

ChessKeys

Action and Consequence

By Rachel Schechter

Sharon Lee burst into my after-school chess class. She was livid:

“Zeke Eller is cheating in chess class. I saw him. Three times.”

I sighed, looked out the window through a New Jersey rainstorm, scratched my head, and sorted through a sheaf of chess puzzles.

“You saw him? You saw Zeke cheat?”

Sharon nodded vigorously:

“Yes—*three times*. The first time, against me. I thought I imagined it. But then I started watching him, secretly. He’s cheating! What are you going *to do* about it?”

I tabled the puzzles; opened my hands, surprised, sadly surprised. Zeke Eller was one of the best players in the class:

“Well, I don’t know, Sharon—I—”

She glared at me...dead serious:

“If you don’t act on this, Miss Rachel, I’ll be forced to take it to the council for a vote. This undermines our school honor code.”

Eleven-year-old Sharon Lee had recently been elected Student Council President at the very prestigious Ridgedale Academy in Washington Township New Jersey. Zeke Eller’s mother, Nancy, had recommended me for the chess teaching position. Prior to this I’d taught chess at two other schools, had done well, and was pleased to accept the job offer. Zeke used to play downtown with a nice mixed group called Tuesday Twilighters. Without his mother’s support, my chess job wouldn’t have happened.

I slowly began distributing the chess puzzle packets.

“Why would Zeke cheat?” I wondered aloud. “He’s one of the best players in the class—if not **the** best.”

Sharon shook her head:

“I don’t know,” said Sharon, “that’s what I don’t understand. Why would he cheat? He doesn’t have to.” She reddened. “I mean, **nobody should cheat**, but he, well—”

I smiled and patted her arm:

“I understand, Sharon, I do.”

I gestured to a table; we sit; she’s uncomfortable but unshakable. I’m depressed and uncomfortable. I thought of the Hans Niemann nightmare, Vladimir Kramnik’s subsequent accusations, all the negative cheating drama. Cheating. My rich uncle Ed cheats on his taxes, my friend Maryann cheats on her husband, my cousin Selene cheats on her diet. Now this? Honor student Zeke Eller, top chess player in the Ridgedale Royal Rooks class—cheating? I was going to recommend him for sanctioned rated play, even states. I rubbed my forehead. **‘Ethos, thou art sore depraved. How doth we degenerate?’** It seemed nothing was sacred. Not even the royal game.

“Uh, how does he cheat,” I asked, “I mean, are you sure? What did you see?”

Students milled about. Sharon lowered her voice:

“He catches his opponent off guard; moves a piece when he isn’t looking— And yes, I’m sure, very sure. Do you think I like reporting this? I *like* Zeke Eller.”

“You mean he just—”

“Kind of like a magician. What do they call it? Slight, sleigh—?”

“Sleight of hand?”

“That’s it. His opponent is talking or joking with another student, or goes to the bathroom, whatever. Zeke is smiling, laughing. Then, wham! He moves a piece quicker than lightning. A few moves later his opponent is mated.”

I lean back, perplexed:

“Does he move a *major* piece?”

Sharon shrugged:

“I don’t think so; pawns, I think, I really can’t explain it. He just leans forward, moves a piece, maybe two, then sits back like nothing happened. Then he wins.”

“And the other player *doesn’t notice it*? We have some decent players, I mean—”

“Sharif Ajit challenged him once, but Zeke convinced him the position was correct. And since nobody notates...”

I closed my eyes, shook my head. Really must rethink this notation issue. The students moan and groan; they hate it. Though it’s an underlying goal, technically we’re not playing or prepping students for rated competitive chess. I needed another kind of notation incentive. There were no killer rivalries, no trophies to die for. It was a logical, critical thinking, mentoring, analytical action/consequence class. But perhaps this was the incentive I needed. I cleared my throat and walked to a window. “It’s an honor,” I whispered, “...an honor to play and study the royal game. To serve it.”

“Honestly, Miss Rachel, it’s been keeping me up nights. I mean, Zeke Eller lives two blocks over; we have family barbecues and swim parties over the summer.” She blinked back tears. “But this is **wrong**. And I was just elected Student Council President. I *must* report these things.”

I turned from the window, nodded, smiled encouragingly:

“Yes,” I agree, “It’s *very* wrong. You were right to tell me, Sharon. Thank you.”

