

# BusinessDay

## Life

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### Chess opens up a new world for Ekurhuleni township children



Picture: DAYLIN PAUL

**Early start: Vangile Nhlapo of the Ekurhuleni Chess Association will represent SA at the African Youth Chess Championships in Egypt in December. Nhlapo is one of the few exceptions among black pupils who need financial assistance to participate in chess events.**

**The hall at Bishop Bavin School in Bedfordview on a Saturday morning is full, but silent. Long tables run down its length and the air is thick with tension. About 250 chess players — from seven-year-olds to adults — are battling it out: some for the prestige, some for the money and some to improve their rankings.**

**At the beginning of 2017, the Ekurhuleni Chess Association was struggling to attract players, especially big names, to its tournaments or to make an impression on national rankings.**

**Its new president, Norman Collier, says: "When I took on this role [in March], I asked the parents: 'Why are we not winning? Is Ekurhuleni stupider? Why are we losing?'"**

**The answer, he says, is that the club had not been making chess accessible to poor black players. "You can take a kid with nothing, and he can mentally compete. That board is an equal playing field, [even if his opponent] is a kid with a millionaire background," Collier says.**

**It costs quite a bit to equip soccer and rugby players with kit such as boots, but chess players need little more than a chess board.**

**Unfortunately, financial constraints and a lack of understanding about the circumstances of poor, black aspiring chess players mean that they cannot attend tournaments, or get the experience that will enable them to improve their rankings.**

**"I have kids here who are brilliant, but do not have money to go to school.... If you have a kid who is brilliant at chess, but his mother is a domestic worker, how can you ask him to pay R200 to enter [a chess tournament]?" Collier asks.**

**Or, he says, if a tournament is on a Friday night, how can a child be asked to take a taxi to a township afterwards? So, he decided to make the tournaments more central and free for those who cannot afford to pay, although — if they win prize money — they're asked to reimburse their entrance fee.**

**But it is a delicate balancing act, because the fee waiver often means asking wealthy members to subsidise poor players, and there has been pushback from some players' parents.**

**Ekurhuleni Chess Association coach Clive Mthunzi says that the transformation within its ranks is due largely to Collier. "He's made a lot of changes, and not everyone is happy about it," Mthunzi says.**

**Collier, who used to play chess for the former Western Province, became interested again when his children were old enough to play.**

**He says many players left the club after he took over.**

**But their numbers are increasing, with tournaments attracting 250 players on average — rather than the 70 who used to attend.**

**Outside the hall, there is no hint of the discontent that followed Collier's changes.**

**Zama Zwane and Emma Nhlapo sit on camping chairs in the winter sun while their children play chess.**

**Nhlapo's daughter Vangile will be representing SA at the African Youth Chess Championships in Egypt in December.**

**"I learnt [chess] when I was three," Vangile Nhlapo says, adding that her favourite part of playing chess is scuppering her opponents' strategies. Zwane's son Kwezi says he plays chess because "it's a nondangerous version of rugby or soccer".**

**According to research, there is more to recommend the game of chess than its lack of physical violence.**

**There is a well-established link between chess and cognitive development. In a 2012 study, published in the journal *Procedia: Social and Behavioral Sciences*, researchers took a random sample of 180 schoolboys and taught half of them chess for six months. "The results indicated that chess-player students showed more achievement in both metacognitive abilities and mathematical problem-solving capabilities than nonchess-player students," the authors said.**

**These results showed chess could be an "effective tool for developing higher order thinking skills", the authors said.**

**Stephen Skosana, head of the Hyenas Chess Club in central Johannesburg, agrees. Skosana, who lived on the streets after struggling to find work when he moved to Johannesburg, began playing chess at the age of 23 when he was unemployed.**

**He has played against former World chess champion Garry Kasparov.**

**"Chess opened up the world for me," he says. "The benefits I got from chess — it puts your life in perspective, it teaches you about plans, strategy. It teaches you to look before you move, think before you act."**

**Skosana says that Collier is an important driver in the collaboration between his inner-city club and Ekurhuleni.**

**But while soccer and rugby are attractive to sponsors, chess isn't, says Collier. "It's not a flashy sport."**

**Funding is a major impediment to the development of the sport in SA. Because the country's reservoir of chess talent — like the talent for other sports — is in the townships, players often do not have money to attend local tournaments, let alone national and international ones.**

**If a player is selected for nationals, it will cost upwards of R15,000 for accommodation, transport, team clothing and coaching, Collier says.**

**Costs for international competitions can run into tens of thousands of rand per player.**

**Chess SA's transformation officer, Joe Mahomole, says that there are about 6,000 active chess players in SA. The main clubs are in Gauteng and the Western Cape.**

**Most players (more than 68%) who compete nationally and internationally are white. The main reasons for this situation are money and "a lack of understanding among communities what transformation's aim is — to redress the imbalance of the past", Mahomole says.**

**"Because of that, there is resistance to accept transformation initiatives from some quarters within chess communities, especially those already advantaged," Mahomole says.**

**The future of the sport in SA hinges on attracting new talent, and to do that, funding and support are required for disadvantaged players.**

**But Collier says financial support should be based on merit. "I told the kids, 'Become a champion and we will find the money for you'.... You can't just give it away. If it becomes too easy, it is not worth anything.**

**"Sponsor kids who are hard-working, who dream, who have a vision. Don't just give them money because they are poor."**