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one of the local book scene's most unusual people.

Game Boy

Palo Alto's Jordy Mont-Reynaud is the nation's top chess prodigy

BY JONATHAN VANKIN

AS I PEER DOWN AT HIM from the other end, Jordy Mont-Reynaud seems to barely peek over the ping-pong table on the patio of his family's Stanford condo. He is somewhat tall for a 9-year-old boy, but he's still in the low four-foot range.

Our two-foot height differential forms the core of my strategy to defeat him.

If I could strike deft baby shots that would fall just on the other side of the net, I scheme, Jordy would be unable to reach them. These tactics, employed against a lad less than one-third my age, may appear

ruthless (though, ultimately, they were fruitless) until one considers that Jordy's ping-pong prowess lags only slightly behind his aptitude for chess—and he was last year's top-ranked 8-year-old player in the United States.

"The ping-pong is a new phenomenon," shrugs Jordy's mother, Randy, who probably not by coincidence makes her living as a developmental psychologist. "We've only had this table out for about a month. He took tennis over the summer, when it wasn't soccer season and there was no school. Piano is ongoing, but he got a big break in August because the teacher's away. So, you know, he takes breaks. Swimming was in the summer. He's going to be doing soccer.



George Sakkesad

Your Move: *Jordy Mont-Reynaud, age 9, looks innocent enough, but on a chessboard, he's one of the nation's deadliest players.*

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Public Eye and Daily Grind are off, but wi

Everybody does. But this year he may have to make some choices.

"Because [for] chess, you really have to have stamina. You have to be very strong. Physically strong. So sports is really important. You can't just sit around on your duff reading chess books all day."

Other activities in Jordy's repertoire: basketball, ice skating, Japanese brush painting. And going to school. (He attends a private, bilingual French school in Palo Alto—his father, Bernard, is French.) And reading. He pays visits to the library and returns with milk-crate-size loads of books. (There is no TV in the Mont-Reynaud home.)

Randy is Jordy's chess coach. Not only does his ranking mean he can, presumably, defeat any other 9-year-old in America; it also indicates that he has the capacity to checkmate most adults who aren't themselves A-rated chess players.

"You know, the Polgar sisters play ping-pong," Randy points out. The Polgar sisters are three world-class teenage Hungarian chess prodigies. "That is a way of getting physical coordination and positional kinds of things to develop."

CHESS, for those who are not versed in the game's intricacies, is not much of a spectator sport. The contest takes place in the mind. The chessboard is as much a visual aid as a playing field. One of Jordy's practice exercises is to play matches without a board, which helps him learn to visualize moves.

For the uninitiated chess spectator, the dynamics between players—and among spectators—are more revealing than the pushing of black and white pieces. Jordy played, a few weeks ago, in a Lockheed Employees Recreation Association tournament—on Aug. 16, his ninth birthday. Chess tournaments tend to be unceremonious affairs. Long, brown tables filled the room at this Lockheed recreation center, covered by chessboards that rolled up like place mats. Jordy sat on what appeared to be a quite uncomfortable chair, his legs folded, his large eyes staring into space. His opponent (a grown-up) pondered a single move for about 20 minutes. Jordy appeared relaxed.

His mother, on the other hand, stood about three feet from the table, hand to mouth in a finger-chewing posture. Short, with short black hair and black-framed glasses, she hurried between the scorer's table and Jordy's game, then over to the table where her 6-year-old daughter, Marijo, was playing against a girl of equal age.

"She makes sure I go to sleep," Jordy says, reciting the roster of his

mom's coachly chores. "She makes me eat yucky bananas every morning. When I have a cold she doesn't let me drink milk, and she does my score sheet sometimes."

All the things a regular mom would do?

"Yeah. And she's the one who flies across the world to chess tournaments."

Though his mom has become his "partner," escorting him to tournaments as far away as Germany (Jordy's take on Deutschland: "I don't like the food or milk they have in Germany. And if you drink the water from the tap, you're gonna get sick."), Jordy learned the game at the age of 5 from his father. The family lived, at the time, in a Palo Alto house rented from Joan Targ (nee Fischer). In that very house, Targ's brother, Bobby Fischer, had slept many times.

Bobby Fischer is the single greatest chess player who ever lived.

FISCHER is also a bit of a madman. Until his current comeback (in Yugoslavia, of all places) he lived in hiding for 20 years. This extreme eccentricity is an affliction that overtakes chess geniuses at a rate seemingly disproportional to their percentage of the population. Brooklyn grandmaster and Soviet defector Gata Kamsky claims to have been poisoned by his opponents, and has ordered his orange juice chemically examined. International master Israel Zilber used to sleep on benches in New York's Washington Square Park. Paul Morphy, America's greatest 19th-century player, ended his days muttering to himself as he wandered the streets of New Orleans.

Perhaps these tales of mind-snapping are merely the price a few players paid for their obsession with a game that strains the mind as much as any Olympic sport strains the body. Just as some athletes break down, gain weight and go to seed, some chess players lose their ability to cope with reality. But such occurrences are rare.

"So much of chess comes from within," says one of Jordy's chess coaches, Lee Corbin. "You see burnout happen very rarely in chess." Parents, Corbin believes, cannot push a child into chess. Either the child is motivated or not.

The same cannot necessarily be said of talent, however, according to Randy Mont-Reynaud, who refuses to characterize her prodigious son as "gifted."

"All children are gifted," she says. "It's just that not all parents are gifted parents."