airport. He wanted the kids to see things they'd never seen before, things they might never see again. So he drove: 1,520 miles and 23 hours across Arkansas, through Oklahoma, into West Texas and New Mexico and finally to Arizona.

Bulington wants his kids to win the national championship. He also wants to give them something more lasting, and he wants to spend as much time as possible on this, his final trip as their coach before returning to graduate school in Indiana.

"Times is hard and I can't travel to all those different cities," says Terrie Townsend, the mother of Latreze Townsend and a deputy at the jail. "It's a gift from God, kinda like."

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The playing floor of Tucson's convention center is as wide and deep as three football fields.

On May 7, it was lined with row after row of folding tables covered with vinyl chess mats. More than a thousand kids from all over the country have entered the tournament.

The tournament goes seven rounds - two on Friday, three on Saturday and two on Sunday. Players earn a point for a win and a half-point for a draw. After all seven rounds, each team's four highest scorers make up the team score. It probably will take 20 points to win the Open division of the K-8 section, which includes the Lennox Lewis Team from Memphis.

Some schools, like the powerful chess programs from New York City, stack their lineups with up to 13 players. That leaves little margin for error for American Way's five players.

Then again, two of this team's players, Abou Anne and Falilou Keita, were on the Oakhaven Elementary team that won the 2003 elementary school national title with only four players.

Bulington expresses confidence in a pre-tournament meeting: "We are the best team here and we are going to prove it."

As the national anthem plays, Abou and Falilou, both natives of West Africa, place their hands over their hearts and look toward the American flag.

When play begins, the hall becomes eerily quiet, except for the clicks of chess clocks and soft thumps of chess pieces filling the void.

The first day goes well for American Way.

Kenneth Hall's smile tells his story. The eighth-grader grabs two wins in the first two rounds. By 10 p.m., American Way is tied for the lead as the final games of the second round come to an end.

Kenneth wanders over to see how Latreze, his classmate, is faring against a Brooklyn girl with a rating nearly 300 points higher. Kenneth tells Mr. B that Latreze looks poised to pull an upset. He's up one pawn and in a solid position.

This is Kenneth at his best, the Kenneth who can be the most mature kid on the team. It is a long way from the Kenneth who got suspended for fighting with a classmate a month before the tournament.

Kenneth's mother says chess has helped him tame his temper and build his self-confidence.

"It has so enhanced his growth," says Latonya Higgins, who works for a local caterer.

Latreze, who lives with his mother and father, is the most sensitive kid on the team. Although built like an offensive lineman, he's the team's gentle, affable giant.

"If it wasn't for Mr. B, I don't think Trez would be where he is today," says his mother, Terrie. "He was shy and not very talkative. There's nothing he don't think he can do now, nothing in life he can't achieve."

Latreze easily deflects predictable cracks about his big frame, and he lets go an infectious cackle when explaining why he took up chess.

"I ain't gonna lie to you," he likes to say. "It was so I could get out of class like Kenneth Hall and them did."

As his teammates watch from a window high above the playing floor, Latreze captures another pawn. He gets up and prowls around the playing area, puffed up by the moment. But Latreze has violated one of Bulington's maxims: "Don't get too happy."

The Brooklyn girl, who plays at a school with chess resources Bulington can only dream about, takes her time before making a move. When she does, Latreze sees he has walked into a trap.

The game dwindles away from Latreze. The Brooklyn girl gets the point and Latreze is devastated.

American Way finishes the first day tied for first, but those losses sting. Abou and Latreze are two of the team's three best players (Falilou is the other), and need a near-flawless run for American Way to have a chance.

"Don't be down," says Abou. "I lost too."

But Latreze broods the entire way back to the hotel, not even the merry sounds of the Lovin' Spoonful - his favorite Mr. B music - able to stir his mood.

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When Latreze enters his coach's hotel room, Bulington sits across from him at a small, square table. Then he plops down his right elbow, raises his open hand and says, "We gotta settle this once and for all, dawg."

Mr. B had summoned him. With the tournament's longest day ahead of them, Bulington knew he needed deal with Latreze's sulking.

It takes Latreze a few seconds to realize what's going on. Mr. B wants to arm-wrestle his biggest, strongest student.

"What you doing?" Latreze asks, a grin sneaking up on him. "You just plain crazy."

