



Maurice Ashley: Top of His Game

The Brooklyn tenement where Maurice Ashley grew up didn't appear to be fertile ground for greatness. Neighborhood violence was commonplace and he was becoming increasingly bored with school. The discovery of a chess book in the library proved to be his saving grace. The young man seized every opportunity to study game strategy and to play.



In 1999, Maurice became the first African American International Grand Master of Chess, indicating mastery on par with the greatest athletes in history. He's often called "Tiger Woods of chess," and he's been profiled by CNN, CBS News, and The Charlie Rose Show. Maurice travels to Richmond each summer from his home in New York to lead summer chess camps for children. Outspoken about the importance of directing youth toward scholastic activities, he is a powerful role model for chess as well as excellence in general. In his own words, Maurice discusses chess, his family, and the future.

Destiny from Defeat

I played this friend and he completely crushed me. It wasn't even close. I happened to be in the library at school and I saw a chess book. I opened the book and I just immediately fell in love. I took it home, learned everything in the book, and I came back and played him and he crushed me again. It turns out that he had read like ten chess books already. That's when I realized that the person who has more knowledge is often the one who is more successful and that books have power. From then I kept buying more books, bugging my parents for books and I really just played all the time.

Hip Hop Connection

RZA [from Wu-Tang Clan] is the first one who reached out and then GZA. They're really into the game, and they can play too. They've never studied it the way they need to get on the highest level. But the natural talent is absolutely there. They're very smart guys, and now they're really involved in the idea of chess helping young people, which is a beautiful thing to see. Jay-Z plays. Will Smith plays also. Musicians play, athletes play. It's release and it's competitive, so I think it's good for them.



Road to Richmond

Richmond came into my field of vision only because of Dr. Theresa Parr. She called me one day in New York. The more I talked to her, the more I sensed her sincerity, her desire to get something positive done in her area. She convinced me that Richmond's a great place. Now that I've been part of the community, I'm all in. I love it. I certainly enjoy my time there.

Chess for Living

One of the wonderful benefits of chess is that chess is a thinking game. You can't play the game without being completely intellectually involved. You have to focus. You have to problem-solve in unique ways. It's a great format for developing critical thinking skills in children in particular. You have to be flexible, and you have to be pretty resourceful. I call it a discipline because it's a fun game but at the same time, it forces you to train your mind to work incredibly well under difficult or challenging conditions.

I have to imagine that I have some talent for the game. But the biggest thing is that I'm willing to sit and study the game. I spend hours doing it. For 29 years I've been at this game. I'm still learning its mysteries, amazed at how much I have to learn.

2009 and Beyond

I'm coming out with a new puzzle magazine that's based on chess but not quite chess. It's called *Pawn Mower*. I'm hoping it's going to be the next Sudoku, but we'll see.

Since I had my second child, I haven't really been competing in the last four years. My wife is very busy as the principal of a school. But I'm back. My form is coming back together and I'm looking forward to playing again.

Uncommon Idol

The mission of The Maurice Ashley Foundation is to support intellectual excellence in our communities. I believe that's something that has gotten short shrift. We put a lot of emphasis on entertainment and sports, and we're struggling to find our niche as far as intellectual excellence as a standard in our community, for all our kids so they can start getting A's and B's and do less thinking about bouncing basketballs and getting on American Idol.

The Foundation aims to help inner city youth overcome challenging circumstances to reach their potential through chess. In September we were able to raise the money to send a Brooklyn school to the national grade school championships in Orlando. We also gave them some laptops to prepare for the event and for school. Also they received scholarships for college. One donor in particular was Will Smith. His kindness allowed them to make the trip.

Ignite Your Game

I would say first and foremost, get some kind of computer program for kids to play, and second, find at least one person for them to play with, a sibling, a cousin, or relative. If you have to play with your child, play until hopefully your child starts beating you. It's a great family game and that's where most of the growth takes place.

Shoulders of Giants

I can't compare any of the issues in my life with those that another hero of mine Jackie Robinson had to face. I feel like I'm standing on the shoulders of giants. The thing I was taught by my mother was that race is never an impediment. It didn't matter what other people thought about you. It mattered what you thought about yourself. I always had this focus that I was going to be an International Grandmaster. I was going to be a great chess player and nothing could stand in my way, certainly nothing as trivial as race. As much as people try to make it a big deal, we're all fundamentally human at the core. I think I had it easy, frankly, considering how many things happened in the past. To be born after the Civil Rights generation as a beneficiary of all those struggles is a great blessing. There were incidents, but I would call them minor, basically having to do with being a black man in a country with a legacy of racism. There was nothing that serious that it could possibly have held me back.

The Idealist

I look at life in a very grand way. I'm always shooting for the moon. I believe in the possibility and the potentiality of people. It's very important to me to inspire others to be their best, to be great, especially young people. It's easy to say they're the future, but they are. I remember myself as a young man in Jamaica when we struggled just to make ends meet. I remember going to school barefoot, or when I had "talking shoes," as we called them. The soles were falling off the bottom. They looked like they had mouths, like they talked. Growing up under those conditions, I couldn't really have imagined I'd end up where I am today. I feel totally blessed. I extend that kind of gratitude to every moment. So I always look to inspire others in the same way. There's this universe out there. We're not even limited by this earth. The stars are our inheritance. We should always look to be as bold in our vision as possible.

"Through Adversity to the Stars"

It's never over until it's over. And even then, it ain't over. Adversity is an opportunity to build yourself, to dig down deep, to learn more about yourself as a person. There's no challenge too difficult to overcome. Every challenge, even mountainous ones, you can find a seed of opportunity to build on. I call myself a great loser because I learn from my losses. Not that I like to lose. But I know when I lose I need to stop and really work that out. Chess has taught me that I am personally responsible for everything that I do. If I make a mistake, I have to own up to it and then I have to fix it. Usually there's some amazing life lesson to come out of that, if you're willing to face it.

This interview is comprised of two separate conversations. The first interview took place late June 2008; the second in Feb. 2009, both conducted by Cesca Janece Waterfield.

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