

Friends of Japan



Karolina Styczynska

Born in Warsaw, Poland. First came to Japan in 2011. Entered Yamanashi Gakuin University in 2013 and divides her time between schoolwork and honing her *shogi* skills. In her play she seeks to emulate the strategy of Yasuharu Oyama, a legendary player who earned the top rank of *meijin*. Hopes to spread the popularity of the game by one day using her expertise to write a *shogi* manual for players overseas.

Shogi — A Japanese Game Wins a Devotee from Poland

The traditional Japanese game of *shogi* has a distinct sound: a sharp click as wooden pieces, called *koma*, are strategically placed on a burnished board. Karolina Styczynska, a Polish *shogi* prodigy quickly on her way to becoming the first non-Japanese *kishi*, or professional *shogi* player, considers this aspect of play among her favorites. “Hearing the click of the *koma* with a game-winning move is perfection,” she exclaims.

As a teenager Styczynska discovered *shogi*, also known as Japanese chess, in the pages of a Japanese manga. A self-professed lover of riddles and puzzles, she was intrigued by the distinctive game and began scouring the Internet for information. “Once I began to understand the rules,” she recalls, “I was captivated.”

Shogi differs in several ways from other variants of chess, most notably in the observance of the so-called drop rule, which allows players to introduce captured pieces as their own. “The *koma* are always alive,” Styczynska explains. “It makes the game extremely dynamic.”

Playing online, the Warsaw native quickly drew attention for her skill and competitiveness. She caught the eye of Madoka Kitao, a Japanese *kishi* in the country’s professional female ranks. Kitao recognized the young player’s potential and invited her to Japan in 2011. Once she overcame her initial surprise, Styczynska assuaged her family’s concerns, convincing them to let her accept Kitao’s offer. Upon arriving in Japan, she recalls, “I did nothing for two weeks except play *shogi*. It was great!”

With few resources in Polish or English, studying has been a challenge. But Styczynska diligently learned Japanese and has pored over official match records, called *kifu*, working out tactics and strategies. She explains that she has largely focused on finishing maneuvers: “As many players say, ‘*Shogi* is decided by the end game.’”

In 2012 Styczynska traveled again to Japan, where she grabbed headlines by beating a professional player in an official tournament, an achievement that helped cement her aspirations of turning pro. She repeated the feat the following year and in 2014 she won the European and World Open Shogi Championships.

Recognizing that the road to becoming professional passed through Japan, she moved to the country almost immediately upon finishing university in Poland. Along with studying *shogi*, she is currently pursuing a graduate degree in information management at a Japanese university.

Styczynska takes full advantage of Japan’s *shogi*-rich environment, studying the game three hours each day and spending most weekends in Tokyo training at the headquarters of the Japan Shogi Association. She points out how facing diverse adversaries has matured her game. “I started off playing aggressive, but in facing younger, assertive players, I’ve been forced to learn how to defend.”

In 2015 Styczynska earned provisional professional status. Though this was a major step toward her goal, she understands the magnitude of work involved in meeting the two-year deadline to win the rank of full-fledged *kishi*. While she is aware of the expectations directed at her as she vies to be the first non-Japanese *kishi*, she has learned to focus on earning one victory at a time. “I just need to be patient and continue pushing myself,” she says. “Being a professional means I have to stay competitive and keep working to be better.”

