

## ChessKeys

### *The King Who Would Be Pawn*

By Rachel Schechter

It's my first chess class since moving to the Minnesota Snow—Franklin Elementary School's after-school program on an a8 square in Minneapolis.

And I'm blessed with an e1 student.

Carl Karlsen is 7. He's smart, silly, wily, witty, endowed with what we refer to as 'chess sense': he knows what to do with the pieces. You can't teach this—you can only improve on it, refine it. One plan on the board, two in the wings. Combining, flipping forks, setting skewers—without knowing what a tactic is. I catch my breath watching him play. A natural.

Boorish over—the—board? Quite the contrary. Carl's the consummate gentleman. An engaging, lopsided grin. Always smiling or giggling, he lets his opponents replay bad moves, plays queen down or queen/rook down when I ask—and still wins decisively. A gracious tiger. A chess instructor's dream. Good—natured, good sportsman, he completes 50 mate—in—one puzzles in an hour.

During one class I ask him to monitor a game of *half—board chess* with two very inexperienced players.

"Sure," he grins, "What's *half—board chess*? We cut the board into pieces?"

"No, no," I laugh, "You play with your king, queen, and half the other pieces. One rook, one bishop, one knight, four pawns. Place them appropriately according to the rules—white rook on h1 or h8, black bishop on f8 or c8, same with knights, and place the 4 pawns on the second and seventh ranks, wherever.

He studies the demo board—I hadn't introduced notation yet.

"Oh, okay, I get it," he nods.

I sigh... he'll be surprised how much he "gets" if he stays with the game.

Then he grins again: "But isn't *half—board chess* like playing with half a deck?"

I smile, pause, he has a point—but my experience proves that the fewer pieces on the board (for beginners) the fewer issues, the quicker they learn.

It's an ideal chess environment—the Franklin Media Center—lots of space and equipment for the kind of chess workshop I like to run: over—the—board play with demo instruction, knights' tours, eight queens boards, several large and small screen computers, a nice area to set up 4—way and floorboard chess, *and* an adjacent, yet open, chess art corner. Perfect.

And so went the class. Smart, upbeat, and into the game. Of course, there are always kids (in beginner groups) who seriously argue for the rights of pawns to move sideways. I smile, uncon-

vinced.

"Forget sideways. Think of how much more *interesting* pawns would be—if they could move *even* backwards!" This from Henry Lawson, Carl's best buddy.

"But they *can* move backwards," grins Carl, "And sideways."

I turn to the class:

"Carl is correct. Under what circumstances can pawns move backwards and sideways?"

"When they go home?"

"If they stumble?"

"If a castle falls on them and they have to escape?"

"When they promote!" yells Mindy Applebaum. I nod, lightly applaud. Thank goodness there's at least one girl in the class. 11 boys and 1 brave girl.

"Yeah, when they promote!" echo the other students.

And so goes this marvelous class... We're four weeks into the eight—week session and it looks like the Minnesota Vikings are going to make the NFC North playoffs. Everyone in the state has Vikings fever, including the children. A pack of about a dozen kids has taken to decorating bathroom mirrors, windows, walls, lockers, floors, desks, whatever surfaces they can, with yellow and green (Franklin's school colors) markers, paints, lipsticks: GO VIKINGS!

After about two weeks, the pack is 'nabbed', 'caught in the act'. The principal makes a loudspeaker announcement: "Going forward, any and all students caught defacing school property will be subject to a three—day suspension and washing the bathroom floors AND toilets for six weeks."

The chess class turns to me, grumbling: "Is that *fair*, Miss Rachel?"

"Yeah, we were just having fun—what do you think?"

Ah, to be seven again. I suppress a smile, switch gears to 'stern Miss Rachel':

"Well, I know how much you support the Vikings—I do too—but let's suppose someone comes to *your* house and paints slogans on *your* windows. How would *you* feel? What would *you*—"

"We already *did* that!"

"Yeah, it's done," echoes the class.

Ah, yes, seven. I look to the board.

"What happens if you leave a piece undefended?" I ask.

"You lose it," says Henry.

"What happens if you don't leave a "trapdoor escape" off the back rank for your King?"

"He can be back rank checkmated," says Carl. Everyone nods.

"Okay, so it's action and consequence, on the board, and in life. Always. What happens, say, if you hit your little sister? You might lose TV privileges or your allowance, or be sent to bed early, right?" The kids nod. Action, consequence.

"My father would *hit me*," says Jacky D, the proverbial class clown.

We all laugh. But I'm serious:

"That's how it goes—for your entire lives—action and consequence. Realizing this is **key** to *living a good life and playing a good game of chess*. You can prepare for it."

"How do you prepare for it?" asks Paul C., quiet, studious.

All eyes on me, questions, seven years old, so many questions.

"By *knowing* the potential consequences of your actions beforehand," I say evenly. "Knowing what *could* happen, what will *likely* happen if you take a particular action." I look again to the board. "Why can't you castle *through* check? Or castle to get *out* of check?"

"Because it's against the chess rules?" offers Mindy Applebaum.