Latreze drops his own elbow on the table, clasps Mr. B's hand and soon enough, pins it. Chris laughs. Latreze smiles. Bulington's face is red.

The mood has broken.

"OK, now we don't need to remember this anymore," Bulington says. "It's just a game."

Latreze isn't quite ready. He bemoans his crucial mistake, again.

"Latreze, are we here to win that game or the tournament?" Bulington says.

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During Saturday's disappointing three rounds, the team fell out of first and into the middle of the Top 10.

First thing Sunday morning, Bulington calls Memphis to tell everyone the situation. It's just like last year, when the elementary team at Oakhaven won the national title. Though 1.5 points out of first, American Way can win the junior high national K-8 title with a big sixth round - and even bigger seventh round.

The day begins with Abou Anne. When he tied for the Memphis Chess Club's city championship as a fifth-grader, Abou earned a nickname from the adult players he had defeated. They called him "Lucky Boy."

The players from American Way know they need some luck to win the national title.

Abou's sixth-round opponent wears a black cowboy hat and a T-shirt with George W. Bush, Dick Cheney and Donald Rumsfeld dressed as cowboys. Justice is coming, the T-shirt says. But it is Abou who delivers chess justice, winning in 23 swift moves.

Abou was a first grader when he met Bulington for the first time. Abou had escaped from his new classroom at Oakhaven Elementary.

Allisane, Abou's older brother, had asked Mr. B to help him find Abou, five years his junior. When they found him, in a crawlspace underneath the school, Abou would only say he didn't like being in the classroom.

When Bulington began the chess program two years later, in 2000, Allisane became one of the first students to adopt the game and show some ability. He took the game home to his family's apartment off Winchester near the airport. The two boys had come to Memphis from Senegal in 1999, two years after their parents arrived.

Like many in Memphis's West African community, their father, Cidy, found work at the casinos in Tunica, and their mother made money with hair-braiding skills she learned in Africa.

It wasn't long before Abou began challenging Allisane in their daily games of chess. When Abou began beating him, Allisane's interest in the game waned.

Bulington quickly recognized the precocious talent that was The Abou, as he came to call him. If his fierce approach to chess sometimes seems reckless - "There are times when Abou needs to be a python and not a cobra," Bulington says - then his aggressive personality sometimes seems too much for other teachers.

Two weeks before the tournament, Abou was nearly suspended when a girl in his classroom complained about his behavior.

He was a curious study in contrasts, The Abou.

Usually dressed with hip-hop flair, Abou wears new glasses that look like they belong to an English professor. He carried a copy of the violent video game, Grand Theft Auto: Vice City III, with him everywhere he went.

Abou talks about becoming a doctor one day, but Bulington is as worried about Abou's petulance as he is impressed by his fierce intelligence.

"He's got to learn to control himself," Bulington says. "Teachers don't have patience enough to see Abou for what he is. I really worry about him."

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Abou's teammates follow his sixth-round victory with solid but unspectacular results.

Falilou draws with an eighth-grader ranked in the 1800s, nearly 300 points ahead of him.

Latreze wins.

Kenneth wins.

Chris loses.

It is a strong round, but American Way still trails a team from the Bronx by 1.5 points. To win the national championship, every player on the team must win his final-round match. No draws, Bulington tells them.

"Here's what it all comes down to, the luck of the pairings," Bulington says.

In the first six rounds, players flip-flopped colors. If they play black pieces in the first round (meaning they moved second), they automatically receive white in the second round. There is a slight statistical advantage to playing white and moving first.

The seventh round, however, is assigned randomly. When Bulington sees the pairings, he cannot believe it. All five American Way players receive black. Four of them face higher-rated opponents.

"We need some help, and the pairings did not give us any," the coach says. "The odds of that are astronomical. But that can just make winning even sweeter."

