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# Amon: The Chess King

Amon says he wants his achievements to inspire chess players in Africa who aspire to become Grandmasters. He wants them to know that despite the odds and lack of resources, they can still achieve their goals.

**By Omar Bourne**

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## [International]

It takes lots of professional training to become a world-class chess player – an experienced personal trainer, a top-notch training partner, chess books. Amon Simutowe had none of these.

Instead, the 25-year-old from Zambia had only the monthly British chess magazines his brother, Solomon, mailed him from his university in England, while Amon was growing up in the Southern African country.



Those magazines were enough for the sharp-minded boy. Today, Amon is on pace to make history, and is just months away from formally becoming the first Black Grandmaster champion from Black Africa.

His journey began 15 years ago in the small town of Ndola, a town on the Copperbelt Province of Zambia, where the then 10-year-old boy had one goal in mind: finding chess opponents.

“My brother was my daily opponent,” Amon recalls in an interview with *The Black Star News*. “After he went away to study, I would go around the neighborhood searching for opposition.”

Amon, who’s mother passed away before his second birthday, concedes that earlier on, his father, whose name is also Solomon, was dubious about him pursuing chess as a viable profession. “My father was concerned because I was spending significant time on chess,” he tells *The Black Star*. “He imagined it would distract me from my academic interests.”

Amon says it was his speedy progression and early success that played a role in helping his father support his chess interests. “I improved quite fast,” he adds. “Within two months I was quite good.” Amon’s chess skills developed so quickly that he became the “unofficial champion of the neighborhood,” defeating opponents who were three times older than him.

He inherited the nickname “pawn”, the smallest piece on the chessboard, because he was the smallest chess player in his town. He found inspiration in the occasional setbacks. “The good thing about me was that I was not afraid of losing,” he says. “When I lost, I found a way to not lose again. Many people would want to give up when they lose, but I was determined.”

Amon’s determination was evident in his work ethic, because on the rare occasion when he did lose, he would play an opponent over and over again until he won, even if it took weeks. That determination paid off. At age 13, he became the Under-21 National Chess Champion, and one year later, at 14, he was crowned Zambia’s senior National Chess Champion. He also tied for second place at the 2000 World Junior Championship.

Amon’s journey to chess stardom has been by no means an easy one. He says that one of the biggest drawbacks of being a chess player from Africa is the lack of resources.

Most African chess players have little exposure to the world-class resources needed to even become an average player at best; forget about becoming a Grandmaster. Unlike their European counterparts, who enjoy sponsorship, including from well-funded chess federations, African players are essentially on their own.

Entertaining the thought of competing for Grandmaster status, as an African native, was a daunting and somewhat unrealistic task, given the odds. Despite the many obstacles Amon had to face, he remained confident that he could accomplish his dream. "I was really passionate about becoming a Grandmaster, and I decided to pursue it," he continues, "I had to work hard, believe and have faith in my abilities."

In order to become a Grandmaster, Amon needed to attain three Grandmaster norms—chess results required to qualify for an official title. He attained two Grandmaster norms at the 2000 African Championship, three years prior to his enrollment at the [University of Texas at Dallas](#) in the spring of 2003, where he attended on a chess scholarship.

He secured his third Grandmaster norm with a victory in the Euwe Stimulans tournament in the Netherlands last August, just months after he graduated with a bachelors of science degree in economics and finance in December 2006.

Amon defeated a world-class field that included three chess legends: Nona Gaprindashvili, the first female Grandmaster and woman's chess champion for more than 15 years; Oscar Panno, the first great South American-born chess player; and Fridrik Olafsson, a former world championship candidate.

The chess prodigy says he wants his achievements to inspire chess players in Africa who aspire to become Grandmasters. He wants them to know that despite the odds and lack of resources, they can still achieve their goals. "Before they give up they can say 'hey, Amon did it without a trainer,'" he says. "I think that's a very helpful accidental part of my achievement. To be an inspiration to others—chess has helped me a lot, it has compelled me."

The young chess sensation has devoted some of his free time to promoting chess around the world. He's played in tournaments in the Caribbean to inspire up-and-coming chess players, he's visited orphanages in Zambia, and he's volunteered as a chess teacher to grade school and high school students in Dallas, Texas. He even uses the analogy of chess to that of every day life for those students who may be disinterested in the sport.

"If you think of life, we're all playing chess," Amon says, and "winning is if your life is turning out how you want it to be. You make a plan in life, and when you reach your dream and become successful, you can say, checkmate."

Amon currently has 2460 Elo points on the January 2008 Elo chess ratings list. He is 40 tournament points away from the 2500 Elo points needed to secure his official Grandmaster title. Amon will be participating in a three-tournament tour across Asia and Europe during the next few months, and is confident he should achieve the remaining 40 tournament points in two to four tournaments by February 2008.

As he puts it: "A good performance would gain me 10 to 30 points per tournament, so the Grandmaster title is basically a done mission."

When Amon eventually makes that final chess move, on his way to what would be the climax of a successful 15-year journey, not only will he become the first Black Grandmaster from Black Africa, but he will achieve one of his dreams: Checkmate.

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