

# A Conversation With Alex Byelashov

Ken Lee

**A**lex Byelashov (bye-lashoff) astonished me when we discussed how he has managed to blend his multiple responsibilities (chess dad, TD, house player) with a fascinating international flair.

I sat down with Alex at the Midyear Scholastic Cup in Bellevue to chat about his family's journey into the world of chess. The interview continued remotely from Marbella, Spain, where his daughters were participating in an international chess camp.

**Ken:** Where did you grow up and when did you first learn to play chess?

**Alex:** I grew up in Odessa, Ukraine. My earliest memory of chess was playing with my grandpa during the warm summer months.

He was a merchant marine captain, and during those long months at sea, over-the-board chess was a way to pass the time.

I played chess from when I was five until I was eight.

**Ken:** Did you compete in any tournaments at that time?

**Alex:** Not at all. I only played for fun.

I took a break before I started playing chess again.

**Ken:** How long was the break?

**Alex:** Almost 40 years!

**Ken:** What inspired you to play chess again?

**Alex:** It was the birth of my girls Darya (ten) and

Sofia (seven) that reignited my interest in chess.

**Ken:** Was it an intentional choice to

introduce your girls to chess at an early age?

**Alex:** Absolutely. When Darya was about seven and a half, I was looking for a simple and natural way to introduce her to a game that promoted concentration and patience. At about the same time, we also discovered that Darya displayed a proclivity toward pattern recognition.

I thought back on my childhood and felt that chess might be a good way to capitalize on her strengths and provide a fun way to practice new skills.

**Ken:** How did you start?

**Alex:** After I taught Darya the basics, we went to our local library in Gig Harbor and met up with a local chess club. The club is led by Coach Robert Gifford, who has been very supportive of our family.

For Darya, it probably was the perfect way to introduce her to chess because it was informal and fun.

It was only later that we started working more systematically with chess coaches.

**Ken:** Did the girls enjoy chess tournaments right away?

**Alex:** Yes and no. Even though they enjoyed some early success winning three out of five rounds, they were a bit hard on themselves initially.

**Ken:** How did they learn to handle setbacks?

**Alex:** I think every tournament provides a unique opportunity to learn about chess and build resilience. Darya used her other hobbies to unwind and decompress after a tournament. She would draw and write creative stories after a tournament. Sofia is younger and perhaps a little more happy-go-lucky.

What I appreciate most is that they stay motivated. Even with the inevitable

ups and downs, they still love playing—and that's what matters.

**Ken:** How did your interest in out-of-state chess tournaments begin?

**Alex:** Fortunately, I can set my own schedule, and I travel often for work. I always loved the idea of having my family travel with me during my business trips. I started doing research about a year ago and discovered various chess events and tournaments in Canada and Europe.

**Ken:** What have you discovered to be some interesting benefits of competing in chess tournaments abroad?

**Alex:** These out-of-state tournaments are a great way to experience diversity in chess.

They are playing in different environments, seeing unusual openings, and eating different kinds of food.

So far, Darya and Sofia accept this unusual chess life as something that our family does naturally.

I believe it keeps the experience of playing chess fresh, fun, and meaningful. Let's be honest—chess tournaments can sometimes get repetitive. On weekends, kids are often stuck indoors, playing for hours in hotel ballrooms or small rooms without windows. That kind of environment can wear anyone down after a while.

When I was growing up, I spent most of my time outdoors—running around, exploring the world. I didn't want my daughters to miss out on that kind of stimulation and change of scenery. So, we've made a conscious effort to turn chess into a way to discover new places, meet new people, and learn through experience.

They've played all over the U.S.: Illinois, Nevada, Oregon, Ohio,

Missouri, Florida. They've also played internationally in the UK, Germany, France, and Canada. Right now, they're attending a chess camp in Spain. It's immersive: they live on-site with other kids, train for several hours a day, and have time for swimming, going to the beach, and just enjoying childhood. It's chess, but it's also life.

Interestingly, I've noticed that when they learn in new settings, the lessons tend to stick better. It's like their brains absorb the experience differently. That kind of exposure has been incredibly valuable, for both their growth as chess players and as individuals.

The bottom line is that I wanted my girls to fall in love with chess in as many ways as possible.

**Ken:** I understand that you have been asked to be a "house player" in various scholastic chess tournaments?

**Alex:** Well, I have been coming up to so many chess tournaments up in Bellevue and Seattle, that Jacob Mayer asked if I wanted to volunteer to be an assistant tournament director.

I guess I did my own calculation. I thought that it was an efficient way to utilize my time. I was already with my girls the whole weekend. I would learn something new. I could also help the chess community at the same time.

**Ken:** What steps did you take to become a TD?

**Alex:** I took a quick test and just asked a lot of questions.

When there was an odd number of players in a round, I would step in as a "house player" just to make sure every kid had an opportunity to play.

**Ken:** How has your experience as a house player shaped your perspective?

**Alex:** It's been eye opening. I developed more empathy for my girls. It's so easy as adults for us to say, "Just play. Have fun. Don't take it so seriously."

