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Checkmate for the Olympiad?

By **WARD LUCAS**

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Fast forward and imagine this: You're watching on television the 2012 Olympics in London, the host city of the XXX Olympic Summer Games. The opening ceremonies have just ended and you are anxiously awaiting the first event.

The master of ceremonies introduces the competitors for the first match-up. Out comes Viswanathan Anand of India. He takes his place in the arena. Anand is a grandmaster of his sport and a former world champion. Thousands cheer while hundreds of tricolor flags of deep saffron, white and green are being waved by his countrymen.

His opponent, Vladimir Kramnik of Russia, enters the arena from the opposite side, draped in a white, blue and red robe, representative of the Russian flag. The crowd erupts in thunder as the two stare each other down. Anand looks a little nervous, because he knows that Kramnik, who is also a grandmaster, is considered by many to be the current undisputed champion of the sport.

The sport? Chess.

Chess? Chess is a sport?

Yes, indeed. The two-player board game which features each player allowed to move their 16 pieces according to specific rules is a sport.

The champions take their seats at a card table at the center of the arena and begin to play ... chess.

Although not currently an official event in any upcoming Olympic Games, chess was recently and officially recognized as a sport by the International Olympic Committee. Recognition as a sport by the IOC is a prerequisite, not a guarantee, for inclusion as an Olympic event. Chess, under the World Chess Federation, has received the honor of becoming a sport.

Naturally, there is debate on whether chess is truly a sport or not. According to Google, the online search engine, the word "sport" turned up many definitions, one was particularly interesting.

Sport: an active diversion requiring physical exertion and competition.

According to Webster's Dictionary, there are seven definitions. However, again, there were two interesting entries.

Sport n. 1. an active pastime (RECREATION); and 2. a specific diversion usually involving physical exercise and having a set form and body of rules (GAME).

Of course, chess is a competitive diversion or recreation and it has a set of rules, but it doesn't require physical exercise.

What a conundrum! So who would know better than the Bowie Chess Club if chess is a sport or not? The club meets Thursdays from 2 to 5 p.m. at the Bowie Senior Center.

The BCC is made up of 12 members, 11 men and one woman. Most of the members are retired and all of them are over the age of 55. Jim Prouty, a former national guardsman, runs the club. He's been playing chess since 1968 and plays competitively in tournaments. For Prouty, chess is about solving problems.

"Chess is a mind game," Prouty said. "It's something that takes all your stamina to make

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it through," He even noted that "people are known to pass out during a game. It's that intense."

There is no doubt that chess gets his vote as a sport, a mental sport as he calls it. Prouty once played a game for five hours. He admits that after a tournament game he feels mentally challenged, in a good way, but drained, often needing to take a nap.

Bill Radcliffe is very instrumental to the club and runs a youth chess camp in his spare time. Radcliffe believes that chess is a sport because of its competitive nature. He was aware of the IOC ruling and noted that chess is subject to the same rules and regulations of the other Olympic sports.

"When (including chess as a sport) was proposed, they said they had to do drug testing and the Chess Federation sat back, expecting there was going to be a lot of protests," said Radcliffe. "E-mails came pouring ... Hey, what drugs would help me play chess better?" he joked.

So, for the record, the score is two in favor of chess and none opposed.

Tom McCloud scratches his head and says, "... chess is not an athletic event. It's true that professional chess players train and they must be in good condition, but it's a mental contest and not an athletic contest."

That reaction is no surprise from McCloud, a former baseball player. "There's strategy in any sport, especially in baseball," he said, seeing the correlation between baseball and chess, yet still struggling with the idea that chess could be a sport.

Laird Towle acknowledges that chess may not really be appropriate for the Olympics. However, he believes that its recognition as a sport is a positive step for the game. Towle, who used to sail boats, is considered to be one of the best players in the BCC. During games, he records his and his opponent's moves. Towle later enters the moves into a software program to have his game analyzed. He uses that information to improve his skills.

Fellow club member Walt Kustka acknowledges that chess is most different from sport. Kustka, a former soldier, played football in high school.

Chess as an Olympic sport is now at a 2-3 disadvantage.

It is interesting to note that the three chess club members who believe that chess is not a sport all participated in some athletic activity as a youth. When asked if they would play competitively in the Olympics each of the members almost unanimously said they would decline ... except for Prouty. He would gladly play, but acknowledged "... you have to have a certain strength, but the strength is leaving me."

The deciding factor on whether or not chess is a sport was the visiting dignitary to BCC, Sen. Ulysses Currie (D-Prince George's County). Currie popped into the center for "skittles," chess slang for a pickup game just for fun.

"Chess is like golf," said Currie, "50 percent mental, 50 percent physical." He speculates further that Tiger Woods has the mental toughness necessary to be a great chess player. "It was the physical stamina that allowed the great (chess) players to be great," said Currie.

When the senator was asked which of his games is better, he joked, "My golf game is like my chess game." He acknowledged that he doesn't take the time he should in deciding his next move in either competition.

"I believe almost every athletic endeavor is part mental as well as physical."

The final vote: Currie believes chess is a sport, making the final tally a 3-3 draw.

Is chess deserving of becoming an official Olympic sport? Who knows? One thing is for certain, however. Playing chess can be mentally and physically taxing and those that indulge in the pastime have different views on the board game that scored big with the IOC.

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