Sharon flexed her shoulders, breathed easily, evenly. Then she put her hands to her hips:

“But something has to be done, Miss Rachel, *something*—”

“I—I’ll have to watch him closely, I—”

Sharon shook her head:

"No. You're always moving around, going from game to game, analyzing, helping us, how can you *watch* him?"

I turned back to the window, studying the rain. She was right. The nature of my position plus my teaching style simply didn't afford me the time to study every student's every move that closely. I squinted into the rain—it was beginning to clear—an idea was trying to form. There had to be a key to this chess cheating problem.

"Sharon, honey, class lasts an hour—is there a, uh, a specific time when Zeke cheats? Early on, middle of the class, towards the end when students are leaving."

Sharon thought for a minute, then nodded:

"Yeah, it's always towards the end of the game. The endgame. Everybody's readying to go. Water bottles, back packs, last game, last moves... Why? Do you have a plan?"

I set up the demo board, forced mate-in-two.

"Even a *bad* plan is better than *no* plan," I smiled, "And yes, I do. Keep watching him, take notes if you need to but tell no one, be inconspicuous. And we'll work this out together. Can you do that?"

Sharon jumped up, excited; she's part of a covert plan:

"Yes! Yes, of course! It'll be our secret and you—you'll handle it."

"The endgame, yes, I'll handle it, no worries."

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That night I sweetened my green tea with a lemon brandy and made a couple of calls. First, my attorney daughter:

"Do you have a contract with the school?" she asked immediately.

"Well, no, it's the first time Ridgedale's offering a chess class, Nancy Eller is the PTA president, so she and I shook hands on it—next semester I'll—"

"Big mistake, mom. No contract, no contingency. I know you trust the handshake thing. But how could you—a chess player—work without contingency? What were you thinking?"

I nursed the tea.

"I wasn't," I said glumly. "And Nancy's my go to, my advisor—"

"So, what? You're going to tell the woman who gave you the job, that her 11-year-old honors son is cheating? Adios, job."

I poured another tea, called my friend Ann on the NJ Chess Executive Board who immediately launched into the Niemann nightmare.

"Ann, this is hardly a state or national issue, I'm just, well, what's your advice?"

"Well, you *do* head our Scholastic Committee. Any witnesses?"

"Just the little girl I mentioned..."

"You could call him out on it—in front of the class—use the girl as witness—see what happens—"

I winced; embarrassing kids wasn't my style:

"Too much trauma and drama. She said, he said."

"Hmm... camera in the classroom?"

"No, there's no camera in the classroom, against school policy. Code of honor." Then suddenly the Zugzwang cloud lifted. "But thanks, Ann, you've given me a move I can make—"

Ann assumed her Executive Board demeanor.

"Ahem, well, that's what we're here for, Rachel. Glad I could assist. We're all on the same board, you know. Be sure to let me know how it goes."

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The week passed. *How would* it go? First, I decided to give Zeke a chance to come forward, tell me about it privately.

I assigned pairings. The students set up their boards.

"Before you begin..." I said, "I want to share a problem with you—perhaps you can help." All eyes on me. "I teach chess in another school in another township as some of you know. Anyway, I caught one of the kids cheating. I talked with her about it; but she denied it. Said I must've made a mistake. Caught her again. She denied it again. So, what should I do? Talk to her parents? The principal?"

"No, no way, bad move "was the resounding response, followed by questions:

"Did anybody else see her?"

"Does her school have an honor code?"

"How do you cheat at chess?"

"It's not easy," I said, "Of course, if everyone took notation—"

Everyone moaned, groaned, 'no not that again'.

I looked at Zeke; searched his face, his eyes, for any kind of clue as to his unethical behavior. Nothing."

"Maybe you should ask her to leave the class?"

"Yeah, leave the class."

"I thought about that," I said slowly, walking through the aisles, "but she'd still need to provide a reason. She's a good player, likes the class; it would seem rather unusual if she just up and quit. In fact, she's considering entering a formal competition..."

"Doesn't there have to be a 'consequence'?" said Sharon Lee.

I turned to her, relieved:

"Right. Of course. Would you please explain to the class?"