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*The Lennox Lewis Chess Team, 2004*

*Kevin Prier, 5th grade, Getwell Elementary  
Carter Bulington, 6th grade, Campus School  
Abou Anne, 6th grade, American Way Middle  
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Cedric Prier, 9th grade, Wooddale High  
Adama Diallo, 9th grade, Wooddale High  
Abdoulaye Diallo, 9th grade, Wooddale High*

## **Tenacity this team's strength**

*The big board at the U.S. Chess Federation's Junior High Chess Championship listed the competitors in various sections.*

*In all, more than 1,200 kids were competing for different titles at the Tucson Convention Center, and there were more than 200 school-affiliated teams from around the country.*

*At the top of the board, the two most important tournaments took a place of honor - the K-9 open championship section and K-8 open championship section, with the latter considered tougher and more competitive since there were 133 more players and 17 more teams.*

*The Lennox Lewis Chess Team from Memphis's American Way Middle School was in that tougher K-8 division, and they had prepared for three grueling days of competition.*

*At national tournaments, there are seven rounds of games - two on Friday, three on Saturday and two final games on Sunday. Each player in each game receives up to two hours of time in which to complete moves, which means a game can go more than four hours (clocks have a five-second time-delay mechanism).*

*Much to the delight of Jeff Bulington, the Lennox Lewis team's coach, his players often are among the final competitors on the floor, pushing their opponents to the very limit. Bulington makes his players apply the most classic techniques of pure position chess, eschewing what he calls the "cheap tactics" and gimmicks that many scholastic players use to bring about a quick ending.*

*Thus, long and exhausting games which, he believes, play to his guys' greatest strength - the tenacity and perseverance learned growing up in Memphis.*

*"It's funny how character traits start coming out, things like tenacity and will," Bulington said at one point, waiting for a game to finish. "It's more animalistic than you think."*

**Coming Wednesday:** The team battles for the title, then says goodbye to its coach.  
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## **PART FIVE**

### **Endgame -- Most painful move wasn't on chessboard**

Commercial Appeal, The (Memphis, TN) - Wednesday, December 29, 2004

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About this series

*From January through May 2004 **Zack McMillin** spent hundreds of hours with the Lennox Lewis Chess Team, a remarkable collection of kids in the Memphis City Schools who competed with the best scholastic chess players in the country for state and national titles.*

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With their hopes fading, the Lennox Lewis Chess Team needs a tenacious final round - and lots of luck - to take the junior high national championship they so badly want to win for their departing coach, Mr. B.

On the playing floor at the Tucson Convention Center things are not going well for American Way Middle School's four remaining chess players - especially The Abou.

Abou Anne, the seventh-grader nicknamed 'Lucky Boy' by his adult opponents back in Memphis, is in a losing position. But he remembers what his coach said before this final round began. The Lennox Lewis Chess Team is 1.5 points out of first. To win the U.S. Chess Federation's K-8 national championship, every player needs to win his final-round game. A draw, worth only half a point, won't help.

So Abou takes huge risks, trying to change his game, trying to find some unseen opening. When American Way won the team state championship in March, Abou's aggressive maneuver against one of the highest-rated players in Tennessee seemed desperate until it worked and salvaged a draw.

"He just never quits," the opponent had said.

This time nothing works. Abou falls down one piece, then two. His opponent goes up a queen. That is when most chess players concede. No use prolonging the torture. No need to endure the humiliation.

Not Abou. He continues to play until checkmate is forced on him.

"Can you believe that?" coach Jeff Bulington says. "Down a queen, and he fights on."

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As tables begin clearing of players and chessboards, things are looking grim for American Way.

Kenneth Hall wins. He's 2-0 for the day after a disastrous 0-3 Saturday. Kenneth will finish 82nd and will have seen his rating rise 300 points since Bulington threatened to boot him from the team in February.

Latreze Townsend wins, giving the team another glimmer of hope.

But Chris Harbert, his time about to run out, takes a draw.

And Falilou Keita, playing yet another opponent rated hundreds of points ahead of him, finally accepts a draw.

Falilou shakes hands with his opponent, carries his board and pieces to a tournament director and walks toward Bulington and his teammates.

Bulington hugs him.

"Well, that's it," he says, as they walk out of the doors to the tournament area.

American Way finishes sixth with 18.0 points, 2.0 points out of first. That's no consolation for the former champs. If anything, it makes it more painful knowing a half-point here and a half-point there could have earned them second place.

Falilou, with 5.0 points, ties for 31st in the tournament. Nobody else on the team finishes in the Top 50: Abou is 66th, Latreze 70th, Chris 76th and Kenneth is 82nd.

As they wait to pick up their trophy, Abou is taking it especially hard. Bulington tries to comfort him.

"Fighting down two queens," Mr. B says. "How many people would do that?"

