



OpinionJournal

from THE WALL STREET JOURNAL Editorial Page

[PRINT WINDOW](#) [CLOSE WINDOW](#)

LEISURE & ARTS

UTD, pg. 2 →

Sport of Kings (and Queens)

Why so few women chess masters? America's top female player ponders the question.

BY BARBARA D. PHILLIPS

Tuesday, March 1, 2005 12:01 a.m.

FOREST HILLS, N.Y.--Don't let appearances deceive you. Susan Polgar, the pretty, gracious and friendly 35-year-old mother of two boys who sat down with me recently over cookies and tea, is a killer at chess. In fact, Ms. Polgar is currently the top-ranked woman player (and No. 11 overall) in the U.S., and No. 1 among women on the active list (and No. 199 overall) in the world, according to FIDE (Fédération Internationale des Échecs). "When I was more active, I was ranked among the top 100 overall in the world," she notes. "There are only two women that have ever done this, and that is my sister Judit and I."

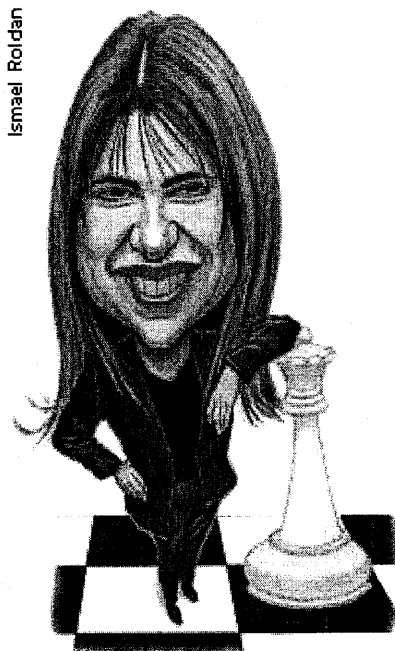
Known for her aggressive moves on the board, Ms. Polgar has been playing competitive chess from the age of four and breaking down barriers almost her entire life--all without sacrificing her femininity. "I was aware of the uniqueness of my situation," she says. "As a young girl I could never understand why people even doubt that women could think or play chess like men do. Looking back, it is really shocking that only 20-30 years ago a large percentage of people just honestly could not imagine that it would be possible."

But Ms. Polgar is not someone who sees the two sexes as the same. "I think women are built differently and approach life very differently," she told me. And in a 2002 column for ChessCafe.com, she took on what might now be called the Lawrence Summers question. "If we talk about pure abilities and skills, I believe there should be no reason why women cannot play as well as men," Ms. Polgar wrote, but she went on to list various reasons that more female players have not reached chess's highest ranks--among them their biological clocks, narrower opportunities to compete, cultural and gender bias, and the fact that "for years, women have set much lower standards" for themselves in chess than men. "If you do not put in the same work, you can't compete at the same level," she said then.

Ms. Polgar's first coach was her father, Laszlo, and she later was joined in competition by younger sisters Sofia and Judit. He emphasized "visualization, pattern recognition and speed. We learned to play blindfold and blitz chess at an early age and solved thousands of chess puzzles in our childhood," she says. Think of the siblings as the chess world's Williams sisters, with Gabor-sister accents--the three were born and raised in Hungary, though Susan now lives in Forest Hills and Sofia in Israel.

Susan Polgar's book "A World Champion's Guide to Chess," co-written by Paul Truong, will be released March 8 by Random House Puzzles & Games, and a book on chess tactics is scheduled for 2006. Her instructional DVD series will be available later this year. Yet another book, her "Breaking Through: How the Polgar Sisters Changed the Game of Chess," also co-written by Mr. Truong, is

due out from Everyman Chess in May. And in June all three Polgar sisters will appear at the Las Vegas International Chess Festival.



Susan, who speaks seven languages, now sees herself as an ambassador for chess in America. Study after study has "shown that children who are exposed to the game are ahead of their peers who are not involved with the royal game. Chess is a wonderful tool to increase concentration, self-control, patience, imagination, creativity, logical thinking and many more important and useful life skills," she says.

Her Polgar Chess Center welcomes players of all ages, from tots to retirees. This queen of chess says the center, which opened in 1997 and moved to its current location in a ground-floor apartment on Queens Boulevard in Forest Hills last year, is the "only full-fledged chess club in New York," operating seven days a week. She lectures there on Thursday nights.

