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60 Seconds with...

Stephen Moss

Born: 30th July 1957 in Newport, South Wales.

Place of residence: Long Ditton, Surrey.

Occupation: Feature writer with the Guardian.

Enjoyable? Mostly, yes. I’ve been on the staff of the Guardian since 1989 and have seen huge changes. I’m not very technical and the digital revolution is all rather over my head, but journalism’s struggle to redefine itself and achieve a stable financial base fascinates me. Just hope establishing a stable financial base doesn’t mean cutting non-digitally inclined old-timers like me.

Home life: Married, with one son who has now flown the nest.

Sports played or followed: Have always played cricket, but am now too old and fat to field. Also have an arthritic knee, so the cricket is drawing to a close. Have managed two social matches this year. I used to ride, but had several falls and thought I was pushing my luck, so retired. Miss it hugely: it demanded total concentration and made you forget the ‘real’ world. A bit like chess in that respect.

A favourite novel? I’m an Anthony Powell fan and like to re-read A Dance to the Music of Time every decade or so. I’ve also joined the Anthony Powell Society recently to commune with other obsessives.

Piece of music: Too many to mention, but Monteverdi’s Orfeo – the foundation of all opera – will do to be going on with.

Film or TV series: For some reason I noted down my favourite films recently. In alphabetical order, they are: The Adventures of Robin Hood (1938), The Alamo (1960), Casablanca (1942), High Noon (1952), The Lady Vanishes (1938), Nashville (1975), Oliver Twist (1948), The Thirty Nine Steps (1935), Way Out West (1937). They are films I could rewatch endlessly – comfort films, in effect, and wonderfully mythic in their way. Probably no coincidence that they all come from the golden age, when Hollywood was a dream (rather than a nightmare) factory.

What’s the best thing about playing chess? I need to supply a bit of personal history here. I played at secondary school and university, then hardly played at all for 25 years before coming back in my mid-40s. I got absorbed in the game, joined the Kingston and Surbiton clubs, and started playing tournaments.

In around 2010 I decided to write a book about my battle to play better chess – I was a mediocre club player. After a lifetime of dilettantism I wanted to get really good at something. After a lifetime of dilettantism I wanted to get really good at something. I enjoyed the games I won, especially enjoyed winning a couple of tournaments, but best of all were the odd moments where I was totally lost in the moment and the game.

That was a beautiful zenny feeling – well described in my book by grandmaster and former British Champion Stuart Conquest, who said he never felt he was playing an opponent across the board, but was rather playing against himself, against the position (searching for the ‘truth’ – the concept which triggered my book), and against the whole weight of chess history. That was one reason, he said, why he often got into time trouble, so his approach is not necessarily to be recommended to less gifted players.

And the worst: Losing, especially to under-11s. My behaviour when I lose is very bad, and I faithfully follow the dictums laid down by the Victorian player Captain H.A. Kennedy:

“When you have lost a game or games, never be guilty of the preposterous silliness of allowing that you are fairly mastered by the more expert skill of your antagonist. There are many ways of accounting for such a mishap, without having occasion to resort to an admission so humiliating to your self-esteem. You may conjure up a bad headache for the nonce. You have been in weak health lately. Your mind was otherwise occupied. You wanted sufficient excitement – a capital excuse, as it implies your opponent’s force being so inferior to your own that you could not muster interest enough to take the trouble to beat him.”

Stephen Moss’s book, The Rookie: An Odyssey through Chess (and Life), is published by Bloomsbury on 22nd September, retailing at £18.99. Subscribers may claim a 10% discount and place an order at Chess & Bridge.

Ed. – Read on for more from Stephen on page 35, while John Saunders explains all about ‘The Rookie’ and his role in both it and Stephen’s chess progress on pages 32–34.
Unknown Weapons in the Grünfeld, Milos Pavlovic
235 pages  €22.95 - £18.00 - $25.95.

The Grünfeld Defence is one of the most dynamic openings for Black. This opening was developed by two famous World Champions, namely Bobby Fischer and Garry Kasparov. While the theory is far from being exhausted and still developing, our author Milos Pavlovic made a strong case and found new alternatives to battle White's setups. This is his first book for Thinkers Publishing, in a series that will surely become very popular among its readers.

