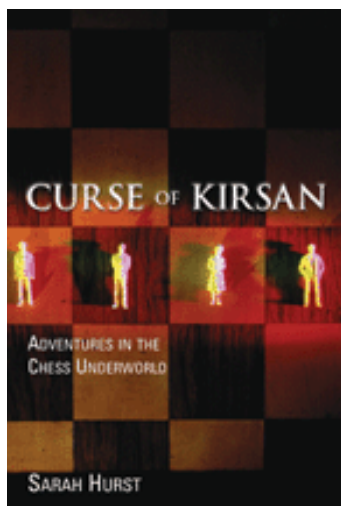




COLUMNISTS

Susan Polgar
on
Chess

Susan Polgar



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Two World Champions with One Common Mission:

Bringing Chess to a Whole New Level of Popularity!

Chess in the 21st century is at a critical crossroad! With the recent surge in Internet chess (where millions of chess games are played daily) and computer technologies (Pentium chips are getting faster and faster), combined with super programs such as Fritz, Junior, Tiger, CM9000, etc., the overall level of chess has hit a new level. Top GMs including World Champions are using super chess programs to help them with their analysis.

Now, you no longer have to live in a big city to be able to play chess or take chess lessons. For these reasons, many chess records are being broken at a record pace. There are more players becoming GMs and there more GMs rated over 2600 than ever. Young talented boys and girls such as Radjabov, Karjakin, Koneru, and Lahno are being hailed as the future of the chess world. In America, the names Nakamura and Abrahmian have been whispered as the next great ones.

Chess has also developed a grass roots movement. In the last few scholastic events I have attended in Kissimmee and Nashville, record entries were received. States like Texas, California, Illinois, New York, Florida and many others are having record scholastic participations. The 2003 World Open also had one of the strongest and largest fields ever.

Hollywood has begun to love chess. There have been many chess scenes in Hollywood blockbusters as well as regular daily TV commercials in the past few years. Corporations are starting to seriously think about chess as a new angle for cool and affective advertising campaigns. Chess is now cool! Chess is now hip! Chess is right on! Chess is colorblind and chess has no boundaries! It makes no difference if you are black, white or yellow, if you are rich or poor, if you are young or old, if you are tall or short – you can play chess!

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So what is the problem? The answer is money, money, and money! After the Prague agreement for the World Chess Championship Reunification, money for the matches has been hard to come by. The Einstein Group could not come up with the funding for the Kramnik – Leko match but its management announced that they were hopeful. There were many discussions and rumors about where and when the Kasparov – Ponomarev match would take place. Finally, Argentina emerged as the official host country.

But, all of a sudden, the Einstein Group is in big financial trouble. They not only failed to come up with the money for the match, they are having a hard time keeping the company afloat. Therefore, the match between Kramnik - Leko is in limbo. Argentina also could not meet its end of the bargain to host the Kasparov - Ponomarev match even though the distinguished grandmaster Miguel Quinteros was trying very hard. Yalta (Ukraine) was then named as the next official city to host that match in September. That also did not happen. The match was cancelled. Stay tuned for the latest chapter of the revolving soap opera. And by the way, has anyone heard about the Women's World Chess Championship?

In the meantime, what are we facing? FIDE President Kirsan Ilyumzhinov reportedly has spent over \$30 million of his own money to save chess but how much longer can he do this? FIDE World Champion Ponomarev was making all kinds of strange and unusual demands. Einstein World Champion Kramnik has become one of the “quietest” World Champions ever. Kramnik's challenger Leko who is in top form may face the same fate as Grandmaster Shirov a few years ago.

There is simply not enough money in chess. One cannot expect the same chess companies to keep funneling money into chess events and matches with little in return. One cannot expect FIDE President Kirsan Ilyumzhinov to have a bottomless money pit. So, the chess professionals now have to rely on corporate money. But where is it? Many world-class chess players (who have devoted most of their lives studying chess) do not have adequate communication and social skills to attract serious mainstream sponsors. Can we expect them to speak in complete sentences? Can we expect them to behave properly? Many of them are very good at whining, complaining, and fighting for their personal interests. That may be good for them but is that good for chess?

