

How My Son Became a Chess Master

Frank Ho

Canada Certified Math Teacher

Founder of Ho Math and Chess

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My son Andrew was interested in chess when he was a bit over 5 years old and at that time my chess knowledge was zero. I thought it was an interesting project if I could learn chess together with him so I went to the Canada Vancouver library and borrowed a few chess books and started to teach him chess by reading those chess books.

Once he learned chess moves, we played games together. Perhaps it was because I could teach end game in separate and independent topics, Andrew learned the end game first. Initially I had to study the moves of all kinds of end game tactics first before I could teach him, but gradually I could not study fast enough to teach him so I had to ask him to study with me together by using a method that is I read the book and he made all the moves according book instructions, the end result was often he understood the meaning but I was still trying to piece all the information together.

Now I have taught many young children chess and many of them are even as young as 4 years, I was able to observe how Andrew or some strong players behaved differently from other weak players at the very young similar age. My personal observations of strong young players are they possess the following characteristics:

1. Can grasp the chess ideas very quickly whether it is theory or tactics.

2. Incredible good memory and can remember the variations of opening lines very deep.
3. Are very much interested in playing and thoroughly enjoyed it.
4. Have a sharp eye in seeing tactics and also the results of what if type of questions etc.
5. Have patience in finishing playing a game from the beginning to the end despite the end result might be a loss.
6. Is more willing to think alternate moves before making a move.

Only after learning chess a few months, Andrew was able to make fast progress and at that time I knew I need someone else to help him to advance to a higher level. At the same time, I was trying to find him a chess clubs but in the 1990's era, there was no junior chess club in Vancouver so I had to bring him to the Senior Chess Club in Kerrisdale. A few of seniors showed some discomfort in playing such a young boy although a retired medical doctor showed tremendous interest in playing Andrew and the doctor took all the time he needed to make a move (no clock was used) when played against Andrew. Perhaps because of this, Andrew was trained to be patient when playing chess at such earlier age when he was a bit over 6 years old.

Quickly we realized that we need to find a place so Andrew could continue to hone his skills, UBC (University of British Columbia) Tuesday night chess tournament was a perfect place since he gained so many points by going to UBC Tuesday night and played against adults. At this point, there was no benefit for Andrew to play against other children any more since Andrew was already in different league.

What troubled me the most was I could not find anyone whom I personally feel could teach Andrew to bring him to the next level or perhaps to the world chess competition level. The problems I found with most the chess coaches at that time were the following:

1. They all had their pet openings in mind and could not teach other lines well if Andrew was interested in learning other lines, so it might be beneficial for Andrew just to buy chess books and learn from books.
2. Most teaching are not structured well enough so Andrew could see the whole picture, instead a piece meal fashion way of teaching was conducted so the effect is Andrew would not be well and thoroughly trained if he only sees trees but not the forest.

3. No experience or idea on how to train a young child to bring him to the world stage.
4. No training or lesson plan is in place but rely on casual presentation of personal past accumulated chess knowledge or game experience.
5. No analysis on what opening style is suitable for Andrew to play.
6. Most chess coaches did not even prepare for the lesson but were only interested in playing a few games.

After going to a few different chess coaches, I was at loss to find a way to educate Andrew so he could continue to progress. One day, an idea clicked in my mind, that is if those chess grand masters are so good in playing chess and their games are all publicized then why don't I analyze their games and study what opening lines they used and Andrew simply could learn from those grand masters by using the criteria of how they play well or not when using those lines?

Without a chess coach, how did I train Andrew to reach the world competition levels in 1990s? Not meant to exhaust listing my ways of helping Andrew, I did all the followings:

- Bought chess video tapes.
- Corresponded with some retired chess grand masters.
- Studied on how Chinese trained their young chess players by reading Chinese chess magazines.
- Subscribed all major chess magazines.
- Analyzed how some grand chess masters became masters and how they were trained when they were young.
- Bought all good chess books on openings which I thought will be good for Andrew.
- Bought computer chess software and PC so Andrew could play and practice chess 7/24.
- Browsed on internet to find out how other countries trained their young chess players.

After did all the above, I concluded that Andrew must be so good at some open theories that he could perhaps claim to be an expert in some opening lines. So what the chance an average chess player could beat a player who is more or less an expert in some opening lines when the average player is "forced" to play an expert's open line? This had become Andrew focal training point without hiring a chess coach. The beauty is this training method can be done anywhere and anytime as long as there is a computer

and chess book around. At competitive level, if one could win at the opening, basically it is a boost psychologically to the player.

When training Andrew, I faced another difficulty that is to try to find the answer for “what if” question at the opening. Too much time is wasted to find a solution when facing an unfamiliar opening line. Because of this reason, I studied all the opening lines by using 2 most popular chess openings books in the earlier years of 1990: Modern Chess Openings and Batsford Chess Openings 2 to find all the main variations that Andrew would play when facing different openings. The end product of his opening lines is all variations were drawn on a sheet with the area size covering the surface of an office desk. In Andrew’s mind, he has a repertoire of what he will do if his opponent plays certain lines. He is so well prepared on “what if” variations of opening.

Andrew was one time dubbed as “terminator” in Vancouver if he were to play his pet opening since most chess players in Vancouver just did not have the expertise when facing the openings which Andrew has trained to play.

Am I advocating to teach children to play chess without a coach? Certainly not. A good coach will save one’s time and the road to success is actually shortened. But on the other hand, what if one just can not find a good coach? In this condition what can a child do if he or she would like to become a chess master? My way of training Andrew so he later became the youngest Canadian Junior chess champion and a FIDE chess master and a Canadian chess master could be a way of training a child to become a chess master.

What would I do differently if given the time machine to revert back? What I would do is perhaps not to spend so much time to train Andrew chess to the world stage to compete, instead take some time away to also advance his math knowledge. By doing this, math will help Andrew in his academics directly and all the way to university. This is also one of the reasons that I got into math and chess integrated teaching and also founded math and chess learning centre so children could learn chess and math at the same time.

More information can be found at www.mathandchess.com.

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