

ACHIEVING MY AIM



Reflections on
earning the
GM title, and
what I learned
along the way.

BY GM ARTHUR GUO

PART I - THE OTHER SIDE OF CHESS SUCCESS

IF ANY WORD WERE TO DEFINE ME, IT would be “chess.” Consequently, I’ve thought a lot about what I’ve told my friends and my teachers over the years about it: how I intentionally leave out the parts I think people won’t want to hear, and why I often take for granted everything this beautiful journey across 64 squares has exposed me to.

I’m writing this article because I don’t want to continue succumbing to those impulses.

I started playing chess when I was around six years old. I wish I had understood how to improve or how to approach chess at that stage, but I didn’t. It was only my mom’s

unconditional love and my dad’s unwavering support that enabled me to fail and fail again for years so I could figure things out on my own and grow.

Often, the prolonged frustration I’d feel would have me wondering if chess was actually my thing. I would put unhealthy pressure on myself to meet my standards of success, and my parents naturally had expectations for me as well. When I didn’t meet those standards, I withdrew from tournaments out of embarrassment.

I unexpectedly won the National Open in Las Vegas in the summer of 2021, right after my freshman year of high school. I finished ahead of 22 grandmasters and earned my first grandmaster norm after three-or-so-years of zero improvement. I remember feeling relieved, thinking, “Finally! This is my breakthrough.”

But the bitter truth soon became clear: I

was wrong. The following year saw some of the worst chess I’ve ever played. Between balancing AP classes and other extracurriculars, failed tournament after tournament began piling up. Chess became a nuisance, a burden. I no longer could muster anything like the same zeal and excitement as I had before.

Worse, even sitting down to study chess had become difficult. I was either too distracted and indifferent, or I made sure to procrastinate so that I didn’t have to stare at the piles of analysis. Even when I did force myself to work, I kicked the can down the road, ignoring my weaknesses and all the effort that improvement required.

I had turned my passion into labor. Even when there were bright spots in my play, light piercing through chess’ dark forest, I chose to ignore them to linger on the same fear that I would forever fall short of becoming a grandmaster. It took a toll on

me. Whether I'd wanted to admit it or not, chess had finally broken me.

So I quit.

In the summer before my junior year, my dad and I agreed I should "take a break" from chess to pursue my other passions. It was supposed to be temporary, but we both knew I was giving up the game for a long while. The shame and regret I felt were unbearable — 10 years down the drain. It felt cowardly.

Yet there was a certain peace I felt in quitting. Not thinking about chess for about a year made me rethink my standards and what I enjoyed about the game. After a few months, I began to miss the adrenaline. I missed sitting down to adjust my pieces, focusing, and immersing myself in every nuance of a position for hours on end. I missed the feeling of winning and proving myself wrong. I just missed chess.

What I realized is that sometimes, stepping back is okay; I now understand that being away brought me closer to the game. As my dad and I packed my summer 2023 schedule with two and a half months of nonstop chess, I hoped for a new start and felt excited for my last shot at this GM thing before my senior year.

It was smooth sailing at first. After achieving my second and third norms in my first two tournaments in Budapest, I thought I had finally struck gold.

Then came a harsh reality check in the Rigo Janos Memorial. Coming off an abysmal collapse, and then blowing a clearly winning endgame in the previous two rounds, I was poised to strike back against an opponent who was also struggling in the tournament.

GIUOCO PIANO (C54)

GM Adam Horvath (2472)

IM Arthur Guo (2445)

Rigo Janos Memorial (7), Hungary,
06.21.2023

**1. e4 e5 2. Nf3 Nc6 3. Bc4 Bc5 4. c3 Nf6 5. d3 d6 6. 0-0 h6 7. a4 a6 8. Nbd2 Ba7 9. Re1 Be6 10. Bxe6 fxe6 11. Nf1?!
Harmless.**

11. ... a5!

The right counter. With prophylaxis against b2-b4, Black has equalized.

12. Be3 Bxe3 13. Rxe3 0-0 14. Ng3 Qd7 15. h3 b6 16. Qb3 Rf7 17. Rd1 Raf8 18. d4 exd4 19. cxd4 Nb4



I blitzed out my moves to here and accumulated a considerable time advantage. I felt confident I could outplay my opponent. Black has the half-open f-file, the outpost on the b4-square, and potential breaks with ... d6-d5 and ... c7-c5 at any given moment. Meanwhile, White has to deal with his hanging pawn center and the awkward positions of his major pieces.

