

Hi Ray!

Here we go... thank you for inviting me to do this.

1. Why do you like correspondence chess?

Because I can take the time to treat positions as a research problem, instead of feeling pressure to move (or being tempted to play a move just to see what happens). I feel like I own my moves more completely (for better or worse) because I really end up settling my mind before I play them.

2. What are your career highlights?

I wouldn't call what I have a career, it is just a hobby and pastime. But I had a number of fondly remembered high points, especially when I was teams coordinator for ASPCC (the armed services CC organization) and we had a number of memorable matches. We played a high-octane match with APCT that got a lot of publicity and I captained five simultaneous teams in the second USCF team championship (which got essentially no publicity). What made those matches so memorable was that they involved every aspect of organization: I was recruiting players, negotiating terms and conditions, resolving disputes, helping players with temporary problems, doing everything possible first to make an event happen and then to make it successful.

As for tournaments and personal results, I most value my old WT/M/GT events from the postcard era. It was such a big deal back then, with events taking so long and costing so much, and then when you finished in the medal positions you would get a formal coupon for a partial qualification to the

WC cycle. As competitive results, my win in the 11th NAICC and second in the 12th NAICC are probably my best results, but not nearly as fun as those old WT/M/GT events.

3. What was the most challenging game in the Absolute and why?

My draw (as white) with Harry Ingersol. Harry equalized out of the opening, too easily on my view. I got adventurous and popped a combination to exchange queens and sacrifice the exchange for a dangerous passed pawn, but he developed his own passed pawn and the game ended in a standoff. I thought I had the advantage in the opening, but I really didn't; then I thought I could seize the initiative, but I couldn't. Harry is a non-nonsense competitor who is running away from the field now in the 2017 Absolute.

4. What was key for you in raising your playing strength to the level you are at now?

I hate to say it, but a zombie computer (i.e. brought back from the dead) and free software. In the 1990s I was rated even higher than I am today. I was too casual about computers for too long, and my rating history shows a sharp decline around 2003-05. I reached a crisis point where I had to decide: why am I doing this anymore? I almost gave up on CC twice in ten years.

I got through the first crisis by deciding to take computers more seriously (not that I would spend money - that was my compromise with myself - the computer was my wife's crashed hand-me-down and the software was free). I hoped to learn more about chess through computer-assisted analysis, where I was still actively pushing pieces around on the screen and the computer was showing me the weaknesses of my various ideas.

Then the second crisis struck when I realized I really wasn't learning anything about chess, and I got through that by shifting my focus from computer-assisted chess to chess-assisted strategy formulation. I had the good fortune to be at Army War College and National Defense University, first as a student and ultimately as an instructor. I learned to abstract a strategy formulation method from chess (especially from Lasker, but with an honorable mention also to Horowitz) and I used it in a research paper as well as in exercise scenarios. That work got me to enjoy CC as a laboratory for studying my own decision-making processes.

5. Do you have an overall strategy or approach to your games when you start a tournament?

Yes. I start with a core decision: am I playing to win, or am I playing to learn? If I am playing to win, then I'll try to play the same opening (or similar openings) in as many games as possible, in order to correlate my results - i.e. I'll try to win a slew of games, at the expense of maybe losing a slew of games. It can get quite interesting if you search for ways to get similar pawn structures out of disparate openings. For instance, for a few years as black I played the Ruy Lopez against e4 and the Bogo-Indian against d4, because I could get very similar positions out of the two openings (a pawn wall a6-b5-c5-d6 with a half-open e-file against the pawn wall d5-e4-f4 with a half-open c-file).

Other variations on the same idea are always playing fianchetto openings, always playing d5 and e6 as black, etc. The holy grail of this approach would be to find a way to play the same sort of systems both as white and as black, but I haven't found a good way to do that which preserves white's initiative when playing white yet yields a playable game with black as well.

The best try that works for both white and black is probably playing the Colle as white and d5/e6 defenses as black (which was what I played in the 80s).

If, on the other hand, I'm trying to learn, then I'll play as many different openings as I can imagine, to see what happens and stretch my experience.

6. How do you select your moves?

I try to build an explanation of my move, and I don't move until I have an explanation. The explanation might be something like "my choice is between X and Y; if I choose X then I can later transpose into the most likely line following Y, but if I choose Y then I may not be able to transpose into the lines beginning with X; therefore play X". There are other common formulas, but that is one of the most common. Anyway, I always seek a natural-language non-chess reason for thinking that the move chosen is no worse than, and might be better than the alternatives.

7. What should an aspiring player work on to raise the level of their game?

Keep a journal or notebook. Document how you came to decide on your move, and what you expect (at the time of deciding) going forward. You should have at least a paragraph and maybe half a page of notes with each move you make. Paper is cheap, so use it generously. Then review the last few moves as you begin your analysis for your next move.

After a game, look through your notes again to see where your expectations were unreasonable, how you made bad decisions, etc. You are not really trying to learn chess so much as you are trying to learn yourself, and learning to improve your decision-making habits.

8. What are your future aspirations in chess?

None, really. My children all play, and now at the age of 53 my wife has even begun! My life's work is completed, chess-wise.

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