"Not many," Falilou says, trying to cheer up his friend.

"You are either crazy or you are Abou," Bulington says. "That's what makes the Abou the Abou."

This doesn't budge Abou. He says nothing.

"Someday," Bulington says, "a son or daughter is going to be proud you are their father. That's fighting against the tide, man."

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As the desert sun breaks above the northeast horizon ahead of the van, the jagged shoulders of Arizona's Dragoon Mountains emerge from the softening shadows.

The Lennox Lewis Chess Team is heading home from Tucson. The sixth-place trophy is stuffed in the back, and the five kids from Memphis's American Way Middle School are deep into a hard sleep.

Bulington puts the cool, melodic music of the Velvet Underground on the stereo and, surrounded by the vastness of the desert and the mountains, begins adjusting to his new reality.

This is it, his last trip with the guys before moving back to Indiana to finish his PhD in philosophy. In the four years he has run a chess program in the Memphis City Schools - first at Oakhaven Elementary, now at American Way - he has grown to love and admire these kids.

They have proven, with their tenacity and intelligence, that children from humble circumstances can compete with anybody. Now it's coming to an end, at least when it comes to Bulington's all-day, every-day, no-stipend involvement.

"I'm really going to miss this, believe me," Bulington says.

He'd wanted it to end with another national championship, a junior-high title to go with the elementary national title they'd won in 2003. He'd wanted it to end like the movie he'd watched back in February, the one about the U.S. hockey team beating the Soviets and the famous line from the sportscaster: "Do you believe in miracles?!"

But maybe that would have been too perfect. After all, as the kids hear Mr. B say all the time, you learn much more from defeats than from triumphs.

"With a little luck it might've worked out different than it did," Mr. B says. "They very well might have won it. Certain strategic lessons take longterm pain. And there is always the promise of next year."

A few weeks later a long U-Haul truck crouches, ramp protruding from its back gate, just a few blocks away from the High Point Grocery.

It is moving day for the Bulington family. Most of their possessions are boxed and stacked on the living room's hardwood floor.

Bulington's wife, Susanne, has labeled the boxes: Jeff's books. Kitchen stuff. Carter's clothes. Ellen's toys. Chess stuff. Philosophy books. Computer room.

Mark Beatty, a neighbor who volunteers as the chess coach at Grahamwood, is helping Bulington move the heaviest items - couches, chairs, tables.

"Mark, we are in the endgame," Bulington says. "The king is leaving the fortress."

Maria Harbert arrives with sons Carlos and Chris. It has been two months since Charles, their father and the team's assistant coach, died of pancreatic cancer, and she looks as if she has finally gotten some rest after so many months of caring for her husband.

Kenneth Hall's mother, LaTonya, has taken a break from her job with a local caterer to bring her son, still with the black cast on his right leg.

Latreze Townsend, the team's gentle giant, has arrived with his mother, Terrie, a deputy at the county jail. Latreze got her to pick up Falilou Keita and Abou Anne from their apartments near the airport, where they live in Memphis's growing community of West Africans.

They've brought chips and dip and sodas and they want to say farewell to their teacher, their coach, their mentor.

The present him with a plaque and an engraved desk set. A white cake sits on the stove, decorated with red and blue icing. It says:

*We Will Miss You*

*Mr. B*

*Lennox Lewis Chess Team*

"It's been our pleasure knowing you all," Bulington says. "We are going to miss you."

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By 5 that afternoon it has stopped raining, and the minivan belonging to the Diallos parks across the street.

Abdoulaye and Adama Diallo follow their father, Bou Bou, to greet Bulington. Bou Bou wears a colorful African robe and skullcap, while his sons go with oversized blue jeans and baggy shirts. But Bou Bou's exuberant attire does not match his mood.

He is sad. Mr. B, the man he calls the "professor" of his children, is leaving. Before this day is over Bou Bou will lower his head to cry and to say a prayer to Allah.

"I am not glad," Bou Bou says. "What he did for the children very important. Her too. Get somebody like him not easy. He never tired. He ride them. He feed them. He advise them. He's got good heart."

After everyone leaves Bulington finds four homemade cards on a table in his apartment.

The construction-paper covers are decorated with chess motifs, and the words are handwritten.

There is one from Chris Harbert.

