

A CLASH OF KINGS

This is not your
Grandpa's checkers.

by Jackson Lewis '13

The Barbados native, Ron "Suki" King, stares down his opponent, the young up-and-comer Lubabalo Kondlo, a poor man from South Africa who has torn through a forest of red tape just to be here. Now the only thing standing in the way of Kondlo becoming a world champion is the smug King across from him.

This is a game of precision, of great strategy and now a struggle between social classes. This is checkers.

The arena for this match is "King Me," a documentary by Think Media Studios. In addition to following the match between the aptly named King and the underdog Kondlo, the film also explains little known facts about the game and the organizations in charge of these tournaments. The documentary premiered this March at the Cleveland International Film Festival and features Millikin's very own U.S. checkers champion, Richard Beckwith '91 (below).

Beckwith grew up in Decatur a mile from Millikin's campus and started playing in local checkers tournaments in Macon County as a child. He debuted in state tournaments by age 15 and took first in the B division of the Illinois State Tournament by the time he was 16. "I started very young because my dad played. Some of the better players started taking me to state tournaments. From there I moved to Ohio and started

competing nationally," he says.

State checkers tournaments usually award the winner with a cash prize of anywhere from \$500 to \$1,000 and the national tournaments and world title matches offer \$5,000 to \$10,000 to the victor. These competitions are not about grown men huddled in a friend's basement betting for pennies.

Beckwith is no minor contender in these events. In fact, he won this year's U.S. national championship in February, as well as the San Remo (Italy) Open last October.

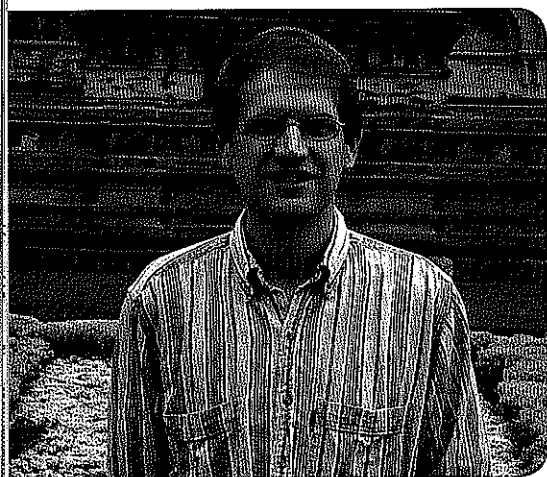
"Just about every household has a checker board," Beckwith says. "[but] people just don't understand the game at this kind of level."

Beckwith is a senior scientist working in analytical chemistry with Ricerca Biosciences, where he tests trial versions of drugs for impurities.

"My time at Millikin provided the groundwork for my career," he says. After Millikin he went on to Purdue to receive his doctorate in philosophy, and he started work with Ricerca straight out of graduate school.

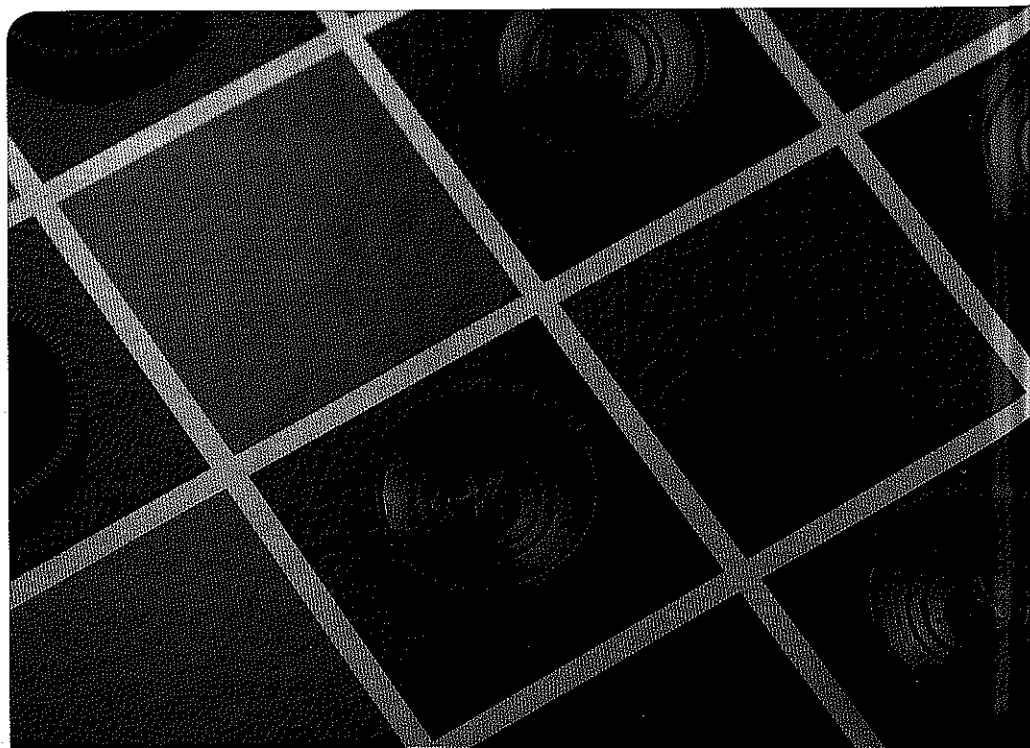
But this mild-mannered scientist by day serves by night as the vice president of the World Checker and Draughts* Federation and players representative of the American Checker Federation, a position that is fairly time-consuming, he says.

continued on page 45



U.S. checkers champ Richard Beckwith '91

*According to the International Mind Sports Association, draughts is an elimination game played between two players on a board with 100 squares. Checkers is a variant of draughts played on a 64-square board.



