At 22, Jennifer Shahade is the strongest American-born woman chess player ever

BY PAUL HOFFMAN

CHESS QUEEN

ON THE THIRD THURSDAY of this past March, when many art galleries across Manhattan were holding openings, 75 people milled about the Viewing Gallery on West 17th Street, sipping wine, eating cookies and occasionally glancing at the confetti-like landscapes on the walls. A little after 7 p.m., two elegantly dressed young women, one wearing only black and the other all white, from their gloves and their dresses to their flapper wigs, emerged from a unisex rest room and took their places on opposite sides of a chessboard. They planned to play two games, at the brisk pace of 25 minutes a side per game. They shook hands, and the woman in the white wig began by confidently advancing her queen pawn two squares and depressing the chess timer next to the board. The crowd nodded approvingly. "I would not have given up chess," a disheveled man in his 60s said in a stage whisper, "if my opponents had looked like this."

The woman in black was Jennifer Shahade, 22, the 2002 U.S. Women's Champion and the strongest American-born female chess player in history. Her opponent was 19-year-old Irina Krush, who immigrated to the United States from Ukraine in 1988 before she turned 5, the age at which her father taught her the game, and at 14 became the youngest U.S. Women's Champion ever. Although the two chess stars are friends—they were teammates at the 2002 Chess Olympiad, in Bled, Slovenia, and classmates at New York University—they are also fierce competitors, and at the art gallery the gloves came off.

Shahade responded to Krush's queen-pawn opening with a provocative defense known as the Grünfeld, favored by the legendary 1972 world champion, Bobby Fischer, and current world number one, Garry Kasparov of Russia. Black (Shahade) goads White (Krush) into placing pawns in the center of the board, normally an important goal, but Black figures that she can undermine White's center with well-placed blows from the flanks. Here the plan failed because Shahade overlooked the fact that Krush could (and did) win a key center pawn. Later, Krush infiltrated Shahade's position with her knights before launching a decisive mating attack. You could sense Shahade's desperation as she struggled to shelter her king. While she pondered the position, she leaned over the board, and the women's heads almost touched. She cradled her face in her hands—a characteristic posture she shares with Kasparov—and squeezed so hard that her fingers left red marks on her cheeks. She squirmed in her seat and twisted her feet in her black boots. There was no defense, and she resigned on the 42nd move.

"This really sucks," she said to me after she got up from the board. "All your close friends show up to drink wine and enjoy themselves, while you lose in front of them." Twenty minutes later she had composed herself and sat down for the second game. This time she had the advantage of moving first. She advanced her king pawn two squares, a more aggressive opening than Krush had employed in the first game. Shahade needed to win to even the score, and she planned to press Krush from the onset. Krush did not shy away from the battle, and steered the game into what aficionados recognized as an obscure line of the Richter-Rauzer variation of the Sicilian defense. The two players later positioned their kings in opposite corners of the board and launched all-out assaults on each other's monarch.

Krush's attack netted her two pawns, and she could have won immediately by sacrificing a rook, but Shahade set a trap on the 30th move. If Krush misjudged the position and made a seemingly natural choice that offered the exchange of queens, Shahade could win a knight—a decisive material advantage—through four simple moves. At classical tournament chess, where each player can take three hours for a game, Krush would presumably never fall for such a trap, but here, with time running out, it was possible she would go wrong. The strong chess players in the audience, even with wine in them, knew what was happening. "It's Jennifer's only chance," whispered her brother, Greg, two years her senior

and a world-class player himself. He turned nervously away from the board, as if staring at it might jinx his sister's subterfuge. Krush fell for the swindle and, unlike her emotional opponent, sat there poker faced as she lost the knight and, subsequently, the game.

It was almost 10 p.m., and the spectators started chanting "tiebreak! tiebreak!"—hoping that the two cerebral gladiators would play a sudden-death blitz game (five minutes a side) to determine the winner. But Krush had a late-night engagement, and Shahade, who was tired and drained, seemed content to call it a tie.

"People sometimes ask me if chess is fun," Shahade told me later. "'Fun' is not the word I'd use. Of course I enjoy it, or I wouldn't play. But tournament chess is not relaxing. It's stressful, even if you win. The game demands total concentration. If your mind wanders for a moment, with one bad move you can throw away everything you've painstakingly built up."

