

# STAR-NEWS

PASADENA, CALIFORNIA, FRIDAY, AUGUST 19, 1983



Ed Norgord / Star-News

George Koltanowski and Anthony Allen, of Indiana's 'the Masters of Disaster,' square off

## Checkmate!

### Elementary school chess champs from Indiana learn winning means more than chopped liver

By SELWYN EIBER  
Staff Writer

They call themselves "the Masters of Disaster."

Coach Bob Cotter beamed when he remarked, "Nobody really expected them to do anything like this." One of the players, 12-year-old Thomas Petty, recalled that "at first I was going to quit. I didn't think it was going to be much fun. But it turned out differently."

Who are these people and why were they in Pasadena Thursday?

They are a team of 11 elementary school students, all but one of whom are black, who live in a disadvantaged section of Indiana. In May, they shocked most everyone, including themselves, by winning the National Elementary School Chess Championship.

So what happens to an unlikely group of 11- and 12-year-olds after such an achievement?

Why, they go on tour.

Already they have visited President Reagan in the Oval Office and ridden in a parade, and they will fly to Japan today. On Thursday, they arrived at the Huntington-Sheraton Hotel where they met Soviet defector Viktor Korchnoi, who is challenging for the world chess crown.

While in town during the U.S. Open, they played international chess master

George Koltanowski, the arbiter during the Korchnoi-Garri Kasparov semifinal world title match held in Pasadena this month. Korchnoi won by forfeit when his Soviet challenger refused to show for political reasons.

Even Gov. Robert Orr of Indiana got into the act. He helped organize the team's travels, and proclaimed, "You are great representatives of our state and nation."

The youngsters achieved their feat by beating out a group of students from New York City's Hunter College Elementary School.

Hunter is a place "where the New York intelligentsia send their kids," said coach Cotter. Applicants must pass a stringent examination to be accepted.

When Cotter, a science teacher at Public School 27, convinced kids to join his chess club almost three years ago, "they really didn't know the difference at first between checkmate and chicken liver."

Some did not want to participate because chess "was perceived as a sissy game," he said.

Then they started winning and the club "kind of caught fire." Attaining the championship "was beyond anything we'd ever imagined," Cotter beamed. "They feel now that they can take on any task."

Team member Anthony Allen initially

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was reluctant to join. But the coach, he said, "did a little persuading."

Allen remembers getting soda pop and extra time in the gym. The coach recalls sparking their interest by giving awards and by appealing to their sense of rivalry.

When asked the secret to their winning, Cotter said his team achieves success the old-fashioned way — by earning it.

The youngsters played chess 2½ hours a day and at least eight hours on week-ends. Between October and May, when the team members were in training, they missed only four Saturdays — two of which were for Christmas for New Year's, Cotter noted.

Still, he does not want to give the appearance that he is completely satisfied. He said the youngsters do not study chess books as much as he would like.

Before Koltanowski played the group in two simultaneous matches, he reminded them of something they already have learned — the importance of persistence. He recounted how he was first taught by his father. "I lost at least 100 games in a row. He was merciless."

But Koltanowski learned well. Said the international master: "If you can't be a loser, you can't win either."