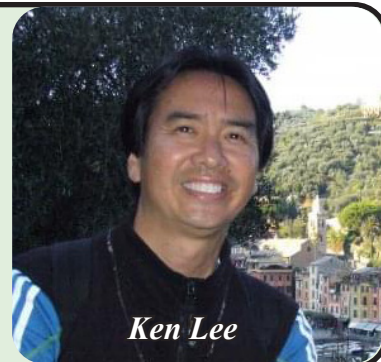


Interview With Attorney General Bob Ferguson

Ken Lee



Ken Lee

Attorney General Bob Ferguson has had a lifelong love of chess. He achieved a FIDE rating of 2320 and a US Chess rating of 2350 and was crowned Washington State Chess Champion in both 1984 and 1987.

I sat down with Bob Ferguson over Zoom to discuss chess, law and politics.

Ken Lee: When did you first start playing chess and what about the game inspired you?

Bob Ferguson: I was about nine when I asked for a chess set for Christmas.

I remember the first thing I did. I took one of the knights and I put it in the toaster to see what would happen! Fortunately, my chess improved from that early start.

I was really fortunate that, although my father didn't play chess, he had a real gift for what it took to feed my interests as a child.

My father worked at Boeing, and he quickly found out that the company had a chess club which was open to Boeing employees and their families.

My dad enrolled me in the chess club and that's how it started.

It was the Boeing Employee Chess Club that really taught me the fundamentals of chess and supported my early efforts.

I was the only kid playing. It was all adults, so they sort of took me under their wing. It was around 1974 or 1975 and kids weren't really playing chess that much like they do today.

Ken Lee: Did you have some early

coaches who were instrumental in your progress?

Bob Ferguson: There was a member of the club who was one of the stronger members of the club. He was an English gentleman named Angus Pitt.

As my first chess coach, he would come home, and we'd have a lesson. It was very casual back in those days.

I played in all the local tournaments I could compete in at a reasonably high level. Somewhere between 12 or 13 years of age, I would still work with Angus but then I also started working with John Donaldson.

John Donaldson was an International Master and had won the State Championship.

Ken Lee: Who else was influential in your chess development?

Bob Ferguson: I never was interested in chess puzzles or books.

I really enjoyed endgames and always felt, throughout my career, if I got to an endgame then I would be in good shape.

I'm not exactly sure where that came from, but I always felt that after 15 moves I could compete and get to the endgame.

I was heavily influenced by Yasser Seirawan. He was a local guy who became a grandmaster and a US Champion. I got to know him personally which was obviously huge for me as a kid.

Yasser played the English Opening

all the time and so I played the English Opening from the time I was 13 or 14 years old for many years.

Ken Lee: How has chess helped you in your legal and political profession?

Bob Ferguson: I often say that, outside of my family, chess is the most formative experience of my life.

I just don't think you can spend thousands of hours thinking about, dreaming about, and studying something, without it having a huge influence on your life, especially during the formative ages of a young person between nine and 20.

I'm sure my legal team rolls their eyes sometimes, but I often use chess metaphors in my job. I phrase it so that anyone, even if they don't know anything about chess, would understand it.

Here are some examples.

Being Objective

In chess and the law, you need to anticipate your moves correctly and if your opponent makes a move that you don't anticipate or you don't anticipate the rationale behind it, that's a big problem.

My job is to get inside my opponent's head and anticipate what's going on. To do that successfully one has to be very objective.

I've heard chess masters say after they've lost a game: "I lost my objectivity, and I got caught up in what I was doing."

I often say that my chess training taught me how to be objective. It's about concentrating on what's in front of you and forcing yourself to not just think about what your opponent might be doing but put yourself in their shoes.

That type of deep thinking is ideal training for the law.

I think that being objective about

"Outside of my family, chess is the most formative experience of my life."



*Bob Ferguson giving 17-board-Simul July 28, 2019.
Photo credit: Duane Polich.
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things is a strength of mine and I'm sure it came from chess.

Ken Lee: What else has chess taught you?

Bob Ferguson: Lawyers tend to be cautious by nature.

Taking Calculated Risks

Chess taught me about the importance of taking calculated risks.

If you're playing an opponent of equal strength, your readers know that White has a slight advantage.

There's often a moment in the game between players of equal strength, where you're faced with a choice of playing it safe or making a move that's going to change the nature of the game. I've trained myself to ask, "What's it going to take to sharpen my position?"

Sometimes we need to take a chance. I tell my staff: "Yes, I hear what you're saying that our odds of winning this case are not that good, but we can't win if we don't file."

I can't tell you how many cases we have won where the team thought, oh man, this is not going to end well.

My chess coaches taught me to take calculated risks.

I remember Angus Pitt talking to me after a big game.

I was playing against a kid at the National Elementary Championship, and I agreed to a draw in the final round.

I got a draw against the number one rated kid, and I remember Angus looking at the game afterwards and saying: "You should not have agreed to a draw. There's a lot more to play."

I was probably 12 years old, and it stuck with me all these years later.

Ken Lee: Any other examples of chess metaphors you use with your team?

Bob Ferguson: I give a talk every year to all the new attorneys in the office.

The Importance of Working as a Team

I talk about the importance of treating everybody in the office with equal respect. That's not just the lawyers; it's the entire staff.

In the game of chess, some people think of the queen as the most powerful piece or the king as the most important piece.

I tell them there's a phrase that *pawns are the soul of chess*.

Even though the pawns are the weakest piece on the board, every chess master understands that the structure of the pawns controls the safety of your king.

Ken Lee: Do you currently play chess?

Bob Ferguson: I have not played in a tournament in a long time.

I do play speed chess online by speed chess, 10 minutes per side. I like to do that in the evening right before the kids are getting ready for bed.

Ken Lee: What plans do you have for chess in the future?

Bob Ferguson: I thought that at some point in my life, especially once the kids go to college, I might have a bit more bandwidth. I do hope to return to tournament chess.

That may still be in the future, but I've often thought it would be fun to play during my retirement years.

I have zero doubt when I retire, I'll be playing in tournaments.

In some ways I look forward to it like when I was when I was younger.

I sort of feel now I could play and, in some ways, love it even more.

I'm not going to be a Grandmaster. I'm not going to be the US Champion.

But I feel like I could still be competitive. I think it might be, in a certain respect, even more enjoyable.



Bob Ferguson. Photo courtesy of AG Bob Ferguson's office.