

# Play Like a Girl!

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# Introduction

**A**s an aspiring young chess master, I studied chess tactics obsessively, reading and re-reading my favorite books again and again. The puzzle books I read at the time were compiled before women came to prominence in chess, and they lacked game fragments by female masters. So I scanned chess magazines and books for games by female trailblazers such as Judit Polgár, Maia Chiburdanidze and Xie Jun. When I spotted a particularly beautiful finale such as ♖xf8+ (see problem 4.18) or ♖g7+ (see problem 2.15), I fantasized that the position was from one of my own games, preferably in a national championship or clutch team match.

When a young person solves puzzles, the improvement is so rapid that she can almost feel her chess brain getting larger by the hour. I always tell my 9 Queens classes and my private students that tactics are the key to chess improvement.

Brilliant women chessplayers and the combinations that earned them titles and honor finally meet in this book, where their sacrifices, checkmates, and nuanced traps are showcased. Every single position from this book comes from a real game won by a female chessplayer.

In my first book about women's chess, *Chess Bitch: Women in the Ultimate Intellectual Sport*, I focused on the lives and struggles of the top women players in the world. At the start of each chapter, I've included some details on the lives and career highlights of fifteen female chess champions. The featured players range from Alexandra Kosteniuk, the Russian fashion model and Women's World Champion tagged the "Chess Queen," to New Yorkers Medina Parrilla (the Bronx) and Rochelle Ballantyne (Brooklyn), each of whom converted her knowledge of the 64 squares into \$65,000 college scholarships. As you read these biographical interludes, relax and stretch your brain in between solving sessions.

## **What Does It Mean to, "Play Like a Girl?"**

The old cliché is that "throwing like a girl" or "playing like a girl" means playing in a soft and passive manner. Nothing could be further from the truth about the players in this book.

When I am interviewed about chess and my efforts to promote women in the game, I am often asked, "Do women and men play chess differently?" The short answer is, "Not significantly."

Every chessplayer has a different style and a different set of strengths and weaknesses. I have not pinpointed any major general differences between men and women, except that the top women players are more likely to be aggressive. The initial chapter of my first book foretold this new book, as it was titled, "Playing Like a Girl." In that chapter I offered some possible reasons for why women like to attack so much. I wrote then that many women develop an aggressive style in homage to the strongest woman player in history Judit Polgár, who is known for her blistering attacks.

Many coaches, fans, and chess pundits have noticed this tendency for aggressive play by women. As a result, I've heard it said that, "women play too violently because they are impatient." Whether people use "You play like a girl" to denote too much passivity, or too much aggression, it is usually meant as an insult. Because women are a minority in the chess world, making up only about ten percent of tournament players, such negative interpretations can be discouraging.

With this book, I hope to change the meaning of what it means to "play like a girl" in chess. The title is a compliment in recognition of the excellent moves of top women players around the world and throughout history.

The styles of the players in this book are quite diverse. I was delighted to play through the games of Koneru Humpy of India, since I had hardly studied them before. She is an incredible fighter, and the only woman other than Judit Polgár to break the 2600 FIDE rating level.

I also enjoyed the attacking style of Xie Jun, the first Women's World Champion from China. Jun has since been succeeded by two other Chinese players, Zhu Chen and Xu Yuhua. Many bets are on the teenager

Hou Yifan (b. 1994) not only to capture a Women's World Championship title, but also to go on to reach even further heights.

I was also impressed by the overall excellence and universal style of Maia Chiburdanidze, who was the first woman to hold her own consistently against strong men grandmasters.

Former World Champion Antoaneta Stefanova of Bulgaria is one of the most charming people you'll ever meet, and also a killer in the endgame. Bear in mind that "endgame" does not translate to "no more tactics." As you will soon see in *Play Like a Girl!*, the most beautiful combinations often arise from a nearly empty board.

### **For Whom Is This Book Intended?**

I hope to inspire players of either gender, who may rarely see women's games featured in the tactics books they usually study. Even if you don't care at all about the gender of the players in your tactics books, you will enjoy the fresh puzzles presented here.