UNTIL THE 19TH CENTURY, women were not welcome in chess clubs in Europe and America. In the mid-1880s, a club in Turin, Italy, allowed the wives and daughters of its members to join them at the chessboard, a practice that was applauded by then-world champion Wilhelm Steinitz. "This is as it should be," Steinitz wrote, "and we hope that this example will be followed by other chess societies, it being evident that, if we engage the queens of our hearts for the queens of our boards and if we can enlist the interest of our connubial mates for our chessical mates, our intellectual pastime will be immensely benefited and will pass into universal favor." But change was slow: when women played in an international tournament for the first time, in London in 1897, a commentator cautioned that they "would come under great strain lifting the leaded, wooden chess sets."

When I played chess in scholastic tournaments in the late 1960s and early '70s, female players were still a rarity, and the flea-infested chess parlors I frequented near New York City's Times Square were a world away from chic art galleries. Even though playing the game well was regarded as a sign of intelligence, chess had an ancillary reputation as the recreation of social misfits. Bobby Fischer was a national hero for wresting the world championship away from our cold war rivals, the Russians, but he was hardly a model of how to lead a balanced life. When a television talk-show host asked him what his interests were besides chess, Fischer seemed puzzled and replied, "What else is there?" In another interview, he said that he wanted to make a lot of money so that he could live in a house shaped like a rook.

Today, three decades later, the game of kings has unmistakably surged in popularity. Writer Martin Amis, comedian Stephen Fry, magician David Blaine, model Carmen Kass, pugilists Lennox Lewis and Wladimir Klitschko, actors Will Smith, Woody Harrelson, Susan Sarandon and Greta Scacchi, even Madonna and Sting, are all "woodpushers." "It's now cool to play chess," said Jennifer Shahade. "The game is finally shedding its image as a magnet for geeks." Shahade herself is a model of cool. Stuffed under the black pageboy wig she wore at the gallery match are flowing brown curls streaked blonde and red. She lives in a loft in the Williamsburg section of Brooklyn, one of the hippest areas of New York City, where Internet cafés and nouveau-Thai restaurants have displaced mustard and girdle factories. She also plays basketball, air hockey and Ms. Pacman.

Chess's popularity extends well beyond the celebrity set. Membership in the 64-year-old United States Chess Federation, the organization that sanctions tournaments and ranks players, has swelled to a record high of 98,700. Colleges such as the University of Maryland, Baltimore County, and the University of Texas at Dallas and at Brownsville now award chess scholarships, and grade schools throughout the country include chess classes in their curricula. In New York City alone, 36,000 children in 160 elementary and junior high schools are learning the fine points of the game from teachers paid by a nonprofit organization called Chess-in-the-Schools. Parents on Manhattan's Upper East Side have been known to pay $200 per hour to hire private chess tutors for their children.

Today more girls than ever before are learning the rules of chess, but male players are still the norm at the highest levels. Of the roughly 1,200 members of the United States Chess Federation who are currently ranked as national masters or higher, only 14, including Shahade and Krush, are women. On the international chess circuit, top-ranked female players are also rare; of the 100 best players in the world, only one is a woman: 27-year-old Judit Polgar of Hungary, who is ranked number ten.

Even if the world of tournament chess is no longer an exclusive male club, there are obstacles for females. For one, world champions have not always put out the welcome mat. Bobby Fischer dismissed female players as "weakies," and Garry Kasparov, in a recent interview in the *London Times,* said that females are not generally capable of excelling at the game. "[Chess is] a mixture of sport, psychological warfare, science and art," he said. "When you look at all these components, man dominates. Every single component of chess belongs to the areas of male domination."

But Kasparov prides himself on being provocative. "You have to laugh," said Shahade. "You don't know whether he really believes what he is saying, or is doing his usual thing of trying to get people riled up. And in a sense, who cares? All I know is that the chess world has accepted and encouraged me. I've never personally experienced any kind of discrimination or roadblock because I was a woman."

Irina Krush feels the same way. "If anything, being a woman is an advantage," she told me. "You get more invitations to exclusive tournaments because you're considered to

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PAUL HOFFMAN's latest book is Wings of Madness: Alberto Santos-Dumont and the Invention of Flight. *Photographer SYLVIA PLACHY is based in New York.*

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be something of a novelty. Male players have sometimes claimed that I also have an advantage because they are distracted by how I look. I don't buy that, though. When chess players lose, they always come up with excuses."

"If you find someone attractive," Shahade said, "you don't play worse. You buckle down and try to play better because you want to impress them with your brilliance."

