

Bellevue girl takes world chess title in Russia

Women have struggled to crack the elite

By ERIK LACITIS
Seattle Times

SEATTLE — So here is how Naomi Bashkansky, 13, explains her opening moves in a chess game.

She is sitting in the dining room of her family home in Bellevue, Washington. Down the hall is her bedroom, which along one wall has a whole bunch of chess tournament trophies.

Along another wall is shelving containing toys from when she was much, much younger. Barbie dolls. Little horses. That's in the past.

"You try to get in a better position," Naomi says about the opening moves, "so that you keep crushing the opponent, and squeezing them."

Crushing and squeezing your opponent. Such descriptions from an eighth-grader. But that's chess.

And that's how Naomi won first place in Girls Under 13 at the weeklong World School Chess Championship that ended this month in Sochi, Russia.

And that's how you compete in a game in which there are no women currently in the Top 100 in the World Chess Federation rankings. Only a handful of women have cracked that elite list.

These days, chess in the U.S. doesn't command anywhere near the coverage it had when Bobby Fischer in 1972 mesmerized the world with his brilliance and dramatic flair in beating Boris Spassky for the world title.

Still, the U.S. Chess Federation does have 85,000 members and sponsors 10,000 tournaments a year. A girl like Naomi represents the future of chess here.

Sometimes Naomi gets too aggressive.

A grandmaster's advice

Her coach is Gregory Serper, a grandmaster, the high-



U.S. Chess Federation
Naomi Bashkansky, a Bellevue, Washington, teenager, competes internationally in chess.

est title attainable other than world champion, and held for life. At the heart of earning that title is winning, and winning a lot, against strong opponents. There are currently 1,598 male and 33 female grandmasters. The explanations for this disparity have created considerable controversy in the chess world.

Serper meets with Naomi weekly for two hours, and also uses Skype to give her advice when she's at international tournaments. In Sochi, Naomi drew her first three of nine games, and the coach had to quiet down her game.

In nine games, Naomi earned first place with four draws and five wins.

Serper writes a column for chess.com. Last year he wrote about girls and chess:

"Now tell me, who is going to succeed in the cutthroat world of business and chess? Wasn't Bobby Fischer talking about 'the killer instinct' you

need to have in order to thrive in chess?"

"So girls, you want to beat the competition in chess (or business)? Listen carefully, it is very simple, just be as aggressive as possible!"

But Skyping with Naomi at the Sochi tournament, Serper told her that there is aggressive and there is aggressive.

"She's very determined," he says. "I told her, 'Young lady, hold your horses. You're too aggressive. You cannot attack from any position just to attack. You need to prepare your attack.'"

Private coaching

It's not unusual for striving young chess players to have a private coach.

If you know of kids in AAU basketball programs or select club soccer, you have an idea of the effort and expense in getting them to an elite level.

Naomi's dad, Guy Bashkansky, a software engineer,

figures that twice a year for the past five years, the family of four (although their older son sometimes stays home) has spent \$4,000 to \$8,000 each time to travel to not only Sochi but to Brazil, Mexico and Greece for Naomi's tournaments.

"What else can we do with the money?" says the dad. "We make it our vacation. We go about town. We feel a vacation without chess is not interesting."

The dad blogs all their chess travels, obviously proud of Naomi's accomplishments.

Naomi's mom, Ludmila Bashkansky, a civil engineer who stays at home, is the one who finds local chess tournaments for the daughter, and drives her to them.

She's also the one who researches future opponents and finds online games that they've played so that Naomi can prepare for them. That's how it is in the chess world. "Everybody is preparing against you," says Ludmila.

Because it was held in Sochi, players from Russia or the former Soviet Union were heavily represented at the tournament. But chess has been a passion in that region since the tsarist days.

Then, for the Soviets, it was a way to show off the country's intellectual talents. Passionate chess players included Lenin and Stalin.

