

## Two classic games teach children useful skills.

By Ethan Goffman

**T**wo ancient games of cunning and patience: In one, sculpted armies face each other, with ornate towers and galloping horses ready for battle; in the other, humble stones of black and white fill a vast, blank space, struggling to surround each other, building up networks of escalating intricacy.

For chess and go enthusiasts, each is certain their game is the best in the world. They also share a thirst for imparting the wisdom of their centuries-old art. Despite jockeying over status, chess and go advocates share a common goal—to educate youth through the mastery of a complex set of actions, through competition, sportsmanship and camaraderie, through learning the best moves and even more through improvising, creating something new within an ancient context.

“Chess teaches children an enormous range of useful skills,” says David Mehler, founder of the U.S. Chess Center in Washington, D.C. “Perseverance and patience, learning the risks of complacency.” And even more, it “teaches them to concentrate, to focus on a task, to resolve issues with their minds.”

For inner-city children who may suffer from low expectations, chess has other benefits. “It gives the kids a sense of confidence that they are intellectually capable,” Mehler explains, “because of the cache of chess. Children who’ve been brought up being told that they’re stupid and worthless, they learn to play chess and they realize that what they’d been told about themselves previously was a lie.” Mehler cites students in his program who have gone on to become doctors, lawyers and engineers.

Far across the country, in Boulder, Colo., go teacher Paul Barchilon touts even more intellectual advantages for his favorite pastime. “Go to my mind is a much better game,” he says, “almost the opposite of chess. In chess you start out with a full board and play in the

squares. In go, the board starts empty and you play on the intersections of the lines. Instead of trying to capture a specific piece, you are creating islands of territory, a world, a cosmos.”

Roy Laird, a clinical psychologist and chair of the American Go Association ([usgo.org](http://usgo.org)), argues that go encourages a more philosophical mindset. “Chess is a paradigm of 18<sup>th</sup>-century warfare,” he says. “Pieces line up and battle each other. I have to cut out your heart.” In go, however, “the whole idea of winning is different. In Asian thought, mountain and valley are not opposed. They coexist and define each other.”

Barchilon adds that the competitive concept is different in go: “If a player is

# Chess & Go



too greedy, and tries to take everything, the game punishes the player." Go, with its handicap system, also rewards the play of the game beyond simply winning or losing. A player may compete against himself or herself to lower the handicap, while players want to help weaker opponents reach a higher level.

For John Goon, an organizer of numerous chess and go clubs in the Maryland suburbs of Washington, D.C., both games offer tremendous opportunities: Go is the easier game to learn and offers a richness of strategic breadth; chess offers great tactical complexity and a

For chess teacher Etienne Gilbert, who works at the U.S. Chess Center, go is a strange and alienating game, one he has played only once, many years ago. He finds the game "very abstract, the board is so wide. All the pieces are the same." Gilbert believes that chess, with its ornate variety of pieces, each with its own special power, "will have an edge. Because it's dynamic; you know, go is static."

Mehler, for his part, points out that "chess has a broader international appeal. Every country in the world has a chess team." The game has also entered the language, so that it's "just part of the

It took six months of puzzlement and pondering before Barchilon finally won, at which point his friend moved away. In a go-famished country, he was unable to find any real opponents for another 17 years. Finally, in 2001, a chance encounter led him to start playing again, and he discovered the Boulder Go Club in Colorado.

Barchilon now sees it as his personal mission to keep such a drought of go opponents "from happening to other people." When a go-playing friend and teacher died of cancer in 2003, Barchilon began to teach the friend's children. Shortly thereafter he started a weekly go club for kids and in 2006 won the Teacher of the Year Award from the American Go Foundation. Currently, he is helping its organizing efforts, resulting in some 100 new go clubs across the country annually. "I have high hopes for the next generation," Barchilon says.

Mehler's path to teaching chess was similarly indirect. Although he learned

consequences," which made him realize he had control over his life.

Mehler used chess to help a few other students and then moved on. A few years later, as a young lawyer in Washington, D.C., he volunteered to read stories to inner-city youth. Soon, he was looking for other ways to help. Not surprisingly, he drew upon his earlier experiences and began teaching chess.

His informal activities soon drew attention. "People liked the work I was doing with kids in the city," he explains. A Washington, D.C., visit by world chess champion Garry Kasparov led to a push for chess education, and in 1991 the U.S. Chess Center opened, with Mehler as its

## "Go and chess offer a treasure chest of opportunities for enlightenment beyond the mere mastery of rules, tactics and strategies."