The chief impediment to more women playing tournament chess seems to be cultural. "If you're going to become very good at chess," Shahade told me, "you have to pour yourself into it. In our society, we consider it weird if a boy is obsessed with chess, if he spends the bulk of his waking hours playing and studying the game. Now if a girl does that, it's not just weird, it's downright unacceptable. Women are usually discouraged from pursuing chess and other intellectual activities that require time-consuming devotion. I was fortunate to have a mother who succeeded in the traditionally male field of chemistry. She's a chemistry professor at Drexel University and an avid games player—blackjack, poker, chess. There were periods in my life when chess was the most important thing to me. It's not that I did chess all day—I took time to be with my friends or to exercise—but I justified the time with my friends and the exercise as being good for my chess. Today my life is pretty balanced. I admire Antoaneta Stefanova. She's a Bulgarian grandmaster who is only a couple of years older than me. She's the number two woman player in the world. She's dedicated to the game but also has an active life away from the board. She likes to party and to go out at night between rounds at a tournament."

ON A SUNDAY AFTERNOON early this past January, I joined Shahade in the offices of Chess-in-the-Schools for a program called Girls Academy. Once a month, a couple of dozen girls, ages 9 through 13, come together from across New York City for six hours of intensive instruction from Shahade and Krush. The two champions know that they are role models for girls who dream of reaching the higher echelons of chess.

Shahade spent the first couple of hours showing the class moves from well-known games that strong women played against each other or, better yet, in which they defeated male grandmasters; her charge to the students was "Play like girls!" She is particularly fond of Judit Polgar's games. The Hungarian's sharp, take-no-prisoners style has claimed the scalps of the world's leading men, including, this past September, Garry Kasparov's—sweet revenge considering that Kasparov had once described Polgar as a "circus puppet." "I love her uncompromising approach," Shahade said. "Just when you think the position is sterile, she stirs up complications by sacrificing a piece and launching a blistering attack. It's awesome."

Shahade favors bold, tactical play herself. She grew up in Philadelphia, where she learned chess at the age of 6 from her father, Michael, a four-time champion of Pennsylvania. She was also inspired by her brother, Greg, who became a national master when he was 14 and six years later earned the prestigious Samford fellowship for the country's most promising chess player under 25. Jennifer's big break came in 1996 at the so-called Insanity Tournament at the venerable Marshall Chess Club in Manhattan's Greenwich Village. "It's a crazy event," she said. "You play, I think, nine games. You play all night with the rounds starting at odd times like 2:11 a.m. and 4:23 a.m. I was about to turn 16 and I managed to get it together and do well with no sleep." She came in first and joined her father and brother as a certified national master.

Of the three, Jennifer is the most aggressive player, something you wouldn't guess from her soft voice and the balletic way she carries herself when she is not huddled over a chessboard. "By comparison, I play like a real wuss," her father told me later. "My style is more positional, accumulating tiny advantages until I win in the endgame. She goes for the jugular immediately and reaches positions that are so complicated they give me a headache to look at. I don't know how she does it. Even Greg, whose play is much sharper than mine, doesn't take the kinds of risks Jen does."

That afternoon at Girls Academy, Shahade shared with her students one of her own disappointments at the chessboard. It is a game from the final round of last year's Olympiad in Bled, where teams from 89 countries competed in the women's division, and the United States was in medal contention until the final rounds. "You can always learn a lot from your losses," she told the students. She set up the key position from her match with Ukrainian Inna Gaponenko and explained what went wrong. "I had a choice of two ways to capture. I could have taken with the pawn or the rook. If I took with the rook, it would lead to a draw. I took with the pawn and quickly lost. Taking with the pawn was a radical misjudgment. Why did I do it? There was probably a psychological reason. Earlier, I thought I had stood better in the game, so I didn't want to settle for a draw and admit that I hadn't been able to press my advantage.

"I also learned from Bled that I didn't have enough stamina," she said to the students, a curious confession from a woman who made her mark in the Insanity Tournament. "I won five of my first six games, but then, sadly, I had a big slump so that I ended up with six wins and five losses. I'm used to American weekend tournaments in which four or five rounds are crammed into two or three days. The Olympiad lasted two weeks. I can play chess 12 hours a day for a weekend on sheer adrenaline and then crash, but I can't sit at the board with peak concentration for days at a time." She told me later that she is running, lifting weights and shooting baskets to build up her stamina. Most of the world's top players

She showed the students games in which strong women defeated male grandmasters. "Play like girls!" she told the class.

have strenuous exercise routines to balance their sedentary chess playing. Bobby Fischer jogged regularly long before it was fashionable to do so, and Garry Kasparov pumps iron, swims and rows as part of his chess training.

