

Game of Her Life

by Tim Crothers

She flies to Siberia in late September with nine teammates, all in their twenties, much older than she is. When she won the match that put her on this plane she had no idea what it meant. Nobody had told her what was at stake, so she just played, like always. She had no idea that she'd qualified for the Olympiad; no idea what the Olympiad was. She had no idea that her win would send her to the city of Khanty-Mansiysk, in remote Russia; no idea where Russia was. When she learned all this, she asked just one question: "Is it cold there?"

But here she is, journeying with her countrymen 27 hours across the globe. And though she has known many of them for a few years, they have no idea where she is from or where she aspires to go, because Phiona Mutesi is from a place where girls like her don't talk about that.

Agape Church could collapse at any moment. It is a ramshackle structure that lists alarmingly to one side, held together by scrap wood, rope, a few nails, and faith. It is rickety, like everything else around it. At the church on this Saturday morning in September are 37 children whose lives are equally fragile. They wander in to play a game none had heard of before they met Coach Robert, a game so foreign that there's no word for it in Luganda, their native language.

Chess.

When they walk through the door, grins crease their faces. This is home as much as any place, a refuge, the only community they know. These are their friends, their brothers and sisters of chess, and there is relative safety and comfort here. Inside Agape Church it is almost possible to forget the chaos outside, in Katwe, the largest of eight slums in Kampala, Uganda, and one of the worst places on earth.

There are only seven chessboards at the church, and chess pieces are so scarce that sometimes an orphan pawn must stand in for a king. A child sits on each end of a wobbly pew, both straddling the board between their knobby knees, with captured pieces guarded in their laps. A 5-year-old kid in a threadbare Denver Broncos No. 7 jersey competes against an 11-year-old in a frayed T-shirt that reads "J'Adore Paris." Most of the kids are barefoot. Some wear flip-flops. One has on black wingtips with no laces.

It is rapid-fire street chess. When more than a few seconds elapse without a move, there is a palpable restlessness. It is remarkably quiet except for the thud of one piece slaying another and the occasional dispute over the location of a piece on a chessboard so faded that the dark spaces are barely distinguishable from the light ones. Surrender is signaled by a clattering of captured pieces on the board. A new match begins immediately without the slightest celebration.

Coach Robert Katende is here. So are Benjamin and Ivan and Brian. And up near the pulpit sits Phiona. One of two girls in the room, Phiona is juggling three matches at once and dominating them with her aggressive style, checkmating her young opponents while drawing a flower in the dirt on the floor with her toe. Phiona is 14, and her stone face gives no sign that the next day she will travel to Siberia to compete against the very best chess players in the world.

Ice? 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.

She returns to the hotel, which at 15 floors is the tallest building Phiona has ever entered. She rides the elevator with trepidation. She stares out of her room window amazed by how people on the ground look so tiny from the sixth floor. She takes a long shower, washing away the slum.

Phiona Mutesi is the ultimate underdog. To be African is to be an underdog in the world. To be Ugandan is to be an underdog in Africa. To be from Katwe is to be an underdog in Uganda. And finally, to be female is to be an underdog in Katwe.

She wakes at 5 each morning to begin a two-hour trek through Katwe to fill a jug with drinkable water, walking through lowland 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.

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 sex and childcare, where 50 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."

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 10-foot-by-10-foot room, 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.

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 6-year-old niece, Winnie. Pouches of curry powder, salt and tea leaves are the only hints of food.

Phiona enters the competition venue, an indoor tennis arena packed with hundreds of chessboards, and quickly notices that she is among the youngest of more than 1,000 players from 149 countries. She is told that this is the most accomplished collection of chess talent ever assembled, which makes her nervous. She is the second-seeded player for the Ugandan team, but she isn't playing against kids anymore; her competitors are women. She keeps thinking to herself, *Do I really belong here?*

Her first opponent is Dina Kagramanov, the Canadian national champion. Kagramanov, born in Baku, Azerbaijan, the hometown of former men's world champion Garry Kasparov, learned the game at age 6. She is competing in her third Olympiad and, at 24, has been playing elite chess longer than Phiona has been alive.

