

The genius of Gata Kamsky

By CHAMPAK CHATTERJI

I REMEMBER what Sugar Ray Leonard had said before his fight with Marvin Hagler for the middle-heavyweight boxing world title. Hagler was the legendary undefeated champion and had bludgeoned all his previous opponents into oblivion. Unfazed, Leonard had said that he would win the fight because no one expected him to. On the night of the fight, cool and mean, and against all odds, Leonard had proved himself right. In Gata Kamsky, perhaps, we have a Sugar Ray Leonard of the chess world, someone who will take away the title from Anatoly Karpov or Gari Kasparov or though it may be sacrilegious to mention it, maybe from both — because no one expects him to.

With the looks of an under-graduate in Harvard Yard, with his spectacles and coconut-shell hair-do, Kamsky at 20 has just become the youngest player in history to qualify for the finals of the World Chess Championship. He demolished V. Salov comprehensively 5½ — 1½ in the process, at Sanghinagar. Earlier, as the only player to make it to the semi-final rounds of both the FIDE and PCA cycle, Kamsky had ploughed his way through gladiators like Van Sterren, Nigel Short, Kramnik and Vishwanathan Anand. None had expected to do this; Kramnik, Anand and Salov were all higher rated players with better track records, but Kamsky succeeded and with impressive margins.

In the sporting world, where all is hoopla and hype, there has been precious little noise about Kamsky so far. When Bobby Fischer took on Larsen and Talmanov in the qualifying rounds for his World Championship clash with Spassky and demolished them 6-0, the Press went to town. Epithets of "genius" and "greatest ever" were freely bandied around. A statistician even went to the extent of comparing his achievement with that of a batsman scoring 800 runs in a Test Match! Kamsky may not be a Fischer, at least not yet, but his track record during the past two years is comparable. His ELO rating alone testifies to this, having climbed almost perpendicularly from the troughs of 2,500 to the dizzy heights of 2,700 plus and all this in the realms of grandmaster chess where as Miss Judith Polgar puts it "progress is glacial".

If we look at his opponents, Kamsky's record equals, if not outstrips Fischer, at his best. In 1994, Kamsky defeated Vishwanathan Anand four times in a row, which included two games of rapid-play chess, the former's forte. Earlier the formidable



Grand Master Gata Kamsky being congratulated by his second, Dzindzi Cashvili, after his victory at Sanghi Nagar on Sunday. — PTI.

Kramnik, whom Kasparov had christened his heir-apparent had also been taken apart. Kamsky's short work of Nigel Short was reminiscent of Kasparov's in the PCA World Championship. Seen cumulatively, the spectacular rise of the ELO curve and the cool demolition of top-grade opposition, surely entitles Kamsky to a place among the chess-greats.

What makes Kamsky tick? Though a significant factor could well be the "Leonard" syndrome — he has won because no one expected him to — that alone cannot explain everything. Kamsky has a remorseless capacity for hardwork, working away at openings and "ironing the wrinkles" as Alekhine once did against Capablanca. Equally important, perhaps, is his sense of the psychological offensive. This unnerves his opponents.

He chose to play the Marshall Attack against Anand at Sanghinagar — a topic on which Anand had just authored a book! In grandmaster chess, where pre-match preparations are critical, this must have shocked Anand and led to his downfall. I can still

recall the dark stubble on the usually dapper Anand as Kamsky ate into his store of nervous energy. There was the same hunted look on Salov's face, in their recent encounter, a similar falling away in sartorial standards. Towards the end, even Salov's coat was not put on properly!

Kamsky has also that rare ability of adjusting his style to the player he faces, something which Karpov also has and which is the hallmark of the true champion. He can be a perambulating box of fireworks with Kramnik in one game and fathom the depths of positional chess with Anand in the next.

On March 8, Kamsky squares off yet again with Anand in the PCA semi-final, this time to select a challenger for Chess King, Gari Kasparov. The second time around, Anand will be more careful and circumspect and everyone expects him to win. I would, however, keep my fingers crossed. Kamsky's father bothers me. Not because he is pugnacious or fractious, but because his name is Rustam and Rustam's son in legend is Sohrab. A mighty warrior.