

Executive Director's Report to Delegates August 2020

What a difference a year makes. Last year at this time, US Chess was on a sharp upward trajectory in our core areas of rated games, tournaments, and membership. We also celebrated the first year (albeit a short year) of focused development activities to advance the US Chess mission and its programs. Little did we know that a previously unknown virus could stop us in our tracks and cause us to recalibrate our thinking, our actions, and our planning for the future of US Chess.

Coronavirus Response

- We worked with the Executive Board (EB) to put temporary rules in place for online play. The EB appointed an Online Play Task Force with a mandate to revise rules for online play. The recommendations of the Online Play Task Force resulted in the proposed Chapter 10 revisions to the *Official Rules of Chess* under consideration by the Delegates during the Special Delegates' Meeting.
- We worked with the EB to put a number of new policies and features in place. The EB authorized the creation of a new ratings system for longer time controls for online play, a system which remains separate from the regular rating for over-the-board (OTB) play. For the first time, we also are maintaining Top 100 lists for rated online play.
- We worked with the EB and the Ratings Committee to review Fair Play methodologies for various online chess platforms. At the time of this report, two platforms have received an endorsement by US Chess for their Fair Play efforts for online events: Chess.com and the Internet Chess Club (ICC). Other reviews are pending.
- In the spring, US Chess volunteers conducted a series of workshops aimed at professional development for tournament directors and organizers. In all, over 450 people participated in various webinars held over a three-month period.
- We conducted the U.S. Invitational Tournaments of State Champions online. The US Chess State Invitationals Committee, Executive Board, and US Chess staff teamed up to execute this transition in the astonishingly short time of just over a month.
- Adapting to a rapidly-changing environment was no different for US Chess development efforts. We participated in #GivingTuesdayNow, successfully raising more than \$10,000 through a brief email and social media campaign. Additionally, the National High School Senior Online Tournament and a volunteer-driven charity chess event, Blitzing COVID, together raised almost \$20,000 to support US Chess.
- In recent years (perhaps a decade or more), US Chess has relied on organic membership growth. We initiated our first membership campaign in July 2020, #GetUSChess, and welcomed back some former members of US Chess during this period. The introduction of more rated play options appears to have been an important driver for our new and returning members.

Membership

The pandemic began to impact membership numbers as early as February 2020. The numbers year over year dropped by a high of 33% in April to a low of 26% in May, primarily due to the reduction of over-the-board playing opportunities. Online events are now an important membership driver, replacing some of the losses experienced by the reduction in over-the-board play. As membership dues are a key component of US Chess annual total revenue, a concerted effort to boost membership is underway. We appreciate all the members who have renewed or joined US Chess during these challenging times.

Mission Support Programs

Scholastics and Education

The 2019 Scholastic Invitationals– the Denker, Barber, and Haring–featured 140 participants representing their respective states. Their popularity led to the creation of a new event, the John D. Rockefeller III National Tournament of Elementary State Champions, making its debut in 2020. Another newly-created tournament, the FM Sunil Weeramantry National Blitz Tournament of State Champions, also debuted and was open to all invitational participants, including representatives from the non-scholastic National Tournament of Senior State Champions, which added another 44 players.

With generous support from US Chess Sales, US Chess launched a program to donate chess sets and teaching boards to Title I schools. With a target of 200 schools for the program, interest in the equipment was overwhelming, reaching our capacity in less than 24 hours. This partnership resulted in free equipment to 203 schools in 37 states out of a total of 234 applicants. This program provided US Chess with an opportunity to support schools that serve students who are at-risk, one of US Chess' strategic goals.

Women's Program

The US Chess Women's program continues to be a flagship offering. Despite complications arising from the pandemic, much of the program has found itself moving online. Weekly girls' club events are happening online, as is the online partnership with wildly popular streamer Alexandra Botez. The first year of Women's program grants wrapped up in the spring of 2020 and a new limited program solicitation was released. The program grants are to be announced in August 2020.

Events

The pandemic put a damper on OTB play during the spring and early summer. Last year, US Chess rated 9,593 OTB events, a 17.6% decrease over last year. Similarly, US Chess rated 628,247 OTB games, a 22% decrease over the prior year. Not surprisingly, there were 770 rated online events, a 63.5% increase over the prior year. There were 62,369 rated online games, a

173.4% increase over the prior year. The US Chess Executive Board suspended online ratings fees through August 31, 2020 to allow for organizers to experiment with online rated play.

Committees are Advancing our Mission

US Chess Committees play an integral part in the sustainability of US Chess and in providing expertise to US Chess leadership on a variety of topics.

The Accessibility and Special Circumstances Committee, after a period of intense research and development, provided [Guidelines for Accessible Chess Events](#) to the US Chess Executive Board. These guidelines provide a primer on legal requirements organizers and directors must consider when conducting a chess event. Additionally, the Guidelines offer practical guidance and examples of reasonable accommodations that can be provided to players with disabilities. The work of the Committee has helped US Chess realize its goal to be a more inclusive and supportive organization.

Additional support for players with disabilities comes from the Flowers Fund housed at the U.S. Chess Trust. With support from this fund, US Chess is able to provide accommodations to players with disabilities at US Chess national events and other programs. Earlier this year, US Chess was able to offer closed captioning on two training webinars at the request of a member with hearing impairment—an accommodation made possible by the Flowers Fund.

The US Chess Clubs Committee created an updated [Guide to a Successful Chess Club](#). The guide provides practical tips for new clubs for getting started and laying a solid foundation for success as a chess club. Through US Chess affiliates and other clubs, the reach of the game extends beyond its current boundaries, meeting another goal of US Chess.

New Information System

US Chess launched a major information system upgrade in July 2020 after 18 months of work. While the upgrade did not go perfectly (no technology upgrade ever does), our members are now enjoying improvements to many functions, some of which are available to users for the first time. Our technology partner, Skvare, spent the better part of last year gathering requirements, documenting processes, and building a system that would link some old US Chess systems to a more sustainable and robust membership system that delivers more than was initially envisioned in scope for Phase 1 of the project. This was done to save funds on development costs from not having to build temporary bridges to existing systems. When fully integrated with our accounting system, US Chess will more easily track transactions to allow for improved analysis of organizational trends.

Because of the impacts of the pandemic, Phase 2 of the project, encompassing the public side of the website and events, has been placed on indefinite hold but is expected to be picked up as soon as a more normal state is returned.

Our membership staff has been working extra hours to process memberships as quickly as they are able, and we appreciate your continued patience and understanding with the delays. In addition, [Boyd Reed](#), serving as our Infrastructure Project Manager, has been working to keep ahead of the issues by testing new releases and helping our internal teamwork through the challenges of learning a new system. If you have a reason to communicate with Boyd, please thank him for all of us. His role has been invisible to most everyone, but he has done the heavy lifting for US Chess on this project. We would never have gotten this far without his leadership.

Gratitude

The past several months have challenged every person involved with US Chess—our members, affiliates, directors, organizers, volunteers, committee members, partners, sponsors, supporters, staff, and Executive Board. I know that you too are experiencing your own version of pandemic fatigue.

The US Chess Executive Board and staff deserve a particular note of thanks for their decisive and swift response to a rapidly evolving set of circumstances. Their professionalism and dedication have been unrivaled during the course of my career and it is an honor to be part of this team.

I remain hopeful about the future of US Chess in the coming year and beyond and look forward to seeing you again at an in-person event before too long.

August 11, 2020