



C O L U M N I S T S

Scholastic
Chess

Steve Goldberg

Queens of Chess

Eight years ago an article by Shelby Lyman appeared in the *Salt Lake City Tribune*. In the February 1997 piece, Lyman noted that there is a tendency for girls to drop out of chess as they reach adolescence. Although chess is unique in that men and women, adults and children can all generally compete with one another on an even basis, nevertheless he opined that girls often get a subtle message that males don't relish such competition and therefore the girls may tend to back away from head-to-head competition with them. He wryly noted, however, that this does provide a benefit to the men. "Half of my most talented and toughest potential adversaries had been effectively vanquished without my having to lift a finger at the chessboard." This month's column takes a brief glimpse at the world of chess among girls and women today.

Did You Know?

Can you name the first female chessplayer to defeat Garry Kasparov? For extra credit, name the year and the tournament.

Women's Chess in the U.K.

"There is no such thing in chess as a grandmistress, which gives you some idea of who it is assumed will be playing the game." Thus begins a delightful radio segment on [BBC radio](#) recorded in December 2004. The full program runs just under 12 minutes long.

The radio hostess notes that at the primary school level, a large number of both boys and girls play chess, but she laments that less than 5% of rated players in Britain are females. The cause of the dropout of girls in the chess world isn't directly addressed, but several female chessplayers are interviewed and selected comments are reproduced here.

Twelve-year-old Amanda Hipshon won a major scholastic tournament in the U.K. and delights in her nickname "Queen of the North." She says she would like to be a chess coach, but even more so, she dreams of becoming a grandmaster.

Another guest on the program was asked about Judit Polgar, the top woman chessplayer in the world. The guest pointed out that the Polgar sisters' father insisted that "geniuses are not born, they're made," and proved this theory through the phenomenal results of his daughters. Certainly, a level of innate talent must be present, but tremendous individual effort must be exerted to achieve what GMs Judit and Susan Polgar have accomplished.

WGM Jovanka Huska (FIDE 2325) was asked if there were any advantages to playing as a woman. “You draw a lot of attention,” she responded, adding that the pressure is on the men. “The men have something to prove,” she chuckled, as she recalled a recent tournament where a male GM was frustrated at his inability to defeat her.

Claire Summerscale, Director of Women’s Chess for the British Chess Federation, noted that one of her goals is “trying to change some of the sexist attitudes that sometimes remain in the game.” She suggests that instead of a man complaining, “I lost to a girl,” he should instead say, “I lost to a great chessplayer.”

I asked Claire to elaborate on the state of girls in chess in Britain and she was quick to point out that a comprehensive [website](#) is available covering details of upcoming tournaments, results of past tournaments, interviews with top players, and links to a number of other chess organizations. She is proud of the fact that thousands of girls participated in the 2004 UK Chess Challenge, which she termed the largest chess tournament in the world, with over 71,000 participants. In addition to the tournaments themselves, Claire adds that “Various coaching initiatives have been set up, including coaching by WIM Ruth Sheldon at the All England Girls Chess Championships [the most recent of which drew over 400 participants ranging in age from 8 to 18].

A new national coaching initiative is currently taking place in various counties across England, with a training day being combined with a tournament.” Ms. Summerscale has been utilizing this combination coaching/playing format for several years, both at tournaments and at schools where she coaches chess. She describes the format further: “These events combine coaching and tournament, with players being sorted into teams of four. They receive 20 minutes of coaching in various different groups (which I strongly believe is the optimum period for coaching) and then play for about half an hour, which gives them an opportunity to immediately use their new knowledge. They then go back into their coaching groups, then play, etc until the prize giving at 4.30, when team, board and age group prizes are awarded. No player can win more than one prize, which allows a larger group of players to feel that their efforts are rewarded. I also give every competitor a chess badge and certificate.”

