





HIKARU

NAKAMURA

WORLD

**“I DO FEEL A BIG
RESPONSIBILITY.”**

Hikaru Nakamura on the Candidates, streaming, and the future of American chess. ■ ■ ■ INTERVIEW BY **JOHN HARTMANN**

Chess Life: Let's begin by talking about your return to the Candidates tournament. What does it mean to you at this point in your career to be a Candidate once more?

First and foremost, it comes as a very pleasant surprise. It was not really an objective of mine when I chose to play in the (2022) FIDE Grand Prix. I was very fortunate to be granted a wild card by the FIDE president, Arkady Dvorkovich. I went into the event wanting to see if I could still cut it against the best players in the world. As most people know, I've been streaming a lot over the last couple of years. I didn't really know what to expect, but I still feel I am quite competitive [with the top players]. I wanted to see how it would go, but there were really no illusions — or delusions, you could say — of qualifying for the Candidates for me.

Even after the first event, which I did win, it [qualifying] was not anything that I was thinking about in a serious way. Then in the second event, probably one of the worst possible results [from my perspective] occurred with [GM] Richard Rapport winning, and [GM] Maxime [Vachier-Lagrave] and [GM] Anish [Giri] having fairly... decent results.

Before the third event started, I knew the groups weren't very favorable with [GM] Levon [Aronian] being in mine. I never really was thinking about [qualifying] until I won this game against Levon in the fourth round of the third FIDE Grand Prix. Prior to that, I knew there were chances. Everyone [was] talking about it when I'm streaming and so forth, but it really wasn't something that I was thinking about.

Let's backtrack a little bit, because I think some people were a little surprised that you were given the wild card by Dvorkovich. Was this something that you were advocating for behind the scenes or was it an offer that came to you out of the blue?

It was more or less an offer that came out of the blue. There are a couple different narratives here, [and] I'm sure we'll touch upon this in other questions as well because it all ties together. There was a certain narrative, at least from certain people in the chess world, that I was trying to avoid playing over-the-board chess. But when I look at some of the tournaments that I was intending to play — like the [2021] Grand Swiss in Latvia, which I chose not to play because of the pandemic — it was more circumstances that prevented me from playing as opposed to not wanting to play.

I think that, over at FIDE, they did notice that. I think also they saw my popularity with streaming, and that's why I got the wild card. But even once they initially invited me, I didn't automatically accept. There were still some negotiations about a couple of little points, things of that nature. It did really come out of the blue in terms of [the] invitation. It was not something that I was advocating for.

The problem was that FIDE, with the [Grand Prix] regulations, put themselves in a very bad spot because there were three players who were essentially excluded: myself, [GM] Ding Liren and [GM Viswanathan] Vishy Anand, because none of us had played the required number of games at that time. Ding found a way to get the required number. Vishy and I, I believe, did not. I could be wrong on that, so you have to fact check on Vishy, but there were three players who could not make it. I was the highest-rated player who was not part of the FIDE Grand Prix series, even though I had been inactive. I think they were looking at that. They saw the popularity and that's why they invited me.

As you were saying, it wasn't intentional, but this was the first classical time control tournament you had played in over two years.

Yes.

What kind of training did you have to do for the Grand Prix? Did you have to modify anything to get your mind in a framework to play such long games?

Honestly, I didn't really do anything special. ... One of the biggest strengths with streaming during the pandemic is that, unlike a lot of other streamers, I was playing against top level players — players like [GM Alexander] Grischuk, [GM] Magnus [Carlsen] in the Meltwater events. I was also playing a lot of events on *Chess.com*. It wasn't like I was doing something like PogChamps, for example, [all the time] ... coaching [for PogChamps], that was a very short window. If I'd been doing something like that for a long period of time, I think it would've been a little bit different with the level of my play and, in general, the quality of my chess would've gone down. But because I was playing so many competitive events, I actually think I played more than anyone else during the pandemic.

Even though it was online versus over-the-board, at the end of the day, having that experience was invaluable. That actually really contributed to why I did so well [in the

Grand Prix]. I think a lot of people assumed there was some difference. To me, I think it was very pleasant. It was more of the same.

So I didn't do anything special in terms of training. I did some review of the openings, but more or less I showed up, did some preparation during the event, and just tried to play good chess.

One thing that I would say about streams, and I think anybody who's watched my streams [would recognize] — or at least the competitive events that I've played in — is there are a lot of moments and critical games that I play in blitz where — and this even happened yesterday for that matter — I'll feel like something is wrong with the position, and my intuition generally is very good, but I won't be able to figure it out. In a longer game, especially in classical where you can think for 20 minutes on a given move, I found that I enjoyed having that extra time and it was more beneficial than anything. To me, it wasn't all that surprising, but I think for everyone on the outside, they definitely didn't expect it.

During the third leg of the Grand Prix, you were mixing online events with the over-the-board event. On the off days you played Titled Tuesday, [and] you played one of the Chess.com rapid swisses. I think to a lot of people that might be surprising. Why do you feel comfortable doing that?

There are two things to that. First of all, I did not do that when the situation was unclear. ... Titled Tuesday maybe was during the first part, but [when I played] the Rapid Chess Championship in particular, that was [after] I had already qualified for the Candidates. Everything was set.

