



Jack Easton stares across his chess board at his home in Manhattan. Easton studies chess-related problems for 30 minutes every day. On Wednesdays he dedicates five hours to practicing the game. At 11, Easton said he is confident in his skills.

Staff photos by Rod Mikinski

Checkmate

Local chess prodigy takes down opponents young and old

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There are kids who play sports and there are kids who eat, sleep and breathe their sport; 11-year-old, Jack Easton is the latter.

Easton, the second of four children, has been playing chess since the age of 3. As he's gotten older his interest has intensified along with his skills. Chess is part of his daily home-schooling curriculum.



OFF THE BEAT

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Life lessons and baseball

"So we beat on, boats against the current, borne back ceaselessly into the past."
— F. Scott Fitzgerald, *The Great Gatsby*

The last real baseball game I ever played was probably in the summer of 1982, just before I went to high school. I'm not sure. I don't remember it. I don't even remember the name of my team. Leaving the game was just not a big deal at the time.

Which today seems very odd, considering that I will never forget the moment at the end of last summer when my youngest son walked away from baseball. It broke my heart.

Baseball lends itself to two things: Statistical analysis and overblown writing. This column is not about statistics. It's about boyhood, and summer, and growing up and growing older. It's about hope, particularly this time of year, as spring training starts and people think of new beginnings. It's about playing catch in the yard on a perfect afternoon, wishing time could stop. It's about buying bags of sunflower seeds, slushies, and concession-stand hot dogs. It's about success — and plenty of failure. It's about me and my kid, possibilities and endings, perspective, life, death and rebirth. (Yes, I know. O-v-e-r-b-l-o-w-n. Just roll with it, please.)

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I played tee-ball, coach-pitch and Cookie League baseball in City Park here in Manhattan. I made a couple of the best friends of my life on those fields. I was lucky enough to knock one over the fence while Butch



run," Jack said. "I'm not as good with physical sports as I am with mental sports."

Every day he practices chess problems for 30 minutes, and on Wednesdays he devotes five hours to the game. He spends two hours playing a four-match series on the Internet Chess Club website, under the username jeaston, and the remaining three hours solving chess problems. He also spends much of his free time reading chess magazines that specialize in tactics training.

"Chess is both a sport and an academic subject," said Jack's mother, Kelly Easton. "It teaches pattern recognition, calculations, positional advantages, multi-step problem solving and deductive reasoning."

Easton regularly works with three trainers—two in Kansas and one in Dubai—via Skype.

He is an avid competitor and takes the game very seriously. At various points throughout the interview he stopped this reporter mid-sentence to ensure that she had understood what he was saying about the game.

His obsession started in 2010 at the age of 8 when he played his first tournament at the Kansas City Chess Club, taking third place in a practice tournament against roughly 15 other children.

"The stress level is really high, even for competitors at a young age," Kelly said.

Since then he has gone on to play in a variety of tournaments, state and national competitions in Topeka, Kansas City, Nashville, Orlando and Las Vegas.

"Before every tournament, Mom makes homemade spaghetti and we have to get up really early," Jack said. "I have to eat M&Ms as I need them at certain intervals during the tournament to keep me going."

From 2010 to February 2012, Easton's rating increased to where he was able to play in K-8, a more advanced division. He took second place in his first K-8 competition.

He enjoys consistently playing above his age range because he finds it more challenging.

In March of 2011 he competed in his first Kansas Scholastic State Championships, taking 17th place in the K-5 division. Last March, he finished seventh in the Scholastic State Champi-



Easton shows off a few of his medals earned by playing chess. His ultimate goal is to earn the title of fastest grandmaster in Kansas by the age of 15. Easton said that he is "not intimidated" by adults or even other children his age who play.

onships, and earlier this month he was the high-scoring individual in an association tournament in Topeka.

"I am always calculating and staying three moves ahead of the position on the board," Jack said. "My signature move is to start by moving the queen pawn up two."

He played in his first National Scholastic Tournament in Nashville last May, taking ninth place in the U.S. Chess Federation (USCF) 900 and under category for K-5. He won six out of seven matches in that tournament.

Easton continued to challenge himself taking first place in his first adult tournament in Stillwater, Okla., in May, in the USCF 1400 and under division.

"People get put off by Jack because he is particularly good and has been better than average since the beginning," Kelly said. "Sometimes the adults are not good sports... some of them don't handle losing to an 11-year-old very well."

In October, Jack was playing in the K-12 division and won first place in the Kansas Scholastic Tournament held in Topeka. By November he found himself in Orlando, Fla., taking 26th in his second national tournament.

