

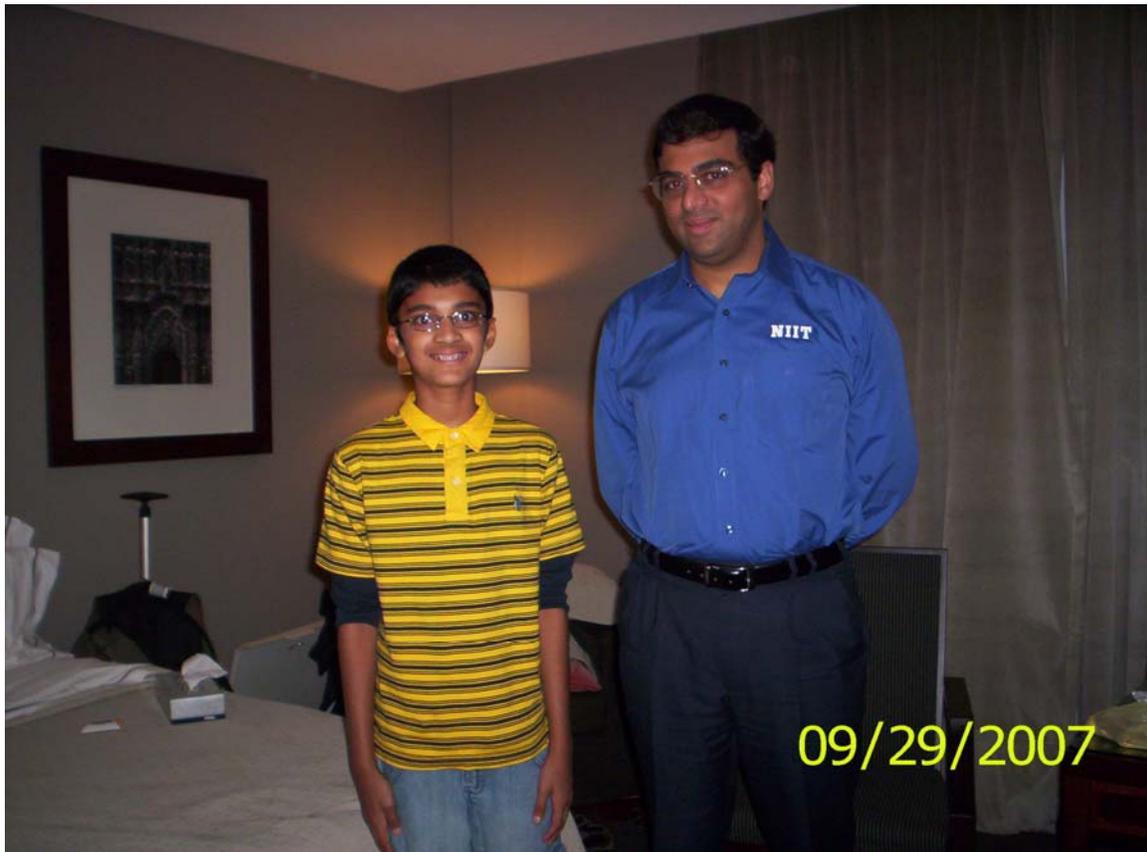
# My meeting with the World Chess Champion

by

**Vikram Arun**

**7<sup>th</sup> grade, Gentry Middle School**

**Columbia, Missouri**



Checkmate! I was recently in Mexico City to witness the last two rounds (rounds 13 & 14) of the World Chess Championship (WCC), held from September 13 to September 29 in Mexico. Eight of the world's top-rated chess players were there to battle it out over the chess board for the world title. The players included Vladimir Kramnik, Peter Svidler, Alex Morozevich, and Alex Grischuk (Russia), Levon Aronian (Armenia), Peter Leko (Hungary), Boris Gelfand (Israel), and, last but certainly not least, Viswanathan Anand (India).

My trip to Mexico was preceded by my intensely following the first 12 rounds of the championship on the internet. Every day, I would come home from school, do my homework, and check the games and results. My excitement grew as Anand pulled into the lead and a win looked within

reach. I was ecstatic when my dad said we could go and see Anand in Mexico for the last two rounds.

