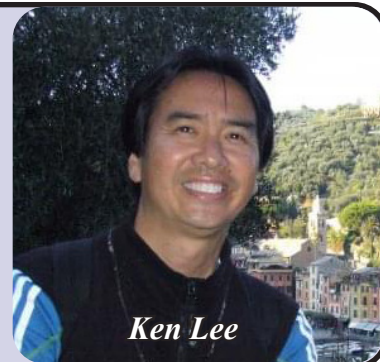


Interview With Alexandra Botez

Ken Lee



Ken Lee

Alexandra and Andrea Botez are among the most popular chess streamers in the world. Through their Twitch, YouTube and Facebook channels, they reach millions of chess fans around the world.

I recently had the opportunity to talk with Alexandra Botez to discuss chess, choosing your own path, and the future of chess.

Ken: When did you start playing chess?

Alexandra: I started playing chess when I was six. My dad was the one who taught me how to play.

He had grown up in Romania and his mom taught him how to play. My grandmother also plays chess, so it is a game that has been passed on through the generations in our family.

Ken: What is your connection with the Pacific Northwest?

Alexandra: We moved to Canada when I was four and then we moved back to Washington when I was 13.

Later, we moved to Portland, Oregon and that's where my family still lives. I spent my teen years playing a lot of chess in the PNW.

I am not taking any interviews right now because I don't have time. I made an exception for *Northwest Chess* because of my strong personal connection with the Pacific Northwest.

Northwest Chess is one of the magazines that I saw my dad reading and this is a community I care about.

Ken: How did you sustain yourself during those early years when there were a lot of challenges?

Alexandra: I actually think when you're a kid you don't feel the pressure. My dad would take me to tournaments,

and I would just try my best.

I didn't really like doing lessons on the computer. We would always find some Eastern European grandmaster and we'd have lessons over World Chess Network and Skype.

My dad would always push me to study and train, but I think since I had such good tournament results, I didn't feel much pressure. That early success also gave me confidence.

It was a lot more challenging when I started playing chess for myself. It starts getting difficult when you don't have anybody pushing you.

When I got into high school, I realized that the top universities take into account all four years when considering your application.

I really wanted to get a full ride scholarship and I saw chess as a means of doing that.

I remember when I was 15, I won the Kasparov Chess Foundation All Girls Nationals for girls 18 and under. I won a full ride scholarship to the University of Texas at Dallas (UTD).

But, by then, I had the realization that I didn't want to spend my entire life trying to get better at a board game.

At the same time, I found that chess teaches you to think through difficult things.

Ken: So, the correct question to ask yourself is what are the games you should be playing?

Alexandra: When I had that realization, I decided that I didn't want to go to UTD, and I would much rather get into a school that had the highest ceiling possible.

That's how I set my sights on Stanford which was my dream school.

Everybody applying to Stanford has perfect grades, great test scores, and good extracurriculars.

You really need ways to stand out. Chess was what tipped things in my favor.

When I was 16, I thought I could use social media to grow chess.

I started social media just to try to recruit students that I could teach online so that I could make some money.

Later, I got into Stanford and majored in International Relations.

By my senior year of college, I had 30,000 followers on my chess themed Facebook page, which seems like nothing today.

But back in those days, nobody was really working with chess on social media.

I got some criticism from people during those early days.

But the CEO of Chess.com noticed my Facebook page and he invited me to do commentary on chess.com.

I basically dove headfirst into streaming full time. At the start, it was just Twitch live streaming.

Now I am partnered with Chess.com and other sponsors.

"What I really respect about chess is that it teaches you how to work hard and how to think deeply. If you have those two things, you can apply them to anything and it's extremely powerful."

We are going to be moving into higher quality productions, which is something my sister Andrea and I are really passionate about.

We are concentrating on new types of storytelling because when you're a content creator you realize that what works one day is not going to work two months from now. You have to constantly reinvent yourself.

Ken: It must be a difficult life lesson to be able to weather the criticism and comments from the trolls on the internet.

Alexandra: It's challenging.

It's even more challenging when you're live on Twitch and you're getting constant feedback about yourself.

The only time negative comments really get to me is when they echo the voice in the back of my head.

I've come to realize that the people who are commenting on these things are not the people whose opinion I would trust on anything else in life.

They are commenting on Alexandra — the product — not Alexandra — the human being.

They'll never know, nor do I know, that they have the emotional depths to understand who I really am.

I want to just start working on content that when I look at it, I think wow, this was a good piece of content. I don't care if other people don't like me. I care that I like me.