It was a unique situation where there was very little on the line. For example, when I was playing [GM] Shakhriyar [Mamedyarov] in the semis, or even [GM] Wesley [So] in the finals, other than perhaps making more money by winning the match or winning the tournament, there was nothing else really at stake. That was actually the single biggest reason I played. ... If the tournament situation was not clear, I would not have played in those events.

Will you try to continue to do this during the Candidates? Will you be streaming during the event, or is it just total concentration at that point?

One of the things that [was] really innovative, and it was definitely unique at the time — is that when I'm playing in tournaments, I have teams who come on and cover my

games. I don't actually stream during most of these events. I'll join for interviews afterwards, or maybe if there's a rest [day] I'll do something, but I'm very rarely on the stream itself. Now a lot of other streamers have attempted to copy this.

If you compare that to, I want to say almost any other esport, anything else that's online, it's very rare where the main person is not there on the stream itself. It's something different, and during the Candidates I don't really intend to be on my stream. I might show up on a rest day where I stream myself, but otherwise I'll just have my team covering the event, covering my games, and [I will be] joining for interviews here or there.

There's a memorable video online where you realize that you're one of the oldest players in the Candidates field.

Mm-hmm.

The shock on your face is... I think anyone who's seen the video, it's pretty amazing, because for most American players, you're the young guy, you're that brash kid who came along and upset the American chess scene. What does it feel like to be one of the older players now, and has that changed your perspective on your game and on what success is?

As far as success goes, I don't think it's age. This will be another question, I'm sure, but this [feeling of] success ties back into broadening the horizons of the game and bringing it to more people out there. I've been very fortunate because I feel like there was a real renaissance in chess [beginning] around 2009 [or] 2010, when Rex and Jeanne Sinquefeld came along, and they started sponsoring the U.S. Championship, the U.S. Women's Championship, and everything else. They've built it, of course, quite a bit beyond that. You recently had the American Cup, which was a great event.

Looking back on it now, it's kind of crazy to think of myself as one of the older players, but at the same time, when I think back to 2010 or earlier, to see where chess has gone, or at least American chess, I'm very proud.

At the end of the day, time passes. To be playing in the Candidates, especially with someone like [GM] Teimour Radjabov, who I think is the one player who is a little bit older...

Right.

He played my brother in the World Youth Chess Championship in 1996 in Menorca,

Spain. I don't remember the first time I played him, but I was aware of him in 1997 or 1998... a long time ago. It's kind of crazy, to think of all the memories, but at the same time, I realize how much time has passed. It's a bit shocking, but you realize nobody's young. I look at Vishy, for example, or at [GM Vladimir] Kramnik, these guys I played against. They're in their 50s — well, I guess Kramnik isn't, but Vishy at least is in his 50s now — and you become aware. I still think of myself as being young, but at the end of the day, I have been around for a long time.

As we do this interview, we're about a month and a half away from the first moves in Madrid. How are you managing to prepare for it while maintaining such a heavy streaming schedule?

First and foremost, I have cut back [on streaming] a little bit. [Beyond that,] there are a couple differences.

First of all, with the FIDE Grand Prix, for everybody, it really wasn't clear how they were going to respond to having not played much. There were players who had played a handful of tournaments, maybe four or five at most. I don't think anybody really played more than that, at least going into the beginning of this year. So I think everybody was a little bit unsure [what] it was going to be like for everyone.

Now though, with the Candidates, there are several players who qualified, I think, in October — [GM] Fabiano [Caruana] and [GM] Alireza Firouzja in particular — where they had close to nine months to prepare for the event.

And so it's different from the Grand Prix series, where I've felt to some degree I could do some basic preparation, just show up, and play. Mainly what I've done is I've cut back a little bit with the streaming. I'm still streaming quite a bit, but not as much as it was before, because the whole approach has to be a little bit more serious and a little bit different than it was [before] the Grand Prix.

I've cut back on the hours and I'm doing preparations with my team. I have a couple of people that I'm working with in advance, but at the end of the day, it is a very important event.

When I look at the bigger picture, it's not even so much about winning the event per se. If I were to go back to — let's say [the] 2019 [Candidates], before everything changed forever — probably the two biggest regrets I have in chess are related to that Candidates tournament.

I've definitely said [this] many times on stream, but one of [these regrets] is that I

felt I switched my openings up too much. I tried to play completely new openings and it really didn't work out very well.

The other big regret is that I felt that I was simply too nervous, and I didn't put forward my best effort. I had a decent result, but I didn't feel I played to a level that I could have played. For me, that's been a big regret with the Candidates, and that's one of the reasons I wanted to get back there.

Now, considering the situation with streaming and everything else, I feel I'll be able to play a lot better. Whether I win or not, it doesn't really make that big of a difference to me personally, but if I do play well, then I won't really have that in the back of my mind. It won't be something that's still bothering me.

I was going to ask you about this later, but I think it makes sense, given some of the things you just said, to do it now. You've been very open about the positive effect that you think streaming has had on your chess, and maybe even on you as a person.

