INTERESTS

Why everyone should try chess at least once

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Everything we consume now is built for speed. Videos are 15 seconds long, articles are skimmed, and we have all been quietly trained to value the output and skip the process.

Chess is the exact opposite of that. You cannot rush it, you cannot skim it, and there is no version of it where you get good in a fortnight. You sit with one problem, concentrate for longer than feels comfortable, and slowly get better.

Chess is also simple to learn and impossible to master. The rules take an afternoon, and after that, you have a game with more possible sequences than there are atoms in the observable universe, which means no two games you play will ever be quite the same. A game from the sixth century still manages to feel new every single time someone plays it, which is quite fascinating.

The best part about chess is definitely the grind. You will get stuck, and you will sit at the same rating for weeks, lose six in a row, and want to throw away your phone. What chess teaches you in this scenario is pretty introspective: step away, come back later, and look again at how you are actually playing rather than blaming your luck. And when you finally break through, when you cross that golden 1000 rating, the feeling is euphoric in a way that very few things are.

Now, the myth. Most people picture chess as two silent old men staring at a board for six hours. That format exists, but it is not where the game lives now. Blitz and rapid are what everyone actually plays, and over the board, they are chaotic in the best way. There is banter. There is trash talk. When both clocks fall under 30 seconds, people start slapping pieces down and knocking half the board over.

Chess is also free. Chess.com and Lichess have millions of players between them, so you can find a game at two in the morning at whatever level you are. Every opening, tactic, and endgame has been explained on YouTube by someone better than you. The barrier to entry is essentially zero.

I should be honest about one thing, because it gets overstated. The research on whether chess makes you academically sharper is mixed. One large meta-analysis found a moderate benefit for maths and general cognitive skills, but other controlled studies found no meaningful transfer at all. I would not sell it as a brain upgrade but as a way to build discipline.

What I did not expect was how social the game actually is. Chess clubs exist at most universities and many schools as well, but they are tiny compared to the sports clubs, which feels like a missed opportunity. A chessboard is one of the easiest excuses to talk to a stranger that I have ever come across. It got me talking to people at university I would never have met otherwise, and at work, it put me in conversation with an entire department I had no professional reason to know.

Nobody intends to network over a chessboard. They just play, and the networking happens anyway. Hence, I think campuses should take it more seriously. You need a board, a clock and a room, or nothing at all if you play online.

Add proper tournaments with real prizes and actual stakes, and it becomes a spectacle rather than a hobby. If that sounds far-fetched, consider that chess is now a certified esport.

So, try it once. If it clicks, you are in for a treat. If it does not, you at least know the rules and can accept a game whenever one is offered. My only advice is to take it slowly and stop being afraid of losing, because the learning curve is steep and you will lose more than you win at first. You cannot become Magnus Carlsen in a month. Trust me, I have tried.

References:

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3. Learning & Behavior (2017). *Does chess instruction improve mathematical problem-solving ability? Two experimental studies with an active control group.*

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