In many of the tactics compendiums I studied as a kid, I saw the same classic brilliancies over and over again. Repetition is fundamental to tactical proficiency, but only up to a point: it's also important to see different ways to implement the same theme.

For some of you, this may be your very first chess book. With that in mind, many chapters include puzzles that can be tackled mere hours after learning the rules of the game. The first chapter, mates in one, is particularly geared to a player who is just starting out. If you have trouble with a puzzle, don't worry – this is not a book that you need to finish immediately. After a few months of play and study, you may find that positions that once made you scratch your head, are now easy for you.

Even combination wizards will find plenty of challenges here. Some of these puzzles are very deep, and the toughest will usually be at the end of each chapter. The puzzles in the final and most challenging chapter of all, "Destruction," will surely give masters pause for thought.

### **Get Involved**

So many young women have become strong players that it would be impossible to cover every brilliant tactic by female chessplayers in this volume. Email

9 Queens at [9queens@gmail.com](mailto:9queens@gmail.com) with your favorite tactics by women players that we missed. We will publish the highlights on [9queens.org](http://9queens.org).

### **Giving Back**

All royalties from *Play Like a Girl!* go back to 9queens.org, a non-profit based in Tucson, Arizona, that I co-founded with Jean Hoffman. 9 Queens is devoted to bringing chess to those most in need of its benefits, especially girls and inner-city youth. Your donation to 9 Queens will be up to 75% of your purchase price! So you can feel good about buying this book and giving it to your friends.

If you want to get involved, visit [9queens.org](http://9queens.org) or join our Facebook page to find out about events in your area, most of which are open to both genders.

### **How to Use This Book**

The puzzles are grouped by theme, but chess in practice is wild and complicated, and so themes will blend together in many examples. In these cases, I have catalogued the puzzle under the more prominent theme. When you solve tactics, I recommend that you just look for the best move, and when the solution crystallizes, you will understand how the theme comes into play. This will give you better practice for actual play as you gradually absorb the themes.

Finding a chess combination is a unique pleasure. In tackling the problems in *Play Like a Girl!*, remember that you will get more satisfaction when you figure out the answer than when you check the solution as soon as you hit a mental stumbling block. Also, be sure to try setting up tougher puzzles with a board and pieces – this approximates a chess tournament situation and you may be surprised at how much more you will see by doing this. That doesn't mean you should never check the solutions – after a good five or ten minutes, it's often O.K. to do so. But in this culture of instant gratification, I guarantee you that it will be tempting to turn the page in more like 15 seconds. Resist!

My hope is that this book will motivate you to play and to study more. At the end of the book, there is a blank page of chess diagrams for you to fill in with upcoming combinations from your own games. Good luck and of course, *Play Like a Girl!*

*Jennifer Shahade*  
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# Judit Polgár/Back-Rank Mate



**Born:** July 23, 1976    **Country:** Hungary

**Claim to Fame:** *Strongest female player in history; never plays in women's tournaments*

Judit Polgár and her sisters Susan (b.1969) and Sofia (b.1974) formed a trio of chess phenoms. They were all chess prodigies who proved that women could play chess as well as men can. All three girls were taught the game by their father and home-schooled so that they could focus on chess. Judit, the youngest, became the most meteoric star of all. She began to defeat grandmasters when she was just 11 years old.

At the height of his career, the American World Champion Bobby Fischer once said, “I could cede the odds of a knight to any woman player and still beat her easily.” It’s fitting that years later, Judit shattered Bobby’s own record to become the youngest-ever grandmaster at the age of 15 years and 4 months. Throughout her career, Judit has made a clear choice to seek out the strongest opponents possible. Because there is no other woman who yet approaches her chess level, Judit does not play in women’s events.