GM Susan Polgar and the Polgar Invitational for Girls Tournament



The 2004 Polgar Invitational

In the U.S., when one thinks about girls in chess, the first name to come to mind is GM Susan Polgar, who has done more to promote chess among females than perhaps anyone else. Besides being a pioneer for women's chess, she is also very approachable and a joy to interview! At her inaugural Polgar Invitational for Girls championship concurrent with the 2004 U.S. Open, 34 girls competed, including Rheanna English who represented the state of Texas. In the November-December 2004 edition of *Texas Knights*, the official publication of the Texas Chess Association, Rheanna writes about her experiences at the first Polgar Invitational: "I was extremely excited to be invited to represent Texas ... I had no idea it would be so much fun! I was able to meet many girls from all around the country. I also was privileged to meet famous figures such as GM Susan Polgar, GM Arnold Denker, GM Anatoly Karpov, and WGM Alexandra Kosteniuk... On the last day of the event, everyone got to meet grandmaster Anatoly Karpov and take a group photo with him. We had a pizza party and he was also in the next room signing boards and books... Every moment was filled with excitement and adventure. I'm sure glad I was invited to this tournament, and I hope to go back next year in Phoenix."



GMs Susan Polgar, Anatoly Karpov and the players

In a Chessbase.com article by FM Paul Truong following the initial Polgar Invitational, Ettie Nikolova from Virginia had the following to say: "When the reception was over and the first game began, I started to understand what the Polgar was all about. In Virginia, as in many other states, there are barely any girls past elementary school who play chess ... When I played in the Polgar, I was in a place, for the first time in my life, where girls were not only excited about chess, but also advanced enough to play good games. As a result, the Polgar tournament has made me want to improve the way I play chess because it helped me realize the true potential that women have in the world of chess. Although I didn't win a prize in the conventional sense at the Polgar tournament, I certainly left richer than I was when I had first nervously entered the reception room."



GM Susan Polgar and happy prizewinners

A number of states are holding Polgar qualifying events to select the top girl to send to the Polgar Invitational; in other states the top-finishing girl in the state's scholastic championship will have the opportunity to represent her state. Susan is hopeful that all fifty states will be represented at this summer's event, held in conjunction with the U.S. Open again. Certainly assisting the effort is the full four-year scholarship offered by the University of Texas-Dallas to the winner.

Susan Polgar has written and spoken widely about improving conditions for girls in the world of chess. In earlier [ChessCafe](#) columns, she has noted the importance of good chess role models for girls. "It is important for them to know and understand," she says, "that they can be beautiful, feminine, graceful, charming, but play a mean and tough game on the chessboard." She has also pushed for more support from the USCF as well as the various state chess organizations. What I sense is an important point that I have not heard much discussion about is Polgar's desire for separate training programs for girls. Patience is also crucial to improving the number and quality of female chessplayers. Susan noted in her [October 2002 ChessCafe](#) column that "It took approximately a decade for China to see phenomenal results in women's chess. Two of the last three women's world champions (Xie Jun and Zhu Chen) are from China. Even with an incredible amount of support from a national system, it took time to make a difference. If we want to change chess for girls and women in America, we have to make a long term plan and stick with it. We need a true commitment and we need to be patient."

On a different topic, I asked Susan about her sister Judit and her return to chess at the recently-completed Corus tournament. With an infant at home, Judit hasn't yet decided whether or not to return to regular tournament play. As Susan commented, she'll just "take it one step at a time."

Interesting Websites

Courtesy of Mig Greengard's Daily Dirt Chess Blog, I found two interesting sites you might want to check out:

[This site](#) contains the story of Katie, a 13-year-old British chessplayer.

[Here](#) you'll find a one-minute TV interview with WIM Jennifer Shahade.

Kasparov All-Girls Championship

From May 13-15, 2005, the second annual Kasparov National All-Girls Championship will take place in Chicago. The tournament offers five sections based on age, with trophies awarded to top players and teams. Side events include blitz and bughouse tournaments.

