

Injustice in Chess and Life

Recently, I entered my daughter in her first under-7 chess tournament. She took the challenge seriously. In the weeks leading to the event, she trained every day, read chess books and watched instructional videos online.

On tournament day, there were 24 players. The games were played over 6 rounds, with chess clocks and the “touch move” rule. They counted toward a player’s official English Chess Federation grade and the best achievers would bring home trophies and a modest cash prize. Parents were strictly forbidden from the playing area.

My daughter won her first round match against a tearful opponent.

In the second round, the incident took place.

She lost. Her opponent, a bespectacled boy, had written down the moves of the game. I asked him if I could take a photo of the notation so that we could analyse the match and learn from it.

It was then that I noticed that my daughter had made a ridiculous king move at the start of the game. It exposed the king in the centre of the board, vulnerable to enemy attack. It was not surprising she was quickly check-mated.

“Why did you move the king so early?”, I asked.

“The boy said I touched the king and so I had to move it. But I hadn’t. I touched the bishop next to the king. It’s so unfair.”

I was faced with a decision: should I raise the matter with the tournament referee or the other child’s parents, or should I just let it go?

The best case scenario would be a rematch. The worst case scenario an ugly scene between parents about whether my daughter had really touched the king. Having weighed the pros and cons, I did nothing.

This episode reminded me of a moment in my brief and indifferent career as a club boxer. I was sparring in the ring with an opponent unknown to me. The coach gave his instructions: *“in this round, I want you both to only use your jab. You can only throw a right if you connect cleanly with the jab.”*

In the middle of the round, my opponent threw a vicious right that crashed into my nose. As the punch was not preceded by a clean jab, I was not expecting it. I turned to the referee in disgust. *“Carry on”*, he said without emotion as the brute continued to box as if nothing had happened.

As a lawyer, injustice is my business. It pervades all areas of life, from an under-7 chess tournament to a sparring session in a West London gym, but not all injustice merits corrective action. Sometimes, trying to remedy the injustice is more trouble than it's worth or just plain silly.

I often meet clients who intend to embark on litigation that is guaranteed to cause more hardship than good. They have lost all sense of proportion, devoting their life to proving that their property's boundary is a few centimetres further or whatever their personal equivalent is to the untouched king or unauthorised punch to the nose. They refuse to tolerate what they come to see as a gross injustice. They will not rest until the matter is resolved in their favour, spending all their energy and savings on legal fees. It is a tragic sight.

When faced with injustice in daily life, it is sometimes best to take the hit and move on. To seek to right all wrongs, however slight or transient, leads to frustration, unhappiness and wasted opportunities for more important endeavours. In life as in

chess the clock is ticking. To use our limited time wisely, we must discern the moves that matter and those that don't.

My daughter performed honourably in the tournament, winning 2 matches, losing 2 and drawing 2. We went for a celebratory meal afterwards and talked about the day. She proudly recounted how she checkmated her opponent with only her king and queen, how she snatched a draw from the jaws of defeat in the last game, and how she would now get an official grade from the English Chess Federation. She also made new friends who shared her passion for chess. There was no mention of the king incident. *"That was so much fun"*, she said, *"when's the next one?"*.

I think she'll be OK.

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