

Maine’s biggest upset this March hasn’t been on the court. It was on a chess board.

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João Vuvu-Nkanu Maviditi, left, and Abdallah Ali ponder their next moves while playing a game of chess in class at Baxter Academy on March 12. The school’s chess team won the state championship last weekend for the first time. *Gregory Rec/Staff Photographer*

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In the lobby of Portland’s Baxter Academy for Technology and Science, a chess board is on prominent display – for good reason.

Earlier this month, the school’s chess team – which didn’t even exist a few months ago – won the Maine State Scholastic Chess Championship against 15 of the state’s best teams, including Kennebunk High School.

Going into the championship, facing established high school chess teams, Baxter was not expected to win.

The player who clinched the big win for school’s six-member team is freshman João Vuvu-Nkanu Maviditi, a teen from Angola who last year was living at the Portland Expo when it served as temporary shelter for asylum seekers.

Related

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During the final round on a recent Saturday, Kennebunk High School and Baxter Academy faced off.



Jacob Kaiser, top left, makes a move during a game of chess against Gibson Holloway next to João Vuvu-Nkanu Maviditi, top right, and Abdallah Ali during chess class at Baxter Academy. *Gregory Rec/Staff*

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“The last round was pretty intense,” said Baxter team member Kai Whitehead, 16, of Gorham, who had played in earlier rounds. “It was down to the wire.”

Whitehead, who was watching intently, first felt optimistic for his team, but then, he said, the play took a turn.

“I thought it was over when both (of Baxter’s two last players) were losing,” Whitehead said.

Then Maviditi, 16, now of Saco, turned his game around and won.

“I don’t know how, but he came back,” Whitehead said.



Kai Whitehead moves his king while playing a game in chess class at Baxter Academy. *Gregory Rec/Staff Photographer*
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Suddenly Baxter Academy was the new champion – thanks in part to this soft-spoken young man who has lived in the United States for just one year and has told his teachers he wants to breed fish.

Whitehead describes Maviditi's chess skills as "fierce."

Kennebunk High won second place in the tournament. Chess coach David Cimato said for his team that "was a huge accomplishment against some really tough schools, Cheverus, Fryeburg Academy, John Bapst."

For Baxter to grab the championship win "is hugely impressive," Cimato said in an email. "Baxter's team held up extremely well under pressure and in sharp tactical positions. Their patience and calculation in those two end games were the difference."

Baxter's other chess team players are Jacob Kaiser, Abdallah Ali, Gibson Holloway and Sean Glass.

The team's coach is Major Juac, an internationally known chess master who once was one of the "Lost Boys" of Sudan who fled the civil war in their country and undertook long and dangerous treks to safety, spending years in refugee camps and eventually resettling in the

United States.

Juac now lives in Falmouth and is on the faculty at Baxter, where he teaches chess.



Chess teacher and team coach Majur Juac watches the progress of a game during chess class at Baxter Academy. *Gregory Rec/Staff Photographer*
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His team’s big win and what led up to it is “extraordinary,” said Anna Klein-Christie, the school’s executive director.

FROM HOWARD JOHNSON’S TO BAXTER

Last April, the Portland chapter of the international nonprofit The Gift of Chess was offering weekly chess games at the Howard Johnson’s in South Portland, teaching the game to children of asylum seekers. The organization said that learning chess would help the newcomers build life skills, adjust to their new environment, and connect with others across divides of language and culture. The new players were encouraged to speak English as they learned to work on their language skills.

Local young people were encouraged to come play with them. Jeff Cawthorne, of Falmouth, brought his sons to play because he saw it as a chance for them to learn “about the world bigger than themselves,” he told the Press Herald last year.

Over the summer, Gift of Chess volunteers brought chess to the Portland Expo, where asylum seekers were being temporarily housed. The young people there had few enrichment opportunities or chances to become part of the broader community, said Katie Moore, a leader in the nonprofit's Portland chapter.

The Gift of Chess asked Juac, who was living in New Jersey at the time, to come to Portland to teach the game at the Expo. But Juac needed a place to live.

That's where Laurie Leonard, a retired doctor in Falmouth, came in. Leonard read about the local chapter's efforts to promote chess here, and he reached out to Moore to donate chess sets.



Student Uriel Valenbin, left, plays chess with retired doctor Laurie Leonard, right, last summer at the chess camp held at Portland's Baxter Academy. *Photo courtesy of Katie Moore/Gift of Chess*

Moore thanked him for the chess sets, but said she had a bigger request: Would he consider having Juac live with him for the summer while the chess master taught the game at the Expo?

Leonard thought about it and then said yes. The living arrangement continues today.

At home, Juac coaches Leonard as they play chess. Leonard calls him "a superb teacher," and Juac praises Leonard's chess skills.

“He is very good. He’s 94 and still competitive,” Juac said. For his part, he asks the doctor “medical and scientific questions” and says Leonard is patient and answers all his questions.

AN INVITATION TO PLAY

Klein-Christie, Baxter’s executive director, said she heard about the summertime chess games at the Expo and met Juac when she went there.

“We wanted to provide a safe space for the kids, because we could provide air conditioning and provide food,” she said of the school.

So she invited the Expo’s young chess players to come play at Baxter, where a summer chess camp was created.

During the summer games, Maviditi was getting noticed as a serious, standout chess player, Moore said. She asked Maviditi’s mother if she would allow him to enroll at Baxter. She agreed.

Klein-Christie said she welcomed him and three other students who used to live at the Expo. Maviditi, she said, excels in math and is in an advanced sophomore math class.

The summer chess games went so well, Klein-Christie said, that “as summer was wrapping up, we said wouldn’t it be amazing if we kept this going?”

So they did.

Baxter offered chess play after school, not just for its students but for other young people, including those who attend the downtown Boys and Girls Club.



The Baxter Academy chess team poses after winning the Maine State Scholastic Chess Championship this month. Lying on the floor is their chess teacher, Majur Juac. The team members, from left, are João Vuvu-Nkanu Maviditi, Jacob Kaiser, Abdallah Ali, Gibson Holloway, Sean Glass and Kai Whitehead.

Courtesy of Katie Moore/Gift of Chess

When the games first started, “a few of those kids didn’t know how the pieces moved,” she said. “But Juac soon changed that.”

The school held tournaments in the summer, fall and winter. It’s hosting another next month and inviting in other schools.

In the fall, Baxter also launched a chess class taught by Juac, and 16 academy students signed up right away, Klein-Christie said.

She said the chess students are “really into it” and put their phones down and talk to one another as they play.

With a limited budget, it’s a stretch for a charter school to expand programs, Klein-Christie said.

“But it’s has been a worthwhile investment. Chess is a way of teaching them strategic planning, math skills. And it’s lovely for them to be building community.”

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