

Banking on Their Teenage Chess Whiz

By Ruthe Stein

Ragiba and Abdullah Shabazz have high expectations for their 14-year-old daughter, Baraka. That alone isn't unusual. Many parents are ambitious for their children to succeed.

What is unusual about the Shabazzes, however, is the lengths they have gone to in their attempts to assure Baraka's success. For the past two years, since Baraka began to exhibit exceptional talent as a chess player, her parents have given up their jobs, moved here from Alaska so that she has more chess tournaments to compete in, and, like the most classic of stage parents, focused their entire lives on her.

The living room in their apartment in the Haight is empty except for a large chess board, a chair for Baraka to sit on as she studies the board and two shelves filled with chess books.

The Shabazzes have used up their \$5000 savings and are living hand to mouth. They have been notified that they are about to be evicted from their apartment for non-payment.

Still, they have undertaken the enormous expense of hiring a private tutor, certified by the San Francisco Board of Education, to teach Baraka at home with the understanding he will be paid if and when she begins to make money playing in tournaments.

They even spent several hundred dollars on two computers for her to use in sharpening her chess skills, but the machines are at a pawn shop, "due to our financial circumstances," said Mrs. Shabazz.

The Shabazzes say they have no misgivings about what they are doing or the pressure they are putting on Baraka, a soft-spoken

youngster with enormous dark eyes who seems old beyond her years.

"We are poor people," said Abdullah Shabazz, hovering protectively over his daughter and hardly letting her speak for herself. "Now we have discovered our daughter can be an asset. It is unusual for a little black girl to be playing chess, and she plays chess very well.

"If I got a job, we could pay the rent, but the kind of money Baraka can earn would exceed anything I could. We have something to offer, and we intend to put it out there."

Baraka (her name means blessed in Arabic) learned chess from her father after he had been laid off from his job on the Alaska pipeline. He was trying to think of ways to occupy Baraka indoors, since it was too cold to go out of their house in Anchorage.

Soon she was beating him in chess with such regularity, it became impractical for them to play together. She began competing in local tournaments in Alaska, but got too proficient for her competitors. To give herself a handicap, Baraka learned to play chess blindfolded. "Over a period of time, I became as strong blindfolded as not because I knew the board so well," she said.

Since the family moved to San Francisco several months ago, Baraka's life has been dominated by chess. Her days are divided between school subjects and studying chess books, some so hefty she can hardly lift them.

The conversations in the Shabazz household are almost all about chess or, more specifically, chess and money. "Chess is a very good thing for us to talk about," Shabazz said. "Chess will get us

Baraka Shabazz spends her days at a chess board practicing for one tournament after another



By John O'Hara

money if we do it right."

Even though veteran chess columnist George Koltanowski, past president of the U.S. Chess Federation, who has observed Baraka play on several occasions, feels that "there is no question that she has ability," the kind of money Baraka's father is dreaming of simply isn't available except at the very top level of competition.

She has earned about \$2000 in the last two years, since she has been playing tournament chess, according to her father. In contrast, Bobby Fischer took home around \$150,000 when he played Boris Spassky for the world chess championship in 1972, and the purse for the winner of that game is now closer to \$250,000.

But, Koltanowski said, comparisons between Baraka and Fischer are "far-fetched." The most Koltanowski can imagine a semi-professional at Baraka's level earning is \$15,000 a year, "and that would be if she played in tournaments every single week."

Which appears to be what Shabazz has in mind for his daughter. Because he is anxious for her to earn enough rating points to compete in the women's championship this year, he has entered her in as many tournaments as possible.

Baraka now has 760 points from her wins, which, Koltanowski explained, gives her a "good B rating." She needs 840 points for

the A rating, which would qualify her for the championship.

Whether she can achieve this depends on how soon the tournament is held — May or September or October — which will be decided by a committee, including Koltanowski, this weekend.

Baraka has long since gotten past feeling intimidated by the older men she is often pitted against in tournaments.

"They would look at me as if to say, 'I'm going to beat you, little girl,'" she recalled. "Now I sit back and intimidate them. One man at a tournament was so angry when I won, he wouldn't sign the sheet making it official."

Before each out-of-town tour-

namment, the Shabazzes typically look around frantically for someone to sponsor Baraka's trip. Eartha Kitt recently donated the money to send Baraka to the California Winner Chess Holiday tournament in Los Angeles, where she tied for tenth among 365 entrants and won a trophy for Best Woman, although the prize money all went to those who finished ahead of her.

Such trips are usually exhausting for Baraka. Recently, for instance, since the Shabazzes cannot afford a car, she had to get up at 4 a.m. to catch a bus to a tournament in San Jose, returning at 1 a.m. the next day. For all her efforts, the most she has won at any tournament is \$180.

The Shabazzes and Koltanowski are hopeful Baraka will get sponsors on a regular basis. "It is refreshing to have a black girl playing chess," said Koltanowski. "It would be good if the black community came forward and supported one of their own."

Although Baraka is virtually cut off from children her own age — she has a sister and baby brother — and her only recreation is going to the park in the mornings, she claims to be content.

"What the children my age do with their time isn't too important," she said. "They go out skating and wasting money. I'd rather be home thinking of ways of providing money."

At least according to her father — and Baraka did nothing to indicate she feels differently — she is not interested in going out with boys. "She knows a lot of the fellows she sees on the street are trouble. I tell her if she gets enough money, she can have any boy she wants," Shabazz said.

Baraka has other aspirations for when she grows up. She would like to do something with languages, perhaps work as a translator for the United Nations. Her parents have also told her that, "being a girl," she should someday be married.

Shabazz imagines the day, not too far distant, when someone will be writing a biography of his daughter. Baraka, more modestly, said simply, "I'll always play chess."