

Checkmate: Garry Kasparov vs. Chess Phenom Phiona Mutesi

by Eli Lake

One of the ambitions for Ugandan chess phenom Phiona Mutesi was to meet Garry Kasparov, one of the greatest chess champions of the 20th century. On Thursday morning, Mutesi achieved that goal and played a game of chess with the man many consider to be the Michael Jordan of the sport.

Mutesi's hero was late to arrive at the event. But when he ambled toward her, she grinned widely, standing up to shake his hand. Kasparov gave her a copy of his book, *Kasparov vs. Karpov*, detailing some of his greatest matches. He inscribed it with the words "For all dreams to come true."

She told the grandmaster that he was an inspiration to her. Kasparov responded that she was a role model and inspiration for thousands and an important voice for chess in Uganda, where chess is not widely played. In Mutesi's native dialect in Uganda there is no word for chess.

Mutesi is from the slums of Katwe. Her father died of AIDS when she was 3 years old, and she began to play the game as a way to earn cups of porridge. In an interview she told *The Daily Beast* that she likes chess because "It's about planning. If I wanted to survive, I had to plan."

In Katwe she lives with her mother and two brothers in a one-room brick shack. She said Katwe would often flood in the rainy season for Uganda and that there was sewage all over the street.

Mutesi began playing when she was 9 years old. Today she is 17, though she does not remember her actual birthday. Rodney Suddith, the president of the non-governmental organization Sports Outreach, which has brought Mutesi to America, said she had to pick a birthdate for her passport. She chose the date March 28th because on that day she remembered being served cupcakes in school.

In recent years, Mutesi has competed in national and international chess tournaments and has done quite well. Author Tim Crothers has written a book about her, *The Queen of Katwe*. Disney Studios has just chosen a director for a film about her young life, according to Suddith.

This trip to New York is the second visit to America for Mutesi. Suddith said when she first came to the country in November last year she asked for chicken. So Suddith took her to a Chick-fil-A and ordered chicken strips. She did not believe however that it could be chicken without bones, so she said she would save the strips for later but instead stuffed the fast food in between the seats of Suddith's car.

After some small talk, Kasparov and Mutesi got down to the match. For the opening moves Mutesi kept up with the grand master. The two traded queens early in the match and were even at least in terms of pieces. But Kasparov had managed to push his pawns to Mutesi's side of the board. Eventually, Kasparov broke through her defense and was one move away from forking Mutesi's king and rook. The Ugandan recognized the vulnerability of her position and offered her hand in resignation.

"He has won the game, but I have learned many things from losing," Mutesi said. Kasparov responded that this was one of life's most important lessons, to learn from one's mistakes.

Later on Kasparov said that Mutesi had "obvious talent." But he also lamented that she had no formal coaching. "Who knows, she could be the next Judy Polgar," he said, referring to the Hungarian-born woman who is considered the best female chess player in history. But Kasparov added that the world would never know how good Mutesi could be without the kind of rigorous training he had received as a young boy in the Soviet Union.