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## Luke Vellotti, a 14-year-old Boise Chess Champ, is headed to UCLA

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Holly MacLean wasn't quite sure what to do. On the other end of the phone line was the mother of 8-year-old Luke Vellotti, asking MacLean whether she could make room at the Treasure Valley Math and Science Center for her son. The Boise School District center, where MacLean is principal, offers a rigorous curriculum for super-smart kids in the Treasure Valley. But they usually don't start until age 11 or 12. MacLean had enrolled students as young as 10. But 8? "I was very skeptical," she said. Luke's mother, Ava, persisted. The Boise boy had done everything there was to do in elementary school. He'd mastered his multiplication tables and taught himself to double numbers (1, 2, 4, 8, 16, 32 ...) into the millions by the time he was 4.

MacLean agreed to have Luke tested. "He was one of the top applicants that day," she recalled.

Six years later, Luke has aced the classes offered at the Treasure Valley Math and Science Center, including quantum and nuclear physics. "This is someone who is exceptional," MacLean said. His math and science abilities are a combination of his hard wiring and his hard work, the Vellottis say. Every child has a gift, Ava said, and math and science are Luke's. His parents say they do not know his IQ.

With virtually nothing left to study in math and science, and his basic credits in classes such as history and economics out of the way, Luke decided he wanted to go to college with his brother, who graduated from Boise High School this year and is headed to UCLA. "UCLA is an amazing school," Luke said. "They have an amazing medical center and I want to become a doctor some day."

Luke applied and was accepted. He also was accepted to Stanford University, University of California Berkeley and Carnegie Mellon University. He got turned down by the University of Washington and Yale. Moreover, he was awarded a scholarship that will cover much of the cost for four years of his education at UCLA. The scholarship is a partnership between the Stamps Family Charitable Foundation Inc. and 35 universities, including UCLA. "Luke has an outstanding record of accomplishment," said Randy Dow, foundation executive director. "We believe that with a UCLA education, he will be prepared to take on important challenges." UCLA won't discuss individual students, citing privacy issues. But the school said in the past decade, it has admitted just 20 students younger than 16.

### CHESS ... AND MORE

Luke is a soft-spoken teen who chats comfortably over a chess table, a familiar place for him. He is Idaho's top-rated player and the nation's top-ranked 14-year-old. Internationally, he is 43rd among players under 16. Ava and her husband, Daniel, a former chess champion, run Vellotti's Chess School in Boise, employing a number of games and other techniques to teach chess to children. Daniel introduced Luke to chess at age 4 as a way to deal with his insatiable curiosity about math. Daniel would find fun teaching techniques to help him learn. He'd reward him with coupons for ice cream. They'd turn other games, such as Monopoly, into ways to learn about chess. As Luke grew, the time he spent studying chess each day could stretch to six or seven hours. Over several years, he consumed a book on more than 5,000 chess problems. At age 7, Luke was playing adults - often losing, but still soaking up ways he could be better. Luke loved it.

"I'm really competitive," he said. "I always try to be the best at what whatever I do." The Vellotti's asked Michael Gold, a Boise anesthesiologist and chess master, to tutor Luke when he was 8. Gold worried that the boy wouldn't have the attention span. "I found exactly the opposite," said Gold, whose tutoring grew into a friendship with Luke. "He could absorb anything you put in front of him." On the day Luke tested for admission to the math and science center, Ava got a phone call from the school. At first she panicked, thinking she'd gotten him in over his head. But it turned out that Luke had developed a nose bleed during the test, but didn't want to stop the exams. "Luke had this tenacious ability to grab hold of something and complete it," Ava said. "He's a nice kid who is always looking for new challenges," Gold said.

### A NORMAL KID

Math and science weren't hard for Luke. He could look at a problem and know the answer, or quickly see how to get. "I really didn't have to read the book at all," he said. History and economics weren't as easy. He remembers once getting a 3 of a possible 9 on a paper. "I have to study a lot more," Luke said. Luke the math phenom isn't the loner or awkward bright kid, often the stereotype for such super-achievers. "I take credit for Luke being normal," his brother Carl said with a smile. The two are close. They are both on the YMCA swim team. "I'm a better swimmer," said Carl, who taught Luke to throw a Frisbee. Despite being four years younger, Luke relates to teens Carl's age, so Carl includes him with his friends. They have shared high school classes.

When not traveling the country playing chess or working math formulas, Luke said, he's like most kids. He plays video games. He likes pingpong and recently got a pingpong table for his birthday. His favorite video game: Super Mario. It requires "problem-solving skills as you search through different lands and collect coins and stars," he said. "I always try to beat the game." Daniel and Ava are still figuring out how a 14-year old will navigate college. Ava is considering going to Los Angeles for a year to help out. The family also is assessing whether Carl and Luke will share a dorm room. The logistical questions, however, won't keep Luke from college.

"I am sad to see him go," Daniel said. "But I know that is what he needs. If he stays in the nest longer, he wouldn't be happy." 🐣



*Carl Vellotti, left, will go to UCLA this fall to study bioengineering. His younger brother, Luke, will seek a double major in math and computer science.*



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