



Almira Skripchenko: 'I learned to play poker in the taxi ride to the hall, reached the final of my first tourney, and eliminated two of my friends along the way.'

Psychology and trash talk combined with chess study skills

# The Chess Queens of Poker

Jennifer Shahade, Almira Skripchenko and Qiyu Zhou, all three national champions, play chess and professional poker. They discovered that poker provides an excellent outlet for competition, one that has helped them to grow and learn new skills.

by Dylan Loeb McClain

**E**lite women chess players are rare, as are elite women professional poker players. Rarer still are women who compete in both games at the highest levels.

Jennifer Shahade, Almira Skrip-

chenko and Qiyu Zhou, also known as Nemo or Nemsko, are among that select group. The three have different backgrounds, but they have overlapping perspectives about why they play both games and what they like about them.

All started as chess players. Indeed, as Shahade pointed out, it is not possible for children to play poker in tournaments because they are usually held in casinos, which are off limits to people under 21. Though chess is as



competitive a game as there is, all three have found poker to be another excellent outlet for competition, one that has helped them to grow and learn new skills.

### Starting with the Game of Queens

It is difficult for Shahade to remember a time when she did not play chess. Her father, Michael, is a FIDE master and her older brother, Greg, got the chess bug early and became an international master. Shahade started playing when she was five or six.

Like many girls, Shahade stopped chess when she reached her early teens. Part of the reason was the social issues – girls that age often spend time with other girls and there weren't that many in chess. Shahade had also become interested in 'more creative endeavors,' notably acting.

Then one summer, she played in the United States Open and she had a good result, including pulling off

some upsets. She also played blitz in the evenings and held her own against masters, even though her rating at the time was only 1,400 or 1,500. That same summer, she went to an acting camp and had a horrible experience when people at the camp made fun of her. The contrast between the two experiences made her choice easy: 'I was ready to go all-in for chess,' she said.

She progressed quickly and went on to win the United States Women's Chess Championship in 2002 and again in 2004. She later turned her focus to helping girls improve in the game by co-founding a chess non-profit called 9 Queens and becoming the program director of women's chess for the United States Chess Federation, a position she left last September.

Skripchenko and Nemo had similar introductions to chess: It was imposed on them by their parents.

Skripchenko was born in Moldova and her mother, Naira Agababyan,

## Social Media

Nemo streams on Twitch as akaNemsko, has a YouTube channel (akaNemsko), and is on Instagram (@akanemsko), X, formerly known as Twitter (@akaNemsko), and Facebook (Qiyu Zhou).

Shahade is on Instagram (@jenshahade), on X (@JenShahade), and Facebook (Jennifer Shahade), and she has a home page (jennifershahade.com).

Skripchenko is on Instagram (@almiraskripchenko) and has appeared in some videos on the YouTube channel Kasparovchess. Hendon Mob Poker Database tracks winnings for poker players. As of May 2024, Shahade had earned \$480,254, Skripchenko \$262,897, and Nemo \$43,512.



Qiyu Zhou, also known as Nemo or Nemsko: 'I have been playing chess for twenty years, but now I take poker much more seriously than chess. I play chess usually in more casual settings, in clubs, in bars. I'm playing with my friends and focusing a lot more on the content aspect.'





## Skripchenko's father pushed her to play chess, making her study from six to eight hours a day

was a talented player, winning the Moldovan Women's Championship seven times. But she said it was really her father, who was a chess trainer, who pushed her to play, making her study from six to eight hours a day and hitting her when she lost. Though she says that he helped turn her into the talented player that she is, those years seem to have left at least some sort of psychological mark. She sprinkles her conversation with the word 'violent' when searching for a way to describe a difficult or extreme situation that she has faced.

'I sacrificed everything on the altar of chess', Skripchenko said.

Skripchenko won the Girls Under-16 World Championship in 1992 and came third a year later in the Under-18 Championship.

