


Interview with GM Darwin Yang

From Interviewers:

IM Justin Wang

NM Davis Zong Jr.





Justin: How were you introduced to chess and what initially drew you to it?

Darwin: How was I introduced? I don't think there was any super interesting origin story per se, like an apple falling on Newton's head or something.

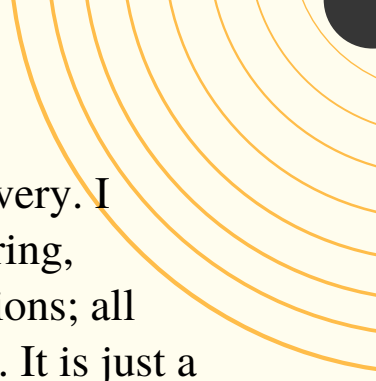
When I was around five or six, I learned the basic chess rules from my father and my brother. When I was seven, It just so happened that I was at an after school program, and we were fortunate enough that there was a Grandmaster who had recently come to that area and started teaching group lessons. Those lessons introduced chess to me and I guess I did pretty well.

You also asked about what drew me to chess. On the one hand, I think I was good at it. On the other hand, there were also a bunch of other people as the friends at that daycare who were playing, so it was like a community. I just really enjoyed playing. I'm sure you can imagine all the reasons why you enjoy chess. And it's probably similar for me. It's just a great game: very deep and very competitive.

Davis: So you seem to enjoy chess a lot. What is your favorite thing about chess?

Darwin: I think that a major aspect of chess is chess as the pursuit, the thing that you're doing - I wouldn't say a career since I was really young, but just the journey of chess: the process of trying to improve and get better and also just chess itself as the game. Chess is so deep and even though it was invented millennia ago, we still don't have the answers to it yet.





There's just so much room for creativity, learning, and discovery. I think it covers a lot of what life is about in a way: just preparing, thinking about it, taking it seriously, dealing with your emotions; all those types of things. I think that just makes it so fascinating. It is just a really rich experience and journey.


Justin: About your chess journey, what is your biggest strength as a chess player?

Darwin: I think that I was always a bit more of a positional type of player: good at intuition and positional understanding. I also think endgames were a particular strength for me, especially when I was younger. A lot of my best results are from end games.

Davis: Well, since you mentioned that endgames were a big strength for you, do you have any particular way to study them?

Darwin: I'm not sure if there's anything in particular that jumps out from or like the secret sauce per se. When I was younger, my coach really prioritized studying endings, and it was kind of natural for me. I think that continuing to work with different materials, studying endgames were helpful.

Dvoretsky's endgame manual was a good resource in those years. I think it really is a lot about understanding. Positional understanding and intuition just happened to connect nicely for me.



Justin: Yeah. So I see that you use many different resources to stay engaged. And so what role did your coaches and parents play in your chess career?

Darwin: Generally speaking, a lot of what coaches do is to provide direction. Nowadays I think there are a lot more resources available for aspiring players or just new players in general like chess.com and other videos.

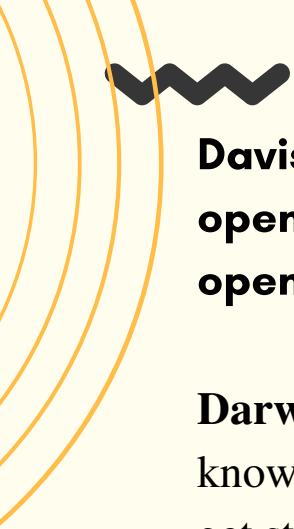
But back then, the coaches could identify what I needed to work on, show me all the material, and guide me through it, which was a big help at a time when even Chessbase was still pretty new. Like I imagine what most coaches do: endgame practice, guiding you through puzzles, the thought process, the concepts, and openings were useful.

I think that a big help in those years was that my coaches were good at diagnosing and guiding me towards openings. I don't think I can really overstate how much my parents helped. My father was the one who mostly traveled with me when we were going to tournaments.

