

# The RESURGENCE of AMERICAN CHESS



2017 Ultimate Moves Match.

SAINT LOUIS CHESS CLUB/LENNART OOTES

## GATEWAY TO THE NEW CHESS WORLD

BY GARRY KASPAROV  
Legendary World Champion

2018 will be an eventful year in the chess world. This November, Magnus Carlsen, the reigning world champion, will defend his crown against Fabiano Caruana, who last week became the first American since Bobby Fischer in 1972 to become the challenger for the undisputed World Chess Championship.

Such a pairing would have sounded fantastical when I was climbing the chess Olympus in the 1980s, back when the mighty Soviet chess machine to which I belonged boasted a majority of the world's elite players. Consider that Carlsen captured the title from Viswanathan Anand of India in 2013, and now, a Norwegian versus an American! Thanks largely to a generation raised with super-strong chess computers and the internet, chess has become truly global.

Just as remarkably, to the extent that chess has a new center of gravity it is the United States, and in particular, Saint Louis, Missouri. Caruana won the right to challenge Carlsen by winning the Candidates Tournament on March 27, 2018 in Berlin. Among the eight players in that tournament were two Americans: Caruana and Wesley So. Both live in Saint Louis.

Nor is this new, chess-centric Spirit of Saint Louis limited to hosting elite players. The upcoming championship clash will be followed live online by millions of spectators watching a broadcast from Saint Louis. That's where three superbly entertaining Grandmasters will break down each move from a studio in the basement of the local chess club, a few blocks from Forest Park. These broadcasts have become a way for chess to transcend its small traditional audience, even if my cherished game is not quite ready to compete with the Super

Bowl for viewers.

This April, the second floor of the same building will host the U.S. Chess Championships for the 10th consecutive year. Nearly half the participants in the U.S. Chess Championship will be Saint Louisian: Of the top 10 American players, not only Caruana and So but also Ray Robson and Varuzhan Akobian now live there. Top international players also flock to the Gateway City. In August, the world's best will compete there in the sixth annual Sinquefield Cup, one of the world's strongest events.

This feast of chess talent is a classic American melting pot. Caruana was born in Miami, learned to play in Brooklyn, and spent most of his teenage years in Europe. So, the current U.S. Champion, was born in the Philippines, Akobian in Armenia, and Robson in Guam. So and Robson both moved to Saint Louis to attend Webster University in Saint Louis's suburbs, on chess scholarships. Webster's powerhouse team, coached by the Hungarian-born Grandmaster Susan Polgar, won the U.S. college championship five years running through last year. (Saint Louis University was a credible third in 2017).

How did all of this come to pass? You can work your way back by following the money, but money without passion is often squandered. In this case, it leads you back to a man, and a family, with a remarkable passion for chess.

In 2005, Rex Sinquefield, a Saint Louis native who had made a fortune in the financial services business, moved back home. One of his goals was policy influence; a conservative-libertarian, Sinquefield is now Missouri's biggest—and therefore most controversial—political donor. But it was a lower-profile Sinquefield project that may turn out to have even longer-lasting influence in

## Why Chess in Saint Louis?

BY RANDY BAUER  
Board of Directors,  
United States Chess Federation

Ten years ago, I was having lunch with Rex Sinquefield, discussing the possibility of doing a study on the City of Saint Louis' finances. At one point, the conversation turned to chess, and Rex's passion for the game was immediately evident. I mentioned that the U.S. Championship was looking for a sponsor, and he expressed interest.

I've been in literally thousands of similar types of business and civic meetings over the years, and few 'expressions of interest' ever pan out. None of those meetings, however, were with Rex Sinquefield. A contract was signed a few months later and the first of what will be 10 consecutive U.S. Championships was held in grand fashion at the similarly grand Saint Louis Chess Club (STLCC).

In the following years, besides the U.S. Championship, Saint Louis has hosted major international tournaments (the flagship being the Sinquefield Cup, which regularly attracts the world's champions and top contenders), matches and other

national, state and regional events. It has become THE constant in U.S. chess—a beacon and gravitational force that regularly attracts 'the best and the brightest' to the STLCC and the city.

The best players in the U.S.—and the world—have taken note. It is no accident that the top board on the 2016 U.S. gold medal winning Olympiad team Grandmaster Fabiano Caruana is a Saint Louis resident, and teammate Roy Robson attended college in the city. Former World Champion Garry Kasparov, commenting on the U.S. victory at the Olympiad, tweeted, "Rex Sinquefield and his CCSCSL are the beating heart of Team USA. He deserves a medal from chess!" Grandmaster Ben Finegold sums it up nicely: "Everyone in the world knows this chess club."