"Well, you always tell us chess is a game of consequence. Action and consequence. If you leave a pawn undefended, you lose it—If you hit your little sister, you lose TV privileges."

"That's right—yeah—" the class chimed in.

"I like the promotion one—crossing the street!" chuckled a few students.

I smiled:

"Which one is that?" I laughed.

"You know. Not using your king to protect your pawn while it's trying to promote, is like crossing a long busy street without a parent. You can really lose."

"I still don't understand about promotion," one of the students said quietly, shyly.

"Me either," said another.

"And what about '*En Passant*'?"

"Is that really a thing or a French joke?"

Everyone laughed. I smiled and set up an endgame board. The students gathered 'round.

"Watch closely. It's not easy to understand, not easy to explain, and it's not often used. ***En Passant is French for 'in passing'. It only involves pawns and can only happen on the 2nd or 7th ranks.*** In this case, white is advancing, so the black pawns are on the 7th rank, right?" The kids nod. "So, if a black pawn moves two squares forward and 'passes through' this capture square—now stay with me—on the next move, *and the next move only*, this white pawn can claim '*En passant*' and capture the black pawn like this and thus advance one square. The **key** is timing, knowing when to use it. And that takes practice."

A few of the kids scratched their heads.

"Geez, that's harder than promotion."

"I'll say..."

"Actually, if you force an *En Passant* it's easy to promote for a back rank checkmate," said Zeke casually, matter-of-factly.

I froze. That was it. Endgame. *En Passant*. Promotion. Checkmate. That's how he was cheating. I turned and looked him directly in the eyes. He held my glance—defiantly—for a moment, then looked away.

"Okay class," I said, "back to your boards. Shake hands. Good luck to all."

I kept a close eye on Zeke that afternoon but after thirty minutes was asked to clarify a draw position. In the few minutes my back was turned, Zeke had concluded a winning game. I glanced at his board. Yep. Back rank mate via pawn promotion to a queen, likely using an *En Passant*. Kids were packing up, Zeke among them.

"Say Zeke, you got a minute?"

"Sure, Miss Rachel," he said calmly.

I erased the whiteboard, waiting for the rest of the students to leave, then looked up at him and half-smiled, took a deep breath:

"Everything okay with you?"

"Or course," he said perfunctorily. "Why do you ask?"

"Oh, I don't know, you seem a bit distracted lately, just thought I'd ask."

He flashed his best smile:

"Couldn't be better Miss Rachel," he said, heading out the door, "Couldn't be better."

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Another week passed. Time for my next move. I caught Sharon Lee in the hallway and asked if she could stop by the chess classroom about 15 minutes early.

"What's up?" she said half an hour later, "What's the plan?"

"Um, do you have an iPhone, Sharon, or an Android, something—?"

She smiled and held up her wrist:

"I have an iWatch, iPhone, and an iPad. What do you need?"

I grinned, standard paraphernalia for children in a wealthy school district, and put a conspiratorial arm about her shoulder.

"Okay, we have three classes left, now I'll put you at Zeke's table for the next two weeks and..."

After ten minutes or so Sharon rolled her eyes:

"That's a great idea, Miss Rachel. I—I hope I don't screw it up somehow..."

I squared her shoulders:

"You won't," I said decisively. "You're a technical maven and you're about to save the honor of the royal game—anonymously. I have every confidence in you."

She drew a deep breath, proud, nodded:

"I'll do my best, Miss Rachel."

"I know you will, dear."

And so, she did. And the plan worked like the proverbial charm. Two of the three remaining classes were done. Spring had sprung and after the paired games were decided, I let the students out early to enjoy the playground.

"Say, Zeke, hang on, will you? There's something we need to discuss."

He dropped his backpack, looked at me quizzically. I walked through the boards, recording the results, and paused at his board—another back rank queen promo mate—suddenly nervous. Geez, he was just eleven years old. What was going on with this kid?

"Sure—what's up, Miss Rachel?"

I pulled down the shades, turned off the lights, closed the classroom door, and pulled down the large white computer screen. Sharon—well hidden—flashed an image of one of Zeke's games onto the screen.

Zeke paled a bit, then angered.

"Say—what's this about?! Are you *spying* on me? That's against school rules, that's—"

"Please sit down, son," I said quietly, guiding him to a chair. "There's something you need to see..."

