

CONNECTICUT CHESS JOURNAL

The Advent and History of the Fairfield Interscholastic League

by Alvin Hamilton

(Photo: St. Luke's Chess Club and League Team meet for practice play, 2022-23)

I grew up in Levittown, PA, learning to play chess when I was about 5. In high school, I played for my school team in a league of 10 teams in Bucks County, just Northeast of Philadelphia. My local chess club was within walking distance of my home, so I also played almost every Tuesday night. When I went off to college, it was Bridge and Go that occupied my free time, with chess a distant third.



As a returned Peace Corps volunteer, I found my way to Wooster School in Danbury, CT in 1986. For a few years, my chess-playing students and I competed within the walls, never venturing out to compete with other schools. Wooster had a boarding component back then, and occupying the boarders productively was always a challenge, especially on the weekends. Our headmaster got to talking with some other heads of school about ways we

could keep the kids engaged, and the idea of visiting a few other schools on a chess barnstorming tour was hatched, with yours truly tasked with making the arrangements. During those first years, we took on Trinity-Pawling in New York, Taft in Watertown, South Kent, and Choate in Wallingford in after-dinner matches. Although the competition was really just for the fun of it, whenever we were lucky enough to get a win, my players insisted that I honk the horn on the

school's disreputable old van as we pulled onto campus, an old-school tradition for victorious returning teams.

A League of Their Own

Things went on like that for about 2 years. But word began to get around the Danbury area chess scene about these matches, and another idea was born. What if we formed a league of local high schools and independent schools? After many

phone calls (pre-email era!), a coaches' meeting was arranged with teams from Brookfield, Danbury, Ridgefield, and Bethel. Soon, face-to-face play began, and it was instantly a huge success. At reunions many years later, the kids who played on my teams always talk about the fun they had traveling to other schools and hosting matches at ours.

Over the years, the Danbury Area Scholastic Chess League (DASCL) grew to as many as twelve teams and contracted to as few as six, with Redding's Joel Barlow High School, Wilton High School, Canterbury School in New Milford, and Taft being the most far-flung. Some teams withdrew as the expense of renting buses became prohibitive; others drove themselves to defray costs. For over 20 years, I organized the league and directed the individual tournament at the end of the season, which ran from October to March. Toward the end of my time at Wooster, Mike Ecsedy of Joel Barlow took over for me and continued to organize the league after I left. My destination was St. Luke's School in New Canaan, and I soon lost touch with DASCL.

New school, same starting point

St. Luke's, with roughly twice as many students as Wooster, had a small but thriving chess club run by my colleague Dave Parsons. I lent a hand with the group for 2 years, then became the principal advisor to the club. Running a school championship that drew faculty and students alike, I sensed a lot of latent interest in the game. With the encouragement of the school's administration, I began thinking big again. Once again, interest grew in forming a league, this time in southwest CT. Loaded as the area is with high schools both public and independent, the environment seemed ripe for it!

In the fall of 2019, I discovered that DASCL was on the verge of disbanding, with rising bus costs and wavering interest as the main issues. This gave me pause as I considered forming another league with face-to-face play. About this time, I met Karen Aronian, a St. Luke's parent whose daughter Laurel and son Jack were strong, avid players. We wondered if a league could be fashioned to give the kids a chance to

compete scholastically. Karen has been a source of unending support ever since.

A COVID keeper

When COVID-19 hit, the players in SLS's club were unable to continue to play face-to-face as school was virtual. This also derailed my plans for a league. The mother of invention, Necessity, forced me to look to a different paradigm: online play. While most of my players used chess.com or lichess.org to play online from home or even while at school in their free time, for many the idea was new – myself included. St. Luke's habitués urged me to create an official club for them on chess.com, so I did, and in so doing, I realized that this could work for a league. The advantages of this format included flexible scheduling and, most importantly, no buses!

After many calls and emails, I found two teams – Danbury High and Joel Barlow – from the moribund DASCL willing to join St. Luke's and Brunswick School of Greenwich as the nucleus of a new league. At our coaches' meeting in late September in the fated year

of 2020, we settled on the name Fairfield County Interscholastic Chess League (FCICL) and agreed to a double round-robin format. We settled on Tuesdays after school with a g/20 time control for that first year, with each of a minimum of four boards playing one game as white and one as black. In early November, play began online in our inaugural year.

