With

The Polgar Sisters: 'one of the most audacious human experiments of recent times', Bounce (extract 2010)

"The tale of the Polgar sisters provides scintillating evidence for the practice theory of excellence. Polgar had publicly declared that his yet-to-be-born children would become world-beaters – setting himself up for a fall in the time-honoured tradition of science – and had been proved right. His girls lived up to the pre-birth hype... and then some..."



Polgar, an educational psychologist, maths teacher and (thought leader), was one of the earliest advocates of **the practice theory of expertise**... he had even lobbied local government officials, arguing that an emphasis on hard work rather than talent could transform the education system... ***'Children have extraordinary potential, and it is up to society to unlock it,'*** he said. ***'The problem is that people do not want to believe it. They seem to think that excellence is only open to others, not themselves.'***

Back in the 1960s, realizing that the only way to vindicate this theory 'of how to produce children with world-class abilities' was to test it on his own future children, he started corresponding with a number of young ladies, in search of a wife... A young Ukrainian named Klara was one of those women... who agreed to take part in his bold experiment. On 19th April 1969, she gave birth to their first daughter, Susan.

Cont...

The Polgar Sisters (cont.)

...'I needed Susan's achievements to be dramatic', Polgar explained. ***'so that nobody could question their authenticity. That was the only way to convince people. And then it hit me: chess. It's objective... there could be no possibility of argument.'***

He schooled Susan at home, devoting many hours a day to chess even before her fourth birthday. He did so jovially, making great play of the drama of the game, and over time Susan became hooked. By her fifth birthday she had accumulated hundreds of hours of dedicated practice.

A few months later, Polgar entered Susan in a local competition. She was so small she could barely see over the table on which the boards were placed... ***'I won game after game',*** Susan recounts, ***'and my final score was 10-0.'***

As soon as their following two children, Sofia and Judit, were old enough to crawl, they would make their way across to the door of the chess room in the family apartment and peer through the tiny window, watching Susan being put through her paces by their father. They longed to get involved, but Polgar did not want them to start too early. Instead he put the chess pieces in their tiny hands, encouraging them to take pleasure in their texture and shapes. Only when they turned five did he embark on their training.

The girls trained devotedly throughout their childhoods, but they also enjoyed it enormously. Why? Because they had internalized the motivation. ***'We spent a lot of hours on the chessboard, but it did not seem like a chore because we loved it,'*** says Judit. ***'We were not pushed; chess fascinated us,'*** says Sofia...

By the time they had reached. Adolescence, all three sisters had accumulated well over ten thousand hours of specialized practice, arguably more than any other women in chess history.

- Matthew Syed, 2010

(see over for a list of the Polgar sisters' achievements)

The Polgar Sisters (cont.)

Susan Polgar: Born 19th April, 1969:

- U16 word title, 1981
- Top rated female player in the world, 1984
- First female grandmaster, 1991
- 4 x women's world champion
- 5 x chess Olympiads
- Only person in history to win the chess Triple Crown

Sofia Polgar: Born 2nd November, 1974:

- U11 Hungarian championship for girls (age 5), 1980
- U14 Girl's Gold at the Chess World Champs, 1986
- Eight Straight wins at the 'Miracle in Rome', against grandmasters including Cherinen, Palatnik and Razuvaev,

Judit Polgar: Bron 23rd July, 1976:

- Word U12 Championships, in 1988
- Youngest ever grandmaster (15 yrs 4 months) 1991
- Winner of Hungarian championships, 1991
- 10+ years ranked no1 female chess player in the world