



GM Anna Muzychuk's (Ukraine) lecture, 1.5.2020 – Q&A Session

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First Topic – Being a Chess Player

Esther: What helped you advance in chess and win throughout your career?

Anna Muzychuk: There were a number of things that helped me advance in chess and it's actually a combination of several factors. First of all, I started playing at a very early age – when I was two years old! Also, from a very young age my parents invested a lot of time and worked very hard to help me obtain achievements. Another thing is the motivation you get when you start winning tournaments. I started winning European Championships for kids from the age of 6, the motivation boosts you continue working hard and win more competitions. Last but not least, If you like chess you just keep going. In other words, it's a combination of great passion and love for the game, hard work, and successes from the beginning of my career that pushed and motivated me. These are the 3 main things, in my opinion.

Inbar: Do you consider yourself to be more of an attacking/tactical or more of a positional player?

Anna Muzychuk: I addressed this earlier in a way. I am a more active player. I do not like playing defensively. I aim for an interesting game, initiative, combinations, attack, etc.

Keren: Who is the player you most associate with his/her style of play?

Anna Muzychuk: Maybe I'm wrong, but among the modern players I think that my style is most similar to the one of Fabiano Caruana. We are both well-prepared and working a lot on our openings, and I also like to discover and develop new ideas. In addition, we both like active play while also being good at positional chess.

Keren: With whom do you like to play more - men or women?

Anna Muzychuk: I don't think I prefer playing with men or women, it doesn't matter to me so much. I do play more in women's tournaments. I don't think that the fact that I'm facing a woman or a man affects my game somehow, but mainly the level of my opponents. When I play in open tournaments, I usually meet stronger opponents than in most of women's tournaments.

Michal: Are you stressed and anxious before games? If so - how do you overcome that?

Anna Muzychuk: Well, I'm stressed and anxious before every game! So, if you're stressed too, don't worry, because this is a normal situation. This happens because before a game you spend a lot of time preparing, you ask yourself whether you have repeated all the variations, how to play if the opponent plays one way or another, should you check more lines. You are constantly in this state of uncertainty. However, as the game starts it gradually changes, I convince myself that I did the best I could in the preparation phase, and I just try to concentrate and make good moves, and then the stress and pressure levels start dropping. That's about what I go through in most of my games.

Michal: What is your opinion on playing in a tournament where you will be an underdog? How do you handle and overcome the fear of losing, and are there situations in which being an underdog is an advantage?

Anna Muzychuk: In my opinion you should definitely play some of the games against opponents that are significantly stronger than you because you can learn more from them, and you can also see more clearly what are your weaknesses and what are your strong suits. As for how many such tournaments you need to play, I think it's very individual and depends on your character. For example, if you will always play in tournaments where you will be an underdog, you will usually gain only a few points, and after a few such tournaments, it can ruin your mood, self-confidence and motivation. So, you have to somehow balance the amount of games with stronger opponents and weaker ones, and decide, according to your character, how many tournaments you have to play in which you will fight for prizes, and how many in which you will be an underdog, where you can try all kinds of new ideas and learn a lot, while not putting an emphasis on results.

Second Topic – Your Career

Inbar: Who brought you to the world of chess and what role does chess play (and played) in your life?

Anna Muzychuk: My parents brought me to the chess world and taught me the game at the age of 2, where by the age of 3 I already knew all the rules and could play a decent game. In my opinion, it was very important, because the first people who teach you how to play greatly influence whether you would like and connect to the game or

not. I was lucky that my parents taught me to play in a very interesting way, I loved it and that's why I play to this day.

Chess obviously plays an important role in my life. I am a professional player for a long time by now, and chess is an important part of my life.

Keren: Who is the strongest player you have ever played against, and who is the strongest you have beaten?

Anna Muzychuk: I didn't play against Carlsen, but I did play against Caruana, however not when he reached 2800 but at the time when he was 2400. Something similar with facing Giri in the game I have showed you, when he was only 2600 comparing to his 2800 today. Also, I've played against a lot of players from the current top 20. I drew against Gelfand, Svidler, Nepomniachtchi when they were at their prime, as well as against other players. As for who is the strongest that I have ever beaten - there were several 2700+ players, such as Fressinet, Sasikiran and probably others, but these are the first ones that came to my mind.

