



Alexandra Botez

Cover Story

Chess Player + Twitch Streamer
2M subscribers across platforms



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THE MOST FOLLOWED CHESS TWITCH STREAMERS, APRIL 2023

- GMHikaru 1,779,594 followers (GM Hikaru Nakamura)
- BotezLive 1,214, 777 (WFM Alexandra Botez and Andrea Botez)
- Chess 989,898 (Chess.com)
- GothamChess 880,338 (IM Levy Rozman)
- Maskenissen 331,860 (GM Magnus Carlsen)

Source: TwitchMetrics

▲ February 2022: Alexandra Botez's billboard is live in NYC's Times Square

TURNING PASSION INTO A CAREER: ALEXANDRA BOTEZ'S RISE TO STREAMING FAME

MORE THAN MEETS THE EYE

In an exclusive interview with Alexandra Botez, one of the most successful chess content creators and streamers, we delve into her inspiring journey from a young chess enthusiast to becoming a social media sensation. From her beginnings in the game to her transition into the world of streaming and content creation, Botez reveals her story of determination, talent, and the challenges she has faced as a woman in both the chess and streaming worlds.

■ By FM Alec Getz

Those familiar with the royal game know Alexandra Botez as one of the most successful chess content creators out there. But as with all successful people, Alex's success didn't just happen overnight. For this interview, I had the pleasure of sitting down with the social media star and discussing not only her beginnings in chess and in life but also her journey into the world of streaming and content. I discovered the fascinating story of this remarkable woman, and am glad to be able to share it now with the readers of the magazine.

Nice to speak with you again. It's been a while! How did you get into chess, and what role did your family play in your early interest in the game?

Sure. I started playing chess when I was six, and as with many chess kids it was because my dad was super into the game. My Dad is Romanian, and his country has a much bigger chess culture, so he learned from his mom, and it's been passed down in my family for generations. I was living in Canada at the time, and I started competing in my first national tournament when I was six or seven. I won the national tournament and my dad decided to keep helping coach me. I really enjoyed playing chess so that was the start of it for me.



▶ Alexandra Botez, Reykjavik Open 2023



FM Alec Getz has been playing chess since he was five when he learned how to play in his school. He quickly climbed the ranks and at age thirteen became a National Master. He had acquired his third International Master norm during college, and although he is now retired from over the board tournaments, he still enjoys keeping up with the game. He, furthermore, likes to turn his passion for writing towards the world of the sixty four squares whenever he can.

When did you start taking chess more seriously?

Although I liked playing chess, I didn't think I took it super seriously when I was a kid. It was only when I moved, and I lost all my friends, that chess was this one thing that was super familiar. So, I started liking it and studying on my own. That's when I was around thirteen or fourteen, when I became really self-driven.

Did you ever think about going professional as a kid, given your chess level?

I never thought that I was good enough to become a professional chess player and I also had always been prioritizing other things at the

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same time, like trying to do well in school and trying to get into a good college. But I started teaching chess when I was 12 and when I was 15, I won a full-ride scholarship to the University of Texas for chess. So, this was the kind of thing where I realized that chess could bring a lot of opportunities. But in terms of being a chess professional, I knew that even if you're a top player or top female player most people need to do something on the side.

What were your first steps in exploring the social side of chess?

When I was 16 that's when I started getting into chess social media and I opened a Facebook page for chess where I would post puzzles and things like that – it's still around today – and I would use that to try to get students so I could make money to play in more tournaments and be more serious about chess. And ironically it was that Facebook page that years later the CEO of Chess.com saw and he was like, “oh, this is one of the biggest chess social media pages I've seen. Do you want to come and do content for us?” That got me into content creation.

How did that content eventually develop into streaming that you do today?