"Florida is one of Jack's favorite chess memories," Kelly said. "He had four wins, two losses and one draw. Three of the four wins and the draw were against much higher rated players, so in essence he had four upsets out of seven games."

In December he played in his first North American Open in Las Vegas; he took second in the USCF 1250 and under division. Since Vegas, he has placed in the top five in numerous competitions and is in hardcore preparation mode for the upcoming scholastic state tournament March 14-16 in St. Louis, Mo. He is also preparing for SuperNationals in April, which are only played every three

years, in Nashville, Tenn.

"It's hard to lose... I still lose to the really tough players sometimes; there are only five of them in Kansas including me, but I have lost to a few of them," Jack said. "I'm pretty well-known in the chess world."

Easton, who turns 12 in March, has more than one thing on his agenda. He is on a mission to steal the title of fastest grandmaster in Kansas. The rules for attaining that status are too complex to be explained here, but they typically involve strong performances against other grandmasters, or winning major championships. According to Easton, the age to beat is 18 and he hopes to accomplish it by age 15.

"Kids do amazing things with chess, and Jack wants to beat each and every one of them," Kelly said.

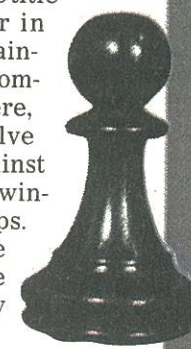
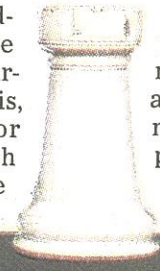
However Easton realizes that if he has to wait until age 20 or 25, that is OK, too—as long as he achieves the title.

"My mom says I'm really competitive," Jack said. "I'm not intimidated by adults or older kids; I'm confident in my skills."

He wants to be top rated in the state overall and later on become top rated in the country. His other goals include someday coaching other kids who are passionate about chess and winning a full ride to Webster University in St. Louis, Mo., by taking first in the Susan Polger National Open Championship tournament.

Easton started with a rating of 711 and is currently rated at 1408 by the USCF.

"Chess requires a lot of study... you have to stay in practice or you might forget your tactics and the ability to see and predict your opponents' moves," Jack said. "I know people who have taken a summer off and have not been as good."



traveling team he helped coach when I was about 11. I played on that team, "Ballard's Sporting Goods," as we played, oh, probably 150 games during three summers. Most were against rinky-dink town teams—White City, Americus, Dwight. We were classified as a St. George team, due to where our other coach lived, which is why we were playing that circuit. We won the state championship, held in Anthony, by beating Wamego.

I was a good singles hitter; I wanted to be the next George Brett. The scouting report: Good glove, accurate but mediocre arm, no power, little speed. I played wherever—some second, some outfield. Catcher was my favorite; I enjoyed trying to think a step ahead of the hitters and control the game. That was my other strength, I guess: thinking.

Eventually, baseball kicked me out. The pitchers started throwing curves, and as a result I wasn't so good a singles hitter anymore. Check the list of assets above and you'll figure out why I didn't last. You can't think your way to first base.

I had also discovered that I was pretty good at tennis, and I started playing competitive tournaments in the summer. So I quit the traveling team one spring; I presume the coaches were relieved to see me go. That summer, I joined a city-league ball team for fun. I hardly remember anything about it, but whenever that season ended, as summer turned to fall, I was finished.

I didn't think anything of it at the time; you tend not to see life passing by when you're 15, and anyway it had become obvious that I was not headed to the Hall of Fame.

It was only much later that I realized how much that all meant to me—the time with my teammates in the dugout, the feel of the bat meeting the ball, the thud of the ball in your glove, the whiff of the concession stand. Powerful stuff; I had locked it away.



Our middle boy started playing traveling baseball a few years ago. He was good, and his team was (and still is) very good. I went to the games; I smelled those hot dogs and heard the gloves popping. I felt the pull. But we still had a couple of younger kids to deal with and I didn't get deeply involved.

I decided to try to help coach the youngest one when he got an offer to do the traveling-team thing at age 7. (Yes: Seven!) I was an assistant for a couple of years, and a head coach for a couple, too.

It completely hooked me. I cared deeply about the teaching, the learning, the life lessons—and the wins and losses. I stayed up at night worrying about lineups. I spent hours talking to parents about their kids. I guess I felt reborn. And most importantly, in that dugout, I got to see a dozen boys at their best and their worst. We became a family.

We were damn good. We won a ton of games. And yes, my youngest was good. As I