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THE GRAND-MASTER EXPERI-MENT

The queen is the most powerful piece on the chessboard. Yet in the ultra-elite ranks of chess, a woman who can hold her own is the rarest of creatures. How, then, did one family produce three of the most successful female chess champions ever? BY CARLIN FLORA PHOTOGRAPH BY ANDREA ARTZ

THE WORLD'S FIRST FEMALE grandmaster was ready to deliver her regular Thursday-night lecture. Susan Polgar was perfumed, coiffed, made-up and dressed in a sleek black pantsuit, an elegant contrast to the boys and young men hunched over their boards in her Queens, New York, chess club. "I have a special treat," Susan, 36, announced in her gentle Hungarian accent. "Tonight, everyone will get to play me." Blitz chess it was—each opponent received five minutes on his clock to Susan's one. She first sat across from a young Serbian man. The two began slamming pieces and punching down their side of the clock, creating a percussive sound track to their lightning-fast moves. Susan beat him with a good 30 seconds to spare. He shook his head and avoided her eyes. A retired bartender and a 14-year-old boy succumbed almost as quickly. A reluctant 9-year-old suffering from an allergy attack was then coaxed to step up to the challenge. "Don't worry about your eyes—everybody loses to her anyway," his mom said helpfully. The boy's minutes slipped away to inevitable loss. "Once you have a winning position," Susan said, "play with your hands, not your head. Trust your intuition."

When Susan was the age of many of her students, she dominated the New York Open chess competition. At 16 she crushed several adult opponents and landed on the front page of *The New York Times*. The tournament was abuzz not just with the spectacle of one pretty young powerhouse: Susan's raven-haired sister Sophia, 11, swept most of the games in her section, too. But the pudgy baby of the family, 9-year-old Judit, drew the most gawkers of all. To onlookers' delight, Judit took on five players simultaneously and beat them. She played blindfolded.

GRAND DAMES: SOPHIA, 30, SUSAN, 36, AND JUDIT, 29, BECAME OVERNIGHT CELEBRITIES IN THEIR NATIVE HUNGARY AFTER WINNING THE WOMEN'S OLYMPIAD IN 1988. AS A TEENAGER, SUSAN COACHED HER YOUNGER SISTERS.

In 1991, when Susan was 21, she became the first woman ever to earn the designation Grandmaster, the World Chess Federation's title for top-ranked players. Judit picked up the honor the same year, at age 15. She was a few months younger than Bobby Fischer was when he won the title.

Judit, who is now the top-ranked woman and eighth overall player in the world, would go on to win a match in 2002 against reigning champion Garry Kasparov, who has said that "women by nature are not exceptional chess players." But the Polgar sisters may be the exceptions that prove Kasparov's point: Only 11 out of the world's about 950 grandmasters, including Susan and Judit, are female. The sisters' saga may cast light on the knotty question of why so few women are elite performers in math and the hard sciences. But in the Polgars' case, a unique upbringing and the idiosyncrasies of chess itself further complicate the picture.

Judit, Susan and Sophia grew up in a

PHOTO: PAUL TRUONG

PHOTOS: COURTESY OF SUSAN POLGAR (TOP); CSILLA CSEKE/MTI/CAMERA PRESS/RETNA (BOTTOM)

Chess is the perfect activity for the protogenius: an art and a science that can be measured over time.

veritable chess cocoon spun by their father, Laszlo, the intellectual equivalent of Serena and Venus Williams' autocratic tennis dad, Richard. Some people consider Laszlo's role in shaping his daughters' careers to be absolute; others call it a happy coincidence. Raw talent and a childhood with all the advantages account for success in many fields, and chess is no exception. But the paths Susan, Judit and Sophia took as adults illuminate many intangibles in the achievement equation. An aggressive streak, birth order, a chance encounter that leads to a marriage on the other side of the world—these factors and changes of fortune are just as critical in determining whether a person rises to the top of his or her game.

FORTY YEARS AGO, Laszlo Polgar, a Hungarian psychologist, conducted an epistolary courtship with a Ukrainian foreign language teacher named Klara. His letters to her weren't filled with reflections on her cherubic beauty or vows of eternal love. Instead, they detailed a pedagogical experiment he was bent on carrying out with his future progeny. After studying the biographies of hundreds of great intellectuals, he had identified a common theme—early and intensive specialization in a particular subject. Laszlo thought the public school system could be relied upon to produce mediocre minds. In contrast, he believed he could turn any healthy child into a prodigy. He had already published a book on the subject, *Bring Up Genius!*, and he needed a wife willing to jump on board.

