

*The Black and White of Chess*

By Mark Wayne [REDACTED]

**E**ven as a child, chess captivated my furthest imaginations. Two opposing armies locked in an epic struggle of one's mind, a game in which wit stood mighty over strength. When adding the fact that academic scholars do not always agree or know how old the game is or who invented it, my fascination has since only increased.

Despite the confusion among historians, the consensus suggests that chess began appearing in the sixth century and was well known throughout Europe by the tenth, attracting the serious interest of the most educated of the time, kings, philosophers, and poets. It has been said that many generals and kings such as the infamous Mongol conqueror, Genghis Khan, the creator one of the largest empires in world history utilized the game of chess to teach strategies to the leaders of his armies. As for myself, I have often referred to chess as, *The Game of Kings*.

Unlike sports such as basketball, football, or baseball which involve physical skills, or other games such as darts and electronic games that require hand-eye coordination, chess test a player's analytic abilities. Chess is game of skill between two people, played using specially designed pieces on a square board comprised of 64 alternating light and dark squares (usually *Black* and *White*). Each player controls an army comprised of eight pawns and eight pieces: one king, one queen, two rooks (sometimes referred to as "castles"), two bishops, and two knights. Although the term *pieces* are sometimes used to refer to all 16 chessmen, it usually does not refer to pawns. The two armies are of contrasting colors, one light and the other dark, and are always called *Black and White* regardless of their actual colors.

Though I have always enjoyed the competition of chess, my first real understanding of the game came when, at the age of seventeen, my family and I moved from Las Vegas, Nevada to Twin Falls, Idaho. I met a kid my age, Chris, who understood there was more to the game

## *The Black and White of Chess*

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than simply moving pieces, that there were strategies. I was instantly fascinated with the concept and Chris and I began playing even at weekend parties.

I found it odd that though the education I was privileged to in Las Vegas put me ahead of most in my Twin Falls classes, Chris was able to beat me routinely on the chessboard. In fact, Chris struggled through every class and eventually dropped out of school, but there was no beating him at chess. I did eventually come to the conclusion that education and intellect had little to do with one another, that knowing a lot of things and being smart were two different things. When explaining this to others I often use the analogy of a fox, a fox is smart but knows little. A fox cannot read or write, or tell you who is president, but a fox knows how to survive. A fox can figure out how to get into a chicken coop and take your prize hen without being caught, and that is what makes a fox smart.

Though we remained friends through the years, as many living in smaller communities, Chris and I were also both inflicted with substance abuse, something I attribute to environment and income inequality, and we both ended up serving time in an Idaho prison. While serving time in the penitentiary, I learned that Chris and I were among the top ranking chess players in the Idaho prison system. I am not claiming that we could not be beaten or that we were ready to face Bobby Fisher or Garry Kasparov, but simply that our chess skills were superior to most in the Idaho Department of Corrections.

The one constant in Idaho's prison system is that nothing is constant. Chris and I did not enter the system at the same time of our lives, neither with the same charge or amount of sentence to serve, and if by chance we were incarcerated during a stint, we were often housed in different locations or facilities and rarely seen one another. However, my one invariable was chess.

Idaho does not have a diverse population, nothing like Las Vegas where I actually grew up, and their prison system reflects this. The majority of inmates within Idaho's prison system are Caucasian, Hispanics making up the largest minority group, with the least being Asian. There are a number of black men behind the walls of Idaho's penitentiaries, and though I am sure the figures are disproportionately large compared to Idaho's African-American population, the numbers of black men within Idaho's penitentiary remain relatively small. However, the oddity I have discovered is that though the African-American population is small, the number of chess players among them is significantly higher than the white majority. Besides Chris, my arch

## *The Black and White of Chess*

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nemeses on a chessboard during my entire incarceration have been black men. Everywhere I have been housed inside the Idaho penitentiary, I have played chess daily with a black man.

At first I attributed this fact to my upbringing in the more diverse city of Las Vegas. Nevertheless, this did not explain the percentage differences of good players between black and white men within Idaho's prison system. Among the white population, there might be one in every one hundred men that play chess at the level I play (probably less than one percent), while the numbers among the black counterparts are closer to three in ten (thirty percent). This huge number difference mystified me, and I began to think it must have something to do environment and income inequality, but I could not put a finger on any one thing that made that notion true in anyway.

Besides being a student of chess, I also like to consider myself a student of the written word. I truly enjoy reading classic works and pieces and ran across an article written by *Jeff Greenfield* appearing in *Esquire* magazine in October of 1975, *The Black and white Truth about Basketball*. In his exposé Greenfield took a look at the dominance of black athletes in the sport of basketball. I admit I had little interest in the commentary and at first I threw it aside, but I picked it up later and read it. Something Greenfield wrote in the third paragraph hooked me; "The current generation of black athletes are heirs to a tradition half a century old: in neighborhoods without money for bats, gloves, hockey sticks, tennis rackets, or shoulder pads, basketball is accessible."

Relating this to the question I had been pondering, I immediately thought of environment and income inequality. How could these two things have anything to do with one's ability to calculate the moves of chess? It made no sense, there had to be more and I dug into Greenfield's article searching for answers. Unfortunately, for me, Greenfield went on to discuss the differences of playing styles between the black and white athletes of basketball and I was left questioning the differing techniques of chess. There were no big differences in style, none that I could identify by ethnic background.

I have noticed that the Russian and Bosnian men I have met and played chess with walk a tight line between aggressive and reckless, but I have not really played enough of these men to determine if this was a specific or personal style or one they had adapted in their homelands. All of the American men I have played, of all ethnic backgrounds, seem to have an approach that can only be described as individual.

## *The Black and White of Chess*

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The answers I sought eluded me until I ceased thinking of race or ethnicity, and began to reflect on what we had in common, what did we share with men such as Genghis Khan, the epiphany astounded me. We have all used and learned strategies to survive. My resolutions lie within my analogy of the fox. The fox has endured by learning and adopting survival tactics, the fox's brain is constantly searching for strategies that work.

Chris and I were born into underprivileged families, living in a small community hit hard with the recession of the Reagan era. Our environment and weak economy (income disparity) forced us to develop survival strategies that manifested in our chess game. And as for the greater number of good African-American chess players among Idaho's prison population, that is obviously due to the four hundred years of oppression that has forced men as them to use the fox's strategies of survival. In neighborhoods lacking opportunities and resources in education, jobs, and job training, people, of all ethnic backgrounds, have adapted and become accustom to weighing strategies of survival within their minds. Paradoxically, people who train their minds in such a way make better chess players. It seems the modern depiction of *The Game of Kings*, would actually look more like *The Game of Paupers*.