I remember I had a lot of friends who were better than me in chess who would say things like, “the only reason anyone is following your Facebook page is because you're a girl. Your chess skill is nowhere good enough to have this amount of following.” So, I got discouraged pretty quickly, and I was still thinking about college full-time. I didn't think that content would be something I would spend all my time on. I did want to take a gap year and work full time on chess, but that was a losing argument I had with my parents. And then in college when I got to my senior year is when I started doing more serious work for Chess.com. But again, I was also working on other things, so chess was never the priority until I decided to go full-time in 2019. It was in 2019 that I thought that there was a big opportunity there, but it took me a while. And in 2019 I think I was one of the earliest chess streamers – Hikaru started after, and I think there were a few other people. But it was super early – I was streaming to like 50 viewers or so at the start.

Can you recap your college days?

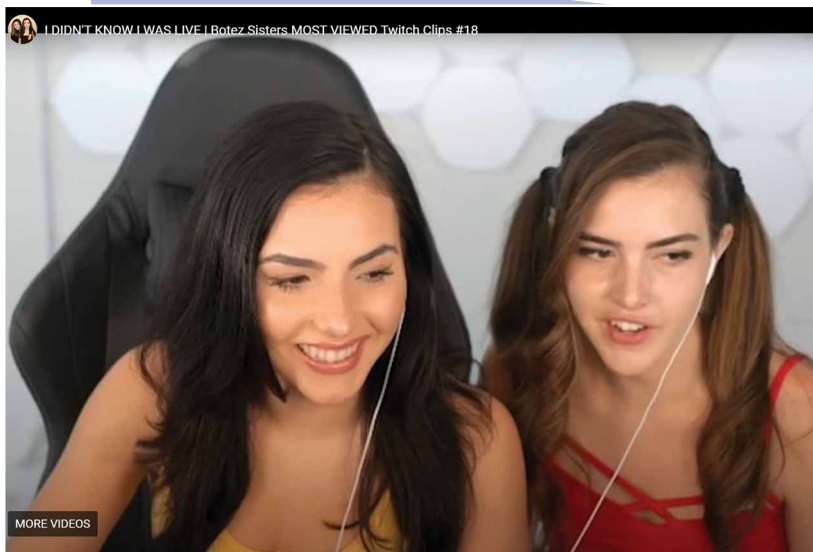
I studied International Relations at Stanford and I either wanted to do pre-law or US-China policy, but then I moved to China for half a



year after my sophomore year and I was working there full-time, where I realized it's something that I'd never have a competitive advantage in and not one that I'd be passionate enough to do. So, I came back home, and I got more into entrepreneurship. I started working on a company while I was at Stanford, and we raised around a million dollars from VCs in the valley. And I ended up working on that up until 2019, so for about three years. When we decided to shut down the startup is when I had also been streaming once a week as a hobby. A lot of the things that I learned from the start up were starting to look like trends in streaming, especially just having a small number of viewers who really love it and they come back every day. It's like, "whoa, it's almost like product-market fit. There's retention here even if it's super early. If this is a market that would grow and something that I'm super passionate about, there might be something there." So, I decided to go full time into chess streaming when my company failed.

When did you know that you were going to make it big as a content creator?

Before the chess boom, I was growing slowly. It wasn't exponential growth, but I think I had started hitting like 1000 concurrent viewers, and I remember just being ecstatic when that happened. That was a big deal for me. But honestly, I didn't know when chess would take off and I was almost getting burned out because I was streaming so many hours of chess, there also wasn't really chess on YouTube yet. Creating content was still something I loved but I didn't know if my content would ever be big enough – I had hoped it would and I was working on initiatives to help it – but I basically just was able to stay for long enough until chess did grow. And I also got very lucky because chess really exploded when the pandemic came, and this is when I realized that this was going to be something big. I remember coming home to stay with



BotezLive: Alexandra and Andreea Botez

How did it feel being a girl in a male-dominated world?

