

A Zillion Chess and Life Hacks

Maria Manakova

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How it All Began

God knows why, but I somehow wound up as a chess player in my childhood. I learned the game at the age of four, and I did it by myself, just like Capablanca. I carefully watched my dad play with his friends, and then asked to play a game against him. He said, “But you don’t even know the rules!” “I saw you play and figured it all out.”

At the age of eight, I enrolled in a chess club, and I got a little bit crazy: I saw the whole world as a chess game, people and events looked to me like pieces and combinations played out between these pieces.

The smell of chess sets in the old Pioneers Palace on Stopani in Moscow, the pieces (varnished, known as “Grandmaster chess sets”), the ticking of the clock in the silence, the glare of mirrors in the playing halls – all this mesmerized me with its atmosphere, and I got stuck in this magical virtual world.

Back then, I didn’t know that it would be for life.

In my childhood, I was a classical *Wunderkind*. One of those who go “wide” instead of “deep”. Those who easily master anything we set our sights on, but after achieving a bit of success we drop it and search for something new. Nevertheless, after being touched by chess, I got seriously stuck on it for some reason. Perhaps because back then, there was not much competition in girls’ tournaments, so I quickly started winning cups and medals. Besides, I was constantly surrounded by boys, traveled everywhere without my parents, played in endless tournaments and won... isn’t that the perfect recipe for happiness?

Interestingly, despite having tons of talent, the fate of the *Wunderkinds* (i.e. us) is usually hard: only a few achieve real success in life. One reason, as I already mentioned, is a constant change of interests. But there’s another, bigger reason – pathological laziness, a conviction that anything can be achieved without much work, simply by doing it. But completing projects – no, that’s totally uninteresting. And while the *Wunderkinds* simply enjoy life for years, their peers work very hard and overtake them in all spheres where they shone brightly not so long ago.

The years go by, but I still “sing the summer away”. If you are... actually... reading this book now, this means that, for the first time in my life, I did the impossible – I finally pulled myself together and *followed through* with my 10,000th project to the very end. And this is a true achievement, an even greater one than gaining the WGM title, which essentially happened by itself, without any special effort by me.



Maria Manakova in childhood.

Photo by L. Makarshin

Psychology

I have a researcher's mind – according to socionics (i.e. in Jungian terms), my psychotype is ENFP (bonus points if you know what that means). One of the characteristic features of that psychotype is an interest in psychology: the passion for studying people and social groups, physiognomy, gestalt and similar sorcery.

I've been reading psychology and neuroscience books since I was ten. At the age of 14, I attended the Young Psychologist School of Moscow State University (MSU); at 15, I made contact with certain people to obtain a pass to the Brain Institute of the Russian Academy of Sciences; and at 17, I lied about my age in a questionnaire to take part in a psychological training program for adults named "Prologue" (of course, they immediately saw through my ploy, but still allowed me to participate because they were charmed by my determination!). I finished school by writing a paper on biology – a paper on the human brain – and the subject of my thesis in the journalism school was manipulation and ways to combat it.

My mom wanted me to enroll in the MSU School of Psychology, but I always did what I, not others, wanted ("That's all because your dad and I never spanked you, but we should have!"). As I finished school, I got so deeply sucked into the chess world that psychology, among most other interests, played a distant second fiddle to it. Every day, my mom pestered me about higher education, and I once asked her, "Will you finally get off my back if I become a grandmaster?" She promised that she would. And so, I had to win the title. Still, my fascination with psychology stayed with me for my whole life. (I did obtain a higher education, too, but a bit later.)



Hosting a chess festival in 2011 at Luzhniki stadium. I'm playing against a chess computer with a robotic arm designed by Konstantin Kosteniuk, the father of Alexandra Kosteniuk. Photo by Y. Manakova

If I, as a grandmaster, was only interested in chess matters (such as, what's the strongest reply to ♖c8 on the 23rd move of the Cambridge Springs Variation of the Queen's Gambit), I would have become the world champion a long time ago. Among both sexes, you know. But I was always fascinated by something else – *non-chess* matters surrounding the game – while the moves themselves were rather secondary to me.

