

Fremont girl is a chess star at age 7

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Alisha Chawla

Alisha Chawla isn't much for dolls, but she loves the children's book, "A Little Princess," and adores the queen.

How fitting for Fremont's 7-year-old little princess of chess, the highest-rated female player for her age in Northern California, who is rapidly becoming one of the best in the country.

Alisha is adorable. She's sweet and petite. Like most 7-year-olds, she's precocious at times and shy at others. For her first newspaper interview, she pretty much stuck to one-word answers and required frequent eye-glance reassurance from her mother.

But on a chess board, particularly wielding her favorite piece — the queen — Little Miss Chawla quickly transforms into a tiger. She moves the pieces authoritatively and thumps them hard onto the board wherever she places them. It's intimidating, even for an adult sports columnist who challenged her to a game. "I like to win," Alisha said with an innocent but confident smile.

A large shelf in her room proves that she's already won a lot. It's loaded with trophies, and she quickly removed her piano recital and softball trophies to display just the ones she's accumulated playing chess — 22 by her count. It looked like more.

One of the largest trophies in Alisha's growing collection came less than two weeks ago, when she tied for first in her age group at the Las Vegas International Chess Festival,

winning four of five games. Her achievement landed her a spot in the prestigious Susan Polgar National Invitational For Girls at Texas Tech in July, an event that will bring together the country's top young female players.

Alisha's biggest honor, however, was the invitation she recently received to participate in the World Youth Chess Championships in Vung Tau, Vietnam, Oct. 19 to 31. It's an unprecedented development for the renowned Weibel Elementary School chess program, which attracts more than 200 K-6 students every year to learn and play the most cerebral of strategy games.

"We've had some fine, highly ranked players who placed high at the state and national levels in the past," said Dr. Alan Kirshner, an Ohlone College history/political science professor who has run the Weibel program since 1988. "But this is the first time we've ever had any of our players invited to a world championship — male or female — so it's very, very exciting for us."

The Bay Area boasts some of the best preteen chess talent in the world. In March, 9-year-old Nicholas Nip of San Francisco became the youngest master in history by reaching a 2200 rating, an accomplishment that the late Bobby Fischer did not achieve until he was 13. In the East Bay, 7-year-old Tanuj Vasudeva of Newark tied for first in the Lerner National Elementary Championships in May, an event in which Chawla finished 57th but was the second-highest female finisher.

The United States Chess Federation lists Vasudeva as the fifth-ranked 7-and-under player in the country with a rating of 1545. Another Weibel 7-year-old, Kevin Moy, is ranked 42nd nationally (1020 rating), and Chawla is 77th and rated at 924. Ratings go up or down with wins and losses against other rated competition in tournaments, and Alisha has nearly doubled her rating in the past year.

"I'm no match for her now," said Alisha's mother, Sunanda Chawla, who taught her daughter to play when she was 3. Neither is her older brother, Ashwin, whom she followed into the Weibel program. Her father, Sanjeev, a telecommunications software executive, has to study constantly to keep up and win an occasional game.

While there are better players her age nationally, Alisha's distinction in chess is her gender. Young male chess players outnumber females by nearly 10 to 1, and the disparity grows as the competition gets tougher. Only in the past two decades have top women started to gain notice, largely because of the Hungarian-born Polgar sisters, Susan and Judit. Susan, the world women's chess champ from 1995 to 1999, is one of the game's leading promoters and authors. Judit is the highest-rated woman in history (eighth) and the only woman among the top 100 chess players in the world.

It's too early to know the full level of Alisha's potential. Her skills must be developed and refined. She has to increase her game study and also maintain her verve for playing. But she showed rare talent and the instincts of a fearless competitor in kindergarten.

"She doesn't like losing," said Ted Castro of Newark, chess tutor to 10 East Bay youngsters ranked in the top 100 nationally, including Chawla and Vasudeva. "She's very, very competitive and very feisty, too. She's very good at opening and she has excelled at tactics, but endgame is an area where she definitely needs to get better. She's a work in progress, but she has many, many years to improve."

She definitely has the heart of a champion. Chawla and Vasudeva "fought it out" for the state kindergarten championship last year, but Vasudeva won — no disgrace considering he had beaten Weibel's top sixth-graders. Kirshner and Castro said she did not take it well.

"She was so upset by losing, she would not accept the second-place trophy," said Kirshner. "You can see a determination in this young lady that's just unreal."

After losing three consecutive times to Vasudeva in competition, she finally beat him in a regional tournament last year.

"She didn't care how she did the rest of the tournament," said Castro, who tutors Alisha four hours a week. "She was jumping around and yelling, 'I beat Tanuj, I finally beat Tanuj!'"

Earlier this week, five other young Weibel players gathered in the Chawla's garage for a "simul" against Alisha. She played the five kids and one columnist on six boards at once. She went 3-3, beating 8-year-old Sangetha Bharath, 7-year-old Desiree Ho (state K-1 girls champ) and 7-year-old Luke Bugbee. She lost to Moy, in the top 50 nationally; 9-year-old Nick Bugbee and the 50-something columnist named Carl ... barely.

She had the columnist in trouble but missed a key move late that would have sealed her win. Ah, that endgame. Then again, it was Alisha's first real simul, and she doesn't often play adults other than her parents. She offered her tiny hand when the game ended, congratulated me and then ran away to play, later returning to pronounce me a good player. In truth, I was probably lucky.

I asked Alisha for some sage 7-year-old chess advice, which she graciously provided.

"Castle as early as you can, knights before bishops and hold back the queen," she said.

Add this one: If you're playing Alisha Chawla, ignore the puppy-dog eyes and the little princess look. She'll have you in checkmate before you can say, "Aw, how cute."

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