

# A Conversation With Coach Sloan Setiadikurnia

Ken Lee

**C**oach Sloan Setiadikurnia (pronounced Se-Ti-a-di-kur-ni-a) has been part of the Pacific Northwest chess community for several years.

Starting out as a high school tournament player at Issaquah High and then becoming a coach starting in 2014, Sloan recently opened a new location for the Grand Knights Chess Academy in Bellevue. <https://grandknightschess.com/>

I recently sat down with Coach Sloan to discuss chess, what motivates kids to play chess at various ages, and his vision for the future of chess.

**Ken:** When did you first start playing chess?

**Sloan:** By today's standards, I started rather late. While I had played a bit when I was a kid, my first real exposure to chess was playing in the tenth grade in high school.

**Ken:** Who was your first coach?

**Sloan:** My first chess mentor was Mr. Jay Radmer from Issaquah High. He was my chemistry teacher and also ran the chess club.

**Ken:** I understand that you eventually became captain of your high school team?

**Sloan:** Yes, while I was in high school, I managed to improve my NWSRS from 700 to about 1250 by my senior year. But becoming the chess team

captain required a great deal of additional determination on my part.

Because our team was so small, it was difficult for our school to really get a consistent team of five people to show up to matches every week.

However, even though our team was relatively inexperienced, it was really important to me that our team do our best.

We attempted to get our team to advance to the state tournament, and while unfortunately it didn't happen, it was something that kept me motivated.

**Ken:** Was it different back in 2009, to recruit high school students to the chess community?

**Sloan:** Yes, the chess community was different back then.

To be completely honest, the reason why I didn't start chess earlier in middle school was that chess was seen as an extremely geeky and nerdy thing to do.

I do I feel like I was affected by peer pressure.

But in high school, I started to care less about what other people thought. While I did participate in football and lacrosse, I found myself drawn more toward chess, and I began to love it.

**Ken:** Do you think high school students find chess difficult to learn vs younger kids?

**Sloan:** I think the reason why many older kids don't start playing chess is that while learning the basics is easy, competition often intimidates older kids.

A younger kid can play, eat some pizza, and have a great time.

But as kids reach adolescence they become more preoccupied with status, and sometimes they take losses very hard.

**Ken:** What do you think is the best way to encourage people to study and develop a sense of grit?

**Sloan:** The biggest growth and joy in chess occurs when a student has a balance of performance, experience, skill set, and a calm yet competitive mental state.

When you have those elements, a student can perform with confidence and sustain the inevitable ups and downs of the game.

**Ken:** Could you please explain how that influences your approach as a coach?

**Sloan:** I like to focus on the things that my students can control. When reviewing games, I avoid being too critical. It doesn't help to focus on mistakes on things that they don't know or concepts that they haven't learned.

So obviously my feedback for a beginner student is going to be vastly different than the feedback provided to an experienced chess tournament player.

**Ken:** What are your thoughts about the timing of game reviews?

**Sloan:** It depends on the student. Sometimes those discussions are best handled immediately after each round.

But sometimes, I find that the student's emotional state is extremely raw after a tournament, and that they benefit from having a discussion after they've had time for an emotional reset.

**Ken:** Did you continue to play chess during your university years?

**“The biggest growth and joy in chess occurs when a student has a balance of performance, experience, skill set, and a calm yet competitive mental state.”**

**Sloan:** Yes, I majored in chemical engineering at University of Southern California (USC).

I have to say that some of my biggest growth in chess occurred during my time at USC.

I was fortunate enough to work with IM Jack Peters, and he taught me what it was to be a chess professional.

By that I mean, Jack really inspired me about the value of storytelling in chess and how to convey the love of the game to my students.

**Ken:** How did chess continue to influence your other studies or other personal interests?

**Sloan:** I believe the biggest thing chess taught me was how to set goals and then create an action plan to achieve it.

Chess is a difficult game that cannot be mastered quickly.

**Ken:** Do you think that makes chess unique?

**Sloan:** For a lot of kids, especially in this era, they're used to instant gratification from online games.

To be successful in chess requires a variety of different skills and a particular type of mind set that is forged over a period of time.

**Ken:** What advice would you have given yourself as a 15-year-old kid playing chess for the first time?

**Sloan:** The biggest thing I wish I did differently was that I would have paid less attention to my ELO. Focusing on my ELO turned out to be a poor use of my time and energy.