20. d5 exd5??

Impatient and immature. I don't know why I rushed to play this move. White has only two options, and I didn't care to evaluate one of them. So take heart, readers: even good chess players get impulsive sometimes!

Of course the only viable option was 20. ... e5. After 21. Rc3 Na6 22. Qb5 Nc5 23. Qxd7 Nfxd7 Black will press for the win.

21. e5

We played many more moves, but the game is now as good as lost.

21. ... dxe5 22. Nxe5 Qc8 23. Nxf7 Rxf7 24. Rde1 Qd7 25. Qd1 d4 26. Rf3 Qd5 27. Nf5 Nc6 28. Qe2 Kh7 29. Qd3 Kh8 30. Nxb6 Re7 31. Rxe7 Nxe7 32. Ng4 Nd7 33. Rf4 c5 34. Re4 Qf5 35. f3 Kh7 36. b3 Qg6 37. h4 Nf5 38. h5 Qg5 39. h6 gxh6 40. Qb5 Nf8 41. Qxb6 d3 42. Qxc5 d2 43. Nf2 Ng6 44. Qxa5 h5 45. f4 d1=Q+ 46. Nxd1, Black resigned.

I was devastated after I lost that game. One cannot quantify my desperation and anger when I realized I was letting my emotions get the best of me. Going into the tournament believing I could just as quickly continue my winning ways to break 2500 was a mistake and a lesson to be learned. I had to reset. After enjoying the sunset and soaking in the serenity of the vast expanse of Hungary's largest lake, I did just that.

I won the next two rounds, and despite shedding a couple of rating points, I felt this was even for the best. The struggle, and the working through it, kept me grounded, hungry, and feeling confident for my

fourth and final tournament in Europe: the Sparkassen Chess Trophy at the Dortmund Chess Festival.

After winning my first two rounds there, I played GM Peter Prohaszka in round three. (Editor's note: for another take on this game, check out WGM Tatev Abrahamyan's annotations in our October 2023 article.)

CARO-KANN DEFENSE, ADVANCE VARIATION (B12)

IM Arthur Guo (2445)

GM Peter Prohaszka (2585)

Sparkassen A-Open (3), Dortmund,
06.26.2023

1. e4 c6 2. d4 d5 3. e5 Bf5 4. Nf3 e6 5. Be2 Nd7 6. 0-0 a5 7. a4 f6!?

An uncommon move order.

8. Bd3?!

Not the most testing. After 8. Be3 Qc7 9. c4 fxe5 10. cxd5 exd5 11. Nxe5 Black needs to be careful to develop his pieces quickly.

8. ... Bxd3 9. Qxd3 fxe5 10. dxe5 Nc5

11. Qd4 Qd7 12. Be3 Nh6

Inviting an interesting imbalance.

13. Bxh6 gxh6



14. Nbd2 Rg8 15. c3 h5 16. h3

I felt like I was already losing the thread here. Black's king is safe and his pieces are active, while he has a clear plan of targeting the fragile White kingside.

16. ... Qf7 17. Qe3 Be7 18. Kh1 Qg6 19. Ne1
Too passive.

19. ... 0-0-0?!

The first mistake, allowing counterplay.

Instead 19. ... Kd7! is what I was expecting. The king's station in the center is well-protected, and the a8-rook serves to enforce prophylaxis against any b2-b4 break.

20. b4 axb4 21. cxb4 Ne4 22. b5



22. ... Bg5??

My opponent slips in time pressure. The natural 22. ... Bc5 kept the edge after 23. Qe2 Rdf8 24. Nxe4 Qxe4 25. Qxe4 dxe4.

23. f4 Bh4 24. Nxe4 Qxe4 25. Qd2

A quiet sidestep by the queen reveals how quickly White is able to consolidate his position.

25. ... d4 26. Nf3

How the tables have turned! Now Black's king is in severe danger.

26. ... Bg3 27. bxc6 bxc6 28. Rab1 Bxf4 29. Qb4 Kd7 30. Qd6+ Ke8 31. Qxe6+ Kf8 32. Qf6+ Ke8 33. Rb7, Black resigned.

The win was not clean, and I was fortunate to stay on track. A grueling five-and-a-half hour game against GM Aryan Chopra in round four, however, brought me back to my senses. Following quick comeback win in round five, the most crucial round thus far awaited me, which would set the tone for the rest of my tournament.

