

# Staying in the Game

BY IM CARISSA YIP



**T**HINGS SEEM TO be going great for May: She's just won a prize for being the top girl finisher at her state championship, she's been profiled in an international chess magazine, and her school's team is headed to nationals.

But like so many things in chess, it's not that simple. She's hyperfocused on beating her rival to become captain of her team — a former friend who's been making rude comments about how girls can't play chess. And just when achieving her goals is going to require even more work than she's already put in, she's starting to realize she really likes hanging with her new friend who doesn't know

anything about pushing pawns.

Before long, it's all unraveling: Her game is suffering, her friends aren't talking to her, and she's starting to wonder whether she even really likes chess. Right when it's time to pick a captain and head to nationals.

That's the scenario of *May the Best Player Win*, by Kyla Zhao, and she knows what she's talking about — she used to play, and was once a member of Singapore's national junior team.

I interviewed Zhao for *Chess Life Kids* about her book and how May's situation was a lot like her own.

"This was a story that I wished I could have read when I was younger," Zhao said. "As a child, I was incredibly passionate about chess, but eventually dropped out of the competitive circuit due to performance anxiety and the loneliness of being in a small, dwindling group of female players." The book is for middle grade readers, and Zhao thinks that's a time when a lot of kids might be "second-guessing their love for an activity."

That's what happened to Zhao. She learned chess from



her grandfather at age 6, “and I just really, really enjoyed it. Then, naturally, I just started participating in competitions. But in middle school, I fell out of love with chess.”

A few things happened to make her feel that way: “First, I started questioning if chess is a sport for girls: This was a combination of not seeing many girls around me, some things that top players were saying about female chess players at the time, and not seeing many female role models in high-level chess. So those sowed the seed of doubt about whether competitive chess was really the right place for me. Also, I really enjoyed the social component of learning chess, but with more of my female friends dropping out, I wasn’t really getting the social aspect anymore.”

She also started to wonder what she was doing it all for. At one point in the book, May’s mother asks her, “Are you playing chess to win medals and impress other people, or are you playing chess because you really enjoy it?”

That was a tough question for Zhao too. “Another big reason why my love for chess waned was because I became too focused on winning,” she said. “My pursuit of medals and trophies overshadowed the joy the game used to bring me, until I started feeling anxious every time I sat down in front of a chessboard. It wasn’t a healthy mindset, so I made the decision to stop participating in competitions.”

The same thing starts happening to May too — she fakes being sick to skip her chess lessons and she thinks about withdrawing from the tournament that’s supposed to determine the team captain.

Zhao found a way to stay

involved in the game: “Even after I stopped playing chess competitively, I still followed it closely as a spectator. In high school, I interned at the Singapore Chess Federation. I also organized a national tournament for girls there. In hindsight, I think taking a step back from competitive chess is probably why I still love the game now. I needed some distance from it to remember

why I loved it in the first place.”

*May the Best Player Win* is Zhao’s third book, and her first for kids, but she has a full-time job in the tech field and she doesn’t see herself making writing her full-time career. “It’s a passion and a hobby for me,” she said. “If it were to become my only source of income, I would lose some of the joy in writing; I would see it as ‘work-work,’ and I would feel





pressure to write what sells.” She explained that her books are all very different, and that’s not what publishers and agents are necessarily looking for.

She started writing *May the Best Player Win* when she saw a lot of her friends playing chess online during the pandemic. “And it hit me that my college friends don’t even know I used to play chess — I kept that part of myself locked away for so long. So I

started reminiscing about all my years in competitive chess, and I wondered: ‘What would have happened if I continued in chess?’ Which led to another question: ‘Why didn’t I continue in chess?’ And so, I started writing to reflect and sort out my own thoughts.”

She’s glad she wrote *May the Best Player Win*, even though it wasn’t easy and took the same kind of dedicated effort that chess does.

“Of all my books, this one makes

me feel the most vulnerable, because it explores something I went through personally,” she said. “After finishing the first draft, I put it to the side and didn’t think about it for a long time. But now it’s finally coming out, four years after I started writing it! ... If I read the first draft now, I might not even recognize it.

“It took a long time before I felt like it was ready to be shared, and I hope this story can help and resonate with people.”

May’s problems come to a head, but she works them out by remembering what she loved about chess in the first place, and Zhao hopes that lesson sticks with readers.

“I hope it reminds players, and even non-players, to hold on to their passions, regardless of other people’s expectations and opinions. I hope they always pursue what brings them joy.” 📖

Left: Kyla Zhao with her book.  
Below: IM Carissa Yip, who got to know Zhao at Stanford University!



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