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It was back in the summer of 2001, at Stamford Bridge, the home of Chelsea FC, that I first met Stephen Moss. We were both there for a press conference being held to announce a match between newly-crowned world chess champion Vladimir Kramnik and the Deep Fritz program. Stephen was (and still is) a staff writer on the Guardian newspaper, who had been deputised to write a general article about chess, while I was there in my role as editor of BCM.

I can’t remember how we first struck up a conversation, but it was probably something to do with Stephen’s journalistic nous in being able to identify someone who looked like a chess player and who might be able to answer some technical questions. I was more than happy to help with this as it was likely to lead to some much-needed coverage for our game in the national press. We hit it off particularly well, and also found to our surprise that we only lived a street or two away from each other in Kingston-upon-Thames. Thus we could continue the conversation on the train home.

The article Stephen wrote following that 2001 Kramnik press conference is still available to read online. On rediscovering it in preparation for this article I was amused to re-read his opening sentence: “I am the Guardian’s specialist in ritual humiliation.” Perfectly true: on the cited occasion Stephen’s humiliation only consisted of losing a game to Deep Fritz, but that is as nothing compared to other experiences he has submitted himself to, including such activities as nude hiking and chess boxing.

I’ll say nothing more about the former (this is, after all, a family magazine), but Stephen’s chess boxing experience was testament to his supreme courage. There may be photos online, but – be warned – the picture of him published in the Guardian after he was pummelled into the canvas by a younger, fitter German police officer/chess-boxer is definitely not for the squeamish.

Stephen’s chess CV at the time of our meeting was typical of someone who had dabbled with chess in his youth. He had played quite a lot at school, a little bit at university (including a win against John Nunn in a simul), but thereafter his chess activity had been constrained by real life for a number of decades. He still hankered after the game and our paths crossed a few more times, when big-time chess returned to London for major events and press conferences, as it occasionally did during the ‘noughties’.

Around 2006, Stephen and some of his newspaper colleagues got together to form a chess club. He invited me along to some of their functions and I gained a measure of his (and his friends’) playing strength. This was before he had embarked on any formal competitive chess and I would guess his strength then was around 120 ECF (1550...
Elo). After a few offhand games at a time control of 15 minutes for all the moves (Stephen’s preference), I formed a view of him as what I would term an initiative player – someone with a good grasp of how to pursue a mating attack, or exploit a tactical mêlée, but less confident or patient when it came to building a steady edge, or playing a quieter, more positional game.

Over the next year or two, as well as playing online, Stephen started playing some local league and tournament chess. He also came to me for the occasional coaching session, during which we looked through a few of his most recent encounters and played practice games. It was a new experience for both of us, as I had never done any chess coaching before. I had more or less brought down the curtain on my own playing career, since I was far too busy editing a chess magazine to have the time to play, and also because I had grown tired of playing evening chess at unsuitable time controls in dingy venues. But it was fun to pass on some of my experience of OTB chess to someone for whom chess was fresh and enticing.

I’ve always been plagued by self-doubt. That assertion might surprise long-time readers of this mag, as I am hardly one to hold back when it comes to pontificating about anything and everything to do with chess in these pages. But on reflection I do wonder whether I was the right chess coach for Stephen. Not that I don’t think I’m thoughtful, patient and conscientious in my coaching; but, as I have already said, Stephen struck me as an initiative player, who wants to carry the attack to the opponent, whereas I have always been a cautious, careful defensive sort of player, who prefers the opponent to make the running. Would my crabbed, pessimistic style affect his optimistic ‘spirit of the bayonet’?

Possibly, but there were deeper factors at work here. Before Stephen started playing formal competition chess, most of his play was with work colleagues, some of whom were quite strong competition players, and also in informal ‘beer matches’ with another similarly informal club consisting of writers and newspaper people. I attended some of these sessions and found them refreshing. They took place outside the framework of organised chess, and the games themselves formed only part of the evening’s entertainment, which was just as much about having fun and socialising. Quite a contrast to formal club-level competitions, which can sometimes be disconcertingly serious in atmosphere. Although a few strong players took part, most of the play was of a social nature. And the transition from informal play to British league chess can be a very tricky one. I did my best to prepare Stephen for the rigours of competitive chess so that it wouldn’t come as a shock to his system, much as a first world war veteran might have given a raw conscript a few pointers about the difference between the parade ground and the trenches. (How did the WW1 veterans used to describe trench warfare? 99% boredom and 1% terror? Quite a good analogy, though I do say so myself.) Looking at his first couple of grades (111 in the summer of 2008, and then 143 the following year), it took him about a year to overcome the initial shock of formal chess competition before moving up to a very creditable grading number.

