

A Conversation with Mani, FIDE Arbiter

Ken Lee

Manunthon (or Mani to her friends) Atikankhotchasee (MAH-noon-ton AH-tee-kahn-KHOT-cha-see) is one of the newer faces to the Pacific Northwest chess community.

The translation of her name gives us just a hint of what makes this young woman so remarkable.

In Thai, her name means “A person who finds deep joy in their homeland and carries a strength greater than that of the mighty elephant and lion.”

It’s hard to believe that someone who started learning chess at the age of 21 went onto to compete on the international chess stage with such success.

Meet Mani, a hyper-accelerated hero from Thailand whose journey is anything but ordinary.

Despite discovering chess relatively late, Mani earned many prestigious titles including WFM (Woman FIDE Master), FA (FIDE Arbiter), and FI (FIDE Instructor), and proudly represented Thailand in four Olympiads.

She went on to found her own chess school, where she taught over 200 students, including children with ADHD and autism, inspiring them through joyful and resilient learning.

For more than eight years, chess was her full-time profession until the pandemic led her into law, where she briefly worked as a lawyer. Now based in Seattle as a student, Mani continues to blend strategy, heart, and purpose into everything she does.

At the 2025 Washington Open, I had the opportunity to chat with Mani about fear, what makes a good Arbiter, and the value of solving puzzles throughout your life.

Ken: Mani, I understand that you started playing chess a bit later in life.

Mani: Yes, unlike many of the kids today who started when they were quite young, I started playing chess when I was 21 years old.

Ken: What motivated to you to start playing chess?

Mani: Free food!

Ken: Interesting! What do you mean by that?

Mani: I was already part of the Championship Air Pistol team at Thammasat University in Bangkok, Thailand.

We were a very strong team. But I heard that there was an opportunity to play on the chess team and that they provided free food to competitors.

Ken: The free food was enough to keep you motivated?

M a n i : Actually, I found out also that there were potential scholarships involved with chess, so I jumped at the chance to get involved. Law school is very expensive and so I had to find alternative ways to pay my tuition.

Ken. So how did you learn to play so quickly?

Mani: A friend taught me just seven days before the Olympiad chess tournament in Istanbul. I practiced and

joined the Thai National Team.

Ken Wow, you made the National Team after only one week of study?

Mani Well yes and no. I took sixth place, and they only took the top five members to the Olympiad.

The following year, I went on to the University Games and I became champion my first year.

Ken: Why do you think you progressed so quickly in chess?

Mani: Ever since I was young, I was highly driven and competitive. I think I took to chess so quickly because I was clever and I had a mix of fear and no fear.

Ken: What do you mean by that?

Mani When I was eight years old, I met a fortune teller with my brother. The fortune teller shocked our family when he told my brother that he was going to die in a train accident at the age of 15. He also told me that I would die in a car accident at the age of 25.

Unfortunately, the prediction about my brother was accurate. My brother did indeed perish in a train accident.

Ken: I’m so sorry. That is quite shocking. How did you react?

Mani: I was very upset about the loss of my brother. It also made me very aware of my own morality because I had to live my life for the next 17 years with this dark prophecy hanging over my head.

Ken: Clearly the thought of mortality shaped and informed your personality.

Mani: Yes. I was convinced that I was going to die at a very young age. So, I adopted a kind of a “no fear” mentality about everything. I would try and do crazy things because I figured that life was so short. I was determined to try everything.

When I was younger, I got into a lot of trouble.

“I think chess players develop a great ability to solve problems and puzzles. I want to encourage them to use that same capacity to work through and solve difficult problems, in their own life.”



Photo courtesy of Manunthon Atikankhotchasee.

But as I got older, I kept using that motivation to fuel my desire to be the best.

Ultimately, that's what propelled me to compete on the national Air Pistol team and eventually the national chess team of Thailand.

Ken: What happened after your 25th birthday when you realized that the fortune teller was wrong?

Mani: Well, one of the first things I did was I learned to drive a car! I figured since the prediction was wrong, I could start living a new kind of life.

Ken: Was it liberating for you?

Mani: Yes and no. After I passed 25 and I became a top chess player in

Thailand, I became a little bored. I felt, for a while, that I was getting lazy.

Ken: Is that how you changed your direction to become a FIDE Arbiter?

Mani: Not exactly. I became a FIDE Arbiter because of a unique opportunity that was presented to me.

A sponsor told me that I could participate in more tournaments if I learned to become an Arbiter. If I was an Arbiter, the tournament fees would be waived.

