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PHOTOS BY CHRISTINE SCHUSTER

**Above:** Metcalf Middle School chess coach Brian Ribnick breaks down a chess game with sixth-grade players during the team's last practice of the season on May 2.

**Right:** In Brian Ribnick's chess classroom at Metcalf Middle School, intelligence is celebrated. He said chess club is a safe space for students to be smart.



PHOTO BY CHRISTINE SCHUSTER

Former Prior Lake Aggregates mining land in south Savage off of County Road 27 is ready for construction to begin on the Prior Lake-Savage Area Schools' new elementary school. However, Savage city officials say the plans need to be redesigned to ease traffic in the adjacent Big Sky Estates housing development.

## District to adjust elementary plan for city approval

BY CHRISTINE SCHUSTER  
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The Prior Lake-Savage Area Schools district needs to compromise on its proposed elementary school designs, Savage city officials said Monday before tabling the proposal for a second time.

The district listened: In an email Wednesday, Superintendent Teri Staloch said the site plan will change to include "a through-road on school property in order to minimize traffic impact in the Big Sky Estates neighborhood."

Elementary to 5 ➤

# COME FOR THE PARTIES, STAY FOR THE CHESS

## Metcalf coach built a chess powerhouse over decades

BY CHRISTINE SCHUSTER  
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On a recent Thursday afternoon, Metcalf Middle School sixth-grade chess players sat divided into two teams, playing a game of chess on a large paper chess board hanging over the classroom's whiteboard.

A banner above the board read, "Every chess master was once a beginner."

Each team member walked to the board

and stood silently, calculating their next move as the others watched. Eventually, a team announced they were forfeiting, the others cheered and both sides of the room came together to shake hands.

After the game, the teammates gathered closely while Coach Brian Ribnick recreated the game. He broke down what moves he liked or didn't like and asked the team to weigh in on the strategies at play. Then he passed out Starbursts and told the students to try and catch up on sleep before

the weekend's tournament.

When Ribnick began coaching in the Burnsville-Eagan-Savage District nearly 40 years ago, he dreamed of coaching the best middle school team in America — a dream that has become a reality.

"I've never been one to set small goals," he said. "Giant goals help stir the soul a lot more than small ones."

Or in other words: "It's better to reach for

Chess to 2 ➤

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## CHESS

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the stars and miss than reach for a pile a manure and hit," he said.

Ribnick will join the Minnesota Chess Hall of Fame this month. To date, Metcalf Middle School's chess team holds 20 national titles and 30 state championships, including titles from the National Championships in Dallas held two weeks ago.

The Metcalf team holds a record number of state titles by a wide margin, and only one other team in the country holds more national titles.

Ribnick and the U.S. Chess Federation's ethics committee have said the other team's coach cheated the players to victory, and Metcalf could one day officially hold the top national spot pending a lawsuit to revoke the team's championship.

"Chess and Brian Ribnick are synonymous," said Jason Kellen, a chess coach at William Bryne Elementary. "If you're talking to somebody where you're from they'll say, 'Oh, you're with Ribnick.'"

Kellen's sons, eighth-grader Gavin Kellen and sixth-grader Mitchell Kellen, both play for Ribnick's team at Metcalf. They're the highest-rated chess players in the district.

"He's very enthusiastic about chess club and always makes it fun for everyone," Mitchell said.

Mitchell recently became a national chess champion at the Dallas National Junior High Scholastic Tournament.

"I just like how it's just a pure thinking game," Mitchell said at chess practice after returning home from Dallas late the night before. "You just gotta out-think your opponent."

### PUTTING BURNSVILLE ON THE MAP

Ribnick learned to play chess at a young age from his father.

He began coaching elementary students while a high school student at St. Louis Park High School in the 1970s. Ribnick became head coach of the elementary team and moved up to coach at the junior high school to continue working with the same students.



PHOTO BY CHRISTINE SCHUSTER

**Sixth grade students at Metcalf Middle School played practice games of chess while waiting to make their next move in a grade-wide game at chess practice on May 2.**

In 1978, the team took home the state championship.