So what can be done? How can we change the face of chess? How can we capitalize on the Hollywood momentum and bring chess to a whole new level? How can we bring the game we love to the same level as golf or tennis? Professional bowling, golf, billiards, skateboarding, X-treme sports and many others lesser known sports are being broadcasted on ESPN and major networks. Why not chess? There is a lot of money to be made in chess for the major TV networks. But they need the right marketing strategy and the right structure.

Let me share with you a story that soon may change the lives of millions of youngsters in America and eventually around the world. This is a true inspiring story about a small group of people who want to make a difference for chess in America for the better and why they are willing to give their heart and soul to

accomplish this common goal.

Back in the early fall of 2002, my friend of 16 years FM Paul Truong and I had a chance to sit down for a meeting with the newly appointed Executive Director of the USCF Mr. Frank Niro. Mr. Niro made quite an impression on both of us about his plan to for US Chess. He demonstrated his great love and respect for the game and we were sold on his ideas, vision and ambition.

We all agreed that chess can help children gain self-esteem, confidence, develop logical thinking and decision-making skills. Chess can also teach children patience and help children excel in school and in life. The next step was how to introduce chess to more children, more schools and gain more acceptance in society. More parents needed to know the facts of chess. The boards of education nationwide needed to know the importance of chess. Our government needed to be aware of this.

During the meeting, Mr. Niro pointed out an example of how one person and one event can change the entire sport. His example was Mia Hamm. The world knows Mia by her first name. She is the face of American soccer. But soccer did not overwhelm America until the U.S. Women's soccer team won the Women's World Cup in 1999, defeating China with the final in penalty kick!

The US Women's Soccer team, along with Mia and Brandi Chastain (the one who scored the winning goal) became instant celebrities. Their faces were on covers of every magazine. They became the most sought after personalities for endorsements. President Bill Clinton welcomed the U.S. women's soccer team to the South Lawn at the White House. The First Lady Hillary, Vice President Al Gore and his wife Tipper joined hundreds of enthusiastic fans to welcome the team. The next thing you know, a professional soccer league was born. Major corporations were throwing money left and right into soccer.

There are more examples. Serena and Venus Williams brought tennis to a whole new level. The US Open Women's Tennis Final last year was aired in prime time for the first time in history. Janette Lee (a/k/a the Black Widow) transformed professional billiards into a phenomenon. ESPN is now the leading network for the regular broadcast of professional billiards.

When ESPN broadcast the final game of the Kasparov – Deep Junior match live for 3½ hours, 400,000 households tuned in to watch even though very little promotion was done in advance. I believe if the format was done right (such as blitz, rapid or blindfold chess), it would attract even more non-chess audience to watch chess.

Like all things in general, hype works and marketing works! Just look at the example of Harry Potter. Need we say more? Why not hype chess? Chess needs heroes. Chess needs role models. This is how the US Women's Olympiad Program was created. We want to introduce to America our heroes, our role models. Next is taking this program to the next level.

Continued by FM Paul Truong ... How the Women's Olympiad Program was assembled

The first piece of the puzzle was World Champion Susan Polgar, the true modern pioneer in Women's Chess. At a time when top women chess players were content with competing for 3,000 rubbles and a 2350-2400 rating, Susan changed that. She became the #1 ranked woman player in the world at the age of 15 and later she became the first woman in history to break the gender barrier to earn the overall grandmaster title the same way men do. Susan also became the first woman ever to qualify for the Men's Zonal World Championship tournament. Even though she accomplished this magnificent feat, she was not allowed to compete because she is a woman. After all, the championship was called the Men's World Chess Championship. But she succeeded in making history again. In the following cycle, the name was changed to simply the World Chess Championship. The word 'Men' was removed. She led the Hungarian Women's National Team in 1988 and again in 1990 to capture the Olympic Gold, ending the Soviet supremacy in Women's Chess. She also became the only World Champion to win the triple-crown in chess (Blitz, Rapid and Conventional time controls).