Ken: Do you have a vision about the future direction of chess?

Alexandra: I think I can create new and innovative chess content that will make chess more mainstream.

We're trying to combine storytelling with chess in new ways.

Andrea and I are going to be playing two tournaments in March back-to-back.

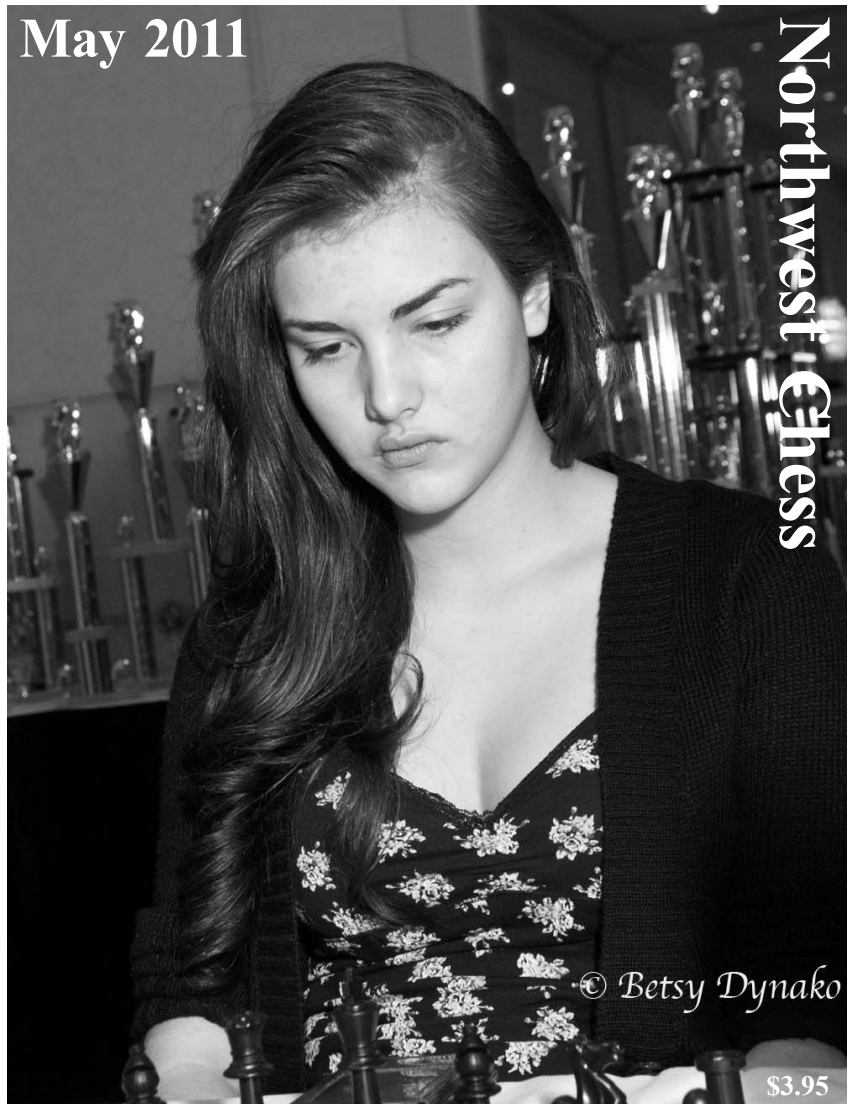
Later, we're going to launch our first new chess variant with a gaming studio.

It is the first chess idea I have seen over the last five years that I think has the potential to be a great game.

I think bringing a great game into the world, which is strategic, cerebral, fun, and social, is a good thing.

It's going to get more people interested in chess in general.

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*V. Alexandra Botez. Photo credit: Betsy Dynako.
Reprint of the cover of the May 2011 issue of Northwest Chess, Ralph Dubisch, editor.*

Ken: What's it like working with your younger sister, Andrea?

Alexandra: When I was a kid, I always loved producing videos and I would force my little sister to act in them.

While my sister was still in high school, I was doing Twitch full time. I started inviting her to stream and I thought she was really talented and creative.

We like working together, and I'm honestly surprised that we survived four years of living and working together.

We're super close. Andrea and I are best friends so we spend a lot of time

hanging out even outside of work and it's really nice to not have to do this alone.

Ken: Do you have some overall bits of advice for the young readers of *Northwest Chess* who are making choices about studying and competing in chess?

Alexandra: What I really respect about chess is that it teaches you how to work hard, and it teaches you how to think deeply. If you have those two things, you can apply them to anything and it's extremely powerful.

