

Chess Among the Kiwis

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Bay Area's Lauren in NZ

By Lauren Goodkind

This past year I had an opportunity to study abroad about as far from home as I could get at the University of Waikato in the pleasant town of Hamilton, New Zealand. I had to work hard in all my classes and spent much time learning and traveling around New Zealand. But I wanted to keep up with chess. So, after arriving in New Zealand in June 2004, I decided to join the New Zealand Chess Federation to compete and also to see what the chess scene is like in a country 6,500 miles away from home.

I have played in two New Zealand chess tournaments since coming to New Zealand.

The first of these was soon after I arrived in country, in August 2004, in Hamilton.

Only about 40 people competed, and I did pretty well. It was a great opportunity to meet some chess players and become involved in something I love in a new country. At this tournament, which was held at a high school, I got to meet and get to know a few local chess players. It was a wonderful way to become involved in the country. For one of the lunch breaks between rounds, a woman chess player invited me and several other players to her house for lunch. At the tournament I learned about some differences between the United States and New Zealand regarding chess: what Americans call "bughouse" chess, New Zealanders call "transfer chess." This is a small point, but it indicates the often subtle differences between the two countries.

New Zealanders, because they live on two primary (and many tiny) islands far from other places in the world, try to travel whenever possible. At the tournament I talked with a top youth chess player who had represented New Zealand in a youth chess tournament in Europe. A local chess player told me that if he wanted to become a grandmaster, he would need to go overseas to the United States, where he would find much stronger players and competition.

I also played in a tournament in May 2005 at a hotel in New Zealand's largest city, Auckland. I went to this beautiful city- it reminds me a little bit of San Francisco- with my guy friend from France. (No, he doesn't play chess, but he found it amazing that all types of age groups competed.

Overall he was a wonderful outside observer of the chess scene). I did pretty well in this tournament, with two wins, two draws, and one loss. I played in the B section and the competition was very tough. Many of the top chess players in New Zealand came to this tournament. It was exciting to see about 100 players from all age groups competing. I did notice that about 1/6th of the people from the tournament originally came from outside New Zealand. For example, my first opponent was an immigrant from France. Whole families from Asia who immigrated to New Zealand came to the tournament where their children- mostly sons, but some daughters, too - played. In the casual chess room outside the tournament room, I did play several very talented young Asian children. One of the young boys, about 7-years-old, had an unusual game strategy shortcut that surely isn't sanctioned by the New Zealand Chess Federation, or any other local or national association for that matter. He kept removing my pieces from the board to give himself an advantage!

Perhaps the highlight of the tournament was drawing against the New Zealand women's chess champion. I had the black pieces, and the game lasted for about three hours and ended in the castle-pawn endgame. After this fun tournament, we exchanged e-mails. I told her that if she and the rest of her family come over to the San Francisco area, she's more than welcome to visit the chess scene in California. In the tournament in August 2004, when I played her the first time, I defeated her in a very difficult game. After the game, I talked to her for a while. She is an amazing player; she has represented New Zealand in many overseas tournaments! She actually teaches chess to children, I think, in schools. Her teenage son plays chess, and he is actually quite good - I played him casually. I learned that her husband is a FIDE master. Her family is very dedicated to chess in New Zealand.

At the Auckland tournament I talked with the top New Zealand women chess players. The highest rated player in my B section was a high school student, who had previously traveled to represent New Zealand in a youth world chess tournament. She and her friends thought I was a high school exchange student. It's fun to look young!

In New Zealand, as in most countries, is a male dominated game. As a female chess player, it made me really happy to see a few females of all ages competing in both of the tournaments that I played in. At the chess tournament in Hamilton, one of the woman chess players is actually a professor at the University of Waikato (where I studied). A colleague had recently introduced her to the game. The top women chess players in New Zealand, whom I met at the Auckland tournament, are about my strength in chess skill. I did notice that the NZ federation is trying to get more girls to play chess, and they plan to hold an all-girls tournament in the near future.

Overall, I learned a lot about New Zealand chess, even though the sport is not particularly popular in this relatively small country of 4 million people. It seems Kiwis mostly like to play rugby instead. Generally, most Kiwis spend their time outdoors, taking advantage of New Zealand's natural playground. They enjoy surfing in the ocean, or skiing in the mountains, or farming. I spent a lot of my time doing such activities as well. I was able to take multi-day backpack trips, called tramping, on three of New Zealand's most famous wilderness trails, and I even tried bungee jumping and sky diving - and I'm starting to really enjoy rugby! During the past year, I learned that the New Zealand Chess Federation is alive and

well with the active support of serious chess players. The federation sends its top players overseas to prestigious tournaments, and the top chess players in New Zealand are FIDE masters who take the game very seriously. The combination of the indoor mental challenge of chess and the outdoor challenges of physical activities make New Zealand really special. I learned from New Zealand that I can have many adventures in my life -- physical and mental. I can become a better a chess player and person who can grow through life by learning about new places and meeting the physical and mental challenges of the world around me.

