

0:01

Alonzo Ross: Oh hi. This is Alonzo Ross, continuing the interview with John Curdo, who has won 936 tournaments and still going. And we're going to continue talking about his chess career. So John, why don't you tell us some more good stories?

0:19

John Curdo: [Laughs]. I was at a tournament in Rhode Island, run by Gus Gosselin (he used to run many tournaments down there) and this woman approached him and asked if he knew of a chess coach for her son who was also playing in the tournament. And Gus pointed to me and that's how I met Carol Palazati[?]. Her name was. She brought her son to my condo in Chelmsford[?] every couple weeks or so and then we started going out for pizza after the lessons. And then I ended up marrying her. It was one of my best moves in my chess career

01:28

AR: But she, she didn't play chess though, just, just her son.

01:32

JC: Well, she knew the moves but no, she didn't play. It was just her son. He actually beat me once, the little monster. [Both laugh]. People consider my game against Grandmaster Robert Byrne as my most memorable game. And it's memorable to the extent that I probably only beat about half a dozen grandmasters in my whole career and I beat him in about twenty moves or so. So he is in one of my *Caviar* books.

02:15

AR: Ok...so do you want to say anything about how you managed to beat him so quickly or...

02:23

JC: He just...stepped into my wheelhouse, so to speak. Since I moved to Auburn, I have a good health organization, HMO I guess they call them, but somewhere along the line my doctor decided to move out of the area. It was really irksome at the time, but I looked up a couple of potential doctors and one of them listed the fact that he was a chess player in his resume. So I chose him. His name was Frederick Georgian[?]. Recently, at the senior center where I take lunch in Auburn, this woman told me that she knew of an avid chess player. His name was Carmine Pujo. So as usual, I looked him up online and I found that he played in the Worcester chess club. So when I brought up his name I went to his last tournament. Turns out he was deceased. But I went to his last tournament and brought it up and lo and behold, in the tournament was my doctor, Dr. Georgian, and my stepson. [Laughs]. So this...Carmine Pujo, this avid chess player, had about 13 tournaments before he passed away. In the same span of time, I had more than a thousand tournaments. Anyways, move on.

04:39

AR: Ok. Yeah, one of the things that really impressed me was when you showed me your closet full of records and scoresheets; why don't you tell us about the records that you keep?

04:53

JC: Ok, actually I didn't mention about the doctor.

04:56

AR: Oh, ok. Yeah, go back to the doctor, sorry.

04:59

JC: Yeah, let's get back to Dr. Georgian for a minute. I'm in pretty good shape [laughs] for the shape I'm in. I go to the gym every other day...and eat a reasonably— follow a reasonably good diet. But I go to doc—I was going to the doctor twice a year: once for a regular check up in the middle of the year, because quite a while ago I had some real physical problems, which have since gone away. So since my health is so good, the doctor and I decided that I should only see him *once* a year. As a matter of fact, I'm supposed to see him... shortly. Anyways, last time I saw him, we were going over me generally and he said "Keep playing chess!" and he repeated himself a half dozen times: "Keep playing chess! Keep playing chess!" 'Course I'm going to keep playing chess. [Laughs]. Thank you. Ok, tournament records and scoresheets.

06:24

AR: Ok, yes, tell us about your...your luminous... set of records.

06:31

JC: My tournament record of course goes back to 1947...and over the years, some of my tournament records have been published in *Chess Horizon*, which is shortly going to go out of business, I think. And *Chess Life* on occasion. And once computers became big...the records are online. Unfortunately the records now only go back to 1991.... Compared to my whole career, that isn't too many years. Luckily, in 1976 I decided to start listing every tournament I played in. Simply put: the tournament, the location, my score in that particular tournament, and I ended up culminating the scores and the tournaments. I have something like 47 or 48 sheets now recording all the tournaments I've played in since 1976.

08:01

AR: Well that's a lot.

