

A Conversation With NM Joshua Sinanan

Ken Lee

Ken: I understand that you began your chess journey in a unique way.

Josh: Although I learned to play chess at around seven years of age, I didn't start playing chess seriously until high school.

Ken: How did you start?

Josh: I was a martial artist during my early years. I obtained my third-degree black belt in Tae Kwon Do at 14 years of age.

When I asked to test for my fourth degree black belt, my sensei told me that I would have to wait until I was 18.

Ken: That's interesting. What did you do?

Josh: Well, I wasn't a very patient kid, so I decided to quit martial arts and redirect my focus to other things. Those turned out to be tennis and chess.

I joined the Edmonds-Woodway High School chess team my freshman year.

Ken: Compared to many kids today, that's a rather late start. What was it about that chess that drew you to the game?

Josh: I always liked patterns and math, so chess was a natural fit for me. Also, chess filled the competitive void from leaving martial arts. Instead of beating opponents on the mat, I learned to defeat opponents over the board.

Ken: How would you describe your path in chess during your high school years?

Josh: During my freshman year, I was on the junior varsity team and played on boards six to ten.

By my sophomore year, I moved up to the varsity team and I was one of the top five players in the state.

Ken: That's remarkable. What do you think contributed to your rapid ascent in chess?

Josh: I think the primary reason I progressed so quickly was that I simply loved the game.

If you really love something, then the hard work required to achieve your goals doesn't feel like work at all. For me, it became a healthy obsession.

Secondly, I had the ability to self-study, which was facilitated by the technology that was emerging.

Using the Internet Chess Club, I could study chess anytime I wanted to.

Finally, I also benefited from having an excellent mentor in chess.

Ken: Who was your mentor at that time?

Josh: The player that took me under his wing was JP Sarausad. In high school he was about a 1900-level player and one of the top players in the state.

I still keep in touch with him, and we've remained friends.

Ken: What else did you do to promote your high school chess team?

Josh: A simple strategy for us to recruit players was to tell students that they get to play, hang out with friends,

and travel to tournaments. As I mentioned before, if you show people how fun chess can be and tell them how much you love it, people will respond.

Ken: Did you play a lot of chess during your time at university?

Josh: I attended Harvey Mudd and majored in engineering. But my university chess experience was limited because there just wasn't a large pool of strong players.

Ken: What did you ultimately decide to do?

Josh: I wasn't very passionate about engineering, and I realized midway through my senior year that I didn't want to pursue that path.

Ken: So, what was your next move?

Josh: I reflected for a few months on what I really wanted to do with my life. I found chess is my passion, so I should lean into that.

My first job was working as a chess coach with WGM Elena Donaldson at Chess Star Academy in 2008.

About four years later, I partnered with IM Georgi Orlov.

We worked together through the Orlov Chess Academy. Even though I have since taken on many other responsibilities

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as a coach, TD and President of the Washington Chess Federation, I still help run the Orlov Chess Academy to this day.

Ken: Is there something significantly different about the way you teach kids chess in the past vs now?

Josh: I think it's a question of attention span and the emergence of technology.

It's no longer the case that you can expect kids to play chess quietly and pay attention to a coach in front of a classroom with a demo board.

Today's kids just don't relate to that style of presentation. It's important for coaches to learn to incorporate technology into their lessons and utilize smart boards and projectors.

Ken: How did you get involved with the Washington Chess Federation?

Josh: In 2008 while on a family trip to Maryland, I got a call from Elston Cloy, who was attending the WCF annual membership meeting at the Washington Open. They were electing a new set of officers, and he said they need someone to run for vice president.

Ken: Interesting. So, it kind of happened by circumstance?

Josh: Well, the opportunity unfolded at the right time. In 2010, the Washington Chess Federation eventually asked me to be President, and I've been serving as President of the organization ever since.

Back in 2010, we were doing about half the tournament events that we are doing today.

Ken: What do you think are the three primary factors that contributed to the boom in chess in the Pacific Northwest?

Josh: First, I think a lot of it has to do with the people in our community.

People don't realize sometimes how unique our market is for chess. The players, coaches and parents are easy to work with.

When players and parents understand how things are run, they are supportive, and it makes things easier to operate smoothly.