RUY LOPEZ, ARKHANGEL VARIATION (C78)

GM Ruslan Ponomarev (2664)

IM Arthur Guo (2445)

Sparkassen A-Open (6), Dortmund, 06.29.2023

1. e4 e5 2. Nf3 Nc6 3. Bb5 a6 4. Ba4 Nf6 5. 0-0 b5 6. Bb3 Bc5

This is second time I played the Archangel-sk. My opponent, a former world champion, was ready for it.

7. a4 Bb7 8. c3 d6 9. d4 Bb6 10. Bg5 h6 11. Bxf6 Qxf6 12. Bd5 0-0 13. Na3 Rfb8!

(see diagram top of next column)

Here my opponent's prep had ended, but I was still firmly in book, guided by human assistance and that of Leela.



14. Nc2 exd4 15. cxd4 bxa4 16. Rxa4 a5 17. Re1 Ne7 18. Bxb7 Rxb7 19. Ne3 Rab8 20. h3 c6 21. Nc4 Qe6 22. Qc1

Here, an equal position arises with both sides having weak pawns. This was the end of my pre-game preparation.

22. ... Bc7 23. Nxa5 Bxa5 24. Rxa5 Rxb2 25. Ra8 Rxa8 26. Qxb2



Liquidation. The rest is balanced.

26. ... Qd7 27. Rc1 Qc7 28. g3 Qa7 29. Kg2 Rb8 30. Ra1 Qc7 31. Qa3 Rc8 32. Rc1 Qd8 33. Nd2 Ra8 34. Qb3 Rb8 35. Qc3 Qb6 36. Rb1 Qc7 37. Ra1 Qb7 38. Nc4 d5 39. Nd6 Qd7 40. e5 Nf5 41. Ra6 Nxd6 42. exd6 Qxd6 43. Rxc6 Qd7 44. Rc5 Rd8 45. Qf3 Qe6 46. g4 g5 47. Rc3 Qe4 48. Qxe4 dxe4 49. Rc4 Ra8 50. d5 Rd8 51. Rxe4 Rxd5, draw.

Getting a draw as Black against a very strong grandmaster not only grew my confidence, but it also ensured I'd get even more favorable pairings (for norm purposes) in the final rounds.

The next three rounds were considerably less stressful. Solid draws against two 2600s as White and a win as Black against a lower rated player concluded my title run with another GM norm performance.

After my dad told me I broke the 2500 rating following my last round, I expelled an impassioned "YES!!," and felt nauseous (in a good way). How inexplicably weird to have the last dozen years of my life culminate in one singular moment.

Suddenly I realized that I didn't even know how to celebrate. All my friends and family were thousands of miles away — all I could do was text them. I think that's why I felt a bit empty then. I won't forget the surreal train ride back to the hotel, looking out the window in silence, and seeing all the stations and people pass by like any other normal day, oblivious to my feeling of accomplishment.

I wish somebody had told me that becoming a grandmaster is not the End-All-Be-All and that it wouldn't suddenly make me fulfilled. I wish somebody had told me what embarking on this chess expedition was really about.

It wasn't about the titles or the rating gains. It was about learning from my mistakes and growing into the person I am today.

The requirements for the GM title now completed, I returned home to the States in July for the 2023 U.S. Junior Championship. There I suffered a tough loss in the final round after going in tied for first, destroying any chances for qualifying to the U.S. Championship. But then, almost as fated, I was fortunate enough to earn a perfect score (6/6) for a second consecutive win at the 2023 Denker to cap off my summer.

Chess has taught me about ups and downs, and that life goes on. Wins and losses are both natural and necessary; both must be embraced. And even quitting is okay.

Chess has made me realize how blessed I am to have found a passion while I was young and could devote everything I had to it. It's made me appreciate all the people who have shared this journey with me. But above all, through the years I've spent on chess, and all the struggles to achieve my goals, I have been shown glimpses of myself I wouldn't have seen otherwise. That's the real gift chess has given me, and I don't think there's anything more important I could have learned along the way.

PART II - MY SECRET SAUCE AND TIPS

Every chess player is different. Likewise, their road to improvement will be unique. But I do hope you'll gain a bit from my experience. Here is my advice to readers.

1. WHAT AND HOW TO STUDY WITH A BUSY LIFE?

Like many other full-time students, or adult players with multiple life obligations, I didn't have the luxury of many hours a day to study

chess. The truth is that on many weekdays, I didn't even glance at a board.