Laszlo's grandiose plan impressed Klara, and the two were soon married. In 1973, when she was barely 4 years old, Susan,

CHESS ROYALTY: (CLOCKWISE) LASZLO, SUSAN, SOPHIA, KLARA AND JUDIT IN 1989. THEIR APARTMENT WAS A SHRINE TO THE GAME.

chess lesson when Laszlo received the call that Klara had given birth to another daughter, Sophia. Just 21 months later, Judit was born. As soon as they were old enough to feel the pain of parental exclusion, the younger girls peeked through a small window into the room where their father taught Susan chess for hours each day. Laszlo seized upon their curiosity. They could come in and watch, he told them, but only if they also learned the game. With that, Laszlo gained two additional subjects.

Laszlo battled Hungarian authorities for permission to homeschool his children, and he and Klara then taught them German, English and high-level math. (All three are multilingual; Susan speaks seven languages, including Esperanto, fluently.) They swam occasionally and played Ping-Pong, and a 20-minute breather just for joke telling was penciled in each day. But their world was largely mapped onto the 64 squares of the chessboard. "My dad believed in optimizing early childhood instead of wasting time playing outside or watching TV," Susan says.

Laszlo believed that the girls' achievement in chess would bring them not only success. More importantly, it would make

At age 4, after just months of training, Susan crushed grown men (and their egos) in Budapest chess clubs.

their rather hyperactive firstborn, found a chess set while rummaging through a cabinet. Klara, who didn't know a single rule of the ancient game, was delighted to find Susan quietly absorbed in the strange figurines and promised that Laszlo would teach her the game that evening.

Chess, the Polgars decided, was the perfect activity for their protogenius: It was an art, a science, and like competitive athletics, yielded objective results that could be measured over time. Never mind that less than 1 percent of top chess players were women. If innate talent was irrelevant to Laszlo's theory, so, then, was a child's gender. "My father is a visionary," Susan says. "He always thinks big, and he thinks people can do a lot more than they actually do."

Six months later, Susan toddled into Budapest's smoke-filled chess club. Aged men sat in pairs, sliding bishops, slapping down pawns and yelling out bets on their matches. "I don't know who was more surprised, me or them," she recalls. One of the regulars laughed when he was asked to give the little girl a game. Susan soon extended her tiny hand across the board for a sportsmanlike victory shake. It was an ego-crushing gesture. Soon thereafter, she dominated the city's girls-under-age-11 tournament with a perfect score.

In 1974 Susan was in the middle of a

them happy. Klara took care of the pragmatic aspects of her family's intense home-life, and in later years, coordinated their travels to tournaments in 40 countries. "They complemented each other perfectly," says Susan. Laszlo initiated the great plans, but, as Klara said, "I am always part of the realization. The thread follows the needle. I am the thread."

THE BRAIN HAS three tasks to carry out when contemplating a chessboard. It must comprehend the rules, as each piece moves according to its own powers and restraints. Then it must analyze

PHOTO: COURTESY OF SUSAN POLGAR

potential moves, which involves envisioning different configurations on the board. Lastly, it must decide which move is most advantageous. Here the game requires critical thinking in the visual-spatial realm. Visual-spatial processing is the single biggest ability gap between men and women—the glimmer of truth behind the stereotype of men-as-road-trip-aces who deftly follow maps and fit the luggage into the car. The visual-spatial processing center is located in the right side of the brain; among elite chess players (Kasparov included), there is a much higher proportion of left-handers, who have dominant right brains, than chance would predict.

Testosterone accelerates development of the right brain and may slow development of the left side. But the effects aren't binary: Regardless of its sex, each brain falls on a continuum between "male" and "female" extremes in an array of traits. Furthermore, the neural pathways that allow for chess's cognitive pyrotechnics develop in response to environmental influences and are most malleable in young children. Estrogen, in fact, enables neural plasticity—women tend to recover better from strokes than men, for example—and the hormone primes women for neural growth and change, points out neuropsychiatrist Mona Lisa Schulz, author of *The New Feminine Brain*. By teaching his daughters chess at a young age, Laszlo essentially molded their brains, enriching their visual-spatial centers and closing any gap that gender may have broached.

