Uzbekistan Chess Olympiad Reflections (6) by Dr Lyndon Bouah

Greetings family, friends, colleagues and the broader chess community from Uzbekistan.

The 2026 Chess Olympiad is being held in Samarkand in Uzbekistan. 200 countries from across the world have gathered to play in this prestigious event. Uzbekistan is in Central Asia, in the heart of the ancient Silk Road region.



This is my ninth Olympiad that I am attending. The Olympiad is really a breathtaking event. The last one I attended was 2018 in Batumi, Georgia. This is certainly for me one of the greatest chess events on the calendar. Grandmasters and amateurs playing side by side against one another. Legends and master's from all over the globe playing in one event. I played my first Olympiad in 1992. The memories are flooding back to me as I enter the hall each day. Reader, come down memory lane with me!

1. International Sport

The history of South African sport can be traced back to the 1800's, when sport was thought to be introduced by the British settlers. South African sport

continued to develop sport clubs and federations in the 1890's and South Africa started competing in the Olympic Games soon after its rebirth in 1896. Cape Town Chess Club was established in 1885 and was soon followed by other clubs in Johannesburg, Pretoria, Port Elizabeth, Grahamstown and elsewhere.

Once South Africa, however, formally announced the policy of Apartheid in 1948, pressure was brought to ban South Africa from most international events, including the Olympic Games. In 1963, South Africa was banned from the Olympic Games by the International Olympic Committee and that was soon followed by other international sport federations. The South African Government supported rebel tours to South Africa, which was met by opposition nationally and internationally. By the mid 1970's, South Africa was effectively banned from all sporting codes internationally due to the practice of Apartheid.

In November 1991, South Africa started its first step to its unbanning by touring India on a cricket tour under the leadership of the late Clive Rice. In February 1992, the ban on South African cricket was lifted, which enabled South Africa to compete in Australia in the Cricket World Cup in 1992. South Africa then started dealing with all the international bodies responsible for sport. In June 1992, the international chess body, FIDE, re-admitted South Africa to the world chess body and South Africa competed in the 1992 Chess Olympiad, for the first time since 1974.

On 2 April 1992, I received a letter from Berte van Wyk which read, and I quote:

> *"L. Bouah*
>
> *Hostel 2, Room 38, Cecil Esau Residence, UWC*
>
> *Dear Lyndon*
>
> *FIDE CHESS OLYMPIAD, 7-25 JUNE, Manila*
>
> *Congratulations on your selection for the team that will represent Chess South Africa at the above-mentioned chess Olympiad.*
>
> *Now that you have been selected, an intense programme of preparation must be followed to give your team the best possible*

chance to perform well. More details of the training programme will follow. Please contact me as soon as possible for information on other arrangements that needs to be done before you can leave for the Olympiad.

Yours in chess.

