



### Sebastian's Blunder

*The following excerpt is from Chapter Three ("How to Think").*

Sebastian Garcia couldn't figure out where he'd gone wrong. One minute he was up by a bishop and a pawn, in good position, feeling strong, looking to start off the 2011 National Junior High Chess Championships with a victory. And the next minute he was in deep trouble, his advantage squandered, his king scurrying across the board like a frightened little mouse, fleeing his opponent's rook. A few moves later, when his defeat was complete, Sebastian limply shook hands with the boy who had beaten him, a sandy-haired kid from a central Ohio suburb, shuffled his way through the cavernous convention-center ballroom where a thousand heads were bowed over chessboards, and slunk back to Union B, the windowless conference

room down the hall that was his chess team's temporary home. Sebastian, a short, stocky, quiet Latino with round cheeks and a thick bristle of black hair, was in the sixth grade at Intermediate School 318 in Brooklyn, and two days earlier, along with sixty teammates and a handful of teachers and parents, he had traveled eleven hours in a chartered bus to Columbus, Ohio, for a few days of competitive chess. His weekend was not off to a good start.

The ritual for students on the IS 318 team was that, win or lose, after each game they would come back to the team room for a post-mortem with the school's chess teacher, Elizabeth Spiegel. Sebastian slouched into Union B and approached the small table where Spiegel, tall and slender, sat behind a chessboard.

"I lost," he announced.

"Tell me about your game," Spiegel said. She was in her mid-thirties, dressed all in black, her pale skin made paler by the contrast with her brightly dyed hair, which changed hues somewhat from season to season. For this tournament, she had chosen the deep vermilion of red velvet cake. Sebastian dropped into the chair opposite her and handed her his chess notation book, where he'd scrawled all sixty-five of his moves as well as all of his opponent's.

The other guy was simply better than him, Sebastian explained. "He had good skills," he said, a little plaintively. "Good strategies."

"Well, let's see," said Spiegel, and she took the white pieces and started re-creating the game on the board between them, making each of Sebastian's opponent's moves while Sebastian, as black, replayed his own moves. Sebastian and the Ohio boy had both begun by bringing out a couple of pawns, and white quickly developed his knights, a standard opening called the Caro-Kann, which they'd gone over in chess class back in Brooklyn dozens of times. And then the Ohio boy had pulled one knight back to an unexpected square, so that both of his knights were attacking a single black pawn. Sebastian, nervous, moved another pawn up to defend, but he had stumbled into a trap. His

opponent quickly swooped a knight down to capture the defending pawn, and just four moves into the game, Sebastian was down a piece.

Spiegel stared at Sebastian. “How long did you spend on that move?” she asked.

“Two seconds.”

Spiegel’s face grew cloudy. “We did not bring you here so that you could spend two seconds on a move,” she said, a steely edge in her voice. Sebastian looked down. “Sebastian!” He looked up. “This is pathetic. If you continue to play like this, I’m going to withdraw you from the tournament, and you can just sit here with your head down for the rest of the weekend. Two seconds is not slow enough.” Her voice softened a little. “Look, if you make a mistake, that’s okay. But you do something without even thinking about it? That’s not okay. I’m very, very, very upset to be seeing such a careless and thoughtless game.”

And then as quickly as the storm had arrived, it passed, and Spiegel was back to moving pieces and examining Sebastian’s game. “Nice,” she said as he avoided a pawn capture. “Very clever,” she said when he took his opponent’s knight. They went on like this, move after move, Spiegel praising Sebastian’s good ideas, asking him to come up with alternatives to his less-good ones, and again and again reminding him that he had to slow down. “You were playing in some ways an excellent game,” she told him, “and then once in a while you moved superfast and you did something really stupid. If you can stop doing that, you’re going to do very, very well.”

I first met Spiegel in the winter of 2009, after I read an article in the *New York Times* about her team’s performance at the National Scholastic K–12 Championship the previous December. The article, by the paper’s chess columnist, Dylan McClain, pointed out that IS 318 was in the federal education department’s Title I program, meaning that more than 60 percent of the students at the school were from low-income families, and yet at the tournament in question, Spiegel’s students had beaten wealthy kids from private schools and magnet schools. I was intrigued, but to be honest, I was also a little skeptical. Hollywood producers and magazine editors love tales of inner-city kids defeating private-school students in chess tournaments, but often, when you look a little more closely at the triumphs, they aren’t quite as inspiring as they originally seemed. Sometimes the tournament that the team from the disadvantaged neighborhood won turns out to be a minor one, or the division that the students were competing in was restricted to students below a certain ability rating. Or the low-income kids turn out to be somehow atypical — they go to a selective school with an entrance exam, or they’re recent immigrants from Asia or Eastern Europe rather than black or Latino kids from families with long poverty histories. In 2005, to give one example, *New York* magazine ran a long, adulatory profile of the chess team from the Mott Hall School, known as the Dark Knights of Harlem, “a hard-charging bunch of 10-to-12-year-olds from Washington Heights, Inwood, and Harlem” who were competing in a national tournament in Nashville. They did come in second in their division of the sixth-grade tournament, which was a fine achievement—but they were competing in the under-1000 section, meaning they didn’t play anybody with a rating over 1000, which is fairly low. And the students had all had to pass an entrance exam to get into Mott Hall, so they were above average to begin with. Plus the team, while technically from Harlem, had only one black player; almost all the others were immigrants born in Kosovo or Poland or Mexico or Ecuador or China.

