

*Phiona Mutesi is a young chess prodigy who lives in Uganda. She learned the game from Robert Katende, her coach. Read the excerpt that describes how she came to participate in the international 2010 Chess Olympiad and answer the questions that follow.*

*from* **Game of Her Life**  
by Tim Crothers

- 1 *The opening ceremonies at the 2010 Chess Olympiad take place in an ice arena. Phiona has never seen ice. There are also lasers and dancers inside bubbles and people costumed as chess pieces marching around on a giant chessboard. Phiona watches it all with her hands cupping her cheeks, as if in a wonderland. She asks if this happens every night in this place, and she is told by her coach no, the arena normally serves as a home for hockey, concerts, and the circus. Phiona has never heard of those things.*
- 2 *She returns to the hotel, which at fifteen floors is the tallest building Phiona has ever entered. She rides the elevator with trepidation. She stares out of her window amazed by how people on the ground look so tiny from the sixth floor. She takes a long shower, washing away the slum.*

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- 3 Phiona Mutesi is the ultimate underdog. . . .
- 4 She wakes at five each morning to begin a two-hour trek through Katwe to fill a jug with drinkable water, walking through low land that is often so severely flooded by Uganda's torrential rains that many residents sleep in hammocks near their ceilings to avoid drowning. There are no sewers, and the human waste from downtown Kampala is dumped directly into the slum. There is no sanitation. Flies are everywhere. The stench is appalling.
- 5 Phiona walks past dogs, rats, and long-horned cattle, all competing with her to survive in a cramped space that grows more crowded every minute. She navigates carefully through this place where women are valued for little more than . . . childcare, where fifty percent of teen girls are mothers. It is a place where everybody is on the move but nobody ever leaves; it is said that if you are born in Katwe you die in Katwe, from disease or violence or neglect. Whenever Phiona gets scared on these journeys, she thinks of another test of survival.



“Chess is a lot like my life,” she says through an interpreter. “If you make smart moves you can stay away from danger, but you know any bad decision could be your last.”

6 Phiona and her family have relocated inside Katwe six times in four years, once because all of their possessions were stolen, another time because their hut was crumbling. Their current home is a room ten feet by ten feet, its only window covered by sheet metal. The walls are brick, the roof corrugated tin held up by spindly wood beams. A curtain is drawn across the doorway when the door is open, as it always is during the sweltering daytime in this country bisected by the equator. Laundry hangs on wash lines crisscrossing the room. The walls are bare, except for etched phone numbers. There is no phone.

7 The contents of Phiona’s home are: two water jugs, wash bin, small charcoal stove, teapot, a few plates and cups, toothbrush, tiny mirror, Bible, and two musty mattresses. The latter suffice for the five people who regularly sleep in the shack: Phiona, mother Harriet, teenage brothers Brian and Richard, and her six-year-old niece, Winnie. Pouches of curry powder, salt, and tea leaves are the only hints of food.

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8 Phiona does not know her birthday. Nobody bothers to record such things in Katwe. There are few calendars. Fewer clocks. Most people don’t know the date or the day of the week. Every day is just like the last.

9 For her entire life, Phiona’s main challenge has been to find food. One afternoon in 2005, when she was just nine but had already dropped out of school because her family couldn’t afford it, she secretly followed Brian out of their shack in hopes he might lead to the first meal of the day. Brian had recently taken part in a project run by Sports Outreach Institute, a Christian mission that works to provide relief and religion through sports to the world’s poorest people. Phiona watched Brian enter a dusty hallway, sit on a bench, and begin playing with some black and white objects. Phiona had never seen anything like these pieces, and she thought they were beautiful. She peeked around a corner again and again, fascinated by the game and also wondering if there might be some food there. Suddenly, she was spotted. “Young girl,” said Coach Robert. “Come in. Don’t be afraid.”

10 *She is lucky to be here. Uganda’s women’s team has never participated in an Olympiad before because it is expensive. But this year, according to members of the Ugandan Chess Federation, the president of FIDE (chess’s governing body) is funding their trip. Phiona needs breaks like that.*

11 *On the second day of matches, she arrives early to explore. She sees Afghan women dressed in burkas, Indian women in saris and Bolivian women in ponchos and black bowler hats. She spots a blind player and wonders how that is possible. She sees an Iraqi kneel and begin to pray toward Mecca. As she approaches her table, Phiona is asked to produce her credential to prove she is actually a competitor, perhaps because she looks so young, or perhaps because with her short hair, baggy sweater, and sweatpants, she is mistaken for a boy.*

12 *Before her match begins against Elaine Lin Yu-Tong of Taiwan, Phiona slips off her sneakers. She isn’t comfortable playing chess in shoes. Midway through the game, Phiona makes a tactical error, costing her two pawns. Her opponent makes a similar blunder later, but Phiona doesn’t realize it until it’s too late. From then on, she stares crestfallen at the board*

as the rest of the moves play out predictably, and she loses a match she thinks she should have won. Phiona leaves the table and bolts to the parking lot. Katende warned her never to go off on her own, but she boards a shuttle bus alone and returns to the hotel, then runs to her room and bawls into her pillow. Later that evening, Katende tries his best to comfort her, but Phiona is inconsolable. It is the only time chess has ever brought her to tears. In fact, she cannot remember the last time she cried.

