

SHOULD YOU BEWARE OF 8-YEAR-OLD PRODIGES?!

# The Kids Are More Than Alright

In the past couple of decades it could be noticed that new generations were able to learn the alphabet, even some foreign languages (not to mention operating mobile gadgets) at a very early age thanks to modern tools and the existence of the internet. Where is the age border for learning and achieving notable results in chess?

By Dylan Loeb McClain



Dylan Loeb McClain is a journalist and a FIDE master. He worked at *The New York Times* from 1994 to 2012 and wrote the chess column for the paper from 2006 to 2014. He now lives in a Paris suburb and works for *Les Echos*, a daily French business newspaper. He also continues to write articles for *The New York Times* from time to time.

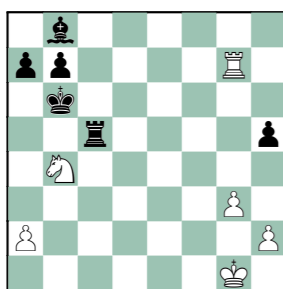
It has been a remarkable few months for 8-year-old prodigies. It began at the World Rapid and Blitz Championships in December in Uzbekistan. Roman Shogdzhiiev of Russia beat Jakhongir Vakhidov, an Uzbeki grandmaster in Round 1 of the rapid event and then Johan-Sebastian Christiansen, a Norwegian grandmaster, in Round 6. He also drew three grandmasters. In the blitz championship, Roman beat three more grandmasters: Kirill Shevchenko of Romania in Round 9, Alan Pichot of Spain in Round 13, and V. Pranav of India in Round 14.



Here is how Roman, who was White, outplayed Christiansen in an endgame, which is usually not the strength of young players.

Roman Shogdzhiiev	2042
Johan-Sebastian Christiansen	2494

World Rapid Championship, Samarkand 2023



44. d3 d5 45. b2 a6 46. c4 c5 47. e3 e5 48. d7 c3 49. d5 c1+ 50. c2 b1 51. c3 b2 52. a3 h4 53. b4+ b6 54. d3 b5 55. xe5 xe5 56. xh4 e3 57. g4 White's pawns are faster than Black's. 57... xa3 58. g5 a2 59. c3 a3+ 60. c4 a2 61. h4 a5 62. h5 g2+ 63. f5 a4 64. h6 a3 65. h7 h2

66. d6+! b5 67. h6 f2+ 68. e4 f8 69. h8 xh8 70. xh8 c4 71. g6 Black resigned

Afterward Christiansen said in an interview, "It's pretty crazy to be that good when you are eight years old. When I was at that age, I had barely learned the rules."

Two weeks later, at the European Women's Blitz Championships in Monaco, Bodhana Sivanandan from England, scored 8½ points out of 13, finishing 15<sup>th</sup> in a field of 105. In the last two rounds, she beat two international masters – Lela Javakhishvili of Georgia and Nurgyul Salimova of Bulgaria – and in Round 9 she also drew with Elisabeth Paehtz, the German grandmaster, who has been

among the world's best women players for more than 20 years.

It might not be surprising that top players can be tripped up at faster time controls by kids, but it is also happening at slower ones.

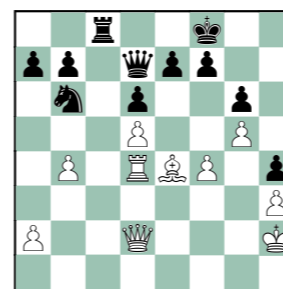
After the blitz championships, Bodhana scored 50 percent in the 2024 Cambridge International Open, beating Supratit Banerjee, a candidate master (who happened to be 9), and also drew an international master and a FIDE master. She is now a candidate master with a rating well over 2000 and ranked No. 1 in the world among children born in 2015.

A day before Bodhana's performance in Monaco, Leonid Ivanovic of Serbia became the first player under the age of 9 to defeat a grandmaster in classical chess. His victim was Milko Popchev, though to be fair, Popchev's rating has fallen to below 2200. Still, it was an impressive accomplishment, particularly as Leonid, who was a month shy of 9, had Black and he kept his head when Popchev launched a speculative attack on Move 39.



