

What Does it Take to Make A National Champion Team (from an inexperience Chess Mom's eyes)

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by Julie Xie (Sartorio)

On January 27, 2013, I opened my email as usual but was surprised to receive the following unusual message.

“Hello Mr. and Mrs. Sartorio:

“My name is Jay Liu and I'm Joanna Liu's father. I get your information from Gomes PTA Directory. Joanna is a 5th grader at Gomes and a decent chess player. She and fellow Gomes players are forming a chess team to compete at the SuperNational Chess Championship held at Nashville, TN in April 5-7. The team currently has commitment of Joanna Liu (1847), Ganesh Murugappan (1761), and Jason Zhang (1497). We are hoping that William is interested in joining the Gomes chess team to compete K-5 Championship section. With William's help, Gomes team will have an average USCF (United States Chess Federation) rating of over 1600, one of the highest rated K-5 teams in the nation. Based on past history at Nationals, we think that Gomes team is very likely to finish at top 3. We even have a reasonably good chance to claim the title of National Champions, if the players play at their normal strength. You probably know that only three elementary schools at the Bay Area have won national titles: Weibel, Mission San Jose, and Regnart. This could be the opportunity for Gomes. We sincerely hope William could be part of the journey.”

All the three children are well known in local chess circles. Only ten years old, Joanna had already won several National Girls Championships and represented our country in the World Youth Chess Tournament twice. Both Ganesh and Jason have been on the top 50 list for their age group for over two years. While I was excited and felt honored for William to be invited on the Gomes team with them, I had to admit that I couldn't help but feeling worried at the same time.

William was passionate about chess for the first 18 months since he was introduced to it after kindergarten in summer 2011. He spent hours studying it by himself during that time. An avid reader, the only kind of book that he read during that time was chess books. While he was proud to have been listed in the Top 50 for his age group since last October, he seemed to have plateaued after he reached 1300. Just one week ago, William only got 0.5 point out of 5 at a tournament at Mechanics Institute Library in San Francisco, which hosts open tournaments for local chess enthusiasts. On the way back home, he cried to me and said that he did not want to play at rated tournaments any more and would take chess as a hobby. My husband, Dominic, and I respected his choice. Even if he decided to join the SuperNational, he would be the weakest link for the team, the youngest and least experienced.

I did not know what this email message would bring but still couldn't conceal my excitement when I shared it with William and Dominic. To my delight, both of them also felt excited and honored to be invited. We quickly decided to make a family trip out of this. William had never played in a chess tournament outside of our local area so it'll be his first experience playing with children from other states. Even his grandparents in Florida were excited and made traveling arrangements to meet us in Nashville.

In the following two months, William seemed to have resumed his interest in studying chess and did tactics online everyday. He was very proud to tell his friends that he was going to the “SuperNational!” Jay reviewed some of William's games and gave him encouragement and advice. We also felt honored to receive an email from Weibel team director, Dr. Kirshner, who invited Gomes players to share Weibel team room at the SuperNational. Both Joanna and

William feel at home with Weibel team as Joanna received her first three and a half years of chess training there while William is still studying there every Friday. Days were passed in earnest anticipation.

On March 28, six days before our trip to Nashville, we were shocked to receive an email from Jay that he had to leave for China that morning as Joanna's grandfather was hospitalized following a heart attack. Within 12 hours, Grandfather passed away unexpectedly while Jay was still on his way.

I felt very sad for Joanna's family. I was also worried about our team's trip. Joanna is not only the top rated player but also completes the team of four. I called Joanna's mother right away. After confirming that Joanna still would like to go and compete with the team, I asked about her flight information. Thanks to prompt help from the chess community in Fremont, especially Weibel team, within the next day we had reached out to dozens of chess players who are going to Nashville. However, there was no other family who had the same flight on the same date. I offered to give up my flight and take Jay's seat to go with Joanna. Jason's father, Haifeng, offered to share the cost of name change on the flight. We were determined to have Joanna get to Nashville, one way or another.

Shortly thereafter, we learned that Jay was able to conclude his father's final arrangements and shorten his stay in China. He returned to San Francisco airport early Wednesday morning and made it to his flight to Nashville with Joanna that afternoon. When our team finally met at Weibel team room at 10 a.m. on April 4, it already felt like a dream come true. We could tell how the sudden loss had struck Jay. He said nothing, but a strong handshake conveyed all the words that we couldn't find to express our sorrow.