So on Thursday, September 27, we went from Columbia to St. Louis. We then flew out to Mexico City via Houston very early the next morning on Friday, September 28. The flight took a little bit longer than expected as the pilot had to weave around Tropical Storm Lorenzo off the coast of Mexico! After some anxious moments at 30,000 feet, we finally landed in Mexico City around noon! My drive through Mexico City reminded me of India – the sights, sounds, people, rain, traffic, and perceived chaos (and that inevitable calm beneath the surface). Was I back in India?? My dad told me that he didn't think we had flown that far...

Once we were settled, we went to the main playing hall and bought our tickets to go in. We then went through the main entrance, past security, to a very quiet, darkened auditorium. As my eyes adjusted to the darkness and dimly lit stage, I suddenly saw all my favorite players hunched over their respective boards in intense concentration! At Board 1 was Anand, totally absorbed in his penultimate game against Grischuk! If Anand drew or won this round, all he would need on Saturday was a draw against Leko in the last round to clinch the world title! On the other hand, if he lost this round, the race for the title could get closer! The scene took my breath away as I realized the gravity of the situation.

I then stared at the giant screen next to the stage, where each of the four games in progress was displayed. Anand had gotten into a tight position with Grischuk and there was a nail-biting battle in progress. It looked like Grischuk was not leaving without a fight. At that time, I began to see Anand's genius at work. He played out an incredible chess game, one that would be instructive to any chess player. Move after move of impeccable thinking improved his position and Anand slowly but surely steered the game to a draw. I heaved a sigh of relief, knowing that he would in all likelihood be crowned as world champion after the final round on Saturday. It was indeed a breathtaking finish, one that demonstrated Anand's complete mastery of the game – not to speak of his calmness, resolve, and composure under pressure. As Grischuk later acknowledged, it took a special player like Anand to equalize a position that most others likely could not have done. This underlines Anand's exceptional talents in a game that has been dominated mostly by European players.

After the game, we met Anand's wife, Aruna. She had been patiently waiting for Anand to finish his penultimate round. She was a very pleasant and friendly person and told us about the hospitality of the Mexican people and the smoothness of their stay (and the tournament!) so far. When Anand

himself came out, at least 100 people were waiting to get his autograph. He signed a lot of them – and I was one of the lucky few! After giving a press conference (in fluent Spanish!), he waved goodbye to the crowd and was ushered out by the organizers.

That evening, we had dinner at an excellent Mexican restaurant with a lady from California and her husband (both Anand fans!), whom we had met at the playing hall. When we were on our way out of the restaurant, we saw Anand dining at another restaurant across the street with Aruna and his second, Peter Nielsen. Anand saw us through the window and immediately smiled and waved at us. He recognized us from earlier!

The next day, we went to the playing hall for the final round. I was still somewhat jittery, but knew that a draw was all that Anand needed to win the title as he was ahead of all the other players by a full point or more by that time. Anand hammered out his moves against Leko at the rapid speed for which he is reknowned. After some quick exchanges, the two agreed to a 18-move draw. This automatically made Anand world champion (for the 2<sup>nd</sup> time in his career!), regardless of whether anyone else won their last round games or not. The crowd immediately cheered and the scene outside was even more chaotic. People were lined up as far as I could see, waiting for an opportunity to get Anand's autograph. Many even started a cheer in Spanish for Anand! At that point, I saw how well-liked and popular Anand was.

After the incredible events of the day, I got to meet with Anand that evening. He discussed the tournament and his experiences, and also wished me all the best. One of the things that struck me about Anand was how friendly and humble he was, in spite of all his incredible accomplishments in chess. He is a wonderful ambassador for chess. In addition, he has a very respectful and enthusiastic demeanor. "Vishy" could thus easily become one of the most popular and well-liked chess champions of all time.

This victory is great for Anand and the entire chess-playing world. I will always cherish my trip to Mexico and the opportunity to meet with Anand. I am glad to have been at a place where he wrote chess history. Anand is inspirational and a true champion! And Mexico is a wonderful place to visit!

More pictures below:





