

Abhimanyu Mishra

The Youngest Grandmaster in the World
at 12 years, 4 months, and 25 days

Edited by Deeksha Vats

New In Chess 2022

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Foreword

The game of chess has, over the centuries, brought great joy to countless people. In the last 40 years it has been a central part of my life – I founded and ran a chess software company. Apart from this meaningful professional aspect chess has given me a beautiful gift: the association with so many incredibly interesting and profound individuals. I have met and helped bring up numerous future World Champions in their early teens. Their talent for the game is beyond human comprehension. Encouraging them has added value to my own life.

Abhimanyu Mishra has a special place in the ranks of the chess super-talents I came to know. I watched him strive to become a grandmaster when he was barely twelve years old – a seemingly impossible task. Decades ago a friend did a doctorate in algebraic topology and secured his grandmaster title, both at the age of 23. I asked him which was more difficult, and he replied: ‘Are you serious? Grandmaster was infinitely harder.’ There are more doctorates per year in individual countries than chess grandmasters world-wide in the history of the game. And here was a young lad, essentially still a child, playing in tournaments with experienced title-holders on his way to obtaining the title.

I first got to know about Abhimanyu in the middle of the pandemic. He was playing tournament after tournament in Budapest, in an effort to achieve his final grandmaster norms. On my newspaper I reported enthusiastically on his progress, on the possibility of his becoming the youngest grandmaster in the history of the game. Encouraging messages poured in from famous players all over the world. But there were also expressions of concern: was the boy being ‘driven’, was he missing out on normal childhood?

To find out, I started conversing with him, in Zoom video chats. I discovered that Abhimanyu was indeed driven – by his own desire to achieve his goal. When I asked him he said he hoped he was not putting too much pressure on his family, on his father, who was looking after him in Hungary! It was a perfectly normal, affable young lad I was talking to, interested in all kinds of subjects, with a keen sense of humor. It became clear to me that he knew, like no other, exactly how strong he was, and how deeply he understood the game. And he clearly savored the progress he was making.

When Abhi finally completed his title, on June 30, 2021, he became the youngest grandmaster in the history of the game. He was 12 years, 4 months and 25 days old, breaking a record that had stood for almost twenty years. It was scarcely believable. I tried to explain it to non-chess readers with an analogy: it was like pointing to a child and saying: 'He's twelve, and has just completed his doctorate in quantum physics.'

In conversation I discovered that Abhi-Baba, as I fondly started calling him, was not just a born prodigy. He had achieved his goal with a tremendous amount of determination and hard work. The manner in which he talks about chess shows you of his love for the game and the focus he has developed over the years. He genuinely believes that nothing is impossible, that when the time is right he can achieve exactly what he set out to achieve. Boundless optimism. What also struck me was his modesty and playful self-deprecation, in spite of his great achievements and the many records he has broken.

This book is a precious collection of anecdotes, with insight into some of his best games. It is an opportunity to get to know a unique chess talent who is on his way to the very top.

*Frederic Friedel
Hamburg, May 2022*

CHAPTER 2

Rome was not built in a day

Bruce Lee famously said, 'Empty your mind, be formless, shapeless like water.' When my father said this to me for the first time, I was taken aback. Why would he ask me to forget everything I had worked so hard to learn? When I asked him the same question, he just smiled and said that I'd understand the true meaning soon. Soon enough every word of it made so much sense to me. It began to resonate with my life, with my perspective towards chess. Considering my experience of all these years I can vouch for the life altering power of keeping an open mind.

Bapu has a knack for unconventional modes of teaching. You might not believe me when I say this, but at every point in our journey into the world of chess he has used one unconventional method after another for my training. I know what you're thinking, I really do. I also know I'm supposed to be talking about my life and my relationship with chess. But, my journey is not mine alone. It is our journey, the journey of my entire family for a reason. I didn't toil in isolation, my family toiled with me. I wasn't the only one learning lessons, it was my parents who learnt with me. And, they had an extra lesson of parenting to do their best at, while I was busy with my game. So well, whether it was the sweet taste of success, or the dark days of failure and distress, we were in it, together.

My journey is a sum total of our collective sweat and blood, and all our prayers. You might not believe me, but even today I stand before our temple at home, hands folded, to pray before every game. Well, I never ask God to help me win the game. All I ask is for Him to watch over me while I put everything I have learnt to practice at the battleground, while my hard work on the chess board speaks for itself. And it gives me strength. The most special part of my prayer routine is the vermilion mark that my mother makes on my forehead once I am done saying my prayers. Making sure I carry her heart with me to all my games is important, you see. Bapu takes over the responsibility when she's not physically around. They're not partners for nothing, after all.

My dad's guidance every step of the way has come to me as a blessing. With time I have learnt to follow him, no questions asked. You might wonder how that works for a teenager who is smart enough to make his own decisions. If I were to be honest, it works wonders. He has worked really hard to be where he is today, and that experience is something I am truly grateful for. Where else could I find years of experience backing me

up right at the onset of my journey? He is learning to be a parent-coach while I am learning to be a chess champion. It is fun to see the results of our experiments. And, isn't that what life is all about, after all? What you'll find fascinating is that my dad chalks out a plan before every tournament, and I follow. It was no different for my first tournament either. We're the best team there is.