Sincerely

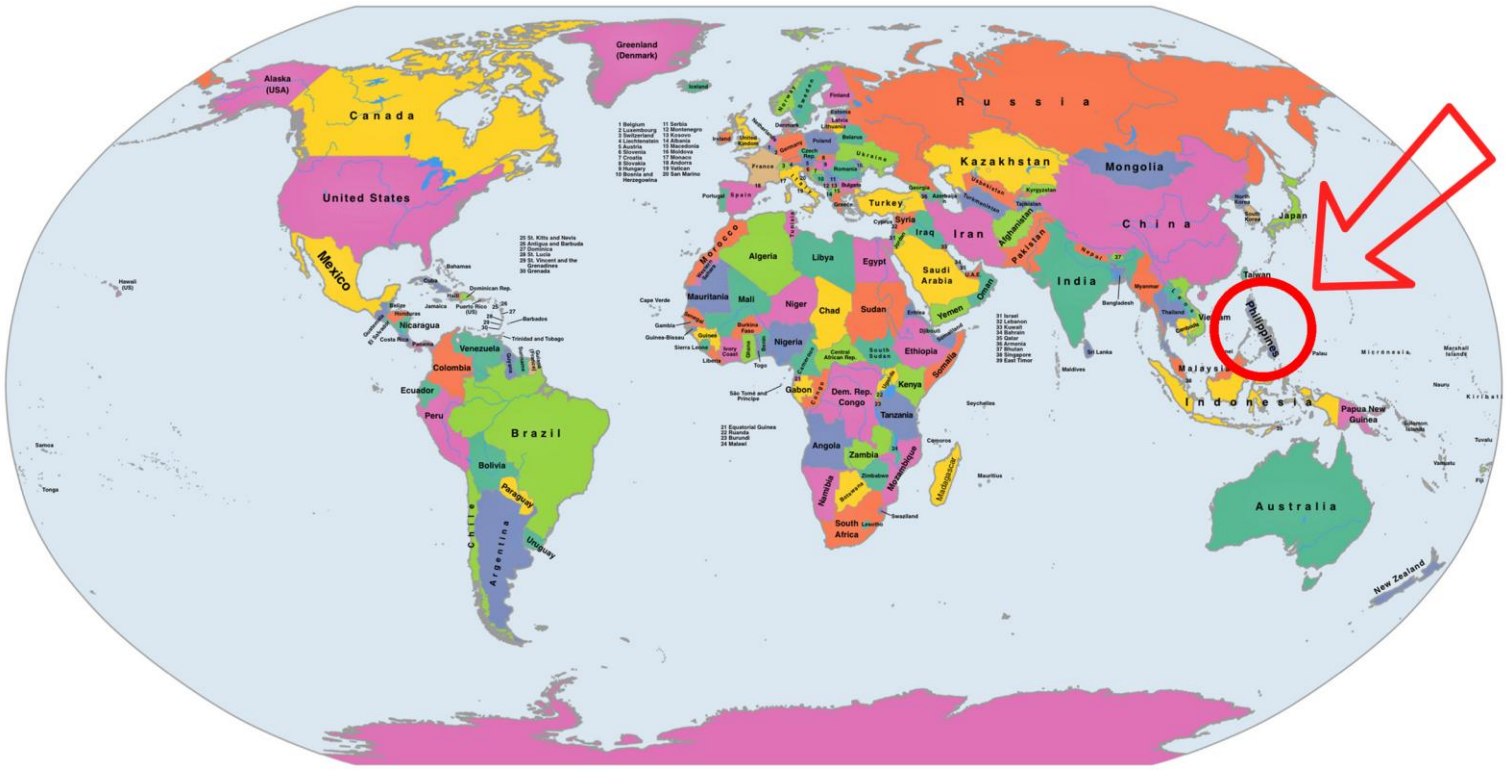
Berte van Wyk, President"

These were the official words in the letter that I received informing me that I was chosen to participate in the Olympiad. I was excited, because this meant that I would compete on the world stage. Only two years before in 1990, Mr John Ritchie, my schoolteacher, had indicated that the standard of chess we were exhibiting was at international standard and here I was chosen to go and compete in Manila, Philippines, in the next Olympiad. The Olympiad of course was known to me, because when we studied the games and books of famous players, they would tell us about their attendance at the Olympiads, and of course the then inevitable result of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics winning the competition. South Africa had last competed in the Olympiad in 1974 in Nice, France, but had walked out with three rounds to go after South Africa was suspended by FIDE. We would thus be in the first team to play in the Olympiad after 18 years. Our expulsion took place in 1977, but we had stopped playing in 1974 already.

The reaction to the team was a mixed one. Within the ranks of the non-racial chess movement, we celebrated the fact that the South African team was a diverse and representative team. The 1992 Olympiad team was Deon Solomons, David Gluckman, Charles de Villiers, Watu Kobese, Maxwell Solomon and me. The former players and administrators of the SA Chess Federation were however not so happy with this unified team. Newspaper articles were published in the mainstream newspapers, criticizing the fact that Maxwell and I were chosen. The players and some administrators pointed to the fact that in the Unity tournament, Maxwell and I had ended 10th to 14th in the event, and that there were other, stronger players than us at that time.