Looking today at the grading list, I see Stephen has advanced to 144 in 2016. Not much of an improvement on his 143 grade of 2009, you’re thinking? Those who put their trust in grades and ratings might be tempted to think so, but, as readers may be aware, I do not include myself in their number. These numbers are a simple record of performance in a given period of time and don’t necessarily reflect a player’s intrinsic chess strength, understanding or experience.

In my view Stephen is a significantly better player than he was ten years ago. Like all of us, he has had his ups and downs –

Not many of us have had the chance to take on Magnus Carlsen, but thanks to his work for the Guardian, Stephen was able to. Magnus told Stephen that he played like “a Norwegian”. Readers of Stephen’s book will also discover that I was particularly scathing about Stephen’s opening choices. As the authors of 1066 and All That might have put it, he has moved from being ‘wrong but wromatic’ to ‘right but repulsive’, often choosing what we came to characterise as ‘old man’s’ openings in preference to something more vigorous. I did try to persuade him, but one word from me and Stephen did as he pleased. Annoyingly, super-GMs sometimes make similarly craven opening choices, making it much harder for me to argue for a more lively approach.

I suppose it was inevitable that, as a writer and journalist, Stephen would want to record his love affair with chess, and he chose to do it in an original way. The Rookie is composed of 64 chapters, titled as per the algebraic notation of the squares of the board, with the white-squared chapters recording the enlightenment afforded by his encounters with (and advice received from) the chess world at large, and the dark squares a chronological account of his own competitive efforts. (Characterising these chapters as ‘dark’ suggests that I may not have been entirely right in identifying Stephen as an optimist.)

When Stephen and I first discussed his aspirations as a player, I seem to recall that he was aiming high – a 200 (2200) grade/rating, even some wild talk of FIDE titles. That struck me as improbable (I may have used a less emollient adjective at the time), at least for a man who still had a very busy day job, family responsibilities, and, dare I mention it, recently embarked on his sixth decade. I tried to get Stephen to focus on what I saw as a more realistic target, maybe 150 or 160.

Looking back at my own side of the equation, I may have been equally nave. I
confess I was hoping I might inspire Stephen to play fearlessly without regard for the false gods of grade and rating, eschew the unrewarding slog of opening theory memorisation, dedicate his evenings to a Botvinnikian study of endgames, and try to control his emotions at the board with the sang froid of a Hebben or an Adams. There was never much chance of any of that coming about: I was a rookie too. Worse than that, I was a hypocrite, since I had signally failed in all those ambitions over the course of half a century myself. If I couldn't do it myself, what on earth made me think Stephen could do it? You might call it a triumph of hope over lack of experience.

Such spare time as Stephen did have for chess, he tended to devote to thrashing much weaker social players on the internet. At least, I assume he thrashed them as most of the game scores he sent me were one-sided massacres, albeit with a nice tactical finish. If there were less successful games, I didn't see them, despite the fact that records of losses were the most valuable ones for me to be able to diagnose his problems and seek solutions. The previous paragraph but one contains the bare bones of the advice I passed on. It wasn't entirely hypocrisy on my part. I like to think I have figured out, late in life, most of the steps I might have taken if I had really wanted to become a stronger player. I never had a coach myself so had to learn the hard way. It took too long and by the time I had absorbed most of the lessons via bitter experience, I had lost the motivation and energy to perform at full throttle.

The true genius of chess prodigies lies in their learning to learn and work at a very young age. In essence, hard work is the be-all and end-all of chess. Or, putting it another way, it is that top players fall more deeply in love with the game than the rest of us do, and consequently have more self-motivation to dedicate themselves to it. The rest of us might think we work hard at the game, but by comparison, we really don't dedicate as much of our time and energies to it as we should, or perhaps misapply them. After a few decades out of school, we even forget how to learn.

Stephen has jotted down many of my homilies in his book. A few years ago he wrote a regular chess column, also called 'The Rookie', for the Guardian, in which he would write about his coaching sessions with Nigel Short. These were often preceded by sessions with me, focused on the same game scores, and it was always interesting for me to read Nigel's reactions to Stephen's play and compare his 'second opinion' with my own. I joked with Stephen that I was his local GP, whereas Nigel was his high status Harley Street specialist. As a result, I find myself referred to in the book as his 'doc'. I hope readers of the book don't confuse me with English GM John Nunn who is also known by this sobriquet in the chess world.

