

Chess champ can't keep a poker face

Lowell student reigns in circuit

By Mike Lipka, Globe Correspondent | August 31, 2006

LOWELL -- The chess world is one of chivalry and royalty, of stern faces and seriousness. And as much as Lowell High School sophomore Jessica Wamala tries to fit in, she cannot.

She is certainly good enough: She recently won the title of the top under-21 female player in Massachusetts. It's just that when the 15-year-old Jessica is beating you, she's unable to hold back her big smile.

"It's really rude," she said with a smile. "I feel bad. I really try not to."

Wamala has had a lot of smiles to contain over her nine-year chess career, and just talking about chess leaves her beaming. For her, the game is about fun. ("I never really got so bummed out playing chess," she said.) And that's just the way her father, Severine, wants it.

But Severine Wamala almost didn't learn how to play chess in the first place. While he was an undergraduate at Makerere University in his native Uganda, his roommate tried to teach him, but it was no easy task; Wamala was fervently devoted to his studies, determined to avoid another distraction.

"I told him, 'Don't teach me chess because I don't even have time,'" he said.

Wamala, who traveled to the United States in 1988 to work toward a doctorate at the University of Massachusetts at Lowell, laughed at the story last week. He said that once his roommate twisted his arm, it didn't take long to realize its benefits with problem-solving and mental exercise.

"When I started playing chess," Wamala said, "I stopped worrying about my education, and I just did it."

So, as soon as his children were old enough to learn, he taught them. Jessica, at 6, and Jacob, at 7, quickly embraced the game, engaging in countless head-to-head battles. When Severine wasn't away playing at tournaments, he'd play them both at the same time (what chess players call a "simul"), beating them both easily.

Things have changed since then.

"My Dad doesn't want to play me anymore," Jessica said, explaining that she surpassed him in rating about a year ago, not long after Jacob got better than his father. The youngest Wamala, 10-year-old Youwana, probably won't be far behind.

For Jessica, chess went from hobby to obsession at age 9, when her father took her and Jacob to one of his adult tournaments. Jessica, who said she was "just happy to be there," lost all of her games, but her father told her to just keep playing.

"We had this computerized chess board, and I'd play the computer. Then, I'd go over the game and see where I went wrong," Jessica said. "Once I started seeing patterns and stuff, my rating would go up."

Chess ratings range from zero to around 2,800, which is super grandmaster status achieved by only a handful of people in history. When you break 2,000, you're considered an expert -- a status Jacob Wamala has reached. Jessica is a notch below, between 1,800 and 1,999 as a Class-A player, but she continues to cut down on her mistakes.

Whatever their rating, the Wamala children have always dominated the competition (Jessica cannot even put a number on how many tournaments she's won). They started out playing in adult tournaments, but soon afterward, their father got them involved in scholastic tournaments, which give out trophies to their top finishers. After a few years of scholastics, an entire room of the Wamala house was devoted to trophies.

Jessica's most recent success was last month at the Susan Polgar National Invitational for Girls in Oak Brook, Ill., where Jessica finished sixth out of more than 50 competitors. She earned the spot by winning the Massachusetts under-21 girls title.

At such a high level it can be a grind to outthink your opponent, she said, since you have to go into the contest with a plan, react to your opponent's method, and constantly be thinking four or more moves ahead.

“Everybody reads the same books, basically, and knows the same openings,” Wamala said. “So, say I know that he's gonna do something with his knight or king; well I have to think of, ‘Oh, what should I do against that?’ before he plays it; so then, as soon as he plays it, I already know what I'm going to do.”

That type of mindset only comes from years of studying tactics and reading chess books written by grand masters. Wamala said that, especially during the summer, she can dive into her chess research and not even realize that hours go by. During the school year, she typically spends two hours a day on chess.

“I'm good at it, so [my friends] can't be like, ‘You're a nerd,’” Wamala said. “They say it all the time, but they don't mean it.”

They certainly didn't question her play when she once brought home a \$1,500 cash prize from a tournament. Wamala used to earn smaller prizes -- in other words, lunch money -- from some of those friends back in elementary school. Her classmates knew of her reputation and would often challenge her to a \$1 game during indoor recess.

“I would always do the four-move checkmate, because they'd never know it,” Wamala said with a laugh.

Now she's playing at a much higher level, playing weeklong summer tournaments and keeping herself busy with local club play during the year. She recently beat a player with a 2,200 rating in Marlborough, maintaining equal footing for a long time before stealing a pawn and rattling the player into more mistakes.

Wamala said she loves the tactical aspect of the game the most, and even has a signature move. Her favorite finish is the “smothered mate,” when you trap a king in a corner behind his own pawns with your queen and knight.

“When there's tactics, you have to think of a combination that's like eight moves deep,” she said. “When I think of those, and when I sack a piece, that's the best. When I sack a queen for a knight and checkmate them, that's the best feeling.”

Wamala is a part of the elite, accelerated Latin Lyceum program at Lowell High, where her father is the head of the math department. She recently reached a height of 6 feet, and she hopes to play varsity basketball for her school this winter.

For chess, she has a sponsor who pays travel expenses for nationwide tournaments and camps, giving Jessica a way to see the country and stimulate her mind.

And, of course, smile.