

Leah Baxter is a genius.

She's a few wins away from becoming a chess grandmaster and her life is on course to achieve everything her mom and coach want for her.

But Leah is at stalemate, grieving for her father and feeling suffocated. She's ready to quit chess completely – but chess isn't ready to quit her.

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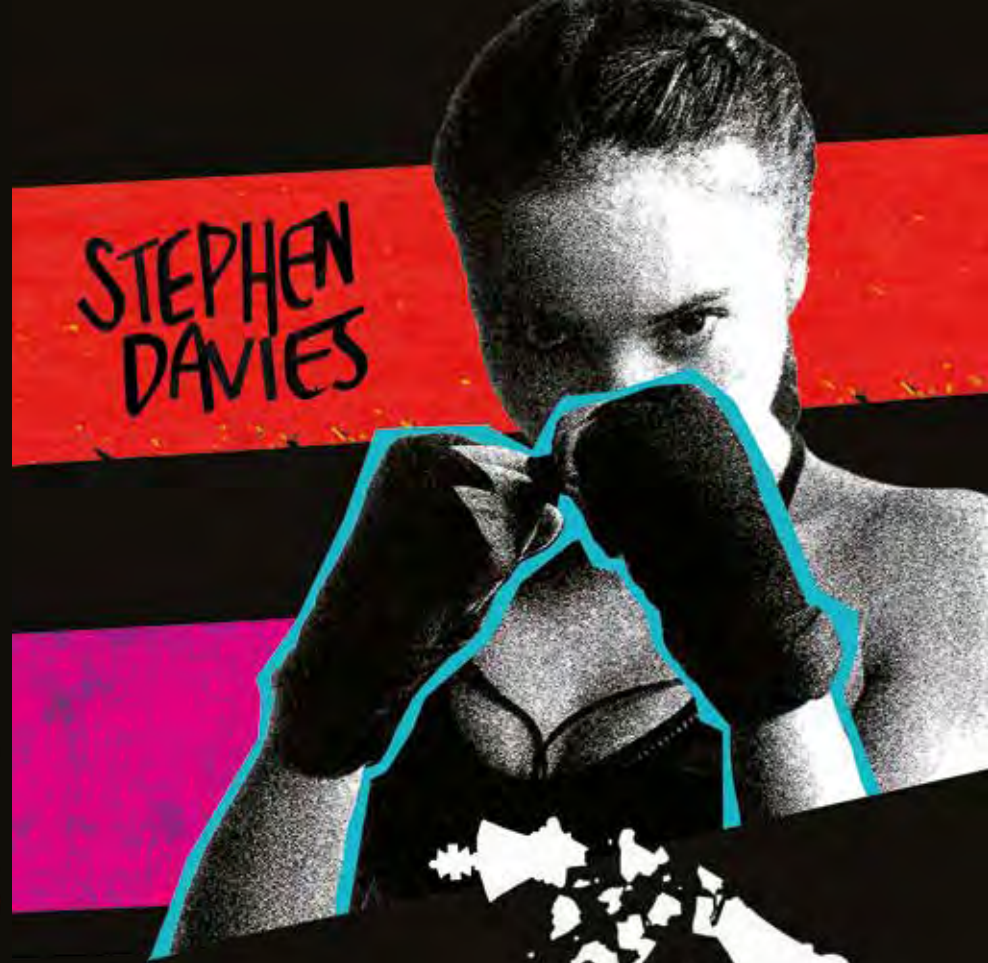
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Play the opening like a book
Play the middlegame like a magician
Play the endgame like a machine

Rudolf Spielmann, grandmaster

PART ONE: OPENING

A single exposure to chess is enough to make an addict of anyone with a sense of adventure

Edward Lasker (1885–1981)

HELLO WORLD

My name is Leah – aka Chessgirl – and this is my first post. I'm blogging for me, not for you, so if you don't like what I write, just move on. You won't be missed.

My life is a moldy cake with five ingredients.

1. Playing chess
2. Staying in hotels
3. Getting yelled at by Mom
4. Getting yelled at by Coach
5. Running, swimming, skipping and shadow-boxing

I'm in India at the moment, not that I've seen much of it. I'm cooped up in a hotel, playing at the Pune Open Tournament. By the end of Day Two I've got three wins from three games and Coach starts saying I have a good chance of winning the whole thing.

Day Three, and I'm up against an old Belgian grandmaster with the biggest forehead I've ever seen. I'm not kidding, it's big enough for four people. I open on the queenside and play the Blackmar-Diemer Gambit just for the hell of it, watching that big ol' forehead crease up into a thousand furrows. I go on to smash him in thirty-five moves.