The next step was to assemble other players for the Women's Olympiad Program. Invitations were e-mailed to the top women players by ratings. Out of the six invitations that were sent out, four accepted and the first-ever training squad was formed. The four are IM Irina Krush (US Women's Champion and two-time Olympian), WGM Anna Zatonskih (two-time Ukrainian Women's Champion and two-time Olympian), WIM Jennifer Shahade (US Women's Champion and two-time Olympian), and WGM Rusa Goletiani (three-time World Junior Champion and European Junior Champion).

The idea was great as far as it went, but we needed a lot of support. Susan (who has agreed to represent the US team in the 2004 Olympiad) and I presented the idea of the team and the program to the USCF Executive Board in March of 2003 and the board unanimously supported the idea. They also warmly greeted the entire group. It was a great experience but we still needed additional financial support. At that point, besides the USCF and the US Chess Trust, we had sponsorships from IBM, the World Chess Network, ChessBase, the Susan Polgar Foundation and International Chess Marketing. But this was not enough. We still needed more.

During the Kasparov – Deep Junior Match in January and the US Amateur Team East in February, we had several meetings and discussions with Michael Khodarkovsky, a friend and confidant of Garry Kasparov about sponsorship. Michael is also a famous coach with extensive top-level experience. After consulting with Garry Kasparov and the Kasparov Chess Foundation, the answer was more than what we could have hoped for. Not only did the Kasparov Chess Foundation agree to financially assist our US Olympiad Women's Program, Michael offered his wisdom and experience as the Team Training Consultant. To make matters even better, Garry Kasparov, the strongest World Champion ever, also agreed to offer his incredible chess knowledge to our women players. We

finally were on our way!



Michael, GM Boris Gulko and Susan Polgar started the first official three-day session of the premier US Women's Olympiad program. They were insightful and everyone learned a great deal. Michael evaluated the strength and weaknesses of each player while Boris offered his tremendous knowledge and understanding of chess. In the second, five-day session, we had GM Gennady Zaitchik, GM Boris Gulko, GM Susan Polgar and Michael. Each trainer worked on a different area of the game with the team. Michael had a special contribution in one of the sessions by showing a very special selection of practical endgames, impossible to find even in the five-volume endgame series by Yuri Averbakh. Each trainer was wonderful in their own special way. The general idea was to enhance each player's strength and improve each player's weaknesses.

The third was an extremely *special* three-day training session with Garry Kasparov himself. Garry's knowledge and understanding of the game is second to none. He went over each player's games and offered his views. He made suggestions for improvement and gave sincere praise and criticism accordingly. Garry also offered specific suggestions for the team on what to work on and how to improve. At the end of the session, he went over with Michael and me his overall impression and suggested a specific course of action to get the team ready for the Olympiad. The one point that Garry made over and over was the word "TEAM". He was very impressed with the unity of our team and how well everyone respects and get along with each other. This is one of the key ingredients for success.

What kind of man is Garry Kasparov and what was my impression of him? For starters, he is an incredible chess player and teacher. He is warm, personable and very passionate about this game. The speed of his analysis is like the speed of light and the accuracy of his analysis is just as good if not better than world-class chess programs. In many instances, his off-the-cuff analysis in strategic positions and endgames was far more precise than the Junior and Fritz programs.

But beside chess analysis and training, Garry also spoke about many other topics. He showed a side that few are fortunate enough to know. He is quite knowledgeable about many things. He is funny, entertaining and he is always brutally honest. He says what he feels and he does not hold back. But most of all, he is very passionate and sincere about making a difference in the chess world. He takes his duty as a World Chess Champion very seriously. He takes pride in

upholding the chess tradition.



