

Matching will and wits

Tuesdays at Framingham's Legion Hall, the only sport is chess

By Igor Greenwald

It is 9:30 in the evening on Playoff Tuesday, and most of New England is watching the Boston Celtics duke it out against the Los Angeles Lakers. At the American Legion Hall in Framingham, though, 40 men, most of them basketball fans, are oblivious to the Battle of the Titans.

Basketball banter stopped the minute the chess clocks started. The game is on the Legion bar television set, but only a single brave soul risks losing his concentration to catch the first-quarter score.

These men have other things to think about: they have only 90 minutes to make their first 40 moves.

On this particular night, probably because of the playoffs, the chess club turnout is on the low side; 60 of the 100 members turn out on an average evening. They straggle in from Acton, Billerica and Stow, even Nashua, N.H.

Twenty-one dollars a year buys them membership in the U.S. Chess Federation, with which the club is affiliated. A couple of bucks at the American Legion bar will buy a consolation drink after a tough loss.

The players sit in pairs, eyeing each other across long wooden tables, occasionally exchanging a furrowed brow for an icy stare. It is hard to tell that the members of the Framingham Chess Club are engaged in a leisure-time hobby; they play with the intensity of Larry Bird taking a last-second shot.

However, beyond the shores of America, chess is a sport. The World Championship, The Team Championship and the Olympiads are followed by millions of fans from Tokyo to Timbuktu.

Americans always do well, although they trail the powerhouse Soviets; but, as far as their countrymen are concerned, they might as well excel at Dominoes.

The status of chess is lower in

the States than just about anywhere else in the world," says Framingham Club Director Warren Pinches. "You tell anyone that you play chess," adds Jack Young, "and they assume that you are something out of 'Revenge of the Nerds.'"

Young, a youthful Raytheon engineer, will never be mistaken for a "computer nerd." An exception that confirms the rule, he likes his chess light and irreverent.

In a friendly skirmish, Young, the Framingham Chess Club champion, finds his position dangerously exposed. It is a situation that would horrify many a conventional player, but Young only shrugs.

"I pick my spots very carefully," he says.

"Right, Jack," someone replies. "You only play this way against the masters."

But while high-jinks prevail in

the practice room, the bulk of the club membership is next door, tearing at each other in mind-to-mind combat. Pawns stagger and fall, knights topple by the wayside, and queens roam the boards spilling blood in their wake.

The comparison to war is not frivolous. Chess was invented as an abstract version of warfare, and in every teacher and technician in the room tonight there lurks a Napoleon.

For many, the pain of losing is just as real. The experience of starting out with equal forces and then watching the opponent march to victory is not assuring.

"There is no such thing as chess for fun," says Mark Steinberg, only half-jokingly. Well, there is, but it is quite unlike needlepoint. The fun is matching will, wits and egos with an opponent; retaining any of them after a humiliating game is a different story.

Amateur players, who also have jobs and families, must face the daily pressures of their 'other' life as well.

"I dropped out of chess for 10 years," admits Pinches. "Didn't play a single game, tournament or backyard. I didn't even know who the world champion was."

Other players, too, say they go through stretches of burnout. "We all quit," says Steinberg, "and we all come back sooner or later. It's as addictive as this," he adds, pointing at his cigarette.

In the meantime, they persist, this advance party of intellectual competition in the land of Hulk Hogan and The Refrigerator. And one day, if Chess Finals are on ABC and your child is playing Little League Chess, you might remember the Framingham Chess Club, passing up the Celtics for a play night at the American Legion.



Drew Sarkisian of Oxford, the big winner Tuesday at the Framingham Chess Club, confidently makes his move.

NEWS PHOTO BY PETER BAYLOR