Toward the end of the afternoon, Shahade's and Krush's students came together for joint instruction. Krush had set up a position on an oversize demonstration board in front of the room. She asked the girls to study it and then pair off and play the position out, with chess clocks ticking as if this were a tournament. Later the girls would compare their moves with those of the chess titans who had played the original game. Shahade glanced at the demonstration board and, feigning indignation, exclaimed, "That position was never reached by a woman!"

The position that Krush had chosen showed the board after the 16th move of a famous 1895 game between Wilhelm Steinitz and a German master named Curt von Bardeleben. On White's 17th move—which the girls were asked to find—Steinitz boldly sacrificed his queen pawn so that a path would be cleared for his knight to join in the hunt for the Black king. Eight moves later, von Bardeleben was so disgusted with the position of his exposed monarch that he simply disappeared from the Hastings, England, tournament hall and never returned. Steinitz then awed the spectators who had gathered around with an elegant continuation in which he forced checkmate in ten moves.

When Krush showed the class the actual game, the girls marveled at the depth and beauty of Steinitz's mating attack. What Krush didn't tell the students was the fate of the two men. Steinitz eventually went mad, claiming that he had played chess with God over an invisible phone line and beaten him. And von Bardeleben, in 1924, leaped to his death from a window. His self-defenestration was emulated by the most famous fictional chess player, Luzhin, in Vladimir Nabokov's novel *The Defense*.

That chess has a long history of association with obsession and eccentricity is not part of the Chess-in-the-Schools curriculum. When a student in one of Shahade's other classes asked her whatever became of Bobby Fischer, she responded, "Never mind! Let's just appreciate his games!" (A fugitive from American justice because he violated economic sanctions against the former Yugoslavia by playing a 1992 tournament there, Fischer reportedly lives in Japan. He condones the violence of September 11 and rants on talk radio about the "world Jewish conspiracy.")

During a break at Girls Academy, Shahade put aside the remains of a large tossed salad. She had eaten none of the sun-dried tomatoes, which were scattered across the bowl. Krush eyed the salad dregs, and Shahade offered them to her. "Why didn't you eat the tomatoes?" Krush asked. "Are you trying to poison me?"

"You never know," Shahade playfully responded.

"It would be a good trick," said Krush. "I wonder if anyone has ever tried it—making their opponent sick just before an important match."

LATER THAT WEEK, Shahade and Krush joined 56 other chess players in Seattle for the 2003 U.S. Chess Championship. Shahade was the defending women's champion, and Krush wanted a shot at the title, which she had earned once before, in 1998. When Shahade won in 2002, it was the first time women and men had played together in the 157-year-old national tournament. No female player had ever qualified to enter the championship, and in 1937 a separate women's division was created, in which female players competed among themselves for the title of U.S. Women's Champion. In 2002, the women's division was dissolved, though the title remained. Shahade, who did not face any women in the tournament, nonetheless became U.S. Women's Champion by achieving the highest score of all the women. At the players' meeting before the 2002 tournament, some men had complained that the participation of women would degrade the quality of the play, but Shahade proved them wrong. In the very first round, she disposed of Gennady Sagalchik, a Brooklyn-based grandmaster who had been particularly vocal in objecting to the inclusion of women.

"I was delighted to beat Sagalchik, but not because he was being sexist," Shahade said later. "I didn't think he was. I didn't think he was speaking about me—I knew I would give the men a fight, and he probably knew that too—but about some of the other, lower-ranked female players. I was glad to beat him because I had a pattern of reaching good positions against grandmasters, getting nervous, and making inaccurate moves to let them slip away."

Even Shahade is not entirely convinced that having a coed championship is in the best interest of women's chess. While the top-ranked women are strong enough to give the men a good fight, or even beat them, the lower-ranked qualifying women are weaker than the weakest men. "Is it good for a young woman's confidence and chess career if she has a horrible result in the U.S. Championship?" asked Shahade. "Maybe it would be better for her to play in an all-women's event? But I can also argue the reverse—that it is motivating to play in a championship with the country's best players, and that women will get better as a result."

The 2003 tournament was more difficult for her. After a slow start and a seventh-round victory, she found herself tied for first among the women and, therefore, in a good position to retain her title. Her brother was also competing in the championship—the first time since 1969 that siblings had played in the competition at the same time—and he, too, had an important victory in the seventh round.

