

Beyond the Classroom

TARIQ AL OLAIMY: For many of us it's hard to imagine classrooms beyond the bounds of four walls. But for one pioneering woman, the answer was simple: go beyond classroom walls and into chess boards.

Today we speak to none other than Judit Polgar herself. Regarded as one of the strongest chess players in history, Judit Polgár is passionate about seeing chess taught in every elementary school worldwide. At the age of just 15, Judit became the youngest to achieve the title of Grandmaster in chess - breaking the record previously held by former World Champion Bobby Fischer. She then won endless other titles, becoming the only female chess player to make it to the top 10 in the men's open world rankings.

But her achievements don't end there. In 2012, she spearheaded and developed a new and unique educational method. Her approach goes beyond the usual boundaries of teaching chess. She believes that with the right tools, access and education, anyone can have the tools to become a champion of their lives.

I'm Tariq Al Olaimy, and this is "People and Planet".

A podcast from Expo 2020 Dubai's Programme for People and Planet, where changemakers from all over the world breakdown what it will take to create a sustainable future for our planet.

[INTRO STING]

TARIQ AL OLAIMY: During Knowledge and Learning week at Expo 2020 Dubai, Polgar discussed the role of chess and gamification in creating a conducive system to help kids learn better academically, but also in their everyday lives.

MUSIC

TARIQ AL-OLAIMY: So to get started Judit, you are a Chess Grandmaster. You're an educator. Your native language is chess. You are an attacker of Kings and a global champion for gender equality. Your life is a testament to the power of positive parenting. And as a passionate tactician of patterns, your patterns are now also forever immortalized in the digital world through your first NFT which commemorates the first time in any sport the number one woman beat the number one man.

Judit Polgar, welcome. It's an honor to be able to speak to you today.

And we'd like to start with, could you please just introduce yourself and what your current life's mission is for our audience.

JUDIT POLGAR: Well now.. I retired in 2014 from competitive chess and I established my foundation, the Judit Polgar Chess Foundation in 2012. I do have a Judit Polgar Method developed by my foundation where in Hungary from 2013, we are providing a program for school children for elementary school. And we are using chess as an educational tool.

We do have this program also implemented for preschoolers and the foundation is focusing on this educational method, how to use chess for kids that they can use in everyday life so that they gain skills that they can use in everyday life. And well I do professional commentary. Like here at the Expo I was here because of the world championship match was taking place and I was the expert in one of the channels. I do a lot of inspirational lectures and many other activities.

Archive

EXPO TALK: There are many cultures where simply kids don't dare to make mistakes. And you can see in other cultures they inspire people to make mistakes because that's the only way you can learn from your mistakes and learn from day to day. And this is something I think is exceptionally important that in a game it's not stressful. Many kids have so much anxiety, they have so much stress and it blocks their brains. When you play, you open up. You say I'm open to learning, I'm open to playing, I'm open to improve.

Back to the interview with Judit Polgar:

TARIQ AL-OLAIMY: And we'd also like to start where it began, in 1976, where you're born in Budapest, Hungary. Your entire family played chess, including your older siblings. And you and your siblings' childhood has sometimes been described as a "beautiful experiment." And I wonder if you could tell us a little bit about how your experience was shaped growing up in Hungary at the time? And also what that experiment was, particularly in the environment that your parents raised you in?

JUDIT POLGAR: Basically my father, when he met my mom and they were dating, already then he had the idea that when he's going to be having children, a family, then he would like to specialize them, to a specific field. And then later on, my parents got married and I was number three in the family who was born after my sisters. My sister, Susan, who is the first one, she found the chess set in a box and my father was a passionate amateur chess player. And at age of four, they decided that chess will be "the game"; the something that they will specialize on my sister. And of course, when seven years later I was born, it was very natural already for me.

So chess was already in the family. That language was spoken by both of my sisters, Susan and Sophia. And it was somehow very natural the way I grew up into this family. My parents had already the experience with my two older sisters. That's how I started the game, which meant also that I was not going to school, but I was a homeschooled due to, after that in the beginning, of course it was only 10 minutes then later on it increased, so by the time I was eight, nine years old, I was playing chess daily 6, 7, 8 hours.

MUSIC

TARIQ AL-OLAIMY: Oh, wow. And do you remember the first time you actually received your own chess board or chess set? do you remember that moment and when it happened that it was there for your own, not your, not your sisters?

JUDIT POLGAR: I remember the first kind of a tournament memory when I was about six years old. And, I went to the block of the area where I, where I, where we lived, that's where I won the first tournament. And then I received a very small pocket chess set.