Ken: So, again money was a motivating factor?

Mani: Yes, but also my boyfriend at the time was an Arbiter and he seemed to enjoy that role a great deal.

Ken: How did you become a FIDE Arbiter so quickly?

Mani: I was a lucky to meet and work with FIDE Master and International Arbiter Peter Long from Malaysia. He was teaching a seminar in Thailand about how to become a FIDE Arbiter, and the organization needed a translator who understood chess.

Ken: So, you stepped forward with your "no fear" attitude?

Mani: Yes. When I think about it, that's one of the qualities that I think makes a great Arbiter.

You have to be fearless.

Ken: What do you specifically mean by that?

Mani: A great tournament is run with excellent time management. A well thought out and accurate start and end time makes a big difference in the quality of a tournament.

What I mean about being fearless is that you have to approach a tournament, big or small, with the attitude that you are going to get it done and that you are going to solve any problem that comes your way.

Ken: What other qualities do you think one needs to become a good Arbiter?

Mani: I think having a quick and agile mind is helpful. I also think that having a facility for numbers and logic are required.

Even though some people might think coming up with pairings is just mechanical, it also involves split second judgement as well. In our community, people understand the subtle nature of pairings and think of it as mix of science and art.

Ken: How did you connect with the Washington Chess Federation?

Mani: About two years ago, I began my studies in Global Business at the University of Washington.

That's when I entered my first tournament in Seattle. At the time, my English skills were rather limited, but I did make some connections early on.

Ken: When did the WCF realize who you were and your formidable credentials?

Mani: At my second tournament, I met Ani Barua. He found out that I was a WFM and that I worked as a FIDE Arbiter. I told him about the FIDE tournaments I worked at throughout Asia and Europe.

Ken: He must have felt like he struck gold.

Mani: Well the feeling was mutual.

Ani introduced me to National Master Josh Sinanan, President of the WCF and things progressed rather quickly.

Ken: You've worked at hundreds of tournaments and seen thousands of chess competitors. In your opinion, what makes the Pacific Northwest a unique community?

Mani: I lived in Norway for a time and the climate in the Pacific Northwest reminds me of Norway.

What I think makes the Pacific Northwest unique is how so many cultures from South Asia, Asia, Europe, Russia, and throughout the USA blend so effortlessly. It's a unique environment and I think the Pacific Northwest can take enormous pride in what they have accomplished.

It makes me smile when I see kids from different cultures playing, discussing chess, and getting along in such a cheerful manner.

Ken: Do you have some advice for chess players in general?

Mani: At one point, I've had as many as 200 chess students in Thailand. I've also seen thousands of competitors throughout the years.

My main advice is this.

Just get a little bit better every day to enjoy a career in chess.

If you are winning too much you are going to get bored. If you are losing too much, you are going to get frustrated. So just concentrate on the idea of small incremental growth every day.

Ken: I've noted that you worked with many students who have ADHD or who are on the Autism spectrum.

Can you tell me what specific benefits you have witnessed that chess provides to the neurodiverse community?

Mani: In Thailand, I've had the privilege of working with many neurodivergent children, some with very significant challenges, and seen them rise to become national players and even represent Thailand at the Chess Olympiad.

What I truly love is utilizing chess as a means to help neurodivergent children develop better social skills. The benefits have been so tangible that some parents have come to me in tears to thank me for my work.

Ken: What specific benefits did you note?

Mani: *Increased focus and a calm state of mind.* Every child sat still, quietly focusing through all seven rounds of a full-day chess tournament. For children with ADHD or autism, this is a remarkable sign and a promising first step in safe and structured social participation.

Increased friendships from every game interaction.

Parents often tell me that their child finds it easier to make friends at chess tournaments compared to the classroom. They build friendships with kids by comforting each other after a loss. They also cheer each other's wins and have even asked me to assist their opponents.

These small acts of kindness become profound steps in the cognitive and emotional development for neurodivergent children.

Ken: That's amazing. Any final thoughts to our chess community?

Mani: I think chess players develop a great ability to solve problems and puzzles. I want to encourage them to use that same skill to work through and solve difficult problems in their own life.

Ken: Can you expand on that idea?

Mani: If you think of life as a series of puzzles to be solved rather than a series of obstacles to overcome, I think it changes your mindset.

I think solving problems and puzzles becomes a joyful activity and can create real positivity and growth in human beings. And it's also good to remember the motto, "No Fear!"





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