"Chess is a zero-sum game that rewards ruthlessness, not cooperation," Shahade says. Yet she is drawn to its intensity.

During the tournament, the two Shahades prepared for their opponents in different ways. Each evening at about 10, they learned whom they would face the next afternoon and whether they were going to have white or black. Before going to bed, Jennifer would turn on her notebook PC and search through a database of more than two million chess games for those played by her opponent. She'd scan the relevant games and make a quick decision as to what sequence of opening moves she thought would give her adversary the most trouble. But she would save the bulk of her study for the morning. "I can sleep better," she told me, "after I select the particular opening. Otherwise, I'll toss and turn and mull over it during the night."

Greg's approach was less disciplined. He routinely went to bed at four in the morning and rose only minutes before the 1:30 p.m. round. He, too, possessed a PC with two million chess games stored on it, but his database apparently got less use than his sister's. He used his laptop to play kung-fu chess—an Internet action game in which multiple chessmen rush forward as fast as you can move them—at which he is the world's number one player. He also kept busy with a Sony Playstation, a TV season's worth of "The Simpsons" on DVD, and a Dance Dance Revolution Pad (an electronic dance mat), all of which he had brought from New York. I happened to occupy the hotel room next to his, and on the night before the final round, when he could have been preparing for one of his toughest opponents—15-year-old Hikaru Nakamura, who a month later would break Bobby Fischer's 1958 record as the youngest American grandmaster—I awoke at 4 a.m. to the sound of Bart Simpson's voice and Greg laughing loudly.

"How's the Nakamura preparation going?" I shouted through the wall.

"Not well," said Greg. "I haven't started yet."

After ten days and nine rounds of classical chess, in which some of the games lasted more than five hours, the main tournament had ended. Greg Shahade, who lost to Nakamura, ended with an even score. Alexander Shabalov, a 35-year-old Riga-born grandmaster from Pittsburgh, was the new U.S. Chess Champion, and Jennifer Shahade and Krush found themselves tied with a third woman, Latvian émigré Anna Hahn, for the women's title. The next day, the three played a round-robin match of speed chess (15 minutes per side per game) to decide the winner. "I departed from my usual, more methodical style of preparation and tried to study every opening under the sun," Shahade said. "I knew it was a crazy, stupid thing to do—you can't possibly master numerous opening lines in one evening—but I couldn't help myself. I wanted to be prepared for anything they might play, and then all night I dreamed about the possibilities." Shahade arrived at the board nervous and exhausted, and lost her encounter with Krush. Hahn, 27, whose lower national ranking made her the underdog, managed to beat both of them and walk off with $12,500 and the title. "Anna is one of my friends," Shahade said, "but losing the play-off was not one of my happiest moments."

SHAHADE HAD GRADUATED from NYU only a month before the championship, and in Seattle she was in a reflective mood about what she was going to do with the rest of her life. "I majored in comparative literature," she told me. "It's a toss-up," she joked, "about whether comparative literature or chess will be more useful in paying the rent. I'm struggling right now with how much I want to make the game the focus of my life. I love chess, but it's the height of decadence. The positions you reach in a well-played game are beautiful, but the beauty is inaccessible to those who haven't mastered the game. There are many good reasons to teach kids chess—it helps them learn to concentrate, to think ahead, to see that their actions have consequences, to cope with defeat, and to be gracious in winning—but the game itself doesn't have a lot of social purpose. You can understand if someone is spending 16 hours a day trying to cure a disease or to write a novel, but to play better chess?" Shahade also remains ambivalent about the game from a feminist perspective: "Chess is patriarchal—I sound like a college student—it's a war game, a zero-sum game that rewards ruthlessness, not cooperation." Yet she is drawn to its intensity, and as a charismatic female in a largely male endeavor, she is enough of a novelty that she might be able to make a decent living from the game by giving lessons, exhibitions and motivational speeches; by publishing books and instructional videos; and by endorsing chess-playing computers.

Shahade also likes the arts—photography, painting, writing—and hopes to forge a career that melds them with chess. She has a contract to write a book about women in chess, and she has created a series of campy photographic self-portraits that play with the idea that a woman can be both a sex goddess and an intellectual. In these photographs, Shahade has made herself up to look like a vampish Marilyn Monroe. She wears a pink wig, pink gloves and a slinky pink dress. She appears ready to party, but closer examination reveals she is reading a book with a pink cover called *Secrets of Chess Tactics*. It's a classic Russian text that is serious even by the erudite standards of chess literature.