*The Best Chess Coach Ever*

*Hey, Mr. B. It's Chris. Just saying hi and telling you I am going to miss you. I know everybody will. But I know I will. Because you done everything to help us. Don't forget us.*

There is one from Falilou.

*Thank you for teaching me how to play chess. You took me to places I would never see. I never thought that I would be on TV, either, talking about chess, or I'd see Lennox Lewis beat Mike.*

*You introduced me to Chicago pizza. I earned A's playing a game that I love that you taught me.*

*Mr. B, you made all this possible for me and I will never forget you.*

*Falilou Keita*

*P.S. I didn't forget the promise I made to you. Remember that. I said that when I have kids that I'll teach them how to play chess.*

There is one from Abou.

*Thanks Mr. B for All the things you helped us with. I don't know how to repay you. You got us out of trouble, helped me with schoolwork, taught me how to control my temper. You helped me do a lot of good things.*

*I hope god repays you for all the things you did.*

The last one is from Kenneth Hall, and it says, simply: *Thank you, Mr. B.*

Kenneth had already given his teacher a going-away gift, even if he didn't know it.

On the way back from Tucson, with the team refueling at a truck stop in the desert, he told Mr. B about a recurring dream he'd had while sleeping in the van.

In it, there is a sense that someone is going to die, or that some terrible thing is about to happen.

"And then Mr. B, it's like he's got this piece of fruit or something," Kenneth says. "When we eat it, it's like we are transported into another world."

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## EPILOGUE

## **'...how much those guys taught me' -- Coach, many players reunited at appropriate venue - a tournament**

Commercial Appeal, The (Memphis, TN) - Wednesday, December 29, 2004

Author/Byline: Zack McMillin zmcmillin@commercialappeal.com

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When he walked into the ballroom at the East Memphis hotel, Jeff Bulington wondered how he would respond.

The players on his chess team - or, rather, the kids he once coached on Memphis's championship Lennox Lewis Chess Team - were playing in the Memphis Chess Classic, an annual local tournament benefiting muscular dystrophy.

He had come from West Lafayette, Ind., where his family relocated after eight years in Memphis, and it had been four months since he drove the team back from Tucson, Ariz., after a sixth-place finish at the U.S. Chess Federation's K-8 nationals.

When he spotted Cedric Prier, now a 10th-grader at Wooddale, engaged in a chess brawl with the 2004 K-12 national champion, Bulington felt himself tugged back into the world that had so transformed his life, and those of the kids he taught chess.

"Of course they looked a little weak and vulnerable to me," Bulington said. "But it was great to see 'em. Ced, he had David Justice killed, and along came the endgame. Ced always gets a little nervous."

Ced lost, but Bulington was pleased to see that 'The Abou' - Abou Anne, a native of Senegal now in the seventh grade - played well enough to win \$140. Only Falilou Keita, the burgeoning eighth-grade chess master from Guinea, was not there; Mr. B found himself trekking to Falilou's new apartment - the family moved after his father was mugged during the summer - to talk with Falilou's father about allowing Falilou away from family duties to spend more time with chess.

More than anything, Bulington was just happy to be around the kids again. Many of them had visited Jeff, Susanne and the kids during the summer, and Mr. B had taken them to his hometown of Monon, Ind.

"I have a great picture of Abou on a tractor," Bulington said. "I told him not to start it. Of course, he started it."

Until October, however, Bulington said he had not so much as considered a game of chess since leaving Memphis for good in May. He was completing his PhD, in something called the philosophy of curriculums, with the idea of completing a dissertation that showed the necessary value of play in the process of learning.

One of the classes he taught this fall - "Exploring Teaching as a Career."

Oh, the stories Bulington can tell.

"I definitely have a different perspective, after eight years in Memphis," Bulington said. "People do not realize how much those guys taught me."

Those guys are still together, still sponsored in part by Lennox Lewis, and now under the direction of American Way Middle guidance counselor Michael McCrory and University of Memphis psychology professor Ronnie Priest.