"Yes!" I say resoundingly. "And why can't you deface public or private property?"

They students look searchingly at each other then back to me:

"Because, well—"

"It's, isn't it—?"

"*It's against the law!*"

"That's right—*it's against the law*," others chime.

"Right," I say, "And what do you have *without* the law?" I throw a fully set board into the air. Pieces fly every which way. "Anarchy. Without law—there is only anarchy."

Paul C googles it. "Anarchy: a state of disorder due to absence or non—recognition of authority or other controlling systems."

"What—what does that mean, Miss Rachel?" asks Jacky D, suddenly serious.

"Chaos," I say calmly, "No laws, no control, vandalizing, stealing, crime, confusion..."

Pin—drop quiet. Carl starts picking up the scattered chess pieces. One by one, the other students join him. Henry Lawson

stands, boldly says:

"May I go to the bathroom?"

All eyes turn to Henry. I draw a sharp breath. Henry had something to prove—to himself, to his peers, to his father, and especially to his smarter, taller, more popular, and better—looking, older brother Victor.

"Uh, the bathroom?" I say, "You, uh, you want to go to the *bathroom*?"

"*I have to use the bathroom*," Henry says defiantly. "*Is that a crime?*"

"No," I say calmly, "But you do know the consequences of defacing it?"

Henry turns on his heel and exits the Media Center.

"Okay," I say to the class, "Let's finish picking up the chess pieces."

Five, ten minutes pass. Five boards are set, four are being played, two kids are on the computers, and Carl is waiting on his buddy, Henry. I'm considering sending another child after him when he strides into the room.

"What do you think of this?" he says, swinging his arms, smiling broadly. Everyone stares. Henry has written GO VIKINGS on both sides of his jeans in thick black magic marker. Silence—then laughter, nervous at first, then louder, then raucous. A few kids applaud.

"You're too much, dude, too *much*," says Carl.

"Did you know that the ancient Vikings used to chop their enemies' heads and drink blood from their skulls?" says Henry.

Responses range from 'cool' to 'how disgusting'.

I stop Henry before he sits at the board:

"So much for 'skoal'. Who does your laundry?" I ask.

"My—my mom," Henry answers. "Why?"

I turn to the demo. Queen takes pawn.

"Then there's your consequence," I smile.

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We're into the seventh week and the class is progressing well. Except for two students who just "can't grasp it," all of my goals for them are being met and/or exceeded, as with Carl.

"But you already scored a 64 on the Knight's Tour," I say to him, "Twice. And you got a 64 on the *Double* Knight's Tour. Why not practice some notation? Just the first ten moves. You'll play a better game."

He reluctantly grabs a notation pad and sits at the board with

Henry.

"It *slows down* the game," he says.

"That *is* the point," I smile. Fifteen minutes pass. I look at the clock. 45 minutes left. An idea occurs. Most kids have finished at least one game. So, there's plenty of time for... "Okay," I said to Carl, who'd just trounced Henry with an unexpected, smothered mate, "I have an idea. I want *you* to do—a *simul*—in chess this means you play, uh," I look around, "you play three opponents at the same time or *simultaneously*. Are you up for it?"

He nods, uncertain. I explain the rules, three students volunteer. The boards are set. Carl opens with his usual lighthearted banter, but his opponents are serious. He finishes one round, then two, standing, smiling, trying to make conversation—but it's a no go. His opponents are focused, silent, trying to win. He plays one more round then pulls me over, away from the action.

"I don't want to do this, Miss Rachel," Carl says quietly.

"But why? You've beaten these students all term. *I'm trying to show you how good you truly are.*" He squirms, shy, uncomfortable, clears his throat.

"Oh, I'm really not that good," he whispers. "And I'm a little tired." His lower lip trembles.

"Carl—"

"I, I really don't want to play this *simul thing*, I'm sorry." He looks like he might cry.

I stand back, assess. I am pushing him, too much, too soon. An arm about his shoulders.

"That's okay, honey. Why don't you and your friends play four—way chess, have some fun, okay?"

He grins. And they do.

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Last class coming up. I always reward *all* students for their chess efforts. Now, I don't believe in awarding trophies just for showing up; but chess is the intellectual gymnasium—the most difficult, most challenging game on the planet. Those who choose to study it *deserve* to be rewarded—particularly at this level—to build confidence and increase their interest in the royal game.

I decide to award actual *Chess Keys*. These are variegated chess piece key chains I buy at US Chess Sales and attach them to write—on keys I buy at Home Depot. The idea is: "Chess is the *key* to achieving your now and future goals, the *key* that can unlock a better life." I ask the recipients to think of a goal—what they want to be when they grow up, something they need, a dream, a wish. What do they write? Oh, grandmaster, new puppy, girlfriend, scientist, tech hack, money, inner peace, and so on... Linking the 'concept' to a physical piece they can backpack, save, and look upon in 20 years provides continuity. And those of us connected to the royal game know that it's true. Chess *can* unlock that better life we *all* seek.