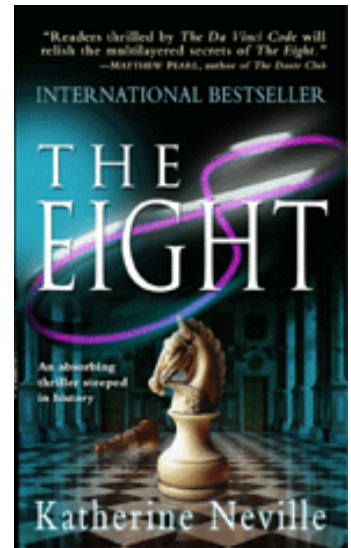
Alisa and The Eight

NM Dan Heisman was kind enough to inform me about the following interesting story involving WFM Alisa Melekhina, the 6th-place finisher in the Girls Under-14 category of the recent World Youth Chess Championship held in Greece. Novelist Katherine Neville has a penchant for including chess in her books and writes in a delightfully animated manner. She mentioned to me that Dan, who has produced a CD on the Fried Liver-Lolli opening, was assisting her in the correction of an inadvertent typesetting error involving this variation in her book *The Eight*. Katherine continues, "I decided to update and fix it when I finished the sequel I'm working on now. I mentioned to Dan that I was having trouble with the sequel, because my heroine had been a child chess prodigy – the daughter of Cat Velis and grand master Alexander Solarin, characters from the previous book – but that I myself had never been a child prodigy at *anything*. Hard to identify with something you have never been. So Dan put Alisa in touch with me. Surprisingly, Alisa told me right off the bat that she had already read *The Eight* and loved it – and added that she was my fellow author, having published her own translation of a Russian fairy tale when she was six! Among other connections, she mentioned that her father (like the father of my young heroine) had taught Alisa chess – and, even more surprisingly, he is also named Alexander!"

I was curious if the heroine in this sequel was modeled after Alisa and Ms. Neville was quick to reply. "No ... Actually, I would not wish to jinx Alisa's chess career by having *any* of the things happen to her that are going to be happening to my heroine in the book! Alisa has been most helpful though, in sending me many of the games she has played in international competition, both on winning and losing sides, which I thought was quite brave of her, and also in sharing her inner thought process about sensory perception, especially vision."

"I try to put some chess into every book," she explained, "because it is so archetypal and its roots go back so far in our collective memory. Indeed, I have a few things to say in the sequel about exactly *how* far back those roots may lie!"

So does this author play chess herself? “I am an awful chess player, but I love everything about chess. Almost everyone I ever dated was a chess devotee ... I actually checkmated an Austrian boyfriend once, and didn’t even know I had him in check! We were playing lightning chess, and I kept saying ‘move! move!’ Finally he said ‘Move where? I am in checkmate and you never mentioned it!’ So that was the end of that relationship – which also convinced me that my chess playing days were over!”



It turns out that Alisa is not the first chessplayer that Neville has worked with. “In my book, *A Calculated Risk*, I was helped by the co-authors of *Warriors of the Mind* – Dr. Nathan Divinsky, (former president of Canadian FIDE) and British grand master Raymond Keene – who both sent me games that could be used in a dazzling scene by the future patriarch of the Rothschild family. It may interest your readers to know that the game that appears in that book is one that Dr. Divinsky found, dating from the exact period that Rothschild would have been explaining to the others how to win it! In *The Eight*, I was helped by being a member of the Mechanics Institute Library of San Francisco, possessors of a fabulous chess book collection with a chess room where tournaments are played. And also by my friend Aileen Des Moulins, a chess player who lived not far from my tree house in Sausalito, just north of San Francisco ... Aileen shared thoughts of how it felt to be a female in a male dominated game, and she helped me find, through a friend of hers, a game that would fit my plot (*The Eight* is based on a real game in world championship competition, where White resigns when Black’s passed pawn gets to the sixth rank. Only one reader has ever guessed which game it was).” See www.KatherineNeville.com for more information about her chess-influenced work.

Any final thoughts about working with Alisa? “For an author like me, who is interested in the quest of the mind, as well as the adventure of the quest, it has been quite refreshing to see a young girl like Alisa who is very good at something as complex and competitive as chess but who can still lead a normal life incorporating a variety of interests. Before I met Alisa, all the precocious children I had known were quite driven – and like my heroine, their parents were worried about their obsession (indeed, in *The Eight* sequel, they will have more than one reason to worry!). So Alisa’s parents must be credited with being focused yet supportive.”