"NO!" he yelled, breathing hard, "THERE'S NOTHING I NEED TO SEE, **NOTHING!**"

Tears welled inside my heart. The video played in slow motion. I tried to sound light, casual:

"Look, here's your game against Ricardo from last week. You had him in a smothered mate in 2 but went for the *En Passant*-promo-back rank mate." I walked to the screen gesturing to the pieces." And right here—here's where you do it. Looks like a legitimate *En Passant* capture but you move your pawn up two squares. Very quick, very slick. Very hard to do, in fact. Then before Ricardo knows what's happening, you slide in for the queen and the mate..."

Zeke cleared his throat:

"I—I must've made a mistake," he said slowly, evenly, "Misplayed it. Anyone can make a mistake."

"That's true," I said. "That's why pencils have erasers. So, let's look at today's game...your match against Debbie."

Sharon flashed the video on the screen; Zeke sat down slowly, wiped his brow, his upper lip.

"Now I haven't seen this one yet," I said in a friendly tone, "Okay—your opening, all good, middle game, oops a recalcitrant bishop, that happens, Debbie's trying hard but you're just a better player. We're moving into the endgame—you're up by at least 8 pawns, have a rook/rook battery and a Cajun queen. All you need to do is—but no, wait, you do the *En Passant* trick. Again. Did you misplay it? Again?" I swallowed my tears. "We can run the film *again* if you like..."

I saw the slump of his shoulders, heard his young heart break.

"So what?" he said, still trying to muster the 'tough guy', "So I cheated! You're Miss Perfect, I suppose, never cheated at anything in your life, you—"

"Actually, I did cheat—when I was around your age—on a science test. Teacher called me out in front of the whole class, told my parents—"

"You—you're going to call my *parents*?" he said fearfully. "Rat me out to the class?"

"Uh, no," I said firmly. "I am not going to 'rat you out' to anyone."

"Why—why not?" a few tears crept into his voice.

I sat beside him:

"Because I know how *horrible* you feel right now—how you wish the earth would just swallow you up—or that this was just a bad dream."

He hung his head:

"It's a nightmare," he whispered, "a terrible, terrible nightmare. All of it."

Finally, he was opening. I leaned in:

"But *why* did you do it—over and over—you're *already* the best player in the class—so *why*?"

"Why?" he half-laughed, half-cried. "Because my whole fucking life has turned into a nightmare—that's why!"

"Zeke, please stop swearing, your parents will think I—"

He jumped up, waving his arms, stamping his feet:

"My parents! Oh yes—my parents—Mr. & Mrs. Eller and their golden boy Zeke—how lucky they are—the perfect family—let's all emulate the Ellers—but wait, what's that you say? A divorce?"

The Ellers are getting a divorce? But they're the perfect family. Tch. Tch."

"I—I'm sorry, Zeke, divorce is rough, I know, I—"

He kicked over a desk.

"No, I don't think you know this move, Miss Rachel, I really don't!"

I tried to put an arm about him, but he pushed me away.

"Zeke, just, please—"

"A REGULAR DIVORCE I COULD HANDLE! BAD ENOUGH, BUT DOABLE. NOOOO, MOMMY IS MARRYING ANOTHER WOMAN AND DADDY IS MOVING TWO STATES AWAY. ZEKEY GETS A NEW PROMO QUEEN MOM AND—AND OH, GOD—"

I grabbed him, hugged him hard; he cried against me.

"—and my dad, I don't know when, if, when I'll see *my dad*. I—I miss him already. Oh God, what am I going to do, I want to die!"

He was sobbing, nearly convulsive. My heart wept with his. How long had this been bottled up inside?

I smoothed his hair and rubbed his back.

"There, there, it'll be alright, really, it'll be alright..."

"It won't *ever* be alright—ever. What am I going to do?"

"You're going to set up a board—right now."

"What—what did you say?" he sniffed.

I opened the blinds, flicked on the lights.

"You heard me. Set up a board. We're chess players. *We solve problems. We don't create them. That's the key—in life, in chess—that's the key.*"

We both stared at a blank board. I held up two white queens, forced a smile.

"Here's your mother, Nancy. Let's put her on a4. And what's your new mom promo queen's name?"

"Lydia..." Zeke said quietly, relieved. "Lydia Armstrong."

