

# My Pandemic Gambit

Or, why I'm terrible at chess and having the time of my life

BY NATHAN SMITH



LIKE MANY BAD IDEAS, MY interest in chess began during the pandemic. Somewhere between online ukulele lessons and my third existential crisis, I decided that what my life really needed was a hobby specifically designed to prove I wasn't as clever as I thought.

At first, it seemed harmless enough. I was 30, trapped in a one-bedroom apartment in Shenzhen that smelled faintly of hand sanitizer and despair, and chess felt — how do I put this? — productive.

I downloaded an app, expecting a few gentlemanly games with retirees and hobbyists. Instead, in my very first match, my opponent introduced me to Scholar's Mate, and before

I could even process what had happened, the game was over, marked by a snarky “gg.”

Still, there was something strangely addictive about it all — the precision, the logic, the way 32 little pieces could pull you back for just one more game. Chess became my intellectual treadmill: I wasn't getting anywhere, but I couldn't stop playing.

After a few months of this cheerful humiliation, I began to suspect I might need professional help. Not therapy — though that wouldn't have hurt — but an actual chess teacher. Someone who could explain why my pawns seemed magnetically drawn toward disaster, and how every “bold attack” I launched ended in a swift and merciless counterblow.

## My Mentor in the Noble Art of Losing Slowly

I met my chess teacher, Pierce, who also lived in China, in the middle of a particularly long lockdown, when everyone was trying to reinvent themselves over Wi-Fi. A mutual friend introduced us (apparently, I'd been complaining too much about losing to children who probably still believed in Santa Claus). Pierce, my friend said, was a serious player who wanted to become a chess coach.

We met twice a week on WeChat, China's homegrown version of Facebook. Pierce would appear on my screen with a smile that seemed to say, *Don't worry, we'll fix you yet.*

His teaching style was calm and unhurried but never dull. He loved drawing on history; every lesson came with a story. One minute he was explaining a quiet positional move; the next, he was telling me about how a 19th-century grandmaster had used the same idea to humiliate a Prussian nobleman. I sometimes felt like I was getting two degrees at once: in chess and in European history.

What began as a diversion became a kind of lifeline. China was still in and out of lockdown, the world outside muffled and strange, but every Thursday afternoon I'd log on, and for an hour, the chaos narrowed into 64 little squares.

Pierce would analyze my latest disaster with an engineer's precision, and I'd nod along, secretly amazed that anyone could care so deeply about a bishop trapped behind its own pawns.



PHOTOS: COURTESY NATHAN SMITH

## Me vs. the Wall (Wall Still Winning)

Not long after our lessons began to really click, Pierce passed away. To honor his memory, I pressed on by myself. I bought *How to Reassess Your Chess* by Jeremy Silman and spent long evenings underlining sentences I only half-understood. I subscribed to online courses, watched grandmasters narrate their thoughts in soothing monotones, and replayed games frame by frame, like a detective searching for clues.

And things finally started to make sense. I could spot forks and pins without having to pause and squint at the board. I could calculate distant opposition in pawn endings — a phrase that once sounded like orbital physics — and occasionally even saw a tactic before it saw me.

For the first time, the chaos of the board felt navigable, like learning a foreign language well enough to order dinner without accidentally proposing marriage.

But eventually, I hit a wall. A thick, immovable, granite wall. No matter how much I studied, I stayed stubbornly average. My *Chess.com* rating flatlined and my blunders remained loyal. Two years later, I'm still there — perpetually 1000, the statistical embodiment of “trying your best.”

I've had plenty of obsessions before: photography, fishkeeping, writing. All of them started out feeling impossibly complex, full of strange jargon and invisible rules, but the deeper I went, the more sense they made. My photos got sharper; my fish stopped dying; my stories began to sound like they were written by a human instead of a malfunctioning thesaurus. In most hobbies, knowledge rewards you. You put in the hours, and the world opens up a little wider. Chess isn't like that. The learning curve only gets steeper.

Sometimes I think Pierce would've gotten a kick out of how little I've improved over the past two years.

## Broadcasting Live from the Department of Clueless Analysis

By the time the 2023 World Championship rolled around, I had been playing long enough to know two things: one, that I was terrible, and two, that everyone else was

terrifyingly good. Still, I tuned in faithfully, watching Ding Liren battle Ian Nepomniachtchi from my apartment in China like some hopelessly underqualified sports analyst.

The commentary was full of phrases that sounded meaningful but may as well have been from the Hogwarts spell book. “This could be a critical moment if Ding decides to transpose into a Catalan structure,” one commentator said. I nodded sagely, as if this were a decision I, too, might one day face. In truth, Ding could have been about to play Uno for all I knew.

And then there was the drama — the infamous moment when Ding froze, staring at the clock as precious minutes drained away. The chat exploded. The commentators grew reverent. I sat forward, caught up in the tension, though I wasn't entirely sure why. Was this a tactical crisis? A psychological breakdown? Or was he just trying to remember whether he'd left the stove on?

Later in a different game came that miraculous pawn move — the one every analyst gasped over. I watched the tiny square light up on my screen, everyone online calling it “brilliant,” and I believed them. I had no earthly idea why it was brilliant, but I felt it was.