As soon as I get out of the playing hall, Mom starts getting mad at me, yelling like a freak on a leash. She tells me she

didn't fly us halfway around the world for me to play half-baked openings. Then it's Coach's turn, bawling me out for disrespecting Belgium's top grandmaster. He tells me I was deliberately staring at the guy's forehead to put him off. In my defense, I tell him, there was hardly any space in the playing hall NOT occupied by that forehead. Coach doesn't even crack a smile. Play the board, Leah, not the man, he mutters, which everyone knows is bull. It's not the board that wants to rip your head off and have it for dinner, is it? Anyways, look at the numbers. Four rounds, four wins, and my rating has gone up eighteen points already. You'd think they'd be happy. After all, I'm their creation.

COMMENTS

Roy: I like the occasional game of chess but I don't really understand this post. What's a Blackmar-Diemer Gambit? Please be clearer.

Chessgirl: What can I tell you, Roy? I'm an IM (international master) soon to be a GM (grandmaster) and it sounds like you're a patzer. I could play you blindfold with rook odds and thirty seconds on my clock and still take you apart. I'm not explaining the BDG to patzers. That's not what this blog is for. Clear enough for you?

Guppy: You don't sound like a very nice person, Chessgirl. And fyi, the Blackmar-Diemer Gambit has been proven unsound. GM Cornelius Hammett says that anyone who plays the

BDG in a tourno might as well climb onto the chessboard and ritually disembowel himself.

Chessgirl: Did Hammett say that before or after I beat him with Blackmar-Diemer at the Gibraltar Tradewise tournament back in 2011 when I was like ELEVEN YEARS OLD? Only one person got gutted that day and it wasn't me.

Socrates: You got a boyfriend?

Chessgirl: Drink hemlock, Socrates. Or go into exile. Your call.

Roy: Why are you so up yourself? Do you think people are going to read your blog if you insult your fellow chess players and everyone who comments?

Chessgirl: Douche.

Comments on this post are now closed.

50 THINGS ABOUT ME

1. The name Leah derives from the Hebrew word for 'weary'.
2. I don't have a middle name. If I did, I would want a Don't Mess With Me middle name like Scout or Jade.
3. I live with my mother on the first floor of an apartment block in Manhattan, New York.
4. I am seventeen years old. Just.

5. My birthday is April Fool's Day. That's right, my very existence is an April Fool's joke.
6. My dad is an engineer on the International Space Station. It takes him an hour and a half to orbit the Earth. He sees sixteen sunrises and sixteen sunsets every day.
7. I'm nothing like my dad. I'm scared of flying, which is bad because I have to travel by plane ALL THE TIME.
8. I'm scared of heights as well.
9. I found that out when I stayed at the JW Marriott Marquis hotel in Dubai. My room was on the sixty-ninth floor. I ended up sleeping behind a couch down in the hotel lobby.
10. I beat my first grandmaster when I was six years old. After the game he claimed he had toothache and wasn't thinking straight.
11. Beating a GM at chess is an amazing feeling. When he knocks his king over you feel a thrill that travels down your whole body and out through your toes.
12. I gave my first simultaneous chess exhibition when I was ten. I played forty strong club players. Won thirty, drew nine, lost one.
13. I got really mad about the one I lost. I thumped a pillar so hard I broke my hand.
14. Intelligence and irritability are a bad combination.

15. I once yelled 'Why am I losing to this idiot?!' during a tournament game in Milan. I got an official reprimand from the referee but I went on to win the game. And the tournament.

16. My cell phone ringtone is an mp3 of Bobby Fischer saying 'I love the moment when I crush a man's ego'.

17. I hate being asked whether there will ever be a female world chess champion. Of course there will.

18. Mom and Coach are convinced it's going to be me.

19. Today my chess rating is 2480. When I get to 2500 I will be a grandmaster.

20. When I'm studying chess positions at home I wear my crocodile onesie. I've had it for years. I cut the feet off so I wouldn't outgrow it.

21. One of my videos on YouTube has over a million hits: two GMs accidentally clashing heads over a chessboard, then cussing in Russian.

22. My best friend is called Rybka. We play chess together every day.

23. Rybka is a computer chess program.

24. My last boyfriend was Sergey, a Russian IM with floppy bangs. We started dating at the World Junior Championship three years ago.