In the late 1990s, she met and married Joël Lautier, one of France's top grandmasters, after which she moved to France, a move she said saved her. In her adopted country, she quickly installed herself as one of the top players. She has won the French Women's Championship seven times, most recently in 2022 (which broke a tie for most titles with Sophie Milliet).

Skripchenko won the European Women's Championship in 2001 and also reached the quarterfinals of the 2000, 2001 and 2010 knockout World Championship tournaments.

Nemo's career has not been as long as Shahade's or Skripchenko's because she is younger, but it has also been impressive. She grew up in Finland and won the Under-10 section of the Finnish Championship when she was five. She finished runner-up in the World Youth Girls Under-8 Championship and won the Finnish Women's Champion-

ship in 2010 when she was 10. Shortly thereafter, she moved to Canada and switched federations.

As a Canadian, she won the World Under-14 Girls Championship in 2014 and the Canadian Women's Championship two years later. She was the first Canadian woman to earn the FIDE master and woman grandmaster titles.

In 2020, she began a Twitch streaming channel called *akaNemsko*, and quickly built a large following. In August of that year, she signed with Counter Logic Gaming, becoming the first chess player anywhere to sign with an esports company.

Despite her successes in chess, the hangover from being pushed to play by her parents stays with her. 'I was super forced by my parents to play chess so my own passion for the game lies mostly within being able to travel and meet people', she said in an interview. 'I try to play chess for myself for fun these days and if I think that a tournament is fun, I'll play it.'

### Finding Poker

As with chess, Shahade's path to poker was, most immediately, through her brother Greg. He started playing first. At the time, Shahade was living in Brooklyn and there were others in her chess circle who also started playing, including Ben Johnson, the host of the Perpetual Chess Podcast, and Mike Klein, the face of ChessKid.

'For me the trajectory with chess and poker is very similar', Shahade explained. 'I wasn't really that into it at the very beginning. I liked it, but I wasn't in love with it. And probably this is also related – I wasn't that good at it in the beginning.'

Shahade, who is sponsored by PokerStars, said she had to play a lot, particularly online, to improve at poker because experience playing many different types of hands is important.

'You need the repetition because one of the best ways to get good at poker is to get lots and lots of repetitions in. I feel like that is even more true for poker than for chess,' Shahade said. 'You need a lot of reps to get a sense for how good your hand is and for what people have, for different tells, and for different bets and making sure that your timing is consistent. Some things you don't have to worry about in chess because it is a complete information game.'

Skripchenko's introduction to poker was happenstance. A couple of friends had come to visit and then explained that they could not stay long because they were leaving to go to a local poker tournament. She asked them to teach her. 'I learned to play poker in the taxi ride to the hall', said Skripchenko. 'I went to the final of my first tourney, and I eliminated both of my friends along the way.'

While Skripchenko, who plays for Winamax, has become a skilled player, immediate success, as any experienced poker player will explain, is often a function of luck. As in chess, there is a learning curve. 'But having early success is also important', Shahade said.

'If you get to the final table or you win it, you will get an adrenaline rush like no other. If you experience that rush early on into your foray into poker, your

## Shahade started playing poker in Brooklyn, with her brother Greg, Ben Johnson and Mike Klein

After playing poker on a professional level, Skripchenko had become a different chess player, incorporating psychology. 'I would think of a move that changes the nature of the game. I would think, What is the percentage that my opponent would find the best move?'



chances of sticking with it will be a lot higher', explained Shahade.

Indeed, like Skripchenko, Shahade did well early on.

'I had some really nice runs in the World Series of Poker ladies event and that was definitely a big, big motivator because I was much less experienced than most of the people in my field', she said. 'I remember everybody at the table was very mad at me because I am so awkward with my chips. I wasn't vibing in the same way as other people were because I was so new to live poker. But my actual play was pretty good, especially towards the end of the tournament. I played good in an annoying way, like someone who only plays the London System in chess and keeps winning. People just didn't want me there.'

