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Champion is out to move girls into chess

March 22, 2006

BY [MIKE THOMAS](#) Staff Reporter

The game of chess is more than just a game, they say. It's life, and life-improving. It's critical thinking, socialization, focus, sportsmanship, discipline and grace under pressure.

It's also mostly male -- which is why millionaire chess superstar Garry Kasparov, the Michael Jordan of his realm, was in town last week to promote chess for girls. If they're hooked young, goes the reasoning, at least some of them will be hooked for good.

"I think there will be more and more women playing competitively," the retired world champion (who stopped playing competitively in 2005) says at the third annual All-Girls Open National Championships, a chess event co-sponsored by his two-year-old Kasparov Chess Foundation. "But there's still a gap. And this gap will not disappear overnight."

Hunched over in competition position on the edge of a sofa in his suite at the Palmer House Hilton, Kasparov, 42, speaks quickly and emphatically during an interview for which he is 35 minutes late owing to stacks of books (the latest volume of his *My Great Predecessors* series) requiring his famous signature.

The night before, he played a "simul," going table to table against 40 girls at once. It took him a bit more than three hours to trounce them all. Now he's putting his money and his mouth behind what he terms "the most undervalued and most undersponsored area of chess" -- girls and women.

'Psychological stamina'

Breaking into the old-boys club of chess requires the creation of "an environment for girls to participate among themselves," says the foundation's president, Michael Khodarkovsky. Which isn't to say girls and boys, men and women aren't on the same level intellectually. It's simply a matter of "psychological stamina," a quality that hasn't been widely fostered among females throughout the game's testosterone-stoked history.

"[Chess] is all about, 'I am the best, I'm stronger than you,' and there's always psychological facets at play," Khodarkovsky says. "And, of course, ego as well. But when kids are playing, I would say aggressiveness is more natural for boys. And sometimes they can be mean."

Valentina Lokhova, 27-year-old president of the Chicago-based organization Chess Wizards, says that girls and women "are more willing to compromise and make everyone happy and just have a good time."

In other words, they enjoy the process and typically don't fixate on winning, as boys and men tend to do.

"I think it's important for girls to compete against each other because it helps them with psychological comfort," Kasparov says. "You can find the best girls and help them to get stronger. That's why we concentrated on bringing whatever resources we could find to the development of this part of the game."

He grows immediately defensive, though -- he's a guy, after all -- when the subject of his 2002 defeat at the hands of highly ranked female grandmaster Judit Polgar (in a match dubbed "Russia vs. the Rest of the World") is broached.

"Excuse me," he says, talking over his interviewer's query, "let's not exaggerate, you know? I lost one game to Judit in rapid chess [a variation of the game]. People ask, 'How do you feel?' I say, 'Look, I had a bad tournament. I lost three games, highly unusual for me, to [male] players that were no stronger than Judit. But forget female or male. I lost to No. 15 in the world [Polgar's ranking at the time] having a bad tournament. So big deal."

'My girlfriends think I'm weird'

Downstairs at the Palmer House, on the third and sixth floors, the day is in full swing. Mothers and fathers and aunts and grandparents sit on chairs and floors with young girls just about to play or fresh from being eliminated. They offer words of wisdom and support. "Good try." "You're a winner to me."

Lokhova, the tournament's chief overseer, is formidable but friendly. Of the 2000 members in her Chess Wizards organization, which teaches chess to kids and teens inside and outside of Chicago area schools, 20 percent of its participants are girls ages 5 to 18.

"In Illinois and Chicago, the participation of girls has been going up in the last three or four years by 2 or 3 percent a year," she notes. And her charges have come to publicly embrace their brainy pastime without fear of embarrassment.

"I had girls come up to me three years ago and say, 'Valentina, I would love to take chess from Chess Wizards, but I can't because my girlfriends think I'm weird, that I'm dorky, that I shouldn't be playing chess because it's not cool," she said. "Now, that will never happen."

Perhaps not among Chess Wizards. But it still happens.

Tall and impressively well-spoken for her age, 11-year-old Laurel Doak of Lincoln Park says most of her classmates at the Catherine Cook School in Chicago's Gold Coast neighborhood "wouldn't want to play chess. As far as I can tell, most kids have other things that they really like to do, and critical thinking isn't very big. I mean, I'll do critical thinking problems just for fun, and everyone else sees them as extra credit work."

This intellectual stigma is a big reason why adolescent girls (those around Laurel's age in particular) drop out of chess: The negative social pressure is too great.

"I have personally met hundreds of girls who told me how much chess helped them with their self-esteem and to do better at school and be less intimidated by boys," says chess champ and the game's first female grandmaster, Susan Polgar, whose younger sister Judit (Kasparov's vanquisher) is the only female ranked among the world's top 100 players.

Susan, too, sponsors all-girl tournaments to create a comfort zone among young female players.

Chess "is still very much male-dominated," she says. "And the problem is that, a lot of times, girls who are in mixed tournaments are getting bullied or intimidated or teased or not welcomed by the boys. Unfortunately, many of the girls, rather than fighting [back], give up and walk away from the game altogether."

Silly boys

Then again, being the underdog has its pluses. "[Boys] underestimate us," says Abby Brownelo, 13, of north suburban Cary. "They don't think we're going to play as well as we actually can, so they'll play a lot slower and they'll make more mistakes. So we have an advantage."

Back upstairs, Kasparov prepares to don a tie and speak at a luncheon gathering of chess coaches and tournament organizers, school teachers and software developers -- only a handful of them women.

Asked whether there will be a greater female presence in the top echelons of chess someday, he says yes, but many years down the road.

"There's already one," he points out, referring to Judit Polgar. "That proves it is not impossible."

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