



Forest, Miss., resident Chris Baker founded the Scott County Chess Club in 2018 to promote the game alongside his son, Aaron Baker. Photo courtesy Scott County Chess Club

Chris Allen Baker: Scott County Father Builds Local Chess Community

By Dustin Cardon, Mississippi Free Press

Chris Allen Baker sat in his living room after getting home from work on a typical Friday afternoon when his son, Aaron Baker, rushed into the room bursting with excitement. On that day Deanne McCown, the teacher for his second-grade gifted class at Forest Elementary School, had taught her students how to play chess, and Aaron was eager to play a game with his father.

Aaron pulled out a makeshift chess board he had made in class out of construction paper and sat it down on a table alongside a set of tiny plastic chess pieces McCown had given him. While Chris Baker had always wanted to learn chess, he had never gotten around to it because he had found the game intimidating as a child, so he asked his son to show him what he'd learned.

As soon as the elder Baker took his seat, Aaron began explaining the general rules of chess and what all of the individual pieces could and couldn't do. Baker found that the way his son explained everything to him made perfect sense, and the movements and interactions of the pieces fell into place in his mind quickly.

"Kids soak things up like sponges at that age, especially anything new and exciting," Baker says. "That day Aaron made a seemingly complicated activity easy to pick up, and his excitement quickly took hold in me as well. After we were done, I felt like I'd really exercised my mind, and everything felt a little clearer. I even felt more energetic at work after playing."



Chris Baker organized the Scott County Chess Club's meetings in the Forest Public Library in part due to the library's role as a community hub. Photo courtesy Scott County Chess Club

Even after the Bakers eventually bought a proper chess board to replace Aaron's construction-paper one, they decided to put the makeshift board in a frame and hang it on a wall in the living room. They also decided to keep using the chess pieces Aaron had brought home from school after finding them more suitable than the ones that came with the chess board, in their opinion.

Baker and his son started playing chess after dinner several nights a week up until Aaron's bedtime. When spring rolled around, the two wanted to seek out other people to play with and began asking around without much success. Baker's desire to promote the game soon prompted him to lay down the groundwork for starting up a chess club of his own, leading to the founding of the Scott County Chess Club in May 2018. He now serves as a coordinator and tournament director for the club.

A Beginning and a Comeback

The first person Baker approached for help in setting up a club was Dianne McLaurin, the librarian at the Forest Public Library, reasoning that a quiet game like chess would lend itself well to a library. The library also served a central hub of the local Forest, Miss., community and was open on Saturday mornings, making it an ideal meeting place. McLaurin gave Baker her full support and agreed to help get the word out about his proposed chess club.

Baker, who earned a bachelor's degree in journalism from the University of Mississippi in 1995, has more than 30 years of experience in the news industry, having worked with multiple local newspapers, including the Scott County Times. At the time he was setting up the chess club, Baker put the media contacts he had made during his career to use by putting out announcements in papers and other media outlets.

Sometime later, he held what he referred to as an "interest meeting" wherein he invited any member of the general public who either played chess or wanted to learn the game. At

least 20 people attended the first meeting and agreed to meet on the first Saturday of each month from then onward. McLaurin and the Friends of the Library support group also purchased five chess sets for the club to use during its meetings.



*Chris Baker (left) founded the Scott County Chess Club after Aaron Baker (right) learned how to play the game while in gifted class when the latter was in second grade. The two initially played chess at home using the board Aaron made at school.
Photo courtesy Scott County Chess Club*

For roughly the first two years, the Scott County Chess Club drew in about 25 people at each meeting, which Baker considered to be a great turnout. Things took a turn for the worse when the COVID-19 pandemic struck in 2019, which forced the club to suspend its activities until September of 2021.

“When we were finally able to reopen, we found that a lot of people had gone back to things like little league baseball that had also come back,” Baker says. “We hadn’t really been around long enough to truly take hold, so we lost some of our familiar faces during the downtime. We’ve been working to rebuild since then, however, and we’ve been steadily bringing in new recruits.”