And so when I showed up at IS 318 on a January morning, I expected to encounter some comparable asterisk. But I couldn't find one. The team is diverse —there are a handful of whites and Asians — but most of the players are black or Hispanic, and the best players are African American. Few students on the team, from what I could tell, faced quite the daunting array of disadvantages and obstacles that the average student at Fenger High School in Roseland did, but with 87 percent of IS 318's students eligible for federal lunch subsidies, the school had come by its Title I designation honestly. IS 318 was in South Williamsburg, near the border of Bedford-Stuyvesant — its most famous graduate was the rapper Jay-Z, who grew up in the nearby Marcy housing project — and the team reflected the student body; the students' families were mostly from the struggling working class, and the majority of their parents were employed but not college educated.

Over the next two years, I returned often to IS 318 — sitting in on classes, accompanying the team to tournaments and chess clubs around New York City, following their progress on Spiegel's blog — and all the while, I was trying to figure out how they did it. The blunt reality is that rich kids win chess tournaments — or, more precisely, rich kids plus the cognitive elite who attend selective schools with competitive entrance exams. Take a look at the team winners, by grade, of the 2010 scholastic tournament in Orlando, held a few months before the Columbus tournament that Sebastian Garcia was playing in:

Kindergarten	Oak Hall School, a private school in Gainesville, Florida
First grade	SciCore Academy, a private school in New Jersey
Second grade	Dalton School, a private school in New York City
Third grade	Hunter College Elementary, an exam school in New York City
Fourth grade	Tie between SciCore Academy and Stuart Hall School for Boys, a Catholic school in New Orleans
Fifth grade	Regnart Elementary, a public school in Cupertino, California, home of Apple and dozens of software companies
Ninth grade	San Benito Veterans Memorial Academy, in southern Texas, a public school whose student body is mostly Hispanic and low income
Tenth grade	Horace Mann, a private school in New York City
Eleventh grade	Solomon Schechter, a private school in a New York City suburb
Twelfth grade	Bronx Science, an exam school in New York City

The winning team in every grade, in other words — with the exception of those outliers from San Benito — came from a private school, an exam school, a parochial school, or a public school populated by the children of Apple engineers.

Except, that is, for the middle-school grades, where the list of winners looked like this:

Sixth grade	IS 318, a low-income public school in Brooklyn
Seventh grade	IS 318, a low-income public school in Brooklyn
Eighth grade	IS 318, a low-income public school in Brooklyn

The students at IS 318 didn't win in just one grade; they won in every grade the school was allowed to enter. The roster of schools they beat reads like a wealthy parent's wish list of the most desirable private schools in the country: Trinity, Collegiate, Spence, Dalton, and Horace Mann in New York

City, and exclusive private schools in Boston, Miami, and Greenwich, Connecticut. And the 2010 tournament wasn't a one-time fluke; IS 318 won in all three grades in 2008 as well. (In 2009, they won in the sixth- and seventh-grade divisions but lost the eighth-grade trophy by half a point.)

In the end, it is a simple truth, no caveats or asterisks required: the chess program at Intermediate School 318 is the best middle-school chess program in the United States, bar none. In fact, it is almost certainly the best scholastic chess program in the country at any grade level. The team's reputation has grown in recent years, and they have begun to draw good elementary-school players from around the city, which has added to their advantage. But mostly, they win tournaments because of what Elizabeth Spiegel was sitting in Union B doing that April afternoon: taking eleven-year-old kids, like Sebastian Garcia, who know a little chess but not a lot, and turning them, move by painstaking move, into champions.

By the thirty-fifth move in the game Sebastian was replaying with Spiegel, he had recovered completely from his early errors and taken a clear lead. He pushed his queen deep into enemy territory, putting the white king in check. His opponent drew a pawn up to block the black queen's attack. Sebastian moved his queen two squares ahead: check again. The white king retreated a square, pulling out of the queen's range.

And then, rather than keeping the pressure on the white king, Sebastian went for the easy score: he captured a white pawn with his queen. Once again, he had missed a looming threat: from the other side of the board, his opponent's rook stole Sebastian's bishop, and Sebastian's advantage started to slip away.

"You took the pawn?" Spiegel asked. "Come on. What's a better move?"

Sebastian said nothing. "What about check?" Sebastian stared at the board. "Think about it," Spiegel said. "Remember, when I ask you a question, you don't have to answer right away. But you do have to be right." Suddenly a bit of a smile crept onto Sebastian's face. "I could win the queen," he said. "Show me," Spiegel said, and Sebastian made the moves, demonstrating how one more check would have not only saved his bishop but also sent white into a tailspin, forcing the Ohio boy to choose between losing his queen and losing the game.

"This is the thing," Spiegel said evenly, moving the pieces back to where they were when Sebastian had gone for the easy pawn. "Think back on this moment. When you made *this* move" — she captured the white pawn, as Sebastian had done — "you lost the game. If you had made *this* move" — she put the white king in check — "you would have won the game." She leaned back in her chair, her gaze fixed on Sebastian. "It's okay if the loss hurts you a little," she said. "You *should* feel bad. You're a talented player, but you have to slow down and think more. Because now you have" — she checked her watch — "four hours until the next game, which means that you have four hours to think about the fact that you got beat by this kid." She tapped the board. "All because of this one time when you could have slowed down but you didn't."