Gender differences do emerge, however, in the way kids look at chess. "Girls can learn how to play just as well as boys," Susan says. "But they often approach the game differently. Girls would rather solve chess puzzles than play against one of their friends," she says. Boys will always choose to compete.

These orientations can long influence a player's style, says Paul Truong, captain of the U.S. Women's Olympiad chess team and coauthor of Susan's forthcoming book, *Breaking Through: How the Polgar Sisters Changed the Game of Chess*. "When I play Susan," he says, "I look for the quickest, most brute force way to win—even if it's a very typical checkmate. She looks for a more elegant, unusual way." As a teacher, Susan indulges girls' preference for conflict-free mental challenges and supports sex-segregated events for beginners. There are so few girls in attendance at national coed tournaments, she says, that their self-consciousness often squashes their enthusiasm for the game.

Susan's feminine touch is apparent at her club, where tea and cakes are served to the mostly male members. "It's rare to have someone of Susan's stature interacting with amateurs like us. You wouldn't see Kasparov sitting here, talking to a normal person," notes Ruth Arluck, a retired teacher. Truong agrees. "Susan even insisted on wooden instead of plastic chess pieces. It takes a woman to notice these things," he says.

ANDERS ERICSSON IS only vaguely familiar with the Polgars, but he has spent the last 20 years building evidence in support of Laszlo's theory of genius. Ericsson, a professor of psychology at Florida State University, argues that "extended deliberate practice" is the true, if banal, key to success. "Nothing shows that innate factors are a necessary prerequisite for expert-level mastery in most fields," he says. (The only exception he's found is the correlation between height and athletic achievement in sports, most clearly for basketball and volleyball.) His interviews with 78 German pianists and violinists revealed that by age 20, the best

Check Your Chess Acumen

There are multiple ways to achieve the objective of each puzzle, but only one solution in the number of moves specifed.

A SIMPLE PUZZLE:

White must capture black rook in two moves.

Answer:
White: Knight to d2 (Nd2)
Black: Any move of the King or Pawn

White: Knight Captures Rook at e4 (NxR)

A TOUGHER PUZZLE:

White must checkmate black in five moves

Answer:
White: Knight to d2 (Nd2)
Black: King to h7 (Kh7)

White: Knight to c4 (Nc4)
Black: King to h8 (Kh8)

White: Knight to d6 (Nd6)
Black: King to h7 (Kh7)

White: Bishop to e4 (Be4)
Black: King to h8 (Kh8)

White: Knight to f7 (Nf7) Mate!

By William Bart, Professor of Educational Psychology, University of Minnesota

QUEEN MUM: SUSAN POLGAR WITH SONS TOMMY (LEFT) AND LEEAM.

A prodigy's greatest weapon may be her "rage to master," a drive that is impossible to inculcate.

had spent an estimated 10,000 hours practicing, on average 5,000 hours more than a less accomplished group. Unless you're dealing with a cosmic anomaly like Mozart, he argues, an enormous amount of hard work is what makes a prodigy's performance look so effortless.

Critics dismiss Ericsson's doctrine as the "drudge theory" of genius. It is reasonable to assume, they say, that the musicians who logged more hours did so because they had more innate ability and therefore obtained better results from their practice sessions. But Ericsson protests that talent's effects level off. Deliberate practice is not mechanically repeating tasks that come easily, but rather targeting and attacking specific areas that need improvement.

"My father believes that innate talent is nothing, that [success] is 99 percent hard work," Susan says. "I agree with him."

The Polgars' high-rise apartment in downtown Budapest was a shrine to unremitting chess practice. Thousands of chess books were stuffed onto shelves. Trophies and boards cluttered the living room. A file card system took up an entire wall. It included records of previous games for endless analytical pleasure and even an index of potential competitors' tournament histories. Framed prints depicting 19th-century chess scenes served as décor in the main room, where the girls often sat cross-legged on the floor, playing blindfolded blitz games that lasted mere minutes.

Such a regimen tempts accusations of light torture had the children been unwilling pawns. But blindfolded speed chess was the sisters' idea of fun. And while they had a few friends in the neighborhood, the girls were perfectly content to pass their days training with elderly male grandmasters. "I had an inner drive," recalls Susan. "I think that is the difference between the very good and the best."

