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Will he become South Africa's first Grandmaster?

By Mark Rubery

The first time your name hit the newspaper headlines was a number of years ago when a reputable South African Sunday newspaper announced that an eight year old chess prodigy from Soweto was to play a match against the then world champion, Anatoly Karpov, in Caesar's Palace Las Vegas! By a strange quirk of fate you played at that very venue last year while Tolya did not. How did that irresistible story come into being?

WK: It was long ago and I do not remember too much about it, although about three years ago I saw the newspaper article-unbelievable! I think I had a good result against a 'strong' player and somebody went over the top!

You have just returned from a tournament campaign in Portugal and Spain. How did you perform and what were your impressions?

WK: Not too badly, as I consistently performed above my rating (2385). In Lisbon I scored 7/9 which got me into a tie for 4th place and in Navalmoral, near Caceres, I got 5.5/8 unbeaten, drawing with two GMs along the way. My game with Suba featured a fantastic swindle utilizing a theme from an endgame study where I am constantly blocking his rook's entry by opposing it with my rook, and if he takes it is stalemate! At the Open tournament in Salou, I came joint 1st 7.5/9 with GM Kolev to register my best result ever. My results against the titled players were around 2638 ELO; however some of my opponents did not have ratings, which spoiled any chances of a GM norm. I made the prize list in all the events I played in, even at Linares where I just scraped in, scoring 5.5/10. All chess players have excuses, and I guess mine were playing and traveling too much. I was drained having played in too many Rapids, and a lot of time is spent getting from one place to the next and preparing before and during the event. But I live in Africa, so I must play as much as I can. There seemed to be less strong players competing here than before and that is due I suppose to the deteriorating conditions for titled players. If the GMs stay away you can imagine how tough it just to be an IM.

As a serious player living in a country on the southern tip of Africa you would appear to be geographically isolated from the major chess action; so how do you train in order to take yourself to the next level?

WK: Basically I use the computer and Informants. Before I got a computer it was very difficult for me to play mainstream theory, but now with all this information I have the confidence to do it. . Preparing at home is a lot different from preparing before the game. At home you try to look at everything, as it is difficult to know what to leave out, yet when I am overseas I tend to feel what the most critical lines are and then concentrate on them.

The next level will be a GM norm and hopefully soon after the title. Do you believe you are capable of making it all the way, and if so, how soon can South Africa expect its first Grandmaster?

WK: Of course! To me there is no doubt at all, although the problem is that I do not play enough in strong events. As for improving, I have noticed that players in Europe have their typical positions, which they know and can thus play easily and confidently, whereas I feel I know less positions and have many holes in my repertoire which can be exploited. In Salou I was lucky to get a number of positions that were familiar to me as I had worked on them and understood them. I do not feel that I am far away from the GM title, and some positions I know I play at GM strength. When I study a position or opening at home and have to play this position for the first time against a 2500+ opponent ... that is not easy for me. I do think I have the talent to become a Grandmaster.

How do you manage to travel these great distances to tournaments?

WK: I luckily have got a sponsor in Caissa Computers through the Manager, D Van Basten, who himself is a casual chess player.

South Africa is a country primarily concerned with soccer, rugby and cricket, with chess placing very low on a very long list. Do you feel chess can elevate its image in the future such as, perhaps, via the enormous attention being focused on schools chess at present?

WK: I think that -- without being too critical -- there is not a problem with the popularity of the game itself, but rather the people involved in organizing it. There are just too many groups (I initially mistook the word groups for crooks, but as Watu pointed out, there is no money -M R). There are too many well-meaning people with divided interests who have a talent for making new enemies rather than new ideas. An example might be the conflict between adult chess, which has been on a steady decline, and schools chess, which is abnormally healthy. Friction here is ridiculous as they should be on the same side with the same goals.

What is your view of the standard of chess in Africa and where do you think it is headed?

