

# From Street Kids to Royal Knights

How a caring teacher and the game of chess changed lives in the ghetto  
*by Jo Coudert*

A Whoosh of flame startled teacher Bill Hall as he walked into his classroom. Whirling around, he saw 15-Year-old Jose Tavaréz holding a lighter to a spray can of deodorant. "Make bueno blowtorch," the Puerto Rican teenager was explaining to a classmate. Confiscating the can, Hall also broke up an arm wrestling bout between a Pakistani and an Ecuadorian boy and gestured to Sze Wai Chen, newly arrived from Hong Kong, to put away his Chinese newspaper.

Sze Wai, age 13, pointed to the chess set Hall carried: "How say English?"

"Do you play?" Hall asked. Sze Wai shook his head no. Hall wondered if the student had understood the question. Recently transferred to J.H.S. 99 in New York City's East Harlem, Hall taught English as a second language, but he was not having much success with these kids. They were all troublemakers, some guilty of chronic truancy, vandalism or thievery. Most had an attention span measurable only in milliseconds.

Sze Wai's interest in the chess set was the first flicker of curiosity from any of them. Hoping to reach that kids any way he could, Hall, a veteran teacher of 24 years, opened the board and set out the pieces. "Chess is a war game," he began, "a fight between two people, like boxing or wrestling." As he held up each chess piece, he wrote the English name on the blackboard. The

class quieted. "If any of you guys want to learn how to play," Hall said, "come around after school today."

At three o'clock, when prime mischief makers Tony Pagan and Jose Tavaréz slouched in, Hall felt a wave of apprehension. Together these guys could take me, he thought. But the teenagers never looked up from the chessboard as Hall described the strategic importance of controlling the board's center. At the end of the session, Pagan mumbled, "Heavy, man." "Cool," echoed Tavaréz. "Now we chess players." "No," Hall corrected him. "Now you know how the pieces move."

To Hall's surprise, the two boys were back the next afternoon, along with Jose Luis Ortiz and Javier Montano. Tavaréz paired off against Pagan and immediately moved to control the center. The school must have been mistaken in labeling him an underachiever, Hall thought. Soon, Sze Wai Chen and two Pakistani brothers, Bashart and Zia Choudhry, joined in. As the group grew, Hall began giving up his lunch hours and Saturday mornings to teach the basics of the game and supervise play. Book Learning. Fellow teachers told him he was a sucker. "You're wasting your time," said one.

"These kids haven't got the brains to come in out of the rain." "Why not play a game with them?" challenged Hall. When the teacher showed up, Pagan creamed him. "Maybe the problem with teaching these kids is our low expectations for them," Hall said. The day Pagan checkmated Hall himself, the teacher sat back and whistled. "Hey, you guys are getting good!" Pagan grinned with pride. "You teach us more?" one of the boys asked anxiously. "You teach us traps and sacrifices?" "If you want to learn," Hall said, "you'll have to read chess books."

"In English?" one groaned.

"If what we need to know is in English, we'll read English," Pagan announced firmly.

The boys' comprehension and vocabulary soon began to improve. When a science teacher remarked on Tavaréz's heightened concentration, the teen-ager explained the change: "I used to give up if I didn't understand. But I don't do that anymore, because if you give up on the chessboard, you're dead."

One Saturday night Hall crammed his Volkswagen with kids and took them downtown to a chess club. "Get those street punks out of here," an old-timer growled. Montano stepped forward. "Sir," he said, "we'd appreciate it if you'd play with us. We need the competition."

Grudgingly, the old-timer took him on. When Montano made a move that exposed his queen, the old-timer waved forgivingly. "You don't want to do that, boy. Take it back." Montano shook his head. "Mr. Hall says if we make mistakes, we have to take the consequences." With his queen duly captured, the boy made two more moves and checkmated his opponent. "You fell for a trap that's 200 years old," Montano said gravely. "You'll find it in a book called *The Art of Checkmate*."

*Gentlemen's Handshake*. Hall considered entering the boys in the 1986 New York City Interscholastic Chess League Spring Tournament, even though they'd been playing only four months.

"Don't," advised Edward Rodríguez, principal of J.H.S. 99.

"They'll get whipped by one of the private schools, and the self-esteem and self-confidence chess has given there will be destroyed." But the boys were not worried. "Who says we're gonna lose, man?" Ortiz demanded. "We're goin."

How can I take such a ragged looking bunch to a tournament?

Thought Hall. They need uniforms and a team name. Since chess is known as the royal game and knights represent the gentlemen warriors, Hall ordered a dozen red T-shirts emblazoned "ROYAL KNIGHTS - J.H.S. 99."

He wondered if the boys might refuse to wear anything so square. He need not have worried. Moreover, within a few days, he noticed that their tough-guy street mannerisms were disappearing. They asked Hall to show them the proper way to shake hands. "We're gonna win," they said. "But in case we don't, we gotta know how to lose like gentlemen."

Ortiz won first place in the individual competition, Montano second place among seventh-graders. Even the boys who had been defeated were exultant. They were the Royal Knights now, and a win for one was a win for all.

*Street Moves.* By now the New York papers, delighted to have a story out of East Harlem that wasn't about drugs or violence, had made the boys local celebrities. And Faneuil Adams, a retired Mobil Oil executive, offered to finance the team's trip to Syracuse, N.Y., to play in the 1986 state tournament. But the boys refused to go.

Hall was stunned, until he realized that the Knights were frightened-not of competing, but of not knowing how to handle themselves in hotels, trains and restaurants.

