

A Conversation With Valentin Razmov

*Being intentional about who you are,
what you do, and how you contribute*

Ken Lee

Valentin Razmov is a chess coach who helps aspiring players to reach advanced levels. His students (both youth and adults) have won awards at a number of regional competitions. Valentin himself returned to active tournament play in 2020, many years after being trained to expert level as a youth in Eastern Europe. He is a board member and tournament coordinator of the Washington Chess Federation. Valentin regularly contributes to *Northwest Chess* magazine and is also the creator of puzzle competitions alongside the annual Washington Open and Washington Class chess events. He can be reached at VRazmov@gmail.com.

Meet the ultimate hyphenate in the world of chess—a chess coach, an active player, a chess parent, and a tournament organizer. I sat down with Valentin Razmov for a conversation about his intentionality in working within the chess community; how chess players can experience the game via different lenses; and what he described as a beautiful tapestry of individual chess journeys.

Ken: Good afternoon, Valentin. May I ask about your beginnings in life and in chess?

Valentin: I am originally from the Eastern European country of Bulgaria. I was first exposed to chess at home around the age of six, playing with my older brother and my dad. We played regularly in those first years. But once I started to outplay my brother often, he decided to take me to a local chess club where I could study more seriously.

Ken: How old were you at that time?

Valentin: At that time, I was ten. I would go to the chess club three times a week after school and also participate in tournaments. I was actively and regularly involved, though by today's standards the pace was much slower.

Ken: What do you mean by that?

Valentin: Kids in the PNW today can participate in tournaments throughout the year. When I was a youth, I played in about 15 tournaments in the span of four years—as many as were available in my region and appropriate for my level.

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

Valentin: During high school and for the following 15 years I shifted my attention more toward high-level mathematics and then to computer science. The emergence of online chess during and after my graduate school years reignited my interest in the game.

Ken: Where were you located when you started getting back into chess? And when did you move to Seattle?

Valentin: In 1998 I came to the United States to pursue graduate studies in computer science and engineering. That's when I arrived in Seattle (and the University of Washington).

Ken: Do you have clear memories of the chess scene in Seattle at that time?

Valentin: I resumed playing chess alongside colleagues from the Computer Science department. Several faculty, students, and guests regularly gathered

on Friday afternoons to relax and connect over bughouse and blitz.

Over the years, I came to realize that many people in the sciences, math, and music often gravitate towards chess.

Ken: Let's fast forward to the present; I know that your son Gabriel (15) and daughter Siana (8) are very much involved in the chess world too. Did their involvement in chess happen organically or was it more intentional and purposeful on your part?

Valentin: I would say it was a little bit of both. I had just (re)started playing chess (online) more regularly when Gabriel was born. When he was two, he learned to move the pieces. He wasn't playing games yet but watched me play and thus developed an interest.

Unrelated to chess, I had decided to work with Gabriel on his intellectual development in an intentional manner.

Ken: What did that entail?

Valentin: While I hadn't yet conceived the idea that it would be in the form of home schooling, that's how it unfolded. Gabriel attended a small private school (PreK-1), quickly picking up English through his daily interactions.

As his intellectual skills developed at a rapid pace in multiple dimensions, the idea of accelerating his schooling (for the following three years) came naturally. This eventually included chess studies in addition to academics.

Ken: What tools were helpful to you at the time?

Valentin: As a teacher by calling, I found it both easy and exciting to piece together an academic home study program based on advanced materials and my own sense of Gabriel's interest and level in different subject areas. The resulting growth was fast, and the depth was well beyond his age. This is, frankly, to be expected for a home-schooled kid who receives intentional support. I hope other parents consider home schooling seriously for the many benefits that this method offers.

For chess, I started taking Gabriel to a local chess club led by an inspiring coach (Ray Easterday, of Orangutan Chess Academy). Tournament after tournament marked solid growth for him. I credit this in part to the coach, in part to Gabriel's inner drive to improve, and in part to the excellent study materials we used, which he devoured faster than I could keep up.

I admire those ChessKid videos—all high quality (in my view, better than most YouTube series), all thoughtfully building a student's chess skills to levels of 1600 USCF and beyond.

Over time, Gabriel received invaluable further training by IM Georgi Orlov and GM Alex Yermolinsky (both through Orlov Chess Academy).

Ken: Was it natural for Siana, being the younger sister, to want to follow in her big brother's footsteps?

Valentin: Yes. In our family the kids like many things that Mom and Dad enjoy too, and they also share activities with each other. This has brought great joy (and relief) to me. It means that we can all engage in seriously meaningful activities as the kids are growing up, not after. We share good books, watch and discuss thoughtful movies together, travel to experience new cultures, take walks, play badminton, and, of course, play chess.