WK: I have not been to every country in Africa so I cannot make an accurate assessment other than of the places I have visited- Angola and Egypt. Egypt has an unbelievably high chess level for Africa and they have a lot of players who are about 2400+ in their understanding of chess. At the same time they have nobody really strong, as it seems their federation concentrates on team chess rather than the advancement of promising individuals. To me it seems in some ways they are further from Europe than we are in South Africa as there always seem to be problems for their players getting visas or making travel arrangements! If we had qualified for the team championship in Lucerne in 1997, you can be sure we would have got there. Angola has many talented players, although there might be a difference between what I and a Russian might consider as talented.... One can maybe draw a comparison to soccer where the African teams have more flair and individuality as opposed to the European's teamwork and discipline. Unfortunately in South Africa we are not improving and have not produced a significant player for sometime. Many players give up chess when they finish school and those that continue have to be really keen as there is not much out there for them. The top players in the country have been long disillusioned with things, and are mostly dormant. So we have the sad situation of the people that are playing and winning- what tournaments there are- who cannot play chess!

Did the brutal system of apartheid impact upon your development as a young black chessplayer?

WK: No I do not think so, although going to a chess school in Germany might have had the most influence on me from a chess point of view. It was very clear to me as I grew up that the quality of education, for example, was a lot more inferior for a black person. Even at a very young age one could see the difference in many things so I guess this must have had some effect on me although as far as my chess development, it would be more of a general thing than anything specific.

How popular is chess in the townships of Johannesburg?

WK: I am not involved in any club and I mostly work alone although I am aware that almost everybody can play chess, or at least know the moves. In fact there is an incredible number of players- so much going on but nothing is organized. One can only guess how many slip through the system – talented players - who if they lived in a richer country would become GMs or more! We in this country do not have a plan, such as to double the membership for example. Instead we still run it like it was 100 years ago. There is no direction. Organizers do not realize they are failing chess and they do not realize that, in the nicest way possible, they are killing chess in this country.

You played in the FIDE KO Championship in Las Vegas last year, where one imagines you were taken aback to see that you were playing Lautier as opposed to Velimirovic, for whom you had prepared extensively. That surprise aside, do you agree with the current format of the FIDE World Championship?

WK: I cannot answer that with a clear yes or no. I agree with

the format in principle, although there are many problems. If FIDE is going to continue in a similar vein, then they should rather return to the previous system of Interzonals. Las Vegas was a fiasco; they did not bother to inform me immediately about the change of my opponent for the first round- as I was just some guy from Africa. If I came from Europe and had a high rating they would have treated me differently as I might cause a boycott or create bad publicity, yet because I come from Africa they assume I will be grateful to receive my first round losers prize and return to the jungle! The qualifying tournament in Africa is surely much weaker than the one, for example, in Russia, but it is all relative and there is far less of a chess culture here. To be a 2100 player here might be as difficult and insignificant as being a 2500 player there. The motto for FIDE is supposed to be "We are one family". In South Africa we are strongly opposed to discrimination in any form, and all we have only ever wanted is to be treated equally- that was never the case for me in Las Vegas. When I arrived there I was constantly wondering if it was going to happen, as the only clear guidance from FIDE was that they would be taking 20% of your money and the possibility of them fining you if you default. These should not be the main priorities!

Which player in history do you admire the most and why?

WK: I would say Fischer for sure. I can compare the information we get from today's computer to the enormous analytical resources that the former USSR had. Yet Fischer could deal with that and even beat them. Only now can we understand what he was up against and the fact that he succeeded was unbelievable!

Who do you think will succeed Kasparov as the number one player in the world?

WK: A very tough question, as there are so many strong players. Maybe there was someone with all the requirements but he was from a poor country and so gave up...The first names that spring to mind have good sponsors or a strong federation behind them, yet are they any better than those with maybe lesser ratings and lesser support? To me the whole idea of chess talent, opportunity, and sponsorship has become blurred, and so it is not possible to predict who will come after Kasparov.

You defeated Judit Polgar at the Cap d'Agde rapid tournament last year, which might be considered your most valuable scalp thus far, even though it was a speed event. What game do you consider to be your most memorable? Your wins over Spragett and Fedorowicz spring to mind....

WK: My game against Neverov in Cairo was very interesting. We were both in time pressure from an early stage and the position on the board and in the tournament was very tense. When I play through the game now it looks like nothing special, but at the time...

If you had to choose a book to take with you to a desert island, what would it be?

WK: Have to think about it ... off the top of my head.... I would take something written by the Kenyan author Ngungi Wathiongo. He writes about the transformation of the African society from an African perspective. In some of his writing I can see history repeating itself, particularly in South Africa at the present.

Thanks for the interview -by the way what are you doing now?

WK: I'm doing the Slav!

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