

Our 9-year-old chess champ



Photo by Dino Vournas

KENNY FONG HAS REMARKABLE CONCENTRATION FOR HIS FAVORITE GAME
'He's got the potential of becoming a master'

By **GARY HYMAN**

HAYWARD — Like many boys his age, 9-year-old Kenny Fong has a surplus of youthful energy. You might find him burning it off outside playing ball or riding through the neighborhood on his bike.

But what he'd rather do is race across the 64 squares of a chessboard where he's tearing up opponents faster than they can set up their pieces on the black and white.

When U.S. chess master Alan Benson took on a handful of opponents simultaneously last November, the first game took only a scant 23 moves. Benson probably never expected that he'd lose the game to a 9-year-old.

"It was easy," Kenny says matter-of-factly. "He made a simple mistake."

The mop-topped youngster discusses his favorite passtime with enthusiasm, moderated by his shyness. Eyes twinkling, his smile turns to a scowl of concentration as he peers down at the board, visualizing his next move.

Following the steps of his brother Randy, a chess whiz at 17, Kenny took up the game seriously about three years ago at age 6. Demonstrating unique discipline at his age, he reads chess books like other kids in the neighborhood would thumb through comic slicks.

And, like any other good chess player, he puts those tactics he reads about to work in weekly bouts held under strict tournament conditions.

He's a fast player for his age — moving 40 pieces in 90 minutes — although his longest game has surpassed the five-hour mark. (By comparison, the longest game by a grand master is somewhere just over 100 hours straight.)

Bobby Fisher says chess is 20 per cent genius and 80 per cent work. Achieving high verbal and mathematics grades at El Rancho Verde Elementary School in Hayward where he's a fourth-grader, Kenny seems to have the genius already, with plenty of time ahead of him to put in the work.

And work he does. He averages five tournaments a year, aside from the time he spends each Wednesday evening at the Fremont Community Center where the Fremont Chess Club gathers for some friendly, but competitive, play.

Hans Poschmann, tournament director of the club and a delegate to the U.S. Chess Federation, sang nothing but praises for the club's youngest member.

"You don't find hardly anyone at his age with his ability," he said. "I've had players his age and younger before, but they were not as good. Kids somehow seem to lose interest, but not Kenny. He keeps on going."

Poschmann said Fisher started at a young age, too, and noted, "if Kenny can keep on going, he has the potential of becoming a master."

Paul Mrs. Fong, who lives at 32039 Bernice Way, Hayward, credits Daily Review chess columnist Richard Shoreman with helping in her son's development as a player.

"Shoreman has taught three masters and a national high school champion," she said. "He's really helped a lot in bringing Kenny along."

The youngster has already notched up a few tournament championships to his credit, often blowing out older and more experienced opponents.

In September 1974, the family took Kenny along to Palo Alto to watch brother Randy play in the first Palo Alto Chess Open Tournament.

Just for fun, Kenny entered the competition and pulled down a cool first place in the 18-years and under category. He turned 9 just before the open was held.

Last August, he captured first place in the U.S. Open Chess Tournament held in San Diego for persons aged 10 and under. Since competition is based on overall scores, Kenny played against persons all over age 15, but still maintained the highest score of all competitors under 10 years.

The biggest problem, according to Poschmann, is slowing him down. He plays at so fast a clip, he often fails to visualize the board with care.

But now, thanks to help from Randy and Shoreman, his game has slowed to a respectable clip.

Chess players are rated according to a points scale, with Fisher himself at the top of the heap (as of December 1974) at 2,800.

Kenny is currently rated at nearly 1,300 and could raise that level if he continues to play opponents in higher levels of competition. Last year, he beat an opponent with a 1,600 rating.

Brother Randy is no slouch either, with a rating of "class A" (one step below expert) and 1,921 points. Last weekend Randy tied for second in the Northern California High School Championships.

Although some of his friends play chess, Kenny has some trouble convincing them to sit across the board from him.

He says they're more inclined to participate in physical sports where there's not so much thinking involved. Kenny likes to play baseball and football just the same, you understand, but he likes the discipline of chess.

Mrs. Fong agrees, "With all this spare time for us these days, I'd encourage people to take the time to learn chess."