08:03

JC: Yeah and if I want to look up a tournament recently...I have to think up his name, Caruana. What the devil's his first name?

08:18

AR: Fabiano.

08:20

JC: Yeah, that's right, Fabiano Caruana. When he became famous, I realized I had played him a number of years ago. And it happens when he was about 10 years old and I beat him pretty good. So I was able to find the score sheet, as a result of my filing system, very fast. He was ten years old at the time I beat him. Four years—he was an expert at the time and I was down the bottom of my... floor, down near two thousand something, three or four or something like that. And he was an expert; four years later he was a grandmaster and getting better every year. So besides...about fifty sheets listing my tournaments, I also have all the score sheets in-how do we say it?-numerical order by year and I can find score sheets in very short period of time if you give a tournament or year or whatever so... I have thousands and thousands of score sheets and a lot of them are in scorebooks.

09:52

AR: Ok...so John one of the questions that I know we've discussed off record is why are you so unique? You've won 936 tournaments, how—why...why—what has made you so unique that you could win so many tournaments?

10:16

JC: Well when I started off playing, I played, obviously mostly in New England. I rarely traveled... So... you might say I've been—I've described myself as a big fish in a small pond or something like that. I've used different phrases over the years. But for a awful lot of years, 'till I met Harold Dondis, I played in the New England area, generally. So I racked up some pretty good results over those years. But once Harold started taking me to the US Open, the World Open, different tournaments around the country, the Senior Opens, and so on, I wasn't such a killer. But I still racked up a lot of good tournaments. And I really enjoy playing and I like the fact that there might be money—money prizes to be had; that keeps me going.

11:33

AR: Now one the things you mentioned to me was that...you, you, you mentioned Korchnoi and how Korchnoi used to play at a higher level and now it's gone down and he quit the game basically. But even though you're not playing at the 2500 level, why don't you continue on?

11:58

JC: Well of course Korchnoi has since died. That'd be about the only thing that would stop him.

12:04

AR: I didn't know that.

12:05

JC: Oh yeah he passed away...

12:07

AR: Oh, I apologize!

12:08

JC: Yeah, and Larry Evans—who again was born the same year as me, as Korchnoi was: 1931—he passed away even earlier...Well...I'm speechless. I'm just going to keep on playing. I don't know when it's going to stop. I worry when I have a bad game or a bad tournament, but I'm just—I don't think I'm losing it yet. That's what we talk about in the senior center; there's a lot of people wandering around with Alzheimer's and of course we've been told that chess players are in good position not to get Alzheimer's.

13:01

AR: I hope so!

13:02

JC: [Laugh] Yeah, there's been a lot of talk about that. But I... I really believe it and it's not only playing chess or doing crossword puzzles or keeping physically fit; it's a combination of a lot of things.

13:22

AR: But, you know, one the things that when we were discussing this before, what you said was that even though you're not playing at 2500 level, you're still in there fighting. And, and, and as a result you keep winning tournaments.

13:38

JC: Well when you sit down at a chess board you gotta fight! I used to say Lasker was my favorite chess player because he said that chess was a struggle. And I've always believed that. It...it's just definitely a struggle.

13:55:

AR: Yes...so now you also mentioned that you had to... you contributed to the history of chess as being the—playing computer early in the history of computers in tournaments.

14:12

JC: There was a time that...computers-chess computers-played in tournaments. And in my book *Forty Years at the Top*... game number 67 is a game against a computer. I believe it's unique in that I've claimed I was the first rated master to play against a computer. I'd like to read the introduction to the game. *"In late 1966, a chess player was conceived in Cambridge and entered into tournament play in February, 1967. Of course, it was MIT's 'Mac Hack' designed by Richard Greenblatt. After four events it had attained a 1400 rating, with a performance rating in one event of 1640. It was withdrawn from tournament play for a long time, supposing to improve on its general skills and to book up on openings. It returned to competition in the greater bust and open at the prudential center in 1971. I was paired against it in the first round and room[?] was put at strength at about 1900. I had made disparaging remarks about chess-playing computers so I didn't want to be the first master to lose a tournament game to one. So it was with great trepidation that I sat down to play. I was extremely nervous at the start but relaxed when the t.v. cameras went away. As it happened, Mac Hack had not improved much, scoring only two draws in six games at this tournament. But being the first person to play this machine, I didn't know its strength. I believe to this day that I am the first master to engage a computer program in rated, tournament play. And I beat it."* [Laughs] That's pretty good, huh?