Especially when you take it seriously and are going for titles, I think it takes a buy-in from the entire family and my sibling. Emotional support, taking care of the logistics for me, reminding me to feed myself, and all those little things were just so valuable.

When I was working on Grandmaster games with an engine and working through what was helpful, they could operate the engine, and they were willing to do so, which I'm always going to be grateful for.






Davis: I noticed that earlier you had talked about openings. How would you suggest other people practice openings?

Darwin: I think there's two parts to it. One is the mechanical part: knowing what to play. That's important. I think that people really get stuck on that sometimes because yes, it's important to know the theory, but if you haven't looked at it in two weeks, staring at it for 10 hours is not going to help you remember it. Working through games and understanding why they're playing in this way is much more important.

I think it's very easy to get stuck in a trap of: I need to learn, learn new openings. The worst feeling I think in my opinion is, when you play something you know but your opponent plays a move that's not in theory. You have no idea why it's not a theoretical response, but even if you knew that they made a small inaccuracy, you still don't know how to punish them. So if you don't understand the opening, then it's also really hard to figure out how to respond.

In my opinion, it's better to just learn a few openings really well; understanding openings at that deeper level before trying to learn too many other things. I did a lot of this; playing mostly 1. d4 for the past six or seven years with a little bit of 1. e4 sometimes, so I do think generally you should try to master a few before proceeding to others. To sum up, memorize the theory, but I think it's really essential to work through games very, very carefully, to understand what's going on.



Justin: Many of our magazine readers have not gone to college yet. Before college, what was your daily study routine?

Darwin: I think this will depend on what you want to get from the game. I think during high school, I was already pretty much at the GM title, so I basically needed to work at the professional level. So I always studied a lot; once I got my homework done I studied during the week. During breaks I would study and play. I think I could go up to 10-12 hours or more on really serious days like break days.

But of course that's not really for everyone, so I wouldn't necessarily recommend that. I think that you should find the balance that aligns with what you're trying to get from chess and what you feel is healthy for you.


If your goals are not like that, and you don't need to work that much then, that's fine; just do as much as you're comfortable doing with, and as much as you can do while staying productive. I know that there are some days for me, at least, where I work for however many hours and I just get fried. There is no hard or fast rule per se, but just do whatever makes sense for you.

Davis: Earlier, you talked about managing time well and not burning yourself out. What things do you think that you learned from chess helped you in life?

Darwin: I believe that chess is like a microcosm of life. For example, chess teaches you the importance of preparing beforehand and how to handle your emotions.

I don't think there is a single chess player on earth that hasn't dealt with struggles including plateauing, feeling frustrated, and making





mistakes. There's also the opposite. Everyone has moments when they feel they are at the top of the world.

I think a big thing for me was that chess put me through all those moments so I could learn how to deal with them constructively. No one's life is smooth, so getting experience from chess was really helpful for me so that I would better deal with the struggles and successes of life.


Justin: What percent of chess do you think is mental, and what percent is technical?

Darwin: The lines are kind of blurred since there are both technical and mental aspects. For one, you need to have some essential technical skills. For example, generally speaking, you are not going to do well if you don't know the openings.

But I also think that chess is more mental than a lot of people think it is. Just because you're a better player, technically speaking, it's not really a guarantee that you'll win. A lot of mental things do affect the course of the game. Like I mentioned, if someone plays a novelty, or you don't know what to do, that can be really disconcerting and could cause you to fumble.

Upsets happen all the time in chess. Time trouble tends to be a great problem for all players. So, I think it would be hard to overstate the mental aspect of chess. I'm not trying to say that it's a hundred percent mental, but I think it's hard to really say that it's not significantly mental. I think that having a good mental attitude toward chess is very valuable. For example, the recent world championship match, is a good example that you could point to about this topic.

Davis: You've probably played in a lot of chess tournaments. Which tournament did you enjoy the most?



