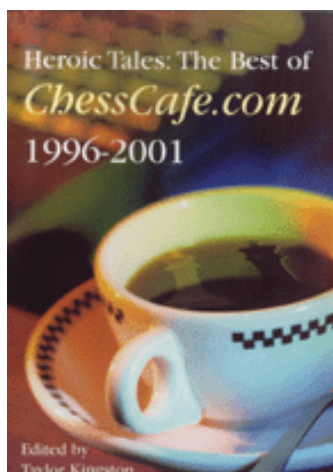




BOOK REVIEWS



Settling for First

Derek Grimmell

Breaking Through by Susan Polgar with Paul Truong, 2005 Everyman Chess, Figurine Algebraic Notation, Hardcover, 320pp., \$30.00.

“Believe you can, believe you can’t, either way you’re right.” – Henry Ford

As I write these words, the world’s best chess players whose names don’t start with a ‘K’ have arrived in Argentina. One will leave as World Champion. The last time this occurred, the popular music was jazz, the national pastime was baseball, Truman was President, zoot suits were in, and Bobby Fischer was just five years old. No matter how feckless and corrupt FIDE may be, they have finally arranged an event worthy of the name “World Championship.” Don’t blink; history looks a lot like this when it happens.

Yet the most remarkable fact of all is that one of the candidates is a woman.



The Polgar sisters have revolutionized how we think about gender and chess. Apart from forming the Hungarian Dream Team in several Olympiads, each has accomplishments that would make many male Grandmasters envious. Susan Polgar, the oldest of the three, was the first woman to win the grandmaster title the same way the men do, by making norms and achieving a high-enough rating. She’s also the only person, male or female, to win the title of World Champion at three different time controls, and has played in four Olympiads without losing a game – and without missing a game, either. Sofia was the first true female child prodigy, winning her first national title at age 5; at 14 she became the first female to achieve a performance rating above 2700 in grandmaster competition. Judit, of course, broke Fischer’s record for youngest person to achieve the GM title, is a legitimate super-GM, and, well, time will tell if she may be promoted yet again.

Susan Polgar’s new book (co-authored with longtime friend Paul Truong) chronicles the development, achievements, and (not least) the games of the Polgars, from their early years through their achievements on the international scene. It’s worth mentioning up front that Everyman has brought out the A-list production values for this one. The pages, binding, and dust cover all feel heavy

enough to stand up to use by dozens of club members or library patrons. Indeed, clubs and libraries would be one natural market for *Breaking Through*, as the contents seem designed for players of low club strength and below, especially young, ambitious talents (as the Polgars were themselves).

We might pause for a moment to ask what makes a book great. An interesting subject, to be sure; a dramatic story well-told; broad relevance to a variety of readers. Frank Brady's *Profile of a Prodigy* is a great book, rating five stars in all three domains. It is perhaps the most thorough and comprehensive biography of Bobby Fischer, the most celebrated and notorious chess player of the 20th century. The story unfolds with the suspense of a novel and carries more twists and turns than an org chart of the government. It also features a games collection that was the best single source for Fischer's games before his own *My 60 Memorable Games*. Subject, story, relevance – great book.

By these standards, *Breaking Through* is *not quite* a great book, though it misses the mark by very little. Interesting subject? Everyone can see the explosion of legitimate grandmaster talent among girls and women. The US Championship now runs the men and women together, and if any of the Polgars chose to compete she would have a shot at the top spot. Dramatic story? Everything they achieved came with a struggle. Their own federation refused them permission to play on the international scene more than once. Susan qualified for the Men's World Championship cycle in 1986 (!) but was refused admission because of her sex. For years their achievements were denigrated, sometimes by claiming they played in an "easier" field of women, sometimes because they played an "easier" field of men. So they resolved the doubts by dominating both. Along the way they met and played some of the greatest players of all time, including Fischer, Kasparov, Smyslov, Tal, and Spassky.

Susan's anecdotes about these former champions are one of the best parts of the text. There are backstage looks at the personalities and quirks of several World Champions, including Tal's health struggles, Smyslov's singing voice, and Spassky's camaraderie and relaxed approach to competition after 1972. The most revealing thing about these stories is how little the top players objected to playing against the Polgars. Chess players, like other competitors, let their play do the talking for them. It's the officials and agencies and federations that ossify, not the players.

