

Interview with Michael Omori

Ken Lee



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Michael Omori is a newly minted National Master chess player and native of Seattle.

He has been playing chess since he was five years old and is now applying his passions of chess and game theory to pursue his PhD in the field of AI and chess.

Ken: When did you first start playing chess?

Michael: I first started playing chess at Wedgwood elementary school when I was five. My dad taught me the basic chess moves and was my first coach.

Ken: When did you first enter the tournament world?

Michael: As a member of our school chess club, I was encouraged to enter chess tournaments right away.

Ken: What was most helpful to you in those early years?

Michael: I was fortunate to have several coaches through the years. My first official coach at Wedgwood was Fred Kleist of the Seattle Chess Club. I've also had the pleasure to work with David Roper and Georgi Orlov.

Ken: Did you find early in your career that your work ethic and the habits that you developed through chess influenced

your academics, sports or other interests?

Michael: I definitely found that learning how to improve at chess or actually any specific activity is useful in learning how to get better at other endeavors.

For example, I believe that I excelled in tennis because I learned how to learn to make incremental improvements. Chess teaches you to develop a passion for learning.

I eventually became tennis team captain in high school. I believe part of the reason for that was that I developed a curiosity towards life in general. I was always asking myself: "What can I do to get a little bit better?"

Ken: Did you continue to play chess in middle school and high school?

Michael: Yes, I continued to play chess and joined the chess club at Lakeside.

But I stopped playing chess when I got to university. I completely stopped for four years because my undergrad years were very busy at UW.

Ken: Now, you are in grad school at OSU. What are you studying?

Michael: I went back to school to pursue my PhD in artificial intelligence and machine learning. This year, I've been

doing research into games, specifically chess.

This has been a lot of fun because I have been playing chess all my life.

Ken: What is the emphasis of your research?

Michael: Way back in 1997, Deep Blue was created by IBM. That early AI was able to beat the world champion, Garry Kasparov.

There is plenty of research on building increasingly sophisticated chess engines but my research, I believe, is pursuing a more subtle goal: using AI to improve the chess playing experience for people!

Ken: What do you specifically mean by that?

Michael: I'm interested in AI that will play and adjust to each individual player's ability.

What I'm working on right now is the estimation of the chess player's skill in their game on a move-by-move basis. In other words, AI would be able to estimate how good each individual move is during a game for each individual position.

Ken: What would be one of the benefits of this kind of individualized AI system?



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Michael: First, this type of AI could develop a customizable system that can easily scaffold to each individual player.

Second, an AI system that can adjust and evaluate individual play, move by move, would be helpful in detecting any anomalies in fair play.

Ken: Do you have a title for your dissertation yet?

Michael: Haha, not yet, but I'll let you know when it comes out.

Ken: What are the potential applications for your work with AI beyond chess and game theory?

Michael: There are many historical examples of AI that start off being used in like games like chess and being applied to other areas of research.

For example, Alpha Zero used deep learning technique that was initially applied to chess.

Then the algorithms were used to work on other games such as Go, Shogi and StarCraft.

Eventually, the work was applied to biology that led to breakthroughs in protein folding, facial recognition and self-driving cars.

I would say there's a lot of good cross-pollination these days between different fields.

Ken: I understand that you recently reached 2200 US Chess to become a National Master.

Michael: Yes, I finally achieved it. When I was in high school, I almost achieved my NM rating but, honestly, I

wasn't that motivated by my ELO back then.

During Covid, I wound up getting back into chess and I saw a lot of companies doing remarkable work in chess. Obviously, companies like Chess.com and also Google were pouring a great deal of money into chess research.

So, I was thinking, perhaps I'm not good enough to make a living playing competitive chess, but I could apply my dual interests in chess and machine learning to create a path for myself.

I thought I should become a stronger player to help me with my new academic career path. I finally obtained my NM rating at the age of 29.

Ken: What do you think about the future of chess?

Michael: Well, I remember back when chess wasn't nearly as popular as it is today.

Now, I feel like everyone knows how to play chess and it's crazy. I think the popularity of chess is definitely a really good thing. There are now unique ways to make a living outside of competitive chess including streaming, publishing, journalism, programming and more.

There are amazing online courses like Chessable that have been great for spreading the knowledge of world class players like Magnus Carlsen.

Ken: Do you have any concerns about the current state of chess?

Michael: I know a lot of tournament

chess players have a strong focus on ratings and tournament results, which is fine, but I would say that for some, the pressure to perform might be too much.

Another problem with the influx of strong chess engines and AI is the prospect of cheating in tournaments. That makes me concerned about the state of fair play in chess. I certainly don't want to see a world where people are just using chess engines to outperform each other.

I feel the main focus should be on enjoying the game. Through chess, you can enjoy all the human aspects of the game. You can make friends, travel, and build good habits that will help you in all your endeavors.

“Chess teaches you to develop a passion for learning.”



Michael Omori at the 2024 World Open Chess Tournament. Photo credit: Meiling Cheng.

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