

Illinois Chess: The Mighty Underdog

SAUMIL PADHYA

University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign

padhya2@illinois.edu

Abstract

In today's world, the emergence of underdog stories, especially in the sports community, is becoming increasingly frequent. One of those 'Cinderella' stories is of the University of Illinois Chess team. Despite having a much lower ranking than the chess teams of elite universities (like Webster University, University of Texas at Dallas), the U of I Chess Team qualified for the President's Cup (also known as the Final Four of Chess) against all odds. This led me to the question: how exactly do underdogs (like the U of I Chess Team), who are not even remotely comparable to the star-studded heavyweights (like the chess teams of Webster University, University of Texas at Dallas, etc.), manage to beat them?

I. INTRODUCTION

Everybody loves a great underdog story, but little do they know about the real factors that 'make it happen.' In the interpretation of such a 'logic-defying' result, the audience most often falls prey to the closest cliché syndrome, that months and months of endless hardship and determination drive the underdogs to victory. While this fact holds true to a certain extent, through interviews and observations, I have discovered conflicting results. Further, by getting an insight into the mindset of players on the University of Illinois Chess Team, I have identified the secret ingredients for their success, which can be re-used in other chess championships, and sports tournaments, to win more honors for the University. More importantly, the results of my analysis emphasize a much larger issue, in that they give a critical interpretation of the complexities involved in competitive sports and game theory.

II. THE WHYS AND HOWS OF U OF I'S EXTRAORDINARY PERFORMANCE

The Pan American Intercollegiate Team Chess Championship (also known as the Pan Ams) is one of the most prestigious and foremost chess championships in America. Any team

comprising of four players from a particular university can participate in the tournament and each university can pitch a maximum of 3 teams (known as the A, B and C teams of the respective university). The top 4 US schools in the Pan Ams qualify for playing in the President's Cup. The Elo Chess Rating system (named under Professor Arpad Elo), is universally used to rank chess players by awarding them ratings in the range of 1200-2800 based on their performance in chess tournaments. In Pan Ams 2012, the University of Illinois Chess team, seeded 14th out of a possible 44 teams, tied for the first place. Further, in Pan Ams 2013, seeded 13th out of a possible 42 teams, it tied for the 2nd place. In both editions, the difference between the rating of U of I and the top 3 teams was about 500 rating points, which made the U of I Chess Team least likely to win the contest.

It is beneficial to know more about the internal workings of the U of I Chess Team. Officially, U of I Chess is divided into the U of I Chess Club and the U of I Chess Team. On the Quad Day, RSO members set up camps on the quad to promote their organizations. To attract students to join the chess club, the club members invite students to play a chess match with them, and offer \$20 gift cards to anyone who can beat them. To be a part of the chess club, one has to pay a one-time fee of \$20. Playoffs are held

among the club members and the top 4 players are selected to form the U of I Chess Team. The Chess Club has training sessions on Wednesdays of every week, and typically involve solving chess problems and playing a short match against other players. The Chess Team also has similar sessions. Club members also assist in organizing the Illini Scholastic Chess Tournament, which is held once a year and is open to players of all ages. Aside from receiving the academic benefits of playing chess like improved concentration in studies, cognitive skills, etc., the members also get to be part of an organization that represents the University of Illinois at national level chess tournaments.

Chess, like any other sport, is highly complex. Success in chess depends on a variety of factors, and hard work is necessary, but not sufficient to achieve your level best performance. 30 minutes before the start of the round, players arrive and organizers set up chess boards and clocks on the wooden tables. Minutes before the match begins, some players crack jokes with their teammates to unnerve their opponents. As the game begins, some players play very fast, and bang the chess clocks to showcase their aggressive playing style, whereas others make a slow start in order to establish, and maintain sustained concentration throughout the game. Some players find it hard to concentrate because they are upset over losing their game in the last round. Towards the end of the game, after 3 or 4 hours of dedicated play, when the players are left with less than 10 minutes on the clock, the sudden death (time pressure) sets in. Because of the fear of losing the game due to 'flagging on time' (a player loses when he has 0 seconds left on the clock), players start to whip their pieces (move their pieces briskly), and there is chaos all over the board. At this stage, there is a high possibility of an unexpected outcome. A player can lose after 4 hours of flawless play, or he can win even after 4 hours of horrific play.

At the end of the day, even players having a high chess rating are humans and not chess engines. All chess players commit mistakes and

blunders. The higher rating of chess players simply indicates that they commit 'less' mistakes. Priyadharshan Kannappan, the captain of the Lindenwood Chess Team, is of the view that the U of I Chess Team was lucky enough to play the B teams of strong universities like Webster and Lindenwood, which had a strong lineup rating-wise, but whose players did not play at their optimal levels in the tournament." For example, when U of I played Lindenwood, our board 1 David Guerra was playing his worst chess of life combined with an ill health, and this made a huge difference in the outcome as LU (Lindenwood University) lost by 1.5-2.5 against U of I, even though our team was around 100 points stronger than U of I's team" (Kannappan 2015).