Ellen Winner, a psychologist at Boston College, calls this drive the "rage to master." She thinks it's what propels prodigies through grueling years of training. "The rage to master is a prodigy's primary motivation," she says. "Mastering a certain activity is more important to them than socializing, than anything else." Winner believes that infusing a child with the rage to master is impossible: "You can force your kids to work harder, but you can't get them to have that level of passion. The sisters could have just as easily rebelled against Laszlo."

In fact, they couldn't be stopped. Laszlo once found Sophia in the bathroom in the middle of the night, a chessboard balanced across her knees. "Sophia, leave the pieces alone!" he said, shaking his head. "Daddy, they won't leave *me* alone!" she replied.

What are the chances, though, that three girls destined for stellar achievement would be born to a man convinced that geniuses are made?

"The Polgar sisters are a beautiful coincidence," says Ognjen Amidzic. A neuroscientist in Switzerland, Amidzic once aspired to become a professional chess player. He had the "rage to master" and even moved to Russia as a teenager to study intensively with grandmasters. But he reached a plateau at age 23 and had to quit. Reeling from his wrecked dreams, Amidzic went into cognitive science to understand what went wrong. Through the use of brain scans, he discovered a marked difference between grandmasters and highly trained amateur chess players like himself: When grandmasters play chess, the areas responsible for long-term memory and higher-level processing are activated.

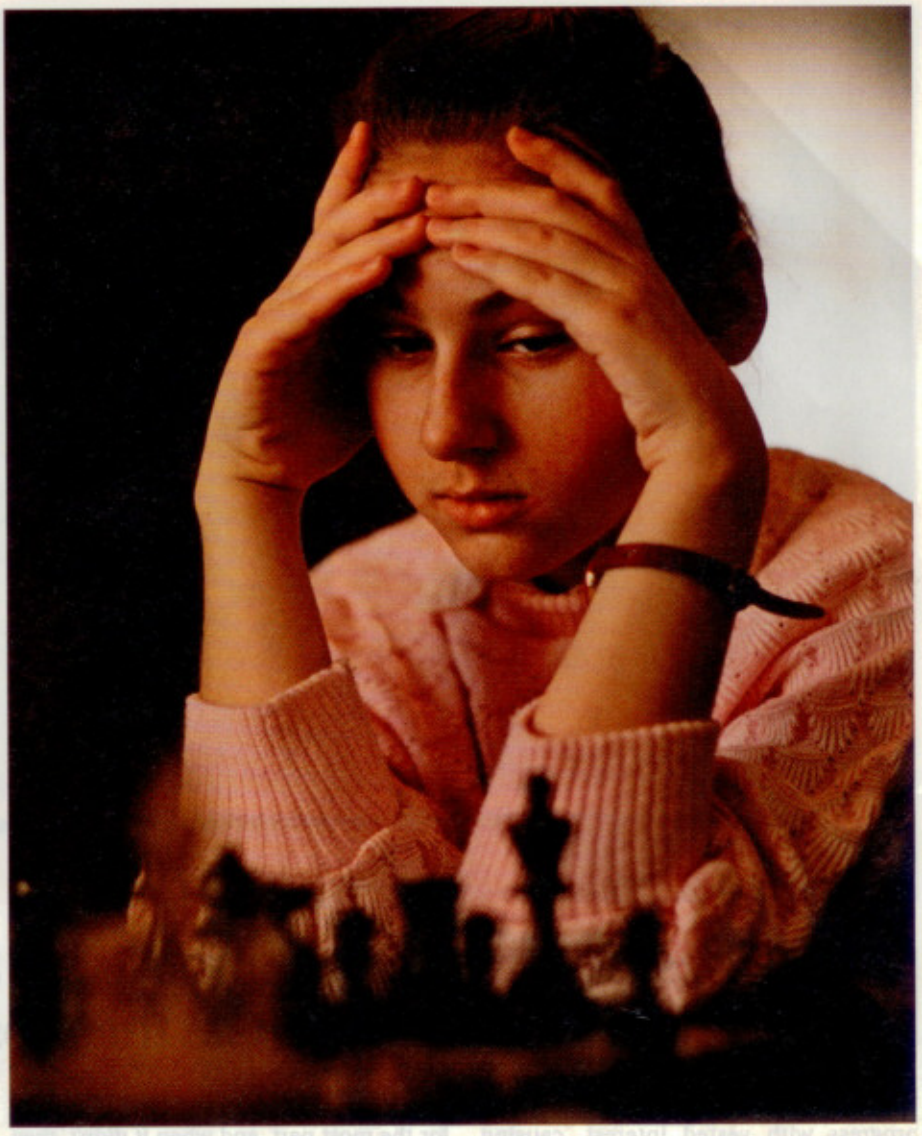
Chess titans have anywhere from 20,000 to 100,000 configurations of pieces, or patterns, committed to memory. They are able to quickly pull relevant information from this mammoth database. With a mere glance, a grandmaster can then figure out how the configuration in front of him is likely to play itself out.