As part of his efforts to rebuild the club, Baker kept information on the club’s meetings circulating in local newspapers and on Facebook. He launched a website in September 2022 that offered information on the Scott County Chess Club and its activities as well as a [comprehensive guide to chess](#) to help new prospective members ease into the game. He has promoted the club [multiple times](#) on the SuperTalk radio show [“Good Things with Rebecca Turner.”](#)

In November 2021, the club expanded its efforts to grow by becoming an affiliate of the U.S. Chess Federation and hosting its first tournament, the Roosevelt Chess Classic, at Roosevelt State Park in Morton, Miss. The event drew in 46 players from across Mississippi and surrounding states. Following the tournament’s success, Baker earned a license as a club-level tournament director with the U.S. Chess Federation so that he could start organizing tournaments of his own.

“Ever since the Scott County Chess Club got set up with us we’ve seen more and more people coming into the library wanting to learn about chess and check out books about it,” Forest Public Library Director Jenn Mormon says. “People come in to watch them and get so invested in the topic, and it generates a lot of interest. You can see the impact they’ve had on our community, especially among gifted students at our local elementary schools who have consistently been placing very high in competitions after learning from Chris and his students.”

As the vice president of the [Mississippi Chess Association](#), Baker also helps direct local tournaments that the MCA hosts in addition to his own club’s events.

‘A Whole New World’

In 2022, Baker launched the Bienville Chess Classic, named for the Bienville National Forest in Scott County. In memory of Beverly Rhodes, a teacher at Forest Elementary School who founded the gifted class where Aaron Baker learned to play chess, the winner of the Bienville Chess Classic receives a plaque with her name on it as their prize. The tournament occurs annually each spring.

Baker also hosts a smaller speed-chess tournament called the Forest Chess Challenge in August each year as well as the Randy Richardson Memorial Chess Camp in October. Baker teaches students about the basics of chess during the camps and hosts mock chess tournaments to give participants a feel for the real thing. The camp’s namesake is a Forest native who donated \$1,000 to the Scott County Chess Club. Baker and Dianne McLaurin used the donation to purchase chess books for the Forest Public Library.



Chris Baker organizes chess events such as the Bienville Chess Classic in the spring alongside the Forest Chess Challenge and Randy Richardson Memorial Chess Camp in the fall.

Photo courtesy Scott County Chess Club

The club still hosts the Roosevelt Chess Classic each fall, usually in November. For these tournaments, players can compete as teams in addition to competing as individuals. To honor McLaurin, starting with this year’s fall tournament, the awards will include McLaurin’s name. Chris, his wife Emily and Aaron have competed in a Thanksgiving chess tournament themselves as a team before in Canton, wherein Emily—a professional musician who plays with the Mississippi Symphony Orchestra as a cellist and teaches music at Forest Elementary—won more games than either her husband or son.

In the past, the Scott County Chess Club has partnered with the Forest branch of the Boy Scouts to offer a merit badge for chess playing, holding a clinic at Forest Baptist Church to teach scouts the game and help them earn it. The club has also developed chess programs for local schools and sets up booths at local festivals to promote the game.

“Chess helps kids improve their memory, problem-solving and critical-thinking skills and makes it easier to learn to plan ahead,” Baker says. “Every time you move a piece, there’s an immediate consequence, so you have to think before you act, which is important for kids to learn. Chess has opened up a whole new world for me, and I feel proud being able to introduce it to people of all ages at our tournaments.”



*The Scott County Chess Club is an affiliate of the U.S. Chess Federation and has hosted the Roosevelt Chess Classic since 2021.
Photo courtesy Scott County Chess Club*

While Aaron Baker, a percussionist for his high-school band, has become more involved in other activities since he introduced the game to his father as a child, the two still play together at home regularly. The elder Baker says the game has meanwhile helped him make new connections through his club’s activities.

“Our tournaments are bringing people from across Mississippi and beyond to Scott County, which has helped put us on the map in the chess community,” Baker says. “As for Aaron, the beauty of the game for someone as young as him is that he can jump back in whenever he wants. On the other hand, I want to soak up as much as I can while I can. I wish I could have learned when I was younger like he did, and I’m making that happen for other kids like him.”

For more information on the Scott County Chess Club, visit cottcountychessclub.org or find the club on [Facebook](#).