



The Chicago International Film Festival

Cinema/Chicago and the Chicago International Film Festival
Education Outreach Program Screening: *Brooklyn Castle*
Director: Katie Dellamaggiore
101 minutes, in English

Please use the below synopsis and film information, study ideas/questions and helpful websites to lead your students in preparation and post-screening discussion. Following the film, students are required to respond to the screening with a one-page essay. Essays (either all or select) must be sent to Cinema/Chicago.*

Synopsis and film information: *Brooklyn Castle* is the 2012 documentary produced and directed by Katie Dellamaggiore. It tells the stories of five members of the chess team at a below-the-poverty-line inner city junior high school that has won more national championships than any other in the country. The film follows the challenges these kids face in their personal lives as well as on the chessboard, and is as much about the sting of their losses as it is about the anticipation of their victories. Ironically, the biggest obstacle thrust upon them arises not from other competitors but from recessionary budget cuts to all the extracurricular activities at their school. *Brooklyn Castle* shows how these kids' dedication to chess magnifies their belief in what is possible for their lives. After all, if they can master the world's most difficult game, what can't they do?

Brooklyn Castle is driven by the compelling personalities of its characters: eleven year-old prodigy Justus is already one of America's highest rated young chess players, and yet he often chokes, stymied by the expectations of others and his uncompromising belief in his destiny; Rochelle has the potential to become the first African American female master in the history of chess, but she struggles to find the balance between chess and academic success; charismatic leader Pobo caters to the emotional needs of his teammates, often at the expense of his own playing; shy Alexis, second ranked in the school, sees chess as a way to get a better education and job to support his immigrant family; and Patrick, a sensitive beginner who is determined to use his modest goal of raising his chess ranking as a means to rise above his attention deficit hyperactivity disorder.

This documentary shows that despite the critical support from their chess teacher/coach Elizabeth Spiegel and chess coordinator John Galvin, as well as the support and encouragement from their parents, nothing would matter without the passion and time commitment the players bring to their study of the game. And while repeatedly winning is exhilarating, the team's victories go beyond a room full of trophies – through chess they learn patience and long-term planning, and the importance of analyzing the wrong or right decisions they make after the game. In essence, chess provides skills that will serve them well for the rest of their lives, regardless of what profession they choose.

For the students, chess is more than a game: it is a realm where they can transcend their reality and become kings and queens themselves. *Brooklyn Castle* celebrates the hard work and determination that fires these young people's pursuit of their dreams. This powerful documentary has won numerous film festival awards and was released theatrically in New York City.

Recommended for: cultural studies, humanities studies, economics classes, chess students, film/video students

Appropriate for: 6 - 12 grade

Study Ideas/Questions:

1. The film shows us that the “nerds” run the school at I.S. 318. How is this different or similar from the social ranking in your school?
2. One of the big themes in this film is disappointment, and how we deal with it. How have you dealt with disappointment in your own life?
3. It seems like women are not a big part of the chess world. Why do you think that might be?
4. Do you think that Rochelle will achieve her goal, and become the first African American female master? What obstacles might stand in her way? Are these obstacles you face in trying to achieve your own goals?
5. Justus suffers from the stress that comes from being in the spotlight. He feels that everyone expects greatness from him, and that he can't let anyone down by failing. How would you cope with that pressure? Have you ever experienced something like this?
6. Were you rooting for Pobo to be nominated as class president? Why or why not?
7. Do you think Pobo will be successful as class president? Why or why not?
8. What kind of friendships and communities emerge during the film? What do we learn about the role that family members of the chess team players play in the performances of individual members?
9. Patrick suffers with ADHD, yet he still manages to sit through long and concentration heavy chess games. What is it about the act of playing chess that makes this possible?
10. Do you agree with Ms. Vicary that, as our society becomes more faced-paced we need games like chess even more? Why or why not?
11. At one point in the film, the assistant principal Mr. Galvin discusses his “diamond” theory, and how he believes that by putting pressure on the kids he is ultimately making them more successful. Do you agree with this theory? Why or why not?
12. Why does Ms. Vicary put so much effort into teaching and coaching the kids? What do you think she gains from it? Have you ever had a teacher like this?

13. What techniques (camera angles, shot variety, sound design, music) does the filmmaker use to keep you engrossed in the stress and anxiety of the characters as they play?
14. Before you watched the documentary, what kinds of things did you associate with the game of chess? Why? Moreover, when you think about the kinds of people interested in chess, what kind of person do you first imagine?
15. Focusing on the individual students, what do you learn about their lives through the chess tournament activity? In other words, how does their chess playing relate to their everyday lives and future aspirations?
16. How does Justus respond to chess tournament pressure along with his high expectations for his performance?
17. How do the financial circumstances of Alexis' immigrant family affect his performance on the team as well as his educational plans for the future?
18. What do you think the future will be for the members of the team? How do you think being on a championship winning chess team has impacted their lives?
19. How does Justus respond to chess tournament pressure along with his high expectations for his performance?
20. Can you see yourself committing to an afterschool program or interest in the way these students have with chess?

Useful Links and Resources:

The official website for the film: watch trailers and learn more about the filmmakers and the chess players featured: **brooklyncastle.com**

This website hosts an online chess community and is the most visited chess-related website on the internet. Visitors to the site can play both live and correspondence style chess games. On the site, players are able to learn to play at any level, take part in discussion forums and watch chess events: **www.chess.com**

Information about Cinema/Chicago's Education Outreach Program: **cinemachicago.org/education**

*Schools who do not send in essay requirement will not be allowed to attend future Education Outreach Screenings.