

VISHWANATHAN ANAND

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Man's competition versus man the real contest, machines only allies

I have often been asked when I realised that chess was a calling. I always say that a sport has to be fun before it's a profession, a calling or a quest for perfection. I started out by playing against my mother, and she was the first person to realise that I was pretty good at the game. For me chess was just one thing – great fun. And that was heightened by the fact that the local club I went to in Chennai used to organise chess tournaments regularly. It was great fun because once you finished a game you could queue up and play again.

However, soon it was clear that I could compete at a national level and then at international level when I was in my early teens. The fun outings now were peppered with serious preparation and from an initial stage itself I knew that discipline was a critical ingredient in the quest for success.

After winning the Asian Championships and becoming a Grandmaster, there was a lot of expectation about how I would fare in the World Championships. From the late 1980s into the early 1990s, the expectations were always high and sadly, I always fell short. However, two factors made it easier for me to handle these setbacks. One was the fact that the nature of a chess match would make it clear from an initial stage whether or not one has won. So by the time the match ended one had time to compose one's thoughts. The other was the fact that once the dejection and disappointment faded, I learnt from my mistakes and that helped my quest for the world championship.

When it did come, it was indeed in a perfect tournament where I played as well as I could have and also where it was as though the competition parted to ensure my win. As in the defeat, in victory, too, I knew well before the final moment that I would win. Therefore, when the moment did come I was composed even though the elation was something that will stay with me for a long time.

Chess has come a long way since the time I first started. This is a different set of youngsters who all come from the post-computer era. Losing to a computer was something our generation had to grapple with. It hurt us to see a computer easily defeat the best players by virtue of being a machine, and for many fans it did take the sheen out of the sport. However, this generation accepts that the machine can beat man but the nature of man's competition with another man is the real contest. The computer is now an ally and not an adversary.

It really gladdens me to see players like Vidit Gujrathi, Aravinth Chidambaram, P. Rameshbabu and Nihal Sarin making a mark in the international scene. Among the women, Harika Dronavalli and R. Vaishali are players to watch out for.