16:51

AR: Yeah, yeah.

16:54

JC: Ok, I want to get to this one.

16:56

AR: Ok, and... you mentioned to me earlier that you had a memorable game that was not against Robert Byrne but you, you wanted to bring it up anyway. Why don't you tell us about that?

17:12

JC: I guess the word is 'self-deprecating' or something like that. I was playing in a tournament, I believe, in Bermuda, and I came down to the tournament room, it must have been Sunday morning. And Arthur Bisguier (grandmaster) sidled up to me and said "you won't have any problem with your opponent 'cause we were drinking all night." My opponent was a Russian émigré: Igor Ivanov. So I was awaiting my opponent, talking to some person out to the side of the room and we heard this terrible crash and we looked around and Ivanov had fallen on the floor when he tried to sit at the board. [Laughs]. So we sat down to play. I was black and I chose the Dutch Defense and at some time in the middle of the day I remember vividly that I should have played something like rook to D8 to contest the D file, but I said to myself "Igor can't even keep score!" So, I took a chance and he beat me! [Laughs]. Well that— it was not a memorable game...

19:04

AR: But it is funny!

19:05

JC: Oh yeah! I mean, it's up to them if they want to use it. This one was at... the World Open and unfortunately, I can't pronounce the guy's name. It's Alex—we used to call him "whoo-Joo." He had a very complicated Polish name.

19:23

AR: Oh, I've heard of him, yes.

19:25

JC: Oh yeah, he's a very strong...grandmaster and I was paired against him in a round towards the end of the tournament. And of course, I played the Dutch Defense; I was black again. And he kept disappearing and he would pop up again and make a move then disappear again. It turns out he was playing blitz for money in the skittles room. [Laughs]. I'm not sure, but I believe that when people get free entry to these tournaments (grandmasters and international masters), I believe they're required to finish their schedule; they can't have a bad tournament and just go home. So, I think that's why he was hanging in. So, the good news there was that I drew with him. [Laughs].

20:25

AR: Congratulations!

20:27

JC: Well, I also beat Igor Ivanov in a later game! But he's one of the few—I think, overall, I've only beaten maybe five or six grandmasters out of many, many thousands of games. They are the elite.

20:53

AR: So any, any more...memorable games you want to bring up?

20:59

JC: I'm sure I could dredge up some, but no...not really...Well I could talk about the caviars...

21:10

AR: Ok, sure.

21:20

JC: My book—my autobiographical book—*Forty Years at the Top* was written about 1982 or thereabouts, I'm not sure exactly. But somewhere along the line, I noticed I didn't have hardly any short games...in the book. So early in my career in particular, I played many, many games...ten, fifteen, twenty minutes long. As a result, I decided to publish— self publish some games, tournament books with short games. So, in 1982, my original chess caviar was born. I typed it on an old manual typewriter and it was in descriptive notation. I described it as well received, rather amateurish production. With the help of Drew Sarkisian[?] *More Chess Caviar* in 1992, with an improved format and style. Now with the advent of more sophisticated computer software I'm able to include diagrams and better notes to help you enjoy the third edition of *Still More Chess Caviar*. This particular edition has longer games than the original and of course it has a lot of notes. The fact there's at least a couple of grandmasters in here...leads,

generally to longer games. The first caviar was converted to algebraic...by...shit...who's the guy that recently died in our club?

