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## The Pool Checkers Kings

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TAMPA -

CHECKERS KINGS

### **Game teaches problem-solving, patience and respect.**

cut,62p7 Tribune photos by JULIE BUSCH Arthur "Moochie" McCarr, left, a school custodian, and Gary Watson, a St. Petersburg businessman, play pool checkers in a carport at McCarr's home in east Tampa. McCarr will compete next month in a national tournament. Pool checkers is like checkers, but pieces have more freedom.

At top, McCarr holds pieces he won in a game against Watson.

TAMPA As many as a dozen men gather almost daily to play checkers at Arthur "Moochie" McCarr's east Tampa home. They sit at homemade checkerboards under a manufactured carport and play into the night. They're mostly older men. The young just aren't taking up the game anymore.

And not many of the older players are as enthusiastic as McCarr, a 65-year-old school custodian who studies books and the Internet to improve his strategy.

The game they play is called "pool checkers," a version that has been a fixture in barbershops, church basements and back porches of Southern black communities for more than a century.

It's more complicated than the game most of us know. The object is the same -- to capture all the opponents' pieces -- but single pieces can jump backward, and kings can zoom across multiple blank spaces to capture a rival piece, like bishops in chess. Experienced players routinely think six or seven moves ahead.

McCarr has lots of experience. He is known as a tough "ham," the pool checkers term for opponent.

He and about 130 other players have paid entry fees of up to \$120 to compete next month at the 39th annual National Pool Checkers Tournament in Atlanta.

Pool checkers is similar to Spanish and Russian checkers, but variations go back centuries. Its beginnings in this country -- and why it's called pool checkers -- are unclear, says the Rev. Ervin Smith of Columbus, Ohio, president of the American Pool Checkers Association. He believes it has been popular since the days of slavery.

In the late 1960s, a Detroit schoolteacher named Nathaniel Leach and a fellow enthusiast, John Otis, organized the first national tournament, Smith says. Top players won trophies and bragging rights the first few years, and the prize hasn't changed much. The winner of this year's tournament will get \$600 or \$700.

"For the most part you're dealing with poor people," Smith says. "That's the bottom line."

Smith, 65, a retiring professor at Methodist Theological Seminary in Delaware, Ohio, learned the game as a 12-year-old in Augusta, Ga.

He laments that young people ignore challenging board games such as checkers and chess to chase a dream that they'll become sports stars, an illusion for all but a few. Pool checkers would teach them problem-solving, patience and respect, which, he says, "might stave off some of that spur-of-the-moment stupid stuff."

## **Camaraderie Part Of The Fun**

Most of the men gathered at McCarr's have been playing for decades. Wilbert Malphus, of Lutz, a contractor, grew up in West Tampa watching men play the game at the corner barbershop.

"More and more I started enjoying it," says Malphus, 62. "It was mostly older guys; they were all much older than I was, and they'd tell jokes and stuff like that. It's just the camaraderie I enjoy."

Women do play, but mostly it's a gentlemen's game, says Gary Watson, 49, a St. Petersburg businessman. "Guys get together under a tree and talk trash to each other."

In one game, Watson lays it on thick.

"This is a ham shoulder," he says of McCarr. "It gets kind of tough. You've got to boil it a long time."

Turns out Watson is the tender ham. He's getting "swung," which means McCarr has offered a few checkers as decoys. But ultimately, McCarr will come out ahead.

"I see it now, now that I'm in it," Watson says, studying the board.

McCarr, laughing, says he learned the trap from Arthur Moore, who is sitting at a nearby board.

"We call him the king of checkers," McCarr says, and the white-haired Moore looks up and grins.

## **Just Like Life**

The game is like life in the real world, Watson says. "You make mistakes, and a person capitalizes on the mistakes that you've made, and it causes you to lose."

To McCarr, the game is a break from the real world.

"Whatever's happening -- family, world, city, state, politics, anything -- it's out of your mind."

Moore, 83, a retired Tampa city worker, says he always has preferred the quiet sociability of pool checkers to partying. The king of checkers has gleaned countless hours of fun over 35 years while maintaining harmony at home.

"My wife always knows where I was at, 'cause she knew I was at checkers," Moore says. "And I have daughters and sons, and they know to find me at the checkers game."

**This story can be found at:** <http://www.tampatrib.com/Baylife/MGBIH4ATEAE.html>