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## Dazzling Moves on Field and Chessboard

By DYLAN LOEB McCLAIN

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Jim Brown and Barry Sanders are in the Pro Football Hall of Fame. The [Jets' Curtis Martin](#) will almost certainly be one day. As Shaun Alexander prepares to lead the [Seattle Seahawks](#) into the Super Bowl, he shares more with these players than just being one of football's best running backs.

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John B. Henderson

The Seahawks' Shaun Alexander not only plays chess but promotes it. He gave money to sponsor a chess program in a Seattle school.

Like the others, he is also an avid chess player.

"I just love what chess is all about," Alexander said. "To me, it is just a great strategy game."

That chess is popular among professional athletes is not surprising, given the many weeks they spend away from home during the season and how easy it is to take a set anywhere.

For example, several former [Knicks](#), including [Larry Johnson](#), [Allan Houston](#) and Kurt Thomas, were enthusiastic players. Chess Life, the magazine of the

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United States Chess Federation, once ran a cover story about how Ron Guidry and Mickey Rivers of the

Yankees often played each other.

But Alexander's interest extends beyond playing the game to promoting it. Earlier this season, he gave America's Foundation for Chess, a nonprofit organization, \$7,500 to sponsor a chess-in-the-schools program at Madrona Elementary School in Seattle.

As part of his involvement with the program, Alexander played a game Monday night against a third grader at the school who had won a tournament earlier in the day. Alexander won.

In a telephone interview, Alexander said he supported chess because he believed that it could help make children successful adults. "Part of being successful is learning how to think," he said.

The 28-year-old Alexander, who was the N.F.L.'s leading rusher and most valuable player this season, learned the game by watching an older cousin. At family reunions, Alexander's cousin would play against all the younger cousins and beat them. "I was like, 'Wow!' " Alexander said.

Alexander said he did not get up the nerve to play his cousin until he was a junior in college. Then, he said, "It did not go well."

Now, Alexander plays whenever he gets the chance. He said that he was not an expert player, but that he had improved. And he said he thought that he might now be the best player on the Seahawks, although he quickly added, "There's always some guy that you don't know about."

Another running back who promotes chess for children is Priest Holmes of the [Kansas City Chiefs](#), whose record for touchdowns in a season was eclipsed this year by Alexander.

Chuck Castellano, a spokesman for the Chiefs, said that Holmes in his first three seasons with the team worked with the Police Athletic League to create chess nights for children. Holmes bought the chess sets and hired a local chess instructor. He also dropped in periodically to play

the children and to make sure that they were staying involved.

Recently, Castellano said, Holmes has paid the instructor to teach in after-school programs in Kansas City.

Like Alexander, Holmes learned to play from someone in his family. In his case, it was his stepfather, who used to sit on his porch in San Antonio and play friends as they would drop by.

Holmes is rumored to be a pretty good player. So, too, is Martin, who says he met Jim Brown by playing chess with him at a friend's wedding years ago.

So, can chess make someone a better athlete, or at least a better running back?

John Fedorowicz, a chess grandmaster and a sports fan, does not think so.

"Chess is kind of a sport itself, but I never saw any kind of carryover to other sports," he said.

If playing chess made someone a better running back, Fedorowicz said, then they would all play and they would say, "I wasn't anything until I started playing chess." Alexander said he thought there was a bit of a connection between chess and being a running back.

"While you're watching film, you're thinking about ways to beat people, and that's kind of the way it is with chess," he said. "Every move, you're thinking about getting an advantage for yourself. That's how it is with football as well."

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