24:20

AR: Lou Jacques?

24:21

JC: Lou Jacques, yeah. The original *Caviar* was changed from descriptive to algebraic by Lou Jacques. I owe him a real debt of gratitude and unfortunately, he recently passed away. These *Caviars* [laughs]...I call them "engineering manuals" but they're still for sale: ten dollars each. [Laughs, hands copy to AR]. So anyway, that's yours.

25:05

AR: Thank you.

25:07

JC: So anyway, I don't know what more I can add.

25:10

AR: Well then let me just ask a question for a different audience: people who are early in their chess careers. Do you have any suggestions on how to study? How to improve one's game? Do you study the endgame, or the middle game, or the openings? Or do you read a lot of games from books? Or, what, what do you recommend?

25:44

AR: The two books at the beginning of my career that influenced me the most were *My System* by Nimozitch and the one that had the biggest influence and my chess style by Tarrasch: *The Game of Chess*. And he—his system was to start with the end game...and that's what most people should do. It's easier, particular for young people, 'cause there are fewer pieces on the board, concepts are easier to understand. So he started with the endgame and of course you have to know what to do in the endgame. Prior to that, so he went to the middlegame, which dealt with...pawn structures...tactics in particular... and middlegame planning generally. And then he went to openings. And I honestly don't remember [laughs] any of his particular opening advice. But I ended up choosing my own openings and I recommend that. You should have a regular opening that you play... in most games, say the Giuoco Piano for instance, if you like e4. Or the Queen's Gambit or something—Queen's Pawn game if you like D4. But you should also have a second weapon because he find yourself playing the same people over period of time, particularly of you're in a chess club. So it's important to have something, I call it "having a second weapon" so you can surprise them on occasion with the white pieces. As black, I prefer e5 to e4 and if you adopt that, you have to learn a *lot* of openings. So, most people would start with, say the Caro Kann or the Sicilian Defense, where they could concentrate on one opening for awhile, that's one to go. You could play the Caro Kann against e4, you could play the Slav Defense (which has a similar structure), against d4. So they're different ways of approaching these types of things. You gotta keep it simple [laughs]...The phrase is KISS: keep it simple...fellow [laughs]. I'm having a little fun now! [There may have been something good in there]? I'm trying to think of some memorable people way back—of course Harry Limeon[?]. ...was the most selfless person I've ever met. Once I was in a monetary pinch, in my married life, and he loaned me...a considerable amount of money, which his wife—second wife very unhappy. But that's the kind of person he was. Of course, I paid him back. But he would give of himself continually. But I had a pretty good record against him. I used to keep a little

black book with people's names like Harry Limeon and...different people, different—particularly, strong or players I would play over a period of time. And I've recently weeded out the pages and unfortunately, threw them away...

30:22

AR: Yeah, I do the same thing.

30:23

JC: Yeah, I've...I've tried to cut down...I have a, a student that still comes to me... he's—I don't know if I mentioned it, I have a student that still comes to me. I don't think I'm teaching him very much anymore, but we are enjoying, very much, our sessions together. But he's been coming for 15 years...so as a result, I've been turning over a lot of my memorabilia over to him. Otherwise I would be throwing it away.

31:03

AR: Alright. So anything else you want to talk about?

31:08

JC: Not really. Actually, when you look throw here, God, there's—there's a lot of famous people in here

31:19

AR: Yeah, you've played some of the best.

31:22

JC: Well, famous...you might say locally... William Robertie[?], he's still around now. He became a famous backgammon player. And as a matter fact, he wrote a backgammon column for *Chess Globe*[?] for a short period of time during the backgammon craze. But people wouldn't necessarily remember him.

31:48

AR: So John, I've known a number of people over the years that were interested in chess but also interested in other games like poker. Have you had an interest in any other games or just stuck—been true to chess.

