



## New chess grandmaster breaks stereotypes

BY BETH GARDINER  
THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

NEW YORK - Maurice Ashley talks about chess the way some people describe their favorite poem or painting.

"It has a majesty, it has a mystical beauty, the pieces come alive when you know what they can do," he says. "It's an unending fountain of action and thrill rides, as tense as the last second of a basketball game."

Ashley has devoted his life to chess, and at 33, he's achieved a dream he's held dear since childhood - and made history in the process.

Moving his bishop against an opponent's queen, the Brooklynite fulfilled the final requirements last week for becoming a chess grandmaster, the game's highest rank. He is the first black person ever to do so.

"It's just been a whirlwind," Ashley said at the Harlem middle school where he coached a chess team until 1997. "I've been thrilled and ecstatic and on a high and unable to sleep. ... I have been dreaming about becoming a grandmaster for half my life."

Joining the uppermost ranks of the elite and clubbish chess world - there are some 470 grandmasters worldwide, 45 of them in the United States - wasn't easy for a Jamaican immigrant who spent much of his adolescence honing his game in Brooklyn's Prospect Park.

"Maurice almost did it by himself," said Jerald Times, a fellow chess devotee who met Ashley in the park a decade ago. "He didn't have a whole Russian chess school, didn't have grandmasters training him."

Ashley's casual childhood interest in chess got serious when a high-school friend whooped him in a game nearly 20 years ago.

"He just crushed me, and I couldn't believe it," Ashley recalled with a laugh. "We don't take any beatings lying down in my family."

So the future grandmaster stuck his nose into a strategy book and fell unexpectedly in love.

"Fourteen was the moment when I was electrified by the game," he recalls now. "I found my passion in life."

Ashley didn't make the team at Brooklyn Technical High School, so he joined the Black Bear School of Chess, a group of chess-obsessed teens and twenty-somethings who played hard-fought, competitive games in Prospect Park for hours on end.

He earned an undergraduate English degree at City College, and later began coaching the Mott Hall Dark Knights, a middle school chess team.

The team won three national championships, and Ashley loved sharing his passion with young players. But he itched to make his own mark on the professional chess world.

"I felt there was a void, there was something that was missing, and that was my own aspirations," he said.

He took a leave in September 1997 from the Harlem Educational Activities Fund, which sponsors the Mott Hall program. With financial support from the group's president, Dan Rose, Ashley devoted himself to chess full time, studying at his home in the Park Slope neighborhood and flying to tournaments in Germany, France and Hawaii.

Competitors say he's a cagey, aggressive player who never misses a chance to gain an advantage on the board.

"You feel that if you make the slightest mistake, you're going to get crushed," Times said.

On March 14, Ashley's single-minded devotion paid off. At a tournament at the Manhattan Chess Club, which counts several grandmasters among its members, Ashley joined their ranks. The coveted title is earned by performing well in high-level chess tournaments for a sufficiently long period of time.

Ashley said being the first black person to do so gives his victory special meaning.

"People around you can't help but feel that pride in their hearts," he said. "The stereotype in this country is that African-Americans don't do well at things like chess. ... We're understood as physically gifted and great entertainers, but when it comes to something intellectual, ... that lags behind."

"I know how brilliant black people are ... and I feel like my achievement is a small drop to add to the wonderful intellectual greatness of our heritage."

Students on the Mott Hall team are thrilled by their old coach's accomplishment, and say his making grandmaster will inspire them to work harder toward their own goals.

"He gave me a boost of confidence that I never had before," said Brian Ovalle, 13, a Dominican-American seventh grader. "Because he did it, he made me believe that I could do it, because we're both minority. ... It's like when Jackie Robinson broke the color barrier. They didn't believe he could do it, but he broke through."

Ashley says he would have liked to have a black grandmaster to emulate when he was a young player.

