



Learners Without Borders - Kenya 2020

To: All 2020 Learners Without Borders Donors and Supporters

Re: Report Back Letter

Dear friends and supporters,

On behalf of Learners Without Borders, I want to take this opportunity to report on our recent trip to establish a chess club at Kapsabet Primary School in Kenya. Before I dive into specifics, I want to extend my deepest appreciation to everyone who donated and supported this effort. This was one of the most fulfilling experiences of my adult life. We really made a big impact at the school. Thank you so much for making it possible.

With suitcases packed full of our chess equipment, I flew out of Albuquerque on January 10. After a journey of four connecting flights through Denver, Germany, and Ethiopia, I arrived in Nairobi on January 12. My childhood friend, Joseph Koech, who had been living in Kenya for nearly a year and played a major role in coordinating this program with the school in Kapsabet, picked me up from the airport. Serendipitously, this trip overlapped with our old Highland High School friend, Tyler Johnson's trip to Kenya to visit Joseph and when we all realized this Tyler happily joined us as a volunteer chess coach. After Tyler arrived in Nairobi a day after me, the three of us headed northwest on the highway for six hours to Kapsabet, which was home to Joseph as well as the Kapsabet Primary School. I represented Learners Without Borders as the head coach of the trip and I was lucky to have both Joseph and Tyler as assistant coaches.

On January 15, as school ended, the three of us met with the Kapsabet Primary School teachers to plan the start of this chess club. I was hoping at least two teachers would show up. In fact, ten teachers showed up! None knew how to play chess, but they were excited to learn. We confirmed that us Learners coaches would run the club for about ten days, 1.5 hours each day, over a three week period. The primary school teachers would run the club thereafter.

As Joe, Tyler, and I were setting up for the first day of the chess club in the cafeteria, there was a buzz of excitement. Meeting and working with a "Mzungu" American to learn a game they had never heard of was going to be quite a unique experience for the students. The youngest children were released from class a few minutes before the older students. They greeted us with smiles, waves, and handshakes before filing onto the buses. Soon after, we met the students who were assigned to our chess club. They spilled into the cafeteria with joy. The group of 34 learners consisted of boys and girls, ages 9 to 11. They were well-behaved, respectful, and engaged. And for all of them, this was their first exposure to chess.

During the first two days, we used the demonstration chess board to teach piece movements and important concepts such as check and checkmate. There was a weekend break before the third day of chess at the school. Joseph manages his family's businesses in Kapsabet, which include a motel and restaurant called Silver Inn. Over the weekend, we hosted the primary school teachers at the Silver Inn restaurant for a good lunch and more chess education. Not only did this provide valuable one-on-one chess training, but we became better friends with everyone who attended including with Mr. Talam, Alfred, and Vincent.

The proceeding days at the chess club were quite enjoyable. It was a pleasure to see the students playing real chess matches and improving their knowledge of the game. They quickly picked up the "two

rook checkmate” technique, which reinforced their conceptual understanding of checkmate. A highlight for me was introducing mindfulness to the club, which we do at all Learners chess clubs in New Mexico. A couple minutes of mindfulness to begin each day allows the students to calm and focus their minds. I had no idea how the students would respond to this practice; I was pleasantly surprised to see them embrace mindfulness from the start and throughout.

After the first week, Joseph, Tyler, and I headed out on a tour of western Kenya while the Kapsabet Primary School teachers took charge during week two of the chess club. Before we left Kapsabet, we introduced the Learners Chess puzzle booklets to the teachers and students. Putting pencil to paper helps new learners solidify and refine concepts and common chess patterns. Further, we helped the teachers plan how they would run the chess club for the week in our absence. This week acted as a valuable test run to see how the chess club would go in the future under the direction of the school teachers.

Joseph, Tyler, and I embarked to explore the natural beauty of Kenya (on our own dime of course). It is truly a cradle of life on earth. We spent time relaxing near the shoreline of Lake Victoria within sight of hippos, trekking in the Kakamega Rainforest with monkeys jumping overhead, and on safari in Masai Mara where we had the privilege to see lions, cheetahs, and a leopard grace the savannah.

After the nature excursion, we returned to Kapsabet for another week of chess club. The teachers did an excellent job with the students while we were gone. The students progressed significantly and were eager to continue to learn as we prepared for the upcoming club tournament. We studied castling, the four-move checkmate, and general chess strategies.

Later in the week, we had the special opportunity to address the entire student body at a school assembly. The teachers wanted us to encourage the students who were not yet in the chess club to learn chess and remind them that the chess club was for the whole school. Joseph, Tyler, and I each gave a speech emphasizing inclusion and learning. The experience was incredible. It was wonderful getting to meet more students and feeling truly embraced by the school.

After the assembly speeches, we held the first chess tournament for the club over the course of two days. All 34 students participated in the tournament and they all carried themselves like seasoned professionals. They engaged in serious, competitive chess matches over the course of five rounds. A precocious learner named Daniel Kiprop edged out a handful of close competitors to claim first place in the tournament. Everyone did so great and we were immensely proud of every student.

To celebrate, we enjoyed cake and juice at the end of the tournament. We handed out prizes and everyone received a Learners Chess tee shirt. Joseph, Tyler, and I were touched to receive gifts from the teachers and handmade cards from the students. The chess club culminated in this emotional and happy celebration. It was the perfect point to transition the leadership of the club to the teachers, which was good timing, since it was the Learners coaches last day at the club. After we took group pictures and the students left for home on the buses, we sat around a large table with the same ten teachers from our first meeting to discuss the club going forward. I was inspired that the teachers were not only committed to continuing the club, but also growing it to include more students.

Since I returned to New Mexico on February 11, the Kapsabet Primary School Chess Club has been meeting three times per week under the leadership of the teachers including Alfred and Vincent. The club was left with 16 chess sets, 30 small travel boards, one demo board, chess puzzle booklets, Learners pens/pencils, and the Learners Chess curriculum (thanks to our donors – the teachers and students were

so grateful!). We have a group message chat with the teachers to address questions that may arise. Additionally, Joseph and Tyler (who is staying in Kapsabet until May) plan to help out at the club on a regular basis.

In conclusion, the Kapsabet Primary School Chess Club is in great hands. I've returned to New Mexico with many new friends in Kapsabet and unforgettable memories. I hope to return to Kapsabet one day. I'm excited to watch the seeds of chess grow in the community. At this point, a future Learners Without Borders trip aimed to expand chess to other primary schools in the area would be feasible and productive. We'll see what happens. Thank you so much for making the first trip a reality!

Warm Regards,
Coach Zach Doran
Learners Chess / Learners Without Borders



To view a video recap of this project and learn more about past and future LWB projects, visit:

<http://learnerswithoutborders.org/>