When I was young, I didn't think about it. I remember I went to play in a tournament in the US where my Canadian rating wasn't accurately reflected. I think I was like 1600 at the time – it was just one of those casual high school tournaments and I was the only girl and only non-high schooler playing in it. And my dad overheard the older boys talking, "Oh, you have an easy game, you're playing the little girl." I ended up getting a perfect score in the tournament. I remember thinking what the boys said was very funny because that's the way that my dad dealt with it. This was kind of how I would approach it, where I would laugh it off and try not to think about it – actually, I just didn't think about it because I was so focused on the chess. The uncomfortableness only really started happening when I got older, and people start treating you differently at tournaments. Once you're twelve or thirteen people start sexualizing you and that's very different, but as a kid I didn't really think about it.

READERS' VOICES

Many top chess players have garnered a significant following (in millions) among audiences typically associated with video games or eSports. This often involves live streaming, where chess personalities play online games while simultaneously sharing their thoughts and insights with viewers. Notable examples include Grandmasters Hikaru Nakamura and Magnus Carlsen, as well as non-professional players like the Botez Sisters and Levy Rozman.

We'd like to know your thoughts on this phenomenon: Have you watched any of these chess streams? Do you believe they contribute to the growing popularity of chess? Are you indifferent to this trend, or do you have any feedback or opinions on it? Additionally, are you interested in learning more about specific chess streamers and their content?

I haven't watched any of these streams but it sounds like something that would be interesting to watch.

Joe Lawson, Tennessee

I very much enjoy good streams focused on chess. I especially like to watch them while I work out. I would enjoy an article focused on chess streamers in order to know what's out there and what each of the streams is like. I've watched

a lot of Banter Blitz and Finegold, as well as some Naka, Levy, and a little of Anna Cramling, Botez sisters. What I would most enjoy are master-level instructional videos, tournament recaps, game analyses, etc. The videos Joel Benjamin used to do for ICC were excellent.

John S. Bath, Ohio

I think chess streamers are instrumental to the growth of chess.



▲ Streaming with Magnus Carlsen

Streamers promote a positive image of chess and stoke interest in the game among the general public. I enjoy watching many of the popular streamers myself and would enjoy feature articles about them in ACM.
Michael Howley,
Pennsylvania

I do not follow “streamers” and do not recommend them to my students but I understand why some might find them “entertaining”. I think interviews with players right after their games and their instant analysis is a very valuable learning tool.
Mehran Divanbaigzand,
Virginia

I tried watching a number of different chess streamers and, personally, I find the chess streams boring and of little instructional or entertainment value.

That said, there are many who disagree and avidly watch chess streams. If large numbers of followers are watching chess games every night, that can only be good for chess in the long run.
Mark A. Babik, *Texas*

Streaming is good for chess players, specially new students of the game. My 5th grade elementary students of our chess club already knew Gotham Chess, Botez sisters, Hikaru Nakamura and others. It certainly helps in the development of chess and making it popular.
Froilan Natividad, *Texas*

I have not watched the chess streams. They may contribute to the popularity of chess, but only blitz/rapid forms. It is good to know what is going on in the world of chess, so yes learning about streamers and their sites and content is reasonable.
Dr. W. E. Davis, *Ohio*

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The thing about being a girl in any kind of content... a lot of people will attribute a lot of your success to that you're female.

my parents during COVID while I was living in New York, just to spend time with them. And all I did was stream when I was home. I started to see the stream numbers growing, which was one of the times when I started to cry tears of joy because I realized it was finally happening and all the hard work was paying off. It had been that situation where I had taken risks before in the past, but they had never panned out. And for once this crazy thing of being a chess content creator when nobody was doing it and everybody was asking what I was doing, especially as a 2000 ELO player, seemed to be paying off – there was something real here.

I asked earlier about being a girl in chess. How does it feel being a girl in the streaming world?