Nemo's introduction to poker was also a bit out of the blue. She said that

she had always been 'aware' of poker, but then in 2021, Fedor Holz, a German poker professional, reached out online and asked if she would be interested in an exchange of services: She would teach him chess and in return he would teach her poker.

She took to it immediately. 'I really like the adrenaline when it comes to poker', she said.

Nemo, who is sponsored by GGPoker, also found that there were similarities that helped her make the transition. 'Poker tournaments are very similar to chess tournaments in the sense that they

are very long. It requires a lot of patience; it requires a lot of critical thinking.'

#### Using Chess Skills in Poker

The three women say that the study habits they developed to become elite chess players have helped them in poker.

'Chess players have a really good way of studying – they know how to break the game up into different parts', Shahade said. 'A chess player will look at poker and say, 'I am going to study what happens when I open the button [the player who bets last] and the big

**'In chess, I was conditioned to win all the time, but in poker, statistically you fail most of the time'**



blind calls' because that is going to happen a lot. It sounds very trivial, but it is this methodical idea of creating a database. That is actually not that intuitive to some poker players because they come at it with a completely different approach. That is a really big edge that chess players have.'

Nemo agreed. 'With poker, it is the constant revision of my hands, constant revision of charts, like preflop charts, it is the coaching, watching videos, everything that I normally would have done for chess when I was a teenager, I do now for poker.'

Chess players are also better at using engines and artificial intelligence tools to analyze how to improve their play in poker, according to Shahade.

'There are a lot of software tools and AI in poker that remind me of the stuff we use in chess, although I actually think that they are harder to use in poker. That is why I think that a chess player has a bit of a head start because they see some of the fallacies', she said. 'If we are analyzing a position [in chess] and the evaluation goes from 0.1 to 0, that doesn't affect us that much unless there is some kind of trend or plan that we are missing. Whereas in poker, people look up some kind of chart and they see that they lost a tiny fraction of a big blind with a play and they feel like they made a mistake. So, it is taking it in perspective: What really is a mistake and how do we define it in a useful way? That is very natural for chess players.'

### Learning from Poker

The skills and information flow can go both ways between the two games.

For Skripchenko, the process was eye-opening. 'In chess, I was conditioned to win all the time, but in poker, statistically you fail most of the time', she said. 'In chess, you play against the pieces. You have to introduce the human element in poker.'

After playing poker on a professional level from 2008 to 2011, Skripchenko said that she had become a different chess player. 'When I started to prepare for my opponents in chess, I started to



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prepare for my opponents psychologically. I started to observe my opponents during the games. I would think of a move that changes the nature of the game. I would think: What is the percentage that my opponent would find the best move?'

Skipchenko pointed out that her new approach to chess seemed to work well as she continued to win championships and became a quarterfinalist in the world championship tournament.

Shahade believes that the wide use of computers and databases in chess has made psychology an important part of the game. 'Chess has become more psychological, even at the top level, because they try to find openings that people were not really expecting. That

was always true but now I feel that it is even more relevant because of the way that people use AI to study chess. They are looking for lines that maybe their opponent didn't look at, even if they are slightly subpar. That is very poker-like thinking.'

#### Trash Talk and Sexism

There are obvious differences in chess and poker when it comes to the social element. In chess, the players cannot talk to each other. That is not true in poker. 'You can heckle, you can trash talk, you do whatever you would like,' Nemo said, adding that that is part of what makes the game fun.

Indeed, that element of poker is actually essential because experienced

poker players can glean useful information from others at the table through the chatter, a skill that not every chess player has or can develop. 'It is not that chess players aren't fun', Shahade said, 'But they are not used to talking during the game to try to get information. In general, that is not going to be their forte.'

The women agreed that sexism exists in both games. Though ideally it would not make a difference, part of the reason is undoubtedly that women make up a small percentage of the players and some men feel comfortable sometimes saying or doing things that they might not otherwise say or do if the numbers were more balanced.

