



SKITTLES
ROOM

An Email Conversation with Charles Katz

by Howard Goldowsky

Charles Katz is the Vice-President and Co-Founder of Edge TV, a new cable television network dedicated to the world of gaming. The channel will begin broadcasting in the second quarter of 2005, and they plan to include in their lineup a healthy dose of televised chess. They have signed an agreement with the US Chess Federation to broadcast six USCF tournaments in each of the next four years. Edge TV predicts success with chessplayers because the company plans to deliver the drama of chess competition, and as promised on their website, they plan to do it while “looking over the shoulders of the greatest players.” So get out your pieces: Soon, Hikaru Nakamura, Rusudan Goletiani, and the rest of your favorite US chess stars will be sacrificing queens in your living room. By next year chess could be well on its way to having the national exposure it’s been waiting for.

I invited Edge TV and the USCF to participate in an email conversation to celebrate and speak about their new relationship. Edge TV contributed to most of the discussion, with a few key contributions coming from USCF Executive Director Bill Goichberg. What follows is an edited version of that conversation.

Howard Goldowsky: Can you please elaborate on the relationship/contract between Edge TV and the US Chess Federation? Are there any promotional agreements? Did Edge TV approach the USCF or did they approach you?

Charles Katz: We approached the USCF because we wanted to televise the preeminent chess tournaments in the United States. We see the relationship as a true win-win. Edge TV is able to televise some of the most competitive and entertaining tournaments available while driving more players toward the tournaments and to the USCF.

HG: Can you please specify which tournaments Edge TV is going to broadcast? Will the \$500,00 HB Global Chess Challenge be one of them?

CK: We are still evaluating which tournaments will be broadcast. Depending on production costs and ratings, we hope to broadcast as many as possible. As our production schedule becomes clearer, we will work more directly with the USCF to get as many viewers interested in our broadcasts and therefore chess.

So far we have only made a deal with the USCF. However, as our network develops we expect to televise more chess. We believe there is an audience that will watch tournaments like the HB Foundation [Global Chess Challenge] and when the time is right we plan to approach these events.

[Note: During this portion of the interview I had asked Katz and Goichberg to speak about the financial details of the contract, but both declined. However, after the interview, I came across Bill Goichberg’s 2004 Executive Director’s Report. It is obtainable from the USCF website, and in it a passage discusses the Edge TV deal. Goichberg writes in this report: “Not exactly sponsorship, but possibly of even greater value, is the agreement USCF has signed with Edge TV,

a planned national cable games network, to televise the US Open, National Open, and the four largest national scholastics. If the network exercises its options through 2008, USCF will receive a total of \$60,000 for the TV rights, and the publicity benefits could be even more important.” In the Proceedings of the 2004 USCF Annual Meetings, Goichberg added: “The first year [of the Edge TV deal] will only generate \$1000 per tournament but if the agreement continues the fees go up.” Neither Katz nor Goichberg wanted to volunteer to discuss the financial details or the current tournament broadcast schedule, but both had no objections to this information being quoted after I reminded them that it had already been made public in Goichberg’s reports.]

HG: What metrics will Edge TV use, to determine if their chess broadcasts are successful? What kinds of ratings do you expect? How do you expect this to compare to your ratings for other broadcasts, such as poker, bridge, etc.?

CK: As a new network, ratings are generally hard to predict. There are 60 million Americans who play poker on an ongoing basis – this player base has generated high ratings for poker on other networks. While the player base for chess is smaller, it tends to be a lot more loyal. Plus, there are fewer outlets for chess on television than for poker. Edge TV has high hopes for chess to be a staple of our programming mix.

HG: For the Edge TV chess broadcasts, do you plan to market to chess players or to a more general audience? Chess is becoming very popular with children and with people playing on the Internet. What demographic are you focusing on?

CK: We see the core viewer base as people who enjoy playing chess. Perhaps not people who play on a consistent basis, but [people who] at least know the rules of the game and want to improve their playing. Ultimately, as chess players develop on-air personalities, we expect that viewer base to grow wider.