Second, I think the culture of chess in the PNW is baked into our DNA here. Entities like Chess4Life, Orlov Chess Academy and the Seattle Chess Club have been around for years.

We don't have to sell the benefits of chess to our community.

If I could take a moment, I also want to acknowledge the parents in our community.

It takes a special level of commitment to be a chess family. I've become friends with many chess parents and it's amazing to me how dedicated and connected they are with their kids and the general chess community.

The third and final factor, which I think explains the spectacular growth in chess in the PNW, is our relative geographic isolation.

Ken: What do you mean by that?

Josh: We have our own unique niche market here. The local pool of talent is quite strong and when you play and compete against a variety of strong players, you are going to get better.

Ken: What level of chess rating do you think you need to achieve to be a successful chess coach or tournament director?

Josh: When I first started coaching chess, I believed that having a title was really important. So, I worked very hard and got my National Master title in 2007.

Ken: What did that require?

Josh: I had to travel out of state to compete in chess tournaments. It required a lot of time, money and dedication.

But now, I don't think being a Master is a prerequisite for creating your own lane in the chess world.

Ken: Why is that?

Josh: These days, people can express themselves in so many different ways in the world of chess.

There is content creation, publishing, AI development, curriculum development and more.

With regards to being a chess coach, I believe the single most important factor in being a good coach is having excellent people skills. A good coach needs to learn to communicate clearly with their

specific target audience.

A lot of the higher-rated players are not able to take complex ideas and communicate them to their students in a simple way. You have to break things down to meet the needs of each individual student.

Ken: What specific advice do you have for our Pacific Northwest players to continue growing in chess?

Josh: If feasible, I encourage my students to travel out of state for chess tournaments.

Ken: What are the benefits of playing in other communities?

Josh: When our players play in different markets, they are immediately exposed to different styles of play.

For example, in Canada you'll see more Slav Defenses and King's Indians. In my opinion, the players from the United States have a broad breadth of knowledge of the game but it doesn't go that deep.

In Europe, they have a narrower repertoire, but their knowledge goes much deeper.

While it's not for everyone, I think planning a trip around a chess tournament can be a great idea.

It supports the passion, exposes players to different styles of play and, of course, is a lot of fun.

That being said, I think it's important for families to incorporate some free time into their trips, so that they are not sitting at the chess board for 99% of their time.

Ken: What other benefits are there of travelling out of our area to compete in chess tournaments?

Josh: For our more competitive

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players, they have noticed that when they leave Pacific Northwest it's lot easier to gain ELO in their USCF ratings.

Ken: Why is that?

Josh: We have some rating deflation here because of our NWSRS rating system. The kids play at a level much higher than what their USCF ELO might indicate since most of their early games were NWSRS only. Things are changing now with far more USCF-rated tournaments in our area.

Also playing in other out-of-state tournaments helps players build resilience.

Ken: How so?

Josh: As players keep competing in more tournaments, particularly in varied settings, they are strengthening their grit and resiliency.

Ken: What recommendations do you have for players to improve their game through self-study?

Josh: I think it's important to do what you like to do in chess. Find the thing that you like to study the most whether it's tactics or opening theory and focus on that.

Also, I think the key is to pursue "active learning."

Ken: What do you mean by that?

Josh: Watching YouTube videos is not active. A video provides good information, but I don't think it engages the student in a way that makes learning engaging and long lasting.

A far better choice would be working on puzzles or reading some classic chess books.

When you combine something that you love with an active learning mode, that's a powerful combination.

There are many studies that support the notion of reading as being an active learning methodology.

If a player is motivated and reads books with the games of Capablanca, Kasparov, Tal and Karpov, to name a few, there are definitely going to be some great benefits.

Ken: Any final thoughts for all the players, coaches and parents in the chess community?

Josh: I've been enjoying your articles for several months now and I

think I've come up with something that I'd like to end with. It encapsulates how I think this mix of love, active learning and resiliency are the essence of chess.

"Every time you play a game of chess, you become a better person."

Ken: Check and mate. Thank you for your time.



Josh Sinanan at the 2024 Washington Open. Photo Credit: Meiling Cheng.