There came a point in time when I wanted to play more but I didn't have enough opponents to play with. While Babu was still my primary mentor, he couldn't make enough time to play as many games with me as I would have liked. It was at this juncture that we discovered the Play Magnus app. Magnus Carlsen is a five-time World Champion from Norway. Now, Carlsen's app has thousands of games with moves akin to those he was making at different stages in his chess career. I didn't exactly start with the intention of beating a world champion. I was in awe of his brilliance, anyway. I continue to look up to him. Discovering the app was like hitting the jackpot. I could play as many games as I wanted. You'd be surprised to know that the more I played, the more I fell in love with the application. I ended up playing thousands of games. In the initial days, Babu was happy that I was sharpening my proverbial ax. But one day, while we were in one of our analysis sessions, he realized that a five year old me was beating the five year old Magnus. I was beating a world champion. The competition with the world champion did not stop there. At age six, I was beating a nine year old Magnus. By age nine I was already beating a twelve and a thirteen year old Magnus. There came a point when the application became a marker of what shape my training was taking. I cannot lie, it did feel amazing to be winning against a world champion's moves. But, I continue to feel grateful for the difference it made to my training, my outlook towards chess. It is only in retrospect that you realize how even the tiniest effort fills gaps in the foundation. And well, it allowed me to do what I love doing most, play my game endlessly.

Once it so happened that I was sitting at a bench in a park, watching my younger sister running around like a superhero. She did not care one bit about what others in the park might think about her. She did not fear their judgment. She didn't care if she appeared silly or more confident compared to other kids. All she cared about was to have fun. I began wondering if she was born with this kind of confidence or developed it over the years. Well, there is no way to find out. But the fact that we're not born with everything that we need in life remains. There are some things that you have to cultivate. We utilized my practice sessions to cultivate conviction, the most important virtue I needed for my tournaments. My conviction

during tournaments came from the fact that we treated practice games with my dad with as much seriousness as we would treat games at a tournament. In fact, the environment, the time control was such that I felt like I was playing at a tournament. Every time I lost, we'd sit down to analyze what went wrong. Every time a game ended in a draw we'd sit down to figure out what moves could have resulted in a victory instead, what mistakes could have been avoided.

Okay, before you ask me what my point here is, I'll cut myself short. Before that fateful Saturday morning when I went to Central Jersey for my first tournament ever, I had already played hundreds of practice games and knew exactly what was to come. I was certain that all our collective sweat and blood was going to come to fruition. When the day arrived my heart raced like never before. When I entered the tournament hall on May 30th, 2014 for the Central Jersey Chess Tournament (NJ) and looked at Bapu I felt like our hearts were in sync. I was nervous, my heart thumped in anticipation, but the anticipation was filled with excitement and a strong conviction. But well, life wouldn't stay true to its name if it followed each of your plans. We were in for a huge surprise. The tournament was a closed-door tournament and players were required to sit in the tournament hall, while parents and coaches were not allowed to enter the hall. It was a completely new experience for me. In all my practice games, my parents had always been around. But this is exactly when the practice games came to my rescue. I told myself that I needed to be calm if I wanted to play well, rather play at all. I adopted a reserve technique here. I treated the real games as though they were practice games. And, to be honest, boundaries were blurred already. And it wasn't like I was all alone fending for myself. My dad's advice, tips, encouragement, my training, stood like pillars around me. All I had wanted until that point was for me to perform the best I could. Do you know what happens when you do your best? Well, in most cases you end up winning, like I did. I secured first place in the tournament, winning three games out of the four, with the remaining one being a draw. Ever since I started training with Bapu, he said one thing to me, 'If you work hard enough, there's nothing you can't achieve.' This victory continues to hold a special place in my heart. Well, not because it was my first tournament, not even because I won, but because this was the day I truly began to believe in the power of perseverance and my faith in Bapu got stronger.

Then there came a time when Bapu realized that there's only so much that he could teach me in terms of chess. It was time for professional help and it was at this point that he enrolled me in a chess class. Oh, how relieved

he must be relieved of his coaching duties? Is that what you're thinking? Well, not exactly. He continued to train me, albeit in a slightly different fashion. And, with his unconventional styles of teaching, are you even surprised? My training wasn't confined to attending my chess class and finishing the homework given. Bapu made sure I understood each and every position and concept taught in class as clearly as it was humanly possible. He'd spend hours with me after class, discussing everything taught at the class in detail.

Once I allowed myself to believe that I could survive, I could thrive, there was no looking back. I came to realize that a day spent not training, was a day spent letting my opponent win. So, Wednesday evenings were now spent playing League Night at Dean Chess Academy. It was a distant venue and it would take Bapu an hour and a half to drive me to it, just so I could play with a diverse range of players. Reaching the top isn't exactly a bed of roses, you see. You fall more than you walk. And you have to walk miles before you can finally sprint.

In the fall of 2014, I was playing at the League Night and it began to get dark outside. For a five year old, it was way more important to reach home in time, than it was to finish a game. Nervous, I resigned and went running to Bapu. We needed to drive back home in time. We had been at the game for a mere ten minutes and here I was ready to be driven back. I had never seen Bapu so upset until then. Well, being at work all day, driving back home, picking their child up, driving another hour and a half and being asked to drive back in the next ten minutes, can rile anyone up. When we got back home he sat me down and politely asked me what on earth I'd been thinking when I mindlessly walked out. Until now, in my head, I had made the right decision. In my defense, that's how the mind of a five year old works. I thought maybe he didn't understand. I tried explaining to him how it was getting dark and it would have taken longer to get back home. I could see murder in his eyes while he suppressed his laugh at the same time. Well, he always makes sure to not belittle me, no matter how silly a mistake I make. That's how one learns anyway, doesn't one? It was only after talking to Bapu at length that I realized it would have taken the same amount of time to get back home whether I played for 3 minutes or for 3 hours. That day a new rule was made, responsibilities were divided. Mine was to focus on my game while logistics would be taken care of by my family. And guess what, we continue to follow this rule even today.

