

Leaving the Stage – Quietly: Lisa Lane Remembrance

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Winners of the "Western Open" at Milwaukee are the man on the left, the "USCF Open" at St. Louis last summer. For further details, see the story of the "Western Open" and the new "Eastern Open," on page 226.
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Almost a month ago, Lisa Lane passed away on February 28th, 2024. The response has been quiet, nearly muted (the *New York Times* published a story on March 25th.) Of course, she had left chess quietly once before. In the mid to late 1960s, she had become disenchanted with a chess professional's life, so she married Neil Hickey, ran a health food store from 1971 – 2005, and then a jewelry store after that. It was appropriate that she so quietly left the stage, as she made a lot of noise while on it.

Around 1956, the 22-year-old Lane was introduced to the game of chess, seeing it played at *the Artist's Hut*, a coffeehouse in the Temple University area of Philadelphia. She started to study with Philadelphia master Attilio Di Camillo after meeting him at the Franklin-Mercantile Chess Club in Philadelphia. Lane's first major event was the 1958 U. S. Open. Her participation and 6 – 6 score went largely unnoticed in the excitement of a computer that could pair player's rounds, IM Donald Byrne winning the blitz event, and the shocking win of E. C. Cobo-Arteaga in the Open.

In 1959, she played in several tournaments in the Tri-State area, including the U. S. Amateur, where she finished 5-1 and was the top female. By the end of the year, she qualified to play in her first U. S. Women's Championship. She shocked previous winners, Giesela Gresser and Mona Karff when she went 7-1 (+6=2) and won first place. The prize fund was minimal, and as a single woman, she did not have the funding and life experiences of most other women players. Her financial situation forced her to be left off at least one Olympiad team, if not more, as the United States Chess Federation (then USCF, now US Chess) in the 1950s was often financially limited in who, if anyone, they could send.

Lane played throughout 1960 and 1961, with highlights in 1960 including winning the Top Lady Eastern Open and winning the U.S. Open Women's title as the top scorer among the women in the U.S. Open, 7-5, and the highest point total ever for a woman. By 1961, she had won the Top Lady Western title and appeared on "What's My Line," a game show where no one could guess she was a professional chess player. *Sports Illustrated* ran a cover story on August 7, 1961, and there were high hopes for her trip to the Interzonal. *Chess Review* went so far as to report, "Lisa is intent on winning the women's championship of the world, which Bobby Fischer, United States kingpin, thinks she may do next year by beating (Women's World Champion) Elizaveta Bykova of the Soviet Union."¹ Alas, with her and Gresser tying for 12 – 14th in the Interzonal, it was not to be. Lane scored +4=4-8, though she drew top finisher WIM Nona Gaprindashvili, who beat Bykova for the World Championship.

In 1962, she came second to Gresser in the Women's Champi-

onship. At the end of the year, she famously left the Hastings tournament because being in love with Neil Hickey was interfering with her concentration. It is unclear how much this hurt her chess, but the love affair went well, and she and Hickey went on to wed and share a long life (he passed on March 21, 2024.)

In 1963, she opened the *Queen's Pawn*, a Sheridan Square chess studio. She was routinely the only woman there, though the business did attract numerous people who played there for \$0.30 an hour.² U.S. Champion Fischer did include the studio in the places he visited. The business undoubtedly kept her busy, and aside from the 1964 Woman's Interzonal, where she finished 12th, she seemed to play in few tournaments. She brought protesters when she returned to the U.S. Women's Championship in 1966. The prize fund was a tenth of the U. S. Men's Championship, just \$600, but the protests were ignored or not treated seriously.³ She played second board for the US, the USCF, having found enough money to send a team of three to the Olympiad, but scored just +2=2-6. Her and Gresser's upset of Romania in the 9th round cost the Romanians the gold, but the Americans finished just 10th.

She would run the *Queen's Pawn* for at least another year before quietly exiting the US chess scene. Her first exit from the chess stage led to a long life with true love, and we sincerely hope she finds such peace upon her final exit.

"Unknown" Game: Not in ChessBase, 365chess.com or chessgames.com. Source: *Chess Life*, June 20, 1960, p. 6.

Lane, Lisa—Fasano, R., U. S. Amateur, Asbury Park, NJ, May 1959.

1.e4 e5 2. ♖f3 ♘c6 3. ♘b5 a6 4. ♘a4 ♖f6 5. ♗e2 ♘c5 6. c3 O-O 7. O-O b5 8. ♘c2 d6 9. ♗d1 ♘g4 10. h3 ♘h5 11. d3 ♗d7 12. g4 ♘g6 13. ♗bd2 h5 14. ♗f1 ♗c8 15. ♗h4 h×g4 16. ♗×g4 ♗f6 17. ♗g2 ♗h5 18. ♗g3 ♗f4 19. ♘×f4 e×f4 20. ♗g5 ♗e8 21. ♘b3 ♗h7 22. ♗g5 f6 23. ♗×g6+ ♗×g6+ 24. ♗×g6 ♗×g6 25. ♘d5 ♗a7 26. ♘×a8 ♗×a8 27. d4 ♘b6 28. ♗h2 ♗f7 29. ♗g1 g5 30. ♗g4 ♗c6 31. ♗g2 ♗d8 32. h4 ♗e6 33. h×g5 f×g5 34. ♗h1 1-0

Note: Hornstein's annotations, not provided here, take up about 1.5 columns. Lisa Lane's result varies depending on source: 3-3 according to *Chess Life* (July 5, 1959, p. 1), 5-1 according to *Chess Review* (July, 1959, p. 197)

Relevant Links and Sources:

[Lisa Lane: US Women's Champion – introduction \(archive.org\)](#)
Alexey Root: [United States Women's Chess Champions, 1937 – 2020](#), McFarland & Company
[Lisa Lane, Chess Champion Whose Reign Was Meteoric, Dies at 90 – The New York Times \(nytimes.com\)](#)

Endnotes

1. Chess Review, September, 1961, 259.
2. Hearst, in *Chess Life*, April 1963, p. 59 through Alexey Root, [United States Women's Chess Champions, 1937 – 2020](#), McFarland & Company, 2021, 54.
3. Root, 55.