

5. Jacqueline Participates in the First Women's Chess Olympiad

Jump in the Waves Chapter 30: "Starting to Achieve"

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In 1954, the first Women's Chess Olympics was held in Emmen, Holland. United States champion, Gisella Gresser and I were the two representatives of our country. I was playing second board. There were twenty-six nations competing. Through our first tournament, we were divided into three groups. Mrs. Gresser and I landed in the second group, which we won, finishing eleventh. Mrs. Gresser left before the closing ceremony and I had to go up to receive the trophy. Everyone before me had made nice speeches, but when my turn came, I was totally unprepared. I froze. Searching for something to say, I hesitated for a moment, a long torturous moment. Then, too afraid to say something wrong, I walked off the stage without a word.

After playing in the first Chess Olympics, I came back to a normal life. I was still participating in tournaments, though I hated the pressure. Competitive chess is tiring beyond belief. It is always played at night, and at that time, in a room full of smoke. An average tournament game lasts four hours. I was immensely nervous before starting. In a game, from the first move on, tension mounts and keeps accumulating with no outlet. Sometimes, out of exhaustion, it's easy to make a weak move or blunder a minute or two before the end of the game, throwing away four hours of concentrated effort.

Chess is highly obsessional, compulsive, so after every game, the rest of the night is spent going over variations. Sometimes the game is not finished in four hours. After adjournment the position really needs studying, but if one stays up all night, it is even harder to be alert the next day. Some players have a second to help them study the adjourned position. I kept saying, "I hate tournaments. I will give them up. But how can I give up if I have not won the U.S. title?"

"If you win the U.S. you will want to go to the Interzonal and compete for the world championship," my husband said. "Oh, no," I answered. Somehow I was caught by surprise. It had never entered my head. Why hadn't I thought of it? Was it so different to be half a point behind the U.S. champion, or be Champion behind the World Champion? Was it just a title that I was after or was there a deeper meaning to my dreams?

Suddenly, winning the U.S. championship seemed a little less important. But I wasn't ready to give up.

A few years later, when my children were both away, and Grisha was starting to age, I did quit tournament chess. I was still roaming around the world with a distorted perspective, crushed by meaningless losses or over-elated by meaningless wins. I had played since I was six years old. Chess had an obsessional grip on me. Chess was my friend, my support. Chess was a refuge from unfairness. It had become part of my blood. Still today, when I am exhausted and sad, and hope disappears, my natural impulse is to flop in front of a chess board and start pushing pieces. Variations take form, rush forward, retreat, attack, defend. No, an error, try again. Interest and vitality, reborn, flow into combinations, soon become storms, a typhoon in a

teacup. It is ironic that chess and its combinations which are so sterile, also awake a passion, bring life. On the little board, pieces grow and shrink like birds in a muddy marsh.