Amateurs, by contrast, use short-term memory while playing chess. When they take in new information, it stays in the "small hard drive" of working memory without passing over into the "zip drive" of long-term memory. "Amateurs are overwriting things they've already learned," says Amidzic. "Can you imagine how frustrating that is!"

Amidzic's research suggests that chess whizzes are *born* with the tendency to process chess more through their frontal and parietal cortices, the areas thought to

PHOTO: PAUL TRUONG

JUDIT TERRIFIED OPPONENTS WITH LONG BOUTS OF CONCENTRATION, PUNCTUATED BY FIERCE GLANCES.



be responsible for long-term memory. Players whose medial temporal lobes are activated more will be consigned to mediocrity. He hasn't yet been able to follow children over time to see if their processing ratio of frontal-and-parietal cortices to medial temporal lobes indeed remains stable, but his retrospective analyses of older players show that their ratio corresponds to their highest historical chess rating, as would be expected if the ratio truly predicts chess performance. And he doesn't think that gender influences this proclivity. He recently scanned the brain of a 22-year-old female chess beginner and found her ratio to be far above average. If she sets her mind to it, Amidzic believes, the young woman has the potential to become a master-level player.

Amidzic's own chess-processing ratio, on the other hand, is about 50-50. "I'm the Salieri of the chess world," he says. "I'm talented enough to admire and also to know what I will not achieve. It's better to be ordinary and not know."

Susan, Sophia and Judit were all extraordinary at a game that was essentially thrust upon them. "It's like an arranged marriage that worked out well," says Josh Waitzkin, eight-time national chess champion and subject of the book and film

Judit Polgar is without a doubt the best female chess player the world has ever seen.

Searching for Bobby Fischer. But eventually, each sister grew into herself.

"The beauty of chess is that your personality can come across on the board," says Waitzkin. "Sophia was lighthearted, very funny and coquettish. As a teenager she was stunningly beautiful. Men adored her left and right, and she enjoyed that. She was a brilliant speed player, sharp as a tack. But she didn't work as hard as the others."

"Sophia is the artist of the family," Susan concedes. "She liked playing chess, but the analytic part was a burden for her. Chess is artistic when the pieces combine in a beautiful, original way. This is what held her back: She was striving too much to find beauty in the game. She didn't develop the other side—defending—which means accumulating small advantages." Sophia had a glorious moment in a 1989 Italian tournament when she finished ahead of five grandmasters in a record-breaking performance that became known as the "Sac of Rome." But she also had a reputation for making careless blunders. Other interests pulled at her attention.

"It's not that chess was too much for me; it was too little," Sophia says. She quit competing shortly before marrying an Israeli grandmaster (and orthopedic surgeon) in 1999. She studied painting and interior design and is now a full-time mom to sons Alon and Yoav. She was the sixth-best woman player in the world at the height of her career—an astounding exit point for the supposed "weak link" of the family. "I may go back to playing professionally," she says. "It's just, at this stage in my life, it's not the right time. I don't have any regrets. There's a lot I can thank chess for. I met my husband through chess."

Everyone agrees that Sophia was the most talented of the three, the one most likely to possess Amidzic's ideal processing ratio. "Everything came easiest to her," says Susan. "But she was lazy." People don't always derive the most enjoyment from the things they're best at. Adults tag children

PHOTO: YVES FORESTIER/CORBIS SYGMA

"Chess was too little for me," says Sophia, the sister everyone considers to be the most talented.

who show promise and watch their progress with vested interest, causing some kids to falter under the weight of great expectations. "The most gifted kids in chess fall apart," says Waitzkin. "They are told that they are winners, and when they inevitably run into a wall, they get stuck and think they must be losers."

Carol Dweck, professor of psychology at Stanford University, has found that people's beliefs about their abilities greatly influence their performance. When she praised children's intelligence after they succeeded at a nonverbal IQ test, they subsequently didn't want to take on a new challenge—they preferred to keep looking smart. When they were forced to complete a more difficult exercise, their performance plummeted. In contrast, some children were praised for "how" they did a task—for undergoing the process successfully. Most of the children in this group wanted to take on a tougher assignment afterward. Their performance improved for the most part, and when it didn't, they still enjoyed the experience.

