

## The importance of a pre-competition mindset in Chess: Case Study of Shiv Shome

Chess is a very strategic and an extremely mental game. I have been working with a young chess player, the 11-year-old Shiv Shome, who is a particularly talented and an intelligent boy and of course a chess player. Recently, he attended a tournament in Barcelona, Spain for the Badalona Open.

He went for a vast number of days- 40 days to play 40 matches. This was his first classical FIDE tournament, his first international and hence, a very important one for him and his parents. Before he headed out to Barcelona, we decided to keep in touch on a regular basis because of which we can start developing a champion's mindset from that moment on. As a sport psychologist, I knew the importance of having a strong and a prepared mindset before any event. But for Shiv and even for me, this tournament was one of a kind, and also a challenge:

1. 40 days, 40 continuous days of matches
2. Each day, he would play for 3-4 hours max.
3. Maintaining that kind of focus and dedication would be THE challenge.

So the key areas I thought of working on with Shiv before every match were:

### **Focus Area 1: Maintaining Concentration**

Player Statements: "I always get distracted especially when I have long games and I have nothing to do in between moves and when the opponent is taking a lot of time to make his/her move. I get distracted by other's games"

Analysis: Maintaining a consistent concentration for 4 hours for a boy of 11 is tough. The process that I felt that he needed to be **aware** of was- What was distracting him, how quickly he got distracted and what happened after he got distracted?

He mentioned, he got bored and always saw other's boards and then could not focus on his own game. This was the key. We then worked on his **switch on and switch off** technique where in he needed to completely switch off after making a move and preserve his concentration energy, rather than getting distracted. As a person, Shiv has a lot of energy. But I realized he needed to control and preserve the energy to maintain a good amount of focus on the right area, especially while playing matches of longer duration. For Shiv, being relaxed, on his seat and a practice of belly breathing helped him develop his concentration throughout the 40 days.

### **Focus Area 2: More of Positive and Productive Self-Talk**

Player Statement: "I fear playing some players, there is also a fear of losing."

Analysis: Common fear amongst any player is fear of losing. But, in this chess there are two additional areas you need to focus on- No age bar, and the time duration in between moves that determines your points and ultimately, result. In this tournament, I considered working **on two areas**- 1. **Awareness** of negative thoughts before the match and 2. **thoughts** during the match. Negative thoughts

generate fear and fear generates pressure that again leads to negative thinking. So the key was to break the thought process before the match itself. The techniques we used were of course, relaxation techniques like belly breathing for 5-8 minutes, some audios prompting relaxation to the body too. This was followed with recalling the objective of playing the match- which was not based on any kind fear but goals of being the best and giving the best. So, reinforcing such goals helped Shiv's mindset before the match as well, and continued during the match. Thirdly, making his self-talk more productive and less of shallow motivational thoughts also helped him strategize at the right time.

### **Area 3: Awareness of the thin lines between Confidence and Over-Confidence**

Player Statement: "After winning day before yesterday I felt confident but I also felt the over confidence came in and I lost the match yesterday"

Analysis: A clear example of mindset after winning is being complacent about your own goals. Sometimes players can get satisfied at a level and in a tournament so long, it is highly possible. This also leads to drop in motivation to prepare and study for the match. The area that I wanted to work with Shiv here was **motivation** and reminding him of his own strengths and also weaknesses, on a daily basis. I also helped him focus less on winning points and more on developing his own chess strategies, especially when the thought process shifted from Strategies to "Oh I think I am going to lose". Secondly, to reduce the over confidence after a very good match, I also asked him to **re-focus on just his strengths and skills** that he requires to make the game shift his way. As a result of this, the focus starts to shift more towards the current scenario and not in the past emotional memory of winning and defeating a very good player. The key here is to help a 11 year old know the difference between emotional memory and a memory of the strongest strategy he made that helped him win.

### **In conclusion**

Developing a focused mindset that lasts a young player's active focus for more than 3 hours a day, everyday, is tough for the player, parent and even the coach. But, a sport psychologist who can deal with the player in good capacity can help the player develop that mindset very well. While dealing with Shiv I learnt that it is the greatest challenge for me as a psychologist and for him as a player to keep that focus active when required and rest it when not. It is a learning process and will continue to be.

Mischievous, naughty but very strong - Shiv

To talk about Shiv, he is a very mature chess player and that has also made him an active decision maker as a person. He maybe mischievous but he values the right knowledge also obeys the learning which will make him a better chess player. What made him stronger was the time when he was physically unwell but played his best in the two-three days without complaining about his health.

Kudos to him, his parents, especially his mother who was accompanying him to Spain and his coach who has also helped him become stronger in his chess skills.

*Shiv Shome completed the tournament with 28 games- and now has an international ranking of 2150 ELO!*



*The unrated Shiv Shome is well on his way to get an initial rating of 2150+!*

*(Pic Courtesy:*

*[https://chessbase.in/news/Spanish\\_Diary\\_06\\_Badalona\\_The\\_final\\_destination\\_](https://chessbase.in/news/Spanish_Diary_06_Badalona_The_final_destination_))*

Performance Psychology  
Consulting