

Gillian Moore

Is this Britain's answer to Beth Harmon? So wondered Ben Graff as he was delighted to chat with Gillian Moore, who remains an avid chess fan well into her seventies

"They call me retired. I'm certainly not retired from life!"
– Gillian Moore

Have you ever researched an opponent's games and been intrigued by what you learn about the person in the process? Chess players lead such rich and varied lives, both at and away from the board, as my good friend Adrian Walker discovered when he was drawn against Gillian Moore in a Gloucester vs Hampshire online match. Adrian told me that he had enjoyed studying Gillian's chess, but more than that, he was fascinated by all he ascertained about Gillian herself. "Get in touch with Gillian," Adrian told me. "This is a special story that is really worth telling."

Few of us can claim to have been a national champion within any age group. Yet Gillian Moore has the rare distinction of having been Junior, Ladies and Senior British Champion. An active part of the chess scene for many decades, at 77 Gillian is still competing and assiduously involved in the organisation of the Hampshire Chess Association. Gillian is also the author of two books, *My Chess Revealed – Selected Games with Commentaries* and *My Chess Career and Holidays*, with a third one on the way. A wonderful chess role model.

I was keen to explore Gillian's career, her experiences of women's chess and her reflections on the game that has been such an integral part of her life. I also wanted to talk about her writing, particularly because it strikes me that many more of us could try and share our chess playing adventures, but perhaps do not know where to start.

We talked on the telephone on a Saturday afternoon. One of those days where the sunlight and the flowers in bloom herald the spring, even if the chill in the air is still of winter. Gillian is a good companion, easy to talk to and insightful in what she shares. Time certainly passes quickly in her company.

I start by asking Gillian about her earliest chess memories, and she speaks fondly of her first teacher, Mrs Weston. Having learnt the basics from her father, it was Mrs Weston, at Weston Park Girls School, who truly introduced her to the game. "I always remember she would set up the boards at lunchtime and it was always so exciting. We played in a local school league and it was a wonderful experience." Mrs Weston would go on to be a lifelong friend and inspiration.



The evergreen Gillian Moore very much continues to enjoy her chess and is no mean attacker.

I asked Gillian if there were any particular challenges in being a girls' team in an otherwise male-dominated league, but she thinks not. It is important not to look for issues where none exist. Gillian has written that chess gave her "Contentment as a teenager that I otherwise might not have had," and we ruminated on this. Chess can never be everything, but it has the capacity to make all of us feel more engaged and fulfilled. We agreed that for both of us chess was a positive life force.

Gillian progressed quickly. Southern Counties and Southampton Girls Championships were followed by victory in the British Girls Championship in 1962 and 1963. Then in 1966 in Sunderland, Gillian shared the British Ladies Championship with Peggy Clarke, which she sees as the pinnacle of her career. "We shared the beautiful large silver rose bowl trophy for six months each [...] We did not have a play-off. I think because Margaret was expecting a baby at the time."

Gillian did not really know Peggy socially, but reminisces about Dinah Dobson (now Dinah Norman), with whom she shared the 1963 Girls Championship and many years later would share the British Senior Championship. "She is the only ladies' player who was around when I was a girl who is still

playing now. We lost touch for a while, but it was wonderful when we met again on the circuit. She is a good friend." Gillian reflected on Dinah's achievements, which include giving a women's world champion an extremely tough game.

Gillian told me that she had never experienced sexism at the board herself, but always remembered a story Dinah told about a time when she beat a man who was so annoyed that he threw his queen at her. "I don't know if he actually took aim, or whether he just hurled the piece randomly, but it's very symbolic that he chose the queen, don't you think?" Gillian says with a laugh.

I ask Gillian what advice she would give to a junior female player today. "You can achieve great things if you love the game, have plenty of practice and study, and keep going. Never be disheartened by a lost game. We all have those. Analyse the games, learn from your mistakes, and you will continue to improve."

The Queen's Gambit's Beth Harmon may be the fictional role model of the moment, but Gillian is keen to point to a real one when I ask her who female players should look up to. "Judit Polgar, what an inspiration! She shows that with the right encouragement and aptitude, so much can be achieved. She certainly could have been world champion. It would have been a dream to

play her." We agree that all things are still possible. If Judit ever does a simul in the UK, it would be fascinating to watch Gillian in action against her.

I ask Gillian how she would describe her own playing philosophy. "I've certainly seen juniors cry when they lose. It can be hard for anyone, but with age you become more philosophical. I think it was Nelson Mandela who said, 'I never lose, I succeed, and I learn.' That is how I look on things. I am a positive person, and I am always very grateful for what I have."

I ask if Gillian sees herself as competitive. She says she is. "I certainly have a competitive edge. You cannot compare chess to tiddly winks or snakes and ladders, there is much more to it than that. I can be aggressive on the board, but I do not have the killer instinct to hurt my opponent. I sometimes think of Bobby Fischer, a brilliant player, but clearly disturbed. He said he liked to see his opponent squirm and I would never think like that. I always remember the time when I beat someone in round three of an event and that was his third loss of the day. He then withdrew and I felt bad for him. You must be able to take it on the chin and to hold on to your philosophy of life."

