

Cuba is the only Caribbean country in which chess masters are paid a government salary. Socialist leader Fidel Castro is a firm believer in the benefits of sport and Cuba has flourished in several sporting fields, including chess, for generations.

Castro was just one year old when Cuban prodigy Jose Raul Capablanca's six year term as world champion – he also went undefeated in tournament chess for eight years – came to an end in 1927.

It is uncertain how *au courant* 12-year-old Trinidad and Tobago chess prodigy Keron Cabralis is with the past, but his collision with Cuban chess history, three years ago, is a tale that might be recalled throughout his career as an earmark to the young resident of Arima.

The St. Mary's College first form student's trophy collection could make many retired sportsmen go red in the face, but, arguably, his most memorable triumph did not yield a tangible prize. Cuba sent two International Masters to Port of Spain, on request by the Trinidad and Tobago Chess Foundation, to simultaneously whet

Trinidad and Tobago's appetite for chess and promote their own dominance in the sport.

Humberto Pecorelli and Gerardo Lebredo set up an exhibition on the Brian Lara Promenade where they both took on two opponents at a time. The simultaneous games would clearly tax the Cubans' mental faculties, but Pecorelli, the star of the pair, might not have expected a serious interrogation when a round-faced nine year old quietly walked over and sat down on one of his boards.

Cabralis used the Sicilian Defence in a successful attempt to dictate terms to his older, more experienced opponent and eventually paved the way for a historic win – he is the youngest Trinidadian to ever defeat an international master – which he helped set up by advancing a pawn to the other end where it was swapped for a queen (the strongest piece in the game).

It was Pecorelli's only loss in Trinidad and, the following day, the Trinidad Guardian journalist Carl Jacobs gushed about the child who brought unexpected honour to his country.

At 12, Cabralis' love for the game and competitive nature remains undimmed. He was recently recommended to be awarded the title of Candidate Master – the first of FIDE (the International Chess Federation) titles, the last being Grand Master – for his Central American and Caribbean (CAC) Games triumph in San Salvador last August.

"I want to be a grand master," Cabralis told *SPED*, with a matter of fact air.