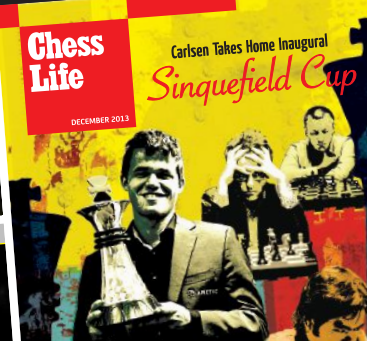
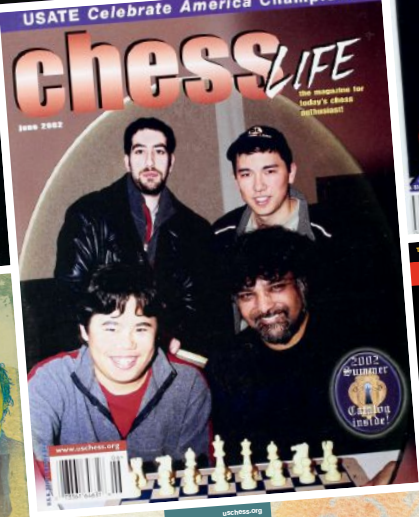
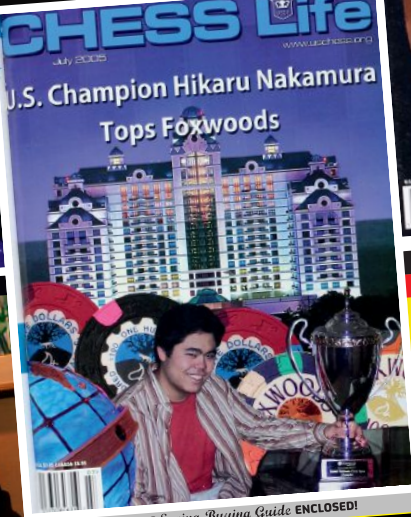
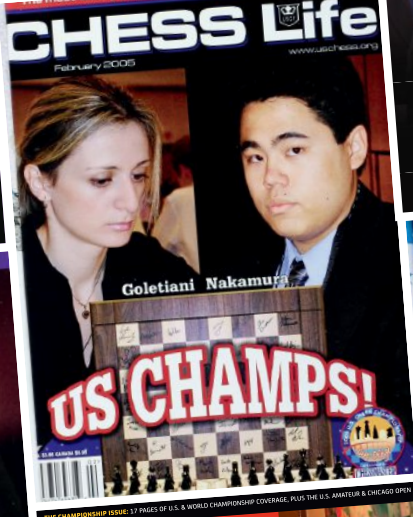
Yes.

You've talked about how during games, you don't freak out anymore if you have a bad position. There's a certain equanimity that you've built and that seems to be benefiting your chess. Do you think that that's part of the streaming? Is it seeing so much chess? Is it having a community that you know is behind you?

It's a combination of everything.

First and foremost, I'm fortunate to be able to make a very good living from streaming. Having that community, [having] all the fans who are out there supporting me, that plays a big role. [Plus] I think that the single biggest factor, above and beyond everything else, is when you don't have to worry [financially] about the outcomes of a game or the outcomes of a tournament.

I look at a lot of the players who are in the Candidates — and I'll use one example, I'll use Richard Rapport, who's a Hungarian grandmaster. For the last couple of years, he's spoken a lot about a lack of invitations to top level tournaments, and generally, how one bad game can ruin everything. I think that's the mindset that almost everyone has. There's such a difference in terms of the weight or the scale of the Candidates tournament — if you win it, you're going to get a match against Magnus for at least a million dollars (or somewhere in that range), versus, say, finishing second or third in the tournament, and making, let's say \$50,000.





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That's nothing to sneeze at, of course, but because there's such a big discrepancy, almost everybody really struggles to keep it together because [the financial difference] really is life changing.

I will say this: I think that, if not for what happened with the pandemic and streaming and everything like that, the odds of me actually qualifying for another Candidates tournament... were maybe five to 10 percent. Because when I look [back] at the end of 2019, things were not going very well. I think I had three really bad events in a row in classical chess, and I wasn't really that inspired by chess at all. Ok, I know I did well in the World Rapid and Blitz — I finished second in both the blitz and the rapid — but I wasn't really all that optimistic or positive about things...

I want to pick up on that in a minute, but before we move past the Candidates, I did want to ask about some of your preparation because you've spoken on this on stream. You've been a bit of an iconoclast in this regard for a long time, because a lot of the top players have teams of grandmasters behind them. But you've worked with your second Kris Littlejohn, who is a master-level player, but that's not the same setup that someone like Caruana or Carlsen have. You've spoken a bit about having to build out a team for this event. Without naming names, how's that going and how have you had to change or update processes?

I have worked with quite a few people over the years. There are people from the past who I can reach out to quite easily to ask them if they want to be part of a team.

This isn't general[ly known], but I'm very proud of innovating. You can talk about Fabiano or even Magnus to some degree, whose main seconds might be a grandmaster, but a lot of people nowadays, they do have someone who's a [rated] little bit lower — a master, an international master, whatever it might be, someone who's very good at using computer engines to understand the evaluations and what [the] computers truly think about certain positions. Or even the differences between the engines themselves like Komodo, for example, and Stockfish.

