

# Chess expert makes moves through the mail



SUSAN POLLARD/Times

**VICTOR PALCIAUSKAS** hopes "Searching for Bobby Fischer" produces new chess fans.

Walnut Creek resident, a master of correspondence chess, will join greats like Fischer in U.S. hall of fame

By **JANET WEEKS**

Staff writer

**H**is uncle taught him to play chess at age 5. And by the time Victor Palciauskas was 16, he was rated an expert in tournament play.

Like the young chess player profiled in the new film "Searching for Bobby Fischer," which opens today, he was a child chess prodigy. But unlike the boy in the movie, Palciauskas says he never felt any pressure to perform.

"Are you kidding? At 15, there is no such thing as pressure," he says, relaxing in his Walnut Creek home with his wife, Dr. Aurelia Gincauskas.

"Chess is a young man's game. In most cases, the children just love it. I couldn't wait to leave school to play."

#### The check's in the mail

On Saturday, Palciauskas, 51, will be inducted into the United States Chess Federation's Hall of Fame, joining the ranks of such chess luminaries as Fischer and Hans Berliner. The former Chevron research physicist plays a grueling form of the game called correspondence chess, in which players thou-

sands of miles away compete through the mail. An international grand master, he is currently trying for his second World Correspondence Championship in a tournament expected to take four years to complete.

But when he started playing as a boy, he competed in "OTB" or "on-the-board" chess, the game featured in "Searching for Bobby Fischer." He learned the sport in his native Lithuania and perfected it in a Lithuanian neighborhood of Chicago, where his family moved when he was 7.

"At 13, I started seriously playing with a friend of mine," Palciauskas says. "We got a hold of all the books we could find on chess. After two years, I entered my first tournament." He gained an expert rating that first time out.

#### Chess hustling

In the movie, the boy's talent is encouraged by a chess hustler in New York's Washington Square Park, known as "speed chess corner." Also known as "blitz," speed chess is played in three minutes, forcing players to think on their feet.

Palciauskas says Chicago, too, had its chess gamblers. As a teen, it was a good way to pick up a few extra bucks. "You develop a very fast style of play, effortless," he says. "It's great for people who love the risky side of chess."

He continued playing on-the-board chess until 1963, when he tied for fifth place in the U.S. Open. Then he quit to finish his graduate

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## 'Searching' will appeal to chess fans, nonplayers alike

By **JACK GARNER**

Gannett News Service

**S**ure, it's a blessing if your 7- or 8-year-old child has an unusual gift — to play the piano, figure math problems, play chess.

But do you channel all his time and energy into the gift, shutting off all the other aspects of growing up? Or, do you struggle to keep the child's options open for play, for family and friends, and for other possible futures? Such is the dilemma facing the parents of Josh Waitzkin, an amazing chess prodigy.

His father, a New York sports writer, chronicled his son's story and their dilemma in a memoir titled "Searching for Bobby Fischer." That book has come to the movie screen.

As written and directed by Steven Zaillian, "Searching for Bobby Fischer" is partially a "Rocky Jr." of

### MOVIE REVIEW

**What:** "Searching for Bobby Fischer"

**Starring:** Joe Mantegna, Laurence Fishburne, Ben Kingsley, Max Pomeranc

**Rating:** PG

**Where:** Opens today at area theaters

**Star rating:** ★★★ out of ★★★★★

the chessboard, and partially a drama that asks questions about how adults deal with child prodigies.

In the latter regard, "Searching for Bobby Fischer" owes much to "Little Man Tate," Jodie Foster's directorial debut that dealt with similar issues and an inordinately young math wiz.

The title, by the way, refers to the best-known player in U.S. chess history, and he's still the measure for all up-and-comers. Chess fans seek "the new Bobby Fischer" like record

execs used to look for "the next Dylan" and Hollywood sought out "the next James Dean.

Zaillian takes a restrained matter-of-fact approach to Josh's beginning interest in chess, but then tightens the tension and the emotions as his parents escort him through the alien world of chess clubs, master teachers, "blitz" chess in Manhattan parks, and rigorous weekend chess tournaments.

The dramatic conflict develops when Josh comes under the influence of two opposing chess camps — the street-hardened gonzo chess practiced by hustlers and hangers-on in Washington Square Park, and the refined, highly disciplined and deeply philosophical approach of Josh's formal teacher, Bruce Pandolfini.

The street hustlers are personified by Vinnie, an aggressive man who plays from the heart. He's vig-

orously played by a charismatic Laurence Fishburne. Pandolfini, meanwhile, is portrayed as a brilliant but eccentric social misfit by the inventive Ben Kingsley.

Josh's father and mother (Joe Mantegna and Joan Allen) finally realize that the only "camp" that matters when the student is so young is the parents' camp. They must ultimately decide what's best for their shockingly talented child.

Zaillian isn't always clear on some points — specifically how Josh picked up chess so quickly in the first place. But he does find ways to make the chess games as exciting as jousts or boxing matches — even if you don't know a pawn from a bishop.

Newcomer Max Pomeranc, a child actor who really knows how to play chess, is appealing and believable as Josh.