Talking of rules, there are certain rules that are specific to the world of sports. As a rule, sports make you a compassionate human being. They ground you. Well, they also give you a wholesome lifestyle. No, the

wholesome lifestyle isn't something you're gifted with because you have talent for a sport. It is something you cultivate, in most cases not out of choice. While cultivation of habits that allow you to play unhindered is the first step, working hard to maintain the habits is the next. As a five year old kid, I was extremely fond of my glass of milk in the morning. When my parents discovered my love for milk, they were rather surprised. They had already prepared a long list of tactics to get me to drink my milk. But here I was, relishing it. Who knew it would soon wage a war against the primary love of my life. Now, not all games that I played were a couple of miles away. Many times Bapu drove for over ninety minutes to get me to the venue. Each of these times I made it a point to drink a glass of milk before leaving. I didn't want to feel hungry on the way, you see. But every single time I would be in a daze, distracted to the highest degree possible until I vomited my heart out. It soon became a pattern. Playing a good game was next to impossible until my ritualistic throwing up happened. In no time at all my dad understood that the long drives combined with the good glass of milk were the roadblock. Eliminating the drives was out of the question. So he chose the second best and eliminated the glass of milk before games far from home. It was replaced with a light, healthy snack, along with a no junk food rule two days prior to every such tournament. In a battle of love and life, life ended up winning.

Challenges in life are never ending phenomena. Now, I wasn't always a tiger roaring at my opponents across a chess board. There was a time when I was a shy little boy. I was working hard at my game, I was making progress, but I continued to struggle inwardly. At one of the League Nights, I was paired against a six feet tall, brawny man who looked deep into my eyes as I played my game. As I took position for the game before it started, he looked at me from head to toe. What do I hear next? He asked me to go call my dad or whoever it was to be playing against him. I don't quite blame him for mistaking me for just a random kid accompanying his chess champion father. It was only when Bapu came to the spot and confirmed that it was me who would be playing against him, did he give in, albeit apprehensively.

I was focused on my game, I was playing well, I was confident about my moves. What I was afraid of was this otherwise wonderful man. Every time I made a move that was good, every time I was in a position of winning the game eventually, I imagined a punch coming my way. Being a tiny little kid sitting before a man more than double my size, I could hardly look at him, let alone make eye contact. In that moment I was a bundle of nerves ready to run at the slightest hint of harm. I was on the verge of making history for willingly losing a game because I was afraid of

a wrestling match with my opponent, quite imminent in my head just in case I won the game. In hindsight I can laugh it off. In fact, it is one of the jokes we relish at home to this day. But that day had it not been for Bapu's constant reassurance that I was in a safe environment, I have no idea what might have become of me.

This tournament was an eye opener. More for Bapu than it was for me. He realized that my training required the molding of aspects of my personality to fit the bill. We practiced reassurance and eye contact, and Bapu instilled in me the idea that no matter what age or size I was, nothing in the whole wide world had the power to frighten me. When I saw Bapu finding ways and means for a more wholesome training, I took it upon myself to make him proud. I honed my eye contact skills to such an extent that on many occasions my opponents complained that I was intimidating them deliberately. I know you must be smiling to yourself, wondering at the extent of my silliness. But moderation and balance are mere words to kids. It was only when Bapu realized that I was too young to be able to find a balance, he took the reins in his own hands and I could finally be a not so intimidating yet confident warrior.

Soon enough, long drives became my new normal and my first major Continental Chess Association (CCA) event arrived. CCA is famous for holding these really big events in the United States. A milestone in itself, I was to play at the World Open Under 13 Championship in Virginia. I competed in the Under 13 section which constituted players of age 13 and under and lost my first game. But hold on, hold on, I did win the remaining five games and went on to bag the second position at the tournament. This was a huge moment for us, for my provisional rating increased from 543 to 660.

I had now come to a point where I could apply everything I was learning in my chess class in the games that I was playing. It was thrilling beyond words. Right then I got the opportunity to play in my first national tournament in Texas. But here comes the twist in the story. My younger sister Ridhima, whom we fondly call Chhotu, was just a year old at that time and my mom needed to stay back home to take care of her. I was going to fly to Texas with my dad alone. I had begun to miss her even before leaving. If I am to be completely honest, I was scared to be going without her. But my mom made the time away from her effortlessly easy. She'd speak to me over the phone every day, once before every game and once after. Although virtually, she made sure she was with me at every step of the way. I didn't think I could make it without my mom around me, but this tournament turned out to be an exciting experience. I was

only five and I was playing in the Under 8 section. It was at this point that my confidence began to rise. I won four out of six games, couldn't win two, bagged the eighth position, and my provisional rating was now 796.

At the onset I did not win every game that I played at tournaments. In fact, I lost more games than I won. I was allowed to lose as many games as I wanted, provided I was learning my lessons consistently, never repeating a mistake. Not to say that I ever play my games fearing I would lose, even when I am playing against the best in the world. Now here's a rule in chess: every player in every game is meant to maintain a sheet with notations of the moves he makes throughout the game. For a five year old child, that was a tough job to do. I know what you're thinking. Yes, tougher than playing against world champions. No matter how much I wrote, or what I wrote, it didn't make a difference. It was always illegible to such a great extent that it became a matter of grave concern for Bapu. I lost games, came home, handed over my sheet to him, and there was no possible way of figuring out what went wrong. Bapu spent some time working on my writing skills, but not even in his wildest dreams did he imagine that every bit of his effort would prove utterly counterproductive. Well, I had learnt to write reasonably clearly, but I spent hours perfecting my notes, writing, erasing, and writing again until every notation was a piece of art. You know what kids are like, right? Bapu must have pulled his hair out wondering what to do. But he isn't one to give in to frustrations. He managed to find the perfect solution and I was presented with a plycounter. I was now able to record my moves digitally. It was the perfect solution, indeed.