Tamar: At what age did you realize that you want to be a professional chess player? Were your parents involved in the decision?

Anna Muzychuk: It is hard to pinpoint exactly that moment, but I think when I graduated from high school, I decided that I will continue with chess professionally, also because by that time I was already in top 10 among women. So, I decided that I will concentrate on professional chess rather than studying a particular profession. I was 16 at the time, and I enrolled at a university, but it was a sports' university, which gave me the opportunity to play tournaments quite frequently, as opposed to a studying for a "regular" college degree.

My parents did not directly influence the decision, they helped and supported a lot along the way and said they would support any decision of mine. They saw that I was very successful at chess and thought that it makes sense to continue with it. We made the decision together, but in the end of the day it was my decision.

Third Topic – The Game of Chess

Keren: What chess book do you recommend to read?

Anna Muzychuk: Not an easy question, because of the different levels of girls. Of course, I classify books by subjects. I remember when I was young, for endgames I liked Panchenko's book, and today I think the best book for studying endgames is that

of Mark Dvoretsky. These are the books I would recommend for endgames. Regarding tactics - it is very individual because it depends on the level of the player. For GMs and IMs, I recommend Jacob Aagaard's books, but for players in the range 1500-2000 it will be a bit too difficult (however, you may still want to try some positions at the beginning). There are new books on tactics by Romain Edouard, which are easier. Also, there is an interesting book of Krasenkow. Regarding positional chess, I like Dvoretsky's book series, especially the fourth volume Positional Play, as well as Gelfand's book on positional chess. Of course, there are also some classic books. For those who like chess history, I recommend the "My Great Predecessors" series of Kasparov.

Keren: How many tactics puzzles you recommend solving every day?

Anna Muzychuk: The first thing I would recommend is indeed solving exercises every day and being consistent with it, even if you have little time. This is vital for not losing your calculation abilities and the so-called "tactical eye", because this is an important issue in every game (you always need to be ready to sacrifice something) and you have to get used to it. It can be studies, tactical puzzles or an analysis of some dynamic and complex game. Moreover, you can vary and do something different every day. That way it will be more interesting, and you will also see what you like more. It's hard to say how much time you have to spend on it, because it's very individual. If you are a good tactician, then you should not do this for many hours because it is your strong suit and you obviously have problems with other aspects of the game, such as positional chess or endgames, so you should rather work on them. On the other hand, if you have trouble with tactics, there is no doubt that you have to solve many puzzles. To conclude, I recommend working more on your weaker sides, yet not fully neglecting working on the aspects you are good at.

Nir: How many hours did you work each day when you were 14-16 years old?

Anna Muzychuk: I worked a lot from a very young age, and at those ages I worked nearly 6 hours a day on chess.

Fourth Topic – Your Sister

Tamar: Your sister is also a professional player and we understand that your parents also play chess. Is there a "healthy rivalry" between you and your sister that helps you (and your sister) to improve in chess?

Anna Muzychuk: My sister is two and a half years younger than me, and we indeed have a healthy rivalry and no jealousy whatsoever. Even when Maria became the

Women's World Champion and people told me that I was stronger than her at the time and maybe I should be disappointed. So no, I was very happy of course. We are in the top 10 among women for a long time already, and currently my sister is rated higher than me in classical chess (however, I am rated higher in rapid and blitz). I'm glad we are together and able to work together and support each other. I am also happy that we have a good relationship, because sometimes it's not the case with siblings. We also travel together to many tournaments, and always support each other when one of us is not doing so well.

Nir: Do you and your sister work together on chess sometimes?

Anna Muzychuk: Yes. She is slightly better than me at solving tactical puzzles, but I can explain other things better. We also play almost the same openings, about 80% overlap. We can also work on different things and then combine the products of our work and share ideas.