Kagramanov preys on Phiona's inexperience, setting a trap early and gaining a pawn advantage that Phiona stubbornly tries and fails to reverse. After her win, Kagramanov is shocked to learn that this is Phiona's first international match against an adult. "She's a sponge," Kagramanov says. "She picks up on whatever information you give her, and she uses it against you. Anybody can be taught moves and how to react to those moves, but to reason like she does at her age is a gift that gives her the potential for greatness."

When asked about early memories, Phiona can recall only loss. "I remember I went to my dad's village when I was about 3 years old to see him when he was very sick, and a week later he died of AIDS," she says. "After the funeral my family stayed in the village for a few weeks, and one morning when I woke up, my older sister, Juliet, told me she was feeling a headache. We got some herbs and gave them to her, and then she went to sleep. The following morning we found her dead in the bed. That's what I remember."

She tells also of being gravely ill when she was 8. Harriet begged her sister for money to take Phiona to the hospital, and though they were never given a diagnosis, Harriet believes her daughter had malaria. Phiona lost consciousness, doctors removed fluid from her spine, and Harriet was sure she'd have to bury another daughter. She later told Phiona, "You died for two days."

Harriet, who is often sick, is sometimes gone from the shack for days trying to make money for her family's daily meal of rice and tea. She wakes at 2 a.m. to walk five kilometers and buy the avocados and eggplants that she resells at a street market. Phiona, who never knows when her mother will return, is left to care for her siblings.

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.

For her entire life Phiona's main challenge has been to find food. One afternoon in 2005, when she was just 9 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.”

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.

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.

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.

Robert Katende was a bastard child who lived his early years with his grandmother in the village of Kiboga, outside Kampala. It wasn’t until he was reunited with his mother in Kampala’s Nakulabye slum, when he was 4, that he learned his first name. Until then he’d been known only as Katende.

Robert’s mother died in 1990, when he was 8. He then began a decade-long odyssey from aunt to aunt and from school to school. He’d started playing soccer as a small boy in Kiboga, kicking a ball made of banana leaves. He grew into a center forward of such speed and skill that whenever his guardian of the moment could not afford to send him to school, a headmaster would hear of his soccer prowess and usher him in through a back door.

When Robert was 15, he suffered a severe head injury crashing into a goalkeeper. He lapsed into a coma, and everyone at school assumed he was dead. Robert emerged from the coma the next morning but spent three months in the hospital, where doctors told him he would never play soccer again. They were wrong.

Nine months after his injury, despite excruciating headaches, Robert returned to the soccer field. The game provided the only money he could earn. After a club soccer match in 2003, his coach told him about a job at Sports Outreach, and Robert, a born-again Christian, found his calling. He started playing for the ministry’s team and was also assigned to Katwe, where he began drawing kids

from the slum with the promise of soccer and postgame porridge. After several months, he noticed some children just watching from the sidelines, and he searched for a way to engage them. He found a solution in a nearly forgotten relic, a chess set given to him by a friend back in secondary school. “I had my doubts about chess in Katwe,” Katende admits. “With their education and their environment, I wondered, *Can these kids really play this game?*”

Katende started offering chess after soccer games, beginning with a group of six boys who came to be known as The Pioneers. Two years later, the program had 25 children. That’s when a barefoot 9-year-old girl in a torn and muddied skirt peeked into the entryway, and Coach Robert beckoned her inside.

Chess. Chess. Chess. After a long day at the Olympiad, the players return to the hotel to talk about, what else, chess. If they are not talking chess, they are playing it.

Dina Kagrananov approaches Phiona in the hotel lobby and hands her two books on advanced chess. Then, with Katende interpreting, the two players break down their first-round match, Kagrananov explaining the strategy behind her own moves and asking about the decisions Phiona made instinctively.

