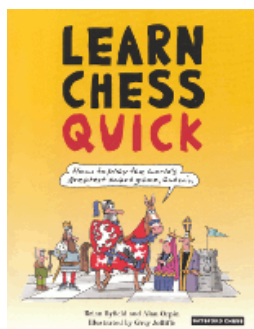




COLUMNISTS

Scholastic Chess

Steve Goldberg



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A Conversation with Ben Finegold Part One

He's approachable, he's humorous, he's hard-working, and now he's a grandmaster, not just in playing strength but in title as well. Read about Ben Finegold and his thoughts, in Part One of this wide-ranging interview.

Everyman Quiz of the Month

Each month Everyman Chess sponsors our Everyman Quiz of the Month, offering a free chess book to three respondents with correct answers. This month, winners of our quiz will receive *True Combat Chess*, by Tim Taylor.

We will accept all contest answers for *two weeks* following the appearance of this column, then randomly select our three winners from this group. In order to meet the two-week deadline, please e-mail your responses to me by March 24, 2010. Send your answers to scholasticchess@chesscafe.com. Good luck!

Problem #1



It is fifteen-year old Ben Finegold with White to move. What would you do?

Problem #2



This position comes from a Finegold game at age fourteen. He is white and it is his move. What do you suggest?

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Elementary Checkmates II

America's Strongest IM No More

Ben Finegold was long known as "America's strongest IM," but now that he has achieved his long-overdue grandmaster title that moniker is now moot. Although Finegold appreciates all the accolades he has received, he is clearly taking it in stride. He might almost be termed "the reluctant grandmaster."



"People who really want their GM norms," he said, "who are fervently trying to get them, people like Lenderman and Shankland, and other people who were trying really hard to get their norms, and Ray Robson, they play in maybe ten or fifteen GM norm tournaments a year, and easily get three. For Ray Robson and for Lenderman, they get three in a row and it's no problem at all. I've probably played in fifteen tournaments with GM norms in the last fifteen years.

"I hardly ever played in the World Open due to the expense, I played at Foxwoods maybe once. When they have round-robin tournaments, which are good for GM norms, I was never invited. So it was happenstance that last year, in 2009, I got invitations to back-to-back GM norm tournaments in August and September. It looked like I was going to get the GM title back in August. I had 4½/6, and I had probably a winning position against Ray Robson with black, and of course I lost. Then I needed 2/2 against two GMs, and I drew a 2700 player the next round, so I couldn't get it anymore. But then I got it in Texas.

"If a tournament had GM norms, I played based on expense and the prize money. I didn't say 'I need a GM norm, I'd better go play there.' My colleagues knew I was GM strength – everyone knew I was a GM, I didn't need the piece of paper. But it's good to get recognition also. I don't think my chess strength has gone up, but psychologically, it's nice to be a GM."

In speaking with Finegold, I mentioned that some grandmasters report a bit of an emotional letdown or diminished motivation after achieving the title. But he said "I haven't experienced this, but one of my favorite books is *Confessions of a Chess Grandmaster*, by Andy Soltis. It's tidbits, he's good at writing stuff like that. Talking about his own experience, he said that once you get to grandmaster, you think all your passed pawns will queen, everything will line up for you. But everything's the same, except you can't get any more GM norms, and everybody wants to beat you to get their GM norms, and you're asking yourself, 'why am I in this tournament?'



"But I haven't had that experience. Since I wasn't really trying to get GM norms in the first place, I didn't say, 'Boy, I'm going to this tournament to get GM norms,' I didn't really care much. For me, it was 'finally, I have the title,' and people congratulate me a lot. I get a lot of texts and Facebook stuff. Of course, because of this big article in *Chess Life* in February, I'm getting a lot of hoopla over that."

Magazine Star

In addition to being on the cover and having a significant splash in *Chess Life*, Finegold also was featured in the quirky "Just Checking" section inside the back cover of *New In Chess* magazine. "They ask you one-liners," he said. "About ninety percent of my answers were jokes, but the publishers are Dutch, and Dirk [editor Dirk Jan Ten Geuzendam] didn't really understand I was kidding. One of them, he couldn't believe the answer, he didn't realize those were jokes too. He said, 'You have Bruce Willis's watch? I want to know that story!' He said, if you could save one thing, what would it be, and I said, 'Bruce Willis's watch,' quoting the movie *Pulp Fiction*, which I alluded to earlier in the interview, when I said *Pulp Fiction* was my favorite movie. I said that was from *Pulp Fiction*, and I'm kidding. He said, 'Oh.' He wanted to hear this story how I ripped off this watch. I threw in a Simpsons quote he didn't notice, so that was good. Some of it's a little funny.

"Some of those questions are so silly – if you could be anything, what would it be, if you weren't a chess player. So I wrote 'butterfly.' No one suspects the butterfly – a Bart Simpson line. But *New In Chess* magazine is probably the best chess magazine in the world, so it was nice that they wanted me to do the back.