25. He was my first boyfriend as well as my last.

26. I learnt dozens of obscure Russian proverbs to impress him with.
27. Shouldn't have bothered.
28. Now I have a rule about not dating chess players.
29. I'd break that rule for the right person.
30. I took my AP exams when I was sixteen. Aced them, obviously.
31. I was home-schooled, if you hadn't already guessed.
32. My home-school routine involved an average of five hours chess a day.
33. I once spent a whole night in my bedroom staring at a rook and pawn endgame. I didn't touch the pieces, but my mind was racing for seven hours straight.
34. I fear I have some sort of mental illness.
35. I feel sorry for anyone who thinks chess is boring. Chess gets its hooks into you and sends you crazy and ruins your life, but the one thing chess is not is boring.
36. My hero is the Latvian grandmaster Mikhail Tal. Replaying his best games is like swimming in chocolate.
37. Can't say I've ever swum in chocolate.
38. I swim in water every day. I can swim 50 meters in 40 seconds.

39. I can run a mile in five minutes flat.
40. I can jab a punchbag 74 times in 30 seconds.
41. I can jump rope 100 times before I screw up.
42. The reason I work out so much is that I need stamina for long chess games.
43. When I was fourteen my hair was so long I could sit on it.
44. Instead of sitting on it I cut it all off and sold it to a wigmaker for \$80.
45. I invested the \$80 in high-risk equity shares and now it's worth \$254. Not even Mom knows about my Hair Money.
46. I like classical music: Bach, Beethoven and most of all Mahler.
47. I like the *Star Wars* music too. In fact, I like everything about *Star Wars*.
48. According to Chinese astrology, I'm a Metal Dragon, which means I can earn a lot of money in a very short time.
49. Chinese astrology is obviously a load of horsefeathers.
50. My sneezes sound like coughs. No one ever blesses me.

COMMENTS

Kaixxo: Some fact checking needed here, methinks. The only Leah in the FIDE chess rankings is Leah Baxter, but there's no Baxter on the International Space Station. Either you're not really an IM or your father is not really in space.

Chessgirl: Or we don't share a surname. Or any one of a MILLION other possibilities.

Kaixxo: So what's his name then?

Chessgirl: His name is Yuri Blocked.

Guppy: Are you going to block everyone who calls you out for lying?

Comments on this post are now closed.

KNIGHT FALL

Round 5 in Pune and I've got black against a Serbian GM with a glass eye. The game is a Sicilian Dragon, Soltis variation. On move 31 I sacrifice a knight for positional advantage but Glass Eye finds all the right moves and my kingside attack runs out of steam. There's no way I can claw the material back and he goes on to grind out a win.

I leave the playing hall and walk to the elevator flanked by Mom and Coach, feeling like Princess Leia being escorted to

the Emperor by imperial stormtroopers. They look so grim, it's almost funny.

'Why did you sacrifice that knight?' growls Coach. 'All the kibitzers in the green room said it was unsound.'

'It felt like the right thing to do.'

'Sacs don't always work out, Leah. Did you just feel it or did you calculate?'

'I calculated.'

'Did you spot the queen h4 line?'

'Sure.'

'So why d'you sac the knight?'

'It's what Mikhail Tal would have done.'

'He was Tal,' spits Coach, stabbing the elevator call button.

'Tal was Tal. Do you want me to make a note of that in my History of Chess notebook?'

Mom whirls around and chews me out. 'Don't you dare be sarcastic, Leah. Do you realize that we'd have GM ranking right now, if you hadn't decided to throw that game away?'

It's true. If I'd won today, I would have gained twenty-five rating points and I'd be a grandmaster right now.

The number above the elevator is stuck on 4. I stand there

staring at it, massaging the skin between my thumb and index finger.

'I think this elevator's broken,' I say.

But Mom's not done with me yet. 'Do you know how much it costs to fly three people from New York to Pune? Well, Leah, do you?'

'I'm going to take the stairs.'

'Don't walk away when I'm talking to you!' Mom yells after me. 'Do you have any idea how much I've sacrificed for you?'

'Guess Coach was right!' I shout back. 'Sacrifices don't always work out!'

I barge through the double doors and run down the steps three at a time. The stairwell reeks of disinfectant and samosas. I run straight to the basement gym and bench press one fifty pounds. Bam. Personal best.

COMMENTS

Roy: What is a kibitzer?

Chessgirl: Google it.

SirLancelot: Hey, Roy. You know how when you play a board game there's always someone looking over your shoulder offering unwanted advice and commentary? That's a kibitzer.

Comments on this post are now closed.