Like each day she will spend in Siberia, Phiona is engulfed by chess, pausing only to visit the hotel restaurant where she dines three times a day at an all-you-can-eat buffet. At the first few meals Phiona makes herself sick by overeating. Even during dinner, chess moves are replayed with salt and pepper shakers.

“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.”

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 32 pieces and 64 squares would deliver her?

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 50 matches before Coach Robert persuaded me to act more like a girl and play with calm and patience.”

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.”

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?”

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 they smelled bad and seemed like they might steal from them. But Katende kept asking until 10-year-old Phiona was playing against teens in fancy blazers and knickers, beating them soundly. Then she played university players, defeating them, as well.

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.

Phiona first won the Uganda women’s junior championship in 2007, when she was 11. 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.”

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.”

Chess is not a spectator sport. During matches at the Olympiad, it is not uncommon for 20 minutes to elapse without a single move. Players often leave the table for a bathroom break or to get

a cup of tea or to psyche out an opponent by pretending that it isn't even necessary to sit at the board to conquer it. Phiona never leaves the table. She doesn't know what it means to psyche out an opponent or, fortunately for her, what it means to be psyched out.

But she is restless. These games progress too slowly for her, nothing like chess back in Uganda. She has spent two matches fidgeting and slouching in her seat, desperate for her opponents to get on with it.

Wary after Phiona's breakdown following the second match, Katende is ruing the Uganda Chess Federation's decision to place Phiona as her team's No. 2 seed, where she must face the top players from other teams rather than lower-seeded players with less experience, whom he suspects she could be defeating.

Phiona's third match is against a women's grandmaster from Egypt, Khaled Mona. Pleased by Mona's quick pace of play, Phiona gets lured into her opponent's rhythm and plays too fast, leading to fatal errors. Mona plays flawlessly and needs just 24 moves to win. When Phiona concedes after less than an hour, Katende looks worried, but Phiona recognizes that on this day she's been beaten by a better player. Instead of being discouraged, she is inspired. Phiona walks straight over to Katende and says, "Coach, I will be a grandmaster someday."

She looks relieved, and a bit astonished, to have spoken those words.

Chess had transported Phiona out of Katwe once before. In August 2009 she traveled with Benjamin and Ivan to Juba, Sudan, where the three represented Uganda in Africa's International Children's Chess Tournament. Several other players who had qualified to join them on the national team refused to go with the slum kids.

It was Phiona's first trip out of Uganda, her first visit to an airport. "It felt like taking someone from the 19th century and plunging them into the present world," says Godfrey Gali, the Uganda Chess Federation's general secretary. "Everything at the airport was so strange to her; security cameras, luggage conveyors, so many white people. Then when the plane flew above the clouds, Phiona asked me, 'Mr. Gali, are we about to reach heaven?' She was totally sincere."

At their hotel in Sudan, Phiona had her own bed for the first time in her life. She had never before used a toilet that flushed. At the hotel restaurant she was handed a huge menu, a strange notion for someone who had never had a choice of what to eat at a meal before. "I could never have imagined this world I was visiting," Phiona says. "I felt like a queen."

In the tournament, the Ugandan trio, by far the youngest team in the competition, played against teams from 16 other African nations. In her opening match, Phiona faced a Kenyan who had a reputation as the best young female player in Africa. Despite her hands trembling with each early move, Phiona built a position advantage, isolated the enemy king, then checkmated her surprised opponent. Phiona won all four matches she played. Benjamin and Ivan were undefeated as well, and the three kids from Katwe won the team championship and a trophy too big to fit into any of their tiny backpacks.

A stunned Russian chess administrator, Igor Bolotinsky, approached Phiona after the tournament and told her, "I have a son who is an international chess master, and he was not as good at your age as you are."

When the Ugandan delegation returned to Kampala, Katende met them at the airport. He tried to congratulate Phiona, but she was too busy laughing and teasing her teammates, something he had never seen her do before. For once, he realized, Phiona was just being the kid that she is.