**Above left:** Players attend the Rockville, Md., Go and Chess Club. *Photo by Ethan Goffman* **Above right:** Kids get their game on at the Boulder Kids & Teens Go club. *Photo by Paul Barchilon*

potent range of educational and club support. To Goon, "the true difference comes from the skill, training and maturity of the teachers and mentors. Go and chess offer a treasure chest of opportunities for enlightenment beyond the mere mastery of rules, tactics and strategies."

Laird also sees huge benefits to both games. "There's a lot of research out there that shores up the cognitive benefits of chess," he explains, pointing to electro-encephalogram studies that show areas of the brain lighting up when engaged in a game. Yet, he says, other studies show go stimulates additional areas of the brain. Studies have also shown both games "enhance reading level and average rate of academic progress."

culture, part of the lingo," pointing to terms used in diplomacy, sports and many other contexts, such as "keep in check," "stalemate," "end game" and "a pawn in the system."

Although chess is more widespread, many Americans will be surprised there are more go players overall, but they are concentrated in Asia, particularly China, Japan, and Korea.

### Paths to Teaching

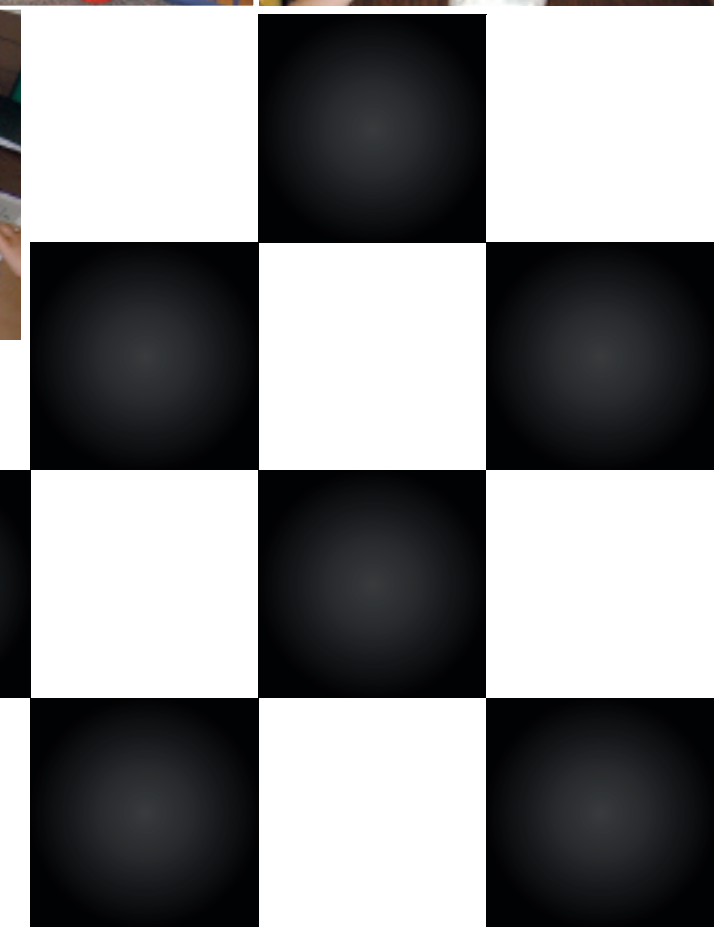
Isolated, like most Americans, from go, Barchilon initially learned the game at age 16 from a friend who, for no discernible reason, kept winning. "I was quite mystified," he shares. "I felt I was at least as intelligent."

the game at an early age, he explains he "didn't have any great ability, or even that much interest." Teaching at a private high school in the 1970s, he dealt with a failing student whom he describes as "reasonably intelligent, he simply wasn't connecting to the whole academic process." Because the student came from a family of alumni, there was extra pressure to help him, and Mehler suggested chess.