The newly formed Chess South Africa, however, responded that this team was a team representing the three bodies of chess that had unified to become one federation. The three bodies were SACF, CAPSA and SACCON. FIDE had granted a special dispensation to South Africa to participate, as they were not yet full members within the FIDE family.

Because the various chess bodies had not played against each other because of Apartheid, it was not so clear who the strongest players in the country were at that time. There were of course many older and experienced players from both sides of the divide, but the players had played too little against one another to make any definitive decisions relating to who were the strongest. It was emphasised, however, that the team was a team representing unity and diversity in South Africa. Prior to 1992, South Africa had only sent teams with white players to the Olympiad. It is doubtful whether the authorities in FIDE or South Africa would have allowed a team to compete that was not representative. The prevailing climate in South Africa at the time was that there was a new South Africa in the making, so teams that left our shores must represent a diverse South Africa.



2. University of the Western Cape assists with mental preparation

When we were two months away from the Olympiad, I had to make arrangements with the law faculty about my June examinations. I made an appointment with the dean of the law faculty, Professor Smit. I was quite nervous and when the day of the appointment arrived, I was not sure what to expect. So, I was very surprised when the first question he posed to me was: "What is your rating?" We then discussed the fact that I was rated over 2000 and that I had beaten the well-known white South African champion Charles de Villiers. Professor Smit then signed the necessary papers for me to travel to the Olympiad, with the agreement that I would catch up with my June examinations in the first week of July 1992 when I returned to campus.

Berte recommended to me that I visit the Sport Science Department. I did this and met up with a senior lecturer at the time, Ms Libby Burrell. She and I agreed to meet weekly to prepare me mentally for the Olympiad. At our first session, she prepared a chess fitness plan for me. As there were nine weeks to departure, Ms Burrell broke up the week into cycles.

The cycles for physical fitness would consist of the following for the first week:

Monday - Walk 30 minutes

Tuesday - Run 10 min, walk 5 min, and run 10 min

Wednesday - Walk 30 min

Thursday - Run 10 min, walk 5 min, and run 10 min

Friday - Walk 30 min

Saturday - Run 10 min, walk 5 min, and run 10 min

Sunday - Walk 40 min

I learnt many things in the sessions with Ms Burrell. I learnt about the 'Big Six Plan' which would consist of exercises relating to side-winders, pushups, jack-knives, squats, dips and crunches. I was not very good at these exercises, but I understood the importance of the 'Big Six Plan'. We concentrated on the mental aspects as well.

I have all my notes from the weekly sessions that I had with Ms Burrell in her office. The lessons I learnt in 1992 have stayed with me throughout my sporting career. The following lesson from Ms Burrell has shaped my thinking:

"To develop and maintain self-confidence you must get into the habit of thinking positively. You cannot expect to perform well if you think negatively and by placing limits on your abilities. You must ban words like "can't" and "impossible" from your mind. Think about what you would like to happen, not about what you do not want to happen. You must talk to yourself and believe in yourself. Your self-talk will determine to a large extent what you are and what you can achieve. Take control over your self-talk by reminding yourself regularly about your goals, ambitions, potential and desire to excel. Repetition is the best way to program your mind to accept positive ideas and beliefs. If you affirm these regularly, they will materialise."

I take this opportunity to thank Ms Burrell and the Sport Science Department for their assistance in my preparation for the 1992 Chess Olympiad. Who would have known that, in 2016, I would graduate from this department with my doctorate in the philosophy of sport science, exercise and recreation!



3. Diplomatic Relations

South Africa and the Philippines had no diplomatic relationship. The SA team had to fly to Hong Kong and use the embassy there to obtain visas to allow us to participate. As a young player, I left that to the administrators and, once we obtained the temporary visas, we then travelled to Manila. We spent time in Hong Kong before and afterwards. Mr Nigel Freeman from Bermuda hosted a dinner at a nice restaurant in Hong Kong upon our return and became a firm friend of South Africa. We walked around Hong Kong, and the city made a huge impression on me. I recall travelling to Kowloon and buying traditional English fish and chips. I also saw restaurants where you could order your fish as they were swimming!

