

Bellingham Knights Chess Club Captures Enthusiasm From All Ages and Skill Levels

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Few games are more iconic than chess, one of the oldest strategy games in the world. From ancient traditions to modern chess clubs and tournaments, the game has long brought people together.

“There’s some records that it started about 1,500 years ago, and it originated either in Persia, which is now Iran, or India,” says [Bellingham Knights Chess Club](#) founder Steve Szirom, adding that trade “brought the game to Europe and then it spread all around the world.”

Chess has spread to Bellingham with as much fanfare.

Bellingham has always had active scholastic chess programs. All-ages Bellingham Knights Chess Club started in the 2000s with an informal group at now-closed Fantasia Coffee House.

“It was a kind of casual, not organized group that just showed up every day almost, at two o’clock and played ’til five,” says Szirom.

“There was no organized chess in Bellingham, per se. In Washington, the center of all the chess activity was in the Seattle area. So in 2015, I started a chess club.”

Bellingham Knights Chess Club has rented numerous venues, including Bellingham Public Library and cafés at Haggan and Barkley Village. The club has canceled all events during the COVID pandemic, but will restart as soon as it is safe to do so.

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Chess club participants during a pre-COVID game. Players may play chess in any style to which they agree. Photo courtesy Bellingham Knights Chess Club

“Today we have about 270-80 members, and about 40 of those are fairly active,” says Szirom. “And we’re trying to create more of an interest in the community about chess, because it has a lot of benefits for both adults and kids.”

Meetups and Tournaments

During non-COVID times, Bellingham Knights Chess Club regularly holds free meetings on Sundays from 2 p.m. to 5 p.m. They also hold monthly tournaments that [United States Chess Federation](#) members can join for a \$35 fee.

“It’s open to anybody, to any age, or any level,” says Szirom. “You come to the club event and there will be somebody there that will be interested in teaching you how to play. And we also have some members who are chess coaches who provide personal lessons on an hourly basis for a small fee.”

Bellingham Knights Chess Club allows members of all skill levels to play in all styles, including standard, rapid, and blitz. People of all ages are welcome to join.

“We have members who are as young as 7,” says Szirom, “and we have members who are in their probably late 70s.”

Joining Bellingham Knights Chess Club simply requires submitting a form through the website. Members receive an email newsletter informing them of upcoming events.

“My intention is to continue the chess club without charging a fee for anybody, to make it easy to play for everybody, and we have volunteers who host the gatherings and provide the funding for some of the overhead,” says Szirom.

Cognitive Benefits of Chess

Bellingham Knights Chess Club provides Whatcom County players the benefits that chess players everywhere enjoy.

“Chess is a very easy game to learn—easy to learn, but very difficult to master,” says Szirom. “One of the things that’s really a benefit to kids is that it helps improve their problem-solving skills.”



Bellingham Knights Chess Club has gathered at various Bellingham venues in the past and is currently seeking a permanent sponsor and location for when it resumes play after COVID passes. Photo courtesy Bellingham Knights Chess Club

Playing chess can improve memory, focus, creativity, and spatial skills in both children and adults.

“Some of the chess grandmasters, who are the world’s best players, actually do physical exercise quite a bit, because the mental part is so straining and it helps if you are in good shape physically,” says Szirom. “You can’t use a computer when you’re playing, usually, so your brain has to really be the computer.”

Additionally, Bellingham Knights Chess Club provides members opportunities to socialize and practice good sportsmanship.

“Chess is a very social game, in a way, because the players shake hands before the game—that’s traditional,” says Szirom. “They are courteous and they lose the game without putting up a fight or anything, so it’s good for the social aspect. Especially for kids, they learn to take losses easily.”



Members of the United States Chess Federation are showing in this older photo taking part in Bellingham Knights Chess Club’s monthly tournaments, which will start up again after the pandemic wanes. These feature five games and a rating with USCF. Photo courtesy Bellingham Knights Chess Club



Club meetups are regularly announced through the official newsletter and will resume once the COVID pandemic is safely behind us. Photo courtesy Bellingham Knights Chess Club

A Community-Building Endgame

Bellingham Knights Chess Club has been well-received by the community, especially parents of the youth who join.

“Our continuing sponsor that’s a friend of chess and also supports us is the [Chess House](#) in Blaine, which is an online chess merchandising retailer,” says Szirom. [Bellingham Youth Chess](#) also sponsors the club.

Bellingham Knights Chess Club’s next moves—once the pandemic has passed and they’re able to meet in person again—may include forming a nonprofit, scaling up events, and adding formal lessons.

“We’re planning in the future to hold a Whatcom-wide or Whatcom-centric chess tournament that will be a bigger event than the monthly tournaments,” says Szirom, noting that the club also plans to have players compete with local masters. “Those are pretty popular for people that like to play chess, to play a game against a really good player where he plays 10 to 20 people at a time.”

Szirom hopes that Bellingham one day achieves a chess presence like Seattle’s. In the meantime, donating and spreading the word about Bellingham Knights Chess Club will help bring even more enthusiasm onboard.



Bellingham Knights Chess Club has been especially popular among youth and their parents—and everyone looks forward to being able to get back to playing once it is safe to do so! Photo courtesy Bellingham Knights Chess Club