TARIQ AL-OLAIMY: Okay. And, and your sisters also became chess champions in their own rights, correct?

JUDIT POLGAR: We, the three of us and one other Hungarian girl, we won twice, the chess Olympiad for Hungary and Susan, my older sister, she became the women's world champion in '96 as well. My other sister, became a woman Grandmaster, International Master in the open section.

TARIQ AL-OLAIMY: Amazing. And how did that affect the family dynamics? What was that like and that competitive spirit back home as well?

JUDIT POLGAR: Actually, it was very interesting because looking back, my family was like a startup company where the parents decided what is going to be the topic, what is going to be the field, which we are going to pick up and do. And then, everybody was for each other. So one for all, all for one kind of attitude was, the, the living lifestyle of the family. And as it was not accepted in Hungary, generally speaking at that time, it was not very common at all that you're homeschooled, and you don't visit school on a daily basis. It was not normal. So there were a lot of difficulties for my parents from that.

Also the Hungarian Federation was not very much supportive, on the fact that as girls, we wanted to play in the open section and not compete in the ladies' competitions. So this gave a lot of difficulty for my parents to raise us the way they were thinking is the best for us. And, this is why I think because of this very strong opposition to my family, the way they raised, this is why it was very easy for us, not, having rivalry in the family, they were really very supportive and very happy for each other's success.

MUSIC

JUDIT POLGAR: At the age of 12, when I was winning the first time, the Olympic gold medal together with my sisters, I was performing the best player of the whole Olympiad. And up to that point, we were traveling, mostly together, the family. Like Susan, the older sister of mine, she was playing in let's say A group, the more professional group, the highest level. And I was playing and my sister Sophia on a lower groups.

ARCHIVE

Journalist: When will there be a women's world champion? Susan: Well, she might be sitting next to me

Back to the interview with Judit Polgar:

JUDIT POLGAR: But somehow then I took over, I also became number one in the world, women, rankings. And after that, it was kind of difficult moment for me because our roads, deviated from each other. And I went to one kind of tournament already invitational events. And my other sisters were going to other events, which was quite a difficult period for me, because we are so used to traveling together, being the best friends with my sisters. And then I was starting to go on different routes to improve my chess as much as possible.

TARIQ AL-OLAIMY: At what age were you conscious that you're living a childhood that was not quite as others in your community or your society. Like when was that something that was very conscious to you?

JUDIT POLGAR: yeah, I was probably around six seven when it was clear and understood that I'm not living a regular life as other kids do.

It was very clear that we have a very unusual life, me and my family. It was not difficult to recognize and, and feel it.

Archive

[EXPO TALK]: I learned the game when I was five so I was growing up in a game which gave me everything in my life because I was able to travel around the world and know so many cultures and so many destinies?? You learn rules, you learn how to be flexible, you learn how to handle loss, you learn how to take victory, how to debate, how to prepare, how to challenge yourself.

And by that time, my sister, Susan was already a pretty good competitive player, and I was joining her and the family to chess tournaments.

I was, I think, around 12 and I was part of the Olympic Champion team.. that was clearly the time and around that, that, it was not the question that, I will not go to university, but I will continue to reach as high as possible in chess.

Back to the interview with Judit Polgar:

TARIQ AL-OLAIMY: And that route led you to a legacy that we can't even describe. Indeed, one of the best chess players of all time. And I wonder, and in that path, in that road, in that legacy, what would you describe as the defining win of your life?

JUDIT POLGAR: Well, the road was long, of course. My career lasted, my professional career and competitive career for 33 years before I retired. A milestone was clearly when I became the youngest Grandmaster, breaking Bobby Fischer's record. As that was the moment when at the same time with this event where I performed this, I also became the Hungarian Super Champion in the Men's Competition of Hungary.

So this was kind of a moment where also in Hungary, and also internationally, it was very clear that I'm heading somewhere much higher than that. Of course, at the same time, still, there were a lot of skepticisms that: "well she's just 15." "In the future maybe she's going to have boys in her life." "Love will take her focus." And so on. So this was of course a big journey.

ARCHIVE

Welcome to Round 4 of the American Chess Challenge. Featuring Judit Polgar and Ron Henley...[Applause].

MAURICE ASHLEY: Thanks Bruce. Hello everyone, this is Maurice Ashley and I'm here with grandmaster John Federovic. This should be an exciting match, John. What do you think?