***I don't believe in psychology. I believe in good moves.
– Bobby Fischer***

And recently, I got thinking: why did this talented chess player face such trouble, why were my priorities so skewed? And then I realized. In addition to my fascination with psychology (and esoteric passions which I haven't yet mentioned), simple laziness was to blame. Yes, the same desire to enjoy myself that has played a defining role in my life.

I grew up on fairy tales and always wanted to find the genie in the lamp, the fairy godmother, or, at the very least, the golden fish, and have these friends grant all my wishes... or at least three... or one. Per week. I wanted to dig and dig, and then dig up a treasure – a magic key that could help me win tournaments without much effort, simply because I wanted to. A key which would work like this: I get into a proper mood before the game, and then I win easily.

Funnily enough, this happy-go-lucky approach *did* actually work while I was young: my energy supply was boundless, I felt like I could take on the whole world and win. I wouldn't touch chess at all for three months, then show up at some tournament completely unprepared and still score brilliantly because I was in the right frame of mind. I could eschew the tedious study of pawn endgames, which I hated; I didn't know them, but I instinctively avoided them in play because I was “in sync with my intuition”.

However, when I got to forty, I realized that neither “self-improvement”, nor the secrets of “psychological battles”, nor the fiercest attitude at the board works without painstaking, well-structured chess prep. I am sure that the material I have put together for this book will be very useful in your chess journey, and not only, but it's still ancillary to the main ingredients – a passionate love for chess and serious, regular study.



A Zillion Hacks

*My biggest advantage over Nepomniachtchi is
that I am better at chess
– Magnus Carlsen*

Lately, my students and others have been asking me a lot: “How to eat properly before the game?”, “How to get rid of unnecessary tension before the game?”, “How to calm down after a loss?”, “How to prepare, how to get into a proper mood, can you exert psychological influence on your opponent and how to ‘repulse’ their influence on you, is it normal to roam around during the game, or do you need to sit there without moving at all?” etc. etc. I answered all those questions individually, but then I felt that a book answering all of them at once would be highly useful! And recently, one “chess mom” told me, “I read that it’s useful to eat protein before the game, do you agree?”

Really, I can’t stand it anymore! So someone once scribbled or mumbled something about eating protein before the game, and now this phrase is passed from parent to parent like a precious diamond! But what about me?! Me?!!! I’ve been asking my coaches and grandmaster friends questions on these matters for years. And I didn’t just write down their advice and learn it by heart, I actually applied it in my practice, and also “did my own research”.

Therefore, I thought, the time has come to gather a collection of useful tips (life hacks), where not only my students and their family, but all chess fans at large will find answers to these questions.

When I started to conduct my research for this book, I studied a huge number of tomes and online articles and saw that nobody else had thought of writing such a book. There were some individual tips in books, in social media, in magazines, on chess sites. I even found a book of short recommendations by an American chess journalist. But there was no fundamental work that encompassed *all* non-chess aspects of the struggle.

Furthermore, I don’t just talk the talk, I walked the walk, too – from zero to the highest title there is, Grandmaster. Well, OK, I’m not the best GM there is, I’m actually “only” a WGM, but I honestly strived to reach the greatest heights of mastery! I’m still striving 😊. I know how the life of a professional player looks from the inside, not only from the tales of my chess-playing colleagues, but from my own career, too.

I have played at Olympiads, at both team and individual world and European championships, and I’m still an active player. I was a European champion and vice-champion in team tournaments. As an individual player, I won the



With Veselin Topalov at the 2016 candidates tournament, where I worked as a journalist

Moscow and Serbian women's championships, and also played in the Russian Women's Championship Superfinal.

I didn't reach the greatest heights in chess because my head was always full of thoughts about love, art, esoterica, some "research" and other things entirely unrelated to sport (I also always had trouble – catastrophic trouble – with self-discipline). I can't give you any deep analysis of an opening variation or complicated endgames – that would be desecration. But I *can* share some information on what happens beyond the board, which will help you both to achieve success in chess and develop as a person. I'll do the best I can.

I borrowed a lot of quotes and tips from various celebrities, chess players included. First of all, I simply like quotes – not all, of course, but non-standard, witty stuff – and, secondly, I simply won't be able to express an idea better than them.