Though this also led me to realize I had to face a hard truth: I was never going to be good at chess. Not bad, exactly — just permanently, stubbornly average. I hovered in that Elo no-man's-land where you know enough to see your mistakes but not enough to prevent them. It's like developing self-awareness in the middle of a slow-motion car crash.

For a while, I found this depressing. Improvement had always been my hobby. Surely chess would yield if I just studied hard enough. It didn't. My rating refused to budge, as if the algorithm itself had decided “No; this is who you are now.”

Then one night, studying yet another humiliating postmortem of my own game, I had a revelation: If millions of overweight Americans can enjoy football without playing in the NFL, surely I can enjoy chess without ever breaking 1200. I found myself loving the game not because I understood it, but because it kept inviting me to try.

## In Which I Accidentally Become a Local Hero

And this revelation turned out to be exact-

ly what I needed — mostly because once you've accepted you're terrible, you become fearless. You start playing like a man who has discovered that dignity is optional, but enthusiasm is free.

That's how I ended up playing more over-the-board chess. When the pandemic ended in China (or at least when they finally let us out of our apartments), I took an online teaching job and started wandering the world. Chess became my portable social life.

Earlier this year, I played a magnificent game at a park in Bishkek. I hadn't meant to, of course. I'd just gone out for a walk and somehow wandered into what can only be described as the Central Asian equivalent of a Roman forum for chess players. The air smelled faintly of tea, cigarettes, and intellectual superiority.

These old Soviet republics bleed chess. You can feel it in the air, see it in the posture of old men bent over wooden boards like monks at prayer. Every park bench seems to double as a chess table. Even the pigeons, I swear, pause to analyze positions before landing. In Kyrgyzstan, chess isn't just a pastime; it's a civic duty, a small act of national continuity.

I sat down at a weathered table where a group of men were already deep in a game that looked like it had begun sometime during the Brezhnev era. They greeted me warmly, the way chess players in this part



of the world do when they spot fresh meat. One of them motioned for me to sit; another offered me a cigarette, and within minutes I found myself drafted into battle. I sat across from a man they introduced as Chynarbek. He was enormous, the kind of person who looks like he can win both a chess game and a bar fight at the same time.

I tried to explain that I was barely an intermediate player, but the men around us smiled and assured me not to worry. “Just play,” one said. So I did. They gathered behind me, muttering in Russian, occasionally groaning when I made a particularly inspired mistake.

Chynarbek, meanwhile, played with serene inevitability, his pieces gliding across the board like precision machinery. Within 15 moves, I was in the kind of position that could only be described as “educational.” Then, somehow, amid the wreckage, I saw it — a tiny beam of divine light shining through my otherwise clouded brain. A skewer of his queen and rook!

No one else seemed to notice. I checked it twice, then a third time, convinced it was a mirage. But it was real. My heart hammered as I lifted the bishop, made the move, and looked up. The murmuring stopped. Some-

one whispered. Then the men around the board erupted into delighted laughter and shouts of approval, as if I’d just reinvented the game. Chynarbek said something in angry Russian. The tone alone told me he was cursing with the kind of artistry that needed no translation.

For a few minutes in Bishkek, I wasn’t a tourist, a teacher, or a mediocre player. I was the man who had seen the move.

The position turned completely. With generous hints from the men at my back, I fought on and somehow managed to win. It was absurd, glorious, and entirely beyond my actual ability.

## How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love My Blunders

In *The Immortal Game*, David Shenk writes about Caliph al-Amin of the Abbasid Empire, who was playing chess in his palace in Baghdad in 813 C.E. while the city was under siege: rocks from catapults, flaming

oil, arrows, battering rams, the whole apocalyptic buffet. And yet the caliph sat calmly at the board. When a messenger begged him to focus on “more urgent matters,” he waved him off: “Patience, my friend. In a few moves, I shall give Kauthar checkmate.”

That story always stuck with me. During the lockdowns in China, when I first discovered chess, the world outside swung wildly between panic and bureaucracy. Meanwhile, I sat in my tiny apartment wondering why every move I made seemed to betray me. If the caliph could keep playing while his empire collapsed, I figured I could probably survive blundering a rook without despair.

I’ve accepted that I’ll never ascend the rating ladder. That’s fine. There’s a quiet joy in sitting down at the board, pushing pieces around, and pretending that whatever just happened was part of my plan all along. I don’t need brilliance, just the occasional moment where I can squint at the board and think, “Huh; that almost looked intentional.”

And on a hopeful note: At the time of writing, I am within sniffing distance of 1100. Maybe by the time I finish polishing this article, I’ll finally break free of 1000-jail.

(Dear reader, I have not.) ♠

# 2026

## National Elementary K-6 Championships

♠ US CHESS May 1-3, 2026 | Baltimore, MD



# MARK YOUR CALENDARS

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## National Middle School K-8 Championship

♠ US CHESS May 15-17, 2026 | Round Rock, TX



# 2026

## National High School K-12 Championship

♠ US CHESS March 27-29, 2026 | Chicago, IL

