

A Conversation With National Tournament Director And FIDE Arbiter Jacob Mayer

Ken Lee

I sat down with Jacob Mayer, a long-time player, coach, and tournament director, to discuss how chess can train your mind for endurance and the unique ways that chess can impact your career and life.

Ken: When did you first start playing chess?

Jacob: I started playing in kindergarten at the Evergreen School. Although I transferred schools shortly after, I made friends in chess clubs wherever I went. I took to the game right away and it's been a part of my life ever since.

Ken: What was your elementary school chess journey like?

Jacob: Two of my teammates and friends at Wedgwood elementary were Michael Omori, now a National Master, and Matthew Yang. They were both top players for our grade every year. But more than that, they were my friends on and off the chess board. I learned a lot from them.

Ken: Who was your coach at that time?

Jacob: I didn't have a private coach but was fortunate enough to learn from many very talented coaches. FM Curt Collyer (former Washington State Champion) and Fred Kleist coached my elementary school. I also got to learn from many other master coaches such as NM Matt Fleury, FM's Bill Schill and David Roper, IM Georgi Orlov, former US Women's Champion Elena Donaldson, and many more.

But I also attribute a lot of my learning to my friends. I learned a lot from Michael and Matthew and without them I

likely wouldn't have continued. Having strong friends and coaches propelled my chess journey all the way through grade school.

Eventually I went to Roosevelt High School and re-started the chess team there too.

Ken: What was your high school chess team experience?

Jacob: I found some friends who had played chess before and were willing to join me on the team. We didn't have a big team, but we were still competitive and committed to having fun.

Additionally, I also took a unique opportunity to train with the Lakeside High School chess team. I had known and competed with many of them since elementary school and they welcomed me with open arms.

I wasn't a member of the Lakeside team, but it was a great learning experience just to play and hang out with other enthusiastic players.

Ken: That's interesting. So, you found different ways to express your interest in chess?

Jacob: Yes, that's exactly what happened.

The chess community is really unique in that it's both small and large at the same time.

Ken: What do you mean by that?

Jacob: While chess can attract 1,500 kids to the Washington State Elementary Chess tournament and host dozens of tournaments every year, it's still relatively small compared to other sports activities. What I really want chess players to

understand is that they can be a part of any chess community they want to join.

It can extend way beyond your school or club and can grow as much as you like. It can even mean meeting new friends and chess players out of state and out of the country. And many of these friendships extend beyond the board, or even beyond your time playing chess.

Ken: What did you do with chess during your university years?

Jacob: I moved to Minnesota and majored in economics and Japanese. My chess definitely took a back seat to my studies.

Ken: When did you decide to switch your focus from playing to directing?

Jacob: I worked hard and eventually obtained my Class A level (US Chess rating between 1800 and 1999). But I realized that I couldn't commit the time needed to take my playing skills to the next level. Additionally, I saw that what the local community needed was not another Class A level player, but additional help in organizing and directing tournaments.

Ultimately, it became a simple decision. I liked the chess community more than I liked playing. So, that's how I started turning my attention to becoming a TD.

Ken: What kind of training is required to run and organize chess tournaments?

Jacob: In Washington we have our own niche NWSRS system. It's free to participate with no membership dues. For that there is no official training or certification required.

Ken: What about USCF training?

Jacob: That's an entirely different ballgame.

That requires more rigorous training and experience. There are also formal tests required.

But like most things, experience is the best teacher. You learn to run big tournaments by running small tournaments. As the tournaments get progressively bigger and more complex, you learn how to scaffold and adjust along the way.

Ken: Are you surprised that chess continued to be part of your life for all these years?

Jacob: Not at all. I knew I loved chess. I just found a way to express that love in a different way than just as a player. I also coach chess and I love doing that as well.

Ken: What makes chess so unique?

Jacob: It's one of my greatest beliefs that chess is what you make of it. For example, a coach can teach you a lot during a one-hour session; they can give you some ideas and concepts to think about. But chess is a game that requires a lot of self-study. That's where the real growth happens.

Ken: It sounds like being a Class A player has significantly influenced your role as a tournament director?

Jacob: Definitely. I know my experience as a chess player makes me a better TD. I understand not only the technical aspects of the game, but I have a great deal of empathy and understanding of the dynamics of actually playing and participating in tournaments.

Also, I think it's been an excellent grounding principle for me to understand that chess is my passion but not the main way I make my living.

Ken: Can you expand on that?

Jacob: I do make a little money from working as a TD, but again, my main motivation is to help and be a part of this community. I want my decisions to be

based on what's best for the player and never consider how it affects my finance or job security.

My primary job is working for Eddie Chang at Realogics Sotheby's International Realty. Working with Eddie has allowed me the freedom to continue my directing and coaching. And we may have a chess board in our office for blitz breaks.

Ken: How has chess influenced your career?

Jacob: I met Eddie through the chess community, and we approach our business with the same critical thinking required in chess.

Ken: What do you mean by that?

Jacob: We take a lot of what we learn on the chess board and translate that to our business model.

For example, we are constantly changing and adapting to what's happening in the real estate market. We are making decisions and helping our clients by solving problems, anticipating changes in the marketplace, and staying several steps ahead of our competition.

Ken: That's amazing. What do you think are other benefits of playing chess?

Jacob: Without a doubt, mental stamina. Playing long games with long time controls builds mental endurance.

If you are getting to play and enjoying long three to four hour matches, it turns out that things like standardized tests or loop interviews, which often require multiple hours, are a piece of cake.

Chess provides unique training for the brain and temperament because it requires sustained concentration for long periods of time.

Ken: What other unique benefits do you see in chess that you don't see in other sports or activities?

Jacob: This is going to sound counter intuitive, but I think the social aspects of chess are often overlooked.



*Jacob Mayer at the 2019 Washington Class.
Photo credit: Josh Sinanan.*

I've been around chess tournaments for years, and I've noticed that chess can fulfill the social quota needs of kids (and adults) in ways that many other activities can't.

You are in a room with 100 or more players and you are speaking the language of chess with each other. So, even though you may not actually talk to anyone (more than exchanging pleasantries) all day, you are still connecting with others. Yes, it might look different than the way many parents think social interactions should look, but it's a very real and meaningful way for those players to connect.

Ken: That makes sense. I am especially aware of the dynamic of post-game conversations where I see a lot of growth and connection happening.

Jacob: Absolutely. I can't think of another sport where competitors go head-to-head and then after the game, have an opportunity to review and discuss their game in real time. Often your frequent competitors become your friends as well, and you find you have even more in common off the board.

Or, if they don't review their game with their opponent, I often see players discussing their games with friends or coaches.

Ken: Any other final thoughts or advice to chess players in our community?

Jacob: Always remember to focus on your enjoyment of chess. I've found that the players who keep the passion going for the game and focus on the journey (and not just the destination) are the ones that have the best mindset related to chess.

If you keep that in mind, chess can take you along for a beautiful ride in ways that you can't imagine.

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