It worked well until a game against a thirteen year old girl. She was a smart player with brilliant observation skills. Even though she was much older, it was an equal game. The twist arrived when she noticed that I was noting my moves on the plycounter before making them on the board. Now, this was against the rules. But five year old me had no idea that the order to be followed was as important as the game itself. Not that I was cheating, testing my moves before making them. But rules are made for a reason, and you have to follow them. I followed the order for a while, made my moves to note them down only once a move was made on the board. But soon enough I was back to my old habit. Old habits die hard, you see. It was at this point that I was asked to use a sheet of paper to write down my notations instead. I was back to square one. I took all the time in the world making note of my moves, and eventually ran out of time. I lost the game. It was a completely equal game which I should not have lost. But I lost because of technical difficulties. I was disheartened, rather angry. I lost for no real fault of mine. Bapu said, 'That's how life works, you know.'

never do that. But there's a reason I mention this particular tournament. I chose to play in a category tougher than the one I was 'supposed' to play in. And I learnt an extremely important lesson in adaptability. It so happened that the player in the last round played the same opening that had been played in the first round. Now, that game was a draw. It was up to me to learn from the mistakes I had made in the first round, or make the same mistakes again and let this game go too. It was a sharp position out of the Sicilian Dragon with chances for both sides. We prepared to handle such positions in a better way with hours of practice. I made it a point to not repeat a single mistake and oh what fun it was to crush my opponent. Until now, adaptability had been a mere word. But at this moment, being on top as a six year old in age 8 and under category, it made so much sense.

I started playing the higher rated sections of the quads. Playing against National Masters and National Experts became a regular practice. Well, it was important for achieving the goal I had set for myself. But there came a dip in my rating again and I was pushed back to 1972. It wasn't a fault with anybody. We understood that there was a gap in my knowledge and understanding. But this was no time to cry over the points lost. I couldn't stand still looking at what was gone. I knew I had to continue moving forward even though I was on shaky terrain. And the one thing that I have learnt from traversing shaky terrains is that no matter how tough it gets, you can make the choice to learn to walk better every day. Which practically makes you a winner every day, doesn't it? And the most amazing part is that the breakthrough wasn't far. It came in the form of Saturday Hectos in New Jersey where I won first place. My rating soared from 1972 to 1997. My destination, becoming a National Expert, was well in reach. It felt like the decision to keep moving forward despite the roadblocks was the right one.

I have developed beliefs of my own along the way. Life follows Newton's laws of motion to some extent. Stagnation continues to hold you back until you put in the effort to move. While, forward movement is often rewarded in the form of opportunity. An opportunity came knocking on my door in the form of the Hamilton Chess Club of New Jersey. You know what was even better? The fact that I was going to play in the top quad. Oh, only if you could watch me smile ear to ear while I talk to you about it. The three players whom I had to compete against were invincible national masters. I was nervous, but my experience had my back. I lost the first game against the top seed. But I did not let the fighting spirit in me take a plunge. I had learnt to keep the fire burning until it was time to come back home for dinner. And we'll light it again after dinner. I went

with full force and managed to get two draws. I gained a total of 11 points, which was more than enough at this juncture.

The moment I had been waiting for was here. I was now the youngest ever National Expert in the USA chess history. I had beaten the previous national record of GM Awonder Liang by six months. I was so happy I couldn't stop smiling. I had the new live rating of 2008, and my first ever title of 'Youngest US Chess Expert'. Do you know who holds this record currently? Me, it's me.

In my opinion, to become a Chess Expert one needs a basic opening repertoire. A stronger grip on tactics already known and knowledge of additional tactics goes a long way. *Silman's Complete Endgame Course* by Jeremy Silman is the book to go for becoming a Chess Expert.

Game 1 Sicilian Defense

Abhimanyu Mishra

1867

Tommy Wen

1719

Chesskid.com Nationals U8 2016

I was qualified to play in the 6U and U8 sections of this tournament based on my USCF rating. I decided to play in the U8 section. I won three games and drew two games to get clear first place.

1.e4 c5 2.♘f3 d6 3.d4 cxd4 4.♘xd4 ♘f6 5.♘c3 g6

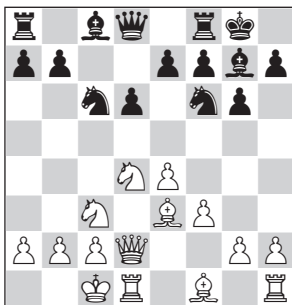
My opponent in this game played the Sicilian Dragon, which is a very sharp opening.

6.♗e3 ♗g7 7.f3 0-0 8.♖d2

This is one of the most common systems against the Dragon.

White's attacking plan here is very straightforward: castle queenside, h2-h4-h5 to open the h-file, and, if possible, it would be beneficial to play ♗h6 in order to trade off the black king's main defender, the g7♗, and try to mate.

8...♘c6 9.0-0-0



9...d5!?

This is one of the lines here and a very direct attempt to open up the center.

9...♗d7 intending ...♖c8, ...♘e5 and ...♗a5 is another plan for Black. The position will become very sharp and double-edged as both sides will rush to attack the enemy's king.

