



MASTER OF GRAND MASTERS

CHESS GURUKUL R B RAMESH



A nondescript two-room flat in a quiet street that houses both the BJP and the Communist party offices is buzzing with activity! A tall, young man in his early forties is all smiles and welcomes you as you enter. As he was greeting us, he casually turned towards the kids & tells “kutties, silence.....” in a tone that you would normally associate with a caring parent. One can sense an atmosphere of absolute positive energy the moment one enters the flat teeming with kids excitedly playing chess.

The way the kids enjoyed themselves fully soaked in their own world - unmindful

of strangers in us walking in, the rhythm of the chess clocks, the informal atmosphere – all these were signalling us that this was not yet another ‘coaching school’ and the person who greeted us was not yet another ‘coach’. For most of us fed and conditioned with mainstream popular sports, it was a welcome relief to hear the interesting journey of coach Grandmaster RB Ramesh & Chess Gurukul.

Ramesh, supported by his wife Aarthie Ramasamy who is also a grandmaster and his first student, had a lot to say about the game and his love for Viswanathan Anand and how he was motivated to play chess.

Ramesh started playing chess at the age of 12 after a head injury that prevented him from playing cricket. Viswanathan Anand was a champion then and he was inspired by him. There was no software, only books that were prohibitively expensive and were not available in India and had to be imported from Europe or Russia those days, so one can imagine the efforts he had to put into the game.

After 1990 there were more international tournaments in India. At the age of 16, Ramesh won the National U-18 championship. With a lot of effort

and hard work he became a Grandmaster in 2003. His coaching Aarthie made him realise he could be a good coach too and she became International champion U-18, and personally it was a big boost for him. When his students started winning championships he started to focus more on training players rather than on playing.

The big bold decision was when he quit his job as Deputy Manager at Indian Oil Corporation (a job that was offered to him because of his mastery of chess) and started focusing completely on coaching. With almost a zero bank balance but with a hope that he could make a difference to the next generation, Ramesh and Aarthie started Chess Gurukul 10 years ago in 2008 with just one student. He says she was his pillar of support and was very encouraging when he came up with the idea of his chess school. She continues to work for Air India that provides the necessary financial



cushioning for Ramesh and handles all the communication and the administrative activities of Chess Gurukul. She knew his strengths and was confident that he would be a great coach. Today, the kids from the age 8 to 18 at Chess Gurukul have earned 30 plus medals in every International competition, Asian championship and the Commonwealth championship. The kids in his school have earned more medals than most countries put together.

Ramesh's day starts at 4.00 in the morning and he has about 300 to 400 children learning from the US and other countries online with some of them representing their countries in world championships. Chess Gurukul is open 365 days since most of the kids aspire to become professionals. Most of their schools are supportive and therefore they spend a lot of time playing the game.

According to Ramesh, the ideal age to start Chess is 5 to 8 years, provided the child is interested, talented, hard working and passionate. For chess you need to have chess-specific talent and chess-specific

learning capacity, is his view. Ramesh tells us that Chess is mostly a psychological game, 50% is more on the mind and the other 50% is technical skill. Kids are told that they have to enjoy the game first rather than look into results. More than performance it is important to build individual mental strength.

Though he trains his players using cloud analytical engines, cloud database and software, they do not rely on computers much. He believes in personal training, using the chess board to play the game. He trains them to play the game more in the mind initially which is tougher than moving the pieces on the board. He has established a Chess Gurukul in Mumbai very recently.

Ramesh proudly states that Chennai is the 'Chess capital of India'. Right from the first International Master in Manuel Aaron, the legendary Viswanathan Anand, to producing the most number of Grand masters in India - Chennai has had a long history of Chess in Chennai. The Tamilnadu

Chess Association is a very powerful body and have been conducting tournaments for a very long time. In fact before the Soviet Union disintegrated the Russian Embassy had a 'Tall Chess Club' that used to be very active in Chennai and it helped Chennai's Chess players immensely. According to Ramesh, India is already one of the top countries in the Chess world with some of the best players and the future looks even better.

Ramesh shared that both the Central and State Government offer incentives for chess players in cash for someone who becomes a Grand Master. The Central Government sponsors the entire travel and stay for the top three players in the Asian, Commonwealth and World Championships and that is a big boost for the players.

Ramesh also runs 'Chess Gurukul Charitable Trust' that helps talented but underprivileged chess players with financial assistance to attend tournaments. He has a set of friends and well wishers who contribute generously to support their travel, lodging and other expenses to encourage them to continue playing and reach a certain level. He does not charge fees for such children and not keen to commercialise and dilute the teaching of chess by opening several branches. He prefers to nurture youngsters with the existing set up.

We interacted with a few of the top players in Chess Gurukul. They are kids who travel to all parts of the world like it is an every day activity. Akansha is one who trains under Ramesh for the past three years, she has won the World U16, and three National titles, two Asian titles and a Woman International Master. We spoke to Michelle who did have a break to pursue higher education in Engineering, a champion who has won the Commonwealth title and several others, but is back to pursue chess again. She thinks Chess Gurukul is the best place to be in and enjoys her learning immensely.

But the icing of course was little Praggnanandhaa, full of mischief in his eyes and bubbling with energy! He became the world's youngest International Master at age 10 two years ago and has recently become the second youngest Grand Master!

What struck us most was that each kid seems to have some achievement or the other and Ramesh talks about it matter-of-factly. This young man has a lot up his sleeve with immense potential as a coach, and is a magician with a mystical wand that churns out Grand Masters in Chess! He is indeed a pride and a Champion of Chennai in the arena of sports. We wish him the very best!

- Sukanya Sriram