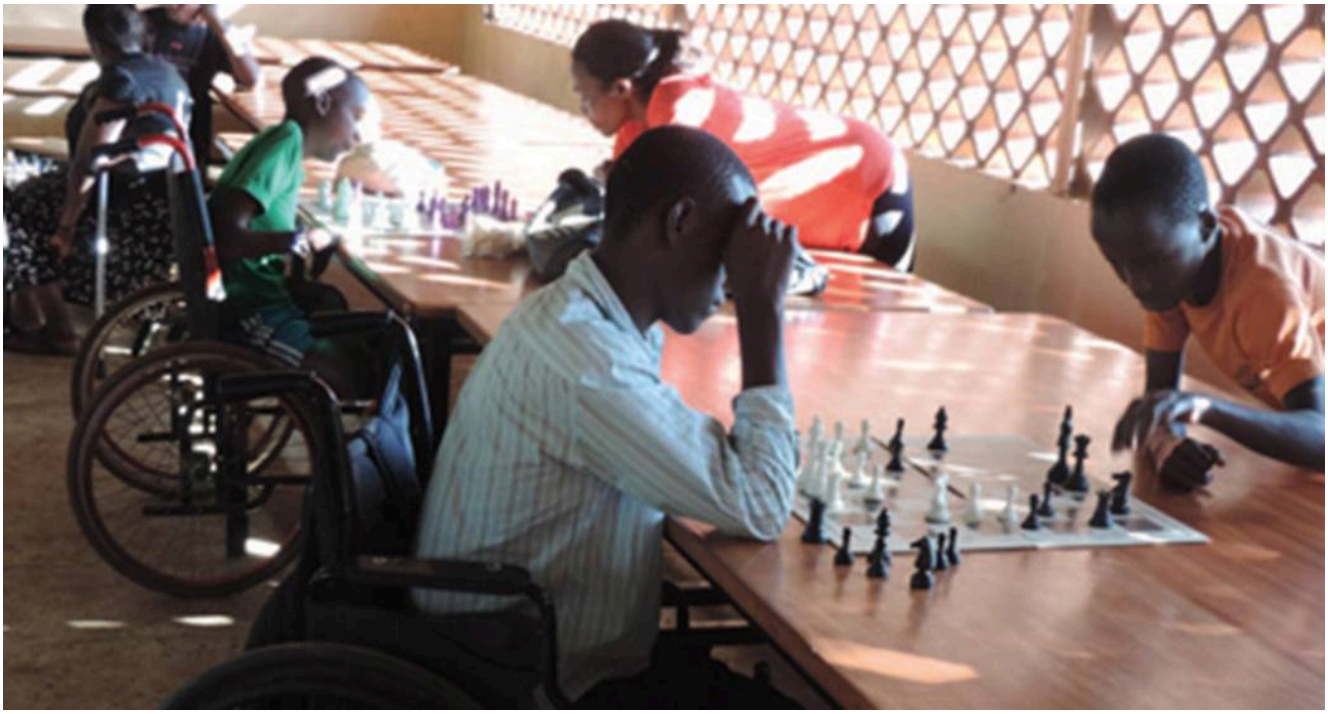
Your move: how chess gives strategies for life

Chess is enjoying a renaissance, as people search for new forms of escapism during lockdown. But for Robert Katende in Uganda, the game never went out of style. Indeed, it's his strategic tool to inspire people with hope of a better life.



April 16, 2021

The recent Netflix series, *The Queen's Gambit*, about an orphaned girl who becomes a chess champion, was just what locked-down audiences were craving: Its positive message "delivered temporary inoculation against toxicity," according to *Time*. But before *The Queen's Gambit*, there was the *Queen of Katwe*. The 2016 Disney production told the true story of Phiona Mutesi, another girl who overcame the hardships of her childhood to become a chess

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champion thanks to a charity chess club run in the Katwe slum in Kampala, Uganda, where she lived.

The man behind that club is Robert Katende, who himself grew up in impoverished circumstances and chose to dedicate his life and career to giving other marginalized children some of the chances he was lucky to wrest for himself. "I wanted them to see that their external circumstances did not reflect their internal capabilities," he says. "I also wanted to feed them."

Often, the feeding came first. Many of Katende's current and former chess students speak of coming to the club in search of their one guaranteed meal a day — a cup of porridge. Some were even ordered to go by their mothers for that reason.

But Katende's purpose went beyond putting food in bellies. Seeing chess as a metaphor for life, he is determined to show the children — who some might see as life's pawns, expendable and unimportant — that through strategy and hard work, they can indeed change their lives.

The game begins

Katende's early life is testament both to overwhelming disadvantages and the role of strategy, education and community in overcoming them.

Raised by his grandmother, herself struggling to make ends meet, Katende spent his '80s youth in rural Uganda, where he was lucky to avoid the violence of Uganda's Bush War.