But I would like you to know that there's nothing in the book that I haven't encountered personally, based on my own experience. Like a true scientist, I have studied every lifehack presented here, and I guarantee that *they work* (in some isolated cases, where the lifehacks haven't been properly tested, I warn the reader, in which case further research is necessary).

The book doesn't purport to be an academic work, because all the issues are covered in a popular format, without getting too deep. It's more like a

compilation of tips and reminders that guide the readers, and they are welcome to study a particular subject academically should they have the desire.

This book is also intended for those people who are interested not so much in chess moves, but in the chess world and its inhabitants, because I discuss the latter's problems a lot, describe them and their life, and consider some real-life cases.

There are a few chess games and fragments in the book. In rare cases, I used them as examples. On the other hand, there's a lot of chess jargon in it. Don't be afraid, I'm sure it'll come in handy in case you ever find yourself in chess-playing company. Chess professionals speak that jargon exclusively, and you'll be able to pass as "one of the guys" rather than resembling a fish out of water. I'll explain the meaning of especially weird-looking terms.



Oh, and don't make the mistake of treating visually-impaired players any differently: you might think that they can't see anything on the board, but they actually see the position even better than you, because they've been playing "blindfold" for their whole life, and you haven't.

There's no sense in giving you advice until you meet such an opponent at the board and experience that yourself. I can only encourage you: hang on in there, bro!

Opponent: A woman. Women's chess deserves a section or two devoted to it, and that's exactly what I'll do.

Women's chess

Men and women are essentially different biological species

Chess requires a huge expenditure of energy. I am not surprised by the fact that male players are stronger. They can better withstand overstrain.

– Anatoly Karpov

Chess is a very difficult sport. You need to be in a combative mood and good sporting form, and men are generally better at this than women.

– Garry Kasparov

Women play chess more aggressively and go all out. They lack the deliberate calculating attitude of men.

– Alexandra Kosteniuk

The difference between the sexes is remarkable in chess, but not any more so, to my mind, than in any other field of cultural activity.

Women cannot play chess, but they cannot paint either, or write, or philosophize. In fact, women have never thought or made anything worth considering. It's got nothing to do with chess, let's not kid ourselves.

What's it got to do with then?



In the first place, there is of course the fact that women are much more stupid than men. That is why women are totally incapable of amusing themselves.

Useful work, especially in its everyday aspect, is the field where women are at home.

– Jan Hein Donner

A woman will never be able to play chess on equal footing with men, because she cannot sit at the board for five hours in silence.

– Paul Keres

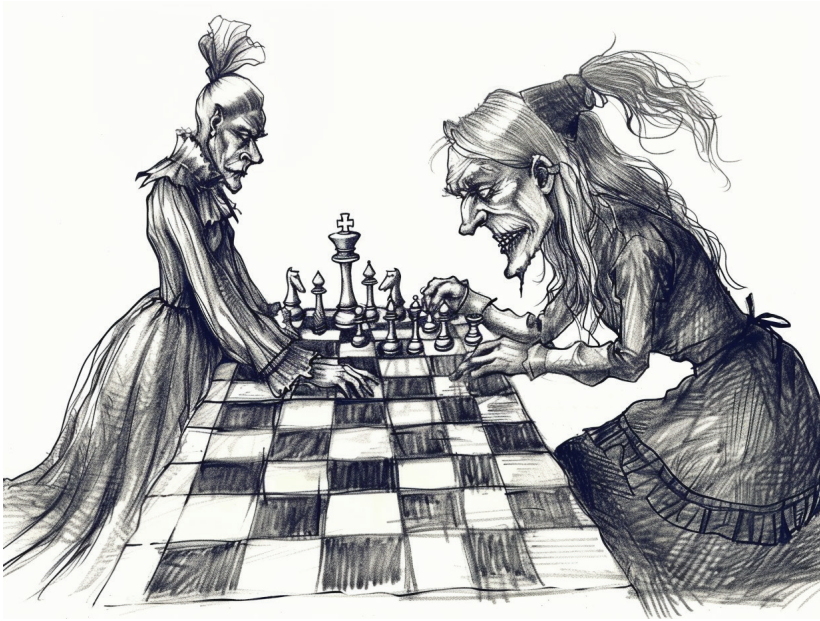
Bobby Fischer on women: “Chess is better.”

