

'Chessaholic' plays 11 at a time

Middletown attorney steps back from world of online speed chess, but still gives demonstrations.

By Lauren Pack, Staff Writer

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TURTLECREEK TWP. — A Middletown attorney walked into a room of men at the Community Corrections Center, lugging a plastic storage bin filled with chess sets.

Tanned from driving his convertible, wearing khakis and an Oxford cloth shirt, the 59-year-old looks like the polar opposite of the men trying to overcome addiction in the lock-down facility.

But looks are sometimes deceiving.

"I am Chris Atkins and I am a chessaholic," he said while putting on his reading glasses.

He has played the game since the sixth grade. It took him on adventures throughout the country for tournaments and won him friends, but it became an addiction once he entered the world of online speed chess.

Atkins spent hours playing chess games lasting 2 to 10 minutes online. Sometimes he would enter his computer chess world at 9 p.m. and stay there until the wee hours of the morning, with just enough time for an hour's sleep and a shower before going to work.

It strained his family life and stressed his well-being. In January 2001, he went "cold turkey."

"I am the only attorney in Butler County without a computer in his office," Atkins said.

But that doesn't mean he has given up his enthusiasm for the game.

Atkins still plays at the Dayton Chess Club, in area tournaments and does demonstrations for school, clubs and prisons. He occasionally plays online, but never in the speed category where your standing is enhanced by the number of people you beat.

Pushing tables together and setting up 11 boards, the players took a seat and readied for play. There was a look of surprise when Atkins said he was going to play them all at once.

Moving to each board, he made 11 different opening moves, then continued to round the boards. Two hours, and a lot of smiles, laughs and handshakes later, all the games were complete.

Most left just shaking their heads, as Atkins went 10-1.

Chess board contains life lessons

Defense attorney Chris Atkins likens a chess game to the courtroom. There is an opening, middle and end, just like open statements, evidence and closing arguments in a trial.

"Whenever I take a case, I am already thinking ahead. When preparing for trial, I am already thinking about the closing. It's the same way in chess. Thinking ahead," Atkins said.

He has been successful at both vocation and the hobby that he calls an addiction.

The Middletown-based attorney practices in both Butler and Warren counties taking primarily criminal cases.

As a youngster growing up in Waynesville, Atkins was taught early on by his sixth-grade teacher the basics of moving pieces around a chess board. That was all he needed.

"I was hooked," Atkins said.

He played tournament chess through his high school years in Waynesville, his college years at Morehead State University in Kentucky and then at Wright State University. He played even during rigors of law school at the University of Dayton.

"I played friends, family, my professors, anyone who would play," Atkins said. He now is ranked as an expert in the world of chess play, traveling to Philadelphia, Chicago and Las Vegas to try his skill for cash.

"The most I've won is \$2,000. It's not a big money maker," he said with a laugh.

One sunny spring afternoon, Atkins took his chess skills on the road, taking on 11 men at the Community Corrections Center outside of Lebanon.

He played them all at one time as part of the exhibition, something he has done since high school, but in recent months not as frequently.

"You can tell I am a little rusty," Atkins told one of the men who studied the board after making a move.

There was a whole lot of studying the boards and little talking among the men who are residents of the lock-down treatment facility after being convicted of felony offenses.

"I've never lost in one of these," Atkins said. "But always the first time for everything."

Teri Nau, community relations director for Talbert House, the company that runs the facility, was amazed at the mass game.

"They really want to beat him," she said in a whisper. Atkins told them anyone who bested him would win a personal chess set.

Countless times, Atkins rounded the tables, making move after move, sometimes giving advice if asked, soon a little banter picked up.

Three players conceded early, knowing they were beat.

"It's all over man," one man said as Atkins approached his board. "I'm done and I don't even know how you did it."

Others shook their heads as he captured pieces. A few did a bit of fist pumping when they captured one of Atkins' pieces.

"I've got him," one young man said to his neighbor about 90 minutes into the session.

To Atkins' surprise, he was right.

"You've got me," Atkins said as he reached over to shake the 19-year-old's hand. Pride gleamed in the teen's face. Others clapped, including the attorney.

"I blundered. That's all there is to it," Atkins said. "I knew it as soon as I did it."

The winner, who did not want to be identified, said he has been playing the game since the age of 12.

"He (Atkins) just made one dumb move," the young man said.

Atkins beat the other 10 players in about two hours.

Andrew Branam was one of those beaten by Atkins, has been a player for 19 years and said he has never seen anyone quite as skilled as the attorney, especially playing multiple people at one time.

"He is very good," Branam said.

The Clermont County man, who has been at CCC since December, said the game takes a lot of concentration and keeps the mind fresh, but is also relaxing.

Branam said he, too, spent many nights playing speed chess online.

"It is addictive. You can loose yourself in it," Branam said.

Atkins, the father of five boys who all play the game, said he also plays golf and tennis, but finds the chess board the biggest challenge.

"I am playing the board, not the person," Atkins said, noting the game is "an exercise with your mind."

He scoffed at anyone who thinks they can't learn.

"I can teach anyone the moves in 15 or 20 minutes. It is up to the person to master it," Atkins said.

He does exhibitions in prisons because it is a distraction for inmates with time on their hands and a source of a little fun for them.

"It's a way to just get away from some problems you may be dealing with, for anyone," Atkins said, adding his has always been a source of escape for him.

He played a positional game with the CCC men rather than an attacking game, Atkins said. There are thousands of book and magazines, some of which he shared with the men, to teach different types of play.

"Positional is the most relaxing, it gives you a chance to think," Atkins said.

Jennifer Burnside, corrections center manager, said the residents are still talking about Atkins' visit.

"They really enjoy things like this," Burnside said. "Chess is a stress reliever and keeps them sharp. Also it is a chance to show there are different sides to an attorney."

Burnside used the chess game to talk with residents about corrective thinking they can use in their treatment and lives when released.

"Don't give up," she said to one player after Atkins captured one of his lofty pieces.

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