That is why he is so supportive about our US Women's Olympiad program and American Chess in general. He constantly attends various fundraising events for his Kasparov Chess Foundation (a 501(c)(3) organization). He feels that it is his duty and mission (as a World Champion) to do his part to make chess more popular and give the players a better financial opportunity in the future. I am not sure who has more optimism for the future of chess, he or I? But we are sure on the same track.

Garry's vision for the future of chess goes perfectly together with our vision. He understands about chess heroes and chess role models. He understands that the younger players are the future of chess. He understands the needs for FIDE and national organizations to do a better job in marketing and public relations. He understands that without corporate money, the future success of chess will be diminished. He admitted that not all his efforts were successful as planned but he sure tried. No one can ever fault him for trying! He always does what he feels is best for chess. His heart is in the right place and his charisma is what the chess world needs. If all the top players in chess were like Garry or Susan, the future of chess would be very bright.

For now, I cannot think of two better World Champions than Garry Kasparov and Susan Polgar to represent our industry, to fulfill the mission of bringing chess to a whole new level of popularity. Their charms, passions, visions, and charisma will undoubtedly change chess forever for the better. As I stated before, many corporations are very interested in investing in chess. But they need some more help to be convinced that investing in chess makes sense. That is why the US Women's Olympiad Program is so important. Our players truly represent beauties, brains, strengths, confidence, and most important of all, they are perfect role models for our next generation. Thank you Garry and Susan for believing and supporting this pioneer program in America. We could not do it without you.

The following are Garry and Susan's perceptions and thoughts about the 2004 US Women's Olympiad Program:

Garry Kasparov:

“Having decided to be a part of this project, we aren't going to do this half-way. We, at the KCF, view this project as a long-term program, which includes not only support of the U.S. Women's Team, but also a creation of the program for gifted children. It is our intention to create a full scale training system, which would allow us to select and nurture young talents in America.



“If you take the responsibility to prepare the team for the Olympiad, it means that you're responsible for making decisions on behalf of the team. I know from my own experience how it is difficult to create a competitive squad where everyone has the same view and driven by the ultimate goal - to do everything is needed for the *team* to succeed.

“What I've seen in this team is quite unique in today's world of chess - it goes to your part of the team's chemistry and respect in the team's members relations.

“Before our session I asked Michael what is the team's ultimate goal? He answered: ‘We will shoot for the gold’. Frankly, I took this statement with some sort of skepticism. But after the session, I must admit you do have ‘The Team’ which is capable to win the Olympiad Gold.”

Susan Polgar:

“I have spent my entire life trying to make a difference in chess. In my native Hungary, the Polgar sisters have inspired a whole new generation of wonderful chess players. As for women's chess, I am very proud to have made a big impact in changing how women are perceived as chess players.

“Now, my goal is to bring a new attitude to women’s chess and chess in general in America. The best way to lead is to show by example. That is why I have agreed to play for the US in the next Olympiad. I want to inspire the next group of young players to follow their dreams. I want them to understand the message that anything can be accomplished if you want it bad enough and if you are willing to work hard for it.

“I am very proud of this group of young players (Irina, Anna, Jennifer and Rusa) who fully committed themselves for 2 years for a chance at the gold medal in 2004. They are giving their all to be role models for the next generation.

“I am also very thankful for the incredible support from Michael (Khodarkovsky), Garry (Kasparov) who is not only a great player but great coach and person, USCF, you (Paul Truong), Frank (Niro) and many others. This is what chess needs. We need people working together if we want to make a difference. The politics, pettiness, and selfishness should be replaced by team work, hard work, and professionalism. We want to bring the ‘Three Es’ to American Chess: Energy, Excitement and Enthusiasm! Our goal is nothing short of the Gold medal in 2004 and we are can do it!”

Paul Truong assisted Susan Polgar in the preparation of this column. Susan Polgar is available for chess instruction. For more information, visit the Polgar Chess Center, 97-09 64th Road, Rego Park, NY 11374 (Tel: 718-897-4600) or email: PolgarChessInc@aol.com

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