JOHN FEDEROVIC: Yeah, I think it will be because Judit is like a heavy puncher and Ron is more like a counter-puncher. So we'll have to see what happens here.]

Back to the interview with Judit Polgar:

JUDIT POLGAR: And then I was competing more and more on an international level. I was moving forward from top 50 to top 30 and then later on, I could enter into the top 10 in the world when I got married and my husband was actually supporting me, very much. He's a sports lover himself. And he joined me in many tournaments. And that was the point, we got married in 2000. And in 2003, I was able to enter into the top 10. And then I stayed there for several years.

And, I never played, so I never could make it possible to win the world championship title myself for ladies. That's practically the only title I did not take.

Because I always felt the way my parents raised me, that chess is a sport to think, and it's a mental sport. So you have to be the best you can. And for this reason, I was always competing in a more difficult opposition. And that was the road for me to show myself to the world how far you can reach as a woman, as a talented player.

MUSIC

TARIQ AL-OLAIMY: And I'm really inspired. I think just to connect back to that story of you being homeschooled, then the approach that your parents and your father took as well to provide that supportive environment.

I'd like to shift gears a little bit, and since it's Knowledge and Learning Week at Expo 2020, to speak a little bit about the access to knowledge and learning when it comes to competitive sports, such as chess.

So you were born into a Hungarian-Jewish family at a time when discrimination was high. Your own father, who was one of your coaches had famously said, I believe, "geniuses are made not born," which really illustrates your point, to the type of environments that are required. And both of your parents were teachers. And it sounds like your dad was talking about knowledge, learning, and perseverance amongst many other things.

And I wonder, could you talk about your own personal experience with access to learning? Especially when you're a homeschooled kind of environment and what barriers you faced personally even beyond you learning the game of chess.

JUDIT POLGAR: Well, of course, it was difficult to, from the point of view that from the outside world, when I met people, they were worried about me. They were skeptical about the lifestyle we live. That how can we grow into normal human beings if you don't go to school, you don't have your daily, different subjects to learn.

In chess wise, it was very clear that, as I was learning many hours every day, this way, you're focusing on something. So you're also improving very fast.

MUSIC

JUDIT POLGAR: And generally speaking, it is with everything that, it's one thing that, to learn something, to have the knowledge of that, to understand it. And it's completely different story, how you can implement it and convert it into results, whether it's chess or your other knowledge.

Generally, when you go to school, when you have any learning that you don't see the fruit of your invested energy and the hours you spent at the same time, it gives you more motivation and the perseverance to hang on. And this was given by my parents and my sisters and coaches. That no matter, whether you don't see the result maybe for months or even a year, you don't see a huge difference in your strengths and in the rankings it is still that you are improving and adding to your knowledge.

But of course, sport is something that you have to have different skills and, it's not for everybody. For me, it was good that I had a very good character, which was matching the knowledge and to chess because I was a very practical player. I was someone who could convert the knowledge into practical game. But of course

there are a lot of different aspects of the game you learn. You practice and you try to implement it into reality into the chess game, but you have to know a lot of psychology to that. You have to be resilient. You have to be able to stand up if you lose. How to handle the victories also.

And since I retired from competitive chess, I also see that, it's an endless story to learn. Many people say that, okay, Lifelong learning. But I usually try to say it in another way, it's a lifelong, being curious because if you're curious, then you're continuously learning, without pain.

TARIQ AL-OLAIMY: Okay and you mentioned on your path you have a very deep commitment to gender equality. You are UN Women's Generation Equality Ambassador. I know it's a topic that's close to your heart, and I wonder what was it like perfecting your craft in that kind of environment dominated by men? And I think I'm also curious as to how you'd reflect today on, do we still have the same structural barriers?

JUDIT POLGAR: Well, chess was always a very much male-dominated sport.

I think generally, of course, I get the question all the time that how it can be changed. And what is the reason for this? I think, mostly or in big part of it is the social expectations from girls and from different segments. It's the parents, the coaches, the teachers, the society that simply sees a girl talent in a very different eye from seeing a boy.

But unfortunately this means that if from real life you would, highlight the talent and the qualities of a talent seven year old girl that well you're smart. You're bright. You have it all. You can make your PhD, whatever you pick at the same time to the

boy, they would say that you're so smart that one day you're going to be a Nobel Prize winner.

But I think it's very important from the parent's point of view, also, not to limit their daughters. That there is a woman's role. That is something that you can do, and other things you cannot do. And for girls who are already into the game nowadays, I always say that, well, do play chess as a profession, try to get better every day and the best you can be compared to yourself.