Being able to understand what someone on that level can do — where they understand how the computer thinks — is more important than what their actual rating level. I [took] that approach when nobody else [did]. I'm very proud of that, because I have seen people who do that now more and more. It's not just solely a team with

super grandmasters — they have someone who's an IM or a master, [and] who is simply able to use the computer engines very well.

At the end of the day, they don't have to play the game — I do, or another super-GM has to. As long as they can get us that position, that's much more important than their true [playing] ability... as long as they understand [the computer evaluations]. We get the positions and work our magic. [And] I'm very proud of that.

Back to your main point about the team, though. I have hired a couple of grandmasters who are helping me out. Since I don't have a lot of time to do preparation, [and] a lot of the other guys do, it's really important to understand what the latest trends are in terms of opening theory and try to come up with ideas. When I look at some of these grandmasters who are part of my team, they're also playing against a lot of top-level players. They're very much aware of what's going on, and having that collection of ideas between them, myself, and Kris... is good. So hopefully it works out.

You grew up using engines. In fact, you're one of the players who really came on the scene while the engines were becoming as strong as they are. But there have been some recent innovations — Leela Chess, [and] the NNUE revolution for Stockfish. How have they changed your understanding of chess? Has there been a quantum leap [with the engines], or is it sort of just the next big thing?

Probably the one thing that's changed for everyone, including myself, is that we're a little bit less materialistic now. I think we definitely try to look for long term compensation.

That's the one thing that everyone's trying to implement, whether it's myself, whether it's Magnus, Fabiano... we are trying to understand where you can sacrifice material for, let's say, a bishop that's very, very good, or an open file, for being able to use that long term in an endgame. Things of that nature.

There are other things too, like pushing your h-pawn, very specifically, which, for the most part, we simply don't understand. We can try to do it, but very rarely does it work out. [So] I would say that [the newest engines help with] understanding the long-term compensation, [and] sacrificing material for activity.

One thing that everybody has learned from Stockfish, Leela, and Alpha Zero in particular, is that material isn't everything, that intuitive attacking compensation, hav-

ing that in your game is really important. That's the one thing we try to do.

Along with pushing the h-pawn, those are probably the two biggest changes. But again, pushing the h-pawn is something that nobody really understands. We try to do it when it makes sense, but it doesn't mean we have any fundamental understanding of why it's good.

You very famously learned most of your chess through playing.

Yes.

You said in interviews, back in 2004 and 2005, that you hadn't read very many chess books, and that you felt you didn't know a lot of chess history. But I've seen a number of your streams where you do [player] rankings. It seems like either you were underselling yourself, or you've done some work to bolster your knowledge of chess history in the intervening years. What changed?

Let me put it this way. I would say that I don't read books cover-to-cover... but I will read little bits here or there. I do go over games that famous world champions have played in the past. I've always had general knowledge, but, for example, if you were to ask me about a specific game that was played in Zurich [1953], there's a good chance I'm not going to know that specific famous game unless I've [otherwise] come across it. In terms of general history though, I have read quite a bit. I just don't pick up a book like [GM Garry Kasparov's] *[My] Great Predecessors* and read it cover to cover.

You were one of the first movers in the chess streaming world. As the recent *The New Yorker* article says in its title, you're the most popular chess streamer on Twitch. Why did you decide to try your hand at streaming, and why do you think you're so good at it?

All the way back in 2017, *Chess.com* had a contract with Twitch — I don't know exactly what kind of contract it was — but *Chess.com* had to [find] streamers, people who would stream the game of chess on Twitch. I want to say [it was] June or July of 2017, when [IM and *Chess.com* CCO] Danny Rensch... came to me and asked if I would try out streaming. The first stream I ever did was in July of 2017. It was fun. It was one hour and that was it. I was done.

I got into it more seriously late in 2018, in October to be specific. I think I streamed maybe six or seven times. [That month] I had a result in the Isle of Man [the *Chess.com*

Isle of Man Masters] which was a big disappointment. I was tied for the lead with two or three rounds to go. I lost this very tough game to [GM] Arkadij Naiditsch. Around that time, I decided that I was a little bit fed up. I wanted to stream a little bit more. Danny had come to that tournament, we had dinner there and, as I've said many times on my stream, [that's when] he came up with the famous quote, "You can maybe be like the Ninja of Chess."

After that tournament, I started streaming quite a bit more. There were some people who were helping me out, and it also coincided with the [2018] World Chess Championship between Fabiano and Magnus. Because of that match, there was a lot of hype around chess. I started streaming every single day around the World Championship.

It wasn't even so much about viewership or any of those sorts of things. It's just something that I enjoyed. I enjoyed interacting with my chat and bringing them the game of chess. As I said before, it's not something I was born to do. I wasn't a natural at it at first — much like [with] chess itself.

[But] as I started doing it more and more, becoming more comfortable talking to people — even though it's one-way as opposed to a two-way street — I started doing it more and more. Even throughout 2019, I wasn't streaming every day. When I had time, I would stream three or four hours. I did it mainly because I enjoyed it. It was not something where I was thinking about [the] financial rewards, or anything of that nature. I did it because I enjoyed it, and it was something to do with the free time that I had.

