

# National Report

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## On Boards Without Boys, Girls Reassert Their Power

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By JODI WILGOREN

CHICAGO, May 15 — Suleidy Quesada, 14, said her chess coach has taught her a special strategy that goes beyond mastering openings and endgames: "I look straight in their eyes, I touch my hair, I lick my lips," explained Suleidy, who has been playing four years. "If you're losing and ask for a draw, they say yes."

But at a tournament here this weekend, Suleidy took a different tack. As the clock ticked away the other player's time, she whispered compliments about her opponent's Pink Panther T-shirt, asking where she got it and how much it cost. "She gave me all the information, and she lost about three or four minutes," a triumphant Suleidy said afterward.

Suleidy, a ninth grader in Miami, was among 209 players who traveled from 23 states for the All-Girls National Chess Championships, a rare pink-and-ponytailed respite in the testosterone universe of checkmate. In its second year, the tournament is

### A chess tournament tries to check a gender gap.

one of several new efforts to promote chess among girls and women, who remain woefully underrepresented in an ancient, vaguely militaristic game that is widely seen as an intellectual badge.

Nine of chess's 950 international grandmasters are female, and there is just one woman, Judit Polgar of Hungary, ranked among the world's top 100 players (she is No. 8). Of the United States Chess Federation's 82,500 members, 8.5 percent are female; among the adults, it is 2.3 percent. At this weekend's tournament, more than half the players were age 10 or younger, and the teenage divisions had to be combined: just 13 girls ages 17 and 18 signed up, fewer than the 15 trophies set aside for each group.

"Girls by the age, let's say, of 11 or 12 are dropping out of chess, because they always compete against boys," said Michael Khodakovsky, president of the Kasparov Chess Foundation, the tournament's sponsor. "We have women who run companies, we have women who serve in the Army, so it's not impossible for them to play chess on the same level with men. The only thing is, we need to create an environment for them so that we

can truly build up their stamina to compete equally."

The push to level the board comes amid national debate about whether there are inherent gender differences in aptitude for math and science. Male dominance in a game that does not depend on physical strength or speed remains a mystery. Players, parents and chess promoters say they see differences in play that are surprisingly stereotypical: boys are always on the attack and care above all about winning, while girls focus more on defense and admire the art of certain positions.

At last year's girls' gathering, veteran spectators were stunned when a player, upon hearing "checkmate," sincerely complimented the winner on a "beautiful" finish, something few could imagine in mixed play.

In part, the gender imbalance can be explained by history: men have been playing chess for 2,000 years, women only since the late 19th century. Beatriz Marinello, who is the first female president of the United States Chess Federation, said some clubs she played in as a child lacked even a girls' bathroom, so "you get the message that you're not as welcome."

Indeed, Mary Jo Kane, director of the Tucker Center for Research on Girls and Women in Sport, at the University of Minnesota, said generations of social conditioning that steered girls away from games with winners and losers outweighed any genetic disposition.

"The whole system is set up to discourage girls from being overly competitive, especially against males, and a true man, by definition, is somebody who wants to win at all costs," said Ms. Kane, a sociologist. "For boys, high-level competition is about take no prisoners, and let us not forget, girls are not rewarded for having a take-no-prisoners mentality, girls who have a take-no-prisoners mentality are punished."

But some worry that separate and unequal tournaments like the one here, which everyone acknowledged was weaker than mixed events in skill level, only reinforce girls' second-class status in the chess world.

"It's nice for the girls socially, to meet and get to see each other," Ms. Marinello said. "But it has to be pointed out to them that this is not the way to go. They have to be willing and able to play in competitions with boys. This is real life, this is what happens. We grow up, we become professionals, we go out in the work fields, and we have to do our best."

Here in Chicago, games were played on chess boards autographed by Susan Polgar, Judit's sister and the top-ranked woman in the United

States, who started a separate girls' tournament last year with the prize of a four-year scholarship to the University of Texas at Dallas. Jennifer Shahade — Ms. Polgar's teammate on last year's United States team at the international Chess Olympiad, the first in history to take a medal, the silver — signed T-shirts, books, and boards.

Before play began, F. Leon Wilson gave a simple pep talk to the four girls from his KnightMare chess club in Columbus, Ohio: "Ladies, I want you to be aggressive."

Normally, Mr. Wilson said, "I don't encourage them to be aggressive, I

encourage them to be strategic," but the girls' championship "is more of a strategic tournament," so he saw aggressiveness as the key.

Kathe Telingator of Chicago recalled a tournament last year in which her daughter, Devon Mitchell, said she agreed to a draw with an older boy because she "didn't want him to have to tell his friends he got beaten by a second-grade girl." Ms. Telingator told Devon that was kind, but unnecessary. "Now I care more about winning," said Devon, 9.

But when Ms. Telingator called parents of girls in Devon's chess club to form a team for this tournament,

none was interested. "There's less competitive push for girls in this kind of endeavor than for boys," she said.

Many players said that they were the only girls in their schools' chess clubs, and that their female friends were too busy with ballet or soccer to learn a game they saw as boring.

Players said the competition here was much less intense than at the SuperNationals last month in Nashville, where more than 5,000 students played but girls were so scarce they were unlikely to face one another.

