

Twelve-year-old Surrey chess prodigy takes on 21 opponents – and wins

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Surrey's Joshua Doknjas, 12, makes a move on Friday at City Centre Library. Joshua took on 21 opponents at the same time - and beat them all. *GORD GOBLE / SURREY NOW*

METRO VANCOUVER —They came from far and wide for a war with a king and a shot at his king.

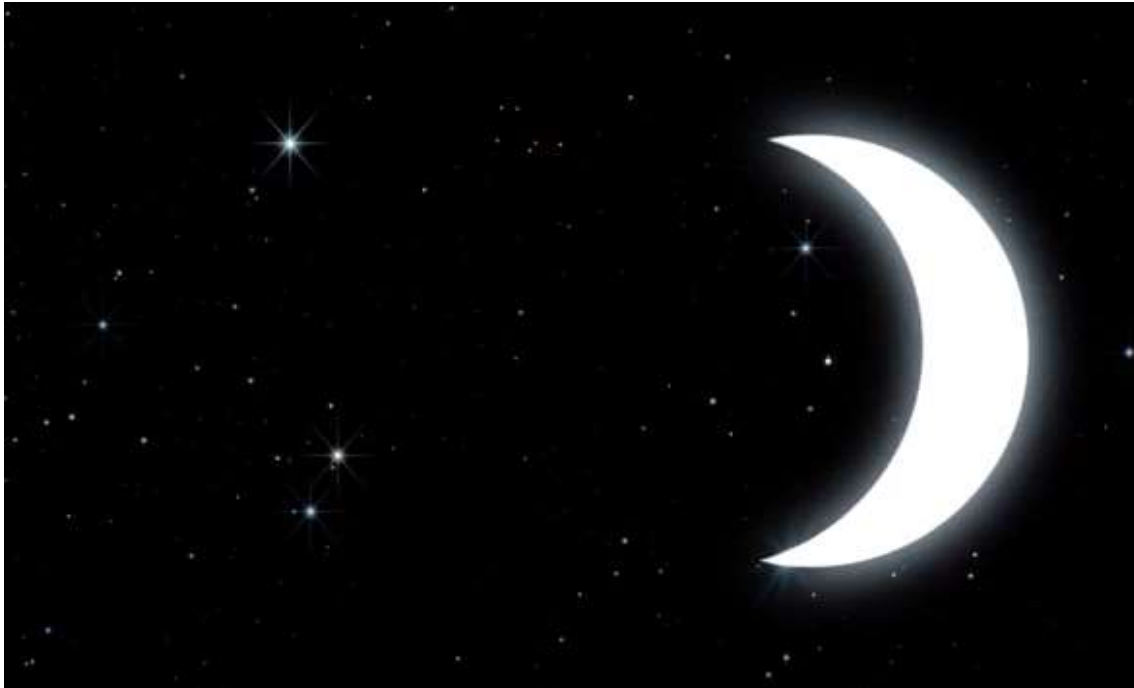
All were battle-tested, some were champions in their own right. They brought their smarts and their skills, their determination and their grit.

And most often, their moms and dads too. You see, this skirmish was not for the old and jaded. It was, in fact, for the young. The really young. Eight to 18, to be exact, but that didn't mean it was any less spirited.

When the smoke had cleared two hours later, the crown remained where many expected it would. The contenders had given it their all, but in the end, after 21 games of chess against some of the best young players the region has to offer, Surrey's Joshua Doknjas emerged blissfully undefeated.

That those 21 games were played simultaneously - Joshua in the centre of the storm between two rows of boards, walking to each new opponent - only adds to his growing street cred.

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At just 12 years of age, Joshua's already a force in the world of chess. He won the BC Youth Championship five out of six times from 2009 to 2014. He won the 2010 Under 8 Canadian Championship in 2010 and the U12 Canadian Championship in 2012. He's twice represented Canada at the World Youth Chess Championship.

And that's just a taste.

It should come as no surprise then that Joshua's no newbie. Being a veteran at anything at 12 is hard to comprehend, but this little dude's been immersing himself in the chessboard since the teeny-weeny age of four. Four - a time when most of us were still trying to figure out hopscotch.

Didn't hurt that he was born into the game. Indeed, toddler Joshua got the bug watching his mom Viktoria (who, along with dad Dave, are chess-playing maniacs from way back) take on older brother John (the first chess prodigy

in this family affair and still a top-level player) in the comfort of his own home.

Watching led to experimentation, which in turn led to expertise. By the age of seven, he was the best Grade 2 player in the province.

He isn't, he says, fanatical. "I like it, but I'm not obsessed," Joshua says in his typically unassuming way. Perhaps, but for a guy who plays every day, "like" is probably a serious understatement.

"He's a very interesting boy," says mom Viktoria. "Chess seems to fascinate him. And when he concentrates on certain things, he gives it his all. He has a strong desire to want to do his best."

Currently, Joshua says he spends a lot of time at Chessbomb.com, mixing it up with challengers from around the world and watching other games unfold. He has his chess heroes too, though old school gods such as Bobby Fischer don't even make his personal cut when compared to some of today's chessbomb whiz kids.

But as he alludes, he's not tied to the virtual - or the physical - board. He also plays tennis and basketball, and regularly rips it up on the piano. He's homeschooled, and not surprisingly goes all analytical when asked to name his favorite subjects - math and science.

Standing in Surrey's City Centre Library on Friday, surrounded not only by all that hoity toity architecture but also the faces of 21 hopefuls, their parents and scores of spectators looking down from the levels above, Joshua seemed remarkably unperturbed.

His face was the very definition of calm. It was an approach that persisted as he coolly, yet graciously, dispatched each of his opponents.

"Checkmate," a polite handshake and nod, and it was on to the next. In fact, if you watched closely, you'd have caught him on several occasions looking to his next move on the adjacent board while in the midst of the handshake at his current board.

And that is perhaps his greatest chesscentric asset. Like Boris Becker on a tennis court, he's an iceman. Though admitting afterwards that "some of them played very well," he says, quite emphatically, that he never felt threatened. "I wasn't nervous...not at all," he says. "I never thought I'd lose."

Much of it, it seems, is a function of not only a well-wired noggin, but repetition.

"There are different types of openings," he says. "Like Sicillian and French. I know most openings from my memory and experience."

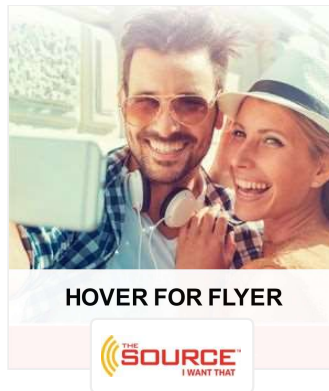
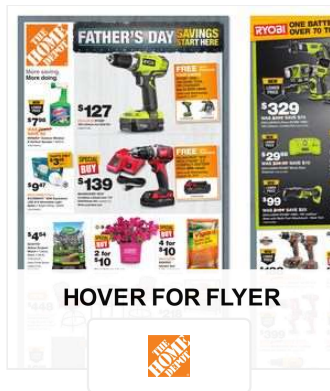
Turns out the truly exceptional chess players memorize most openings, and deviants thereof. Joshua, for example, pretty much knows how you'll play him and how to counter your pathetic efforts up to ten moves into the game. No matter which avenues you take. Only if you do something "bizarre" will he be forced to wing it a bit.

And even then he'll likely thump you.

Politely.

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