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JANUARY 2023 ■ USChess.org



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"Sharing chess, one story at a time."

The story behind *Chess Connections*.

BY **DAVIS ZONG**



Chess Connections IS A flexible, dedicated, and inclusive publication founded by IM Justin Wang in Spring

2021 to "promote chess in underprivileged communities, provide school-aged chess players a platform to write articles of their own, and build stronger chess communities by sharing experiences, knowledge, and information." Having recently published its seventh (Fall 2022) issue, *Chess Connections* has grown substantially, thanks to numerous new writers providing fresh content for each issue. In fact, the magazine's length has grown to 78 pages, more than twice as long as its first publication.

One of my favorite parts of *Chess Connections* is conducting the featured interview with a top player. In past issues, we have interviewed WGM Thalia Cervantes Landeiro, GM Awonder Liang, GM Darwin Yang, GM Joshua Sheng, IM Annie Wang, WGM Jennifer Yu, and GM Andrew Tang. Preparing for these interviews is a group effort.

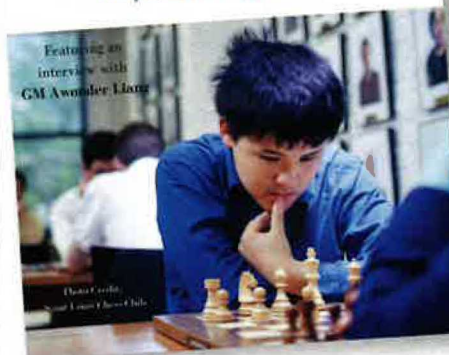
Before each interview, the core team members meet on Zoom to outline questions. We want to make each interview unique, but keep a general structure, so we conduct some research to create both general and tailored questions for each featured person. For example, for our interview with GM Joshua Sheng, who achieved his final GM norm in 2021, WIM Ellen Wang and I learned that Sheng had published *Mastering Chess Logic*, a book that seeks to unravel the complicated thinking processes of strong players and present them in simpler terms. We made sure to ask Sheng about what in-



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spired him to write his book and to explain the importance of logic.

Prior to these interviews, many of these top players were merely names to me. I might have seen them once or twice on the top boards of an open tournament or said "Hi" to them while waiting for pairings, but I'd never had involved discussions with them. It has been an honor talking to these players face-to-face and sharing in-depth conversations about our common interests. The interviews in which I've participated — Sheng with Ellen, and GMs Darwin Yang and Awonder Liang with Justin — were all originally scheduled for half an hour, but the enthusiasm of the young grandmasters often extended the time to almost an hour. Even though some of the interview questions were the same for everyone, the responses were still vastly different — each player had their own inspirational advice to offer!

For example, when we asked Liang to



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explain "the differences between studying chess and studying other things," he responded that chess players should understand that it takes a lot of discipline to spend so many years on chess, so they know in a unique way what it means to be good at something. In Liang's words, "The world is yours. You can do whatever you like and be quite successful at that." When asked what he liked most about chess, Yang said that it was the journey. "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." Messages like these are inspirational to our enthusiastic readers.

I started writing for *Chess Connections* when Justin asked me to submit an article about an interesting chess experience. Having recently played a blitz game against GM Leinier Dominguez Perez — a player whose FIDE rating has placed him as high as number 10 in the world — I was happy to comply. I analyzed a complicated missed draw in the middlegame as well as the brilliant finishing combination, a bolt from

the blue that the grandmaster unleashed against me. My article appeared in *Chess Connection's* first issue — a whopping 34 pages long, with articles spanning topics from stalemate puzzles to chess psychology, all written by chess enthusiasts like me. The diverse format continues today: in a typical read, you will find content that ranges from a jolly chess poem to a focused study on a particular motif.

This content diversity is due, in part, to the diversity and uniqueness of our writers. Anyone can write for *Chess Connections*. The magazine has published articles written by players of all ages and ratings. After their first article, many of our contributing writers stay on to become staff writers, writing articles multiple times a year.

No matter how intriguing or well thought out, all articles go through an organized editing process to ensure that they are presented in the best way possible in the final publication. When I suggest revisions to an article, I try to read from the perspective of our typical audience member: a chess enthusiast, a club player, or a curious young kid introduced to chess in an after-school program. I ask myself questions such as, “Does this article make me want to play chess more, maybe jump into a game right now? Can I visualize these moves clearly or do I need to go through the hustle of setting up a physical board? Would a friend who is not into chess be inspired to try it out after reading the article?” Amazingly, most of the articles have been great at stimulating the reader’s creative mind — I often embark on a chess study session right after I finish editing!

One of the first writers that I worked with during an editing process was Roger Zhang. He has since written multiple articles for the magazine and is now a staff writer. In the Spring 2022 issue, Roger wrote about his experience at the U.S. Amateur Team East (USATE), a fun six-round tournament where

teams of four players with average ratings below 2200 compete.

I enjoyed reading through his article, and his game annotations were detailed and engaging. To format articles in a more audience-friendly way, I encourage writers to add intermediate boards between long variations and explain their thought processes behind certain decisions and tactics. Sometimes, if a section is particularly interesting, I challenge writers to elaborate and provide even more of their exciting experiences and commentary.

As an editor, another important task is to encourage new people to write for the magazine. Jack Levine, a friend who attends Hunter College High School with me, is an enthusiastic blitz player who enjoys sharing his experiences during our weekly school club meets. He was equally excited when I told him about *Chess Connections* and agreed to write an article.

In his first piece, “Mind Games in Chess: Mikhail Tal,” Jack provided examples of how “The Magician from Riga” (a nickname for Mikhail Tal) used psychological tricks like jokes or oversized sunglasses to intimidate his opponents and gain an advantage. For example, when Bobby Fischer showed his intended next move to Tal, hoping to gauge his reaction, Tal — who knew that Fischer’s intended move was the best one — walked away. He came back laughing after cracking a joke with Tigran Petrosian in order to throw the 15-year Fischer off guard.

Fischer originally planned to play the best move, but he was influenced by Tal’s unexpected reaction and subsequently changed his move, thereby losing the game. Stories like these provide valuable lessons because they demonstrate how chess can sometimes be played beyond the board. With his unique ability to analyze the psychology behind the seemingly technical aspects of chess, Jack is now also a staff writer for the magazine.

After the interview, drafts, and edits are completed, the articles move to the design phase, where members of our design team use Canva to lay out the magazine, adding their artistic flair to its pages. It is always a proud moment when the magazine is published and we can send it to our writers and other friends in celebration, spreading the love of chess to enthusiasts wherever they might be.

Our goal is to continue sharing our chess experiences. We hope to ignite the chess spark in more people, and we welcome them to our community as we embark on this amazing journey together. ♠



Davis Zong



WIM Ellen Wang



IM Justin Wang

FOR MORE:

▶ **CHESS CONNECTIONS WAS** founded by IM Justin Wang, who remains the Editor in Chief. He is supported by a team of editors, designers, and writers, including Olivia Coward, Jerry Chang, Lulu Huang, Jack Levine, Anjali Lodh, Roger Shi, WIM Ellen Wang, Roger Zhang, and Davis Zong. Check out their finished products at chessconnections.org.