

Interview With Bruce Pandolfini

Ken Lee



“Just because a computer can beat the best player in the world, doesn’t mean that interest in the game is going away.”

Let’s remember, chess is not an abstract, impersonal game. It’s a vibrant, human game.”

Bruce Pandolfini is a legend in the world of chess. Few individuals can claim to be a part of so many of the key inflection points in the history of chess. For over five decades, Pandolfini has touched the lives of millions of people around the world through his work as an author, coach, and film/tv consultant.

I had the opportunity to chat with Pandolfini from his apartment in New York via Zoom.

Ken: Bruce, do you see any particular patterns regarding the ebb and flow of the interest of chess over the decades?

Fischer vs Spassky

Pandolfini: Well, the Fischer-Spassky match in 1972 was probably the greatest spectacle in the history of chess.

I was working at the Strand Book Store in Manhattan, and I happened to meet a producer from WNET, a PBS affiliate. The station was assigned to cover the match.

The producer was buying a stack of chess books, and he started peppering me with questions about the game. I politely answered his questions.

He must have liked what I had to say, because the very next day he called me and asked me to be a TV commentator, assisting Shelby Lyman, for the Match of the Century.

Shelby was a strong chess master and one of the few chess coaches during those days earning a living at it.

I was only 24 years old at the time.

Even though I loved chess, I had absolutely NO experience doing commentary about chess or being on TV.

That serendipitous encounter turned out to be a defining moment in my life.

After the Fischer-Spassky match, I recall that membership at clubs such as the Marshall Chess Club and Manhattan Chess Club practically quadrupled.

But the surge in interest in chess was superficial. The frenzy centered around Fischer’s achievement and public attention. In the press, it was portrayed that Fischer was taking on the Soviet system, Henry Kissinger, and all that.

But it wasn’t as meaningful or long lasting because the excitement was based on Fischer and not the game of chess itself.

There’s no doubt that Fischer had a big impact on the game, but after he failed to defend his title against Karpov, interest in America surely waned.

Ken: What happened to those recordings of your commentary of those historic games from 1972?

Pandolfini: Unfortunately, almost all the footage was destroyed, mainly for insurance purposes. There are only bits and pieces here and there.

Scholastic Chess

I think a big boom in scholastic chess occurred after the release of Fred Waitzkin’s outstanding memoir in 1988, *Searching for Bobby Fischer*, and the subsequent release of the Paramount film in 1993.

You know, there always has been this trope that primarily old white men—possibly smoking cigars—played chess.

Well, *Searching for Bobby Fischer* shattered that myth and showed that not only kids were involved in chess, but, in fact, some of the best players in the world

were young people.

Searching for Bobby Fischer showed something else. That a kid could love chess and be entirely healthy in mind and body, even excelling at sports and athletics.

Josh Waitzkin, the central figure of the book and film, was exceptional at chess, and yet played all kinds of sports. Ben Kingsley portrayed me in the film. He did a very good job, but I’m a much better baseball player than he ever was.

Waitzkin went on to become a champion of Tui Shou (Pushing Hands), which is a discipline in Kung Fu.

The Queen’s Gambit

The Queen’s Gambit is another matter altogether.

I worked on the original manuscript as a consultant for Random House, starting in the summer of 1982.

I met with Walter Tevis, the novelist, and his editor, Anne Freedgood. They asked me to review the chess in the book. In that first meeting, I came up with the title, *The Queen’s Gambit*. I think it was the reason they hired me.

This book and film broke barriers because they highlighted something I knew all along. Specifically, that women could be just as competitive as men in chess.

The Queen’s Gambit premiered on Netflix in October 2020 during the COVID-19 pandemic.

We had no idea that so many people would be drawn to the series. I think it’s been streamed more than 65 million times, and it still continues to be a fan favorite.

It’s a great story, but also the actors played a huge part in the success of that series.



*Bruce Pandolfini (L) on the set of The Queen's Gambit with Anya Taylor-Joy.
Photo provided by Bruce Pandolfini.*

Anya Taylor-Joy was spectacular in portraying Beth Harmon.

As an actor portraying chess, you don't have to be great at the game. You just have to look like you are.

You can tell right away if someone has had significant experience playing chess simply by how assuredly they grab the pieces. I created the original 92 chess scenarios and was on set to teach the actors how to move the pieces like real chess players. Garry Kasparov joined the team early on, brought his great insight and brilliance to the project, and we were wonderfully backed up by two marvelous techs, Iepe Rubingh and John Paul Atkinson, both of whom should get a good deal more credit than they've been given.

The Rise of AI and the Internet

Certainly, the rise of AI and the internet have had a huge impact on chess.

These days, you can play chess any hour of the day and instantly find challenging opposition on websites like chess.com.

Also consequential has been the proliferation of chess school programs throughout the USA and the world. The number of new fans is staggering.

When you have all these youngsters learning the game, they are going to absorb ideas and methods of reasoning that should stay with them throughout their lives.

Ken: What about the state of chess books?

Pandolfini: When I was first getting into chess, it was said there were more books published on chess than all other games combined. If anything, even more chess books are being produced these days.