Playing against a woman is a special kind of chess. I agree with the ironic opinion that women and men are actually two different biological species. They have different brain structures and different metabolisms. Men are better organized, and a thought that has started must be finished. In women’s heads, there’s controlled (or uncontrolled) chaos, jumping from thought to thought. This is natural and explained by their brain structure. Chess is a man’s game, a logical game, and if a woman wants to become an IM or GM (without the “W”), her main goal is to learn to think “like a man”. Basically, to overhaul her whole nature. Female players who do manage that play at a high level. They have managed to reconstruct their thinking.

But they can’t reconstruct their bodies. Thus, with some caveats, we can still say that they are feminine. “With caveats” – because despite their fair, well-groomed appearance, they are only interested in the sporting result, and they subordinate all their life to this goal. Yes, a win is the most important thing in chess, but this constant striving for victory is something distinctly unfeminine. As they grow older, most professional woman players start putting family first. Nature takes over after all.

Women’s tournaments are a peculiar sight. Position evaluations jump at every move – yes, women are that illogical and brutal in their treatment of chess. It’s not a fun task to be a woman player’s coach, let alone a captain of a women’s team. You need to have a forceful personality and strong nerves. A captain of a **men’s** team can tell his guys after two or three hours of play, “We’re going to score +2,” but a captain of a **women’s** team, even if they are highly experienced, cannot say anything even if the team consists of full grandmasters and international masters. This person knows that at absolutely any moment, on absolutely any board, anything can happen for unknown reasons. The result will be unpredictable until the very last move.

On the other hand, there’s something good in this for women as well: they can also suddenly play a brilliant game against a male grandmaster. Perfect,



logical, matching the engine's first line. Or, maybe, she's just in a good mood today, and she will tear apart any king that has the misfortune to be attacked by her. And today, this particular king happened to be yours, and it was purely bad luck to face this particular woman on this particular day.

Male players have also told me stories along the following lines: you are playing against a female and then she suddenly resigns. She shakes your hand without explaining anything and goes away, and you sit there flabbergasted. Later, you ask her why she resigned, and it turns out that she simply "lost the desire to play."

Since women are much more resilient, cunning and sly creatures than men, it's hard to play chess with them for this reason. For instance, you have a big advantage, and she forces you to relax by playing possum. But as soon as you let your guard down, a trap emerges all of a sudden, you, of course, step right into it, and after that, nothing can save you.

Another reason that makes it harder for men to play women is the fear of losing. It's hard for me to understand, but all men I have discussed it with told me that yes, the result is exceptionally important for them. This is important for their *manhood*, which, of course, I only know about from second-hand accounts.

In addition to this "manhood", men have another weakness – the facts of life. Modern female players have solved this simple mystery and successfully use it in their nefarious goals. They openly and blatantly distract their male opponents from deep thoughts with their appearance. It turns out that the sight of an attractive, sexy woman subconsciously affects men's brains. On a

physiological level, it's nothing personal. Hormones fluctuate, the brain gets distracted, concentration lowers, and suddenly you're in too deep. Some women use this huge advantage very successfully.

In the last few years, however, men have found a solution to this problem – they simply and clumsily, in their usual style, introduced an obligatory dress code that forbids woman players from looking sexy.

More on dress code towards the end of this book.

So, how should you play against a woman?

When you have to deal with a woman, forget everything you knew beforehand. You're dealing with Mother Nature, the Earth, the Moon, the ancient gods, call it what you will. But it will be always stronger than Rationality. Simply relax and enjoy yourself. Set a goal, and it will fall into your hands by itself.

A second method is for those who are very sure of themselves: come and take what you believe is your birthright. In such cases, this "temporal and ancient being" submits quickly, without a peep. But what should you do if you confuse the two methods and get punished as a result? Well, resort to an old anecdote:

"Lieutenant, why are you so successful with women?"

"I come up to them and immediately invite them to my room."

"But you can get slapped for that."

"Sure, but more often, they do come to my room."