"And the *Chess Life* spread was huge – so many pages and so many pictures, and one of my favorite pictures there is when I was nine-years old. I looked a lot different than I do now."

Growing up with chess

As a child, Finegold was surrounded by chess, with both his father and his older brother being chess masters. "When we were kids, the three of us would play speed chess in the house, and my father took me to tournaments all the time. I think most of it was playing instead of instruction, although of course playing him was instructive since he was much better than we were. So that was interesting."

In his late teens, Finegold left for Brussels, Belgium and stayed for four years. He returned to the U.S. in 1992 and a year later, at age twenty-three, he was awarded the prestigious Samford Fellowship to assist in his chess development, and he began studying with GM Gregory Kaidanov. "When I won the Samford Fellowship in 1993-94, we worked together at tournaments and I went to his house a few times, and he went to my place once or twice. We tried to work between twenty and thirty hours in a weekend, and then at

tournaments we would work three or four hours a day on chess.

"One tournament we worked at, we stayed together at the 1993 U.S. Open, in Philadelphia, which was quite odd because the World Open was at the same hotel in July as the U.S. Open in August, so the turnout wasn't what we had hoped. I was staying with Gregory and we played in round five or six and it was a really complicated draw where I sacrificed a rook and got perpetual check. I ended up tying for second with 7½/9, and I think he lost the last round and finished just out of the money unfortunately. But it's funny we played in the tournament. I remember him once showing me a chess problem and he was laying on the bed reading the book [*Searching for Bobby Fischer*](#)."

Although they no longer work together, Finegold still sees Kaidanov once in awhile. "I see him at chess camps, usually in Phoenix every year. We occasionally text each other, talk on Skype. We haven't looked at chess in awhile, but we keep in touch. He doesn't play as often as he used to – he's so busy teaching now, at camps and with private lessons. When he came here in the early '90s, he was doing ninety-five percent playing and five percent teaching, and now it's the opposite."

Chess in Ann Arbor

Before moving to St. Louis late last December, Finegold had lived in Ann Arbor. He describes the chess scene there. "We had a lot of scholastic chess and scholastic chess teachers and chess in schools, and a couple of clubs. It was pretty good considering that Ann Arbor is not as big as St. Louis. Chess in Michigan – a lot of it is scholastic-related and the chess association didn't have as many members as I wanted.

"Scholastic tournaments were pretty well attended. We'd get five or six hundred at the elementary team events. We had a reasonable organization and we had people interested in chess, but there weren't enough strong players, there weren't enough strong junior players. It was mainly for the masses – there weren't a lot of tournaments that had good prize money. It was lower level chess, but we tried to get everybody interested. Still, it was a good chess scene. I would go to the chess club a lot and it was a fun place to hang out."

But then Finegold came to St. Louis to be a commentator for the 2009 U.S. Women's Championship, with Jennifer Shahade, and a few months later, found himself working full-time with the beautiful Chess and Scholastic Center of St. Louis. "It's just fortuitous timing that the chess club hired me when I became a GM. They wanted to have a GM-in-residence, and I think they were going to hire me anyway. I would have been an IM-in-residence.

"This club is just a lot better than every other club in the country"

"I really like St. Louis, and I like the Central West End a lot [the fashionable section of St. Louis that is home to the chess club], and of course this chess club is amazing. It's funny that people don't know what they have here. A lot of them think that this is just a chess club, and they don't realize that there aren't any chess clubs like this. A lot of times people will meet at a Borders or Barnes & Noble once a week, and they get kicked out eventually. This is a lot different from most chess clubs.

"I would give chess lessons in Ann Arbor at a Panera Bread store, and there would be chess clubs meeting there – that's pretty typical. In this country, the three good chess clubs I know are this one, the Marshall, and the Mechanics club in San Francisco. I've been to the other two clubs, and this one is a lot different, because we're not just having tournaments with twenty or thirty players every day, and that's all we do, which is basically what the other clubs are doing.

"We have a lot of outreach in the community and we have a lot of programs. We're in schools, and we have a really big presence on the web, and we hold big tournaments, like the U.S. Championship. So our club is a lot different, and we're a lot bigger. This club is just a lot better than every other club in the country.

"We have a lot more members here. Last I counted, of active, paid members, we had 380. We actually had more than 500 at one point. Our membership is really affordable here; it's quite expensive at the Marshall and the Mechanics – several hundred dollars a year. Here it's \$120 for a family and \$80 for adults, and \$30 for students. Thirty dollars for students is a pretty good membership fee.

Always working

"I've been here every day since I moved here; I come to the club every day. I play chess with members or give private lessons. People who work here get a free lesson every week. And there are a lot of meetings we have regarding marketing, championships and camps. We're always working here."

Indeed, the St. Louis chess club in 2010 will again be hosting the U.S. Championship and the U.S. Women's Championship, and will also be adding the 2010 U.S. Junior Championship.