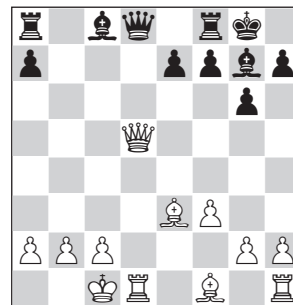
10.exd5

I do not like this move as now after all the exchanges, Black will have open files and most importantly, his g7♗ will be extremely strong, exerting pressure on the white queenside.

I think 10.♗e1 is a better move here for the reason that it does not open so many lines on the queenside.

10...dxe4? obviously fails to 11.♘xc6 with a discovered attack on the queen.

10...♘xd5 11.♘xc6 bxc6 12.♘d5 cxd5 13.♖xd5



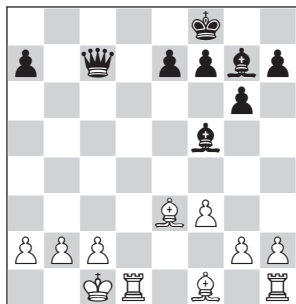
13...♖c7!

This move seemingly hangs a rook. Or does it?

14.♗xa8 ♗f5!

This was Black's idea behind 13...♖c7. The threat on the queen and the mating threat on c2 cannot both be stopped, so White has to give up his queen.

15.♗xf8+ ♔xf8



Even though White is up by two points materially here, it is much easier to play with Black. The reason is the following: by spending a few tempi taking material, White has fallen behind in the race of attacking the black king. Furthermore, Black has open b- and c-files. Therefore, it will be much simpler to attack the white king, than to attack the black king.

16. ♖d2

Defending c2.

16. ♘d3? would lose to 16... ♖e5 with a double attack on e3 and b2. The key point is that 17. ♘xf5 ♖xe3+ 18. ♗b1, trying to be sneaky, fails to 18... ♖b6!, which wins as Black defends against 19. ♖d8# and threatens mate in one. Once White defends, the f5 ♘ would be hanging (18... gxf5?? 19. ♖d8# would be a rather unfortunate way to end the game for Black): 19. c3 gxf5—+.

16... h5!?

Preventing g2-g4 which would have kicked away the bishop. 16... ♖e5?? just blunders as 17. ♖d8 is mate.

17. ♘e2

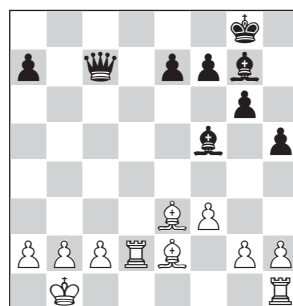
Developing my bishop and preparing ♖hd1.

17... ♗g8!

The idea behind this move is that now ♖d8 would not be mate, and therefore Black can now move his queen freely.

18. ♗b1

18. ♖hd1 is also possible, but after 18... ♖e5 19. ♘d4 ♖xh2 20. ♘xg7 ♗xg7 a double-edged position emerges where both sides will advance their pawns, but I prefer Black here due to his superior dark square control.



18... ♖b7?

I dislike this move as it allows me to challenge the extremely strong g7 ♘ with ♘d4 without giving up the h2-pawn.

18... ♖e5! was the best move, and after 19. ♘d4 ♖f4, attacking both the rook on d2 and the bishop on d4 and therefore forcing 20. ♖hd1 ♘xd4 21. ♖xd4 ♖xh2, Black is better. This is a better version of 18. ♖hd1 for Black, as here White cannot simply move his bishop to c4, for example, to protect the pawn. Instead, to defend the pawn, he has to play more passively with 22. ♘f1 h4⌘ and here there are now ideas of ... ♖g3 followed by ...h4-h3.

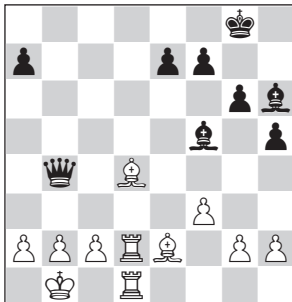
Once White captures on h3, then Black can take the f3-pawn.

19. ♖d4! ♜b4?

This move is a mistake because it allows my rooks to get coordinated. 19... ♖xd4! was better, as after 20. ♜xd4 ♜c7! Black attacks the c2-pawn and, more importantly, it prevents the h1-rook from moving as then h2 would be hanging.

20. ♜hd1 ♖h6?

This move is a mistake as it allows my rooks to invade on the 8th rank. After this, White gets mating ideas. Something like 20...e5 21. ♖c3 ♜c5 was better compared to the game, but even here, although double-edged, I believe White is better as pressure from the g7 ♖ has now been prevented by the c3 ♖.



21. ♖c3!

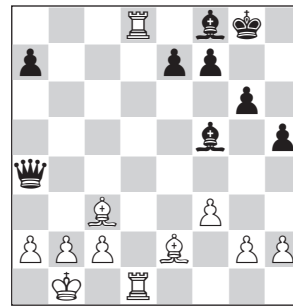
Attacking the queen and opening the d-file for my rooks.

21... ♜a4

21... ♜b6 was perhaps a bit better, stopping the combination in the game, but after 22. ♜d8+ ♖f8 23. ♜e8! White should nevertheless win as the threat of 24. ♜dd8, winning the f8 ♖, simply cannot be prevented.

22. ♜d8+ ♖f8

Of course 22... ♖h7 just loses to 23. ♜h8#.



23. ♜xf8+!

This combination ends in a rook up position. Other moves may have also won, but this was by far the easiest.