But as Phiona, Benjamin, and Ivan were driven back into Katwe for a victory celebration, a psychological shift took place. Windows in their van were reflexively shut and backpacks pushed out of sight. Smiling faces turned solemn, the mask of the slum. The three children discussed who would keep the trophy, and it was decided that none of them could because it would surely be stolen. They were greeted with cheers and chants of "Uganda-Uganda-Uganda!"

But they were also met with some strange questions: *Did you fly on the silver bird? Did you stay indoors or in the bush? Why did you come back here?* "It struck me how difficult it must have been for them to go to another world and return," says Rodney Suddith, the director of Sports Outreach. "Sudan might as well be the moon to people in the slum. The three kids couldn't share their experience with the others because they just couldn't connect. It puzzled me at first, and then it made me sad, and then I wondered, *Is what they have done really a good thing?*"

As Phiona left the celebration headed for her home that night, someone excitedly asked her, "What is the first thing you're going to say to your mother?"

"I need to ask her," Phiona said, "Do we have enough food for breakfast?"

Who is she? Is Phiona trying to prove that she's no better than anyone else or that she's better than everyone else? Imagine that psychological tug-of-war inside the mind of the least secure creature on earth, a teenage girl, as she sits at a chessboard nearly 5,000 miles from home.

Phiona's opponent in her fourth match, an Angolan, Sonia Rosalina, keeps staring at Phiona's eyes, which Rosalina will later say are the most competitive she has faced in chess. Phiona is behind for most of the match, but refuses to surrender. She battles back and has a chance to force a draw in the end game, but at the critical moment, she plays too passively, too defensively, not like herself. After more than three hours and 144 moves, Phiona grudgingly submits, admitting that she didn't have her "courage" when she needed it most. She promises herself that she will never let that happen again.

No matter how far chess has taken Phiona Mutesi, a 10-foot-by-10-foot home in Katwe remains her destination, the life of the ultimate underdog is still her routine. Although Phiona is back in school through a grant from Sports Outreach, she is just learning to read and write. Also, Phiona faces a potential hazard that could make her life even more challenging: Her father died of AIDS, and her mother worries her constant illnesses are because she is HIV-positive, but she is too afraid to be tested. Phiona has never been tested either.

Phiona says that her dream for the future is to build a house outside Katwe for her mother so that she would never have to move again. When Harriet is asked if her daughter can escape the slum,

she says, "I have never thought about that." Ugandan universities are not handing out scholarships for chess, and, without benefactors stepping in again, a trip to the 2012 Olympiad in Istanbul, Turkey, is unlikely.

Katende, when pressed to describe Phiona's realistic blueprint out of Katwe, can come up only with a vision he's had about starting an academy where the children of the chess project earn money teaching the game to kids of wealthy families. He says he hopes through her chess that Phiona can begin to blaze a trail out of the slum for all of his chess kids to follow. To do that, though, Phiona must produce on a world stage like no other Ugandan, man or woman, has ever achieved.

September 30th, 2010, in Khanty-Mansiysk is cold and dreary, like every other day at the Olympiad. Phiona hates Russian weather but loves the hotel room, the clean water, the three meals a day. She is dreading her return home in four days, when she must begin scrapping for food again.

She sits at the chessboard for her fifth match wearing a white knit hat, a black overcoat and woolly beige boots that are several sizes too large, all gifts from various *mzungu*. Her opponent is an Ethiopian, Haregeweyn Abera, who, like Phiona, is an African teenager. For the first time in the tournament, Phiona sees someone across the table she can relate to. She sees herself. For the first time in the tournament, she is not intimidated at all.

Phiona plays black but remains patient and gradually shifts the momentum during the first 20 moves of the match until she creates an opening to attack. Suddenly she feels like she is back at Agape Church, pushing and pushing and pushing Abera's pieces into retreat until there is nowhere left for Abera to move.

Abera extends her hand in defeat. Phiona tries and fails to suppress her gap-toothed grin, then rises and skips out of the hall into the frigid Siberian air. This dismissed girl from a dismissed world cocks her head back and unleashes a blissful shriek into the slate gray sky, loud enough to startle players still inside the arena.