4. Impressions of the 1992 Manila Olympiad

Pre-tournament bulletins were handed to us upon our arrival at the hotel. It was clear to me that chess was loved in this country. The president of the country at that time was Mrs Corazon C. Aquino, who stated in her message

that "*our belief in sport as a means for personal and national development spurs us to hold fast to the commitment to host the Chess Olympiad."* The late FIDE President, Mr Florencio Campomanes, in the pre-Olympiad bulletin, stated that every chess player should at least once in his life see an Olympiad. It was clear that there was a rich history of chess in the Philippines.

The 1992 Manila Olympiad would be historic for many reasons. A record field of 112 nations confirmed participation, and these included the newly independent republics that emerged following the break-up of the former Soviet Union. Russia together with Armenia, Azerbaijan, Estonia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Latvia, Ukraine, Lithuania, Moldova, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan and Byelorussia all confirmed their participation. Campomanes further noted that this Olympiad was historic and had become more so with the celebrated return of South Africa after the 15 year seclusion from FIDE. The bulletin noted that South Africa was barred from participating in 1977, but at the March 1992 FIDE Presidential Board meeting in Graz, Austria, South Africa was readmitted at a meeting presided over by Campomanes. He declared that he was extremely delighted that South Africa was readmitted within his term, as he was also part

of the fact-finding committee whose report resulted in the ban because of South Africa's Apartheid policies.

The organisation was top notch. We stayed at a hotel very close to the playing hall. At our hotel we met the Canadian team, and we also met GM Boris Gulko, a former Soviet champion who was playing for the USA. We were introduced to GM Eduard Gufeld who became a good friend to us as well. I also met players from Mauritius and Jamaica and became lifelong friends with them. Patrick Li Ying from Mauritius played his first Olympiad in 1990 and today he is the captain of the Women's team of Mauritius.

In the first round, we were paired against Argentina and were beaten 4-0. The result was not unexpected given the strength of Argentina. They were headed by GM Daniel Campora. I played against the player who would become the World Junior Champion that year (1992), IM Pablo Zarnicki. I was the exchange up against him but did not keep my composure.

In the first seven rounds, I scored 3.5/7, which allowed me to qualify for a provisional rating of 2205. I was the first South African to qualify for a title at an Olympiad. The Candidate Master title was conferred upon me only twelve years later. I beat the players from Turkey, Morocco and Hong Kong and drew with Bangladesh.

During the rounds when I was not selected to play by the captain, Mark Levitt, I visited the tournament hall to continue watching the games. I enjoyed watching the World Champion Grandmaster Garry Kasparov and was entranced when he beat GM Gata Kamsky in the Russia vs. USA match. In that game, Kamsky captured the black knight on f4 while playing the white side of a King's Indian Defence. Kasparov then activated his Bg7 and later said that it was a basic mistake by GM Kamsky to give up his dark square bishop for a pawn in the King's Indian Defence.

In the final standings of the Olympiad 1992, South Africa ended in position 63 from 102 countries. The top African countries were 56.Tunisia on 28, 63.South Africa on 27 points, followed by Egypt on 26.5 in position 64 and then Algeria in position 66 also with 26.5.

I had scored 3.5 points at the Olympiad. The Olympiad showed that South Africa could compete in this arena. I was however not happy with my performance. Of course, it was our first international experience, and I accepted it as part of the growing pains of a chess player. The Olympiad was an eye opener and allowed us to see that we still had much work to do. My first Olympiad game was against IM Pablo Zarnicki on board four. I was of course nervous when we started this first game. It was the first Olympiad match for South Africa since 1974.

My fellow South African the writer Alex la Guma toured Uzbekistan in the 1970's. He says that at dinner one evening that one of the young men knew the whole of the Rubaiyat of Omar Khaayam in the original Persian which of course was really something. The young man recited the opening stanzas at the dinner table.

