Unnerved by the Urge to Win

Our dinner stirred up all sorts of issues. I have never gotten along with alpha males and am unsure about the line between acceptable competitiveness and nasty aggression. I had difficulty in gym class not just because I was inept but because sports seemed too brutal to me. When is the urge to win not just about performing optimally and more about breaking your adversary, physically or psychically? Assuming your opponent is not a jerk, is it immoral to want to destroy him? To me this kind of attitude, which is common in chess, detracts from the nobility of the game. Chess is said to be a safe way to sublimate aggressive impulses. But is it harmless just because the aggression isn’t physical? The idea of “healthy competition” may be a myth when it comes to chess. Can you really play a friend, go for each other’s jugular, and be buddies afterward?

I have watched thoughtful chess players wrestle at different levels with these issues. Pascal Charbonneau avoids playing chess with his girlfriend, who is an international master. Nor will he play a game with me, although he’ll happily help me for hours with my own chess (although I must wonder if he is actually conflicted about the reverse possibility—that he’d derive unwhole-some pleasure from trouncing me). Nigel Short has eliminated the possibility of playing chess with his wife by humiliating her the first time she asked him. He insisted on doing it blindfolded with just 15 minutes on the clock while she could take all the time in the world while looking at the board.

As for my own attitude toward competition, I can play games with people I love, but I can’t do it casually. I like to go all out in games. So if I think people I care about are going to misinterpret my determination as aggression, I won’t play. Ann [his wife] has tried to interest me in Scrabble, but I’ve turned her down because I don’t want to risk upsetting her. She probably has a better vocabulary than me, but I’m convinced I’d consistently beat her because I’m a better strategist. I also have the infuriating habit of appearing like I don’t give a damn. So she might be deflated to lose to someone who doesn’t seem to be trying.

Paul Hoffman ’78 was a child chess prodigy and now, after a 25-year break from tournament chess, he has started playing again. He has been president of Ency-clopaedia Britannica and editor in chief of Discover magazine and has written books about obsession, genius, and madness. His new book, King’s Gambit: A Son, a Father, and the World’s Most Dangerous Game—chess, of course—is about those themes, as well as deception and male competition. When he first had dinner with then-world champion Garry Kasparov, for instance, he was unnerved by the Russian’s “insane competitiveness.”

This pattern of governmental policy includes some elements that encourage and some that alarm virtually every American citizen. No single citizen is fully satisfied, because these policies are the product of compromise and the building of consensus. The process is messy and often untidy. That is the nature of a system that deliberately divides power and distributes responsibility. And the presidents who have served during the period since John F. Kennedy have played a crucial role in these developments.

We have consistently resisted proposed changes in our institutional arrangements that would move us more toward a parliamentary democracy. Moreover, it is unlikely, at least in the near future, that we will unwind the march toward greater democracy in selecting presidents and presidential candidates. As long as primaries continue to dominate, individual candidates will run alone, making the strong, cohesive, unified, purposeful parties that James MacGregor Burns yearns for an unlikely development. This will mean that voters will have both the opportunity and the responsibility to select presidential candidates with wisdom, initiative, good judgment, and the ability to work effectively with others.