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# Top 10 Myths About Chess



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People, especially chess players themselves, say the darnedest things about chess and about chess players. Here are some of our favorite myths about the royal game. Some of these sayings are definitely untrue, some of them are uninformed opinion, and some of them are controversies that might or might not be true.

### 1. Chess is hard to learn

Chess may not be the easiest game to learn, but it is far from the most difficult. You have to learn the moves of the six pieces, where the piece with the least value, the Pawn, has the most complicated moves. Then you have to learn the rules about attacking and defending the King, including castling. Then there are a few rules about games where neither player wins. • One aspect of this myth is true -- it is hard, very hard, to learn to play chess well. One player in a hundred achieves mastery.

### 2. Chess is thousands of years old

We can reliably date the direct ancestors of chess to around 600 A.D. This makes the game 1400 years old. If chess survives another 100 years we can then round up to 2000 years old, making the game 'thousands of years old'. • We can reliably date chess as we know it, where Queens and Bishops move like the modern pieces, to the end of the 15th century, around the time that Christoph Columbus discovered America. This makes the *modern game* a little more than 500 years old.

### 3. Chess is a waste of time

This is better classified as an opinion than as a myth. Of course, chess is 'only a game'. Unlike many games, it also incorporates elements of logic and art. If these are wastes of time, then so is chess. • For many people in our modern world, anything not related to economic development is a waste of time. For those people, chess is certainly a waste of time. So be it. Let each person choose his or her pleasures in life.

### 4. You have to be smart to play chess

There is some relationship between chess ability and general intelligence. Minimum smarts are required. Cats and dogs will never learn the basics; no one has tried teaching dolphins and chimpanzees. Chess does involve, after all, using various advanced compartments of the brain as efficiently as possible. • People from all walks of life enjoy playing chess, many attaining mastery. Some very smart people enjoy playing but never go beyond beginner.

### 5. Chess is for nerds

In fact, this isn't a myth, since chess is for everyone. It is for nerds, geeks, eggheads, and boffins, as much as it is for anyone else. People who need to call other people unpleasant names should better say, 'chess is *only* for nerds', but this is decidedly false. Even if it were true, so what? Smart, awkward, quirky people have made more contributions to the advancement of humanity than have the rest. If they want to play chess, that's their business.

### 6. Chess has been solved by computers

Computers have made impressive strides chipping away at the front and back ends of chess. Opening theory extends beyond 10-15 moves in some popular openings, endgames of up to five pieces (counting the two Kings) have been perfectly solved by gigantic databases, and endgames of six pieces

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are also yielding their secrets. In contrast, computers have made little progress tackling the intractable complexities that lie between the opening and the endgame. Chess is not a simple game.

## **7. Computers play chess better than humans**

In 2006, the best computers play chess better than 99.99% of humans, but are evenly matched in games against the best humans. If, as some experts consider, computers are gaining 20-30 rating points per year, the time will soon come when humans have no chance against the best machines. • It should not be overlooked that computers are always trained by teams of human specialists who program them in psychological areas like opening repertoire. Removing this advantage would erase their superiority.

## **8. Chess is a sport**

Here we run the risk of upsetting the many outstanding chess organizers who have spent years trying to convince the International Olympic Committee (IOC) that chess should be included as an Olympic sport. Lifting little pieces of wood or clicking quickly on a computer screen is not physically demanding activity. As any number of photos from recent high level chess events will show, chess players don't always cut a slim, trim, athletic profile.

## **9. Chess isn't a sport**

Here we try to make amends with those same organizers who almost convinced the IOC that chess is a sport. Chess has been included as a medal sport for the 2006 Asian Games. • A game between two top chess masters is full of tension, where good nerves can make the difference between a winner and an also-ran. Grandmasters have been known to lose a lot of weight during the course of a month-long match.

## **10. Women can't play chess as well as men**

To date it is true that women have not performed as well as men in chess events. There are many possible reasons for this. One may be that male players are often expert at making female players feel uncomfortable at chess events. The Polgar sisters have gone a long way to convince the chess world that women can play very well. Perhaps one day we will discover that women can even play better than men. No one really knows.