It [being on stream] feels very fast to me. With all the chat rushing by and everything going on... thanking the subs and banning the people who need to be banned... How did you get it to slow down for you? How did you get it to look so natural?

I think, for me, the hardest thing was learning how to be myself. Not being too stiff... just being loose and interacting. I've always liked the Steve Jobs quote: "You can only connect the dots looking backwards, never looking forward." The reason I bring that up is because, when I think back to when I was much younger and I was playing on the Internet Chess Club (ICC), one of the things that I was very good at was kibitzing — essentially typing back and forth [during a game]. People are writing messages, whether it's during a game, whether it's to each other, and whatnot. Because I had that experience

— [though] it's a little bit different, typing versus talking — I had already gotten used to seeing those lines of text on the screen.

I think that was really, really helpful. [Without] that experience, I'm not sure that I would've been able to do what I've done. But because I have that, I [was able to] I understand how I am, [how] to be loose, and [how to] go with the flow. Then I could combine [that understanding] with that past experience of reading messages... I now respond verbally versus typing, but because I had that experience, it was really invaluable.

Mainly it was figuring how not to be so serious. That is one thing that certainly top-level chess suffers from. Players tend to play it very close to vest, whether it's intentional or not, [but many] people are like that.

[I'm trying to be] the exact opposite, where I try to essentially say what's on my mind. I don't try to pretend that I played some opening line, or I forgot some theory, or things of that nature. Whereas there definitely are quite a few top players who do that in their post-game interviews.

I've learned how to let it all flow. It's something that you grow into when you stream every day and you have those interactions. You see the same people in your community over and over, there's that familiarity. That is one of the biggest things — having that familiarity. You forget that you're in front of a camera in some ways, and you get used to it.

I was going to ask you about that a little bit later, but I think it's worth bringing in here. The chess community is small, and you've always been a public figure in that community. I'm glad you brought up ICC because I remember watching you on ICC doing exactly what you mentioned — kibitzing your way through entire games and having blitz marathons.

There were plenty of times when I would play a game and I would type a couple of things for kibitzing because not everyone had it blocked. Sometimes you'd see all that chat. I really enjoyed those days...

How has being so public, being on screen so much, and being such a big part of so many chess fans' lives now... how has that affected you as a person? How has that changed you?

I don't think it's really changed all that much. You know this, and I think probably a lot of readers know this, but I come from a very chess-centric background. I have an older brother [Asuka Nakamura] who played chess. He was one of the best scholastic players in the country. My stepfather [FM

Sunil Weeramantry], he's been coaching at Hunter for something like 45 years now, a very, very long time.

I think back to when I was younger and I remember seeing chess everywhere. You'd see it everywhere in popular culture and [I would] wonder why it wasn't bigger. In many ways, I think that it's what I always was hoping would happen for chess. [Now] it just so happens that I'm the person who's at the center of all of it.

I don't think a lot has changed for me. Really, for me, it's just amazing to see all the people who follow the game. It doesn't happen all the time, but I would say more often than not, when I go out these days — just go shopping or to a public place — I do actually get recognized. I want to say [it happens] 75, 80% of the time.

This morning, for example, I went to Costco and I got recognized by this kid. He was probably 18 or 19. He said he watched a lot of my streams. For me, having all those people who love the game and [who] want to see chess do well, that is more important to me than anything.

So I don't think it's really changed a whole lot for me other than I don't take vacations and I stream pretty heavily. As a person, I don't think I've changed. I think in large part it's because I already had a certain level of fame or notoriety within the chess world. Now it's a bigger world. It's everyone, as opposed to solely the chess community like before.

You're playing a lot of chess on stream.
Mm-hmm.

Does it ever feel like a job? Like: "Oh, it's time to make the donuts. I've got to get on stream, and I've got to play blitz." Does it ever get to that point for you?

Certainly it does. The hardest part... there were a couple of very difficult periods, but I think the most difficult period was early in 2021. That's because, if you look at the progression of what happened throughout the year in 2020, it was a series of new highs. It was one milestone after another, whether it was streaming to, say, 1,000 people, then becoming 4,000, 5,000, 10,000 people.

Then there were events like PogChamps. There was a Meltwater Tour Final where I played Magnus in September of that year. It was a series of new highs and, as with everything at a certain point, it had to level off or stabilize somewhere.

Certainly I've had plenty of moments where that [having to "go to work" feeling] does pop into my mind, but there are so

many people who've been watching for such a long time. That's always the overriding factor. The second fact is that at the end of the day, chess is still way, way further... it's advanced a lot versus where it was, say, in 2019, at least online. That's how I put in perspective. There are plenty of times where I'll wake up, I'll be like, "I don't want to stream at this time," but then I remember all the fans, and realize that we're still doing so well compared to where we were. Those are the overriding factors.

Let me take it a little further back in terms of how chess has changed. Botvinnik famously said that a chess player should play maybe 50 serious games a year. I just looked in MegaBase before we started. You have 338 games from the first four months of this year. That's including Titled Tuesday and [online] rapid tournaments. Your Chess.com account has 42,000 games on it. I don't even want to think about how many games you played on ICC over the years.

Right.