The Rubaiyat of Omar Khaayam famously uses the metaphor of a chessboard to illustrate human helplessness and cosmic fatalism. Here are some direct chess notes:

> Tis all a chequerboard of Nights and Days
>
> Where Destiny with Men for Pieces plays.
>
> Hither and thither moves and mates and slays,
>
> And one by one back in the Closet lays
>
> Edward Fitzgerald, the Rubaiyat of Omar Khayyam

In today's round Grenada played Nauru which is a Pacific nation in Micronesia. Grenada was winning 2 nil and Nauru came back to draw 2-2. We nearly had our second win.

Bo.	181	Nauru (NRU)	Rtg - 198	Grenada (GRN)	Rtg	2 : 2
		(c) Jed Selu Taleka		(c) Lyndon Bouah		
97.1	□	Gadeanang, Lanni	1819 -	■ Renniel, Gilbert	1848	0 - 1
97.2	■	Apadinuwe, Tieta	1779 -	□ Roberts, Gennard	1564	1 - 0
97.3	□	Temaki, Jamiedson	1701 -	■ Pope, Omario	1431	0 - 1
97.4	■	Scotty, James	1655 -	□ Mendez, Vladimir	1651	1 - 0

The Grenada women's team played Gabon who is staying at the same hotel as we are. The Grenada women's team won 4 nil against Gabon. All the players now have wins under their belts.

Bo.	183	Gabon (GAB)	Rtg -	172	Grenada (GRN)	Rtg	0 : 4
		(c) Barthelemy Bongo Akanga Ndjila			(c) Denise Bouah		
92.1		☐ ONANGA NDJIMBA, Pauline C. Kendall	0 -		■ Rhonda, J Lambert	1577	0 - 1
92.2		■ NGOUA OYANE, Felicia	0 -		☐ Achazia, N.A.Lewis	0	0 - 1
92.3		☐ OUSSOU, Lyne Marley Sabine	0 -		■ Naziyah, S.A.James	0	0 - 1
92.4		■ ELISEE NDAM ZIZA, Kristyna	0 -		☐ Tehalyani, Kenishka	0	0 - 1

The SA Open team played Italy who fielded three grandmasters in their team. Two victories on boards one and two by IM Jan Karsten And IM Banele Mhango. In 2004 SA beat Italy, and in 2016 SA beat Austria. The teams drew 2-2.

Bo.	77	South Africa (RSA)	Rtg -	26	Italy (ITA)	Rtg	2 : 2
		(c) Henry Robert Steel			(c) Michele Godena		
24.1	IM	☐ Karsten, Jan	2386 -	GM	■ Lodici, Lorenzo	2573	1 - 0
24.2	FM	■ Mhango, Banele	2354 -	GM	☐ Moroni, Luca Jr	2556	1 - 0
24.3		☐ Mnyasta, Charlton	2236 -	GM	■ Sonis, Francesco	2539	0 - 1
24.4		■ Dinham, James	2124 -	IM	☐ Di Benedetto, Edoardo	2473	0 - 1

The SA Women's team played neighbours Lesotho and won comfortably.

Bo.	86	South Africa (RSA)	Rtg -	127	Lesotho (LES)	Rtg	4 : 0
		(c) Kenneth Terence Solomon			(c) Moorosi Moorosi		
50.1	WFM	☐ Badenhorst, Chloe	1997 -	WCM	■ Ntsielo, Bonolo	1803	1 - 0
50.2	WIM	■ Laubscher, Anzel	1817 -		☐ Boitumelo, Sethabathaba	1615	1 - 0
50.3	WCM	☐ Nel, Hayley	1864 -	WFM	■ Lieketseng, Ngatane	1578	1 - 0
50.4		■ Masango, Sizakele	1880 -		☐ Pontso, Makhebesela	1519	1 - 0

Regards

Dr Lyndon Bouah

Reporting live from Uzbekistan