What's more, with the upsurge in self-publishing, the variety of chess books is growing even faster. With self-

publishing and digital books escalating, you can have all kinds of people with unique insights and creative ideas getting their work published.

I tell my students that with all these great tools to learn about chess, you now have excellent opportunities (paraphrasing Isaac Newton), to stand on "the shoulders of giants" by reading books about great historic games and studying classic works on chess strategy.

There are so many great chess books out there, but here's a list of some my favorites.

My 60 Memorable Games by Bobby Fischer

Great Moments in Chess by Fred Reinfeld

Self-Taught Chess by Milton Finkelstein

New Ideas in Chess by Larry Evans

Ken: What other key inflection points have there been in chess?

Pandolfini: One thing we shouldn't overlook was the major impact on chess interest ensuing from the Kasparov vs Deep Blue match of 1997. (Deep Blue was the IBM computer and program specifically designed to play chess.)

It was front page news.

Curiously, it was reported at the time, and wrongfully assumed, that computers had finally become better than the top human chess players. But that wasn't entirely true.

Kasparov did not play his best during the match. Even though he lost, he was still the superior player at that point. But the public didn't realize that.

Ken: What do you think about the rise of interest in chess among young people?

Pandolfini: These days, more young people are getting involved in chess than ever before, and the quality of play is ostensibly better than ever.

Think back to the late 1950s. Bobby Fischer received his Grandmaster title at the age of 15 years six months. That was an extraordinary thing, beating Boris Spassky's record by almost three years.

Since then, maybe fifty players have surpassed Fischer's record. Now what does that mean? Are they really better than Bobby Fischer?

Well, yes and no.

To be sure, the increase in ratings of the top players can't be dismissed. It must mean something.

But if you gave Fischer or Capablanca the tools we have today, I think their competitive drive would propel them to contend at even higher levels than they achieved in the past. In Capablanca's case, for example, he might not have given out so many draws summarily if he realized fifty plus years later his rating and ultimate standing in the chess community would be impacted by those thoughtless draws.

Ken: What do you think about the common tropes in film and TV of the chess community being eccentric or having poor social skills?

Pandolfini: I'm a chess consultant and so it's my job to be of service to the filmmakers. I try to do my job, being accurate on chess without interfering with their aesthetics.

We must keep in mind, the depicted art is cinema, not chess. Chess is just the leitmotif of a movie or tv show whose main theme may be about something else.

Of course, I don't want the producers of film to abuse the game of chess, placing pieces on idiotic squares and such. But for the most part, I've had the benefit of working with very intelligent movie and television people—artists who want to create the best productions possible at all levels.

That doesn't mean they always take my advice or give me credit. I've been involved in some productions where my advice was ignored and I didn't receive acknowledgement, such as my work on the 1995 film *Assassins*. They did, nonetheless, pay me a lot.

Of course, the sensational accounts about Bobby Fischer or Paul Morphy going mad have captured the public's imagination, but their stories are the exceptions. Chess is played by millions of people who are quite happy and functional, as most chess aficionados know.

Ken: What does it take for kids to be successful in chess?

Pandolfini: Well, I've said this before. There is no one quality that must stand out. But generally, for kids to be successful in chess, it would be great if they have two things going for them.

They would certainly profit from having both "the fighter instinct" and a real love for the game.

Studying chess is helpful, but playing it is more important. Kids should play and enjoy the experience fully.

I hate to see parents impose chess upon their kids, especially if they're doing it supposedly to help kids with their future school applications.

Parents who push their kids into chess because they think it will help them get into Harvard are instilling wrong values.

Ken: What is the current state of chess coaching?

Pandolfini: First, I'd like to distinguish between teaching and coaching. They are not the same. When you teach, you try to instill basic knowledge and skills. When you coach, you try to prepare and improve students for competition.

When I started, there weren't many chess teachers, and almost none of them were making a living. I became one of a handful of teachers in America making a living teaching and coaching chess.

Back in those days, the best chess teachers and coaches were largely intuitive.

Through the years, however, the leading American chess educators also became more scientific. They've adopted techniques from Russia and Europe. Of course, there are many more systematic and technical tools at our disposal now because of software and the internet.

So today the best chess coaches are the ones who are both artful and scientific.

I often recommend that, if you're studying chess just to learn more about it, and if you can afford it, try taking lessons from several different people.

You'll probably expand your horizons by getting different perspectives. It should be interesting to experience the little nuances and subtleties that distinguish each coach. If you can learn one or two things from a lesson, and have some fun doing it, then you've spent your time wisely.

Ken: What do you think about the rise of AI in chess specifically?

Pandolfini: People have been talking and debating the role of computers in chess for years. Some people have said that the ascendancy of AI, and the fact that some computers can beat Magnus Carlson, would dissuade the rest of us from playing chess.

That's just not the case. Before AI became a factor, could many chess players have beaten Kasparov or Fischer? I don't think so. But that didn't discourage most of us from playing.

Ken: How can our community of parents, coaches, and students contribute to the ongoing success of chess?

Pandolfini: If you love chess and want to be part of it and see it grow, just put it out there. Talk about chess wherever and whenever.

Form clubs. Make it part of school activities. Get it into the libraries. Show people that you love the game. You don't have to do much more than that.

Love chess and it will always love you back.