The Gaylord Opryland Resort is as beautiful as a palace in a fairy tale. We admired the musical water fountains, exotic plants and amazing scenes from each angle. It also had a very large convention center, and this tournament needed every bit of the space. With 5,335 participants, the 2013 SuperNational beat the previous record set in 2005 to become the world's largest over-the-board chess tournament. Held once every 4 years, this event brought players from every grade level, Kindergarten to 12th grade, to compete all under one roof. The 1565 teams came from 47 states, plus Washington DC and Puerto Rico. The thousands of boards in the spacious Delta Hall left us in awe. Various activities at the exhibition hall were heavenly for chess enthusiasts. William was thrilled to meet his favorite "PinkHamster" on Chesskid.com. Children lined up to solve chess puzzles and win prizes. We felt honored and excited to be here and participate in it.

As we had just thought that the stress was over once all four players arrived at Nashville, we realized that the real stress had just started. William walked out of his first round with tears in his eyes after two grueling hours. He threw his notation book down and was taken over by anger and disappointment. He did not even want to have his game analyzed by the Weibel coach as he knew exactly where he had made a mistake. He had played an even game against a much higher-ranked opponent, only to lose with a simple mistake in the end game.

We still had hope. William was the only player on the team whose opponent's rating is higher than his. He was also the youngest and least experienced. Previously Jay had said that even champion teams don't have only top players. They may have one or two dominant players, and the rest are just good enough not to give up too many points. If William could get just half the points available in his matches, it should be enough if Joanna, Ganesh and Jason played to their potential.

Minutes felt like hours while we waited for everyone to return to the Weibel team room. But one after another, shocking results made our hearts sink lower and lower. Jason lost to a player from Ohio rated 1282; Ganesh drew a player from Florida rated 1433. What really broke our heart was that Joanna lost to a player from Alabama rated 1463. Our team received only 0.5 points after the first round, putting us near the bottom of the team rankings. Everyone

disappeared to be by themselves. The bright sunshine on that beautiful spring afternoon couldn't bright up anyone's mood.

Before the second round started, I saw Joanna by herself, running to her seat. Her father, who was a staple at her tournaments in the past, was nowhere to be found. I tried to give her a cheerful greeting but she seemed to be occupied with deep thoughts, so did Ganesh and Jason's fathers.

Everyone could breathe again after all four players won their second game. But again, all of their opponents were rated below theirs. Our new team standing at the ninth place still seemed very far from the top. We did not know what to anticipate in the next two days.

Saturday morning, the third round started at 9am. Nashville being in Central time, this was 7am for California. Each child looked a little tired. William took a long time to beat a much lower-rated player. After Ganesh drew a player from New York rated 1362 and Joanna drew a player from Ohio rated 1282, Ganesh's dad, Muru, couldn't help but sharing his worries.

"It is demoralizing." He started. "This was Ganesh's first tournament at a national event. I used to be so confident in his chess skills. He was over 1700 and one of the top players for his age group. But now I can't help but doubting whether that's accurate. There seemed to be a discrepancy between the ratings among different states. Maybe ours is inflated. Maybe he is not as strong as what I had thought."

"I shouldn't be here." He continued. "This is too tense for me. I feel nervous. I wish that my wife was here instead of me. She handles pressure much better."

Haifeng also shared that he had not seen the kind of blunder that Jason made in his first game for a long time. "I don't know what had happened."

Coaches and other parents shared their thoughts in the Weibel team room:

"This is the toughest K-5 section I have ever seen", said Dr Kirshner. "The number of players there with high ratings is unbelievable."

"Our kids are all strong players, they had high expectations. But now we find that we traveled a long way, different time zones, different environment, and the competition is very tough. Things aren't going our way. Maybe this is a life lesson."

"Let's tell our kids to forget about scores and ratings. Instead they should play for their own pride. Play so they have no regrets after they go back home. They should feel like they fought hard and didn't hold anything back, gave it everything they had."

"Take each game as it comes, just focus on playing your best, forget about everything else."

In spite of all the doubts and uncertainty felt by parents, our players surprised us!

All four of them seemed to be more and more at ease, learning and growing at the same time, as the fourth and fifth rounds went on. Ganesh wore his signature calm smile again after winning one and drawing the other. Jason won

one and lost another but was as energetic as ever between rounds, with bright sparkles in his eyes. Joanna regained her chess excellence winning both rounds convincingly.