*Abou Anne is a seventh- grader at American Way.*

*Falilou Keita is an eighth-grader at American Way.*

*Kevin Prier is a sixth-grader at American Way.*

*Latreze Townsend is a ninth-grader at Houston High. His mother and father moved from the city during the summer, but he's still participating in practices and tournaments.*

*Chris Harbert and Kenneth Hall decided to join their older teammates at Wooddale High.*

*Abdoulaye Diallo , who tied for second place at the 2003 junior-high nationals, is an 11th-grader at Wooddale High but has not been playing tournament chess this fall.*

*His brother, Adama Diallo , is a sophomore at Wooddale and still playing chess.*

*Cedric Prier and Carlos Harbert are 10th-graders at Wooddale. Carlos recently finished eighth in the country among 10th-graders at the grade-level nationals.*

## **Learning life one move at a time**

Commercial Appeal, The (Memphis, TN) - Wednesday, December 29, 2004

Author/Byline: Jeff Bulington

Edition: Final

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*Under the lens of chess, kids who were perceived as weak in mathematics could suddenly look quite strong, says teacher Jeff Bulington.*

*Bulington spent eight years as a Memphis City Schools teacher. During his last four years with the district he also taught and coached chess.*

Zack McMillin 's "Chess Kings" series, about my final season as coach of the Lennox Lewis Chess Team, takes me back to a time when we were simply a small group of kids from Oakhaven Elementary School and their teacher.

I had just finished my third year of teaching there when I was given the task of helping other teachers transition from the old "abstract" basal methods of math instruction toward something more pertinent to the lived experiences of the children.

I was really excited about the assignment because it involved the extensive use of mathematical games. I was convinced that there was a place in that process for chess, the single greatest mathematical game ever invented and a childhood passion of mine.

One of the strengths of chess as an educational tool is that it blurs the distinction between work and play. Playing chess can be simple and carefree entertainment, or it can be as serious as a heart attack.

It can be used to teach basic reading, arithmetic and geometry, or to develop highly sophisticated spatial reasoning skills. It can reach kids at all levels of interest.

Chess also teaches important social and academic skills. Kids learn to control their impulses, manage time, respect their opponents, value preparation and hard work, appreciate the beauty of logic, take responsibility for their actions and persevere in hard times.

I had the good fortune of teaching in a school that had a principal, Melanie Landrum, who understood this and created a place in Oakhaven's curriculum for me to teach mathematics through chess.

Making chess part of the school day at Oakhaven was crucial. Treating it as an academic subject was the school's way of saying that chess was not merely a recreational activity, but a serious subject worthy of study in its own right.

Chess gave teachers an entirely different way of looking at kids. Traits such as stubbornness and single-mindedness, which are too often treated categorically as "problems," became virtues. Under the lens of chess, kids who were perceived as weak in mathematics could suddenly look quite strong. In a math curriculum dominated by arithmetic operations, related talents in spatial reasoning often go unnoticed or under-appreciated. Chess is another important way of seeing how kids do math.

This "game" can tell us more about a child's character and cunning than any TCAP score could ever hope to reveal. It can also carve out a legitimate place in the curriculum for the flesh-and-blood wisdom of parents like Charles Harbert - a wisdom not found in books.

Many people - too many for me to be able to thank by name in this limited space - reached out to help with our chess program.

Oakhaven Elementary's corporate sponsors, The Airport Authority and Catherines Corp., were there from the beginning and always willing to support team or schoolwide chess activities.

Lennox Lewis made much of our later travel possible and showed the kids how small the world can be.

Associate Supt. Dr. Marieta Harris of Memphis City Schools actively supported the initiative to make chess available throughout the school system.

Oakhaven teachers such as Charles Chandler, Barbara Peppel (my all-time favorite teacher), Mary Whalen, Carolyn Rich, Melinda Skelton, Candy Pollan, Theresa Young, Joy Bentley and Marsha Pauley all modeled lifelong learning as they learned chess along with their students.

Several adult members of the Memphis Chess Club embraced the kids and taught them chess by struggling with them over the chess board. They include Allan Bogle, Tony Maneclang, Gary Pylant, Mike Sansom, Carlos Sims, Aaron Smith and Patrick Butler.

Former scholastic chess champion B. J. Wade gave moral and financial support, and many outstanding scholastic players befriended and challenged us. These included national champion Evan Mah, Mike Ross, Jonathan Wade, David Kernell, Jonathan Beatty and Adeline Brown.

Bill Cummings of the Tennessee Chess Association taught me how to run a chess tournament and offered much-appreciated advice.

We also learned a great deal from the stalwart chess program at Grahamwood Elementary School. That amazing program was started by Dr. Robert Schoumacher and is now run by my dear friend (and former mortal chess enemy) Mark Beatty.