"a5? for Lydia?" I asked.

Zeke smiled through his tears.

"Yeah, she's pretty butch," he nodded. "Definitely a5."

We both laughed as I set down the queens. Then Zeke picked up the white king, held it against his heart as if it were dearer than gold.

"But what about my dad?" he whimpered. "I—we—we're such good buddies—he said he'd never leave me—"

I took him square by the shoulders:

"And he *won't*," I said firmly, "he *won't*. We'll just rearrange the pieces a bit more, find another route." I positioned Zeke's dad as a black king on e5. "Which state is he moving to?"

"Pennsylvania," said Zeke. "He got a job in Philadelphia."

"Philadelphia? Just a train ride away, dude. A train ride away. And a great city." I moved the black king to e3. "You'll have all kinds of *new adventures* with your dad—you will. It'll be sad not seeing him every day, and it won't be easy living with the two white queens—but it's manageable." I picked up a black knight. "Is this you in the new scenario?" Then I held up a black queen. "Or do you like boys? Not that it's any of my business—"

Zeke laughed, grabbed the black knight, put it on the board between the white king and the white queens.

"No, I like girls—at least I think I do. So that's me, jumping back and forth."

We both laughed, looked at the board.

"Do you think we'll always be adversarial?" asked Zeke. "I mean—we could all be the white pieces, working together."

I nodded:

"That's the goal—but with any divorce, there's some rough terrain to traverse. Tears, scenes, shouting matches. Difficult squares. Be prepared."

"I—I didn't tell you the worst part," Zeke said, lower lip trembling.

I sat down before him:

"There's more?" I said quietly.

"My—my cat—my cat Mr. Whiskers is...sick..."

"Sick? How sick?"

"Well, the vet said—I'm not really sure, but—"

"But he could be *okay*, right?" I said nodding, "Cats do have nine lives. You know that. They reincarnate. They just keep promoting, right?" I drew a large cat with huge happy whiskers on the back of a chess board. "Here, take this home for Mr. Whiskers."

"He might pee on it—he keeps peeing on everything," Zeke said.

I looked out the window then back to Zeke. How to respond?

"Well, we have a lot of boards. Put a nice pillow or cat bed on it. Maybe the squares will divert him."

Zeke rolled up the board and stuffed it into his backpack, donned a light jacket.

"Sorry about the cheating, Miss Rachel. I—I—it just happened during one class, by accident, really; I saw that it worked, and well, I just kept—I don't know why—I'm just sorry."

"I think it was stress," I said, "Life throwing you one bad curve after another—you couldn't even catch your breath. Very tough dilemmas to deal with. You kept it locked inside but ultimately it played out on the chess board. You *had* to talk with someone. I'm glad it was me."

"I'm *not* a *cheater*, Miss Rachel."

"I know, honey. I understand. I do. You're a fine young man."

"You still think so?" voice soft.

"I know so," I said, "I also know that to get through difficult situations, it's imperative to talk to someone."

"Are you—are you going to tell anyone?" voice small.

I shook my head.

"No, Zeke Eller. I think you've suffered enough." I tossed him the computer chip with the videos.

Impulsively, he hugged me.

"Thanks, Miss Rachel. You're the *best*." Then he stood back. "But what about chess?"

"What about it? There's one class left until the semester break. Or do you want to set up a board now?"

"No, I mean 'consequence'. Action and consequence. That's what you taught us, right?"

"Oh, right, right." I looked at the chess listings on the walls. Pairings Results, Knight's Tour Scores, Puzzles Solved, Nine Queens' Boards... Looked through the window, closed my eyes. I couldn't bear to issue an appropriate 'consequence' but... I pointed to the chess listings on the wall. "See those listings? Your name is at the top of each one. Next week, after one more pairing, I plan to announce the winners and award prizes accordingly. Since you *did* cheat—"

"You should remove my name from the listings," he said quietly.

My heart wrenched.

"You mean the *Pairings List*—the Wins, Losses & Draws?"

"No," Zeke said, "All of them. And I can't come to the last class. I just can't—I'll stay home from school that day. Can you tell the other kids I'm sick or something?"

I looked through the window, through my tears. Yes, a fine young man, indeed. What the royal game needs. It cannot be conquered, the game. It cannot be deceived. But it can be loved. And from the first time I watched him play, I knew Zeke Eller loved the royal game. I cleared my throat, shuffled through some papers.