Was Botvinnik wrong? Or has chess changed in a way that playing that much is now good for you?

I think chess has changed a lot. There's a lot more information readily available to you. Whether it's the opening databases, whether it's the engines... even doing puzzles for that matter, or playing online. There are so many more resources that players have now versus say 50, 60 years ago.

I think Wesley So is a good example of this, someone [who] played a lot of tournaments. He would play a lot of Opens, play a lot of online chess, and he learned from that. At the time [Botvinnik's claim] was probably a fair assessment, especially because the opening ideas probably were good for long periods of time. Nowadays, at the top level at least, you play a great opening idea in, say, the Najdorf... everyone's going to go look at that with a computer engine and, probably within half an hour, they'll know what the refutation is, or how to equalize.

Your opening ideas are not as good as they once were, and, because of information in general, it's not the same. Now there are a lot of players who just play, play, play. I think you see it with the young kids in particular. There are a lot of these young kids who are [rated] maybe 2400 or 2500, who were not able to play during the pandemic, or play over-the-board, but now they're playing in person and a lot of them have gained 100 to 150 [rating] points. It's a different time.

When it was said it was probably true, but now with all the information it's completely different.

I saw a tweet from IM Levy Rozman about the future of streaming the other day, and I wanted to ask you about it. He said, "We're finally seeing the slow decline of the chess boom. Everyone's numbers are down. I'm eternally grateful for the past two years and I feel a sense of responsibility to keep pushing our game to people who haven't been captivated by it yet." We're at a point where the world is beginning to open back up.

Mm-hmm.

There are tournaments, there are spectators allowed at the Saint Louis Chess Club. The world is for better or for worse, going back to normal. Is this going to change chess streaming? Are you seeing an effect in your stream?

I sort of answered this earlier in a different way when you asked if this is a job. The way that I look at it, once again, is that chess is in a much better place online than it was in 2019 or before the Boom. Yes, numbers are down, [but] at the same time, I think one thing that is kind of missed is the fact that there are always going to be periods of really hyped events, and periods where things slow down.

To use an example — I don't want to be too much about the stats here, but if you look at say August or September of last year, there was definitely a big slowdown in my stream and just chess in general. As soon as the World Championship rolled around... late October rolling into November with the World Championship, everything started climbing once again. You're going to see that when the Candidates happen.

I would say that a slow decline is probably not the right way to characterize it. There are going to be periods where the numbers are really high, where there's a lot of people and a lot of interest, and [there will be] periods where it's going to be a little bit slower. The base is much larger now than it was three years ago prior to the pandemic.

I would say separately, as I alluded to before, I've been in the chess world my entire life. I've seen a lot of the booms or busts. You look at Kasparov, [the] PCA, [the] Intel [Grand Prix], all that stuff — there were some very big sponsors, very interested. Chess seemed to be doing very well. That faded into the background.

More recently, I look at Erik Anderson. He and AF4C hosted and sponsored the

U.S. Championship in the early 2000s. Of course, that went by the wayside, too. The way that I look at it... when I use that as the context, I think it's important that you make sure that the base is always growing. I don't really feel the base was necessarily growing during those booms, but now I think there's a much larger base than there was before. It is going to be sustainable for the long term.

Was there a second part of that question? Was it about my streaming?

If you had seen an effect on your stream?

Yeah. Certainly the numbers are down across the board, but as I said, I am expecting it to pick up for the Candidates. My view, long term, is that there will be ups and downs, but the slow decline, where it slowly goes down, down, down forever and dies... I don't really see that happening at this point.

I would also say, however, that... and this is not to sound egotistical, but a lot of it does depend on the big streamers and whether they keep streaming chess. For myself, at least, I don't really have any plans to do anything different. But again, to use chess history, I feel there are always a lot of singular points... these stress points where if something happens to one person, things can fall apart. I intend to do my best to keep on streaming, to bring the game to everybody.

Do you feel a certain responsibility in that regard, given your place in the ecosystem?

Yeah. One of the biggest things — whether it's myself, whether it's someone like [the Botez sisters], I'll use us both as examples here — is that there are people who understand very little about chess who watch both of our streams. [It's] not just chess people... [it's] a lot of people who, honestly, I don't think would watch chess at all, if it wasn't us streaming.

I do feel a big responsibility. That's why, at least for the near future, I don't see anything changing for me. I will play a lot of over-the-board and — I'm sure you were going to ask about this, too — I do intend to play more over-the-board tournaments. But the notion that somehow I'm going to stop streaming and go back to simply playing over-the-board chess is not something that's realistic.

The landscape is changing right now. We're at one of these inflection points in chess history. We've got Chess.com announcing a Global Championship cycle. Play Magnus has instituted what

to a lot of people looks like an [eventual] attempt at a [alternative] rapid World Championship cycle. Of course, FIDE is continuing to run its Classical [championship] cycle. There are a lot of dollars out there competing for eyeballs.

Mm-hmm.

You competed in a lot of the Magnus Tour events [sponsored by Chess24 and Play Magnus ~ed.] last year and also the various Chess.com events. This year, you seem to be mostly playing the Chess.com circuit. Is there a reason for that?