JUST FUNNIN'

continued from page 17

shall as "a great instructor" with a gift for pragmatically explaining lessons in terms students could understand, relating them to everyday business.

Today, Lienhop lives in San Juan Capistrano, Calif., with his wife of 26 years, Debby. They have two grown daughters, Megan and Janna.

Tom Neville came to Millikin from his home in Colorado in large part due to the urging of uncle Mark Neville '72, who then served MU as director of development (and eventually as vice president for advancement into the early 1990s). Neville graduated in the midst of the 1980s bull market and counted on making his mark as a stockbroker before switching gears to sales.

At Millikin, Neville says he met "a lot of quality individuals — professors, staff and students — and received a well-rounded education with real-world experiences." It was "...like being part of a family that is the Millikin community," he adds. Professors

lectured from their experiences in real business with real clients, clubs and activities taught leadership, internships were a place to apply knowledge and the occasional evening class exposed Neville to the perspectives of working commuter students. "It was just a great experience, being exposed to many different areas at once," he concludes.

Neville lives in Houston with his wife, Sue, a consultant in the energy industry, and with daughters Lindsey, 16, and Erin, 14. His sister, Melissa Neville Rose of Littleton, Colo., graduated from Millikin in 1988.

Both Lienhop and Neville sent a full-to-bursting box of products to the alumni and development office this spring as a tangible demonstration of what their companies do (and a few of those toys also served as nifty illustrations for this article). The toys will be donated to a local charity in honor of these two alums who invest their hard work and brain power into helping today's children have fun. •

A CLASH OF KINGS

continued from page 30

Hours of work must be put in to serve these organizations at the administrative level. His responsibilities range from making major decisions and raising money to selling items on their online store and writing books and articles about checkers. "To be honest, there is limited time left for other things, but I manage fine," Beckwith says.

That limited time has to include training for upcoming matches. He reads up on checkers strategy, plays against practice opponents and studies past games. In some of the more sophisticated tournaments, the matches are recorded, yielding a great resource for players to use for practice and review. Unfortunately, these organizations do not always possess the necessary funding for these resources.

"We do struggle with sponsorships," Beckwith admits, "but hopefully 'King Me' will shed some light on our world and tournament scene. We have a fantastic game and we want people to know about it."

ESPN airs Scrabble® and poker tournaments for cash prizes that can range from \$50,000 to millions, so why not checkers, too, Beckwith wonders. Especially now that this mind game is working its way into the Olympic arena.

Beckwith took seventh place out of 42 checkers contenders four years ago in the 2008 World Mind Sports Games hosted in Beijing's Olympic Village. Another American player, Alex "The Mad Russian" Moiseyev, took the gold. "He's an aggressive player with a very blunt personality," Beckwith says, "but he's a very smart fellow and he dominates the game." During the Cold War, Moiseyev learned a version of checkers in Russia which utilizes a larger board, but quickly mastered the smaller American version when he moved to Pennsylvania in the mid-'90s.

Moiseyev may not be able to attend this year's World Mind Sports Games in Lille, France, due to lack of funding, leaving the field open for players from other countries to grab the gold. Instead he plans on entering the International Mind Sports Association (IMSA) event in Beijing this December, where his expenses will be covered and he has the opportunity to win \$5,000 in prize money. Beckwith predicts that Ron King, the champion challenged by Kondlo in "King Me," will be a favorite if Moiseyev does not attend the event in France.

King took the silver medal in 2008 and has been the world champion of the freestyle version of play for 20 years. The documentary highlights this world champion's bravado attitude, adding plenty of spice to the rich mix of characters.

But King is not the only opponent Beckwith will contend with this summer. Michele Borghetti of Italy defeated King in Ireland in 2010 and barely lost the world title to Moiseyev. "Borghetti is already a legend in Italy, and if he goes to the Olympics he could be a serious contender," Beckwith says. "He's aggressive like Alex. They're both very biting and they try to mix it up."

Beckwith, unlike Moiseyev, is competing in France with or without funding, and he knows the competition this summer will be tough. "I can get draws with these guys, but I think they're the better players," he says, disregarding his own accomplishments on the checkers board which seem sure to keep his fellow champions wondering what move to make next.

Although the competition is important to him, Beckwith plays checkers chiefly for enjoyment. "It's a fun and challenging game that is continuing to reach new heights," he says. In this clash of kings, whoever the victor is, the war is fought for the love of the game. •