

A Conversation With FIDE Master Aziz Degenbaev

Ken Lee

Aziz Degenbaev (deh-gehn-bah-yev) is one of the newer faces to the Pacific Northwest chess community.

Originally from Bishek, Kyrgyzstan, Aziz moved to Seattle in 2023. At just 19 years of age, Aziz established an immediate presence in the Pacific Northwest chess scene winning many of the top tournaments with style and precision.

I sat down with Aziz to discuss the transformational power of chess, the myth of fast improvement, and what motivates him to keep studying chess every day.

Ken: Nice to meet you, Aziz. When did you first start playing chess?

Aziz: I started playing chess when I was seven years old.

Ken: What motivated you to start playing?

Aziz: My mom had a friend whose son played chess and also played the Komuz, which is the national

instrument of my country. She wanted me to follow in his footsteps. So, I played chess and the Komuz for several years. The chess club was just a two-minute walk from my house.

Ken: Did you love the game immediately?

Aziz: Actually no. I hated it. I was kind of a soft kid, and for the first

three years of chess competition I never medaled. I wanted to quit several times, but my mother wouldn't let me.

Ken: What turned it around for you?

Aziz: At the age of ten I started winning, and I transformed from a kid who wanted desperately to quit to a person who wanted to compete and win all the time.

Ken: What was instrumental in helping you make that transition?

Aziz: Looking back, I am thankful that my parents kept pushing me. They encouraged me to read books, work with my chess coach and play chess every single day. Of course, another big motivating factor was that I wanted to see my mother smile.

Ken: Do your parents play chess?

Aziz: No, they don't play chess, but thankfully they pushed me out of my comfort zone.

Ken: What was your favorite chess book at the time?

Aziz: It's a famous Russian chess book called *My System* by Aron Nimzowitsch. It's an older classic chess book.

[Editor's note: My System was written in German by the Latvian-born Danish Grandmaster Aron Nimzowitsch.]

Ken: How else did you progress in chess during your middle school years?

Aziz: My first coach was Baktygul Tilenbaeva. I worked with her for five years. I know she believed in me because

she patiently encouraged me during those early years.

Ken: What other ways did you change and grow as a player?

Aziz: As I competed in more tournaments. I became more confident and developed a killer instinct.

Ken: What other changes did you see in yourself?

Aziz: As I got older, my stamina slowly increased. I could focus throughout an entire tournament. Endurance is critical during long matches, and it often makes the difference between winning and losing.

Ken: What were other key steps in your development as a chess player?

Aziz: I think it becomes a matter of choice. By the time I reached 12, I made a choice to increase my attention on chess. That is when I started working with my first private coach. Emil Saper helped me grow as a player.

Ken: How many hours were you studying chess at that time?

Aziz: At the age of 12, I was devoting about three hours of study per day. By the time I turned 18, I was studying up to eight hours a day.

Ken: How did your training schedule break down?

Aziz: On Mondays, I worked on chess puzzles. On Tuesdays, I switched to middle game analysis. Wednesdays were reserved for end game study. On weekends, I would play lots of games online. Back in 2018, there was a lot of emphasis on studying openings because it was the hot topic. Looking back, I probably wouldn't have spent that much time studying opening theory until later in my career.

Ken: How did you make the transition to Seattle?

***“Concentrate
on your own
individual
journey as a
chess player.”***

Aziz: I decided to come to the USA, and I enrolled at Seattle Central College with a major in Computer Science.

Ken: Was it easy for you to plug into the Seattle chess scene?

Aziz: Yes, I went to a tournament at the Seattle Chess Club within two weeks after I arrived. I didn't have a US Chess rating, and I managed to win all five rounds. I think I've only lost one game since I moved here two years ago.

Ken: Did you get noticed quickly once you arrived in Seattle?

Aziz: I think I got noticed right away when I told them that I was a FIDE-rated player. It's rather interesting that I can travel to almost any part of the world and get a chess game. I speak Russian, Kyrgyz, and English, but for me chess is the ultimate universal language.

Ken: Do you work with a coach now?

Aziz: No, I continue to study on my own. I base my self-studies on my weaknesses. I just look at my games and work at my own pace. For me, this is just a natural way for me to work on things.

Ken: What have you observed about the chess scene in the Pacific Northwest?

Aziz: The kids in the Pacific Northwest are interesting. They are used to playing stronger players and are quite fearless. At the Washington Open tournament, I was playing some very strong young players. I actually sensed that they were stronger than me. They certainly were not intimidated by me.

Ken: How did you prevail?

Aziz: I eventually won because of my experience and training.

Ken: What tips do you have for improving quickly?

Aziz: In my opinion, you can't improve quickly. You have to train every day. You have to be passionate about chess. I tell players not to be afraid of losing. You must have the willingness to learn from your losses.

Ken: Do you have a vision for yourself of where you want to live and play in the future?

Aziz: At this point, I want to achieve my IM (International Master) title. I also want to continue to grow as a chess player and join a strong university chess team. My short list would include Webster University, St Louis University, and the University of Texas Rio Grande Valley.

Ken: Do you have experience of playing on a chess team?

Aziz: Yes, I played on the Olympiad team for Kyrgyzstan in 2022. I achieved my main goal and played on board five. I didn't study and prepare enough in Chennai. I didn't play well during the actual Olympiad, and I was disappointed with my performance.

Ken: What did you learn from that experience?

Aziz: I learned that you have to change your mindset when you play team chess. You have to review all the games that are played and think about the goals of the team rather than focus on individual goals. It was a humbling experience.



Ken: How do you recover after a tough loss in chess?

Aziz: For me, I like to listen to music. It helps me get rid of my disappointment.

Ken: Any final bits of advice for chess players?

Aziz: It's important to remember to concentrate on your own individual journey as a chess player. It's not good to obsess about other players. That is their journey. While it's great to have goals and to track your progress, constant comparison to others will lead to frustration and disappointment.

Ken: I think your mother continues to be proud of you and will definitely smile when she reads this article!

Aziz: I think this is true. Thank you.



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