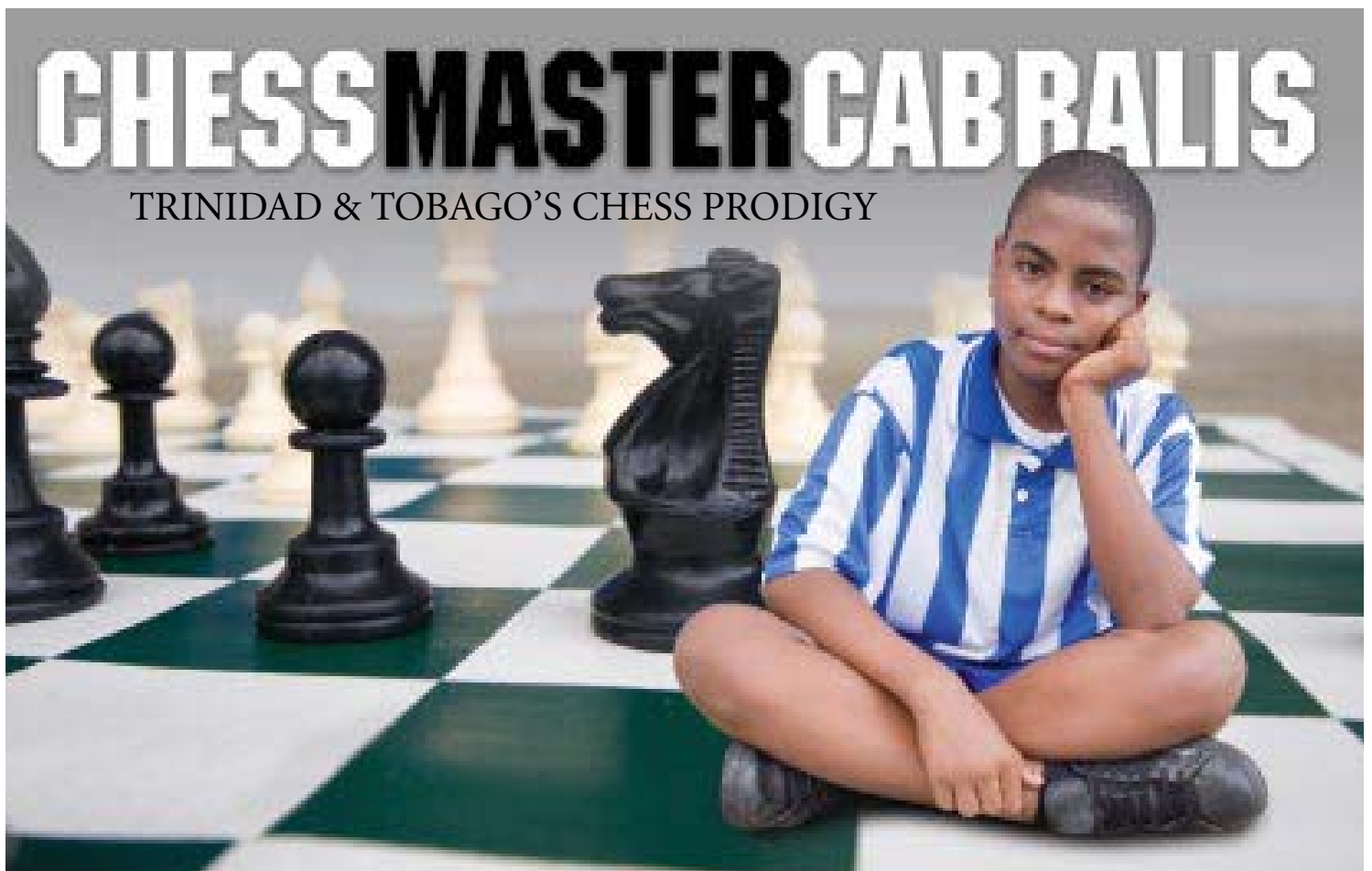
When?

He smiled, looked away and shrugged his shoulders.

"It will take a lot of work," he said. "But at least I would like to be making progress all the time."

Cabralis has outmaneuvered opponents more than twice his age in more than a half dozen countries including Guatemala, Colombia, France, Martinique, El Salvador, Barbados and the United States of America, but he is a shy boy for the most part.

The young chess champion is pleasant and well mannered, but he smiles



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and fidgets regularly and answers as briefly as possible. He probably does not see the point of the whole interview. His mind seems refreshingly uncomplicated.

He plays chess because he likes the way it “makes me think”, he makes each move based on the situation rather than a predisposed penchant for action or safety and he is never flustered. It is only a game after all, right?

Lure him on to the chess board and he reveals more of himself. He adjusts each piece so that they are in a symmetrical order. (Is that superstition, his personal tribute to the game or merely childish compulsion?)

His pieces talk too. There is an assertive thud as he wheels his soldiers across the board in rapid attacks. His face is a blank sheet and he offered little emotion beyond the odd exhalation. At one point, his amateur opponent dithered and Cabralis politely offered a suggestion. Not for just one move, mind you. He rattled off a string of algebraic notations such as QP3 to 5 (queen’s pawn from third to fifth square) that was meant to help show a series of possibilities available for either player, but only left this writer slightly dazed and humbled.

It felt like sped-up open brain surgery. His dad, Quinton Cabralis, smiled as he looked on. His contribution to the young man’s career is immeasurable. A general manager at JMH Enterprises Limited, Cabralis senior once played football for Holy Cross College and some recreational chess as a schoolboy, but did not stand out in either field.