William drew a player from Minnesota rated 1662 at his fourth round, which seemed to help him cope with his loss to a player from New York rated 1609 during his fifth round. He did not cry this time and had his fourth game analyzed by a coach from Chesskid.com. "I learned a lot," he stated at the end. After reviewing his fifth game Saturday night, Weibel coach Demetrius told William that he had "played tired" and the only solution was to rest well that night.

Our team standing had climbed up to the sixth after the fifth round. The difference between Gomes and the top team was only 1.5 points. But we didn't get our hopes up too much. The final two rounds were still ahead, and those are always the toughest rounds in order to win a championship, the pairings will be very strong.

I finally saw Jay on Sunday while he was waiting for Joanna during the sixth round.

"You always seem so calm whenever I see you at Joanna's tournaments." I admired.

"Actually I always feel nervous when she plays at tournaments. I hide by myself when I'm stressed out." He told me.

That statement from one of the most experienced chess parents in the country sounded reassuring to me. As an inexperienced chess mom, I'm not alone.

"Tell William, do not worry about winning or losing or the opponents' rating. Just to play one game at a time, take his time, avoid blunders." Jay shared.

We had a perfect sixth round with all four players winning. Everyone's spirit was at its highest as we saw our team was tied with four other teams at the top. There was also some luck in the pairings. Ganesh and Joanna, our two top players, were paired against players with other teams now tied for first. Winning against them ensured Gomes could catch up to them in the standings.

My heart quivered when I saw the pairings for the seventh round. While all his teammates' opponents were rated near or below theirs, William was paired with a player rated 1551 from the team with the highest average rating, the Greenbriar West Elementary School Team from Fairfax, Virginia, currently listed as number one. That is about 200 points higher than William's. Our weakest link meeting a stronger opponent, for a match that could make the difference

When William asked me about his opponent's rating as he was entering the Delta Hall, I told a white lie and said that they are rated about the same. "You both have 3.5 points so far. You are equal." I couldn't help but feeling worried more when I saw how mature and confident his opponent looked when William found his board. What was worse was that William looked tired and kept on rubbing his eyes and yawning. He had to share a bed with his younger brother over the past three nights and woke up a couple of times last night by his sleep talking. All I could do was to hug and kiss him, telling him to treat each move as a tactic as he was an expert on that.

I went to the Chess Store directly after the round started as I would bury myself with worries and negative thoughts if I didn't distract myself. Grandpa picked out a nice design and made a souvenir shirt with SuperNational logo for William. Then I lined up with dozens of parents, waiting to buy the used tournament chess sets. Although I enjoyed my conversation on different chess cultures with a parent from Maryland and another from Wisconsin during the wait, I couldn't help but worrying about William's game. "Most likely he'd lose. He may draw if he is lucky. Our team should

still be in top three if everyone else wins. At least we are here and have tried. Top three is something to be proud of." I comforted myself.

I'd been waiting for an hour when the line finally started moving faster with more chess sets arriving after more games ended. Suddenly my phone vibrated. Dominic told me on the other end: "William has something to tell you!"

My heart beat faster.

"Mom, I won!"

I couldn't believe my ears! I jumped up and down with dozens of parents around me looking with understanding smiles.

If each of the team player's loss hit them double hard due to the impact on the team standing, each win also brought double joy.

We jumped again after Jason and Ganesh's wins. Joanna drew a lower-rated player but who was having an excellent tournament. 3.5 out of 4 points for the team at the last round!

How did the other tied-for-first teams do? Dominic kept on checking the team standing while we waited with hundreds of other families outside of the Delta Hall before the award ceremony. The tournament's website was down, so nobody could check results online. We had to give up checking after the door was finally opened. But our team's spirit was high. Jason and William were having a heated discussion on a popular computer game. Joanna arrived in a bright red top as well as a bright smile that I had not seen on her before. Even the usually very composed Ganesh seemed to be chattier than ever.

I went out to check on the posting board with the hope that results could be found there. I was excited to see a group of parents gathered in front of it when I got there.

"Number 1, Gomes, CAF021 20.00 points."

I couldn't believe my eyes!

We were half a point ahead of the second team.

I ran into the Delta Hall at record speed and couldn't conceal my excitement when I saw our team.

"We won! We are National Champions!"



Everyone was beaming with pride and joy! High fives! Hugs! Haifeng rushed out to share the exciting news with Jason's mother on the phone. Muru happily announced: "I want to come back to the National next year!" I teased him that only yesterday he had concluded that he shouldn't be here because it was too stressful. Tears filled up my eyes. Even the usually serious-looking Jay broke out in a smile.