Further, as opposed to a standard chess tournament which has about 9-11 rounds, Pan Ams has only 6 rounds (each team competes against only 6 universities), and hence, there is a high possibility that a lower ranked team such as U of I's, would not play any of the top 5 teams and yet, make it to the Final Four. Michael Auger, the president of the Illinois Chess Club, and the board 2 player on the Illinois Chess Team, agrees. He confidently says that 'pairing luck' was 50% of the reason for U of I's splendid performance "Almost every round, the teams U of I was paired against, had at least 1 player who was in a bad form in the tournament" (Auger 2015). For instance, "In the 2012 Pan Ams, Lindenwood and Illinois had the same points going into the final round, but as LU was higher rated than Illinois, LU got paired against Webster-B (which had a 2450+ average), whereas Illinois got paired with Princeton (whose average rating was around 2250)" (Kannappan 2015).

However, Leo Xin Luo, the top scorer for Illinois in the Pan Ams, is of the view that pairing luck doesn't entirely justify their passionate performance. "In every tournament, we played up (with a higher rated team) 2 to 3 times. Especially in 2013, we upset 3 teams which were about 200 points higher than us. Pairing luck could not explain all of the wins"

(Luo Xin 2015). Illinois team captain Eric Rosen is the 2011 National High School Chess Champion. Having competed against some top-ranked chess players, he prepped his teammates before their match. He believes that their opponents, as opposed to U of I players, had many games in the players database, which made the play of their opponents predictable and easy to prepare against. In chess, although it is counterintuitive to not overthink a move, many top chess players lose their games because of overthinking. Players make this mistake because it is difficult to trust their intuition to make a move by using less time, as opposed to analyzing the possible moves and making the optimal move by utilizing more time. Eric affirms that U of I players refrained from making this common mistake and thereby, managed their time well.

Psychological factors also exert an influence over the outcome of the game. Overconfidence of its opponents, particularly, was a key factor in U of I's win. "Strong players were relaxed when playing me. They thought I was weak and they did not prepare against me. On the contrary, I prepared for them, which gave me better chances to win against them" (Luo Xin 2015). U of I players made use of all tactics available at their disposal. For instance, in many of U of I's crucial games, they made mistakes, and hence, were forced to play worse positions. In such situations, the players who are worse off usually become psychologically vulnerable and thus, their opponents expect an easy win. However, U of I players confused their opponents by keeping a sturdy body language, and delivered huge psychological blows by making furious attempts to fight back. It is important to note the fact that we are playing humans, and that humans have weaknesses. All we have to do is to exploit them. "Never play the board, always the man" (Zaillian 2015).

In the 2013 Pan Ams, some of their higher rated opponents were even afraid of them because of their outstanding performance in the 2012 Pan Ams. In the quote below, a U of I player is the 'kid' (who beat Waitzkin in a chess

game), and its higher-rated counterpart (for example, a player from Webster University) is Waitzkin himself (when he was a 'young boy'). "While a young boy, I had been all promise. I only knew winning because I was better than all the other children and there was no pressure competing against adults. Now there was the knowledge of my mortality. I had lost to a kid, and there were other children who were also dangerous rivals" (Waitzkin 2007, p. 23).

About a month before the 2012 Pan Ams, the Illinois Chess Team did not even have the funds to cover the tournament expenditures for Pan Ams. The Chess Team's future was hanging by a thread. However, at the last moment, the SORF (Student Organisation Resource Fee) funding came through. Although, it was only able to cover the flight expenses, the players managed to cover their tournament expenses from their personal funds. When they were able to make it to Pan Ams, they felt like they had achieved something huge. "It felt as if we were living our dream. Our team spirit had never been higher" (Auger 2015). They had nothing to lose. Their opponents, on the other hand, played under immense pressure. "I was still the highest-rated chess player for my age in the country, and when I went to tournaments, there was immense pressure. If I won, it was no big deal, but if I lost, it felt like the sky would fall" (Waitzkin 2007, p. 23).

III. CONCLUSION

So, what do we make out of all this? Winning a competition is not about being the best. It is about recognizing the underlying factors in a competition, and extracting the most out of them. The fact that funding through donations (mainly from chess lovers) is essential for making the U of I Chess Club & Team sustainable, makes it all the more important for the team players to recognize and utilize psychological, situational, and other factors that are out of our control (such as luck) to perform optimally at the prestigious inter-collegiate chess tournaments. After receiving donations as a result of their magnificent victory at the 2012

Pan Ams, the U of I Chess Team has increased their efforts to recruit top chess players to their team, with the hope of increasing their chances to win the upcoming 2015 Pan Ams. Several young chess players consider U of I Chess as a source of inspiration, and with the 2015 Pan Ams approaching, are longing to see it back in action.

REFERENCES

- Auger, Michael Auger, Personal Interview, March 5, 2015.
- Priyadharshan Kannappan, Email Interview, March 2-3, 2015.
- Leo Luo Xin, Email Interview, March 2-5, 2015.
- Eric Rosen, Personal Interview, March 9, 2015.
- Josh Waitzkin, *The Art of Learning: A Journey in the Pursuit of Excellence*, (New York: The Free Press, 2007), 23.