I'll even take it even a step further. Sometimes, I wish the ELO rating didn't even exist at all. An over emphasis on ELO and tournament wins can be counterproductive to the type of growth mindset that I want for myself and my students.

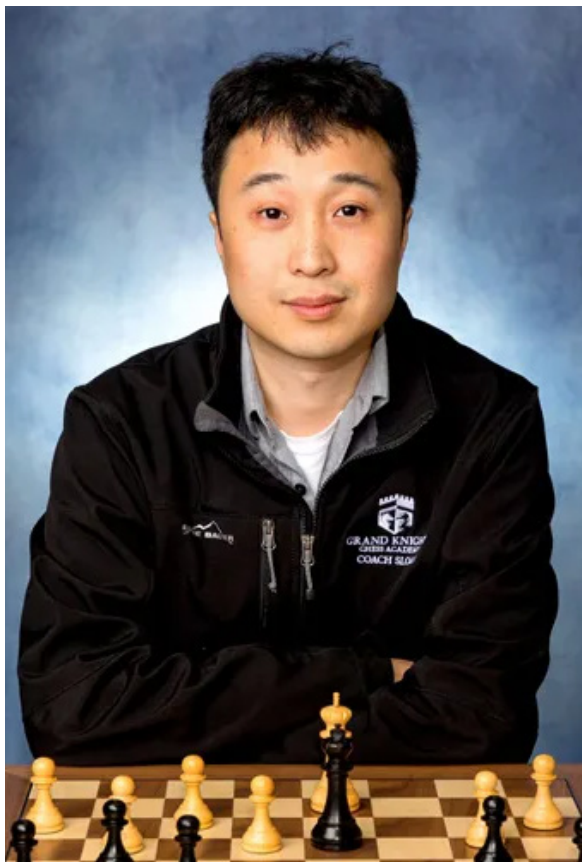
I started enjoying chess a lot more when I didn't care as much about those things. But I completely understand that for coaches, students, and even some parents, that the ELO is often the only way of defining performance and growth.

But chess is such a deep and complex game, that a person's progress cannot be measured by a single number alone.

**Ken:** What motivated you to play chess when you were a kid?

**Sloan:** When I first started playing chess, I did it so that I could win a trophy and maybe earn some money.

But later on, I realized why I really loved chess was for entirely different reasons. I enjoyed socializing with the people who love the game as much as I do.



*Sloan Setiadikurnia.  
Courtesy of Sloan Setiadikurnia.*

**Ken:** When did you decide to become a chess coach?

**Sloan:** In 2014, I was doing full time lab work, but I kept my hand in chess, by doing part-time coaching at Chess4Life.

I coached at Chess4Life from 2014 to the end of 2020.

Trust me, I had no aspirations of becoming a full-time chess coach, but Chess4Life offered me a full-time position in 2015.

**Ken:** What motivated you to start Grand Knights Chess Academy?

**Sloan:** There were two things that made me want to open my own chess academy.

First, I wanted to run more tournaments that were US Chess rated to normalize the rating system here in the Pacific Northwest.

Because the competition is so intense, I wanted to modify the system to allow beginners access to US Chess rated tournaments.

Second, I wanted to reach a larger number of students.

I had a good number of private chess students at the time, but the Grand Knights Academy gives me an opportunity to serve an even larger community.

I think students learn best when they're not only motivated by their parents or their coach, but by their peers as well.

**Ken:** When did the Grand Knights Chess Academy officially open?

**Sloan:** Technically we started in 2023, but we were only working with a few schools.

Then in 2024, we opened our first location in Bellevue.

We grew out of that space quickly, so in January 2025 we moved to our new larger space.

**Ken:** What is your vision or hope for the future of chess at your academy and the Pacific Northwest?

**Sloan:** My hope is that more people will start playing chess.

While today, the Pacific Northwest has the biggest elementary state championship in the entire county, I still think we can get even more schools involved.

**Ken:** And what are some great ways to motivate kids, particularly high school kids, to start playing chess?

**Sloan:** I think the best solution is to have other chess playing kids act as role models.

The kids, who are already playing chess, need to encourage their friends to participate and to always remember to have fun!