ARCHIVE

JUDIT POLGAR: I was very fortunate when I was very little to learn to the game of chess, but until my dream becomes reality I like to inspire people, especially youngsters to dream big. Make good moves in life. Set your goals high. And reach the impossible. Thank you.

Back to the interview with Judit Polgar:

TARIQ AL-OLAIMY: And that really speaks to the psychological strength as well. And the different kind of, I think mentality as well that you need for modern day chess. And that's of course, what you're trying to do through the, the engine of the Judit Polgar Method. And you spoke a little bit earlier when we started about, the Judit Polgar Chess Foundation and your mission to bring educational chess to schools.

I wonder if you could elaborate a bit more on what the Judit Polgar Method is, and to talk us through what the chess foundation, aims to do through its two educational programs.

JUDIT POLGAR: My foundation is focusing on several things. We have two very specific focus. One is generally to promote chess internationally in different ways. We are organizing a yearly global chess festival. There we show the connection between science education, eh, as a sport also.

And of course we have the other focus, which we are very specifically doing for many years, since 2013, that how chess can develop skills for children, which they can use in everyday life.

Archive

[EXPO TALK]: You go out from the school and immediately you're using those skills. Planning your ideas, take the consequences, communication or decision making...

Back to the interview with Judit Polgar:

JUDIT POLGAR: And, the main idea of that is that chess is a pretty complicated game, as many people say. And it's true. If you want to play it and learn it on a very high level. You can split up every segment of it. So you can use it very beautifully in education. The 64 squares, the coordinates, the six different kinds of pieces, which are moving in a different way. The 32 pieces on the chess board and all six different pieces characters you have which move in different ways and also it has different values.

So for example, if you pick mathematics, we have the values of the pieces. One is the pawn. Value of the Knight and Bishop is three. Rookies five. Queen is nine, and actually the King is invaluable. It's just everything. So you can replace the other

numbers with the king. You're taking with the Chess piece, the pieces. And then you make some number, a mathematical equation in the classroom.

And also the main idea is to, to, to push a little bit and add to the engine they have inside of them.

Archive

[EXPO TALK]: We don't inspire kids to be competitive sports people that they should be masters. It is important in some ways to be a winner and to be competitive but I think first of all it's very important that every child should be better every day to compare themselves and not to everybody else.

Back to the interview with Judit Polgar:

JUDIT POLGAR: So the youngsters, they cannot develop if somebody is pushing them. It can be pushed in the very beginning, but at a certain point it's either you yourself, you have this inner motor. That, this drive, which pushes you ahead or, or you will not, excel on the very highest level.

So my main strengths, I think when I motivate some of the youngsters, I make them believe that they can do it and it's worth it. And, and they should fight for it and be perseverance on whatever they want to reach.

TARIQ AL-OLAIMY: And on a closing note. You're known worldwide for your superb tactics, your aggressive and assertive chess-playing style, and known for often planning several steps ahead.

If you're to plan your next steps in life, like you would a chess game, could you walk us through how that would look like? What would your next moves look like in life and what is the legacy that you'd actually like to leave on chess board?

JUDIT POLGAR: I'm a person generally who lives today - in the present. That's what I was, and that's what I believe that that's how you can live the best life. At the same time, of course, you're making, planning, and you have a vision. How you visualize yourself or your career or your family in the long run.

Sometimes it's not easy to combine these two. Well, generally speaking, if I look at it, my professional way of thinking, of course, I believe that the, it would be great if I could leave a legacy on, how chess became an obvious part of education, like math or science or some of the other parts.

So this is something that I believe that it will get there, and, I will be happy that I will be considered probably being a contributor to that. Regarding my private life and my family, I'm always looking for balance. How to manage family matters, health and work, which is a practically an impossible mission.

But, as I like challenges, I'm always challenged by this.

TARIQ AL-OLAIMY: Thank you so much, Judit, for your wise words and thank you for the life you've lived. The life that you continue to live in service. And we also hope you find all the balance that you need in every chess piece of your life. Thank you so much for your time and wisdom today.

JUDIT POLGAR: Thank you. Thank you.

TARIQ AL-OLAIMY: People and Planet is an official podcast of Expo 2020 Dubai. Creating a sustainable future for our planet, together.

Learn more by visiting virtualexpodubai.com or searching “Programme for People and Planet”.

People and Planet is produced by Kerning Cultures Network.

Episodes are released every second Monday. Hit subscribe on your favorite podcast app so you don’t miss an episode. And if you enjoyed the show, share it with your friends and leave us a review!