Yeah. One of the most difficult things — and again, I try always to be very objective about the situation — for chess in general is that, because it's this small pool or this small pond of fish, everybody feels like they are competing against each other.

I feel that's not been a good thing in many ways. I am sponsored by *Chess.com*, and I have been for many, many years now. But I did play in the Meltwater tournaments last year. Unfortunately, as far as this series of events being put together, or the contract they [Chess24] offered me, it wasn't something that I could even sign, frankly. It wouldn't let me stream or do other things. There were a lot of little things that... I don't need to go into details on, [but they] just prevented me from accepting it.

The thing, unfortunately, about Chess24 and the events they put on is that they did not listen to the concerns from players. I remember very distinctly that, around the same time when I chose not to play, the people at *Chess.com* asked me what sort of format I thought would make for a good event. What they hinted at, or alluded to, was that there were quite a few players who were part of the previous Meltwater events, [and] who were not happy.

Unfortunately, Chess24 didn't really take into consideration how the players felt about certain commitments, [and] also [didn't account for] the return of over-the-board chess.

That's really what led to the creation of the Rapid Chess Championship, which is happening on *Chess.com*. [And the] Global Championship now, which is another very big event. Everybody's competing.

The next year is going to be very critical, I would say. I feel that if online chess remains where it's at now, I don't see it going away. If anything, it's only going to slowly keep chipping away at over-the-board tournaments and what FIDE is trying to do, simply because it's much easier to get sponsors. People are willing to put money towards

chess that's online versus over-the-board, and the main reason is simply eyeballs.

It's very easy. When you go on a *Chess.com* stream, [or] you go on my stream, you show 10,000 viewers, 20,000, whatever the number might be. You can [easily] say this many people were watching at a given time.

When you look at over-the-board tournaments — tournaments in St. Louis, or tournaments like Gibraltar, or even the World Championship — the only numbers you really can give are unique visitors to your website from X number of countries. I don't think that's a way to sell big companies on major sponsorships. If online chess stays where it's at, even right now with these slightly lower numbers, I think it's here to stay. It's going to slowly keep on chipping away.

Is this good for chess? What I mean by that is: having competing cycles, having contractual issues that may prevent certain players from playing against other players, or may give certain advantages to some players in certain cycles. In the long run, is this good for chess? Is it good for chess fans? What's the effect?

I sort of hinted at it before. At the end of the day, it would be much better if everybody could come to terms and agree to try and work together with their own groups and what they're trying to do as opposed to becoming a situation where I feel it's a winner take all. If you end up with the winner-take-all [situation], you're going to have a very clear winner down the road and two organizations are going to suffer, or maybe even go bankrupt for that matter. I don't know if it's actually good, and I wish that people would sort—

I'm sorry, can I ask...

Which one that I think is going to win?

Yeah.

If you look at the general trend, the way things are going, I think the big winner is going to be *Chess.com* in the long term.

That's simply because they're the most popular site out there, and they have the most unique events. They have the most unique users. They're financially viable. They're definitely making a lot of money. They have a lot of investors. I know they're [privately owned], but they have some very big investors who are backing them.

In any sort of world where it's a winner-take-all, I really see *Chess.com* taking over more and more, and FIDE and Chess24 suffering along the way. Whether it's good for

chess, I'm not sure. I would hope that people can reach agreements and understandings, but it is chess, and a lot of people want to do their own thing.

There's a new generation coming in American chess. You've already spoken of the Sinquefelds and the effect that they've had on the American chess scene. You've done battle with a lot of these up-and-coming players over the years, [especially] online. Who strikes you as the leading talents for the future?

Just to add to that a little bit, it is really great to see what has happened since I was up-and-coming. I remember back when I was a FIDE Master, after I became a master at 10 years old, in order to play in the norm tournaments, I had to go abroad. There were basically no norm tournaments in the U.S. at the time. Maybe [there were] some at the Mechanics' Institute in San Francisco, but that was about it.

To see all the norm tournaments [now], whether it's in places like Charlotte, places like Chicago, St. Louis... it's really great to see all these juniors having the opportunity to compete.

Beyond that, there are some of these juniors now who are close to 2700 [FIDE], who, unfortunately, are not quite strong enough to play these major events, but there are still events in St. Louis which they can compete in to gain rating points and improve. It's really good to see what has happened with American chess.

In terms of who I think are the brightest talents, I actually want to say, that [GMs] Jeffrey Xiong, Hans Niemann, maybe Sam Sevian... those are probably the three juniors who have the most potential to improve, at least at the moment. There are plenty of others who are up and coming, like [GM] Abhimanyu Mishra and other young kids as well, but in terms of ones who are very, very close to that level, those are the three.

Whether they get there or not remains to be seen, but I think based off the ample opportunities they've had to play in St. Louis against the best players — like Fabiano, Levon, Wesley, myself — I think any of them can make it. It's exciting.

You mentioned a little earlier that you are planning to play some more over-the-board events. Do you have a list of tournaments that you're looking to play? The U.S. Championship, the Grand Chess Tour, anything like that?

The Grand Chess Tour I already chose not to play. I decided some time ago on that

one, and there are a couple of reasons that I chose not to play. But the main reason is [that] I have to do what is best for me, and at the moment, streaming is still significantly better than competing in chess tournaments year-round. Due to the schedule, I simply couldn't take that sort of time away from my commitments to sponsors like Twitch and TSM and *Chess.com*...