Two years ago, she founded her nonprofit Susan Polgar Foundation to promote chess to young people nationwide, with a special focus on girls. This year, more than 3,000 of them will participate in regional qualifying events for the second Susan Polgar National Invitational for Girls. The University of Texas at Dallas will award a full four-year scholarship to the highest finishing player who has not yet graduated from high school when the tournament is held in Phoenix this August. She also is looking for support, both from donations and from politicians, for her foundation's Excel Through Chess program, which aims to introduce chess to every child in every school to help them do better in their studies and in life.

And if that isn't enough to keep Ms. Polgar occupied, she writes regular columns not only for ChessCafe.com but for Chess Life magazine.

Looking back, she says one of her biggest disappointments in the sport was in 1986. After qualifying for the Men's World Championship, the first woman--girl, really--ever to do so, she was not allowed to participate. But Zsuzsa (as Susan is also known) persevered and would have her share of victories. They included "breaking the gender barrier and becoming the first woman to ever earn the overall (men's) International Grandmaster title. Winning 10 medals in the Chess Olympiad, with five gold, four silver and one bronze. Winning four Women's World Championships and being the only World Champion, male or female, to win the triple crown in chess--World Blitz, usually each player has five minutes for the entire game; Rapid Championship, usually 25 minutes for each player per game; and Classical Chess Championship, where the games usually last six to seven hours. The reason this is so special is because it is like winning the 100-meter dash, 800-meter race and marathon, or winning tennis on all three surfaces....Most players are good at one and not at the others."

And her latest victory? "After a more than eight-year break from international competition, I made a triumphant return to the Chess Olympiad, this time representing the U.S." That was in October of last year, when she picked up four of those 10 shiny objects in her collection. "I am proud to win the first-ever medals for our Women's Chess team--two gold and two silver."

Did I mention that just before that, in Lindsborg, Kan., she tied seven-time World Champion Anatoly Karpov in "The Clash of the Titans," which was the first officially sanctioned match between a male and female World Champion?

Some of her clashes have mixed the bitter with the sweet. In 1999, FIDE stripped Ms. Polgar of her

classical Women's World Championship title in a dispute over the timing, location and purse of the event in which she was to defend her 1996 crown. She calls it "a bitter moment in my life." But the feisty player fought back, suing FIDE. In September 2001, she won a \$25,000 judgment from the International Court of Sports Arbitration in Switzerland. "Basically, I got the minimal monetary compensation, which I consider like a moral victory, because the courts take so long that by the time they decided, it was too late...by then they had another World Championship."

She had planned to take some time off from international competition to focus on her family, anyway, but "the break would not have been that long if I had had a chance to defend my title at the time," she says. "Then it would have been just two, three years. That was really the problem. They wouldn't let me defend my title and I got kind of upset."

Ms. Polgar says her comeback at the 2004 Olympiad in Spain "was fun." And she flew home to Forest Hills expecting the mainstream American press to be buzzing about Team USA's strong showing and her own return to the chess limelight. Instead, she was greeted with near silence. But if anyone can raise the profile of American chess--and women in chess--it is Susan Polgar, the self-appointed envoy from the sport of kings and queens, bishops, knights, rooks and pawns.

"Only the very top women players can make a relatively decent income from chess. The funny thing is, many sponsors just do not realize that they can get a lot more mileage sponsoring women's events. Just look at tennis. I believe that CBS put the women's final at 8 at night! That was a brilliant idea. Any event I have done in the past always brought a full house." As for people who think chess isn't, well, telegenic, she believes that "even as a competitive sport it can be very, very attractive, just like golf is, or billiards, or tennis. It is a matter of our having our own heroes and presenting that to the mainstream media, just like the World Poker Tour is such a success. It's a matter of marketing it the right way."

Even celebrity chess tournaments? "That's one of the things I'm working on, actually," she says, noting that Will Smith, Madonna, Woody Allen and "even Arnold Schwarzenegger" play. "I met him once, but now he's so busy."

So, too, is Susan Polgar.

Ms. Phillips is deputy Leisure & Arts features editor of The Wall Street Journal.

Copyright © 2005 Dow Jones & Company, Inc. All Rights Reserved.

[PRINT WINDOW](#) [CLOSE WINDOW](#)