23... ♖xf8 24. ♜d8+ ♜e8 25. ♖g7+!

With this nice intermezzo, White bags a full rook compared to 'just' a piece.

The natural 25. ♜xe8+ is also winning because White is up a piece, but why be up a piece when you could be up a rook?

25... ♖xg7 26. ♜xe8

From here the game needs no more explanation; White is completely winning due to his extra rook.

26... ♖f6 27. ♜a8 ♖e5 28. ♜xa7 ♖d6

29. a4 f6 30. a5 ♖c6 31. ♜xe7 ♖c8

32. a6 ♖b6 33. a7 ♖b7 34. ♜e6+

♖xa7 35. ♜xf6 g5 36. ♜f5 g4 37. ♜xh5

gxf3 38. ♖xf3 ♖c8 39. g4 ♖b6 40. g5

♖f5 41. g6 ♖e6

41... ♖xg6 42. ♜h6+–.

42. g7 ♖c7 43. ♖d5 ♖xd5 44. ♜xd5

♖c6 45. g8 ♜c7 46. ♜d8+ ♖b7

47. ♜b5+ ♖c6 48. ♜d5+ ♖c7

49. ♜b7+ ♖c8 50. ♜d7# 1-0

my problem areas. The pandemic gave me this much-needed break from tournaments. The entire world had shut down. Everything had shifted to the virtual world. Chess training didn't take too long to catch up with the new normal either. I started participating in online group camps held by super GMs conducted by Mr. Xuhao He of NA Chess club. Until the pandemic, getting the opportunity to train under super GMs was rare for their busy schedules and limited time. As the pandemic forced the world to shut down, they could use their time to interact with and train chess players across the globe. These group camps turned out to be an excellent resource for an understanding on an entirely different level. Only a while back my heart had been in pieces with everything coming to a halt. But this opportunity to interact with professional players, albeit virtually, brought a ray of hope. I was determined to make the best out of the situation, and seized the opportunity with both hands.

There are some players in the chess fraternity I truly admire. While I was enjoying my time interacting and training under some of them, I got the opportunity to build an association with others in ways I never thought I would. GM Maurice Ashley is someone I have always looked up to. He has built a phenomenal career for himself and is quite an inspiration. He is a world class commentator and a brilliant player. I wouldn't be exaggerating to say that if joy was to be a person, it would be him. What is even more amazing is that my family shares my opinion. I had just won the Youngest International Master title when GM Ashley interviewed my entire family for the cover story in *Chess Life* magazine, virtually. When my parents spoke to him, they instantly understood my admiration for him. Even though he wasn't present in the room in person, his energy was infectious. Nobody could have told my story better. GM Ashley made it a point to develop an understanding of the story behind my name, Bapu's vision for my future, Mumma's support, and even my little sister's presence in my life and game.

I continued practicing my game, playing my tournaments and going about my regular life after the interview. One day, while setting up a game to play against Bapu, he broke the news about an invitation to GM Ashley's show as a guest to me, as casually as ever. For a moment I didn't even know how to react. I was overjoyed. When Bapu started laughing, I realized that he knew it was a big deal for me. Talking to GM Ashley on the show was an experience I can never forget. It is true that I love socializing, I love making new friends, but it is also true that getting comfortable with a person often takes me a while. With GM Ashley it felt like I was talking to a long lost friend. Oh, he is marvelous. My respect for him continues to grow, you see. And, he did not stop there. I was invited to the show one

more time later when I became a Grandmaster. The best part, I was fondly referred to as a Chess Monster, a name I have grown exceedingly fond of.

There is a reason that my family could contribute so greatly to my story featured in the *Chess Life* magazine. It has been a significant part of my life in chess at every turn, in ways one would not expect. It is as if my journey started even before I was born. Back in India, when my parents were growing up, books occupied practically all their space. Their love for books has been a constant since the time they were kids. Babu continues to believe that there is no better teacher than a book. It is another story that I am blessed with the best teachers in the world. And my mother believes that there is no better friend than a book. Not a day goes by when we go to bed without reading a book.

With books playing so important a role in the life of my family, their entry into my chess world was inevitable. Ever since I started taking interest in a game that I had no idea would eventually become my lifeline, my parents started building a library of the best books on chess for me. My books have been a constant support for me. Well, they have reason to. In the course of my chess career I have read, re-read and worked hard on many of them. And I have enjoyed every moment of my time with my chess books, practicing the lessons they have imparted. But twenty-four hours a day is all you have. It was becoming an increasingly time-consuming task to consult books in detail. Reading each book through and through, jotting down everything important in one place, placing a brief version of the notes taken on placards was the process we followed. And however simple it might sound, it took us an immense amount of time. I couldn't change the number of hours in a day, but I could certainly change my approach. It was at this point that we were fortunate enough to discover Chessable. It came into my life as a blessing in more ways than one. With Chessable, I could work on a book in close to one third of the time I usually took. They have thousands of books in video format without compromising on the quality or a single detail. It was magic, pure magic.

As soon as things started getting better, Charlotte Chess Center started their norm events again. My heart is filled with gratitude for Grant and Peter for organizing these events in the midst of the pandemic havoc, in the best possible way. They could not have been organized better.