The thing about being a girl in any kind of content, especially if you're playing games, is that a lot of people will attribute a lot of your success to that you're female. And that's something that happens to the chess world to some extent because it is easier as a woman to qualify for things like the World Youth and there are female only sections. But there's also instances when you're playing competitive chess when you experience being sexualized or certain sexism. And you experience that as well as a content creator. It could be as blatant as people coming in like, “what is this girl talking about, why is she commentating?” when I'm commentating on an 1100 match, or it could just be people saying that me and my sister haven't worked for anything and we only have views because we're females, which is what a lot of haters

and trolls like to say on the Internet. But at the same time, there's also positives that I like to focus on because being a minority in any industry is going to have both, and I'd like to think that being unique did help me grow as well. Obviously, it's not the only reason why, but I wouldn't change it. I think you need to have that mentality; otherwise, it can be very draining. So that is what I've tried to switch my focus on.

How did your sister come aboard?

I always thought that my sister was funny, and I enjoyed making content with her from a young age. When she was young, I used to direct and produce little home movies with her as the actress. And when I started streaming, I started inviting her to be a guest on my stream so that we could do sibling matches. I always thought that it was entertaining, and I also thought that she was talented, so I pushed her to get her own twitch as well. And then when COVID happened, my sister had gotten into the University of Toronto and everything was shut down, it wasn't going to be the traditional



college experience, nor did I think that going to college right away when you have such a good opportunity in front of you and you don't know what to study is worth it. So, I convinced my parents and my sister to take a gap year and come work for me with me for the channel. And it ended up working so well that we've done it ever since.

You've been doing this for a while. How do you see your content shaping out in the future?

With content you need to be very fluid in terms of what's doing well and what isn't. I'm going to keep going for as well as I'm still passionate and the content is doing well. I want to continue putting out good chess content while expanding into other areas. I realize I'm not going to be a content creator for the rest of my life, even if I'll always want to make content. It might not be the thing where I'm producing as much as I am now, but there's a ton of opportunities for content creators if you do it properly in terms of



▲ Alexandra Botez, Chess Olympiad, Baku 2016 Photo by David Llada

As a successful female content creator, what steps do you think the gaming and streaming industries can take to foster a more inclusive and supportive environment for women?

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I mostly watch Gotham Chess & Hanging Pawns. Not sure if they contribute to the popularity of chess as I believe you'd already be into chess to know about them. I think the *Queen's Gambit* had more to do with increasing the popularity of chess than the chess streamers. Also watch some of the big tournament coverage. **Joseph Oliva, Massachusetts**

I have definitely watched and think that they are a big plus for chess. It opens it up to many more people to follow. It also can help current chess players improve their play. **Steven Olds, Georgia**

I have no use for streaming. I have watched a few snippets of various streamers. None of them have held my attention for over a couple of minutes. **Stephen Embrey, Georgia**

I sometimes enjoy the banter in the background while a game is playing out but I do not like unnecessary derogatory remarks. **Howard Taylor, Kansas**

Yes, it definitely adds to the growing popularity of chess. I wish they'd use YouTube or something else rather than the provincial Discord and Twitch, it's easier when traveling outside the USA and for international markets. **Dan Ruparel, Colorado**

I do not watch the streamers, although it is clear they have a following. I have nothing against it, and I think it is one of many things that support the popularity of chess. I have my own chess vices, which include watching chess YouTube videos and listening to chess-related podcasts. **Steve Etzel, Florida**

Very neutral. Sometimes I may watch on YouTube but no chess favorite personality. **Sam Pearson, Maryland**

Sadly, chess streaming takes over the great OTB tournaments. The problem, I think, is the enormous amount of money, and it's hard to keep up with Hotel, Transportation, etc. costs for the grand old tournaments. The other point is that I don't like speed chess as I think chess is losing the creative spirit.

Dr. Ferdinand Burmeister, California

Still working, no extra time for streaming. However chess is my main hobby and has my attention at all times!

John Jacobs, Pennsylvania

I started with Kingscrusher and loved it. I enjoy banter blitz and top players reviewing their games.

David Beagan, Michigan

While not all streamers are entertaining and not all of them appeal to everyone, some will appeal to some people and certainly help promote the game. Does it produce lifelong



devotees, not nearly as many as just check things out, but it is a nice way as any to promote and encourage growth in the game.