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13 “When I first saw chess, I thought, *What could make all these kids so silent?*” Phiona recalls. “Then I watched them play the game and get happy and excited, and I wanted a chance to be that happy.”

14 Katende showed Phiona the pieces and explained how each was restricted by rules about how it could move. The pawns. The rooks. The bishops. The knights. The king. And finally the queen, the most powerful piece on the board. How could Phiona have imagined at the time where those thirty-two pieces and sixty-four squares would deliver her?

15 Phiona started walking six kilometers\* every day to play chess. During her early development, she played too recklessly. She often sacrificed crucial pieces in risky attempts to defeat her opponents as quickly as possible, even when playing black—which means going second and taking a defensive posture to open the match. Says Phiona, “I must have lost my first fifty matches before Coach Robert persuaded me to act more like a girl and play with calm and patience.”

16 The first match Phiona ever won was against Joseph Asaba, a young boy who had beaten her before by utilizing a tactic called the Fool’s Mate, a humiliating scheme that can produce victory in as few as four moves. One day Joseph wasn’t aware that Katende had prepared Phiona with a defense against the Fool’s Mate that would capture Joseph’s queen. When Phiona finally checkmated Joseph, she didn’t even know it until Joseph began sobbing because he had lost to a girl. While other girls in the project were afraid to play against boys, Phiona relished it. Katende eventually introduced Phiona to Ivan Mutesasira and Benjamin Mukumbya, two of the project’s strongest players, who agreed to tutor her. “When I first met Phiona, I took it for granted that girls are always weak, that girls can do nothing, but I came to realize that she could play as well as a boy,” Ivan says. “She plays very aggressively, like a boy. She likes to attack, and when you play against her, it feels like she’s always pushing you backward until you have nowhere to move.”

17 News eventually spread around Katwe that Katende was part of an organization run by white people, known in Uganda as *mzungu*, and Harriet began hearing disturbing rumors. “My neighbors told me that chess was a white man’s game, and that if I let Phiona keep going there to play, that *mzungu* would take her away,” she says. “But I could not afford to feed her. What choice did I have?”

18 Within a year, Phiona could beat her coach, and Katende knew it was time for her and the others to face better competition outside the project. He visited local boarding schools, where children from more privileged backgrounds refused to play the slum kids because

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\* six kilometers — almost four miles

they smelled bad and seemed like they might steal from them. But Katende kept asking until ten-year-old Phiona was playing against teens in fancy blazers and knickers, beating them soundly. Then she played university players, defeating them, as well.

19 She has learned the game strictly through trial and error, trained by a coach who has played chess recreationally off and on for years, admitting he didn't even know all of the rules until he was given *Chess for Beginners* shortly after starting the project. Phiona plays on instinct instead of relying on opening and end-game theory like more refined players. She succeeds because she possesses that precious chess gene that allows her to envision the board many moves ahead, and because she focuses on the game as if her life depended on it, which in her case might be true.

20 Phiona first won the Uganda Women's Junior Championship in 2007, when she was eleven. She won that title three years in a row, and it would have been four, but the Uganda Chess Federation didn't have the funds to stage it in 2010. She is still so early in her learning curve that chess experts believe her potential is staggering. "To love the game as much as she does and already be a champion at her age means her future is much bigger than any girl I've ever known," says George Zirembuzi, Uganda's national team coach, who has trained with grandmasters in Russia. "When Phiona loses, she really feels hurt, and I like that, because that characteristic will help her keep thirsting to get better."

21 Although Phiona is already implausibly good at something she has no business even doing, she is, like most girls and women in Uganda, uncomfortable sharing what she's thinking. Normally, nobody cares. She tries to answer any questions about herself with a shrug. When Phiona is compelled to speak, she is barely audible and usually staring at her feet. She realizes that chess makes her stand out, which makes her a target in Katwe, among the most dangerous neighborhoods in Uganda. So she is conditioned to say as little as possible. "Her personality with the outside world is still quite reserved, because she feels inferior due to her background," Katende says. "But in chess I am always reminding her that anyone can lift a piece, because it is so light. What separates you is where you choose to put it down. Chess is the one thing in Phiona's life she can control. Chess is her one chance to feel superior."