

That's What Queen-d1 Said

WGM Jennifer Shahade talks candidly about advocating for women in chess and how she balances her many roles.

By JENNIFER VALLENS

Most *Chess Life* readers are familiar with Jennifer Shahade, but most probably don't know her extensive resume. She is a two-time U.S. Women's Chess champion, a MindSports ambassador for Poker Stars, author of three chess-related books, Grand Chess Tour commentator, board member of the World Chess Hall of Fame, co-founder of the nonprofit organization 9Queens, inventor of Hula Chess and Naked Chess, and co-creator of Roulette Chess and television reality show, "Extreme Chess Championship." Jen won the first TonyBet Open Face Chinese Poker Live World Championship High Roller Event. She is also the host of the new US Chess "Ladies Knight" podcast.

The latest title Jennifer can add to her resume is Women's Program Director for US Chess. This newly-created position supports women's initiatives and furthers US Chess' mission to "empower people, enrich lives, and enhance communities through chess." Jennifer will promote growth, outreach, and fundraising for women in chess, and she also will serve as an ambassador to inspire female players of all ages.

Let's dive right in, Jen. You've been a champion for women's chess for many years. You authored a tactics book titled *Play Like a Girl* in 2011 and you co-founded a non-profit, 9Queens, in 2007 with former US Chess Executive Director Jean Hoffman. What excites you most about your new role?

As a former professional player myself, I will support top players while also working to recruit and retain female members. Let's make the pyramid higher and wider! From women of color to seniors, women with disabilities and transgender women, I want to invite everyone to the party and make our chess family more diverse.

One impetus for creating this position was seeing the strong reactions to the "Girls in Chess" video that Jenny Schweitzer created in 2018, executive produced by Richard Schiffman and me. The piece debuted in *The New Yorker* magazine and went viral, as numerous viewers told me it encouraged them to teach their daughters chess.

The momentum in girls' and women's chess is growing on the coasts and in the heart of the country, from Madison, Alabama and Brownsville, Texas to Chicago, the site of the Kasparov Chess Foundation (KCF) All-Girls Nationals, which is presented by Renaissance Chess and is

one of the most popular events on the calendar. St. Louis also has a great duo of summer tourneys, the U.S. Junior Girls Invitational and the SPF Girls' Invitational at Webster University. I hope to augment the efforts of organizers around the country who are already supporting women and girls in chess and who want to do more. Some other amazing coast-to-coast initiatives include:

- Robin Ramson at Chess Girls DC;
- Gabrielle Moshier and Jason Bui at the Philadelphia Chess Society;
- Numerous initiatives in New York City, including Girls To Grandmasters and Her Move Next;
- Elizabeth Shaughnessy at the Berkeley Chess School, who had a Girls Club Cairns' Cup viewing party;
- Judit Sztaray, a passionate and tireless organizer in the Bay Area who always makes an effort to recruit and support girls.

And so many more! We opened a grant application process in March to allow local non-profit affiliates the chance to intensify their efforts with seed money, and I can't wait to see the applications come in.

In your book *Chess Bitch*, which was published in 2005, you reflect on your experience competing as a young girl in the chess world. Can you tell me what your biggest challenge was (and is) competing in such a highly male-dominated field?

My biggest hurdle was quitting when I entered junior high. I'm so fortunate that I was able to "unquit" in high school due to my supportive family: my father, FM Michael Shahade; brother, IM Greg Shahade; and mother, Dr. Sally Solomon. They all loved to see me succeed in chess and my dad pointed me in all the right directions. Most importantly, they didn't push me to play when I tried to quit. I came back to it myself. And that's really the only way I could have become a champion.

This is a story I'm starting to tell more regularly, as my new role at US Chess has caused me to take a closer look at the statistics. Girls still drop out of chess at an alarming rate in junior high. Some may have gained what they wanted from chess and moved on to other things. But it really nags at me that many have so much more to learn and get from chess, and unlike me, may not get the opportunity to "unquit." I want people to know that chess is not only a great game to get into, but also a great game to come back to.



IN HER NEW ROLE AS
WOMEN'S PROGRAM
DIRECTOR FOR US CHESS,
JENNIFER SHAHADE SEEKS
TO EMPOWER AND INSPIRE
FEMALES OF ALL AGES.

PHOTO BY **MARIA
EMELIANOVA**

Tell us more about your new podcast "Ladies Knight." How do you choose your guests and where can we listen?

If I am looking forward to a conversation, my enthusiasm will rub off on listeners. My first three guests, Alexandra Botez, Adia Onyango, and Natasha Regan are all women who I really wanted to know more about, for different reasons. Alexandra for her precocious entrepreneurial success; Adia for her style, blindfold skills, and power to inspire young women of color; and Natasha because she co-authored one of the most fascinating chess books I've ever read, *Game Changer*.