While the accolades of the world's elite are noteworthy, equally impressive are the opportunities it provides to players at all levels—particularly kids. Rex and Jeanne Sinquefield are passionate about educational achievement for all, and they and the club are putting chess in local schools throughout Saint Louis. As former U.S. Women's Champion Jennifer

Shahade puts it, "this is the Mecca of chess. Obviously, the financial contributions are so considerable and so generous. But a lot of the passion to donate money is that Rex really absolutely loves chess and sees the multifaceted nature of the game."

The recent heightened interest in chess in the U.S. is on display in movies, TV, magazines and advertisements. I would venture to say that much of that interest can be traced back to Saint Louis. Grandmaster Maurice Ashley explains it this way: "I think the American chess scene has become much stronger because of what's happening in Saint Louis. The magic of the STLCC. The fact that they bring so many top, elite events to the U.S. Because of that, everyone's inspired. Everyone—from the top players down to the collegiate ranks down to the scholastic level. And that's going to continue. It's a runaway train right now."

World Champion Kasparov echoed this sentiment in a fitting tribute to Rex's vision: "now, here in Saint Louis, we are facing the renaissance of the great game of chess."

 Saint Louis  
CHESS CLUB

 WORLD  
CHESS  
HALL OF FAME

## Saint Louis Chess Club 10 Year Anniversary Celebration

TUESDAY, JULY 17 | 10 A.M. – 10 P.M.

Join us as we celebrate the Saint Louis Chess Club's ten year anniversary with family-friendly activities, live performances, simul games, special programs, and more on the Chess Campus.





# U.S. Chess Championships

**BY ALEX ONISCHUK**  
Grandmaster

The 2009 U.S. Chess Championship in Saint Louis started a new era in American chess, and the Saint Louis Chess Club is the driving force behind chess in our country. The Club hosts the U.S. Championship each year, but it does a lot more than that!

The Club organizes a lot of events for scholastic and junior players. It runs GM and IM norm tournaments, and it provides support for our national teams. All this activity has motivated many players, including myself, to work harder on our chess. The U.S. Championship has, as a result, become a much stronger event in just a few years.

I have played in all the U.S. Chess Championships in Saint Louis. The exceptional organization and fantastic atmosphere make the event very special. People travel to Saint Louis from every corner of America to watch the games, and it is nice to see so many chess fans at the Chess Club. I always have friends that come to Saint Louis to support me during the U.S. Championships.

I also enjoy watching all the broadcasts from Saint Louis. The students at Texas Tech follow all the major tournaments in Saint Louis on a big TV screen in my office.

In the past ten years I have spent so much time in Saint Louis that it feels like my second home. I have made thousands of chess moves at the Chess Club and I have walked every trail in Forest Park. One of my greatest memories in chess is our team preparation for the 2012 Chess Olympiad in Istanbul at Rex and Jeanne Sinquefield's farmhouse.

I'm very grateful to everyone who makes the U.S. Championship and other events in Saint Louis so great, and I'm looking forward to new tournaments at the Chess Club, both as a player and a spectator.



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● Playoff between GM Alex Onischuk and GM Wesley So during the 2017 U.S. Championship

● 2009 U.S. Chess Championship Field

● GM Hikaru Nakamura contemplates his next move during Round 10 of the 2015 U.S. Chess Championship

● GM Sam Sevian vs. GM Ray Robson during Round 9 of the 2015 U.S. Chess Championship

● GM Alex Onischuk during Round 1 of the 2016 U.S. Chess Championship.



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# U.S. Women's Chess Championships

**BY JENNIFER SHAHADE**  
Woman Grandmaster, author, and commentator

In the stunning galleries of the Contemporary Art Museum (CAM), Anna Zatonskih buried her head in her hands, her eyes covered with a thick black scarf. Anna Zatonskih played a five board blindfold simultaneous exhibition, much to the delight of visitors and fans, spellbound by the magnificent mental spectacle. The last man standing was tournament sponsor, Rex Sinquefeld, the president of the Saint Louis Chess Club. Rex resigned. Anna, after two hours, five victories, and zero losses could remove the scarf and see the light again.

The 2009 U.S. Women's Chess Championship, at the time a standalone event, kicked off with a Community Day and opening ceremonies at CAM. In addition to Anna's breathtaking simul, there was my own favorite, hula chess, glamour photo shoots, and a group blindfold game.

The Women's Championship was held for the first time in Saint Louis in 2009. Anna Zatonskih won the ten-player round robin event with a magnificent 8.5/9, for a performance rating of 2765, the standard of a "Super Grandmaster."