So above all, you need to believe in your own success, and then whatever happens happens.

I can give you advice that I usually give for any interactions with women, not only in chess.

Forget everything you've ever known about the fair sex: all your life experience, all the books you read, all the tales your friends told you. Any new woman should be a *tabula rasa* for you, because it's simply impossible to predict what awaits you. Act spontaneously, improvise, don't try to guess her thoughts – they jump around like fleas, you won't keep up. Relax and have fun. A woman is needed to create an atmosphere, not to search for the truth.

It's the same in chess. Did you prepare for the Ruy Lopez? She'll play the Caro-Kann, which she'd never tried in her life. Has she lost in every previous round? Surpri-i-i-i-ize! She might well destroy you without giving you a chance. Throw away your emotions completely, and may common sense guide your every move.



Chess players love telling stories about women's chess. For instance, the entire team spends a whole evening preparing a woman grandmaster who plays for the national team in an important competition (by the way, I heard this story from the original

source). And the next day, she makes a different first move – 1.d4 instead of 1.e4. Well, just like that. She forgot, or changed her mind, or got mixed up – oh, please, leave her alone, she's just a girl!

In light of all the above, the main lifehack is this: **“Do not try to outplay a woman, she will do it for you herself.”**

Play solidly, firmly, resolutely, without any fanciful or showy moves. Women's play is peculiar in that they eventually defeat themselves. You only need to wait for the right moment. Her emotions and pseudo-ingenuity will definitely prevail. “She'll get there by herself,” as chess players say. And when this does happen, finish her off with strong moves, watching carefully for counterplay and traps.

If you don't know what you are doing, then your enemy doesn't know either!

If you're much stronger than her, or you are facing an old granny, or a little girl, or someone who hasn't played for a long time, try pressing from the very beginning. Use all your manly might to crush her before she realizes what has hit her.

If she's about your strength, on the other hand, be more modest in your play.

As we finish our pleasant discussion of women, I'll show you an example from my own career – and you'll learn a great idea in an opposite-colored bishops endgame in the process.

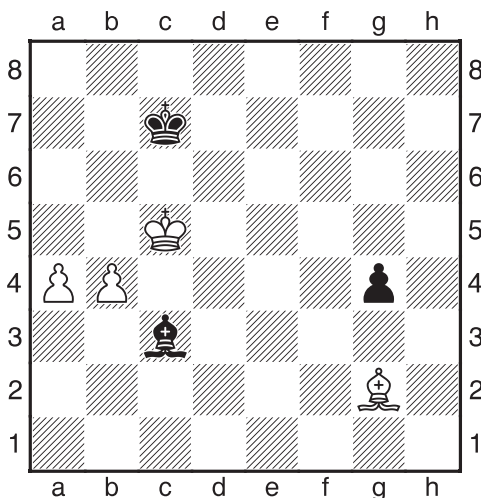


The game was played at the Tbilisi Women's Interzonal in 1999 (back then, the world championship qualifying path included Interzonal tournaments). My opponent in the last round had already secured a qualifying place for the world championship, but I had to win on demand to qualify.

Shortly before the second time control¹, I realized that winning was impossible: the opposite-colored bishop ending was completely drawn. The only thing I had in my favor was some mystical conviction that I would succeed in this tournament.

Rusudan Goletiani played extremely well and made no mistakes. Her coach, Zurab Azmaiparashvili, was watching her intensely from the hall. She was proving to be a fine student. Nobody could have predicted what would happen next.

Game 2
M. Manakova (2344) – R. Goletiani (2310)
 Tbilisi Women's Interzonal, 1999



White to move

For the last ten moves, the black bishop had moved between the d2 and e1 squares, which was completely correct. I was ready to abandon all hope for the win, but then Rusudan, for a completely incomprehensible reason, put the bishop on c3! Would a man who simply moved his bishop along two drawing squares and

¹ Time controls have frequently changed over history. Back then, time control was as follows: 40 moves in 2 hours, then 20 moves in 1 hour, and then 30 minutes until the end of the game, with no increment. The second time control was hence once you had made 60 moves.

could secure second place with this back-and-forth movement just put it on c3 for no reason? Something tells me no.