I'm also super proud to have intro and outro music from the song "Oh Capablanca" by the artist Juga.

You can subscribe to "Ladies Knight" on iTunes, stitcher or Google Podcasts and find the pod on uschess.org/clo on the third Tuesday of each month. You can also search our podcast category to find "Ladies Knight," along with "Cover Stories," "One Move at a Time," and "The Chess Underground."

And definitely write a review on iTunes and spread the word.

You are a viewer favorite for your chess commentary with the Saint Louis Chess Club. If you had to choose a female successor, who would be your top picks?

I love all the top female commentators and it's a special treat when my childhood hero, GM Judit Polgar, does commentary for the World Chess Champs! It can be a rough world out there with troll comments (as you can see in my art installation, "Not Particularly Beautiful"), so the women who rise to prominence in chess are as tough as nails and usually incredibly charismatic and smart. But these four stand out to me:

- Tania Sachdev is so charming and quick-witted.
- Anna Rudolf is one of the kindest people I've met, has an incredible work ethic, and a gift for interacting with fans.
- Alexandra Botez is pure magnetism, my first guest on "Ladies Knight."
- Jovanka Houska is so classy and intelligent, and also brave in writing a romance novel about chess, *The Mating Game*, which gives us an insight into a totally different aspect of her and the world of chess.

You are the mother of an adorable two-year-old son. Tell me, has your world view changed since becoming a mother?

I now understand an entirely different world of working moms and single parents (though I have a wonderful husband).

I better relate to the challenges that many Americans face: stagnant wages, struggling with childcare and healthcare.

I also fully jive now with the Bill Gates quote, "I choose a lazy person to do a hard job. Because a lazy person will find an easy way to do it." Substitute "lazy person" with "busy mom" and the quote works perfectly, too. Moms will find a way to do it faster.

Speaking of motherhood, I am saddened to hear that you lost your mother at an early age. Can you tell me one pearl of wisdom, piece of advice, or greatest gift you received from her?

My mom was the first female chemistry professor at Drexel University and she thrived on accomplishing things that no one ever had.

She was also an exceptionally kind person. Anytime she heard of someone who didn't have a place to go for Thanksgiving, whether it was a foreign grad student, a young chessplayer on the road, or someone fighting with family members, she would welcome them. And she had

a strict policy: if you were invited once, it was a lifetime invitation.

You can imagine it got pretty crowded in our narrow Philadelphia rowhouse.

She also had so many little witticisms about writing, games, career, and another major passion, cooking. Here are a couple that come to mind:

"Always throw many things at the wall as you don't know what will stick!"

"Never substitute butter."

In addition to being a pioneer in chess, you also are ambassador for PokerStars. Can you tell us more about that?

As an Ambassador for PokerStars, I play tournaments wearing their patch, consult, and create bridges between the chess and poker communities, like the #MyChessPokerGame Challenge that YOU [interviewer Jennifer Vallens] were a runner-up in.

I apply my passion for diversity and gender parity to both worlds. Chess is a mirror for the value of hard work and self-improvement. Poker is a metaphor for some things that are holding women from unleashing full potential: less access to capital and free time. These were themes I focused on at an International Women's Day event in London sponsored by PokerStars. Using games to promote social good is powerful, because games dissolve many of the differences between us while we play. But that doesn't mean those differences are irrelevant—who plays, how often, and how they are perceived all play into the broader game.

What is Open Face Chinese Poker?

It's a variant of poker that is a lot more like gin rummy or Pai Gow, if you know either of those games. I became one of the best players in the world at this game due to my ability to balance heuristics and brute force calculation in the same way chess masters approach the royal game. I had my biggest poker win in this variant in Prague, and the trophy was a huge wrestling belt that was clearly designed for a man. This made victory even sweeter.

Let's round back to your role as Women's Program Director. What are some of the goals you hope to achieve?

I want to meet more girls face to face and inspire them through my own story and passion. I also plan to develop partnerships to increase the exposure of girls and women in chess, from our top players to our mission to approach parity in our membership numbers. I think of Ruth Haring's untimely death and can only imagine how thrilled she'd be to see so much momentum for US Chess Women. Some of my specific plans include:

- Create a prestigious event or category that requires women to be on a team.
- Think outside the 64 squares and expand the idea of winning in chess via creative contests, puzzle solving, or chess variants.
- Create an initiative for men and women to teach girls and women chess, providing incentive to those who teach the most new females to play.
- Work with Scouts BSA to get more girls to get the badge (*see Cairns' Cup article on pg. 24*).
- Think about events and initiatives that fit into the schedules of women we may not be reaching, i.e., women with small children, senior women, or women in college.