Ribnick graduated from the University of Minnesota, and one year later, in 1980, he began teaching math and coaching chess at Nicollet Middle School.

Ribnick noticed the accolades given to the district's successful sports teams but found there wasn't any recognition for what he called mental athletes.

"I felt that Burnsville could do big things in chess," he said.

He began telling everyone he would put the district's chess teams on the map, hiring and training coaches and building programs at the district's elementary schools. In 1983, he transferred to teaching and coaching at Metcalf Middle School and became the district's chess coordinator.

Ribnick continues this effort today, two years after retiring from teaching, and he doesn't yet have any plans to retire—depending on how many healthy years God has left for him, he said.

A few years after he took the post, Burnsville High School won its first state championship in chess, and although Ribnick wasn't the high school coach, others noticed his vision starting to take root.

Today, the high school chess team holds more state titles than any other sport or activity in the school's history.

Back in 1983, Ribnick made a tough decision to sacrifice his personal chess career and focus solely on coaching.

He had won the St. Paul Winter Carnival chess tournament and done well at

major contests, but when he was competing in an all-ages national championship alongside a dozen of his students, he realized he needed to make a choice.

"I take a long time for my moves and I was in deep thought, and they'd all be done and wanting my attention," he said. "I was sitting there and I was trying to play my game, and I realized I can either continue playing or retire from the playing circuit and focus on coaching."

It wasn't the first time he'd followed his passion for coaching. In college, he left the University of Minnesota's engineering school after four years to pursue a teaching degree over the objections of his family, who wanted him to put his academic success to use in a higher-paying career.

"All my relatives were absolutely on my case about not going into teaching," he said.

"It was definitely a type of a high to try and inspire that age of kids to success and also to see it happen in front of your eyes," he said. "It was just so inspirational, and I felt it was so meaningful to give back to the next generation and make the biggest difference I can in the years that I'm on this planet."

### EARNING SUCCESS

The Metcalf chess team this year had 55 members and has had as many as 90 in the past.

The chess club's high participation numbers are partially driven by Ribnick's recruitment efforts. The club is known around school for large parties orchestrated by Ribnick, which include paintball and trips to Great Wolf Lodge.

"I've had so many kids say

they joined because of the parties and they stayed because of the chess," he said. "Chess is a very addicting game."

Once they're hooked, it's down to business. Kellen described Ribnick as an old-school coach who knows how to show tough love to students. It's something he says pays off in the classroom and in sports.

"Chess kids are always some of the best," he said. "You can tell who came from a chess program; they are the kids that are calm and collected and prepared during finals."

Ribnick said he wants to teach students that success in life is not handed to them—it's earned.

"A lot of these kids aren't going to go on to become professional chess players, but whatever careers they do go into, I want them to learn skills that will help them get an advantage," he said.

As a coach, he keeps close track of each student and maintains a list of criteria, sometimes 80 items long, students need to fulfill to compete in tournaments. That structured technique has certainly paid off, he said.

But above all, he said a good chess coach is someone who understands that chess is about having fun.

"Chess is one of the best tools for teaching thinking out there," Ribnick said. "They are playing a game, they are having fun and they aren't even realizing they are learning how to use the most powerful organ in their body, which is the brain."

Sitting at a desk after all the students had left the Thursday afternoon practice, Ribnick remembered how much chess club meant to himself as a middle school student.

"I want to create a family atmosphere," he said. "Another big thing is a safe place to be smart. Sometimes middle school kids can be brutal as far as bullying and teasing."

Growing up, he turned to chess club to find encouragement for his academic success and lifelong friendships. Giving that experience to others is something that brings him back year after year.

"If you have a lot of kids that like to think and be smart together, there's a lot of safety and affirmation that goes on."

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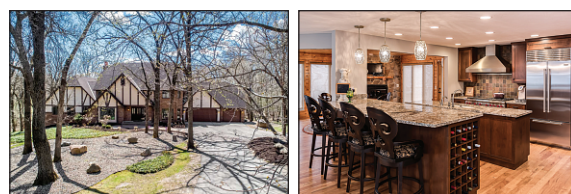
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