HG: It seems to me that it is the more serious players who are the most loyal. Will Edge TV provide specific programming for serious tournament players in addition to those who have just learned the rules of the game? How do you plan to maintain your hard-core viewers, the ones who are the most loyal, while attracting new players? Does the USCF have an opinion about this?

Bill Goichberg: I believe that Edge TV should seek to maximize its audience, and that serious tournament players are such a small percentage of potential viewers that it would not be wise to give special consideration to them.

CK: The specifics of how we will cater to the wide range of chess skill levels will be resolved on the producers of the programming. However, Edge TV and USCF see a good way of offering valuable programming that covers a range of skill levels by focusing on the human aspect of chess and really delving into the personal side of the players. There are currently numerous sources offering advice on how to play the game better, but there is nowhere to find content focusing on items such as how chess has impacted various players lives and what it’s like to travel the world as a chess champion.

BG: Seems like a good idea. However, I expect that there will also be game analysis and that not all will be at the beginner level (if a winning combination is played or possible, the analyst should explain it even if it is difficult for beginners to follow). Past televising of chess, such as Fischer-Spassky 1972 which achieved high ratings, was of interest to players of all abilities.

HG: How long will each broadcast last for, and what content do you plan to cover during each broadcast? Do you plan on using on-screen graphics to illustrate chess strategy? Will there be computer analysis, grandmaster commentary, interaction between announcers and viewers via the Internet, etc.?

CK: We will absolutely make chess programming as interactive as technology allows. That is a

cornerstone of our network. The details of what the actual broadcast will look like are yet to be determined.

HG: Currently, what is the state-of-the-art interactive TV technology that you could use today, and can you please give some examples of how this technology *could* be applied to chess broadcasts? Who will be consulting Edge TV in this process?

CK: The technology is on cable and satellite system-by-system basis for the one screen (direct television only) environment. However for the two-screen environment – watching on television and interacting on another screen such as a cell phone or the Internet – there are many opportunities that chess provides. One project Edge TV is working on is to allow a chess champion to have the opportunity to “play against the world” whereby viewers at home vote for the best chess move and the majority rules. I think it may be a long time before the viewers best the champion, but one day I think they will and that will make for great ratings. Edge TV is working with GoldPocket Interactive on some of these initiatives.

HG: Some of Edge TV’s promotional material talks about their plans for interactive television. Already on the Internet there are numerous chess servers with live analysis and commentary of chess games via Internet radio/TV, and the technology is getting better all the time. How does Edge TV plan to compete with this already existing infrastructure?

CK: Edge TV hopes to use our network as a way of augmenting the offerings that are already out there. Since poker has been televised, starting around 2001, there has been a 2500% increase in the amount of online poker play. We believe the same thing could happen with Chess.

Additionally, while analysis and commentary is critical, nothing compares to actually seeing the action as it unfolds.

HG: Will you learn from ESPN’s broadcast of Kasparov-Deep Fritz in 2003? Yasser Seirewan is listed in your company’s literature as a chess consultant. Have you thought about whom Edge TV will use for announcers and how they will fit into the programming? Will you broadcast live or use pre-edited material? Has Edge TV done any market research to determine if live or edited broadcasts would be better?

CK: Edge TV will broadcast an edited version of any tournament we televise. By doing this, we hope to make the tournament the most informative and entertaining option for our viewers. We will certainly rely on our consultants and previous experience to deliver the best viewing experience possible.

HG: What attracts a company like Edge TV to chess? Why do you think chess is exciting? What is your general philosophy about broadcasting chess on television?

CK: Edge TV caters to people who enjoy playing games. Chess is one of the primary forbearers to all modern strategy games. Given its history, coupled with its strong and dedicated following, chess is an obvious natural to televise. By televising chess, Edge TV will take people over the shoulder of the world’s best chess players and allow the viewers to learn, play along and enjoy.

HG: What cable companies will carry Edge TV? Will it cost anything to the consumer, will it be part of the basic package, or will this depend on the community?

CK: The package will be determined on a carrier-by-carrier basis. We will be announcing carriage agreements shortly.

Edge TV can be found on the web at: <http://www.theEdgeTV.com>

The US Chess Federation can be found on the web at: <http://www.uschess.org>



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