Chess coaching isn't easy, but as with playing the game, it can be fun despite the occasional frustrations. I wasn't prepared for opened doors for him that would remain closed for the rest of us. It wasn't all hobbobbing with famous people by any means. Stephen took particular delight in his encounters with the hobos and hustlers of Washington and Union Squares in New York, and these episodes are amongst the highlights of the book. They are written with empathy, indeed, Stephen tells us he loved the Marshall club, but that he loved playing chess with the guys in the park even more. Stephen also befriended many fellow club and tournament players in the UK and their trenchant views are well represented in the pages of the book.

The parts of the book which I enjoyed the most were Stephen's interviews and offhand games with players. Stephen is self-deprecating, and not a little deprecating of chess players in general, but he draws people out well and elicits a number of fascinating stories from people on his travels. I’m not a great traveller myself, but these tales did make me a little envious. The descriptions of tournaments, on the other hand: the weird arrangements (and people), snatched meals between rounds, cramped conditions, shabby hotels in uncongenial towns, chessboard disappointments and failures, all woven into triumphant narratives... these I enjoyed less, but not because they were not authentic. On the contrary, they brought it all back. Nostalgia in the true Greek meaning of the word (the pain of remembrance).

Stephen’s depiction of the grind and the emotional swings of the tournament circuit – that familiar feeling of ‘why the hell do I put myself through this?’ – is all too realistic. Occasionally there is an oasis in the desert and Stephen enjoyed one of those rare red-letter days which made it all worthwhile (or very nearly). Again, it brought it all back, that heady feeling of tournament victory, which I think I experienced about three times in 40 years of trying (he wrote, bitterly). Given that the book is not for an exclusively chess-savvy audience, these chapters depicting the chess tournament scene, at home and abroad, may be particularly enlightening for the generalist reader. They may not fuel a recruitment drive for competition chess in the UK, but that is not the purpose of the book either.

Reading Stephen's lively account of his experiences in New York, and with amazing characters such as GM Vlad Tkachiev in Moscow and London, I once again start to wonder whether Stephen was the coach and me the pupil. Although Stephen had taken the plunge and become a competition player wholeheartedly – joining two local clubs and, incidentally, doing some admirable work by organising and captaining teams – I sense he still feels more comfortable and less stressed when playing in a more informal environment, online, at a club night or in the street. That probably explains why he never applied himself to any significant book work. Who can blame him? Even as his ‘doc’, and for all my sermonising as recorded in the book, I accept that it is up to the patient whether to take the medicine or not.

In the end it wasn't about playing strength, or fees, or how big a name you are. It was about being immersed and absorbed in chess. That's the essence of chess. Stephen walked the walk, and I enjoyed walking the walk with him. As to whether he has successfully talked the talk: I recommend you buy the book and decide for yourself.
60 Seconds with...

Stephen Moss

continued from page 7

Your best move: I played a blitz game against Magnus Carlsen ahead of the London Classic in 2009 – purely for publicity, you understand. It ended humiliatingly with a back-rank mate, but he said afterwards he liked 14 \texttt{b1}. He also said I played like a Norwegian. This was not a compliment: he meant I played too intuitively and suggested I strive to play more like a Russian. Anyway, here are the moves of the historic (sic) Moss–Carlsen game: 1 \texttt{e4} \texttt{c5} 2 \texttt{\textsc{g}5} 3 \texttt{\textsc{f}6} 4 \texttt{e5} \texttt{\textsc{d}5} 5 \texttt{\textsc{d}4} \texttt{cxd4} 6 \texttt{\textsc{c}xd4} \texttt{d6} 7 \texttt{\textsc{d}7} \texttt{\textsc{d}7} 8 \texttt{\textsc{f}3} \texttt{e6} 9 \texttt{0-0} \texttt{\textsc{d}7} 10 \texttt{\textsc{c}c6} 11 \texttt{\textsc{bxc}3} 12 \texttt{\textsc{a}3} \texttt{\textsc{d}6} 13 \texttt{\textsc{f}8} \texttt{\textsc{f}8}

Your worst move? Too many to enumerate, but the worst moment in the course of researching the book came when I was in the amateur at Wijk aan Zee in 2014. It was a 10-player, all-play-all mini-tournament within band five, so for players with a FIDE rating around 1800. I had a reasonable tournament and was on 4/8 going into the final round against one of the leaders. I played confidently and powerfully to begin with, establishing a commanding position. But as usual I couldn’t calculate with sufficient precision, and my opponent kept finding get-out-of-jail moves. The advantage seesawed in the middlegame, but I was sure I had the advantage in the endgame and turned down the offer of a draw.

