

Checkmate at the Border

The true story of how a teacher from El Paso's Segundo Barrio coached his students into national chess champions

The Champions' Game by Saul Ramirez as told to John Seidlitz

In April of 2015, a team of 12 middle schoolers—border kids—from South-Central El Paso surprised the country by taking first place in the national chess championships.

The 11, 12 and 13-year-old chess players at El Paso ISD's Henderson Middle School largely credit their success to one man: Saul Ramirez, a 30-year-old dad and husband who teaches art at Henderson during the day and coaches the chess team after school. The story of Ramirez and his students is chronicled in *The Champions' Game*, a testament to the resilience and spirit of children who dare to dream.

Many of the 700-plus students at Henderson Middle School come and go from across the border in Juárez, where they live. A third of the students are English Language Learners, and over 96 percent are from low-income families, with all of the students at the school qualifying for the free lunch program.

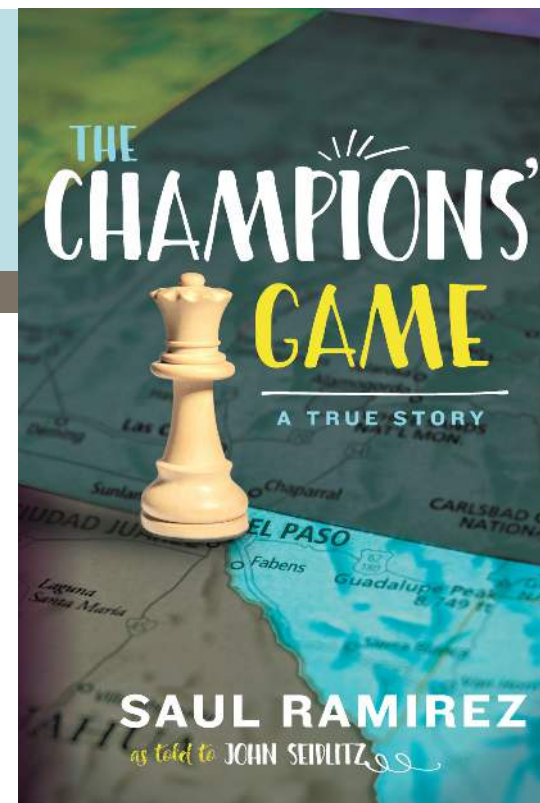
For these kids, dreams of beating highly privileged students from “fancy” schools in upper-crust neighborhoods aren't on the radar. They have bigger issues to deal with in life. Which is why it borders on the miraculous that they choose to voluntarily—even enthusiastically—commit countless hours every week to the practice of a game that they had known virtually nothing about until two years ago when Ramirez started a chess club at Henderson.

Ramirez's genius is not so much the chess that he teaches (even though he's a former Texas state chess champion), but in his ability to intertwine life principles with chess rules to expand the minds, the insight and even the future possibilities of the students he teaches. The book's 14 chapters lay out Ramirez's rules for life—and chess, introducing concepts like guard your queen, control your center and protect your king.

Ramirez grew up in El Paso's *Segundo Barrio*, a neighborhood that might bring to mind Compton, or South Central, or 8 Mile, often noted as the poorest zip code in the United States. Ramirez seems to possess a singular ability to draw out the talents of his students, perhaps because chess is much more than just a game to him. In *The Champions' Game*, he writes, “I want to start a revolution. A revolution of the mind. I want to do what was done for me by [the people] who were always there for me when I was a child, guiding me, teaching me, showing me how to be a man, an artist, a teacher. I want to build children anew, from the mind up. That does not take genius. It takes love.”

The Champions' Game follows Ramirez's original 12 champions through their triumphs—and failures—at local, state and national chess competitions, including:

- Lirio Amanalli Gomez - the only girl on the 12-player team, who sheds her shyness as she finds independence from her helicopter mom



BOOK DETAILS

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PR  BOOK

- Manuel Esteban “Manny” Tejada - a gifted and talented student who takes up chess because it’s a “gentleman’s game” and quickly becomes the spirit of the team
- Chris “Baby Face” Carmona - a hardworking student who was raised by his grandmother. When he first joined the team, all he knew of chess was that “it’s something you put your toys in, *sí?*”

Under Ramirez’s caring but firm tutelage, the 12 soon-to-be-champions of El Paso hunker down, deal with the daily challenges of life and shrug off troubling national news riddled with racism and division, instead trusting Ramirez to mentor them in their new extracurricular passion—*chess*.

News tie-ins & core messages

- The Path to Becoming a Champion: The students of El Paso ISD’s Henderson Middle School who beat the odds to win the national chess competition in 2015 and 2016
- The artful genius of Saul Ramirez, a young art teacher and chess coach from Segundo Barrio who is starting a revolution in El Paso
- Border Kids: The identity of being a *Fronterizo*
- Rules for Chess—and Life: Lessons for students, parents, middle grade educators and administrators on how the rules of chess can teach life principles and skills such as visualization, critical thinking and strategic planning
- Recruiting More Girls to Play Chess: The first year Henderson went to the Texas state championships, one girl competed; this year about 16 are competing.
- The Texas State Chess Championships are March 3-5, 2017; the National Chess Championships are May 12-14, 2017

About the authors

Saul Ramirez is the chess coach and art teacher at Henderson Middle School in El Paso, Texas, where he coached his students to win the national chess championships in 2015 and 2016. Ramirez grew up in El Paso’s *Segundo Barrio*, located in one of the poorest zip codes in the United States. When he discovered chess as a child, it created a pathway out of misfortune. Ramirez, like his current students, competed in chess tournaments across the country and was a Texas state champion. Ramirez graduated from the University of Texas at El Paso (UTEP) in May 2010 and started teaching at Henderson Middle School in August of that same year, where he continues to create new paths for the dreams of his students. He lives in El Paso with his wife, Edna, and two children, Saul Jr. and Frida.

John Seidlitz is an author and educator, who provides professional development for teachers of immigrant students. He is the author of the children’s book *Sometimes*, which chronicles the story of elementary-age Mexican immigrants. Seidlitz lives in Irving, Texas, with his wife and five children.



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