"It was tough on me in the mid-'80s, looking at (chess) magazines and not seeing any black faces," he recalled. "If there aren't examples, you can't see how to do it. ... What I've been blessed to do is show what's possible."

## Jesse Jackson shuns 2000 presidential bid

By JENNIFER LOVEN  
THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

WASHINGTON - Two-time Democratic presidential candidate Jesse Jackson will not make a new bid for the White House in 2000. The Associated Press has learned.

"He is not running. All of us have been talking to him," a source within Jackson's close circle of political advisers said Tuesday. The source spoke only on condition of anonymity.

The source said that Jackson wants to devote all his attention to his campaign to pressure Wall Street into providing more start-up capital to minorities.

"Reverend Jackson doesn't have to be a candidate to make an impact," the adviser said.

The news of Jackson's decision not to seek the presidency will be delivered to supporters Wednesday on the campaign Web site of his son, Rep. Jesse Jackson Jr., D-Ill., and later at a Chicago news conference.

At press time, Jackson had not posted his decision.

The source said Jackson had discussed the matter with President Clinton when he joined him on Air Force One on the way back from a fund-raising trip to Florida last week.

Jackson himself said on Black Entertainment Television's "Lead Story" over the weekend that he was "not very motivated to at this point" challenge Vice President Al Gore for the Democratic nomination.

"While I have not decided altogether to say yes or no, I'm inclined not to," Jackson said on the program Sunday.

Speaking to reporters in Chicago on Tuesday, Jackson would not reveal his plans, only saying, "We intend to impact



The Rev. Jesse Jackson, pictured above talking with gang members during a 1993 summit, will probably not make a run for the White House, sources say. Jackson is expected to announce his decision sometime this week on the Internet.

public policy in a major way in 1999 and 2000."

Current and former Jackson advisers said if he were to run it would be with the goal of winning the nomination and not merely to ensure discussion of issues he cares about. He is said to be concerned that the newly condensed primary season, which requires candidates to raise greater amounts of money sooner, could inhibit his ability to be a contender.

In addition, Jackson has not begun building the kind of organization needed to mount a serious presidential run, nor has he begun raising money for a bid, people close to him said.

Disclosing his intentions first on the Internet follows in the

footsteps of Republican Steve Forbes, the only other candidate to make an official announcement via a Web site.

If Jackson bows out, former Sen. Bill Bradley of New Jersey would remain Gore's only declared competitor so far.

Other prominent Democrats who have opted out are Sens. Paul Wellstone of Minnesota, John Kerry of Massachusetts and Bob Kerrey of Nebraska and House Minority Leader Dick Gephardt of Missouri.

Jackson's first White House bid in 1984 was followed by a second populist race in 1988. Nearly every presidential election season since has seen him at least contemplate a rerun.

The 57-year-old Jackson, who

calls both Chicago and Washington home, has never held public office but remains one of the country's best-known black political leaders.

He founded Operation PUSH in 1971, and still runs the now-merged Rainbow/PUSH Coalition, a Chicago-based nonprofit organization seeking economic and political empowerment for minorities. Jackson also is the author of two books, the host of the CNN talk show "Both Sides with Jesse Jackson" and Clinton's envoy for democracy in Africa.

Earlier this decade, Jackson was the District of Columbia's "shadow senator," advocating for statehood and voting representation in Congress for the nation's capital city.

## Hospitalized octuplets continue to gain weight

THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

HOUSTON - The four surviving Houston octuplets who remain hospitalized are experiencing steady weight gain, consuming a combination of formula and mother's milk, doctors say.

Girls Gorom, Chidi and Chima Louis and their brother, Ikem, remained in serious but stable condition Monday at Texas Children's Hospital. Three of the octuplets -

Ebuka, Echerem and Jioke - went home March 3.

Chidi and Chima are expected to leave the hospital

later this month or in early April. Gorom and Ikem, the two smallest babies, face longer hospital stays.

The eighth baby, Odera, died in December, a week after Nkem Chukwu delivered the infants.

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