Conquest and others had told me that only wimps took draws, so I was determined to play on as long as there was life in the position. There was just one problem: I pressed so hard that the advantage swung back to him. I lost a pawn to his predatory queen, he swapped queens and seemed to be marching his lone pawn to the eighth rank and queenend. I resigned. “You know that position was drawn,” an incredulous spectator said to me. And to my horror, I immediately realised he was right. It would have been simple to exchange my final pawn and draw the game, but my head was so frazzled after six hours of chess and the snuffing out of my attempts to win that I had barely looked at the final position. I had just assumed my opponent was on the point of breaking through. It was a devastating blow.

What really irked me was that I felt I had let down the two players who would have shared victory in the group with my opponent. All three would have tied on 6/9, and presumably all three would have been promoted to division four at Wijk next year. Now the player who had this fortunate, foolish success was left alone at the top of the leader-board, and only he would be promoted. My stupidity had distorted the entire tournament, and seemed to negate all my – perhaps all our – efforts over the previous nine days. Much of my fortnight at Wijk had been enjoyable and instructive, but I hated chess at that moment.

A memorable opponent: There were many in the course of the three years or so I spent researching the book: trash-talkers in Washington Square Park, strange Russians in an underground chess club in Moscow, the rich tapestry of club players in the UK. One accused me of whistling and humming as I played (he had just lost the game – very Captain Kennedy), another said I was gurning and asked me if I needed to go to the toilet, a third objected to me making notes in a little book (for my own research purposes), and played with remarkable intensity for what was after all a fairly low-key ECF 140-ish encounter.

Among club players in the UK, I especially enjoyed playing Timothy Crouch, who fell asleep at the London Classic and still beat me; Brendan O’Gorman, who it is always a pleasure to encounter at tournaments; Mark Heffer, with whom I tussled in the final game at a tournament in Bury St Edmunds and who I thought played with great spirit and took defeat in an exemplary way; Adrian Waldox, with whom I had a series of very enjoyable games and who enthusiastically shared with me the 50 years of pleasure the game has given him; and David Cachet, the former Wimbledon player, who kindly lost to me in the final of the 2014 Felce Cup (Surrey Individual Under-140), allowing me to carry away that large and distinguished trophy.

Favourite game of all time: I don’t really have one, but one of my favourite players is Nicolas Rossolimo. Cosmopolitan, cranky, a great chess artist, dying in mysterious circumstances – he was an early inspiration for writing the book. In the end I didn’t really do much about him, so maybe I will return to Rossolimo some time in another volume.

The best three chess books: I have trouble reading analytical books – I’m just too slow at visualising and playing through games. For the purposes of my book, Arnold Denker and Larry Parr’s The Bobby Fischer I Knew, which I read during a chess-playing stay in the U.S., made me rethink what drove people to play chess; Jan Hein Donner’s The King was a great source of provocation when I was flagging; but by far the most moving and elegiac writing on the game and the culture that worshipped it comes from Genna Sosonko in his great series of books on the vanished Soviet era.

Is FIDE doing a good job? I don’t really want to get into chess politics. Sport interests me; sports bureaucracy doesn’t.

Or your national federation? There is always scope for improvement, but I was impressed by the seamless way the ECF introduced a national membership scheme – no small undertaking and surely vital to securing the future of the game in England. By the way, I am a supporter of a single UK federation, but I know feelings run high on the subject.

Can chess make one happy? If I could reach a FIDE rating of 2200 or maybe 2000, or even an ECF of 150! – I would be happy. As it is, my form is lacklustre, I sense I am in decline, my last game was a wretched defeat to a 13-year-old and the future is bleak.

A tip for the club player: You mean a tip from the club player! Steep yourself in the history of the game and see yourself playing in this fantastic continuum stretching back centuries. Greco, Philidor, Morphy, Steinitz, Moss… what a pantheon.
Training online
New: Openings-App

How do you learn and practice your openings? Where do you get bright new ideas for your repertoire from? Where do you save your variations and how do you keep everything up to date? Perhaps the most important question - how do you internalize new lines and ideas so that you can recall them at the board?

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