"Not only are we having the U.S. Junior Championship in the summer, we're going to have three chess camps," Finegold added. "Two of the camps will be just normal camps you'd see anywhere where you pay and it's a week long. However, we're having one camp – I believe the last week of July – which is an invitational camp for the top junior players of Missouri, and it's free. We'll probably invite about 8 players; we'll try to have them all over 1800 if possible. It's sort of like the U.S. Chess School. We'll have something similar, except it's just Missouri players.

"We're in discussion with the U.S. Chess School currently and it looks likely, starting in 2011, we're going to have one camp a year here from the U.S. Chess School. We'll host the players. Normally they don't do the same place every year, but we're going to pay the accommodations of the players, so they want to use us.

"Greg Shahade is going to be here for the U.S. Championship. He's one of the people working with the special tiebreak rules we have; he's in charge of that. So we'll talk about the U.S. Chess School when he's here. It looks like we'll have it every year, hopefully in the summer."

Among his many duties at the chess club are his Thursday evening lectures. "I change the topic every week. I try to make it a lot different from the week before, so it's pretty eclectic. One week it was king-and-pawn endgames, one was attacking games in the Qc2 Nimzo-Indian, because that's one of my favorite variations, so I had a lot of examples.

"We're going to put them on the website – they videotape all the lectures and they'll all be up eventually. We usually get between twenty-five and thirty people coming, so that works out pretty well. They are free to members.

"Occasionally on the weekends, we have players from the world team championship come and give a lecture. Those go over really well. Robert

Hess was in, and we had Yury Shulman the week before that. Alexander Onischuk is coming to do a lecture soon. Hikaru Nakamura is coming, but instead of lecturing, he's going to play in the tournament in April. The players all agreed to come here and do something interesting."

Finegold mentioned that one of his favorite recent games was against Gergely Antal, at the 2009 Spice Cup in Texas, where he achieved his final GM norm. Here is that game, with annotations by the new GM:

Finegold, Ben (2515) – Antal, Gergely (2486)

Spice Cup 2009 Lubbock (6), 24.09.2009

Queen's Pawn Opening [D03]

1.d4 Nf6 2.Nf3 g6 3.Bg5

This was the end of my prep! I figured I would not let Antal play his favorite Grünfeld.

3...d5!? 4.Bxf6 exf6 5.e3 Be6 6.Nbd2 f5 7.c4 c6 8.Qb3 Qb6 9.Qxb6 axb6 10.cxd5 Bxd5 11.Bc4



This is about equal, but it is the kind of boring position I like!

11...Bxc4 12.Nxc4 b5 13.Nce5 f6 14.Nd3 Nd7 15.h3! Bd6 16.g4 fxg4 17.hxg4 Kf7 18.g5 c5?

This is weakening. Black should sit tight. Now White is clearly better.

19.dxc5 Nxc5 20.Nxc5 Bxc5



21.0–0–0!

Gergely overlooked the strength of this move when playing 18...c5?.

21...Rxa2 22.Kb1! Ra7 23.Rd7+ Be7 24.gxf6 Kxf6 25.Nd4

White has more active rooks, a safer king, and Black has a lot of weak pawns.

25...Ra6 26.Rh3 Kf7 27.Rxb7 b4 28.Nf3 Ke6 29.Nd4+ Kf7 30.Rh4 h5 31.Nf3 Re8 32.Rhxb4

Finally, an extra pawn for all my hard work!

32...g5?! 33.Re4 Kf6 34.Rb5! Rg8 35.Ree5

Black's pawns are too weak.

35...g4 36.Nh4 Rd6? 37.Rxh5 Rd1+ 38.Ka2 Rf1 39.Rb6+! Kf7 40.Rh7+ Rg7 41.Rxg7+ Kxg7 42.Nf5+ Kf7 43.Nxe7 Kxe7 44.Rb4 Rg1



45.Rd4

Cutting off the black king, and preparing the march of the b-pawn.

45...Kf6 46.b4 Rg2 47.Kb3 Ke5 48.Rd2 Ke4 49.b5 Kf3 50.b6 Rh2 51.b7 Rh8 52.Kc4 Rb8 53.Rb2 1-0

Answers to Last Month's Quiz

Problem #1



White has just moved Ba5, skewering Black's queen and rook. How does Black respond?

Answer: 1...Bg4! 2.hxg4 (2.Qf2 Qxf2+ 3.Kxf2 Bxc3; 2.Qe3 Rfd8, threatening 3...Bd4) 2...Bd4+ 3.Be3 Nxg4 4.Qxg4 Bxe3+ 0-1, from Sherman-Littlewood 1973, in [The Rules of Winning Chess](#), by Nigel Davies.

Problem #2



It is White to move. What do you suggest?

Answer: 1.Qa7+ Kc8 2.Qa8+ Bb8 3.Qa6#. From Lasker-Marshall, St. Petersburg, 1914.

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