"Almost immediately, his whole academic outlook turned around," Mehler says. "Other teachers were commenting, what am I doing with this kid that he's gone from being an F student to an A student virtually overnight." Chess had enabled him "to plan ahead, and he understood that there will always be



**Near right:** In the final round of the 2007 U.S. Youth Go Championship regional qualifier in Boulder, Colo., 12-year-old Kellin Pelrine (left) was the winner and went on to compete at the nationals in Seattle. His opponent was 11-year-old Jessica Lin. They are playing on a traditional Japanese floor board. *Photo by Paul Barchilon* **Far right:** John Goon teaches go at his Rockville club. *Photo by Ethan Goffman* **Below:** Students at Harriet Tubman Elementary School in Washington, D.C., take in a game of chess. *Photo by Ethan Goffman*



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## Success Story

Among many stories, John Goon remembers one particular child. In the 1970s, a sparse decade for go, he taught for a few months at a local program that soon failed. Some 20 years later, the one student who had shown a strong enthusiasm “called my home out of the clear blue sky and brought me up to date.” He had joined the Navy and been assigned to Japan, where “because of his go interest, he was embraced by the players and gained access to a level of native Japanese culture not normally encountered.” This student was now better than his former teacher, but both teacher and student emerged the winners.



**Top and left:** This chess program is held at Harriet Tubman Elementary School.

**Below:** Chess teacher Etienne Gilbert demonstrates how to hunt down a king. *Photos by Ethan Goffman*



coming up to me, thanking me for what an amazing experience this is for their kids.”



### Successful Blending

Chess and go teachers, despite their competitiveness, are really taking part in the same mission, using games as an opportunity for cognitive, social and academic development. Indeed, over his years as an organizer, Goon has come to realize the benefits of diversity. After struggling to make go clubs work, he added chess. “It quickly became clear that the inclusion of other games greatly improved the chances for a club’s survival,” he explains.

To Goon, a monolithic approach, whether to sports or to boardgames, serves “to winnow out rather than to embrace all. It seems to me that educational programs with student enhancement as their goal ought to be all-inclusive if at all possible.” Over the years, Goon’s clubs have expanded to include an increasing variety, from fantasy card games to word games to European-style games such as Carcassonne and Ticket to Ride. Participants drawn to one kind of game will often switch around and become interested in others, leading to a variety of styles, a variety of riches.

director. The center sends chess teachers to area schools, and although it focuses on inner-city children, it serves all schools that ask. It also runs tournaments that bring together kids from all parts of the city and suburbs.

One of the newest programs is at the Harriet Tubman School, where Etienne Gilbert teaches third and fourth graders on Friday mornings. “The teachers love it,” he explains, “and for kids it’s like an indoor recess.” Gilbert begins classes with a lecture, although with much student participation. “What three things can a king do to get out of check?” Gilbert asks a recent class, and a slew of hands shoot up, waving for attention.

“Run like a coward,” answers one boy. “Good,” says Gilbert, and solicits more answers. Soon the kids divide into twos and sit in rapt concentration at their chessboards while Gilbert patrols the room, answering questions.

Beyond attracting kids’ attention, Gilbert believes chess imparts many lessons. “You have first a sense of responsibility,” he remarks. “There is the principle of fairness; you can’t cheat. There is the principle of concentration and focus, that’s a good quality to develop, of creativity, calculation and planning. Obviously chess is a strategy game, [so] you have to look ahead in time. Backwards and forwards. Those are qualities that definitely are applicable to other areas in life.”

His favorite part of the job, however, is the children. “Oh, yes, we have chess,” they will shout. They will high five me or hug me.”

Barchilon also recounts a hugely gratifying response: “I routinely have parents

Still, Goon’s foundation rests with the two classics: “The successful blending of go and chess programs demonstrated the feasibility of future friendly and respectful coexistence,” he explains.

The two games, although overlapping in some ways, also teach different skills. Chess is

the ultimate game of tactics, with pieces swooping down unexpectedly, with forks, pins and discovered attacks. Go is a big-picture, long-term game of patience, structure and development. Very few children will achieve top-level mastery of either game, and even fewer will become professionals. But the games will be a part of their formative experience and, in some cases, the key element that taught them how creative thinking combined with self-discipline can lead to success.

A child taking up chess or go, then, may be analogous to the development of a knight in chess toward the center of the board, pushing from a protected place to a perhaps scarier vantage point, yet one that opens up new directions, new possibilities. Or it may be considered akin to the placing of a stone in go, a move that builds toward a larger structure, one that, scores of stones later, may prove the key that changed the game. For most, chess and go will be a stepping stone, one piece in the development of a complex person. And the ability to stimulate a child toward a thoughtful and satisfying middle game ought to gratify any teacher. ♠♣