Milko Popchev	2193
Leonid Ivanovic	1865

Belgrade 2024



39. f5 gxf5 40. d3 e5 41. xh4 e4 42. xe4 fxe4 43. g6 f5 44. g7+ e7 45. g4 g8 46. g5 f6 47. g2 f4+ 48. g1 e3 49. h1 f5 50. g6 d7 51. e6 d4 52. xd6+ xd6 53. g6+ c7 54. f7+ d7 55. xg8 e4+ Black takes the initiative and does not relinquish it the rest of the way. 56. h2 e5+ 57. g2 e2 58. e6 xg7+ 59. f2 e5 60. d6+ xd6 61. c4+ c6 62. f4+ d6 63. c4+ b6 64. xe2 e5+ 65. f1 b5

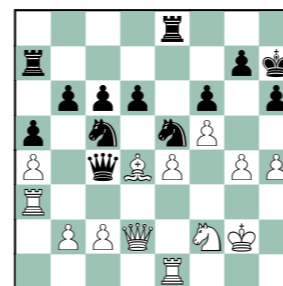
White resigned

Leonid's record did not last long. A month later, Ashwath Kaushik of Singapore beat Jacek Stopa, a grandmaster from Poland, in Round 4 of the Burgdorfer Stadhaus Open in Switzerland. Ashwath, who had White in the game, was five months younger than Leonid and Stopa, while no longer at his peak, is still over 2300.

The game went:

Ashwath Kaushik	1892
Jacek Stopa	2351

Burgdorfer Stadhaus Open, Bern 2024



27...d5 28. b3 b4? The exchange of queens favors White. 29. xb4 axb4 30. aa1 dx4 31. xc5 Fracturing Black's pawns; Ashwath plays the rest of the game masterfully. 31...bc5 32. x4 xg4 33. g5+! fxg5 34. xe8 White is winning, but Ashwath cleans up nicely.



Leonid Ivanovic

older. Children can understand and develop theoretical, hypothetical and counterfactual thinking, they can understand and apply abstract logic and reasoning and develop higher strategic and planning skills. They are also able to apply concepts that they learn in one context in another.

Though we know that children can learn to play chess and play fairly well as young as 5, according to Piaget's stages, it seems unlikely that they become truly elite players at that age because they lack the ability to form complex, abstract ideas, which is essential for chess mastery. So, for now, while elite players have to increasingly watch out when playing 8-year-olds, it seems that if are facing 5- or 6-year-olds, they are probably safe.

## A MEA CULPA

In my last column, I criticized the International Chess Federation (FIDE) for how it organized part of the selection process for the Candidates Tournament. I concluded the column by suggesting that it was unlikely that FIDE would learn from or correct its mistakes.

Well, it has, and the changes should help rectify the problems that arose in the last cycle.

FIDE is abolishing the spot in the next Candidates (after 2024) reserved for the loser of the World Championship. It is also changing the criteria for a qualifier for a spot based on rating, which was abused by players last time. Instead of having the spot reserved for the highest-rated person on one list (which allowed players to enter tournaments up until the last minute), it will be based on the average of six months.

Two spots will be for the top finishers of the FIDE circuit, but here, too, there have been some important changes. Players can now play as many tournaments as they want in one country that qualify for the circuit, so long as the average rating of the top eight players in a tournament is at least 2650. And anyone who wants to organize a tournament that qualifies for the circuit after July 1<sup>st</sup> must inform FIDE at least three months in advance, which should eliminate organizing last-minute tournaments, which created an issue at the end of last year.

All in all, the changes should make qualifying for the Candidates fairer. ■

## A PHENOMENON OR A NEW REALITY?

The phenomenon of children getting better at chess at younger ages is not new, and, while 12-year-old grandmasters are still not common, it is no longer as shocking as it was when Sergey Karjakin became the first in 2002. (Four others have qualified for the title since 2018 before their 13<sup>th</sup> birthday.)

Still, eight years is very young and begs the question of whether that is the lower limit of when children can become elite players. It may be, according to the theories of Jean Piaget, a Swiss psychologist who studied human development and whose ideas remain influential. Piaget identified four stages of cognitive development in children. They are:

- 1) Sensorimotor, from 0 to 2 years. Children coordinate their senses, develop motor responses, and develop rudimentary language skills.
- 2) Preoperational, from 2 to 7 years. Children begin using symbolic thinking (i.e., associating symbols like letters with sounds so that they can begin to read), begin using proper grammar and syntax, and begin to develop their imagination, but still struggle with abstract thinking.
- 3) Concrete operational, from 7 to 11 years. Children can apply concepts to concrete situations and begin to understand abstract ideas such as time, space and quantities.
- 4) Formal operational, 11 years and