Laszlo's staunch belief that talent is irrelevant may have protected his daughters from losing motivation when they failed. Defeat is inevitable as one moves up the chess ladder—as soon as a player achieves a higher rating, he or she is paired with stronger opponents. By keeping his daughters focused on the learning process, says Dweck, Laszlo also kept them from worrying about a precious gift they would have to sit and polish.

"The motivation for succeeding in chess was just there in the atmosphere of our house," says Sophia. "Susan was such a strong player that Judit and I wanted to be like her. But I could give up easier than Judit. I never worked as hard as she did."

Judit launches aggressive attacks as often as she creates elaborate defenses and "artistic" combinations. She may freely use emoticons in e-mail correspondence, but on the chessboard she is nothing short of macho. She is known for her laserlike focus and unladylike desire to crush her opponents. Kasparov once described chess as "the most violent of all sports." The only goal is to prove your superiority over the other guy, he said, and "women are weaker fighters." When Judit was 15, Pal Benko, a former Hungarian chess champion who coached the Polgar sisters, said of the tall teen with flowing red hair: "She is dangerous. She does not play chess like a woman."

"Judit was a slow starter, but very hard-working," says Susan. She was also born into a chess factory that had worked out its production kinks. She is, without a doubt, the best woman chess player the world has ever seen and at the age of 29 still has a shot at winning the world championship. Like Kasparov, Judit considers chess a sport more than an art or a science and dedicates every spare moment to training. Just as no

PHOTO: COURTESY OF THE POLGAR FAMILY

SUSAN PLAYS CHESS LEGEND BOBBY FISCHER, WHO CALLED WOMEN "WEAKIES" WHOM HE COULD DEFEAT WITHOUT A FULL CHESS ARMY.

player can capture the other side's king without sacrificing some important pieces, she is willing to give things up for chess glory. "If I felt a sacrifice was too much, though, I would stop," Judit says. "I feel happy with my life the way it is." She lives in Hungary with her husband, a veterinarian, and gave birth to her first child, a son, Oliver, last August.

Judit's face adorns billboards selling cellular phone service in Budapest, where she is a household name. "I believe that I am as tough as other women who are very successful and have had to prove their abilities over and over again," Judit says. "My colleagues have finally accepted me, but years ago they did treat me differently. Susan once said she never won against a healthy man. What she meant was that men always had some excuse after losing a game to a woman: 'It must have been my headache.'"

THERE EXIST some downsides to being a female chess player that Kasparov may not be aware of. "There were many times when I felt faint at matches because of menstrual cramps," Susan says. "When I was about 16, I did faint. I fell off the chair." A room filled with older male adversaries is a horrible place for a girl to experience Judy Blume-esque moments. Tournament games are often six hours long, and extra time for trips to the ladies' room is not allotted. In a game where every point is precious, even one minute of discomfort could jeopardize a woman's score, Susan insists. (Mother Nature may have equipped female chess players with a compensatory measure, however: The extra estrogen surging through a woman's body during menstruation aids concentration.)

Of course, women in chess face more public challenges as well. In 1986, at age 17, Susan was the first woman ever to qualify for the Men's World Championship. The world chess federation, FIDE, would not let her go. She was devastated. (The federation eventually changed its policy and renamed the tournament the World Championship.)

The Polgar sisters also had strained relations with the Hungarian chess federation, which wouldn't let them travel abroad for fear of defection. Laszlo ruffled bureaucratic feathers by encouraging his daughters to skip many of the all-women tournaments so they could spar with better-trained male players. But in 1988, when the girls were 19, 14 and 12, the federation allowed the family to go to Greece to compete in the Women's Olympiad. Playing together as a team, Susan, Sophia and Judit brought home the first win against the Soviets in history for Hungary, or as some joked, for "Polgaria." *The Independent* described the scene after the big victory: "The three girls of various sizes, a plump mother and Laszlo, gnomelike, with a cloth cap covering his balding head, they looked like the happy scene at the end of a fairy story."

"It was one of those few things that permanently changes your life," Susan says. "Until then, we had a lot of doubters and bad-wishers. After that, we became national heroes." Sponsorships poured in. "We could have a summer house and a car. It was almost like winning the lottery." Except, of course, that the Polgars had earned it.