It would be difficult to overstate the impact of grandmaster Sam Palatnik, who brought the history of chess alive for us and showed us that the game is nothing less than a mirror of life.

Dr. Ronnie Priest of the University of Memphis dedicated hundreds of hours to playing chess with the kids. They also received valuable instruction from Jake Kleiman and R. O. Mitchell, both great examples of what Tennessee chess players can achieve.

My wife, Susanne, and our children have been fortunate in sharing our lives and our home with the team.

Most of all, though, I am very proud of the children who put all of these opportunities to good use.

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*The Oakhaven Elementary School chess team, which became sponsored by former*

*heavyweight boxing champion Lennox Lewis, won state and national championships under Jeff Bulington's guidance.*

*Bulington has returned to Purdue University in West Lafayette, Ind., to finish his PhD in curriculum studies.*

## **Readers respond to city's chess kings**

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It is with great encouragement that I read about the accomplishments of the Lennox Lewis Chess Team. My hope is that all of this community (particularly the hopefully rare teacher who expressed that the children of a school were better off as abortions) is encouraged as well. Thank God that the team's coach and new teacher to this area, Mr. Bulington, didn't succumb to the locally spread poison about what a failure the whole city system is. Just maybe his great work and that of his team will influence those in the county system to at least, for all of our sake, partner with the city system wherever and whenever possible to build on the great things happening in each system. After all, the constant separatism in our schools is only supporting a divide in our society at large. If life's experiences haven't taught us yet that we can achieve more working together, then what is the value of a supposedly better educated society.

As I said before, I am encouraged, mostly by the fact that others in this community have yet another opportunity to see the great works of the Memphis City Schools system. I have had and continue to have many first-hand opportunities to see their great works, through the system's products that result in successes. I have twin graduates of the system who have just completed a successful first semester in two of this country's great universities and they have many high school friends who have done and are doing the same, realizing successes. So when I look at the system, I choose the perspective that the glass is half full. My hope for the future of our city is that others just try it sometimes.

Kudos to Kevin Prier, Carter Bulington, Abou Anne, Falilou Keita, Latreze Townsend, Kenneth Hall, Chris Harbert, Carlos Harbert, Cedric Prier, Adama Diallo, Abdoulaye Diallo, Mr. Bulington, the late Mr. Harbert and all of the other parents and supporters of this fine effort. Also, it pleases me immensely that Mr. Bulington can leave our city knowing first hand that good things do go on in our Memphis City School System. Spread the news, Mr. Bulington!

Angella Battle

Cordova

Like most men, the first thing I read in the paper is the Sports. I am not a chess player but

( **Zack McMillin** 's) initial article caught my eye. Since that day the first thing in the sports I have read is the series.

What a wonderful story. Not only about the kids, Jeff Bulington, but the parents. Like our forefathers, these parents left their native lands and moved to the United States for a better way of life.

Leaving a culture you know to come to an unknown one has to be very difficult. To see the changes in the kids and the parents is wonderful.

(Zack is) to be commended for weaving this wonderful story. I hope that in the future there will be followup stories to this series.

I am not sure if chess is considered a sport but it is heartwarming to get away from the negatives we see so often in the sports world.

Woody Galyean

Southaven

I just wanted to write a little note to tell you how much I'm enjoying the series on chess and the Lennox Lewis team. I've always looked forward to teaching my kids how to play and your writing is very inspiring. (Son) Calvin's birthday is next week, he'll be 7, and I believe he'll be getting his first chess set as a gift.

Richard Alley

Memphis

I have never read an article in The CA that has moved me as much as (the chess) series has. Not only did you describe the events, but you so beautifully captured the spirit and love among the kids and Mr. Bulington. They are an inspiration to all of us.

Thank you for working so hard to share this important story with us.

Paula Jacobson

Memphis

Dear Mr. McMillin,

Thank you, thank you for the beautifully written, inspiring, and moving story about the young chess playing team coached by the incredible Jeff Bulington. I, who rarely read the sports pages, found myself totally absorbed by each article. At a time like this, when we all are in a state of shock over the horrendous happenings in the world, it was so heartening and life-affirming to read of these young men and their wonderful coach.

I will certainly follow their careers - and yours - in the years to come.

Judy Korones

Memphis