Notable exceptions include the 1988 and 1990 Olympiads, in which Judit played with her sisters to score a historic team victory over the mighty Soviet team. Most of the women profiled in this book play a mix of open events and events restricted to women. One of the most controversial issues in modern chess is whether gender-specific tournaments should exist at all. Detractors say that women are no less intelligent than men, and that chess should be an equal playing field. Those in favor of women’s tournaments believe that occasional women’s championships help to encourage women to stay in the game, and can help train them to become better overall players – against men or women. Women’s events also allow girls and women to make friends and support each other on the male-dominated chess circuit. I encourage female readers to make up their own mind about this issue.

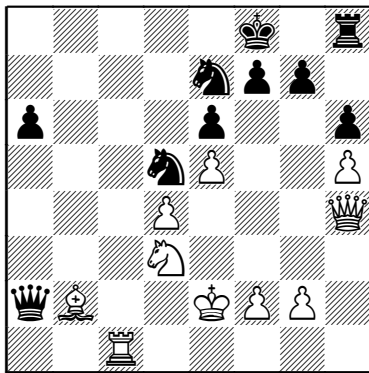
At Judit’s peak she was ranked number 8 in the world, and she is recognized as a member of the

chess world elite, a so-called “Super-Grandmaster.” Although Judit emphasizes that you “need fighting spirit,” she also sees the beauty in chess: “Making the right moves is similar to an artist creating a masterpiece.”

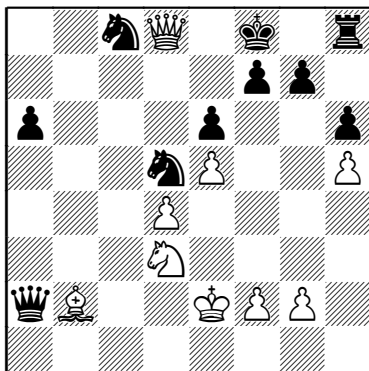
**The Back Rank**

When castled, the king is far safer than he is in the center, but then he is often vulnerable to a back-rank mate. This is why you see so many strong players making *luft* moves like 1. h3 or 1...h6, which give a monarch a potential escape square.

Back-rank accidents happen to everyone, from beginners to pros. In this example, Judit uses a back-rank motif (in this case involving a king which never managed to castle) to defeat the strong Russian grand-master Evgeny Bareev:

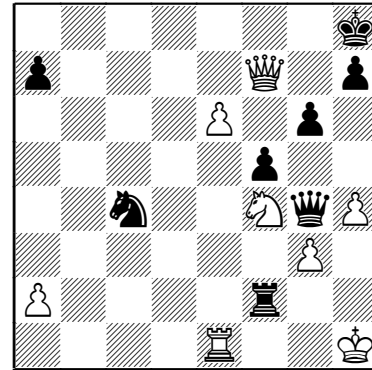


Judit played 1. ♖c8+! After 1...♗xc8, 2. ♕d8 is check-mate. The queen can deliver back-rank mates that the rook cannot – in this case, the queen covers the potential escape square at e7.



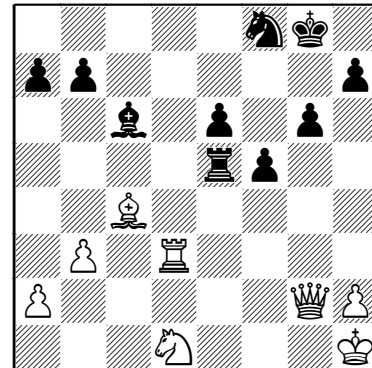
If you’re winning, back-rank mates can be a frustrating way to lose. Solve the puzzles in this chapter so that, like Judit, you find yourself on the right end of the back rank.

