



Fair And Square

By KATHY STEELE, The Tampa Tribune

Published: March 15, 2008

Updated: 03/13/2008 07:56 pm

EAST TAMPA - Trash talk - just between friends - is proper language at Moochie's birthday party.

Pool checkers is the game, and Arthur "Moochie" McCarr's friends got game on a recent Saturday. From 9 a.m. to 9 p.m., more than 70 players slid and slapped their pieces across the squared boards.

There were "Kuntry Preacher," "Bowlegs," "Layaway," "Pawey," "Doman" and "CocaCola," brows furrowed, fingers jabbing at board pieces.

Strategies, bragging rights and turkey legs so juicy the meat fell off the bone kept them going. If turkey legs disappeared, ribs and chicken took their place.

"I'm turning him every which way but loose," said Odell "Mailman" Bright, hooting over his second or maybe third win against Sam Kinsey.

Kinsey fired back.

"All the way from Jacksonville and can't play worth a lick," the Tampa native said.

This down-home social at Hope Community Center in honor of McCarr's 65th birthday drew players from near and far: Tampa, Orlando, Lakeland, Bradenton, the Georgia towns of Tifton, Alapaha and Sylvester, Kansas City, Mo., and a Chicago suburb.

It was McCarr's fifth year marking his birthday among friends playing the game he loves. This year he also had his sights set on giving back to the East Tampa community by mentoring the young players in the College Hill Chess and Checkers Club.

On the eve of McCarr's party, about 40 youngsters showed up at the community center to play pool checkers and chess.

"Checkers is a faster game, but it still requires the same amount of thinking," said Angel Lee, 17, who plays both games.

Ben Smiley, 15, placed third in the club's inaugural South Florida Adult and Youth Checkers Tournament in December.

"There is excitement in moving the pieces on the board," he said.

Old-fashioned board games sometimes get written off as a draw for youngsters dazzled by the speed of

video games and the Internet, McCarr said.

That doesn't deter McCarr and community center administrator Daniel Dean, who started the chess club several years ago.

"These kids come here on a Friday night," said McCarr, whose bragging rights put him among the top three pool checkers players in the state. "That's unbelievable, and they're enjoying themselves. That gives you hope that something good can happen."

He wants more churches, schools and civic groups to support similar clubs and give youngsters something to do beside get into mischief. And he's on a crusade to win recognition from the American Pool Checkers Association for the club's first checkers tournament.

The national group's tournament director is supportive, as are other board members.

"I hope to see this venture grow to unimaginable heights," Wayne Lockheart wrote in an e-mail to McCarr.

If the club isn't recognized, McCarr and Dean said they plan to launch a national pool checkers association.

"All we need to do is get organized and move forward," said McCarr, who will compete for a national title in Chicago in July at the annual tournament sponsored by the association.

Traditionally, pool checkers has dominated in black communities in the United States and traces its origins to Spanish influences on slaves in New Orleans and the Caribbean. But so-called "Spanish pool" also has advocates who say it has Russian origins.

In pool checkers, as opposed to straight checkers, kings can leap across several squares in a single move. Uncrowned pieces can move backward and forward.

The possibilities for offense and defense are mind-numbing, said three-time national pool checkers champion Fred D. Shurn, who lives in Maywood, Ill.

"Pool checkers is on a level like chess," he said. "It's deep."

On the eve of McCarr's party, Shurn, who has no nickname, and Elliott "Layaway" Eley Sr. hunkered over a board at the community center. Eley, 67, is a funeral director from Kansas City and won the blue ribbon level at the 1997 national tournament.

The next level up is Gold Star, followed by junior master, master and top master.

Eley and Shurn, 71, applaud McCarr for promoting the game to youngsters. Generally, "it ends up being an old man's game," Eley said.

It comes with a mix of passion and craziness.

"You go to bed thinking about a move you made," Eley said.

McCarr learned pool checkers decades ago while unemployed.

"That was the cheapest sport," he said. But "guys were beating me real bad. I started playing the best guys around."

As he stood beside his board, the Rev. Joseph "Kuntry Preacher" Stephens sang softly, "I just can't stop praising your name."

"I don't fish. I don't smoke. I don't drink," he said. "This is my thing."

He was taking on Larry "Doman" Wiley, who has played for about 10 years but felt a bit outclassed by some of the older challengers.

"These guys are fascinating. They are hard to beat," Wiley said.

"Don't move too fast for your own good," the preacher told him. "I say something, you just say, 'Yessir.'"

CHECK IT OUT

For information about the College Hill Chess and Checkers Club, go to www.collegehillchessclub.com.

Reporter Kathy Steele can be reached at (813) 835-2103 or ksteele@tampatrib.com. Keyword: Checkers, for an audio slideshow on Arthur "Moochie" McCarr's pool checkers party.

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