32:03

JC: Speaking of poker, there's a former New England chess master named Dan Harrington. He won the world series of poker back in the early days. He's in my book. Oh yeah! Hey Pal Benko's in here—well I put in a loss. Walter Brown is in here...I think I drew with him. Harlow Daly[?]...Harlow Daly lived to be 95 years old and when I started playing him, I handled him very easily, when I was 16, 17 years old. And then he finally beat me in the later years and I found out he was already 70 at the time. He's in the book of course. Arnold Dink is in here. That's a loss. John Fedorowicz, wow! You know who runs the World Open and all those tournaments?

33:33

AR: No, I don't.

33:34

JC: William Goichberg. He's in the book. He used to play chess. [laughs]. A long time ago...I...I don't know, unless you can come up with some specific questions.

33:52

AR: Um, well let's see. I think we're doing just fine...Do you have any advice to younger players? Now you mentioned that you had a sole opening or a series of openings to play, do you have any more advice on how to find your style? You know are you an attacker or positional?

34:20

JC: That's a good question. I think style happens automatically or naturally. Some people are just going to be more conservative than others. The particular student that still comes to me is ultra-conservative. I do all I can to get him to lash out but he won't do it. But again, style is just—I think it just happens. And of course, if you find that your style is conservative say, your openings should be conservative. In other words, something like the French Defense or the Caro Kann would be better than the Sicilian Defense. The Sicilian Defense is more of a fighting defense.

35:21

AR: There's a quote that I like from Bobby Fischer. He said that his game really started to come together when he decided that he was going to try to win for both black and white, rather than just try to win for white and get a draw for black.

35:42

JC: Yeah, the black vs. white...it's just a dilemma...I'm...I'm caught up in it myself. I feel much, much better with the white guys. And a story that sort of amplifies that is that I played a fellow from Harvard years ago, his name was Robin Spatal[?] and he played the French Defense against me at the Boylston Chess Club. And I beat him pretty good. So, after the game (I was pretty young and probably intolerant) I asked him how he could play something like the French Defense. I said "It's so cramped and uh!" And he came out with a brilliant quote. He says "Black has his choice on how he wants to suffer." [Laughs] I think that might be in here.

36:51

AR: That's a good one!

36:52

JC: That *is* a good one. Yeah, he...he deserves credit for that one. [Laughs].

36:57

AR: And John, earlier you were talking and you mentioned someone who said that chess was a struggle, but I didn't catch the name of the guy who...

37:06

JC: Lasker.

37:07

AR: Oh, Edward— Edward Lasker.

37:09

JC: Not Edward...Emanuel.

37:11

AR: Emanuel! Ok, ok

37:12

JC: Edward came along later so...There was another memorable chess player who came through New England. His name was.. Platz; I'd have to look up his first name. He was a doctor and he...knew... Emanuel Lasker personally and I think towards the end of his...life/career he settled in New England. And quite a while back, Andy Soltis wrote in his wonderful *Chess Life* column, that Dr. Platz was a dominant force in New England chess. No way! He settled in Connecticut or western Massachusetts and he was only a shadow of his former self. But he was good chess player and a gentleman. I was always pissed because Soltis had built him up...and that's denigrating me, you see. 'Cause I was...

38:43

AR: Well then let's correct him right here. You're a great chess player and a true gentleman and sportsman and it's been a pleasure doing these... doing these interviews.

38:55

JC: Well if you can think of anything more [laughing] I don't know...

38:59

AR: I don't know of anything more either, you...I mean I think we've covered quite a few people that you've met during you years. I've tried to steer it maybe so that people who are learning the game could get some valuable advice and you've done that.

39:18

JC: I can't imagine that this—I haven't listened to anything. I'm scared to listen to it because I can't imagine good reception, if you know what I'm saying. I don't want to hear it.

39:31

AR: Oh, you mean people who hear it will be unhappy because they don't like it...

39:39

JC: Well no, I just feel I would—I just imagine a little thing like this doing a good job.