My attitude is [that] I'm going to play tournaments here or there. I will play tournaments that are part of the cycle, of course, like the Grand Prix, the World Cup, and so forth. Beyond that, it'll probably be just picking a tournament here or there.

Even if I don't play in certain tournaments, there are organizers who have reached out to me about their events. Some of them, which I played many years ago, are smaller of course... [but] I do try to give them some exposure. I might play a tournament here or there, which isn't even a super top-level event simply because of where I'm at and the potential to give them that exposure. That is a big part as well.

So you're coming to [one of my tournaments in] Omaha, that's what you're trying to tell me?

Coming to Omaha? Maybe for next year's annual [Berkshire Hathaway] meeting. There you go. [smirks]

I'll play here or there, but I don't have a set list of tournaments. There will have to be something about the tournament that excites me besides simply the prize won.

When I think about a tournament that went away for a couple of years... obviously due to the pandemic but I think it's coming back next year, a tournament like Gibraltar, [that's] definitely something that appeals to me because it's an Open tournament. There are a lot of players there, it's in a pretty good location [both] weather-wise and in terms of places to interact with people. A tournament like that, for example, would be more interesting to me than... I guess now you don't have tournaments in Russia, but, for example, in the past there were tournaments like the Tal Memorial, which was held in Moscow. A tournament like Gibraltar would be much more appealing to me than a tournament like the Tal Memorial.

Two more questions. You turned down interviews with a number of journalists as you're leading up to the Candidates, including, I'm told, *Europe Échecs* and *The New Yorker*, but you agreed to speak to *Chess Life*. Why?

First of all, *The New Yorker*, I'm not exactly

clear what that situation was. [This refers to the article by Jacob Sweet, "The Most Popular Chess Streamer on Twitch," published April 12 on *newyorker.com*. ~ed.] I noticed some emails [I] received the day that the article was published. That one... I'm not one hundred percent sure [how that worked].

In terms of *Europe Échecs*, the main reason is simply because I'm very busy and there are a lot of things going on and my time is valuable. If I'm going to give an interview, I do want to give it to what I perceive to be one of the most important publications.

When I think about *Chess Life*, [I recall] the number of times that I've been in the magazine, that I've been on the cover or given interviews... it stretches back to when I was nine years old. I was on the cover with Sunil in '98, I think it was — or maybe that's when I broke master — with the pictures from the Intrepid, the one where he's wearing that white sweater... I really would like to see American chess keep moving forward, [and] *Chess Life* seems like the most apt publication to do an interview with.

I am very proud to see what has happened. I don't really like to toot my horn in terms of accomplishments, but when I look back, another thing that I'm really, really proud of is that I moved to St. Louis in 2010. I was very involved from the get-go in terms of what they've tried to build there and... [it's important to me] just to give back and then do what I can for American chess.

It's funny you should mention that cover, because when I was doing my research, I... [holds up May 1998 *Chess Life*]

Oh, you have it even, nice.

I went and dug this out of my...

Wow. Yeah.

Out of my loose issues.

Yeah. That's one event that I wish at some point could happen again. That was from what they called... was it the Chess-a-thon? I think that is what they called it?

Yeah.

It was a bunch of simuls. I remember that event — there were so many masters there who were giving simuls, and that was such a big event. It would be nice if one day something like that could happen again. Because I think around that time is when it stopped [happening]. That was pretty memorable.

I wanted to ask you, as I was sitting here getting ready for this [interview], I looked at this and saw your stepfather. I

played him years ago at the Nassau Chess Club.

Oh, wow. Okay. You played him on Long Island. Yeah.

I remember seeing you cutting your teeth at Nassau.

Mm-hmm.

I wonder what this journey looks like looking back — you talked about "connecting the dots afterwards." That Steve Jobs's quote. What does this all mean? Looking back at that 10-year-old kid, that fresh-faced kid sitting there on the cover, what would you tell him about all this?

About everything that has happened? It's similar to another question I've been asked: "What would I tell myself 10 or 15 years ago when I was a strong chess player coming up?"

I think at the end of the day, what I would say is: Believe in the journey in chess. Enjoy it because it's only going to be here once. When I look back on that... even with my chess career, I feel I've had a lot of periods in time where I've had a love / hate relationship with the game and everything that entails. You have those moments, but know that you believe in it. Follow that path to where it may lead. ♡

Interested in keeping up with Fabiano Caruana and Hikaru Nakamura as they try to become Candidates? Here's what you need to know about the 2022 FIDE Candidates Tournament.

Games begin on June 17, and run through July 4 in Madrid, Spain. Tiebreaks, if needed, are on July 5.

The official website is: worldchampionshipcycle.fide.com

Daily coverage will be available at *Chess.com*, *Chess24*, and *Lichess*, among many others. *Chess Life Online* will also feature extensive reporting.

Live coverage on Twitch and YouTube will also be offered by many outlets, including *Chess.com*, *Chess24*, and the Saint Louis Chess Club. Nakamura's Twitch channel will also feature live analysis: www.twitch.tv/gmhikaru