



PHOTOGRAPH BY CARLOS ALEJANDRO

TO THE VICTOR GO THE SPOILS: All it takes to put on a major event is time to organize, space to play and, of course, a fair amount of money. The Main Line Chess Club president is confident that a corporate sponsor will eventually step forward.

Chairman of the Board

To its devotees, chess is far more than a game. Mild-mannered John Bayley loves it so much, he wants to attract a world-class tournament to the Philadelphia area.

JOHN BAYLEY, 77, wanted to retire. Instead, he became chairman of the board—chess board, that is.

On any given Tuesday evening at Waverly Heights Care Retirement Community in Gladwyne, the card lounge and art room brim with Bayley's peers in the Main Line Chess Club, a group of players from all over the Main Line and surrounding area. They range from schoolchildren to retirees, from novices to masters, and they gather at Waverly Heights in search of worthy opponents.

Don't let the appearance of two frozen players staring at the board fool you into thinking they are doing nothing less than waging war. Chess is anything but a game of chance. It is a tabletop battle of royal proportions laid out and played out on a 64-square checkerboard between two 16-piece armies. Each man moves in a specific way to defend his king

while trying to corner and topple the opposing king. Chess is complex and relentless. Its strategies require supreme logic, memory and foresight. No wonder that, even in today's high-tech world, it remains as fierce, as daunting and as satisfying to play—at least for the victor—as when it emerged from India in the seventh century.

Which is exactly what lured Bayley out of retirement. In the same way chess is played, Bayley has unleashed a new strategy for the club, one he is no less ferocious about achieving, but one that, unlike chess, lets all players win.

"I have three distinct dreams and goals for the club," he says with a trace of his native Tennessee drawl. "I wanted to create a friendly, comfortable place where anyone of any skill level can have a real chess challenge, to encourage and support young people to study and play the game, and to put

Philadelphia on the chess map.”

The Main Line Chess Club is the area’s oldest. Since becoming its president about eight years ago, when the incumbent president retired to Florida, Bayley has given his time, talents and, sometimes, his own money to the organization.

Most chess players learn the game as children. Bayley, however, had no time to study or play until he had finished medical school. He then moved to Philadelphia to train at Children’s Hospital, where he later worked in the outpatient department. He

left the area for several years to direct the pediatric outpatient department at the Medical College of Virginia, then settled in Gladwyne in the late 1970s to start a thriving practice in pediatric medicine and a career in academia while helping with a research project at Jefferson Hospital. He also helped to set up the pediatric departments at Crozer Chester Hospital and St. Francis Hospital in Trenton, New Jersey. Bayley still lives in the same Gladwyne house he bought 37 years ago.

Bayley was enjoying a state of semi-re-

tirement when he accepted a position as a pediatrician at the Youth Development Center in Bensalem, a residential correctional facility for teenage boys. In the mornings there, Bayley would often play chess with one of his coworkers, a dentist. “It wasn’t long before some of these kids got wind of this,” Bayley says. “They’d stop by our office to see what was going on. First they started watching us play, then they started hounding us with questions, and eventually they begged us to teach them. It soon got to the point where they were bragging to their buddies, ‘Hey, I beat the doc at chess this morning.’”

Bayley noticed something. As the boys’ games improved, so did their behavior. Delinquent kids who had seen real war on the streets became noticeably more civil toward each other through the ritualized warfare of chess. “It astounded me how quickly these kids turned themselves around,” Bayley says. “They weren’t just playing a game of chess. They were also learning how to shake hands and play fair and to respect and abide by a set of rules and regulations. Their behavior, patience, and impulses dramatically improved as well.”

So as he contemplated his nearing retirement, Bayley considered devoting more time and attention to the boardgame. “I thought that, this time around, it might be fun to join a cadre of old men sipping sherry, sitting by the fire, playing chess.”

Bayley bought a chess set and a book on the game, then joined the U.S. Chess Federation. As a member of USCF, he started receiving chess magazines, which listed clubs, including one that met in the annex of Ludington Library in Bryn Mawr. “I figured, ‘What have I got to lose, except maybe a few games of chess every now and again?’”