When his family relocated to the city, things did not improve. The death of Katende's mother threatened to slam the door shut on educational opportunities, until two aunties took him in and helped him pay his school fees.

Katende excelled in school. He worked hard, seeking scholarships, coaching football to be eligible for room and board, and basically making himself indispensable so his schools would find ways to keep him.

Strikingly, for a child from a disadvantaged background, and despite a broken wrist at exam time, he achieved a government scholarship to study civil engineering at Kyambogo University. Rather than pursuing a lucrative job in his field after graduation, he instead went to work for Sports Outreach in the Katwe slum, where he eventually started the SOM Chess Academy. His engineering degree still came in handy, though: He built his own house and

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also the houses of some chess club participants. And he now anticipates building the SOM Chess Academy School.

Play time

The chess academy started as an offshoot of a more popular football club. Not all the children who came for the porridge stayed for the game, but for those who did, Katende began to build the legacy that has transformed the neighborhood today.

In the beginning, he had a single plastic chess set, which was entrusted to the care of one of the children. All of the participants started from zero, and many had little or no formal education. How do you teach chess to eight or nine year olds who have never been to school?

"You contextualize it for them," Katende says. "You use the vocabulary and technology they are already familiar with. Football, for example, or real-life examples like mothers and grandmothers. Chess terminology and more advanced concepts come later. At the beginning, they just need to
play."

Katende also makes a point of having the children be responsible for each other. In Phiona Mutesi's case, he asked a younger player, Gloria Nansubuga, to teach her the game. This served a twofold purpose: "It humbled Phiona to learn from someone younger than her, and it increased Gloria's self-esteem, confidence and sense of leadership." (Nansubuga has gone on to become a world-class chess champion in her own right, attaining a Master title from the international chess federation FIDE.)

No timeout

When teaching vulnerable young people, there is often no end to the workday. Katende has organized emergency food supplies for families and even taken in children who were in impossible housing situations to temporarily live with him and his wife. Mutesi was one such child. She stayed in the Katende household for seven years.

He also found ways for his students to compete in chess nationally and internationally, hosting events and arranging transport. When Disney came calling to make the movie, he coached some of the children for small roles in the film and helped them get passports to travel for filming: no easy feat, as many of the children did not even have birth certificates.

The chess academy provides academic scholarships, helping to pay school fees for promising

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children. Katende identifies those who show potential and channels them to schools where they can realize it. Many have made remarkable progress, going on to university and then to work as teachers or engineers, often mounting their own chess clubs on the side. Two former chess students, Mutesi and her teammate Benjamin Mukumbya, are both studying on full tuition scholarships at Northwest University, near Seattle, in the United States.

Beyond the economic support, many of the academy alumni speak of how their lives have been transformed thanks to chess, teaching them to think and plan in ways they had never known before, and thanks to their coach, who held them accountable, encouraged them to work hard and taught them to never give up.

Former students have spoken admiringly of Katende's ability to turn hardship into positive energy and to "get the ghetto out of the kids' heads." His philosophy has always been "not to coddle, but rather to mentor; this means that, in addition to your support and encouragement, they also benefit from rebuke when necessary."

COVID puts plans in check

The international spotlight put on Katende's chess academy has enabled it to expand beyond what originally seemed possible, with donations of time, resources and chess boards coming from around the world.

But like all good strategists, Katende is always planning ahead. Inspired by the twin benefits of chess and education, he hopes to build a school that will focus on traditional academics but also on "using chess principles and concepts that not only enhance the students' academic performance but also teach the students soft skills that help them be more articulate in their daily lives."

So far, a plot of land has been acquired, but the coronavirus pandemic has put plans on hold. Although Uganda has not been hit as hard as other countries in terms of case numbers, the general shutdowns have affected local economies, particularly areas like Katwe where many live hand to mouth and even the slightest disruption to normal daily life can have major consequences. Throughout the pandemic, Katende's association has been focused less on chess and more on getting food parcels to the approximately 400 families associated with their organization.

In Katwe, chess was always about survival more than mere entertainment. And this year, everyone's strategizing skills are being put to the test.

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How chess prepares you for life

Find the best move: Each move you make should have a purpose. A good opening leads to a good middle and a good endgame.

Focus on winning the war: While you're chasing lowly pawns, your opponent may be thinking bigger.

Challenge yourself: To improve, sometimes you need to face opponents who are better than you are.

Sacrifice: Position trumps material. Sometimes it's worth losing a queen to reach that checkmate position.

Don't crumble under pressure: You may find yourself unexpectedly in check. Staying flexible and keeping your cool lets you explore new options and keep moving forward.

Never lose the lesson: You can't win every game, but make sure you always learn something, even from your losses.

MORE INFO

Tips taken from Robert Katende's book, *A knight without a castle: A story of resilience and hope* (2019). For more on the Robert Katende Initiative or SOM Chess Academy, visit https://www.robertkatende.org.

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