In Armenia, President Serzh Sargsyan is also head of the nation's chess federation. Chess is compulsory in schools; grandmasters are salaried and top players get the same adulation as pop stars.

Serper is originally from what is now Uzbekistan and he lives in Bellevue.

Immigrant family

The Bashkanskys themselves migrated from Russia to Israel (where Naomi and her brother, Ethan, 18, were born) and then to the United States. A good number of kids playing chess competitively in the U.S. are from recent immigrant families.

It is a family of very, very

smart people. At age 18, Ethan already is a senior at the University of Washington, majoring in math. Naomi is in the gifted program at Bellevue's Odle Middle School.

The parents say that they themselves aren't particularly good chess players.

It was Ethan who first began playing chess at age 5, back when the family lived in Israel. He saw older kids at a chess club and thought they were playing checkers, with which he was familiar.

At home, the then-kindergartner used a basic chess manual to teach himself.

In first grade he joined the chess club; "Pretty soon I was beating everyone," he says.

Then, when Naomi was 4 or 5, she began playing chess, sometimes with her brother.

Ethan remembers the emotions the game carried for some kids.

"For me that was not the case, but I've seen kids burst into tears over losing a game," he says.

Naomi says that she has shed tears after a loss.

The British journalist Dominic Lawson, an avid chess player, wrote in 2010 in Standpoint Magazine:

"There is no game of wits at which losing is more unpleasant than chess. Any game involving cards or dice involves chance. Not so with chess. Everything is visible."

"One reason why many strong players give up the game they love is that they increasingly find that the agony of losing so much outweighs the ecstasy of winning that they almost dread sitting down at the board to play."

Ethan dropped chess when he entered college at a young age.

It's not uncommon for young players to quit competitive chess when college takes up their time, says Serper.

Naomi says that also may happen with her.

Disparity controversy

The chess world has many titles, and there are also categories just for women. It's an acknowledgment of disparity in how, using the same criteria, women rank considerably lower.

It is a topic of controversy.

In 2015, Nigel Short, an English grandmaster, wrote in the magazine New in Chess, "Men and women's brains are hard-wired very differently, so why should they function in the same way?"

He concluded, "It would be wonderful to see more girls playing chess, and at a higher level, but rather than fretting about inequality, perhaps we should just gracefully accept it as a fact."

That resulted in Short being described as "sexist" and a "Neanderthal."

Maybe, says Naomi, the points difference is because women play less aggressively than men.

Although with Serper's influence, that's certainly not the case with Naomi.

Her goal, she says, is to earn a Woman Grandmaster title (there are so few women in the general grandmaster category open to all that one was created just for women) or International Master (a lesser title than grandmaster) by the end of high school.

That'll be a big leap from being ranked No. 24 in the U.S. for girls and boys age 13.

"It takes time. It's all about opportunity," says Serper.

She has literally spent thousands of hours on the game.

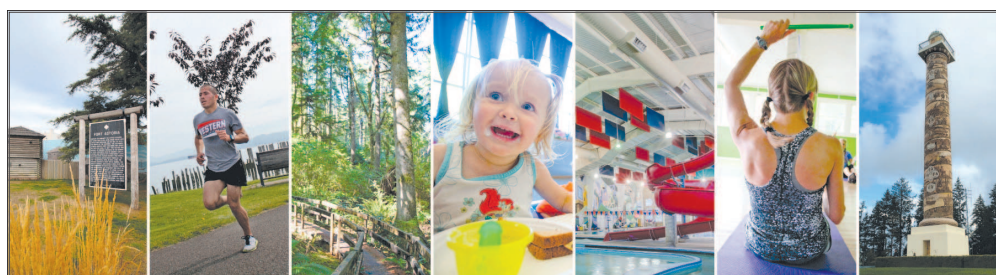
She says, "I just love playing it. I mean, it is a game. It's a game that requires strategy and calculations and precision. I'm good at it. I can play near-perfectly in my better games. What's not to like?"

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