



MENU



This week, Hibba al Kindi meets Maria al Balushi who, at just 17, is ranked the top female chess player in Oman and last week made her debut in an international competition

At first glance, Maria Al Balushi is just like any other 17-year-old girl. She goes to school, spends time with her family and hangs out with her friends. But what sets Maria apart is that she is ranked as the top female chess player in the Sultanate.

It all started at home. Maria's earliest childhood memories are of watching her relatives play chess. "Everyone in my family plays it," Maria tells me. "I remember watching them play and play and I never got bored. I wanted to learn how to play so bad!" As she grew up, Maria soon learned how to play chess from her parents and uncles, but she never thought that she would compete.

At 14, Maria participated in her first chess competition. "It was a game held at school. I wasn't expecting to win or anything, I just did it for fun." But to everyone's surprise, Maria won. And she also won in the following local, regional and national games until she qualified to represent Oman in the 2015 Asian Zonal Championship.

The Championship, which was hosted by the Omani Chess Committee (OCC), was Maria's first major competition. At 17, she was competing against older

and some of the world's most experienced chess players.

At first, Maria was shocked when she learned how long the games were. "I am usually used to playing for 15 minutes, whereas in the Championship it took the player 15 minutes to make a move and a game would go on for three hours!" Nevertheless, Maria was able to overcome this obstacle. "It was a wonderful and exhilarating experience and I learned a lot from it." She was impressed and amazed by the other competitors. "Everything about them was just so sophisticated; the way they play, their mindsets, their plans and skills and even their professionalism."

But Maria says she also encountered some difficulties during the competition. "Some of the rules that I was taught to play by differed from the international rules, so it took me a while to get used to them." With the help and support of her family and her coaches, she was able to overcome them. "I am so thankful and grateful for all the support I have been getting from my family, my coaches and our gracious Government".

One thing Maria has noticed is the absence of Omani women in the chess world. "Girls competing in

chess in Oman is a rare thing. That is very sad."

At the end of the day, Maria believes that the game of chess is an important skill to learn for everybody.

"Chess is not just about moving pieces on checkerboard; it's more than that," says Maria, who believes that chess is a noble game.

"It develops your mind and teaches you a lot, like patience, for example – something we Arabs need," she says, laughing. "But in all seriousness, I strongly urge everyone to play chess."

Unfortunately, Maria is taking a break from chess next year to focus on her senior year of high school. When asked whether she would consider an education and a career in chess, she says she'd love to, but the opportunity hasn't been presented to her yet.

Hopefully, Maria will get the opportunity to develop her talent further, which would be a shame if it is wasted. But, what I do know is that we will have to keep our eyes on her.

Want to learn to play chess? Maria practices her moves daily at www.chess24.com. ■

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