In 2010, the event returned to Saint Louis and Irina Krush nearly matched Anna's incredible record, scoring 8/9 for a performance over 2650.

Starting in 2011, the tournament was organized in conjunction with the U.S. Championship, an event that is open to all genders. 2011 was a special year for the U.S. Women's. Eight players were invited to play in a dramatic format that merged knockout style competition with round robin. Tatev Abrahamyan faced off against Zatonskih in the dramatic final, which went down to the wire, awarding Anna her fourth Championship title.

In 2012, Irina won in a tight race that went to playoff. She recalls the game that gave her the title: "I was losing and then she hung a rook! The tiebreaks are always stressful and that was the most dramatic moment in any of them." For the next three years, the Odessa born and Brooklyn raised Grandmaster captured each Championship. This brings Krush's grand total of titles to an incredible seven, with Irina holding the winner's ceremonial check four times in Saint Louis. She earned her very first at the age of 14 years old in Denver. Irina's goal is to win at least ten U.S. Women's titles.

Reflecting on a decade of top women's chess in Saint Louis, Krush said, "It's been wonderful to have such a stage for the U.S. Women's Championship these past ten years in Saint Louis. The prestige of the event has grown dramatically with stronger players, higher



● 2016 U.S. Women's Championship

● 2012 U.S. Women's Championship

● WGM Sabina Foisor exits the playing hall after winning the 2017 U.S. Women's Championship

● GM Maurice Ashley blindfolds WGM Anna Zatonskih during the Pop-Up Chess Demo, a 2016 U.S. Championship side event

● International Arbitrator Carol Jarecki looks on during the 2016 U.S. Women's Championship.



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prizes, and unparalleled coverage." The competition gets fiercer, younger and more determined with each Championship. 12-year-old Carissa Yip defeated the legendary Irina Krush in the 2016 Championship. In the broadcast booth, we knew that as strong and experienced our top two female players were, someone would eventually break Anna and Irina's stronghold, not only in one game, but for the whole Championship.

In 2016, Nazi Paikidze, 22 at the time, prevailed in an inspiring performance. She faced defending champ Irina Krush in the final round, and played a brilliant game with the Black pieces. After realizing that she won her first U.S. Women's Championship, Paikidze covered her face with red nails, overcome with emotion: a career highlight for the Vegas resident born in Russia. Soon after this victory, Paikidze would become one of the most popular chess players in the world for her principled stand against playing the World Women's Championship in Iran due to the requirement to wear the hijab during the games.

2017 saw the most magical U.S. Women's Championship of all. Sabina Foisor entered the competition as an underdog, behind perennial favorites Irina Krush, Anna Zatonskih, as well as defending champ Paikidze. Beyond the board, Sabina had recently lost her beloved mother, Cristina Adela Foisor, also a chess champion. Despite her personal grief, Sabina channeled the spirit of the woman who inspired her chess career in a dramatic performance. She won the Championship with a score of 8/11, finishing the tournament off with a precise queen sacrifice in the final round against the young Apurva Virkud.

Sabina said, "Winning the U.S. Women's Championship has been a goal I worked hard on for years and being able to win it in the memory of the most loving and supporting person in my life has made it exceptionally dear to me. I feel connected to the club as my 10 year anniversary of arriving to the United States is celebrated in the same year as the Club's hosting the U.S. Women's Championships for the 10th time! The new format and prestige of the U.S. Championships in Saint Louis has kept me motivated to [keep] playing chess seriously."

# U.S. Junior Chess Championships



SAINT LOUIS CHESS CLUB/SPECTRUM STUDIOS



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**BY AKSHAT CHANDRA**  
Grandmaster

The U.S. Junior Chess Championship has long been one of the most exciting chess events in the country. The invite-only tournament has served as a platform for young and ambitious juniors to display their prowess while fighting for the coveted title of U.S. Junior Champion.

A strong performance in this tournament is a good indicator of future success, as many past winners went on to become Grandmasters. Even the great Bobby Fischer tested his mettle in this tournament, winning in 1956

with a score of 8.5/10. The evolution of this tournament over the years has been intriguing to follow, and something I'd like to take a closer look at.

For many years the U.S. Junior Championship led a nomadic life, as each year the city and venue changed. Enterprising local organizers did their best to seek sponsorship and organize a professionally conducted tournament. Everything changed in 2010, however, when the U.S. Junior Championship found a more permanent abode at the Saint Louis Chess Club (STLCC). The last edition of U.S. Junior before it transi-

tioned to its new home was organized by chess player and coach FM Alex Betaneli in 2009 in the city of Milwaukee.