"I wanted to be champion of the world," Susan says. "That won't ever happen now, but I was able to pave the way for Judit, and I'm very proud of that." (The gender divide in chess is such that even as the second-best woman in the world, Susan ranks in the hundreds overall.)

In 1994 Susan married an American computer programmer and left her cushy existence in Hungary to join him in Queens. "It was a downgrade for me," she says, with a hint of disappointment. "I would not have to work if I were in Hungary. Here, I am not at all set financially." When she was pregnant with her first son, Tommy, FIDE would not allow her to postpone defense of her title. She later sued the organization and won a settlement.

Susan stopped playing professionally for three years after the birth of sons Tommy in 1999 and Leeam in 2000. She considered the average three-week tournament too long to be away from her boys. "Children are a part of life," says Susan. "Because of that, there will always be fewer women playing chess than men. In many

Scanning for Champions

As a young man, Ognjen Amidzic, now a neuroscientist who runs a private research lab in Switzerland, watched his life's ambition—to become a professional chess player—slip out of reach. So he developed a simple test (the patent on which is pending) that he's convinced will reveal whether a child is destined for chess glory or would be better off packing up his pawns. "Chess is a great hobby for children," he says. "I just don't want people to waste their lives training for something they won't be able to do."

To take the test, a child plays one game against a computer while his brain is scanned to see whether he primarily uses his frontal and parietal cortices (the centers that are activated more when grandmasters play chess) or his medial temporal lobe (the center where the most activity takes place within trained amateurs' brains, according to Amidzic's research). Amidzic believes that this proportion is genetically predetermined and doesn't change much with practice. He uses this ratio to predict the exact chess rating at which a child will eventually peak.

Five years ago, Amidzic tested a boy whose ratio was above average at 60-40, but not in the grandmaster range of 80-20. "I told his father he should stop training," recalls Amidzic. "I just saw the boy recently, and his rating is exactly what I predicted. If he doesn't advance, I'll be sorry the father didn't take my advice."

Yet had Amidzic been saved from his own chess odyssey, he would never have landed in his current career. "Life is funny. I'm more famous for this than I would have been as a chess player." —*CF*

Despite the Polgars' glory, Laszlo's grandest plan was never realized.

professions, it's OK to be good, or very good; there is no need to be the best. But only the very best can make a living at chess. While it's tough for any new mother to go back to work, it's much tougher when you're trying to be world-class."

In 2002 her marriage fell apart, and she now faces the logistical and emotional challenges of single motherhood. She plays chess just a few hours a week with her sons, and is not nearly as methodical with them as Laszlo was with her. "It's hard without the support of both parents—my mother was there taking care of things. I can't always raise my sons the way I'd like.... It's a sad situation."

Susan did, however, realize a lifelong wish when she opened up her chess club in 1997. She is now chess's ambassador at large, promoting the game in schools, especially for girls. "Chess teaches children concentration, logic and creativity. It also teaches them to be responsible for their actions," Susan says. "There are no take-backs—just as in life. You must think before you move."

As Laszlo steered his daughters' careers, he kept one simple fact in mind: Most female chess players do not set their sights high enough. In order to achieve parity with their male counterparts, they, too, need a vision of world domination. Susan now wants to raise chess's stature in the United States to that of golf or tennis, and last year led the U.S. women's team to win a silver medal in the Olympiad in Spain. A live television broadcast of the Anna Kournikova and Tiger Woods of the chess circuit facing off as Budweiser banners wave in the background is hard to envision. But 32 years ago, when Laszlo first taught Susan chess, it was just as difficult to imagine a woman posing a legitimate threat to any male chess champion.

This summer, for the first time in 10 years, the sisters will appear together in an exhibition in Las Vegas. Susan, Sophia and Judit will take on 100 opponents simultaneously. In relay style, Susan will make the first move on each board, Sophia will follow with the second, Judit will make the third and so on.

Laszlo harbored one final, grandiose hope that never came to pass. "About 15 years ago," says Susan, "we had a sponsor, a very nice Dutch billionaire named Joop van Oosterom. He was fascinated with the idea of whether genius is the result of nature or nurture. He wanted to enable my parents to adopt three boys from a developing country and raise them exactly as they raised us. My father really wanted to do it, but my mother talked him out of it. She understood that life is not only about chess, and that all the rest would fall on her lap." PT