Before the pandemic hit, we would always fly to Charlotte for norm events. With the health risks that the pandemic imposed, taking flights became unsafe. Now, the distance between New Jersey and Charlotte is close to 600 miles. So Babu decided to drive up to Charlotte, as a safety measure. Driving for approximately 11 hours, once we'd reach our hotel Babu would sanitize the entire room. The footboard and the headboards of

the bed were cleaned, the linen stripped to use those that we carried with us, as part of our sanitation drive. I was allowed to sit on the bed only after a shower and a change of clothes. We made sure to carry at least three sets of fresh clothes for a single day. Bapu's time management skills deserve an award. He sanitized the room in exactly the same amount of time as I took a bath. Getting infected was not an option. Staying safe was as important as playing at the tournament, extreme precautions were imperative. We even avoided eating out and made sure to carry enough home cooked food. Once Bapu had taken his bath, inhaling steam was the next step. And the most important were our vitamin supplements, not a single dose missed ever. After the tournament, Bapu would drive during the night to reach home early the next morning. I think he is superhuman, because he would take a nap and go back to work. And if he isn't, he loves me way too much.

It was in the month of Dec 2020 when Coach Magesh mentioned that he had been planning to form the online Prochess training academy alongside GM Ganguly Surya Shekhar and GM RB Ramesh. GM Ganguly is a very strong player, an Arjuna Award winner, and has worked with former World Champion Viswanathan Anand. GM Ramesh is the founder of Chess Gurukul and has tutelage many GMs in the past. GM Magesh is the director of Kings and Queens Chess Academy, and I had been working with him for many years. My father and I were ecstatic with the idea. Even before the first class that was scheduled to start on Jan 1st, 2021, Bapu enrolled in the academy for the entire year. This was the turning point where I interacted with many strong GMs during the five classes every week. These sessions proved to be a fuel and provided a much needed boost.

With consistent hard work, working on the loopholes in my game, my performance and the quality of my game started improving. I began getting a minimum of 4 points out of 9 in the GM norm tournaments conducted in Charlotte Chess Center, NC. In one such event, I won against GM Vladimir Belous and an FM, and drew against GM Kamil Dragun along with 3 other IMs. I could see the improvement in my games. In the Charlotte Masters tournament, I was leading after the first five rounds. In the last round against an FM, I over-pushed and lost the game. Despite that, it was a good tournament. I gained 16 Elo points.

It was at this time that I was introduced to GM Pentala Harikrishna. He was number 2 in India and number 22 in the world at that point. After a great deal of contemplation about what he would be contributing to my game and my life, he took me under his wings despite a very busy schedule. He believed that I had the potential to soar to greatness. He gave me a whole new perspective towards the game. I couldn't believe it

was possible to approach the game in the way he did. It was my first time interacting with a super GM on a one-on-one basis. My understanding of the game changed beyond leaps and bounds. Now I cannot describe what the difference was, but learning with one of the best players brought about a psychological shift. I began to believe in myself more than ever. I felt overwhelmed with gratitude for him.

Tournaments were far and few. I had to get the rating points and GM norms in the few opportunities that were presented to me. One such opportunity came my way in the form of the Spring 2021 CCCSA GM Norm Invitational tournament. Taking it up proved to be an excellent decision. I won the tournament with 5½ out of 9. The best part was that I won against GM Vladimir Belous and IM Craig Hilby along with five draws against other players. I lost only one game at the tournament. And incidentally, throughout that game I was in a winning position. But I succumbed to time pressure, made a move that was tactically wrong and lost. With that loss, I lost the opportunity to earn a GM norm. But I gained 38 Elo points, increasing my rating to 2408.

Owing to the limited number of tournaments conducted in the USA, Bapu started exploring the norm opportunities in Hungary and Serbia. These were countries that were conducting norm tournaments frequently. But the pandemic brought with it a kind of uncertainty in every decision. We felt unsure of the amount of time that the journey to the GM title would take. At this crucial point, Bapu's knack for brilliant ideas came to our rescue. We booked a one-way ticket to Hungary. Our objective was to return only after winning the title. It sounds crazy when you think about it. It takes guts and a tremendous amount of faith in oneself to go through with such a thing. Coincidentally, we had both. We decided to play in any and every norm tournament that we would find in Hungary. Next was the plan to go to Serbia to play in the strong open tournaments and other norm events conducted by IO Sasa Jevtic.

In Hungary, IO Laszlo Nagy had been conducting the First Saturday Norm tournaments for years on end. These tournaments are popular all over the world. A great number of elite players have earned their norms at these tournaments. We were visiting Hungary for the first time, and the pandemic made it a herculean task. We were not sure whether we would be able to get out of the country, let alone play the tournament. The pandemic had wreaked havoc in the true sense.

As citizens of the USA, a visa to enter the Schengen area is something we didn't need. What we needed instead was a letter from the Hungarian police at their embassy in New York. Countless phone calls later, we got the appointment to collect our document from the embassy. While we

didn't need a visa, the effort that went into collecting the letter was no less. Adding to our effort was the information that the Schengen area had a time restriction for American citizens, their stay in the region was limited to three months.

We booked our flight to Budapest two days prior to my first game at the tournament. Taking a flight before the pandemic was as regular as drinking a glass of water, or eating a bowl of noodles. But the pandemic changed everything. Nothing in the whole wide world was the same. We were under enough stress about safety measures in the flight already. To add to it, we received different information from different avenues about flight rules. Some flights asked for a negative Covid test report, done 72 hours prior to boarding. Others asked for test reports done 24 hours before. With no clear information, our concern grew. Bapu came up with the idea to carry two test reports, to cover both the 72 and 24 hours requirement. Bapu said, 'We have given our sweat and blood to reach this. These external factors cannot decide our fate.' Taking every precaution possible, we boarded the plane wearing double masks and a face shield. While we had worked like ninjas to reach the top, in that moment we felt like ninjas too. After a short stop-over in Paris, we landed in the beautiful city of Budapest in Hungary.