But in a real tournament, you often find yourself being stared down by a little kid who clearly has no fear and wants to crush you.

Your heart begins to beat a little faster and you understand, perhaps a little bit, about the amount of focus and proper state of mind required to compete.

It's a humbling experience but I enjoy every minute of it. My girls are better than me at chess now, and I'm perfectly comfortable with that.

**Ken:** As a chess dad, you speak the same language of chess to your girls. Do you ever use chess as a metaphor when you are discussing other important concepts with them?

**Alex:** I often talk to them about the benefits of slowing down and making good decisions. I also talk to them about the downsides of multi-tasking as well.

The biggest idea I like to convey is that if you want something to happen, you are going to have to put in a lot of hard work, and that hard work may not always be fun.

**Ken:** Can you expand on that idea?

**Alex:** Well perhaps playing a bunch of bullet games is a lot of fun but, in my opinion, it doesn't really help you in the long run. On the other hand, doing puzzles might be a grind, but it might be a much better use of your time.

**Ken:** It's amazing how chess became a central part of your family's identity.

**Alex:** I'm more surprised than anyone. As a family, we've been playing chess for about two and a half years now, and I love being a part of it.

**Ken:** What else do you do to support your family's interest in chess?

**Alex:** Lately, I've started putting in more intentional effort. I feel like if I expect my girls to practice and grow, I should model that too.

Kids pick up on what you do more than what you say. If they see me

enjoying chess — playing in the evening, watching a game or solving a puzzle — they naturally see that as normal and fun. I'm trying to lead by example.

**Ken:** Thinking about *The Anxious Generation* by Jonathan Haidt, what is your opinion about screentime?

**Alex:** We try to keep their iPads focused only on chess: no YouTube, no other games, no distractions. That way, when they want screen time, it ends up being something productive. If their brains are looking for that dopamine hit from a screen, it might as well come from playing a game of chess.

**Ken:** What do you do to encourage more in person interactions?

**Alex:** We support the local chess scene here in Gig Harbor however we can. We help Robert Gifford to promote chess in our area and invite other kids to play in informal gatherings.

Recently, we spontaneously threw together a small unrated tournament at a pizza place.

We also meet up regularly at a local café with our friend Allen Messenger, a local tournament director, to play over-the-board games and keep the community vibe going.

**Ken:** What are some unique challenges and opportunities of encouraging girls in a male-dominated chess environment?

**Alex:** Believe it or not, my daughters don't even realize that chess is considered a male-dominated space. No one's told them that it should be intimidating or unusual to be a girl in chess, so they just don't think about it. They don't care about opponent age or gender. They're just there to play the game.

**Ken:** In your travels, what are some similarities and differences you've noticed in chess communities around the world?

**Alex:** What's amazing is how similar chess communities are, no matter where you go. It's one of the most inclusive environments I've ever experienced: people of all ages, backgrounds, and professions coming together over a board. There's a shared love for the game that brings people together instantly.

That said, each place has its own cultural flavor, and those differences often mirror the broader national culture.

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For example, in Canada, I noticed how polite and orderly everything was. Players followed the rules closely, and there were fewer disputes or issues during tournaments. The kids were generally more structured, less wandering, and more focused. It had a very calm, buttoned up feel to it.

At the British Chess Festival we attended last year, it was even stricter—FIDE rules enforced to the letter, metal detectors at the entrance, and very formal procedures.

In Germany, the culture was also very rule-based and structured. People were more reserved and direct, but again, respectful. You could feel that everyone took the game seriously, and the events ran like clockwork.

So yes, the chess world is incredibly diverse, but at its core, it's built on shared values: respect for the game, love of learning, and the joy of competition. The differences just add texture to the experience.

**Ken:** In your travels, how has the global chess community inspired you and your daughters?

**Alex:** One of the most inspiring things we've discovered through chess is how universal and welcoming the community is. No matter where we've gone, the spirit of connection around the game is the same. There's this unspoken understanding among players—a shared focus, curiosity, and respect—that transcends borders.

For my daughters, being part of this global chess world has opened their minds. They've learned to communicate through the game itself, building confidence and friendships along the way. It's shown them that they belong to something much bigger than their local club or weekend tournaments.

For me, it's been a reminder of how meaningful this journey really is. Chess has become more than a game in our family—it's become a way to explore the world, connect with others, and grow

together. The people we've met and the experiences we've had through chess have truly enriched our lives and deepened our appreciation for the game—and for each other.

**Ken:** What are your family's goals when it comes to chess?

**Alex:** My wife Alyona has always been part of this journey. We're not trying to raise grandmasters. Our main goal is to enjoy the game and the journey together as a family.

We want our daughters to remember this as a fun, enriching part of their childhood, not as pressure or obligation. Chess has become a lifestyle for all of us, something we genuinely enjoy.

We see it as a way to bond, learn, grow, and create memories. And if along the way the girls develop strong skills or reach milestones, that's great. What really matters is that they stay motivated, curious, and excited about the game. That's success for us.



*Dayra is third from the left; Sofia is first from the right, Marbella, Spain. Photo courtesy of Alex Byelashov.*