You may ask, what's the difference between the bishop being placed on e1, d2 or c3? There actually is a difference! White now has a great chance. The position is not won yet, but there is now a dangerous trap. And Rusudan steps right into it.

60.b5! If the bishop were on d2 or e1, black could simply give a check along the a7-g1 diagonal. Now, however, black is forced to play **60...♗a5 61.♗e4**, and now the only continuation is **61...♗b6+ 62.♔b4 g3 63.♗g2** (black can also play g3 first but let's not worry about that). And so, the moment of truth arrives. The only moves that can save black are ♗e3 or ♗d4. But my opponent doesn't understand the difference (during the game, I didn't either – I only found the draw using a computer when writing this book). **63...♗f2??**

64.♔a5!! Many players I showed the game to missed this move. Rusudan did too, and when she finally saw it unleashed against her, she got terribly upset. Had black instead put her bishop on e3 or d4, she would be able to control the b8 square from the neighboring h2-b8 diagonal. In this case, her king then transfers to c5 through d6 and it's a draw. Now, however, white's position is completely won, and I finished her off: **64...♗e3 65.♔a6 ♗d4 66.a5 ♗e3 67.b6+ ♔b8 68.♔b5**. Curtains! **1–0**.

I shudder when I remember what happened with Azmai at that point. He flew onto the stage and had quite a few choice Georgian words for his pupil's play. The profession of a woman's chess coach is dangerous for your health.

Training a female player is driving the devil out of her
– Anton Korobov



On Your Marks

Allow 5-10 minutes to pump yourself up before the game

Before an important battle, you should be fully concentrated on it.
You are an arrow on a drawn bow.

The time spent on the starting block is crucial. The bow is drawn, and the arrow is ready to hit its target. The minutes before starting the clock are very important. My observations, however, show that every chess player uses this important moment differently.

Professionals: concentrate on the game, calm their spirit, mind and body. Some recall their goals and how to get there, remind themselves that they need to play rapidly and positively. Others don't try to recall anything at all, simply sitting in inner silence, accumulating energy.

Me: I run into the tournament hall 5–10 minutes late. Apologize profusely to my opponent and swear to myself for the hundred thousandth time that this is the last occasion I arrive late.

Some women players: banter with their opponents, complete with fake giggling and loud, unnatural laughter. If I somehow *don't* arrive late to my game, then watching this anti-theater causes me immeasurable psychological pain and throws me off balance.

Modern young coaches teach their pupils: give your opponent a small gift before the game, ask if they have ever visited our country or town, if they liked it there?... butter them up!

“Can you imagine?” a coach once told me. “I taught him all that, he comes to the game, gives his opponent a souvenir – and the opponent does the same. And then the latter also asks, *How is he doing? How does he like living in this great city?*, all that stuff... His coach also taught him that, LOL.”

Alexander Grischuk: dashes late to the table, surrounded by a cloud of cigarette smoke. He might even sit at the wrong board and start playing the wrong opponent. (OK, this happened with Alexander only at a blitz tournament. OK...once.)

And now let's get serious. Because players treat it really seriously.

Most chess players get to the board 5–10 minutes before the game, settle down on their chairs, and fill in the scoresheets. Everyone is nervous before the game, no exceptions. And everyone tries to hide and control their anxiety, no exceptions. Everyone has their own way: talking to the opponent, talking to

friends or arbiters, getting some coffee. Some just sit and glare at their opponent if they too decided to sit down rather than roam around.

In all these cases, concentration is enormous, adrenaline is rushing through your veins, but you cannot show that. I once jumped off a mountain with a paraglider at Krasnaya Polyana near Sochi. Well, the feeling on the “starting block” before an important chess game can be quite similar to that before jumping into the abyss from a mountain. The adrenaline load is so huge that I, as an overly emotional person, simply cannot cope with it. That’s why I always show up late to games and important meetings. Hurrying helps me to “burn off” some of that adrenaline. That’s a peculiar defensive mechanism of my body, as I wrote earlier.



With Svetozar Gligoric, match between the USSR and Yugoslavia, 2007. The USSR and Yugoslavia no longer existed but the match did! I helped to organize it