We were fortunate enough to find a great apartment. Gyorgy and Eniko were amazing hosts. The best part about them was that they helped us navigate Budapest during our entire stay, to the point that we felt we had known the city forever. They were the humblest people we met on our trip, God sent angels for us. Had it not been for them, we would have felt completely lost in the alien city. They received us at the airport and dropped us at the apartment, as if we were long time friends. Well, we did become friends in the course of our stay. The gratitude we feel for them is too great to be put down in words.

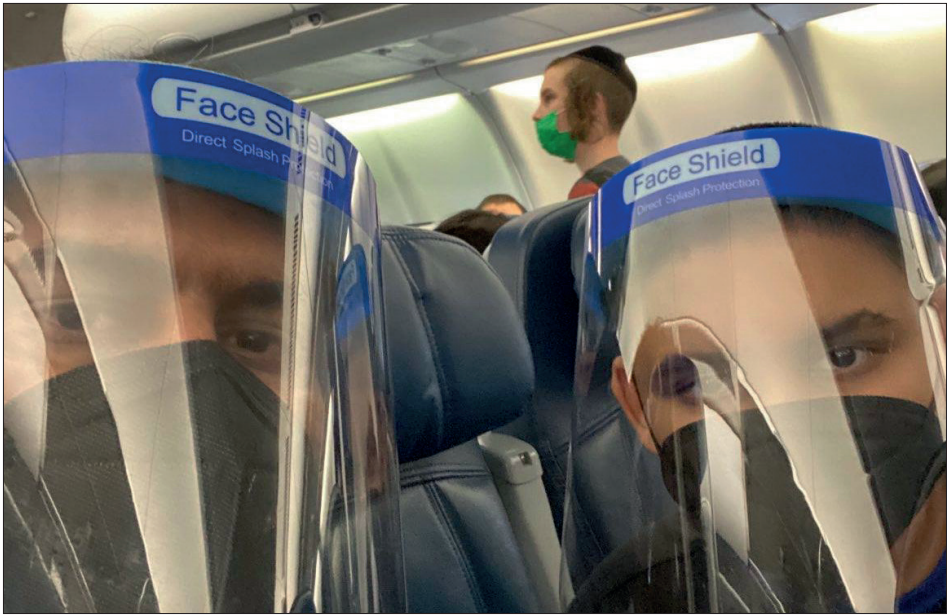
When you're on the road to breaking a nineteen year old world record, challenges are certain to arise. There is no escaping them. In fact it is in the overcoming that champions are born. But the world changed with the onset of the coronavirus pandemic. Nothing was the same anymore. Adapting to the new world order was the only option left. Challenges grew multifold. While we were planning our trip to Europe, the world was reeling in uncertainty. Information on vaccination was still scarce. But there was no way we could miss this trip. We had limited time for me to acquire the GM title to be able to break the previous record. Fortunately, by the time it was time to leave Bapu got his first dose of the vaccine, while it was unavailable for children under twelve years of age. We were in a muddle. It was a risky situation for both of us. But Bapu took matters in

his hands. Before we could even leave, he constituted a strictly disciplined regime. Once we reached the apartment, it was time to put the Covid precaution regime to action. Bapu sanitized every nook and corner of the apartment, stripped the linen to replace it with our own, made sure the apartment was properly ventilated. We were in complete isolation, not leaving our apartment for anything but the tournament. Bapu strategically sanitized each and every container that the food ordered arrived in. When it comes to food, the one thing that I cannot stand is raw tomato. While in Budapest, we needed high immunity. I had to make a choice. I could either compromise on my immunity, marring Bapu's safety regime, or I could compromise on my likes and dislikes. I chose the latter. It was tough eating raw tomato every single day, but we went to Budapest with a mission and we were determined to accomplish it come what may.

While Bapu took the sole responsibility of mentoring me, looking after me and supporting me, he continued to have professional commitments. He needed to work in the EST time zone, six hours behind the CET time zone. So, his day started at seven in the morning, he would prepare breakfast, help me set up for the opponent's game, have lunch and reach the tournament venue. By now the time usually was 1.30 PM in CET. The tournament venue was at walking distance from the apartment that we had rented for most of my games. We'd walk the stretch, get our daily dose of the sun, and most importantly get the chance to talk to my mother back home. Once my game would start, Bapu started his day at work, 2PM CET, but 8AM in the US. He was working remotely, had a great laptop, access to uninterrupted internet, but working in the midst of a high decibel clamor is as challenging as one can imagine. But, Bapu did that every single day. And did it well.

Once back to the apartment in the evening, showering followed by steam therapy was an unsaid rule. And, after our daily rituals, can you imagine, Bapu would go back to working again. Yes he did get up intermittently to help me with practice, to have dinner, but he'd get back to work right after. He would work until 3 in the morning, only to wake up at 7 to do it all over again. Hard work is a family tradition with us.

My tournaments in Hungary started with the 2nd Vezerkepzo GM event. I forced a draw against GM Vojtech Plat, the top seed in the tournament, in the first game. This gave me an excellent start. But the games that followed turned out tougher than I thought. I ended up losing against two other Grandmasters. I went on to play fairly well in the remaining tournament. I scored 6 out of 9 points, shy of just a point from getting a GM norm. But I gained 16 Elo points with a live rating of 2425 Elo.



Getting ready for the grand finale of the race to break the record. During the pandemic, my father Hemant took every precaution possible.



We did it. Grandmaster at 12 years, 4 months, and 25 days.