*WFM Alisa Melekhina at the
2004 Polgar Invitational*

As for 13-year-old Alisa herself, she was born in the Ukraine and began playing chess at the age of five. As Alisa explains, “My father is the best (and only) chess teacher I had,” although her father also credits FM Aviv Friedman with assisting Alisa in several international tournaments. In addition to Alisa’s strong showing at the WYCC in Greece in November 2004, she also won the title of U.S. Girls Under 12 champion in May 2004, and placed second at the Polgar Invitational tournament in August 2004. Quite a year for young Alisa!

Her talents, however, are not limited to chess. The straight-A student is fluent in Russian as well as English, and enjoys ballet, volleyball and reading, especially the Harry Potter books, and is active in the school choir.

Although not yet a USCF Master, she received her WFM title at the age of 9 when she took first place in the Pan American championship for girls under 10. Her typical day includes between two and three hours of chess study. Asked to describe her chess training regimen, she said that she and her father “study chess openings, endings, middle game positions, and do several chess tactics problems. I will also probably play against the computer (Fritz or Chessmaster).”

She has already participated in international tournaments in Argentina twice, in Greece twice, and in Spain. She also plans on attending the 2005 World Youth Chess Championship in France.

What advice would Alisa offer to other aspiring chessplayers? “I would tell them to take the game seriously and practice everyday. They should



also play in a lot of tournaments and spend less time playing blitz.” Alisa’s

*GM Susan Polgar and
WFM Alisa Melekhina*

father, Dr. Aleksandr Melekhin, a Class A player himself, stresses the practice. As he notes, it was eight years of “everyday boring practice” and her talent that has allowed her to reach her current level. Dr. Melekhin and his wife, both dentists from the former USSR, have altered their practice schedule to accommodate Alisa’s tournament schedule. I asked Dr. Melekhin if Alisa has faced many obstacles as a girl playing in a male-dominated sport. Interestingly, he commented that he feels this has not been an obstacle at all. Rather, the tough competition has only strengthened her play.

Congratulations to Alisa and best wishes for continued success. We look forward to following her progress.

Answer to Did You Know?

It was at the Russia vs. the World event in 2002 that GM Garry Kasparov lost to GM Judit Polgar. To see the game, pull up GM Susan Polgar’s [ChessCafe](#) article from [October 2002](#).

Notes/Corrections from last month

Jim Stallings, Associate Director for Chess and Education at the University of Texas - Dallas (UTD), provided the following photograph of the winning UTD team from December’s Pan-American Intercollegiate Championship. Dr. Tim Redman noted that this tournament has actually been held numerous times in the Midwest, correcting a statement to the contrary in last month’s column.



Standing left to right: James Stallings, Andrei Zaremba, Michal Kujovic, Amon Simutowe, Coach IM Rade Milovanovic; kneeling is Magesh Panchanathan and Peter Vavrak

Upcoming Tournaments

In addition to the Kasparov All-Girls Championship in May, the big SuperNationals III event is getting close. It will take place April 8-10, 2005 at the Opryland Resort and Convention Center in Nashville, TN, and feature the 2005 National elementary, junior high, and high school championships. Various simultaneous exhibitions and lectures are planned, with visits by GM Maurice Ashley, GM Susan Polgar, GM Yasser Seirawan, and WIM Jennifer Shahade.

The University of Texas-Dallas is again offering full four-year scholarships to top finishers and the girls who finish highest in each section (K-6, K-9, and K-12) will receive automatic qualifying berths into the 2005 Susan Polgar Invitational for Girls. Side events will include Blitz and Bughouse tournaments. Go to www.uschess.org for additional information.

As many as 2000 players are expected at the 2005 Texas Scholastic & Southwest Collegiate Championships, scheduled for February 26-27, 2005 at the Adams Mark Hotel in Dallas, Texas. The tournament is divided into five sections: primary, elementary, middle school, high school, and collegiate. For more information, see www.texaschess.org.

Have something newsworthy you'd like to share? E-mail me at scholasticchess@chesscafe.com. I can't promise that I'll be able to respond to each e-mail, but every one will be read and considered. For all games submitted, please provide the following information: (1) Names and age of both players; (2) Ratings of both players; (3) When and where the game was played; (4) The time control used in the game; and (5) Any other information you think would be helpful for us to know.

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