

A Chess Festival that Celebrates Our Journey

How some Unruly Queens are bringing chess to girls nationwide.

BY WIM ELLEN WANG

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N OCTOBER 9, 2022, UNDER a bright autumn sun, New York City's Washington Square Park buzzed with energy as

the Unruly Queens Fall Chess Festival got underway in the park's legendary chess plaza, renowned for its long-standing history as *the* New York City hotspot for chess.

Two and a half years prior, four young female chess players had made waves at the 2020 U.S. Amateur Team East tournament: WFM Yassamin Ehsani, WIM Evelyn Zhu, WFM Martha Samadasvhili, and your author. Our team, the Unruly Queens, scored an

extraordinary 5½/6 points to place second overall, win the New York State Benjamin Award, and earn the top female team award. Most notably, our results marked the most outstanding achievement of any all-girls team in the tournament's 50+ year history.

Barely a month later, life as we knew it skidded to a halt. New York City became the epicenter of the COVID-19 pandemic. Millions of people were stuck in lockdown, with many mourning lost loved ones. As we huddled at home, constrained to online chess platforms with zero over-the-board chess tournaments to look forward to, we began to ponder how we could give back to the phenomenal chess community that has given so much to us over the years.

We particularly hoped to encourage young girls to continue playing chess even under such unprecedented circumstances. We wanted to instill a lasting love and passion for the sport and work to expand the female chess community. Over the course of our careers, every member of Unruly Queens has felt the enormous disparity between the number of boys compared to girls in chess — a staggering 8-to-1 ratio. And, while we have all enjoyed the positive aspects of tournaments — garnering medals at the regional, national, and international levels — we also have witnessed and experienced everything from a disheartening lack of acceptance to vile, sexist remarks to blatant exclusionary practices, all of which have pushed far too many aspiring female players from the game.

We consider ourselves fortunate, though, as we have maintained the tight-knit friendships that formed after meeting each other at local tournaments many years ago. This connection not only led to the formation of Unruly Queens, but also spawned a mission that has quickly evolved into much more than developing a competitive team.

Our first Unruly Queens Charity Tournament debuted on *Chess.com* in April 2020. GM Irina Krush, WGM Jennifer Yu, and IM Carissa Yip generously accepted our invitations to commentate on Twitch, enlightening everyone with their superb chess knowledge. Through this event, we also endeavored to assist in the fight against the coronavirus, ultimately raising over \$3,000 for UNICEF's COVID-19 relief. [See the July 2020 edition of "First Moves" for WIM Evelyn Zhu's account of tournament. ~ed.]

Since then, Unruly Queens has hosted more than 30 free camps, tournaments, and group lessons remotely, with attendance at our weekly Tuesday online group lessons reaching a record high of more than 40 participants. Our aim is to bring girls together in a warm and welcoming environment where they can study, practice, and share their passion for chess. We constantly receive thank-you notes and inquiries from chess players and parents regarding our programs, which encourages us to continue with an even greater sense of responsibility. Our dedication to this great cause has inspired other top girl players to join our instructional team — this fall, the four founding



WIM Ellen Wang

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members of Unruly Queens welcomed new instructors that include FM Alice Lee, WIM Zoey Tang, and Kelsey Liu. With two years of persistent and vigorous effort, we have had the privilege of working with over 300 female chess enthusiasts from across the nation, all at different levels, and have watched them progress as players. More importantly, we have watched our participants build invaluable camaraderie with each other.

While online instruction sessions have been a useful tool to connect players, communicating over a computer screen simply does not replicate the aspect of chess that we all know and love — the thrill of socializing face-to-face and hugging our chess friends to celebrate our hard work and persistence, especially throughout the unexpected pandemic. Thus, the vision for our first chess festival was sparked.

We diligently prepared for nearly two months, culminating in the sensational afternoon in Washington Square Park, where we were extremely excited to meet chess people from the tri-state area: girls who were long-time online participants, beginners who were just picking up the game, and even hustlers who live and breathe chess each day! We kicked off the festivities with opening remarks and carefree practice games before jumping into our first activity, a simul exhibition.

WFM Yassi Ehsani and I each played 10 talented girls at once, and we were pushed to our limits. One victor emerged from each challenge: Lilianna Gao and Anjyu Fujita, respectively, each demonstrating impressive chess strength. Everybody put up inspiring fights, with additional awards given to Emma Phu and Dena Wang from my simul, and Cora Dunn and Hrtha Rajiv from Yassi's.

Next was the highly-anticipated and nerve-racking blitz tournament! With a G/3+2 time control, players had to quickly switch to a lightning-fast thinking pace. Many games could have gone both ways until the very end, with one player prevailing due to the clock. Alice Shen went on a spectacular streak, going 5/5 in the first few rounds!

The tournament concluded with a three-way tie for first between Alice, Lilianna, and Eric Niyazov (yes, boys were welcome!), who placed third, second, and first, respectively. Fourth and fifth place were taken by Emma Phu and Romir Mukherjee. All of the prize winners earned signed copies of *Chess Queens*, generously donated by WGM Jennifer Shahade, US Chess Women's Program Director and a longtime supporter of our initiatives.

Off the board, players competed in a puzzle contest, with problems spanning from undemanding mates in one to seemingly inconceivable studies. The difficulty of the exercises did not stop the ambitious puzzle solvers from demonstrating their tactical prowess, with the top three places being taken by Alice, Dhruthi Rao, and Lilianna.

All in all, the first Unruly Queens Chess Festival was a huge success. Participants enjoyed a half day of low-stakes, yet instructive, chess while connecting with the local community and forging the beginnings of what will hopefully turn into lifelong friendships. Participants left with cheers, smiles, and inspiration — and we couldn't hold back our own joy at accomplishing our initial goals!

On behalf of Unruly Queens, I would like to extend our gratitude to a few special people who helped make this event possible. Our first big thank you goes to US Chess Women, especially Jennifer Shahade and Kimberly Doo, who not only sponsored our festival but have also supported us every

The first Unruly Queens Chess Festival took place in New York's Washington Square Park, attracting players from the tri-state area.

step of the journey and guided us with their personal experiences and insights.

We are also grateful to the New York State Chess Association, Chess-in-the-Schools, Girls 2 Grandmasters, Little House of Chess, and Marshall Chess Club, who have contributed immensely by helping us reach out to the local chess communities.

We are especially appreciative of our amazing volunteers — Rowan and Lila Field, Lisa Jin, Catherine Mong, Summer Li, and Emma Wang — who gave up their valuable Sunday and made the commitment to critical logistic tasks such as distributing refreshments, checking in participants, resetting boards and clocks, and grading the puzzle contest answers.

Last, but certainly not least, a major shout-out goes to all of the participants who have attended our online activities and our in-person festival: We could not have gotten this far without your enthusiasm and your trust in our aspirations.

While the first edition of our festival has concluded, the Unruly Queens remain as motivated as ever to achieve our mission of closing the gender gap in chess. We continue to hold weekly Zoom classes, and the next chess festival is already in the works, set to take place in Spring 2023. Although it may take years for the number of chess girls to match that of boys, the Unruly Queens are fully dedicated to undertaking the challenge and taking the small, gradual steps to reach the final destination.

For more information on Unruly Queens programs and events, please contact us at theunrulyqueens@gmail.com. ♠