Nevertheless, he had a keen appreciation for sport and, when his first child, Coreen, showed promise in table tennis, he went to remarkable lengths to offer support.

Coreen Cabralis won a national youth title in the 1990s and her father, who took up administrative jobs in the sport to help develop her gift, made waves too as he moved from club administrator to local table tennis association second vice-president, assistant treasurer, treasurer and general secretary.

Five years ago, daddy bought a new computer system that came with a chess game and he showed his seven-year-old son

how to play. Cabralis Junior found it to be a more fascinating challenge than monopoly and the two played each other regularly.

In the same year, Cabralis’ pet dog passed away and his father took his distraught son into central Arima for a new one. “I was driving through Victory Street,” said Cabralis senior, “and I saw a sign saying ‘chess coaching done here’. I asked Keron if he was interested and, when he said ‘yes’, that was it.”

Young Cabralis began his chess education on Victory Street under the guidance of former Chess Olympiad Roger Chin-Fung and progressed rapidly. Within weeks, his father was no match for him. Before a year was out, so was most of his age group.

Cabralis came third in his first national tournament – the 2002 under-10 competition – where only two students of local Chess Foundation president, Eddison Raphael, managed to top him. Impressed, Raphael invited Cabralis to an invitational tournament where the boy again finished third and a bright career had begun. His father quickly sought a personal tutor for his son and, with Raphael’s help, formed a chess club in Arima, the Knights Club, to further promote the sport in the borough.

Armed with regular opponents and backed by sound coaching, Cabralis quickly captured an array of trophies and records. He is the youngest player to participate and score fifty percent in a National Senior tournament; the youngest Trinidad and Tobago player to win an under-20 tournament and the only local junior to defeat an International Master or to score fifty percent or more at a World Championship.

At present, Cabralis is trained by local FIDE Master Ryan Harper and Venezuelan national master Cesar Ramos. His father spends between \$50-60,000 per year on Cabralis’ chess development which, added to crucial financial aid from the Trinidad & Tobago Ministry of Sport and Youth Affairs and the local Sports Company, fuels his meteoric rise.

There are no signs that his schoolwork has suffered as a result of his occupation. In fact, his dad believes exactly the opposite as Cabralis did not

look inconvenienced by the Secondary Assessment Examination (SEA) in which he finished in the ninety-ninth percentile with a perfect score in mathematics, ninety-five percent in language and ninety percent in creative language.

“I want to be a chemical scientist,” said Cabralis. He might be a grand master first.

Did he have any discernible weakness to his game? “Sometimes I get tired and lose concentration,” he said. Almost immediately, he laughed awkwardly and looked in his father’s direction. “Maybe I shouldn’t have said that,” said Cabralis. “People who are going to play me might read that.”

Behind the shy smile and low voice lies an unceasing strategist. Perhaps he wanted to speak freely, but felt inhibited by his own ambition. He was looking a dozen plays ahead.

“There is a joke in the local circuit about the first time Keron played (local chess champion) Christo Cave,” said his father. “Cave started off in normal fashion but, somewhere after move thirty, suddenly realised that this little boy was even with him in terms of position and pieces. He used his experience to win, but afterward, I was told that he wondered ‘what is happening here’ and went to other chess officials to ask ‘who is this boy?’”

They might be talking about Cabralis in the Cuban chess circles too. Neither Castro nor Pecorelli, however, might find it funny though.



*Lasana Liburd is an international freelancer with over ten years experience as a journalist. He writes for the Trinidad Express Newspaper after starting his career at the Trinidad Guardian Newspapers. He has been published by several newspapers and magazines in Europe including the British Guardian, Telegraph and Voice Newspapers, World Soccer Magazine and German national papers the Berliner Zeitung and the Frankfurter Allgemeine. His work was also featured on Danish international sport transparency organisation, Play The Game, while he was one of 23 international investigative journalists asked to contribute to a book entitled “Korruption im Sport”, which was published in Germany this June.*