At times the opposition the Polgars faced crossed the line between foolish and wicked. In 1986, when it was clear that Susan Polgar was about to take over the #1 position on the ratings chart from the Soviet World Champion Maia Chiburdanidze, the FIDE Congress decreed that all women players would have 100 points added to their ratings *except for Susan Polgar*. Imagine the outcry that would follow if the NFL announced that all running backs would have 1,500 yards added to their career rushing totals *except for Walter Payton*, or all batters would gain 30 points in their lifetime batting average *except for Ty Cobb*. Yet the Polgars persisted, never doubting themselves and never doubting that the truth would win out.

It would be natural for someone who faced so much resistance to settle old scores

in a book like this. Polgar and Truong deserve praise for doing the exact opposite. After reading the book I can't think of a single person for whom Susan Polgar has an unkind word. This remarkable display of good taste deserves mention precisely because good taste and restraint are so rare in the world today. Yes, you can let your children read this book in safety. You might even hope it would rub off on them.

But the stories, the history, and the plans for the future are only the appetizer. The meat of the book is chess. Each of the sisters is represented by ten annotated games, several unannotated games, and an average of 20 combinations. There is a supplemental section that contains all of Sofia's games from Rome 1989, where the 14 year-old middle sister achieved a performance rating of 2735, and Judit's win over Garry Kasparov in 2002 is tacked on for good measure. All told there are 75 games included, plus the combinations.

One feature that makes this a good resource for juniors is that the annotated games have a note after every move. Some of the notes are trivial; there's not much you can say about 1. d4 or 1...d5, for example. But as the transition to the middlegame appears, the notes involve more ideas and more variations. The blend of ideas and concrete analysis is again appealing to younger or weaker players, and if nothing else it helps to communicate the lesson that *every move must have a purpose*. Let's look at an abridged example, with only a few of the notes reproduced:

Susan Polgar – Kiril Georgiev
Pardubice 1994

1.d4 d5 2.c4 e6 3.Nc3 c6 4.e4

“The most ambitious move, but risky as it often involves a pawn sacrifice.”

4...dxe4 5.Nxe4 Bb4+ 6.Bd2

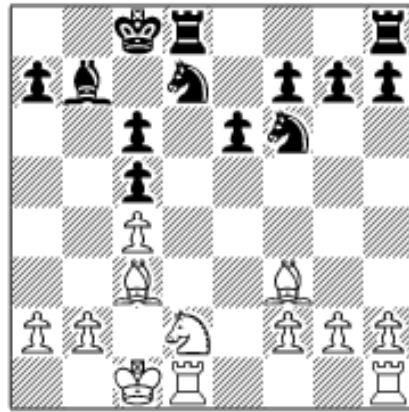
“I choose to give the pawn up. This is called a ‘speculative’ pawn sacrifice. What that really means that it is a long term plan. There is no immediate or clear visible way to get the material back or to checkmate. The pawn is usually given up for certain dynamic factors, such as the pair of bishops, preventing the opponent from castling, a lead in development. After the more conservative 6. Nc3 Black's best answer is 6...c5.”

6...Qxd4 7.Bxb4 Qxe4+ 8.Be2 Nd7 9.Nf3 c5 10.Bc3 Ngf6



“This is the most natural response, developing while protecting the attacked pawn. However, perhaps 10...Ne7 was a better move. Then if 11. Bxg7 Rg8 12. Bc3 Rxc3 wins the pawn back again. It is better not to hunt for the g4 pawn, but continue with 11. 0-0 0-0 12. Bd3 and White has good compensation because the black queen is in an awkward position.”

11.Qd6 Qc6 12.Qxc6 bxc6 13.Nd2 Bb7 14.0-0-0 0-0-0 15.Bf3



15...e5

“A mistake! This makes more holes in Black’s position. After 15...Nb6 16. g4! Na4 17. Bxf6 gxf6 18. Ne4 Rd4 19. b3 White wins back either the c5 or f6 pawn with a clearly superior position. It was the last chance for Black to play 15...h5 preventing my next move.”

16.g4! h6 17.h4 h5 18.gxh5!

“When circumstances change, plans need to change as well. After 18. g5 I did not want to allow 18...Ng4, although White is better after 19. Ne4.”

18...Kb8 19.Rhg1

I first discovered organized chess in 1970, just before the Fischer boom. Among my first order of chess books was a first edition of the aforementioned *Profile of a Prodigy*. Its portrayal of Fischer's life and early career was gripping, to be sure, and the games were a treasure. But few parents would want their children to follow the same path, and its portrayal of the chess world and the demands of greatness were more a cautionary tale than an invitation. *Breaking Through* presents a far more appealing picture of chess, and of life as well. Perhaps one day this will the face our game shows to the world. Until then, at the very least, it deserves to be the face we show to our students.

[Order](#) *Breaking Through*
by Susan Polgar with Paul Truong



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