

Bronx Stars of Tomorrow: Chess Master Justus Williams

March 23, 2012 at 2:44 PM



Bronxite Justus Williams is the youngest African-American to be awarded the title of Chess Master. (Photo by Emily Piccone)

In his first year as a teenager, Bronx native Justus Williams has already become the youngest African-American chess player to be awarded the title of Chess Master in the country, and he is the first to tell you about the hours of studying and dedication that he is continuing to put towards his game. Williams sat down with the Norwood News at IS 318, the Brooklyn middle school he attends, which boasts a nationally ranked chess team, to talk about his past tournament in Brazil, his favorite chess piece, and his secrets to match preparation.

You were just in Brazil for the World Youth Chess Championship, welcome back! How did it go down there?

It was very good out there, very hot. I got 26th out of probably 200 people. I was there for two weeks and I played one game a day and the games usually last somewhere between three and four hours with a 90-minute time limit per move. I played against a top rated player from Russia who was 14 and it was a draw (a tie). When I went to Brazil, all my opponents were from different countries. I prepared for each one so I wouldn't be blindsided by their moves and so I wouldn't get into opening trouble. When I go to continental tournaments I bring my own chess set because I feel more comfortable with it. The pieces are wooden and are not too big, not too small; I just like the way it feels.

How did you prepare for a game?

I look at my opponents' past games, see what they're good at and see what openings they had trouble with. I would build a database for them, and try to get the best position, so I felt that I had a good edge.

How did you begin playing chess?

It started at P.S. 70 (in the Bronx) with the Bronx Bomber chess team. I didn't really know how to play, but my mom was just pushing me to do it. I moved to IS 318 (in Brooklyn) in 2009, because it would be a good chess team, and I felt that I should be challenged. I'm glad now that there are more people into chess than just me. Now, playing [with my classmates] is a challenge. I will probably win, but it's challenging. I used to not study a lot, but now I've gotten more serious about chess and I'm trying to study an hour a day, like reading books and looking at top games. I used to just play in tournaments and think that it was helping me but it really wasn't.

What makes a challenging opponent? Strong offense or strong defense?

I would probably say offense because a lot of the top grand masters have told me that I have a lot of good defensive skills, and usually an offensive type of player will push you hard.

Does the opening player have an advantage?

Usually people would want to play first and usually they have an advantage. But the part of chess is learning how to use your color to your advantage. I wouldn't really care what color I got. I would just let it be.

Who do you think is the most skilled opponent that you've beat?

I beat my first GM (grand master), Michael Rohde, when I was 11 years old. I felt that that was a big accomplishment, and I was playing black.

Any GMs that you look up to?

I was honored to meet Maurice Ashley. He's the first black chess GM and we've talked a lot. He's a good guy.

Are you friends with the other young chess masters from New York?

Yeah, James Black goes to this school. We kind of go back and forth a lot because we're both good players, but I don't know, I think I'm better than him. But we're all friends. The other one lives in White Plains. When we see him at tournaments we always hang out.

If you had to be a chess piece which chess piece would you be?

I really like knights because they can just jump all over the board, and sometimes knights are just annoying pieces because generally they're good at attacking. They could just jump towards the King, attack it and jump back out.

Do you have any words of wisdom for Bronx kids your age?

I didn't think I was going to be good at chess, so just try everything, and try the things you don't think you'd be good at. If those don't work out then try the things that you don't think you'll like.

—Interview by Emily Piccone.

Ed. Note: *Bronx Stars of Tomorrow is a periodic feature in the Norwood News highlighting young people who are excelling in different activities. To nominate someone, e-mail us at norwoodnews@norwoodnews.org. A version of this interview appears in the March 22-April 5 print edition of the Norwood News.*