Joshua Milton Anderson,
Pennsylvania

I follow numerous players/streamers. When it is about I am interested. When it is about selling your personal brand through sex it becomes less appealing. Don't get me wrong beautiful women are walking pieces of art but when it comes to that it is simply about money.

Ken Calitri, *New York*

I have watched a few of the chess streams, and yeah, they contribute to the popularity of chess. People who don't follow chess sometimes find click bait on an opening trap or something and it's interesting to them. You don't need to be a grandmaster to present something that attracts attention. — and the public decides what attracts attention!

I think it's a positive trend, as more people will have more types of chess content they may find interesting. Let's face it, the vast majority of the world's population don't play tournament chess.

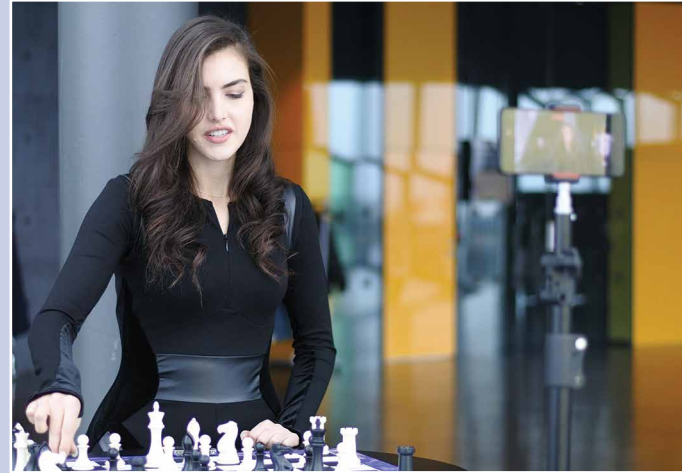
And yes, I would be interested in some of the top chess streamers, especially if they are just amateurs who have figured out just the right way to catch an audience.

Lawrence Stevens, *California*

I do not think that they add to the popularity of chess. Hikaru's incessant laughing is forced and it just grates on me. The Botez sisters are screaming, which is also a turnoff. I used to be in awe of Magnus until I saw him drinking, playing chess, and ridiculing his opponents while flanked by hangers on. Levy is the best of all of them. He is kind and entertaining. Unfortunately, he goes too fast.

You might think about writing about chess podcasts. Now THOSE I listen to. Perpetual Chess is wonderful!

Richard Bales, *Illinois*



▲ Streaming from Reykjavik Open 2023,
Photo by Hallfridur Sigurdardottir

▲ Alexandra Botez with a teammate from the Canadian Olympiad Team, Yuanling Yuan, Baku 2016, Photo by Paul Troung

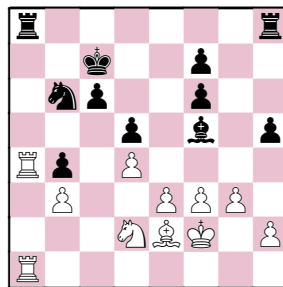
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Alexandra Botez 1988

Steven Wollkind

Reykjavik Open 2023

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opening side business or growing your brand or starting things in the space as a result. So, I'm not too worried about that; right now, I just want to make sure that I'm excited about what I'm putting out and that the content I'm putting out is enjoyable for people. I'm just trying to make the best decision in the short term since content is very short term.

Excellent. Thanks for the chat! On a final note, what is your advice for people wanting to get into streaming?

I don't think anybody should start streaming with the intention of making it into a career. I think people should stream first as a hobby to see if they like it. It's one of those things which is extremely hard to turn it into a career, and if you are going to turn it into a career, you'll know that once you're streaming as a hobby. If people are serious about content and they do want to get into it – if it's their life passion – I would recommend not starting with live content because it's a lot more difficult to grow. I would start with shorts or YouTube and do story-based chess content. You could either do it as a personality, as a voiceover or coverage of games educational videos. There's so much you can do but it's just a lot easier to grow. And there's only a lot of videos to teach you how to be a better YouTube creator. So, there's a lot of resources to get better at making content and I would look into those.