Despite Bayley’s standing in the medical community and a career that included teaching and frequent public speaking engagements, he was painfully bashful. His first meeting with the unfriendly, unwelcoming members of the club exacerbated the old anxiety he’d felt before addressing large groups of people in medical school. “I knew that if I had felt shy and panic-stricken, then maybe other new and prospective members might be feeling the same way, too,” Bayley says. He recalled old lessons learned at Toastmasters (which

led to winning several public-speaking tournaments), and he applied them to the Main Line Chess Club.

“I figured the best way to start was to lead by example,” Bayley says. “I was friendly and outgoing, thanked people for coming out to the chess club, and made it a point to acknowledge them to everyone else in the room. This had a tremendous impact.”

Membership swelled. So did the need for more playing space. “The folks at Waverly Heights in Gladwyne were generous and gracious enough to allow our club to meet there,” Bayley says. “There was simply no other place around that had all the amenities and facilities that Waverly Heights had. And of course, it’s BYOB—bring your own board.”

Today the Main Line Chess Club has nearly 120 members. No one has to show up and play every week. But when they do, they can expect to be paired with opponents at or above their USCF rating (based on their win-loss records). The club has a mix of novices, experienced players and a handful who have achieved USCF master status.

Dan Heisman of Wynnewood is a full-time national master instructor and author of seven books on chess, as well as vice-president of the Main Line club. He is proud of Bayley’s unflagging efforts to make the game more visible and credible in the community.

“He wants to do everything right by this club, and does so with a certain elegance,” Heisman says. “Dr. Bayley has vision—and I don’t just mean board vision when he’s playing chess. He’s taken this club from some local group and made it into one of the top chess clubs there is. He’s truly earnest and sincere in helping others to learn and love this game.”

Rory Wasiolek agrees. “I’m addicted to chess,” says the 17 year-old senior at Devon Prep. He joined the Main Line Chess Club three years ago with his father, and they have played there steadily ever since. “This is one of the few chess clubs that have USFC-rated games every week. There’s a wide playing field here, so novices won’t feel intimidated.”

Wasiolek also feels as strongly about the club’s president. “Dr. Bayley is great for everything. He makes everyone feel like they fit right in. Chess is the ability to

pitch yourself against someone else on an intellectual battlefield. No game is ever the same, and there are an infinite number of possible moves to play. Your mind is always engaged and stimulated.”

Such reasons brought Tony Durkin of Upper Darby into the fold. He joined the Main Line Chess Club soon after he won a chess tournament at work about a year ago. The last time he was a chess champion, he was a senior in college more than 30 years ago. Now in his 50s, Durkin is ecstatic about returning to the game.

“After I won that chess tournament at work, it positively fired me up to get back to the game,” avows Durkin. “This club provides a non-threatening, friendly setting to play competitively ranked chess with people of all ages and skill levels. Dr. Bayley is a wonderful representation of what chess is all about and of what this club hopes to achieve in raising the bar for chess in this area.”

Bayley’s next gambit? Like a well-calculated chess maneuver, he has set his sights on garnering the necessary funds from local businesses to help sponsor a top-drawer tournament in the area, one that would attract the best players from around the globe and an equally stellar cache of prize money.

An impossible move? Maybe not.

USFC vice president Steve Shutt, the chess coach at Masterman High School in Philadelphia, said that hosting a major tourney in our area boils down to space, money and manpower.

“Whether it’s a scholastic tournament or an internationally recognized invitational event attracting the world’s best players, the criteria remains the same—a large, comfortable playing space, sufficient accommodations and transportation for your players, a staff of volunteers to oversee the event, and a deep well of prize money.”

Bayley remains steadfast in his belief that some local corporation will apply its combined financial firepower and marquee starpower with similar gusto.

Now *that* might take luck.

Main Line Chess Club meets every Tuesday evening from 7 p.m. to 10 p.m. at Waverly Heights Life Care Retirement Community, 1400 Waverly Road, Gladwyne. Players of all ages and skill levels welcome. Call (610) 649-5735. ◆