

## SPOTLIGHT

# Checkmate!

## Residents try their hand against chess master

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If you think beating one experienced chess player is hard enough, try playing 21 at the same time.

Local chess players are gathered at the Oak Brook Public Library for a chance to play a simultaneous game against Andrew Martin, an international master visiting from England. They line up for a chance to team up and take him on all at once. Martin is traveling in America with Bill Whited of Downers Grove, a member of the Willowbrook Chess Club, to film and promote instructional videos.

"People are coming here for the rare chance to play a master," says Jim Edgerton, a chess instructor who holds classes at the library and one of the Aug. 21 event organizers. "But the odds of anybody here winning tonight are slim to none."

The players, many from chess clubs in Willowbrook or at the Oak Brook or Indian Prairie public libraries, congregate in a small meeting area near the lobby. A handful of spectators sit waiting to watch the action.

Simultaneous games are no stranger to Martin. He once held the Guinness World Record for most people played at the same time, challenging 320 club-level chess players in 2005. Club level players aren't professionals, but they play regularly, are typically ranked by the U.S. Chess Federation and are involved in some kind of organized chess club.

"Actually I find it quite easy," Martin says. "It's really a question of technique. Any strong chess player has great concentration."

The field is mixed, some as young as 10 and others as old as 65, all with varying skill levels. All of the players were men.

Even though Martin is the one playing 21 games at the same time, the challengers won't find victory as easy as he does.



International chess master Andrew Martin of Sandhurst, England, gives some tips on strategy to players at the Oak Brook Public Library Aug. 21. Martin played 21 opponents simultaneously at the library.

### Rules of the game

Two long tables are lined up with 21 chess boards; the space in the middle is left open for the master. All challengers use the black pieces, while the master uses the white pieces.

Martin briefly reviews some strategy and rules. When the game begins, he goes clockwise around the table, shaking challenger's hands as he makes his first move. The room immediately falls silent; nobody spoke louder than a whisper.

The player with white pieces gets to go first. Martin uses the white side — not because of any strategical advantage — but because it typically takes longer for the player using the black pieces to win, Whited says. If the master uses the black pieces

on all or some of the boards, the game could last hours longer.

The master then makes his first move, one by one, on all the boards. The challengers have until Martin makes it around the tables and back to them before they can make a move. This gives every challenger at least a few minutes to ponder the next move, while the master usually takes less than 10 seconds per board.

The challenger can pass up to three times and is encouraged to do so if the master reaches him before he has decided on a move. There is no official time limit for each move, but challengers are expected to show good sportsmanship by not taking too much time.

The games continue until challengers hear "checkmate" and have to leave the table.

Many don't make it to the end, however; they are encouraged to resign if Martin has a significant lead.

"If you know you have lost, then you should resign," Edgerton says. "If he has a three-piece lead on you, there is no point to dragging it out."

As the tournament wears on, less challengers are still playing, which gives the remaining players less time to think about each move, making it much more difficult on them.

If the challenger has an advantage, the master commonly offers a draw to end the game. This happens, Whited says, because the master can avoid a potential loss, eliminate a strong opponent and have more attention and time to focus on the remaining players. The challengers usually jump on the opportunity,

because forcing a draw from a master is something they can be proud of.

### Going against a heavyweight

Many of the challengers come into the event expecting to lose.

"I knew I never had a chance," says Craig Davis of Oak Brook. "But it was pretty cool. He was a nice gentleman and a good sportsman."

Others set goals to last a certain amount of time before getting put into checkmate or resigning. Don Amirante, president of the Willowbrook Chess Club, hopes to last 25 moves — and he does.

"It's pretty much as I expected," he says. "I mean, me going against this guy is like a heavyweight taking on a lightweight, you know, relatively. I just



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wanted to go a couple of rounds.”

It isn't until about the 12th move that challengers begin to fall. After the first player resigns, a domino effect takes place and another challenger drops out about every other move.

Most players have no chance of beating Martin, Edgerton says, even if they are playing their best game. There are a handful of local players who have a shot to force a draw, but there is little optimism from organizers that anybody will walk away with a win.

### 'He's got a chance'

When there are only about six players left, eliminated players begin gathering around Frederico Gentallan. Players notice that Gentallan not only has a shot, he actually has an advantage and may pull out a win.

“He's got a chance,” Whited says. “Let's see if he can finish him out.”

Gentallan is unranked in the U.S. because he does not play in tournaments, but other players estimate he would be ranked at about 1800 to 1900, which is close to master status. Born in the Philippines, the 65-year-old Darien man moved to the U.S. in 1986.

He plays to keep his mind sharp and hopes the game will become more popular in America. It's good for adults, he says, because it fights off the mental deterioration that comes with age. It's good for



Bohdan Khomtchouk of Clarendon Hills (left) and Ray Royce of Willowbrook go over a possible solution to a chess problem. Martin showed the players different situations he has faced in tournaments and asked for the best solution.

kids because it's a positive habit that keeps them away from harmful vices.

“You cannot be drinking wine and playing,” he jokes. “It does not combine with chess.”

As more players are eliminated, Gentallan has built a strong position.

Martin could offer a draw, but he never does. Then, more than three hours after the game began, he resigns.

“It was just luck,” Gentallan says, downplaying

the victory. “It was very hard. It was a really tough game.”

While Martin defeated 20 other players, Amirante still calls Gentallan victory a major accomplishment.

“He wasn't cutting any slack,” he says. “He was playing full throttle. I couldn't believe it when he started to get ahead. (Martin) might give some draws, but not losses.”

Whited compliments Gentallan's skill and calls it an extraordinary match, handled with dignity on both

sides.

“Trust me, these guys hate to lose,” he says. “This would be like some country club hacker beating Tiger Woods. That's the difference in skill level between these two guys. They both played great games, but (Martin) resigned because he knew it was hopeless.”

Like Gentallan, Martin takes the result with good sportsmanship, knowing the event is relatively laid-back and everybody has come to

learn and have a good time.

“It was quite a tough field,” Martin says. “Losses happen when you make mistakes. I made a mistake and he took advantage of it. He's a strong player.”



Frederico Gentallan of Darien contemplates his next move in the match against Martin. He was the only challenger at the event to defeat the international master.