If you don't have much time, efficiency in studying is key. For me, I spent my time studying GM Magnus Carlsen's games deeply. I would argue that all you need to become a strong player can be found there.

Carlsen's games have no weaknesses, span all kinds of openings, and reveal the best middle-game and endgame strategies. Of course, working with annotations or books on his games can help you understand how the best player in the history of chess thinks. Look up the theories if you don't understand certain openings, pawn structures, strategic themes, or endgames, and fire up your engines if you can't grasp why a move is a mistake.

Study those brilliant games — or the games of your favorite elite GM — again and again. Everything you need is there.

Also: work hard and relentlessly on your weaknesses. Chess is more like a marathon than a 100-meter dash. In other words, slow and steady wins the race.

2. PLAYING UP AND PLAYING DOWN

I learned a lesson by always playing up in my early chess career. The truth is, I “enjoyed” playing up because it often resulted in gained rating points. But playing up doesn't give you the pressure you will have to face in open tournaments, in which you inevitably will play players around your level or below your level. It took me a long time to overcome a sense of uneasiness when playing lower-rated players due to the fact I always played up.

This is why, if I had to start over, I would balance playing up with playing in my rating groups.

I continued to play in scholastic events, especially Nationals, even after I was already a titled player. Nationals are hard on the top seeds. A lot of kids are underrated, and they prepare with their grandmaster coaches to take the top players down. You rarely gain any rating points, and a slight miss is all you need to ruin your championship chances.

What, then, is the benefit of playing nationals? The experience of how to handle pressure. It is very stressful to sit on the top boards all the time; you'll learn how gravity works. Fighting against it is a path to growth.

3. COACHING AND LEARNING TO STUDY ON YOUR OWN

I believe having someone stronger than you to discuss things with is a shortcut to improvement. If you want to reach an expert level, having at least an master-level coach is

crucial; if national master is your goal, then an IM coach is needed, and so on.

However, after your US Chess rating is around 2300 or so, I think it's possible to plow ahead on your own, especially with all the tools available today: books, annotated games, videos, online classes, and chess engines.

Good coaching is expensive, and many families can't afford it. The ability to study on your own becomes critical. One thing I have noticed is that the desire to read chess books at a very young age often is an indication of how much you will remain truly passionate about chess later on.

I was fortunate to be among the few made the GM title before graduating high school without being homeschooled. I did it without a coach (though I briefly tried to find one), for the last six and half years, and after becoming a strong master. Progress is definitely possible, but I would be lying if I were to say that it had not been a very lonely and tough road to traverse. Extremely hard work is needed, and so is a pure mind/heart; both are more important than the often overrated “talents.”

4. PURSUE OTHER PASSIONS

Chess is wonderful, but it's not everything. Regardless of what your coach tells you, the truth is that it's just one of many passions, activities, or hobbies you can pursue. It's not the magic pill for your future success, but the lessons learned from chess — like those from any other competitive sport or intellectual interest, if intensely pursued — can be very helpful.

It is okay to leave chess if you find out you

may be better at something else. You will come back if you truly miss it, and then you will know chess is your thing. I would also argue that interests outside of chess may help you grow overall, helping your chess without your recognizing the benefits.

For the parents reading this article, I would refer to an old blogspot post IM Greg Shanhade wrote many years ago. There he said getting to GM is very hard, and that while chess should be encouraged, it should not be forced or falsely pushed. I completely agree.

As with any time-intensive activity, excellence in chess requires years of sacrifices. The trade-off is having less time to pursue other activities, to focus on academic interests, or to spend time with friends and family.

I would argue that even if your kids choose not to continue in chess, your investment won't be wasted. I suspect many of them will find their way back to the board again in another stage of their life, or at least, they can coach their own kids in the future!

Finally, I would like to close by thanking the people who were instrumental to my chess progress: David Vest, who got me started in a free library chess class and became my coach in my first few years playing; GM Alonso Zapata, who guided me to a rating of nearly 2300 US Chess—I was his first student when he moved to Atlanta from Colombia; IM Greg Shanhade, whose US Chess School camps made me hungry to improve; and finally, GM Sam Shankland, who helped me shake off the rustiness after a long absence from chess and boosted my confidence by working with me in an intense multi-day training session.

To all of them, I'm very grateful. ♡



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