

Singaporean achieves chess grandmaster title



Kevin Goh attained the title of Chess Grandmaster after nine years of hard work. His interest in chess was ignited by a teacher in his primary school.
[Photo: Kevin Goh]

ZACHARY JOHN interviews Singapore's newest Chess Grandmaster.

When Kevin Goh Wei Ming was a student in Boon Lay Primary School, he participated in chess tournaments where the winner received a plate of chicken rice. Today, he stands shoulder to shoulder with the greatest chess players in history.

On 3 March, Mr Goh attained the title of Chess Grandmaster (GM). This title is awarded by chess' governing body, FIDE. Only the top 0.0002% of all **FIDE** registered players are GMs, and only four Singaporeans have ever made the grade.

In order to reach the GM title, a player must have a rating of 2,500 and achieve three "GM norms". Players gain or lose rating points by winning or losing games in FIDE **sanctioned** tournaments. How many rating points you gain or lose depends on the rating of your opponent. To get a GM norm, players need to perform well in top tier tournaments against other top players.

Mr Goh, 37, got his first GM norm in 2011 and his second in 2012. He had to endure a six-year wait to achieve his third norm in 2018 — and his wait did not end there. It would be another two years before his live rating would finally **surpass** 2,500 and his GM title was secured. When asked what it felt like to be a GM after nine years,

Mr Goh said, “I didn’t derive any joy at the end of everything, it was just pure relief. It’s finally over. Now I can enjoy my chess.”

Inspired by teacher

Mr Goh was introduced to chess in 1993 by his teacher Khoo Geak Chong in Boon Lay Primary School. Mr Khoo took his role as teacher in charge of the chess club seriously. He shared his passion for the game with his students, showing them the complex, competitive, and sometimes brutal nature of chess battles. Mr Khoo’s enthusiasm had such a **profound** impact on his students that, according to Mr Goh, “it became the main thing in school. You were not cool if you did not play chess”.

The Chess Club in Boon Lay Primary would play chess every day, before or after school. They would also attend training sessions on Saturdays. Mr Goh said that because co-curricular activities were not as important as they are today, his dedication to chess was regarded as “totally insane” by some people. Mr Khoo organised “5-3-2 tournaments”, where the winner would get \$5, the second placed, \$3, and the third, \$2 – with the prize money coming out of his own pocket. With a laugh, Mr Goh recalls that “in the 90’s, \$5 was a lot of money”. Some parents complained, so Mr Khoo changed the prize to chicken rice.



Mr Goh, who has won the Singaporean Chess Championships seven times, was national champion for four years in a row between 2006 and 2009, before coming in third in 2010. [Photo: Kevin Goh]

Regular training and Mr Khoo’s 5-3-2 Tournaments helped to turn the Boon Lay Primary Chess Club into one of the best in their age group. Mr Goh continued to play chess in Commonwealth Secondary School, National Junior College, and beyond – earning the title of International Master at the age of 24. Mr Goh, who has

won the Singaporean Chess Championships seven times, was national champion for four years in a row between 2006 and 2009, before coming in third in 2010. After his third place finish, Mr Goh was dropped from the national chess squad.

Motivated by failure

Instead of letting his exclusion from the national squad **demoralise** him, Mr Goh was more motivated than ever to become a GM. In 2011, he took a year of no-pay leave from his job as a chartered accountant and hired Israeli GM Boris Avrukh as his coach. The pair continue to work together today. Under the tutelage of Mr Avrukh, Mr Goh refined his theoretical understanding of chess. He managed to gain his first GM norm in just two months, but time was not on his side.

Mr Goh, who is the Chief Financial Officer of Lucence Diagnostics, felt that taking more than a year off work to play chess might damage his career prospects too much. He returned to his job in 2012, and studied chess an hour a day after work and “substantially more” on weekends.

The nine years of chess between Mr Goh’s first GM norm and finally getting the GM title were tough going. The amount of time, effort and money he had put into chess caused Mr Goh immense pressure during tournaments. If things were not going his way on the board, he would start to question if the amount of sacrifice he had made for chess was worth it. His stress levels were so high that he even suffered from **insomnia** during some tournaments.

Passing on the passion

Chess can be an extremely taxing sport — at the highest level, players can burn up to 6,000 calories a day at tournaments. “It is no longer possible not to associate physical fitness with chess”, said Mr Goh, who goes on regular runs to maintain his mental toughness. Mr Goh completed the OSIM Sundown Marathon 2018, a month before the QCD Lim Kok Ann GM Invitational, where Mr Goh achieved his third GM norm. “I spent the entire race thinking about how I would beat my opponents,” he recalled. It worked.

Finally a GM, Mr Goh hopes he gets a chance to guide young chess talents in Singapore. “I’ve met many, many young players who are much more talented than me,” he said. Mr Goh hopes that his story shows other Singaporean chess players that the GM title is attainable with enough hard work, perseverance, and competitiveness. He said, “I think people can be inspired, with a certain focus, a certain discipline — mastery at any level is possible.”

VOCAB BUILDER

FIDE (say “fai-d”; noun) = acronym for “Fédération Internationale des Échecs” which is French for “International Chess Federation”.

sanctioned (say “sank-shen’d”; verb) = approved.

surpass (say “ser-pass”; verb) = exceed.

profound (say “pro-faund”; adjective) = very great.

demoralise (say “di-mo-re-laiz”; verb) = cause one to lose hope.

insomnia (say “in-som-nia”; noun) = inability to sleep.

Activity**WORDS FROM GAMES**

Many English idioms come from games. Here are some from chess: A **pawn** (above) is the smallest, most common and least mobile piece on the chessboard. The word is often used to mean that someone is helpless: “The worker had to follow orders all days. He felt like a pawn.”

A **stalemate** is a draw, when neither player can win. The word can be used in other situations: “After a long debate, my friend and I

could not agree on who is the greater footballer, Lionel Messi or Cristiano Ronaldo. We were locked in a stalemate.”

The **endgame** refers to the final stage of a chess game, when there are few pieces on the board and you need a clear strategy to win. The word now means the last steps or winning strategy in a challenging situation: “He kept watching videos and neglecting his studies. ‘You seem to be having fun, but what is your endgame?’ his best friend asked out of concern.”

The following sentences contain other idioms from sports and games. Can you fill in each blank with one word to complete the expressions?

1. “I have done everything I can to help you. The _____ is in your court.”
2. At first, she felt her two classmates were so smart and pretty that they were in a different _____. She felt better about herself when she realised that they liked her and sincerely wanted to be her friends.
3. “Although you did not do well in your last three tests, don’t give up. Don’t throw in the _____. You can do it!”
4. The prime minister wanted to retire, so he passed the _____ to a younger leader to take over from him.
5. He was poor, and had a learning disability. Yet, he was able to clear these _____ and succeed.

Answers: (1) ball (from tennis); (2) league (from baseball and other sports); (3) towel (from boxing); (4) baton (track and field relay race); (5) hurdles (track and field)