

# A Conversation with FM Stephen Willy

Ken Lee

**A**t 16 years of age, FM Stephen Willy has packed a lot of chess and competition in his life. I sat down with Stephen recently to discuss how a blend of home schooling, a competitive streak and a particular mindset has helped him thrive in the world of chess and more.

**Ken:** When did you first start playing chess?

**Stephen:** I first started playing chess in 2017 when I was seven years old.

**Ken:** Who first taught you?

**Stephen:** My dad taught me the basic rules and then I started competing, on a whim, at the Chess4life quads.

**Ken:** How did you do in that first tournament?

**Stephen:** Honestly, I didn't know what I was doing, and I didn't perform very well. I stopped playing for one and a half years because it didn't appeal to me at that time.

**Ken:** Interesting. When did you play in your next tournament?

**Stephen:** I don't think I played again until I was almost nine. I had started homeschooling and it allowed me some

opportunity to renew interest in chess. I played in another quad and scored 1½ points.

Thinking about it, I think that modest score was just enough to keep me motivated.

**Ken:** How did you progress from that point on?

**Stephen:** I started doing some individual online chess studies. I was always competitive, and chess appealed to me for that reason. I participated in some other memory competitions like spelling bee and Bible bee. While they were fun, they did not offer me opportunity to compete consistently.

**Ken:** How often did you play back then?

**Stephen:** I would play the Chess4Life Friday quads as often as possible but then COVID hit. I started playing more online games for fun and online tournaments.

**Ken:** What were those years like for you?

**Stephen:** Since I was already in homeschool, I had a unique opportunity to use my time creatively.

I played WCF tournaments and started participating in some online out-of-state tournaments as well.

**Ken:** How did you progress during that time?

**Stephen:** I was steadily progressing in my online chess rating. One day in 2021 I played GM Varuzhan Akobian in blitz during his livestream session of STL chess club, and I beat him. That's when my parents sought coaching for me.

**Ken:** Did it feel logical to have an online chess coach during COVID?

**Stephen:** Yes. It didn't matter where they were from. I just wanted to work with someone who could help me with

my game.

**Ken:** Who was your first coach?

**Stephen:** I worked with GM Aleksandr Lenderman from New York for a bit.

**Ken:** What kind of advice did he give you during that time?

**Stephen:** He made me aware that I need to slow down considering that I played too many online blitz games. He was the one who encouraged me to compete in my first out of state chess tournament.

**Ken:** Where was that?

**Stephen:** My first out of state tournament was the National Open in Las Vegas in the summer of 2021. I signed up for Under 1500 section. I did very well in that tournament and had a huge boost to my ELO.

**Stephen:** Eventually, GM Lenderman introduced me to GM Giorgi Kacheishvili. I worked with him for three years.

**Ken:** What specific knowledge or psychological tips did he share with you that helped your game?

**Stephen:** With GM Kacheishvili it really was the first time that I understood what it meant to study chess with intention.

**Ken:** What do you specifically mean by that?

**Stephen:** When I was younger, I would play a lot of blitz and kind of have an open-ended way of studying.

But GM Kacheishvili would pick specific themes, and we would discuss them from both the white and black perspectives.

He would set up positions based upon specific things I needed to work on.



Stephen Willy

Then when we thought I was through understanding that individual theme, he would introduce me to more themes.

Over time, the effect was that I could recognize patterns and understand the game from both positions with precision.

**Ken:** How often did you meet?

**Stephen:** We would meet online maybe once or twice a week. But the thing about chess is that it has a way of seeping into your consciousness so much so that you are studying it even when you are relaxing.

**Ken:** What do you mean by that?

**Stephen:** When someone gives me a particular chess problem to think about, I often work on those problems when I'm walking around my house.

I can visualize the position in my head. I think a lot of my gains in chess come because I have the time, flexibility, and interest to think about chess a lot.

**Ken:** How do you balance chess and academics?

**Stephen:** To be honest, it used to be 60% chess and 40% academics. Now that I'm getting older, I think it's reversed to 60% academics and 40% chess.

**Ken:** How have you overcome setbacks in your chess career?

**Stephen:** There have been a few times when I've had a very rough tournament or a very dry spell, and I think I'm just going to quit.

**Ken:** What did you do about it?

**Stephen:** I learned not to ignore my bad experiences but rather reframe them in a way that is useful to me.

**Ken:** Can you amplify on that please?

**Stephen:** Instead of trying to forget my past poor performances, I reflect on them and use them to push me forward.

I say to myself: "Hey, I'm still standing. I made it past that experience, and I can go on."

**Ken:** That's amazing. Usually, the phrase, "I'm still standing" is supposed to be a message of survival for older folks. Somehow you have figured out how to utilize this mantra, at a very young age, to keep you going and competing in very high stakes situations.

**Stephen:** Yes, I know that chess tournaments can mean big opportunities

for rating boosts. Or they could mean winning prize money. It's a lot of pressure.

**Ken:** Do you think chess has helped you become a stronger individual?

**Stephen:** I think chess helps me train my mind to be resilient. Of course, it's stressful sometimes. But I remind myself that I chose to be in these situations and that being purposeful is helpful for my game and my life as well.

**Ken:** Do you see chess as a viable career?

**Stephen:** I can see myself coaching but I really don't know if chess is going to be my primary career. I do see it being a part of my life for a long time.

**Ken:** How have international chess tournaments changed you or your game?

**Stephen:** International tournaments allow me to play against players with different style than in the US. I also enjoy engaging with players coming to those places. One of my favorite memories from a recent international trip was the 2025 Zupanja Open blitz tournament in Croatia.

**Ken:** Who is your current chess coach?

**Stephen:** I'm currently working with GM Aleksander Delchev from Bulgaria. I knew Coach Delchev when he organized hybrid tournaments during COVID time. He had made a few positive comments about my games and when we decided to play in Europe, we reached out to him to help with planning and preparation. We connected right away, and it continues even now.

**Ken:** Please describe your studies with Coach Delchev.

**Stephen:** He is pushing me to go way beyond "trick chess" where I would learn a gambit or something that works a few times.

When we study openings now, the emphasis is not so much about the moves

or strict memorization but the IDEAS behind the moves.

It's an entirely different level of chess study.

**Ken:** That's amazing. What are your current chess goals?

**Stephen:** I'd like to get the IM title and keep progressing forward.

**Ken:** What advice do you have for younger chess players?

**Stephen:** My first piece of advice is that if you want to improve, it's important to be very passionate about chess. You have to enjoy the process.

My second piece of advice is to not let results overwhelm you. Of course, people want to do well. But chess is a difficult sport. If you start caring too much about results, then you can get discouraged when you lose.

Finally, my last piece of advice to young chess players is to view chess outside the box.

**Ken:** What do you mean by that?

**Stephen:** Chess, for the most part, is an individual sport. People often incorrectly assume that chess doesn't encourage socialization or friendships. I can tell you that I've met hundreds of players from around the world and now they are a part of my community.

**Ken:** Is there anything else you would like to add?

**Stephen:** I believe my faith has given me the skills and the passion for chess. I give back to the community by connecting with people and helping them improve their chess. I'm doing some volunteer work at the Sammamish Library where I teach kids chess basics. As another example, through chess, I got to meet you! I've been reading your articles for some time and now we are meeting!

**Ken:** It's been a pleasure, Stephen. Check and mate.