J'adoubé

Brunswick won the league, suffering only one defeat that first year. Although the players all agreed that this was a great format, many things were learned through that limited, experimental foray. Organizing many players on two teams required sharing online IDs and informing them of the rules governing play. After-school play also meant that kids often had to choose between chess and the myriad of other activities their schools offered. Spotty internet meant that a few games were interrupted and could not be resumed. Another issue was that g/20 time control meant that the top boards often took close to an hour and a half to complete the two games, which some players found excessive

and meant they would miss their buses home. Finally, some players just didn't care for online play, and one school withdrew from the league after the season ended.

The adjustments the league would make in its second year made us stronger and more attractive. A shared database of user IDs was born, and more communication about the rules was encouraged. A choice between playing Tuesday after school or playing Tuesday evening was formalized, with negotiations to determine which was most suitable. Rules for interrupted play were instituted, and the time control was reeled into g/15 with a 5-second increment. During the COVID era, face-to-face play was not possible with online the only alternative, but we began to ponder if the league individual championship could be an in-person event.

Growing to meet demand

I have learned that teenage chess players have lots of friends who play, and those friends have other friends, many of whom attend different schools. Word spread quickly that we had the makings of a

great enterprise, and I kept getting emails from interested schools' captains and coaches, making the search for new teams easy. At the second year's organizational meeting, 9 teams were represented, including Hackley School of Tarrytown, NY, three more Greenwich schools (Greenwich Academy, Greenwich Country Day School, and Greenwich High School), Staples of Westport, and a unified team from a variety of Bridgeport schools.

With so many teams, a single round-robin format seemed prudent, and the second year's play began in late October. Staples emerged victorious with a sparkling 7-1 match record. The evolution of the league also saw us migrate from chess.com to lichess.org, a favorite site of many of the new teams. The shorter time control and the flexible scheduling meant many more games were actually played, and that's what it's all about... promoting fun interactions among the squads and lots of great chess. Although we did crown an individual champ, Sebastian Lopez of Bridgeport, the tournament had to be virtual once more.

Year 3 and counting...

Today, the league continues to evolve and grow. Bridgeport Central High School now represents that city, and Ridgefield High has joined our ranks as well for the third campaign. Our default is now Tuesday night play, beginning about 7:15 pm. Action chess is clearly the preferred format, with g/15/5 remaining in force. We have issued a strong statement on cheating and banded about the idea of a captains and coaches fair play committee to deal with potential issues arising from improper use of technology. We hope we never have to convene. Conversely, we do hope to convene in March for a face-to-face league individual championship tournament.

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FCICL Champions

2021: Brunswick School (Greenwich)
2022: Staples High School (Westport)

FCICL Individual Champions

2021: Jake Lambrech (Barlow HS, Redding)
2022: Sebastian Lopez (Bridgeport Combined)

Nearing the halfway point of our year, Greenwich High and Brunswick are undefeated with GCDS, having only one loss, sitting third. A clash of titans will happen soon and likely determine the eventual champs. The format is generally well-received, but we do have our challenges, including that even with evening matches, kids have other things to do (going to football games and doing homework mostly). Some postponements have put us behind schedule. Communication among teams has not always been perfect. For some, reading email is not a daily habit... too slow! IM seems their preferred mode. Still, these challenges are ones we can surmount with goodwill and determination.

What's next?

The idea of creating a statewide scholastic league surfaces from time to time. While I am approaching retirement in a few years, I would love to see a sustainable model for such competition come to the fore and be implemented soon. Perhaps FCICL's format and experience can be applied on a grander scale. I hope so. Chess itself and moving to online play gives us a way to stay in community when circumstances hinder or even prevent being in each other's physical presence. The game has the power to excite minds and channel our competitive urges. As I close in on 60 years of play, I can only be grateful to the game for the countless hours of enjoyment and stimulation it has given me and my teams.

FCICL is open to new teams. Team leaders can contact [Alvin Hamilton](#).