"Well, let me think about it. And I'll tell the class you're not feeling well, no worries."

"I suppose I should quit chess completely," he said voice breaking, moving toward the door. "I don't deserve to play."

"Nonsense!" I said sternly. "We have a 3-week break and then we resume—start anew. I expect you to be there, Zeke Eller."

"You—you *still* want me to play?" he said incredulously.

I tossed him a notation pad and snorted:

"You need the royal game, and the game needs you. Understand? And not only do I expect you to *play* next semester, I *insist* that you try to teach the class the *En Passant*."

Non-plussed, he was.

"You—you want me to *teach* the *En Passant*?"

I threw my hands up into the air:

"Heck, yeah. You're the only student who understands it." I tossed him another board and bag of pieces. "Practice over the break."

"Miss Rachel, I just don't know what to—"

"Say you'll do it—and go, Zeke Eller."

"Yes ma'am."

And he was gone. And I was alone in the classroom. Or so I thought. Sharon Lee slipped out from behind a cabinet. Hand to my heart.

"Oh, geez, you scared me, Sharon, I almost forgot you were there—"

Her face was stained with tears; I couldn't handle any more emotion; set up a board and opened the Queen's Gambit.

"Miss Rachel, it was, you were, Zeke was—"

I smiled, gave her a tissue.

"Dry your eyes, Sharon, and thank you. *You* made it possible."

She daubed her eyes, cheeks, and pulled herself together. A strong young woman who would be a formidable player if she stayed with the game.

"You know," she mused, "my cat just had kittens. Do you think—?"

I tossed her a board and pieces and pointed to the door:

"I think you should make a *good* friend a *better* friend. Now go—please—catch up with Zeke before he moves an extra square ahead.

She turned back at the door:

"But, Miss Rachel, what should I—?"

"Go! I'll think on it. Just, move!"

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And think on it I did. Over a handful of brandied teas. Quiet, contained, played game after game. Over the course of a week. Finally, at 2:00 a.m., the night before the last class, resolution dawned. Conflict and Resolution. Several hours later I stood with Sharon Lee in Ridgedale Academy's final chess class of the semester:

Sharon studied the paper I'd given her:

"You—you want me to read this speech before the class? The whole class? Me?"

"That's right," I smiled, sitting behind my desk, "You're the President of the Student Council. And the students are starting to file in so..."

Sharon positioned herself before the class, waiting for them to take their seats.

"Quiet everyone," I said, sitting behind my desk, "Sharon Lee has a very special announcement to read. Go ahead, Sharon."

Sharon cleared her throat:

Miss Rachel has asked me to inform you as follows: 'Zeke Eller will not be attending or participating in our last class today because he is under the weather—'

"Under what weather?" a couple of students laughed.

"Sick, it means he's *sick*, be quiet..." said a few more.

"Yes, thank you," said Sharon.

'Furthermore, as he is a much more experienced chess player than any of us—having played Twilight Chess for the past two years, he relinquishes all First-Place titles—and awards—to the players next in line, claiming it would be unfair to the class and dishonor the Royal Game. He wishes everyone good luck and hopes to see you again next chess semester.'

Kids (being kids) talked about this for a few minutes then settled into their pairings and enjoyed their subsequent awards. We took a few group and individual photos and students left in high spirits.

Sharon lingered about my desk:

"Was I okay?" she asked, "I mean, the speech, did I—?"

"Fine," I assured her, "the **keynote** speech." You could have a future in politics. We both laughed. "Now, go home, stop worrying and enjoy the semester break."

She paused at the door:

"Do you think *I* should come back to chess class? I mean—*maybe I* should quit—maybe Zeke will be uncomfortable, I mean—"

I stood, shouted:

"You did the right thing, Sharon. Never forget that. And YES! I think you should come back to chess class. And YES! Zeke should come back to chess class." Now, vamoose!"

She threw me a smile and a salute. I sat at my desk, put my feet up and sighed. Conflict and resolution. Action and Consequence. How we love this game.

And yes, Zeke did return to chess class the following semester. Sharon returned. I returned. The class learned notation. And we were all the better for it. So too, the Royal Game.

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