I base this group of awards on the Knight's Tour results. Carl

finished first with 64, Mindy 60, Eric 58, the rest were low fifties and forties. I have one king, one queen, one knight, and 9 pawn *Chess Keys*. Assorted colors. I arrange them handsomely, with copies of *Chess Life for Kids* magazines. When the youngsters arrive, they surround the awards table:

"Wow!"

"What're these?"

"Are those *real* keys?"

"I want that one!"

"Hey—I want *that* one—"

"Do we get the magazines too?"

"Okay," I smile, "*Everyone gets a Chess Key and an issue of Chess Life for Kids* magazine. Now, it's our last class of the semester. Let's review the Four Knights Game, play 2 games over—the—board, do *other* workshop activities, *then* I'll award the prizes."

And so, they do. Towards the end of class, we gather around the awards table; we discuss the *Chess Keys* and the idea of achieving goals, of chess unlocking the future, what their dreams and hopes are, how chess can assist them in these endeavors. The kids lean in. You can sense the anticipation:

"Hey—no breathing on the keys!"

"You can't touch the keys—"

I intervene:

"Everyone, please stand back. I want to congratulate *all of you* for electing to study chess. And I hope you will *continue* to study chess. Now, there's a *Chess Key* and an issue of *Chess Life for Kids* for each of you to take home. The results are based on our Knight's Tour competition. When I call your name, *you select* the *Chess Key* and the magazine you want." Everyone nods. "First place, Carl Karlsen with a perfect 64 on the Knight's Tour *and* the Double Knight's Tour." Applause. "Okay, dude, you first—choose your *Chess Key*!"

Carl grins, looks around, smiles at his buddy Henry, looks at me, then knits his brows and leans in toward the keys. "Oh, I think I'll take this one," he says, choosing a pawn. I stand back startled. My e1 King has chosen a pawn *Chess Key*.

But Carl," I blurt, "You won. You *won* the *King*. *Fair and square*. Take it."

He shakes his head, shy: "No, I like this one," he says. "This one's fine."

Mindy takes the Queen, Eric grabs the King, and the Knight and other pawns quickly disappear. Henry hugs Carl. Tears catch my eyes. Seven, seven, and true best friends. I look to the window, swallow, unable to speak. Moments, ah, pinnacles like these—too few and far between—are why we teach. I fumble for a chair, sit quietly while the students jump around the Media Center, twirl-

ing their *Chess Keys*, writing their goals, flipping through their magazines—the bell sounds—grabbing their hats, coats, and backpacks, filing through the double doors— “Bye, Miss Rachel!” “Really liked the class, Miss Rachel!”

Carl is among the last to leave.

“What—what did you write on your *Chess Key*?” I ask, helping him into his boots.

“Oh, I couldn’t think of anything to write,” he says, arms into his jacket.

“What do you want to be when you grow up?”

He shrugs:

“I really don’t know,” he says, searching for his mittens.

“But there must be something,” I say lightly, “Something you want, need?”

“I—did you see my hat? —I, you know, I really don’t *want* anything,” he says, “and there’s *nothing* I really need.”

I hand him his Vikings cap.

“Oh, there has to be *something* you want to do—”

He thinks for a minute:

“Play more chess?”

I tap his hat:

“Now that’s a *great* idea—*that’s* what you can write on your *Chess Key*.”

He nods, walks toward the door:

“Are you going to *be here* next semester, Miss Rachel?”

I look through the windows...blend and drift with the Minnesota snows.

“Yes,” I say.

Carl spins back around, steps toward me:

“Are you *sure*?” he asks.

“As sure as I *can* be,” I smile. His half—zipped backpack slides from his shoulders, nearly all its contents spill onto the floor.

“Damn!” he says, sitting on the floor, re—stuffing his backpack. “It was only half—zipped!”

I kneel to help him:

“Like playing with half a deck?” I laugh. We both laugh—pure, fresh, deep—like the Minnesota snows. And stand silent for a minute. Then: “We’re taking my grandmother to Florida over vacation, because she’s been sick,” Carl says quickly, quietly.

My heart skips. I check his pack, hug his shoulders.

“There you go—fully zipped,” I say to this remarkable young man. “I’m sure the Florida sunshine and warm ocean waters will help your grandmother feel *a lot* better.”

Carl nods then runs through the double doors:

“Thanks, Miss Rachel. See you next semester.”

“See you, Carl. Have a good vacation.” I spy something shiny on the floor. It’s his key, Carl’s *Chess Key*. I move quickly through the double doors: “Carl!” I shout, “Your *key*, you dropped your *Chess Key*—” But he is almost outside, nearly out of earshot.

“Keep it *safe* for me, Miss Rachel—my family’s waiting in the car—I’ll get it next semester—you’ll be here, right?”

All doors close to the breathless majesty of the Minnesota snows. I pocket Carl’s *Chess Key* close to my heart.

“Yes,” I whisper to the stately snows, “You’ll *always* play chess at Franklin Elementary, Carl Karlsen. And I’ll *always* be seven. Thanks for teaching me.”

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My Affiliate FB Treasure Chess photo