Ken: You're very thoughtful and have a lot of intentionality around education in your family. Do you purposely adjust when switching between roles as a father, a coach, and a player?

Valentin: Ah, you'll need to also add a fourth lane—a chess event organizer!

Yes, indeed, I see my roles as a father, a coach, a player, and an organizer combining in an organic way.

Ken: Can you give me an example?

Valentin: For the past few years, I've been putting together puzzle competitions alongside several annual Washington Chess Federation events. As an organizer, I want to create events that are stimulating and rewarding to a range of participants of different ages, experiences, and skill levels.

As a dad, I wish to demonstrate how our dedication can lead to good quality, and to emphasize how one can make unique and valuable contributions (e.g., most puzzles come from my own analyses or games). As a player, I want to experience the progressive depth of understanding that one can reach in tackling puzzles of varying difficulty (from beginner to master level). As a coach, I find myself thinking about the instructional value and the balance within the entire puzzle set I create.

So, yes, I am quite deliberate about my planning and execution. In preparing a puzzle competition event, I usually go through several passes of progressive refinement—to make sure that things would work well across all aspects.

Ken: Are there times and places in your children's development, either by age or experience, where you believe it would be beneficial for them to work with an outside coach?

Valentin: Both of them have worked, and still work, with outside coaches, at specific times and for specific purposes. While I personally feel qualified to coach my kids, there's a definite value in them experiencing an outside perspective that complements and reaffirms what they may hear from me or read in chess books. As they continue their growth, I will seek out more opportunities to further their development with the appropriate help of outside coaches and other resources.

Useful learning experiences can differ greatly depending on age, skill level, and

personal preferences. For example, Siana gets stimulated by interactions with kids around her age, so we take her to many chess tournaments, in addition to weekly meetups with chess playing friends, as a way of complementing her rigorous at-home training. Gabriel, in turn, also thrives on interactions with chess peers, but at his level (nearing Expert) the necessary depth must be served by carefully selected tournaments and high-level training materials.

Ken: What methods of chess instruction from Bulgaria were different from those used in the USA?

Valentin: Being historically part of the Eastern European bloc, Bulgaria was naturally influenced by Russian traditions in many aspects of life. For the case of chess education, this means first studying endgames in some depth, then moving on to typical middlegame patterns, and eventually learning some opening theory. All along, there's a strong emphasis on proper technique and excellence through repetition.

In the modern Western world, I see much emphasis on studying openings in great nuances—much before a player acquires a solid grasp of middlegames or endgames. As a result, one often observes a steady decline in play quality as a game progresses.

As a coach, I strive to teach students to carefully think through and calculate during all phases of a game, not being overly reliant on memorized scenarios.

Ken: Could you expand on that idea?

Valentin: I have noticed how some young players don't progress much in chess, because they get into the addictive habit of learning tricky opening moves that may yield quick wins (against unsuspecting opponents) and thus bring instant gratification. We often call this "trap chess."

Ken: What do you mean by that?

"While for most of us, chess will not be a profession; I see it as an opportunity to learn to be better human beings."

Valentin: Trap chess is a style of play where one chooses moves, often of known inferior quality, primarily to provoke a blunder by the opponent.

But there is no long-term value in playing this way. While it occasionally brings some predictable and pleasant results, it discourages growth! The sweet pull of repeated easy victories leads to a bog of stagnation. I have observed juniors winning quick games by exploiting opening traps, but remaining rated below 1000 for several years, while their peers who practice principled chess outstrip them by hundreds of rating points in that time!

As a coach I explicitly forbid my kids—and discourage my students—to play “trap chess” (or play quickly when they have plenty of time on the clock). In principle, we do not seek easy or quick wins. Instead, we aim for meaningful skill growth over time and are ready for the effortful study that this requires.

The “old-school” practice of being prudent and deliberate in calculation and pacing throughout a game has been time tested and proven advantageous *in the long run* over alternatives.

Ken: Do you think that there is a vast difference in the way chess players perceive themselves around the world?

Valentin: While I do not know how this differs between cultures, I have observed many chess players identifying as a mix of three archetypes, with one being expressed predominantly in each individual. Chess is commonly seen as a combination of sport, science, and art.

A sports person thrives on competition. In their personality and style of play there is heavy emphasis on winning (even at the expense of accuracy or elegance). Those who see chess as a

war game are likely viewing it largely from such a sporting perspective.

A scientist, in contrast, is a diligent and deliberate problem solver. They like to calculate, and they enjoy the process of untangling difficult conundrums (sometimes even at the expense of practicality). For such a player, a game is an object worth studying deeply.

An artist greatly enjoys the process of engaging in “a dance” with their opponent. Both sides participate in creating something beautiful and unique in real time. After a game ends, they look at it as a piece of artwork. The end result is often not as important to an artist; they are instead thriving on the creative process and the harmony they seek as part of it.

