

Chess player wins division chess championship

A local player's skills earned him a divisional championship in a recent tournament, bringing the first such title to the Scott County Chess Club.

Malcolm Johnson, of Newton, won first place in the U600 division of the second annual J'Kennethon Smith Memorial Chess Tournament held July 13 at the Outlets of Mississippi mall in Pearl. It was Johnson's fourth tournament since resuming his participation in chess last year when he began commuting to Forest on weekends to play with the club.

Johnson said he didn't expect to hear his name called when winners were announced at the end of the day-long event.

"I was surprised because I didn't realize I had done that well. I had a great time just competing, so it was really cool when the tournament director called my name," Johnson said. "It felt great to accomplish this and now that I know what this win feels like, I want to play more tournaments."

The 4-round tournament attracted 18 players spread across three divisions coming from across the state. Johnson needed just two wins in his division to capture the championship and dropped one game giving him a 2-1 finish on the day. He played two additional games for practice toward his rating, but those games were not part of the divisional section.

Johnson said his skills improved with each tournament and his confidence continues to build. "I saw this time when one of my opponents made a blunder and I was hoping that he wouldn't see it. I was able to take advantage of his mistake and get the win," Johnson said. "I feel better as a player because I can see moves further ahead and my focus on the whole board has increased. This win makes me want to keep learning and improving."

Chess is a centuries-old two-player strategy board game played on a checkered game board with 64 squares arranged in an 8x8 grid. The game, played with 16 pieces for each player moving in a variety of ways, is played by millions of people worldwide. Each player's objective is to checkmate the opponent's king to win the game. Players are grouped in tournaments according to their skill level as indicated through ratings issued by the U.S. Chess Federation.

Johnson is a native of Jackson and has resided in Newton for seven years. He is a retired law enforcement officer after serving until recently as a State Trooper in the Mississippi Highway Patrol, starting his career in 1993. He is also a veteran of the U.S. Marine Corps where he served eight years.

Johnson started playing chess in 1984 when an uncle taught him the game and Johnson played regularly during his military service with other Marines. Apart from playing some games on a computer through the Internet, Johnson said he participated less during his time with the highway patrol.

"When I retired, I decided to get back into playing, starting with some games on a computer," Johnson said. "Then I learned about the club in Forest and wanted to get more involved."

Johnson said his wife once worked at the Forest Public Library and told him about the chess club that meets there each month. Johnson began attending in 2023 and assisted with the club's chess camp for youth in October.

Chris Allen Baker, founder and coordinator of the Scott County Chess Club, said Johnson's championship means a lot to the club and he has become part of the club's legacy.

"We are so proud of Malcolm for his tournament victory, and he is a special part of our club. We have had players win tournament games, but he is the first to win a championship in a division like this," Baker said. "We are blessed to have him among us, and we appreciate his participation in our activities."

Johnson decided to take his chess game to a new level after he noticed the club's hosting of two annual tournaments. He joined the U.S. Chess Federation and began working toward his rating starting with a tournament earlier this year in Kemper County. He followed that with the Scott County club's spring tournament, and a tournament in Meridian.

"Then I heard about the tournament in Pearl and decided to give it a shot," Johnson said. Johnson said it is never too late to learn chess and getting involved is easy with many opportunities that are available.

"Chess is a good game that opens your mind and helps you think strategically about each move before you make it. It is a lot like life in making good decisions while understanding the consequences of each move," Johnson said. "I encourage everyone to try it by getting involved with someone who knows the game."

The Scott County Chess Club, which started in 2018, meets on the first Saturday of each month from 9 until 11 a.m. at the Forest Public Library. In addition to other events, the club hosts tournaments in the spring and fall in Morton. More information is available on the club website at scottcountychessclub.org.

Baker encourages everyone to attend the club's meetings and see what the game is all about first-hand. "We welcome all ages and skill levels and like Malcolm said, it is never too late and easier than you may think to learn the game of chess," Baker said. "We encourage everyone to try it."