

Susan Polgar Girls 2007 World Open Champion
By Karen Chernesky Fotis



Rebecca, an 11th grade student at Notre Dame-Cathedral Latin in Chardon, Ohio, placed first in the Open section at the Susan Polgar Girls World Open held in Las Vegas on June 9th-10th. Texas Tech had just formed S.P.I.C.E, the Susan Polgar Institute for Chess Excellence, and they were on hand to award the 4-year scholarship worth \$36,000!

Rebecca learned to play chess from her mother, Freddie Lelko, when she was four years old, and now her mother frequently spends the day with her daughter while she plays in tournaments. While Rebecca has achieved so much so quickly, she is still a normal 16-year old girl. I recently spent the day with Rebecca and her mom at the Akron Zip Swiss, and along with my daughter, we enjoyed sharing our games and talking with each other. It was cool to hang out with the girls, a rare treat at any chess tournament!

Karen Chernesky Fotis:

Your rating has really shot up in the past year, Rebecca. You've gained over 400 points! What was the greatest motivator to get you to work at your chess game? How do you train?

Rebecca Lelko:

I just decided that if other people could work hard and have good results because of that work, I could too. To train now I basically do what my coach (Aleksander Kitsis) tells me to, which includes learning an opening, which is right for me, analyzing my games to find my weaknesses, and working on tactics. I do go over all of my games. Unfortunately, I also have a very busy school schedule and sometimes it takes a while to analyze all of them.

KC:

How do you feel about your losses? Can you really learn from a loss?

RL:

After losing, I usually don't feel that bad. If I just made a dumb mistake, I shake it off, but also try to figure out why I made that mistake (being too tired, being overly confident, etc.). If I can figure out why I made a dumb mistake, I can be better prepared to avoid those situations the next time I play. If I lose because I was outplayed or did not know how to handle a situation, I get to learn from the better player or see a weakness in my game that hopefully I can start to fix.

KC:

How do you learn what style of opening or defense works best for you?

RL:

I am still learning what style and openings to use!

KC:

Rebecca, as a 16-year old high school junior, you must have a busy life outside of chess. Can you share a little something about yourself? What are your favorite subjects, sports, books, movies, and music?

RL:

My favorite subjects are math and science. I tried track and volleyball. I liked the competition, but was always afraid of the ball coming at me. I enjoy reading and my favorite author is James Patterson. I do not know what career I will go into, but it will probably involve math.

KC:

Your biggest win so far was at the Susan Polgar Open in Las Vegas. What was that like?

RL:

It was really exciting to win the 2007 Susan Polgar Open. While I had played well for my rating in previous tournaments, it had been a long time since I actually won one. I didn't really feel any pressure towards the end because it took a while for me to realize that I had a chance to win, and even then I was satisfied with the tournament because I had managed to draw two people 200 points higher than me! It wasn't until after I won the tournament that it hit me. When I wasn't playing chess I saw some of the casinos, which was fun because Las Vegas is so different from anywhere else. I didn't get a chance to meet Susan Polgar because she was always busy talking to someone. I just got my picture taken with her when I won the scholarship.

KC:

When is your next big tournament?

RL:

My next big tournament is the State Grade Level on Dec. 1. But my mom and I had a really good time in Las Vegas, so we're making plans for the 2008 National Open!

Here is a recent game annotated by Rebecca: [Lelko-Demetruk game](#)