The move to Saint Louis was a turning point in the tournament's history, as the STLCC built greatly on the successes of the previous organizers and worked hard to elevate the Championship profile. The tournament also benefited from the meteoric rise of the chess vibe in Saint Louis. At its new home, the Junior Championship acquired the publicity and marquee status that was not always visible earlier.

In talking with GM Varuzhan Akobian, who

won the 2002 edition, he related to me how the conditions have changed since he played in the U.S. Junior. "It is much more prestigious, and the tournament has a great prize fund," he said, and he laughed as he tried to recall whether there were even monetary prizes when he won the tournament! In addition to the much-improved prize fund, the publicity and playing conditions of the Junior Championship have never been better. The games are now played on elegant wooden electronic boards and are broadcast online.

There is a live commentary team at the Club's studio that

covers the tournament and post-game interviews. But to me, the greatest reward of winning the U.S. Junior Championship is earning an automatic qualification to play the U.S. Championship, a privilege that was added during the Championship's tenure at the Club. I won the U.S. Junior event in 2015 in my very first appearance and had the honor of participating in the 2016 U.S. Championship.

Saint Louis, as the nation's chess capital, has become the proving grounds for future top chess players, and it is only fitting that the U.S. Junior Championship found its permanent residence here.

From left to right, Jeffery Xiong during Round 8 of the 2016 U.S. Junior Championship; 2017 U.S. Junior Championship, Round 6.

# U.S. Girls' Junior Chess Championships



SAINT LOUIS CHESS CLUB/AUSTIN FULLER

**BY JENNIFER SHAHADE**  
Woman Grandmaster, author,  
and commentator

In 2014, Annie Wang broke Irina Krush's record for the youngest American female chessmaster in history. Annie was 11, and as the *New York Times* pointed out, she broke a record older than she was. Less than a year later, Carissa Yip broke the same record. On the International stage, and in the same year, Jennifer Yu became the first American girl to win gold at a World Youth Championship since 1987. Do you sense a pattern? The top girls in American chess are becoming stronger with no sign of slowing down.

Many all-girls tournament helped to foster this incredible new generation of female talent. Among them: the National Girls Tournament of Champions, the All-Girls Nationals, and the Susan Polgar Girls' Invitational. All-girls' events may be controversial, but their track record in the U.S., as well as their social benefits, are indisputable.

A crown jewel in the new feast of formidable girls' championships is the U.S. Girls' Junior Championship, founded in 2014 in New Hampshire. Then-US Chess President Ruth Haring said, "The 1st Junior Girls Closed is even stronger than U.S. Women's Championships in the 70s and early 80s."

Claudia Munoz took the 2014 title on tiebreak. The 2015 event was held in Tulsa, Oklahoma, with Ashritha Eswaran claiming the title. In 2016, the event moved back to New Hampshire, where Emily Nguyen took clear first with 6.5/9.

The U.S. Girls' Junior Championship moved to Saint Louis in 2017, to coincide with the U.S. Junior Championship, adding

attention and excitement to both events.

Emily Nguyen was thrilled to play in the 2017 edition in Saint Louis: "The Saint Louis Chess Club is probably the nicest club I will ever go to. The playing conditions are perfect, and the community is amazing as well." Her favorite part of playing was the camaraderie with other girls. For aspiring participants, Emily advises, "do not feel too much pressure from the lights and cameras and interviews," but try your best to get in because "Saint Louis and the Girls' Junior [are] really worth it."

Akshita Gorti won the 2017 title with a commanding score of 7/9, 1.5 points ahead of Maggie Feng, her nearest rival. She agreed with Emily about the location. "In my opinion, the Saint Louis Chess Club is the best place to have chess tournaments. The chess club has amazing playing conditions and I loved the live commentary [hosted by WGM Tatev Abrahamyan and GM Alejandro Ramirez.]"

The leisurely one game a day schedule is great practice for prestigious international competitions, in which these same girls represent the United States on a regular basis. It allows ample time for preparation and game analysis, and the girls relax and bond between games, creating lifelong friendships. Gorti recalled celebrating Maggie Feng's birthday, and seeing Wonder Woman with fellow competitors.

The biggest prize of all was a chance for Gorti to be our Wonder Woman. Winning the U.S. Girls' Junior Championship earned her a ticket to the 2018 U.S. Women's Championship.

From top to bottom, WFM Carissa Yip vs. WIM Akshita Gorti during Round 2 of the 2017 U.S. Girls' Junior Championship; Round 5 of the 2017 U.S. Girls' Junior Championship.