Fifth Topic – Men vs. Women in Chess

Renana: Do you think that enough efforts are being made (training, financial support, etc.) to help women reaching the level of best male players, and what needs to change for that to happen? *(Only five women in chess history crossed the 2600 ELO mark - including A. Muzychuk herself - and only Judit Polgar crossed the 2700 ELO mark, reaching the top 10 among men)*

Anna Muzychuk: It is not so easy to answer that, as there are many reasons for women not getting to the top, and many people ask why men are better at chess, being a "mind sport" and not a physical one. Indeed, only Judit was in the top ten, while Hou Yifan was in the top 100 (me too, but in rapid and blitz chess). Today, unfortunately, women are not close reaching the top ten among men, and there are many reasons for that, but I would like to mention the two main ones, in my view. First, as you know, more boys start playing and learning chess than girls (probably due to social reasons), which means that women are already outnumbered, and so it is more likely that a boy will reach the top. But what is more important regarding why men have higher achievements, and isn't so obvious, is that men are physically stronger. It may seem puzzling or odd why physical abilities and a physical condition should affect chess results, but it is. We train and play for many hours, tournaments last many days, and girls just get tired faster. You can see that in the fifth or sixth hour of a game girls start to play less accurately and make more mistakes, because they are getting tired quicker. I think that physical condition and fitness are important in chess, like in other sports, except that in chess this is less obvious.

Renana: What do you think should be done to increase the number of female chess players?

Anna Muzychuk: I always support girls who start playing chess and I like the fact that in the last period more girls visit chess clubs and chess classes. Whenever I have the opportunity and as time allows, I try to support ideas for promoting girls in chess, giving lectures and discussing the topic. It doesn't matter if you are a boy or a girl, or whether you will become a professional or not, I think that chess is a very interesting game that enhances a lot of abilities that will help you in life. For example, it will improve your memory, concentration, will teach you to fight and not give up, and more. I think that girls must at least get familiar with the game and its rules, and then decide whether they like the game or not. It is also important to know that girls can become successful in chess and by showing them my own example and the example of my sister they can learn more about it and they can actually see what is possible to reach.

Renana: Have you ever been treated differently (for example, prejudiced) due to the fact that you are a woman who plays chess?

Anna Muzychuk: As you may have heard, when I played in the World Championship in Iran, I had to obey some of the Islamic Laws, and specifically, to wear a headscarf (burqa) during games. Another thing is that in some cases men joke before playing against a woman and say that they must win at all cost, since otherwise people will laugh at them. However, I do not recall many significant cases throughout my career that I felt uncomfortable due to the fact that I am a woman.

Huda: Much luck in the next online event you will take part in - the Nations Cup!

Anna Muzychuk: Thanks! Yes, it will be a very strong tournament and I will represent "Team Europe" there, along with Anish Giri, Maxime Vachier-Lagrave, Levon Aronian, Jan-Krzysztof Duda and Nana Dzagnidze. My sister will play for the team "Rest of the World". Almost all top players will participate, therefore I recommend following the event.

Oded: Regarding the penultimate question about increasing the number of female chess players, are there any ideas you can come up with to make it happen, should something be done by FIDE or some other federation?

Anna Muzychuk: Of course, everyone should support that more girls get involved in the game. What trainers can do is to attract girls to take part in chess classes and learn the game, give the experience that chess is a very interesting game, show examples of women players who have been very successful, hoping it will make more girls staying in

the chess world. In my opinion, the number of female players is rising, which is a good sign.

Nir: Following previous questions - what is your opinion on girls aged 14 and under who do not play in separate girls' tournaments but with boys?

Anna Muzychuk: They can try but it comes back to the question of being an underdog, which will happen to them in most of the cases, because boys in that age are usually already stronger (assuming we are talking about tournaments for the same age group). They can certainly try to play in some such tournaments, but in my opinion also finding the motivation to play in women's tournaments.

Shlomit: Regarding the European Women's Club Cup - why do you think so few teams come to play there? Do you like this tournament?

Anna Muzychuk: In my opinion, the European Chess Union, FIDE and national federations need to do more marketing for the event, because it indeed does not look good that only about 12 teams play there, and this has been going on for years.

I have played this tournament many times, most often for the Monaco team, and we won it 5 times. I like that competition because it is a team event and so it is also nice from the social point of view.

Nir: Do you have a YouTube channel? If not, do you like/follow any YouTube channel?

Anna Muzychuk: I don't have a YouTube channel, but about a month ago I started streaming on twitch. I also have an account on Instagram and Facebook. I follow several channels of chess players (mainly my friends), as well as channels of well-known chess sites, such as chess24 and chess.com.