While I personally identify more with the artist and the scientist, I’m not suggesting that any one of these archetypes is superior to the others. They are simply what makes you tick.

Still, it is highly instructive for people to be consciously aware of what type of chess player they tend to be, and to appreciate the potential benefits of adopting (or switching to) other chess playing modes—either for training or for tournament purposes.

Ultimately, chess as a game allows each of us to experience and express many different facets of ourselves.

Ken: I think the outside world often sees a very one-dimensional aspect of chess. To them it can feel foreign and intimidating. In my *Northwest Chess* magazine interviews, I try to bring out the multi-dimensional aspects of chess.

Valentin: You are doing the chess community a real service with your work. What I really appreciate in your articles is how they probe different perspectives

related to the game.

Although we are a friendly chess community, we don’t get together often in a room to share how we think and feel. So, we don’t know much about each other, and your work fills a void.

You are helping us to foster mutual understanding within our chess community. Your articles provide raw materials for us to become better chess parents, chess coaches, and chess event organizers. Thank you for doing that!

Ken: What is your vision for the future of chess in the PNW?

Valentin: Over the past five years with the Washington Chess Federation (WCF), I have enjoyed collaborating with our team to gradually improve the quality of local and regional tournaments. We strive to make them more diverse, reliable, efficient, and ultimately more rewarding for many. This work is ongoing.

It involves encouraging wider audiences to participate. It also means running tournaments with fewer or no glitches. Finally, it is about offering value to everyone, no matter their skill level, age, gender, or goals.

Ken: How do you plan to achieve that?

Valentin: WCF has been adding chess events in new locations; having more FIDE-rated events; offering new types of events (e.g., Casablanca chess, Chess960, hand-and-brain chess); encouraging tournament directors to learn from each other; significantly broadening award categories (so that more players feel acknowledged); etc.

We’ve also started adding new sections (e.g., for lower-rated players) to a number of premier tournaments. Both scholastic players and adults coming to



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the game (or coming back after a hiatus) now have more opportunities.

For the Washington Open, the Washington Class, and the Washington State Championship, we now have sections to specifically cater to newer players—where previously they would have had no option or would have had to swim in deep waters against seasoned opponents from the very start. We see real interest in such an expansion of sections, as gauged by their respectable size.

Likewise with the side events that WCF organizes. Years ago, there used to be only a couple of side events at the Washington Open and the Washington Class. Nowadays we feature many more (e.g., puzzles, blitz, bullet, bughouse, chess960, novice/unrated, etc.), and many of those attract a crowd.

Ken: Anything else you'd like to see in the world of chess?

Valentin: I've been thinking about this, and I see your articles as supporting the big idea of bringing people together in our community in more meaningful ways. Like you, I look forward to us continuing to discover how each person

can contribute to a better community.

Your contribution is integral to this mission, because you know how to build bridges between people and how to weave strands of individual stories into a beautiful interconnected tapestry.

While for most of us chess will not be a profession, I see it as an opportunity to learn to be better human beings.

We can all learn to treat each other with respect no matter the result of a game. We can appreciate what each person does and where they come from. We can be thoughtful about what we do and how we make our contributions.

I'd like to conclude by thanking the many individuals in our chess community who have helped us get to where we are and where we want to be.

Some of my heroes, from whom I've been learning much along my path, are:

- Josh Sinanan – always being the voice of openness, reason, and balance;

- Siva Sankrithi – helping to connect many of us behind the scenes, and acting with patience and tolerance;



Valentin Razmov.

Photo courtesy of Valentin Razmov.

- Meiling Cheng – openly embracing who we are, without judgment, and selflessly contributing everywhere;

- Dwight Barber – pointing the way of the wise, and guiding us toward the next level.

News Flash:

Bertrand Wan becomes National Master!

By Josh Sinanan

Congratulations to Bertrand Wan of Redmond, Washington, who recently became Washington State's newest National Master! Bertrand achieved a US Chess rating of 2205 as a result of winning the 2025 King County Open with a perfect 5.0/5 score followed by winning two more games at the recent SCC Pumpkin Spice tournament.

Bertrand defeated three National Masters—Vidip Kona (2206), Nikash Vemparala (2245), and Rishabh Chinni (2196)—on his way to winning the Inaugural King County Open, hosted by the Washington Chess Federation September 27-28, 2025 in Bellevue.

Bertrand continued his amazing streak with two more wins against Pratik Thorwe (1983) and Pavel Trochtchanovitch (2009) at the SCC Pumpkin Spice Friday Night tournament, hosted by the Seattle Chess Club October 3-24, 2025 in Seattle.