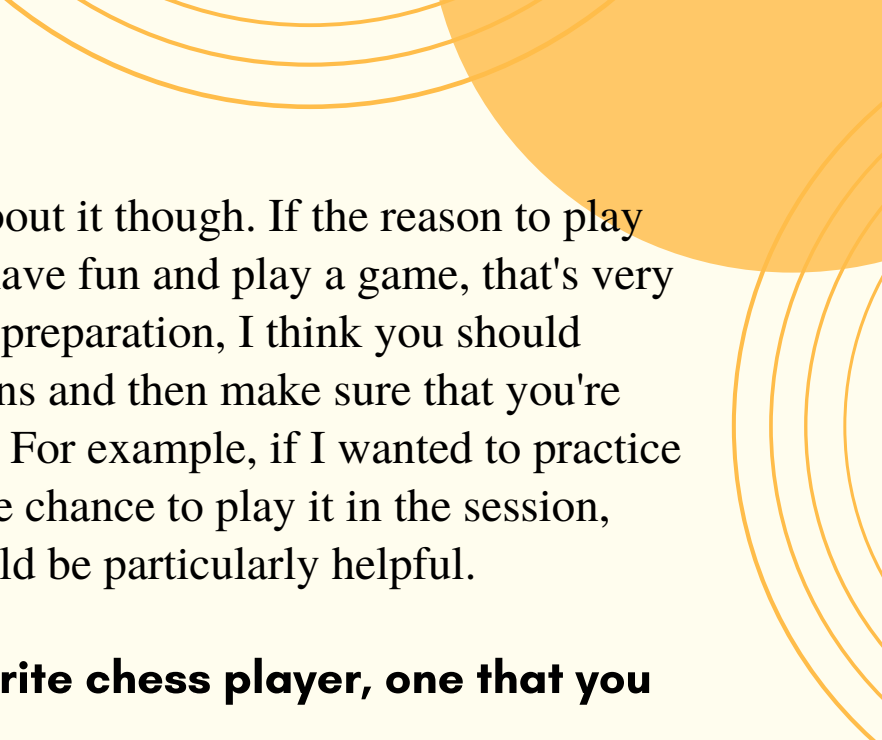
Darwin: I had a great time on a number of tournaments like playing for the Pan-American with Harvard when we made the Final Four, or maybe some of the international youth tournaments back in the day like the World Youth or Pan-Americans, just being in that type of environment.

Of course, tournaments are very fun when you're successful. So I guess the other way I can answer this question is, some of those triumphs. For me, my big goal was always to become a Grandmaster, so I would probably have to point towards my third GM norm tournament which was the Bay Area International in I think 2014. It was a bit stressful because I had to win both of my last games to get the norm, so I can't quite say that it was full happiness the whole ride, but I guess I am very fond of that.

Justin: Do you like to practice chess online, with blitz games? Would you recommend that as a way to improve?

Darwin: I think there are a few things that are valuable. One reason that I played blitz was because it was a quick way of practice openings. I don't think this gets into the deep understanding part that I was discussing earlier, but it does help to play some games to have at least something on the line and to keep yourself sharp. I know a lot of people use tactics puzzles to do that, and I did do some of that, but I think blitz, at least for me, was a bit more useful than just solving puzzles.

However, I think I'm probably a bit of a slower player, so playing some of these time controls doesn't always correspond with my tournament style. You could, of course, practice for a low time situation, so I think there's value in it.



You should think carefully about it though. If the reason to play blitz is that you just want to have fun and play a game, that's very good. But in terms of serious preparation, I think you should think about the specific reasons and then make sure that you're trying to fulfill those reasons. For example, if I wanted to practice an opening and I didn't get the chance to play it in the session, obviously I don't think it would be particularly helpful.



Davis: Do you have a favorite chess player, one that you look up to?

Darwin: Carlsen, because he plays in a methodical way that I really admire. Also, I don't consider myself like an opening guru, so I think his style of playing less theoretical openings and grinding on from the middlegame as well as his accuracy in doing so is something I really admire.

Justin: I've heard that you are really into economics. When did you start becoming interested?