We then talk about Gillian's writing. I ask her what made her decide to put pen to paper, and what advice she would give to any chess player out there who would like to do the same, but lacks confidence. "You don't need to be a GM or have a title to write. Everyone has an interesting story. If you love the game, that will shine through. You can always get some technical help with proof-reading and so on if need be."

"I wrote my books before the pandemic. The bulk of my life is behind me, albeit both of my aunts lived into their nineties, so I am hoping for a good few more years yet. When you get to my sort of age you feel like time is going too fast. If there are things you want to do in life, you must do them before it is too late. I started with a few articles and my writing grew from there. I would say to everyone out there, just go for it!"

I say to Gillian that I think her writing would resonate with any player. Her stories of competing in events capture the essence of what it is to travel the country in pursuit of the game we love. From descriptions of venues as far flung as Aberystwyth, Bognor Regis, Edinburgh, Great Yarmouth, Paignton, Sunderland and Torquay, with many others in between, through to the actual experience of playing in the events and meeting up with fellow players, her writing has a real authenticity to it. The game is certainly richer for her stories.

Notes by Gillian Moore

Michael Roberts is another former valued member of the Southampton club and my B team, who has now sadly passed away. Gung-ho, off to battle we go! In this daring and double-edged game with both our kings on the run, I showed myself to be more dangerous than danger. Once again my fancy foxy Tartakower 4 g4 line made good.

A player with a more cautious style who stood watching my play thought it to be "not much of a game". Really? I loved it and it worked, even finishing off with a pleasing queen trap. I realise that my flashy style of play here would not suit everyone; I made some oversights and my opponent missed stronger moves, but, hey, we are not grandmasters.

G.Moore-M.Roberts Southampton Club Ch., 2014 Dutch Defence

1 d4 f5 2 e4 fxe4 3 ♖c3 ♜f6 4 g4 h6 5 f3 d5 6 g5 hxg5 7 ♗xg5 exf3

This just played into my hands, allowing access to Black's vulnerable g6-square. Better was 7...♜c6 8 ♗d2 ♗f5, etc.

8 ♗d3 f2+ 9 ♗xf2 ♜g4+ 10 ♗g3 ♗d6+ 11 ♗f4 ♗c6 12 ♗g2 ♜f6 13 ♗g6+ ♜d8 14 ♗f3 ♗d7 15 ♗e5 ♗e8 16 ♗d3 ♜h5+ 17 ♗f2 e6 18 ♜ge2 ♜d7 19 ♗g3 ♗d6



Development. The best way to take advantage of White's poorly positioned king.

20 ♗h4+ ♗c8 21 ♗g5 ♗f8 22 ♗e3 ♜hf6 23 ♗e1

White's king is running scared now, but is none too safe where he tries to hide.

23...♗b4 24 ♗d1 ♗g6 25 a3 ♗a5 26 b4 ♗b6 27 b5 ♗c4 28 ♗g1 ♗f5 29 ♗f4 g6 30 ♗b1 ♗a5 31 ♗b3 ♜b6 32 ♜g3



32...♗h8

Black should have heeded his queen's danger. He would have done better to attack White's queen with 32...♜a4 or, even better it seems, with 32...♜g4, immediately challenging the enemies intent upon dark doings.

33 ♜xf5 exf5 34 ♗e2

"You can achieve great things if you love the game, have plenty of practice and study, and keep going. Never be disheartened by a lost game. We all have those. Analyse the games, learn from your mistakes, and you will continue to improve."

- Gillian Moore

The queen now has no escape from her captors.

34...♗xc3 35 ♗xc3 ♗xc3 36 ♗xc3 ♜e4 1-0

Distracted by having just lost his queen, my opponent missed my immediate threat of checkmate on c7, and so resigned.



We are coming to the end of our time together and Gillian tells me about her experiences of chess in lockdown. "Chess has certainly been a positive part of my life during the pandemic. I have been playing by telephone with a friend from Southampton Chess Club, four afternoons a week. He is from a generation that does not like the internet, but the phone is perfect. We generally start out by rattling off a few opening moves and then one of us will decide we need to think. We will ring off and then ring back. It might be after five minutes, sometimes up to half an hour. It is an interesting way of playing. You can certainly take the game to a different level and go quite deep." Gillian laughs as she adds, "I have a good deal with British Telecom!"

Gillian tells me that she has also made friends with a lady in the U.S. during lockdown and plays her via email. They are of a similar age and are both keen writers as well as chess players. "So that is three things we have in common. The point is, we could just play online, but playing this way has enabled us to build a real friendship." Perhaps we sometimes underestimate the power of chess to connect people and how this scope can be enhanced away from the purely competitive arena.

We finish up by reflecting on the future. Gillian is optimistic. "We usually have a Hampshire Congress in November. I am really hoping that it goes ahead, and we are properly back at the board by then. There is nothing quite like having a real opponent and all that goes with that. I think we've all missed that opportunity to drink and socialise with fellow chess players, but fingers crossed it won't be much longer now."

Here's hoping. One thing is for sure. As a competitor, organiser, writer, and superb women's role model, I have no doubt that there is yet more to come from Gillian Moore.

Ed. - Both of Gillian's books can be downloaded from the Hampshire Chess website: hampshirechess.co.uk/tag/books.