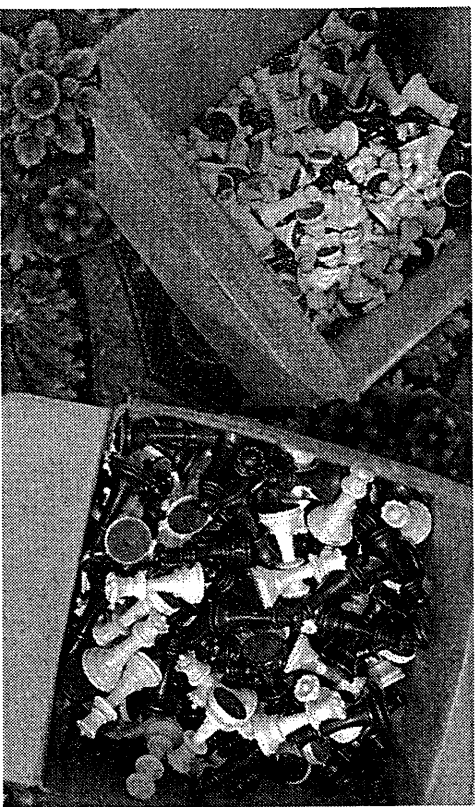
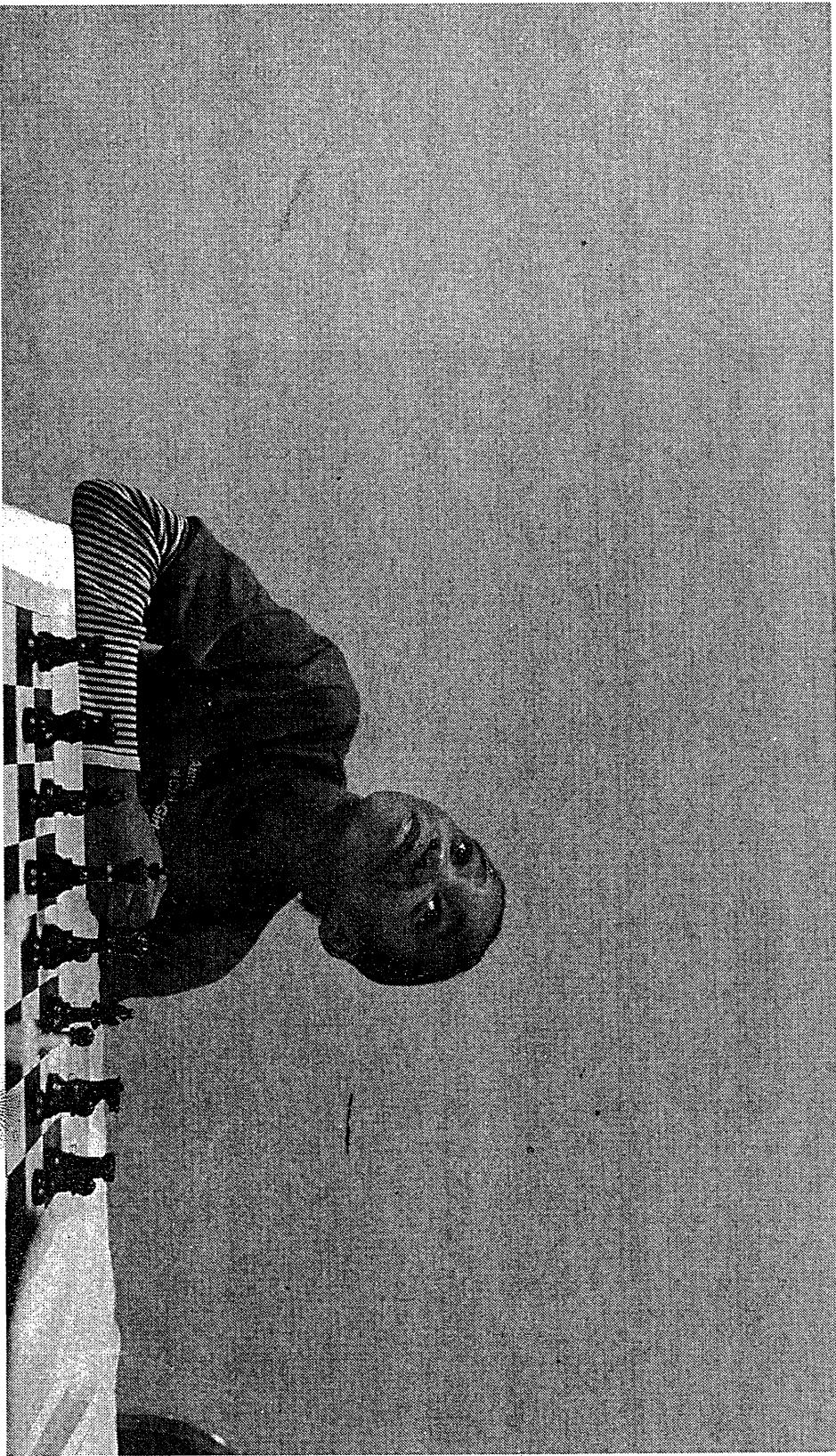
Walking out of the game room after the first round on Saturday, Kris-

ten Walker, a 15-year-old from Detroit, turned to the girl she had just beaten in 19 moves, and asked, "You want to play me again, for fun?"

Alex Korves, an eighth grader from Manhattan, said that in Nashville, the hallways were filled with boys roughhousing, and that "when they find out you're on the opposing team, they're nasty."

"This is calmer," Alex said. "It's like, 'O.K., we played a game. O.K., you lost, I won. Want to go get some ice cream?'"

With that, she and some girls from Miami, including the flirtatious Suleidy, headed off to find some.



Mhayang Diop, top, a member of a girls' chess team in New York, was one of 209 players from 23 states who competed over the weekend in the second annual All-Girls National Chess Championships in Chicago. Nery Quesada of Miami, above right, watched her opponent make a move.

Photographs by Kenneth Dickerman for The New York Times