"Okay," he said, "forget Syracuse. But let's celebrate this win. I'm taking the team to dinner."

At the restaurant, Hall began musing aloud over the menu. "I see we get a choice of a first course: soup or fruit cup. I don't want to eat too much because then comes the main course, over on this side of the menu . . .

The boys, busy watching which fork Hall used and how he cut his meat, left most of the conversation to their teacher, who spoke of places he'd been, trains he'd taken, and hotels he'd stayed at.

A few days later Pagan announced the team had decided it might be possible to go to the tournament after all.

At the station they turned up carrying their belongings in shopping bags and cardboard suitcases tied with rope. One boy's jeans were out at the knees, another's sneakers were ripped and flopping. Hall took them across the street to a clothing store and bought them replacements.

On the train, the Knights set up their chess sets and began practicing. Soon they had an audience. "East Harlem, eh?" one man whispered to another. "I wonder how many are into drugs." Pagan overheard him. "None of us," he said. "We're into chess." At the tournament, Alexis Ortega had already clinched third place when Eduardo Santana began playing for fourth. It was a tense game. Suddenly Santana made a crazy move. Hall stiffened, but Tavaréz gave him an almost imperceptible wink that said, "It's a street move, man. Keep cool."

Santana's opponent hesitated, reached for a piece, pulled back. Finally he took the gambit, and Santana moved crisply, in a beautifully played end game and checkmate.

Many Thanks. A few weeks later Hall was called to the principal's office. Which team member is in trouble? he wondered. The Knights had come to be known as his boys, and he was called in whenever there was a problem.

Entering the principal's office, Hall found the Knights lined up in front of Rodríguez. [?.] "Is the whole team in trouble?" Eduardo Santana stepped forward, started bravely on the speech he'd memorized, and choked up as a plaque was handed to Hall. "For Mr. Hall," it read. "We hope that this plaque helps to show how much we appreciate what you have done for us. Many thanks from all of us. The Royal Knights of East Harlem."

A year and a half after they first started playing, the Knights

flew to California to compete in the 1987 National Junior High School Chess Tournament. Faneuil Adams again helped with the expenses. Not only did the Royal Knights come in 17th out of 109 teams from 35 states, but by now they were beginning to act like seasoned travelers.

Moscow Bound. Two of the Knights, Jose Lab and Sze Wai Chen, were later invited to the Manhattan Chess Club to play an exhibition against Maya Chiburdanidze, the women's world chess champion from the Soviet Union. The two were among those holding out longest against Chiburdanidze's championship play, and afterward Hall spotted the three of them talking together. "Maya says we should go to the Soviet Union and play the kids there," reported Sze Wai. Hall was speechless. The Knights would be the first American scholastic chess team ever to visit the Soviet Union. But Hall could already hear the chorus of people saying, "You're crazy. Can't be done. Too expensive." In addition, he thought, the school administration will probably veto the idea. He was wrong. So Hall continued rounding up corporate and private donations, and made the arrangements with Soviet chess officials. New York banking executive Bob Moore and his wife, Mimi, bought luggage for the boys, and an exclusive men's clothing store outfitted the team.

Meanwhile, the Knights urged Hall to impose an almost military discipline. When one boy didn't show up for a practice session, he was dropped from the team. "Actions have consequences," Hall reminded him. "You've learned that in chess, and it's true in life too." The boy was reinstated, but only after he got permission from each teammate to return.

When the team arrived in Moscow, members of the Soviet Sports Committee met the boys and escorted them to their hotel for a festive dinner. The next day, at the Central Chess Club, the team

was surprised at the youthfulness of their opponents, who were only ten and 11 years old-and shocked when every Knight was quickly routed. .

Back at the hotel, they sat in gloomy silence. "Look," Hall told them, "they start these kids when they're five years old. Of course they're good. But now you know their style, and tomorrow they'll be overconfident. You'll do better."

*Controlling the Center.* The next morning, in a demonstration match against international grandmaster E. Sveshnikov, Pagan finished in a draw. This lifted the team's spirits, and that afternoon, playing against Soviet youths, the Knights achieved a 50-50 split.

Later at one of Moscow's newer youth centers, the team was warned that the competition would be the stiffest yet. Even so, Hall was surprised when Tavaréz emerged after only 15 minutes in the tournament room. "That sure was a quick loss," said Hall. "Who lost?" asked Tavaréz, beaming. "I won!" That night Bashart Choudhry got a draw against a young Soviet champion, and the whole team celebrated. They had demonstrated to the Soviets, among the strongest scholastic chess players in the world, that the street smart kids from East Harlem could control the center. "It isn't that winning's so important," Tavaréz explained to Hall. "It's proving you can win. I don't want to leave the board until I prove that the guy who beat me isn't indestructible."

How they've changed, Hall thought as he walked down the aisle of the plane on the trip home. They had grown into thoughtful young men willing to take responsibility and able to plan ahead. That morning, one of the boys had teased Bashers Choudhry about his intention of becoming a lawyer. "Life is no different than chess," Choudhry had said. "If you don't have a plan, you'll get beaten."

Hall dropped into the empty seat beside Pagan, who was writing in the journal he'd kept on the trip. "Maybe someday you'll write a novel about kids growing up in East Harlem," remarked Hall.

"Yeah. Remember what a pain I was?"

"Now you're talking about going to college," Hall marveled. "It's great what chess has done for you."

"Chess has been good for us," Pagan agreed. "But if I write that book, it won't be dedicated to chess. It'll be dedicated to the teacher who taught us the importance of controlling the center—and that the center is really ourselves."

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