All is well that ends well! And the victory tasted even sweeter after all the stress, worries and doubts before and during the tournament.

With a reminder from another parent, Dominic went outside the main hall to a room where they were handing out trophies on awards of top three players in each rating section. Much to our surprise, William won the first place in "1300-1399, K-5 section." Who we thought was the weakest link wasn't so weak after all. And the U.S. Chess Federation staff had told Dominic, "This year was a very challenging K-5 section. You should be very proud of how well your son did. We hope he continues to play and learn chess. He's a great talent."

Jay told us, "To be honest, I was most worried about William at this tournament. But he turned out to be the hero!"

But the truth is, every player is a hero! With our team winning by just 0.5 points, every win and every draw, from every player in every round, mattered. This was truly a team effort that our whole Gomes community should be proud of.

Seeing our four players walking up the stage to receive the championship trophy was a proud moment for our five parents and two grandparents. But what we were most proud of is our children's persistence throughout those three days. Facing their disappointing first round results, all of them walked back to their boards more focused and determined. They arrived at Nashville with a goal and they kept on working towards it. We had thought that we as parents were stressed outside of the competition hall. We could only imagine the pressure that they felt at each board. It is amazing to watch them learn and grow after each round.

I also learned that what weighs more than the championship trophy is our players' passion for chess. Throughout those three days, I've met so many players and their parents who participated in the SuperNational not for any trophy but for the joy of the game. There were hundreds of players in the unrated sections. Several of those parents told me that they take their children to national chess tournaments every year as they enjoy playing with other children around the country. They don't care about any rating or winning. They just love playing the game with fellow chess lovers. In retrospect, I remember what a joyful experience it had been for William when he first started studying chess. Soon the joy was mixed with bitterness once he started rated games. But if I as a parent do not put so much weight on winning or losing, his love for chess will last much longer with the joy of the game so pure. I am truly grateful that the invitation to the Gomes team reignited William's passion for chess at the very point when he was ready to quit.

In addition, I am grateful for living in San Francisco Bay Area, one of the most active chess communities in the country. Children who are interested in chess have an abundance of resources to support their learning. Many schools have chess class offered as part of extracurricular activities. Jason started with weekly lessons at Gomes taught by coaches from Success Chess School. Joanna received her first three and a half years of training with Weibel Chess, one of the top programs in the country. William started with weekly lessons at US Chess Mates that also offers monthly tournaments for beginners where every participant receives a trophy. Later both Jason and William had studied at NorCal House of Chess where more advanced chess camps and lessons are offered. Their director, Coach Castro, has brewed multiple national and state champions.

While I've heard about "toxic" atmosphere in other chess communities, all that I have felt and observed in the Bay Area was support for each other. Jay always credits Dr. Kirshner for recognizing Joanna's talent at a young age. Without his encouragement, Jay and his wife wouldn't have taken chess seriously and raised one of the youngest chess stars for our country. I'm also thankful that Dr. Kirshner has allowed William to study with Weibel team since January 2012 even though he does not attend that school. Parents share information and cheer for each other. Jason's mother was the one who had directed me to the right places when William first started. There were multiple times at the Open tournaments in Mechanics Institute Library where parents that I had never met before approached me and praised William's progress. I had no idea that they even took notice of him in the past. William's personal coach, FM Bela Evans, was also recommended by one of the most dedicated chess dads in the country, young expert Kevin Moy's father, Mr. Carl Moy. I can only imagine how difficult it would be to build a national champion team without such a supportive community.

Our team sat at the elegant Revela restaurant for dinner after the award ceremony. Parents sipped on wine while watching our players laughing and playing like siblings. Jay, Haifeng and Muru exchanged experiences on how their children have persisted on bettering themselves on chess through ups and downs. We all thanked Jay for reaching out to the other three players and organized the Gomes school team from scratch. Jay thanked Jason and William for giving up their opportunity to receive a better individual standing in the K-3 section and competed in the much tougher K-5 section for the team. We all realized that it would be extremely difficult for any one of our children to win an individual championship. But with the combined strength, they were able to win the team championship. The value of teamwork is a memorable life lesson.

All of our players came through with their best sportsmanship and team spirit at the end, more determined and confident than before. Under the extremely tough competition, they had the courage to fight back from the initial defeat and finished at the top of the podium. Those experiences are also priceless life lessons that they'll treasure for the rest of their lives.

Winning or losing may change with each tournament. But may our children's love for chess, determination in facing challenges and value for teamwork accompany them forever!