What are some projects you can't wait to get more involved in?

The Girls' Club concept that [Women's Committee Chair] Maureen

From women of color to seniors, women with disabilities and transgender women, I want to invite everyone to the party and make our chess family more diverse.



BEFORE AND AFTER: THE EFFECTS OF MENTORING ON ASPIRING YOUNG CHESS PLAYERS.

Grimaud spearheaded at our national scholastic tournaments over the past few years has been wildly successful, and I will be attending most of these to mentor, interact, and give out US Chess Women swag to girls! I love attending the National Girls Tournament of Champions (NGTOC) because every girl there has already accomplished so much on her way to qualifying. I was so impressed by the reigning champ, basketball star and chess expert Veronika Zilajeva, who told me, “I have a friend from every state because of [the NGTOC].”

I also plan to spend a lot of time at the Saint Louis Chess Club, which generously partnered with us and donated \$100,000 to the program. I will help them push the envelope with women and girls in chess via research and visits to girls' schools. Since a 2015 show at the World Chess Hall of Fame, the chess campus hosts Thursday “Ladies Knight” classes, which was the inspiration for my new podcast's name.

And I'll continue to drive more female-centered and female-created content to US Chess on both our website and our social media channels, @USChessWomen on Instagram and Twitter.

So, tell me: How do you do it all?

Lots of coffee and adrenaline.

I also work a lot at night, after Fabian is asleep, or in St. Louis after a broadcast/dinner.

All my life, but especially since becoming a mom, I've further honed my efficiency techniques. I try not to get bogged down with negative energy and gossip. I also apply this to email or text threads. If it's mean-spirited, I try to ignore it or answer in as few words as possible.

In poker, I've been working on developing high efficiency models for learning. For instance, I give lessons to adults with a New York-based company called “Never Stop Learning,” which focuses on adult learning via experience. I instill the poker hand values and a few basic poker computations in about an hour. It may take a whole evening of trial and error if taught traditionally. I credit my work in chess for knowing how important constant feedback is to learning. Chess educator of the year Elizabeth Spiegel (nee Vicary) expounded on this so well in her acceptance speech (see *First Moves* on pg. 12). It doesn't matter if you are 50 or five: you can't absorb information without getting your hands dirty. Dr. Jeanne Sinquefield likes to say, “You can only talk (lecture) to someone for as long as how old they are.”

Explain your statement, “When the queen became the most powerful piece on the board 500 years ago, she made chess a much better game. This is a perfect metaphor for what happens when we give women more power in male-dominated fields.”

The history of the chess queen, as captured by Marilyn Yalom in *Birth of the Chess Queen*, is one of the most incredible aspects of chess history. I talked about this at a “Ladies Get Paid” (LGP) conference in December 2018. LGP is devoted to seeing women get promoted and paid what they deserve, and I was on a panel called “Breaking into the Boys' Club.”

As we went live to almost 600 attendees, I tweeted, “An auto-mechanic, drummer, and a chess champion all walk into a bar ... and they're all women. Cheers!”

I hope to do more events like this in my new role at US Chess. One of the most powerful parts of the panel to me was when drummer Mindy Abovitz Monk talked about how she noticed some time ago that all her pro-bono work was with women, and her paid work was with men. While it's great to donate time to creating more equitable conditions for women and girls, I also believe it's important for women not to be tricked into working for free or for exposure. Economic power is freedom that also allows us to push other women and under-represented groups up. I am very proud that US Chess is one of the first major chess companies that has created a position specifically to promote women in chess.

Is there anything still left on your Bucket List?

A World Series of Poker bracelet, two more books, a triple check raise, a 40 in Puzzle Rush, and 20,000 female US Chess members.

Would you say you are more a hunter or a gatherer?

I asked my very good friend Dr. Coren Apicella, who is an Evolutionary Psychology professor at the University of Pennsylvania, to comment on this for me.

Hunting has more variance in returns compared to gathering so it is higher risk. Hunting is so variable it only requires short bouts of physical strength every now and then—mostly just walking around waiting for opportunities.

Gathering is all day everyday. Requires lots of endurance and stamina. Pulling tubers from deep in the earth, carrying fruits, water, etc. is not easy.

So you are sort of both!!

You have endurance and stamina but you like risk.

Women in forager societies engage in about 6½ hours of manual labor each day. Men just sort of walk around and wait.

Doesn't that sound a lot like the queen versus the king?

Do you have any last words for our readers?

Subscribe to “Ladies Knight” and consider making US Chess Women part of your giving strategy! ♠