Each game also has its own issues.



Shahade said that a big barrier for women in poker was financial.

‘Women have less money. Period,’ she said. ‘The most important thing for a poker player is to have money. If you don’t have enough, you have less options, it is harder to travel to tournaments and you might feel more afraid of losing. So, there are ripple effects from not having that comfort feeling of having enough capital.’

Shahade added that the fact that most poker competitions are in casinos, where a certain amount of sexism is glorified, can also be off-putting.

When it comes to chess, she said, ‘I think there is a lot of misogyny embedded in the culture with the idea that chess is a game that rewards brilliance and that women aren’t inherently brilliant.’

Nemo, who is a FIDE master and woman’s grandmaster, pointed to the women’s titles in chess, which she said many people find confusing. Though she personally does not care about what people call her, it has led to some difficult conversations.

‘It is a constant battle for me to explain,’ she said, continuing: ‘No, I am also not a grandmaster, although thank you very much, I am just a woman grandmaster, but, no, that also does not make me inferior to men. It just means that I am not a grandmaster and that is also totally okay.’

Nemo hasn’t experienced any sexist behavior in poker tournaments, but has had trouble in chess. ‘That might also be because I’ve spent a lot more time in chess,’ she said.

One recent example: she went to a Pub Chess event in Toronto. It was a casual five-round tournament in a bar, and she streamed her games. A guy

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came up to play with her and started ‘aggressively flirting’, she said. ‘He was asking for my number, a date, and would not accept, ‘No.’ It is the type of thing where if I didn’t know I was on camera, if I didn’t know that I have safety in numbers and literally have the Internet to back me up on this, I would have probably called the organizers and said, ‘This is completely unacceptable behavior.’

Later, she posted the video on social media and the guy contacted her, asking her to take it down because, he said, ‘This is not who I am.’ Nemo said that annoyed her even more than his behavior during their game. ‘I personally don’t care that much if people make sexist remarks because it is good for content. What does annoy me though is if someone asks me to take the video down. If you are going to be an ass, at least let me profit off of it.’

Looking at both games, Shahade said, ‘Once a woman is successful in the field, she gets a lot of support and there are a lot of people who want to welcome her because there are fewer of them and so people are excited – it means more representation, more diversity. Overall, I would say that people are welcoming but then there are those bad actors and exceptions. That is true in both.’

Shahade said that there is a lot to do to address sexism in poker and chess, but that right now chess ‘needs more love and attention.’ Skripchenko and Nemo agree.

### Which Game They Prefer

Poker has become important to Nemo. ‘I take poker much more seriously than I take chess. I have been playing chess for twenty years, but probably haven’t studied it in four years’, she said. Part of the reason is the social environment of poker. ‘That is why most of the time these days when I play chess I am playing in more casual settings – I am playing in clubs, I’m playing in bars, I’m playing with my friends and focusing a lot more on the content aspect for chess.’

Shahade said that if she had to choose between the games, she would choose chess because her son, Fabien, really likes the game. If not for that, she said, ‘I would play poker and study chess because studying chess and looking at chess problems is such a joy. It is so beautiful. Writing about chess, writing chess books, in some ways, is the best part of chess for me: the books, the puzzles and the problems.’

While Shahade ‘loves the cross-generational appeal of chess’, one advantage of poker is that ‘there is something nice about having a game that is only for grownups.’

Skripchenko said that poker has helped her ‘reinvent’ and learn about herself. It also has given her a chance to ‘express myself and to be more nuanced’. She explained: ‘In poker, you need to know who you are. If you do not, you are not able to bluff.’ For that reason, the game is ‘a form of psychoanalysis’ that has given her something very valuable.

‘It is the first time in my life when I have this feeling that I am enough’, she said.

Nevertheless, chess remains her focus. ‘I find chess fascinating. It is the philosopher’s stone.’ ■

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