**4.1: Hou Yifan – Boris Khvan  
Greece 2004**



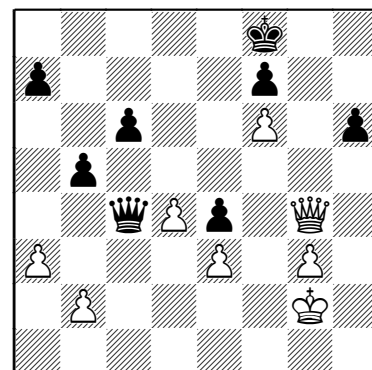
White to move

**4.2: Dora Trepát de Navarro – Vera Menchik  
(variation), Argentina 1939**



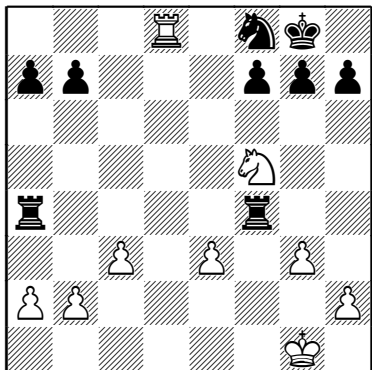
Black to move

**4.3: Oksana Sarana-Hungeling – Anna Zatonskih  
Kiev 1998**



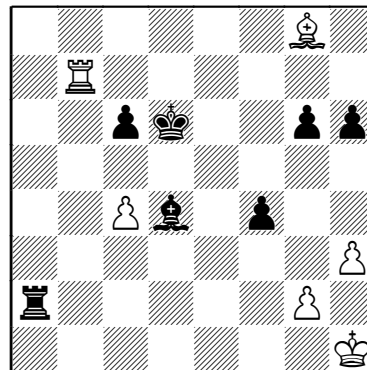
White to move

**4.4: Nadezhda Kosintseva – Tamar Tsereteli**  
Slovakia 1996



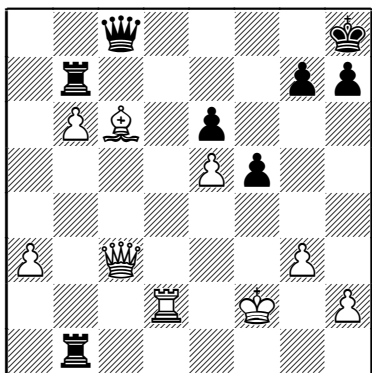
White to move

**4.7: Carlos Salvat – Antoaneta Stefanova**  
Spain 1999



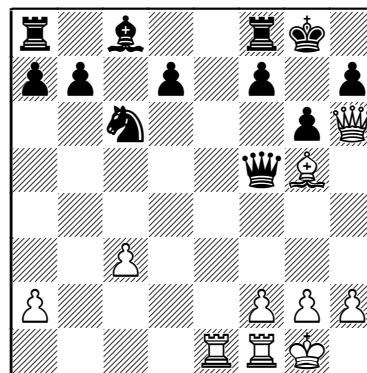
Black to move

**4.5: Koneru Humpy – Lee Jones**  
Malaysia 2005



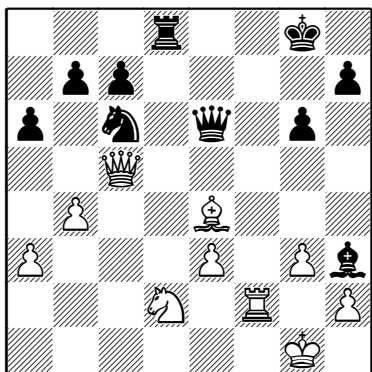
White to move

**4.8: Judit Polgár – Pavlina Chilingirova**  
Greece 1988



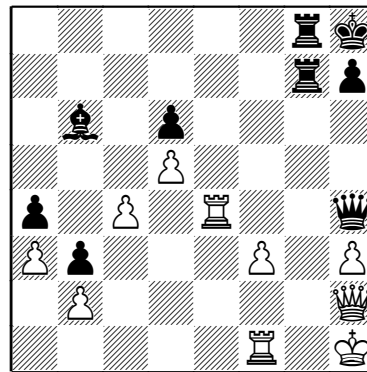
White to move

**4.6: Viktor Korchnoi – Irina Krush**  
Gibraltar 2007



Black to move

**4.9: Xie Jun – Alisa Galliamova**  
Women's World Championship  
Kazan/Shenyang (6) 1999



Black to move