Darwin: I took AP Econ in high school and also took some classes in my freshman and sophomore year of college. I was originally a history major but then I switched into Econ in my third year of college. I really did enjoy learning the econ material and just learning more about it appealed to me.

I was also very fortunate to get to know people who were in the field so that they could encourage and give positive impressions. A little tip is that you should talk to professors and teachers to get to know them.





Davis: So this may be a bit far-fetched, but how has chess helped you in the field of economics?

Darwin: I think there are a lot of concepts in economics that just made a lot of sense to me because of chess. The things that you get taught in Econ 101 are opportunity costs, decision-making, and weighing benefits versus costs, which chess provides an intuitive framework for.

After all, we chess players make decisions every turn! So when it's your turn to move, you need to think carefully about what to do. For example, do I want to progress on the queen side or should I defend a bit more on the king side?


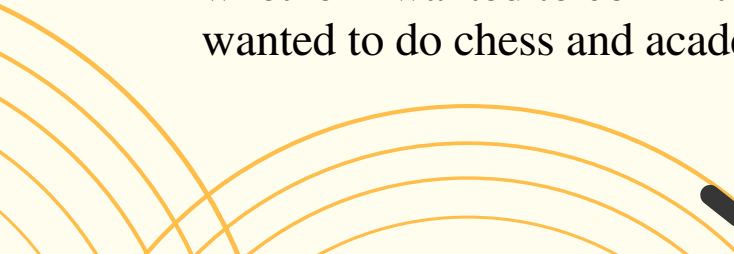
So I think a lot of those aspects came together, and it really just clicked for me. In terms of actual content though, I don't think that knowing an opening is really going to help me with my academic work.

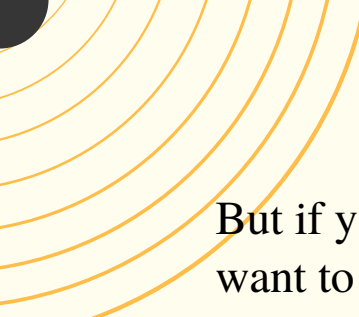
Davis: How did you balance chess playing as well as schoolwork in high school?

Darwin: I think part of it is to be careful with how much I wanted to commit to certain activities. For example, there's a lot of possible extracurriculars you can get involved in, so I mostly just focus on a few and commit a lot to them.

For academic work, I didn't really follow a specific formula.

I just made sure that I took care of my academic responsibilities before chess. Around seventh or eighth grade, I was thinking about whether I wanted to commit fully to chess or not, and I decided that I wanted to do chess and academics at the same time.





But if you want to focus more on chess that's totally fine; if you want to focus more on academic work, that's fine too. Just whatever you're comfortable with. Again, I don't think that what I give will be a solution to everyone; just do what works best for you.

Justin: Did you participate in any other extracurricular activities?


Darwin: Uh, at the time I was really interested in classics. My high school offered Latin and I was always really into it. I was originally a history major in college, so it kind of makes sense that this is something that I enjoy doing.

So classics was probably the main other extracurricular I did. I think it worked out nicely then: I really enjoyed it and I don't think it was a huge amount of time and work. Since I enjoyed it a lot, it wasn't something that I felt burdened to do.

Davis: Do you plan on continuing to play chess for fun?

Darwin: I would really love to; I don't think I've played in a tournament in a long time. The pandemic made everything harder. I decided to commit to academia specifically, and with the PhD program, now this is kind of hard.

But I would love to play in a tournament every now or then when I have time. So I think I will keep up with chess to a certain extent. I still really enjoy the game and maybe sometime you'll actually see me at a tournament!



About GM Darwin Yang



After his first official tournament at seven years old, Darwin Yang's early scholastic and international performances included tying for first at the 2006 Pan-American Championships and earning the bronze medal at the 2008 U-12 World Youth Championships. He became an International Master in 2011 and a Grandmaster in 2016. Some of his other achievements are being the 2014 National High School Champion and helping the Harvard team reach the Final Four of College Chess in 2019. Apart from chess and his studies, two of Darwin's interests are sports like football and basketball, along with learning about history.