

## *The Jessie Effect* by Peter Wilson

My first meeting with Jessie Gilbert was when a very polite little girl sat down to play chess against me in The World Amateur Championship which was then part of the annual Hastings International Chess Congress.

Although I take a serious approach to every opponent, and every game, I wasn't too worried about my youthful opponent. After all I had played literally thousands of competitive games and had even taken part in a number of Olympiads. We introduced ourselves, shook hands and began the game.

There was nothing surprising in the opening, and my thoughts were that I would simply build up the better position and then look for tactical lines to gain an advantage. It wasn't to be like that at all. Jessie didn't seem to be leaving any weaknesses in her position, in fact she seemed to be gaining space and my position started to look rather cramped. To my horror I realised shortly that she had much the better position and was restricting my choice of moves.

The more I looked at it, the worse it appeared. I managed a few exchanges as I calculated this would free up my position a little; it did just that, but not with the effect I wanted. Jessie started to put more pressure on my position and won a pawn. As more pieces were exchanged it was soon clear that I would lose a second pawn. I was going into a lost ending 2 pawns down against an eleven year old. This called for radical action. The only thing I could do was to make my pieces as active as possible and hope that my greater experience was such that I could make the ending as difficult as possible for my opponent.

Jessie's concentration was 100% and there was no sign that she was in any way worried about her position. Finally we got down to a rook and pawn ending where we had king and rook each, and Jessie had three pawns to my one.

I continued to post my rook actively and threatened to win back a pawn. To this day I don't quite know how I managed it but I did win one back. That wasn't the end of the story as we exchanged rooks, but in the process we also exchanged a pair of pawns. My thoughts were that I had battled long and hard but would now lose the king and pawn ending. These are never easy, and I started to search my memory banks - trying to remember which way loses at once and which way draws. I was fortunate as we had reached one of those positions where the lone king can draw against the king and single pawn. Jessie tested me for several moves - making quite sure that I knew the correct was to hold the position. Suddenly a smile split her face from ear to ear.

"It is drawn now isn't it?" she asked.

"Yes" - I replied.

We shook hands, signed the score sheets, and she went off to tell her mother the result. She was naturally a little disappointed that she had not taken the full point, having outplayed me for most of the game. I know that just a tear or two were shed...then she was back at the board saying "I should have won the ending

shouldn't I ?" to which I replied, "Yes, when you were two pawns up on the ending".

"Would you show me where I went wrong ?" was the next question.

"Gladly" I said, and we spent about ten minutes analysing the earlier position, and I was able to demonstrate exactly how Jessie should have won the ending.

I can remember telephoning my parents after the game and telling them that I had just been lucky to draw against Jessie. I described her as the best behaved and best mannered junior I have ever played. I must have played hundreds of well behaved juniors over several decades, but none who left the same impact Jessie did.

I found myself sitting next to Jessie when the final round of the tournament started. She was holding what seemed to be a rubber ball. I remember wishing her good luck and saying "It's all in your own hands now - if you win today you are World Champion".

She smiled and showed me the ball, revealing that it was actually a small globe of the world.

"Yes", she said, "I brought this with me as I thought I have literally got the whole world in my hands". As history shows she did become Women's World Amateur Champion - the youngest person ever to win a world title in any adult discipline. I wasn't able to see Jessie receive her medal and world title as I had to leave before the ceremony to fly home.

What also impressed me with Jessie was that her mother and sisters were all there supporting her. She did want to win all her games, and it did matter if she lost one, but she was always a good loser (not that she lost many games) and she both won and lost games with equally good grace.

That was to be the only time Jessie and I ever played. Over the years our paths crossed many times. I would see her at both matches and tournaments, almost always with her mother and sisters. I used to refer to them as the "Five Gilbert Girls" as Angela always seems more like an older sister than a mother !

Jessie's concentration at the board was exceptional, but she also found time for the occasional look round the room. I can remember many occasions when I visited matches and tournaments when she would look up, recognise me, and give a slight acknowledging nod of the head. The smile, for which Jessie will always be remembered, would be there too.

We only ever had one conversation which wasn't about chess. That was fairly obvious, chess was the one interest, and the only interest, we had in common. It does provide a common link across the generations. Our usual conversations (at the end of a match) were more likely to be "What happened after you took the pawn" or "Why did you exchange knights ?".

I was an Arbiter at the Womens' Olympiad in Torino, so saw Jessie and the rest of the England Womens' Team each day. After the games were over on the final day I was chatting to Jessie, and this time it wasn't about chess. We talking about her university place, how she was going to read medicine, how long the course would be, and about how pleased she was to be going to university. She was very positive about her forthcoming studies, and assured me that she would still find time for competitive chess both in tournaments and at club level.

I had played at Coulsdon Chess Club for the previous couple of years, and often saw Jessie there. Strangely enough in that Olympiad Jessie won the same kind and pawn ending which she had drawn against me in Hastings. This was because I had known the correct way to play it to hold the draw while her Olympiad opponent did not find the way to draw and so lost the ending.

Did the ten minutes I had spent looking at our Hastings game so many years ago help her play? I would like to think so.

It was only after her death that I learned Jessie had followed my own chess 'career' over those years.

She was very exceptional and not just as a chess-player. Her quiet and rather shy manner linked to her impeccable behaviour ensured that she would be popular with all her opponents, whether they won, drew or lost. The juniors she helped and the older girls who were her team mates and opponents all loved her. The older players such as myself liked her, admired, and respected her.

As we said goodbye at the end of the Torino Olympiad little did I think that would be the last time I would see Jessie.