

Manion's Next Move

From top-ranked junior player to Internet entrepreneur, IM Josh Manion's chess life is not as far behind him as you might think.

By Andrea Rosen

Top-level U.S. junior chess players often have a tough decision to make when they reach adulthood. The time commitment needed to maintain their play at such a high level is huge, but with no equivalent of the NFL or NBA draft, and few real career opportunities in chess, most opt to roll up their chessboards and move on.

If any wonder whether the knowledge they gained through years of honing their chess skills will help them excel in other endeavors, they can take a cue from former childhood chess prodigy turned entrepreneur Josh Manion. The 34-year-old married father of three, who earned his international master title at the age of 19 before permanently packing up his pieces, is a leader in his field and an unqualified success. He owes much of it, he says, to his involvement in chess.

"Chess was the way I learned to get really good at something," says Manion, who now owns two highly-regarded and growing computer companies whose innovative products are used by some of the world's biggest firms. Through chess, he said, he developed an "understanding of the commitment level, and amount of work, dedication and focus that has to be applied to something" in order to excel.

He also developed a confidence borne out of the experience of competing against much older opponents, an attitude of always striving for improvement, and an ability to move on after heartbreaking defeats. What better foundation for a future entrepreneur?

And if that wasn't enough, he found true love. Manion met his wife, Julie Oberweis, a former Illinois junior high champion, when she was seated at a table next to his at a national high school tournament.

Unlike many childhood chess prodigies, Manion was late to the

game. He didn't learn how to push the pieces until he was about 13, but when he did, he quickly started making waves on the local chess scene. He won the Wisconsin junior championship at age 14 in just his third rated event while competing against many more seasoned players, and a year later followed up by becoming one of just two 15-year-olds to ever win the state open title in 1992 (prior to that, the last time a 15-year-old won was in 1947).

Once he got interested in chess, his deep commitment and quick progress came as no surprise to his parents Ruth and Dale, who early on realized Josh was an intensely focused kid. And in the early 1980s in a small Wisconsin town, they had a unique philosophy towards education that let him capitalize on that focus.

When Josh was just 6, his mom felt that homeschooling would be a good fit for him. "My philosophy of learning is that it should be fun, and if you're really interested in something then it is fun and you'll pursue it," she said. Her plan was to devise an individual curriculum for him that would revolve around his interests, and encourage him to pursue things in as much depth as he wanted. As a young child, it was outer space, and later the Civil War. "He always had something he was passionate about," recalls Ruth, who would structure English, math, social studies and science lessons around those topics.

But local school officials in Janesville objected. At that time, Wisconsin had no state laws pertaining to homeschooling, and when Josh failed to show up for kindergarten, school district officials dispatched a social worker to the Manion home. After she couldn't persuade Ruth, a certified teacher, that her son belonged in the public school system, the district took the family to court for truancy. A sympathetic attorney, persuaded the judge that



Manion with wife Julie and kids.

the Manion family was within their rights to educate their son at home.

Because of Josh's unique schooling, "he had time to figure out what he loved, and he had time to do it," said Ruth. So when he discovered chess at age 13, his natural inclination was to pursue it with intensity and passion.

He recalls getting interested after his sister got a chess set for Christmas, and beat him handily. "I went to the library and got out all the books they had about chess—there were three—and after that I could beat my sister," he said.

He heard about a simul being given at a nearby mall by local master Pete Webster, who over two days played 162 games, nine of them with Josh. Of the 162 games, Webster said he lost only one and drew three, two of which were with Manion. He suggested to Manion's parents that their son had some talent and might like lessons. From there, Manion was on a fast-track trajectory, attaining the rank of master by age 15 and scoring an invitation to the U.S. Cadet Championships, and from 1993 to 1997 was invited to the prestigious annual junior invitational, playing against the top youth players in the nation, including the then more-famous Josh Waitzkin.

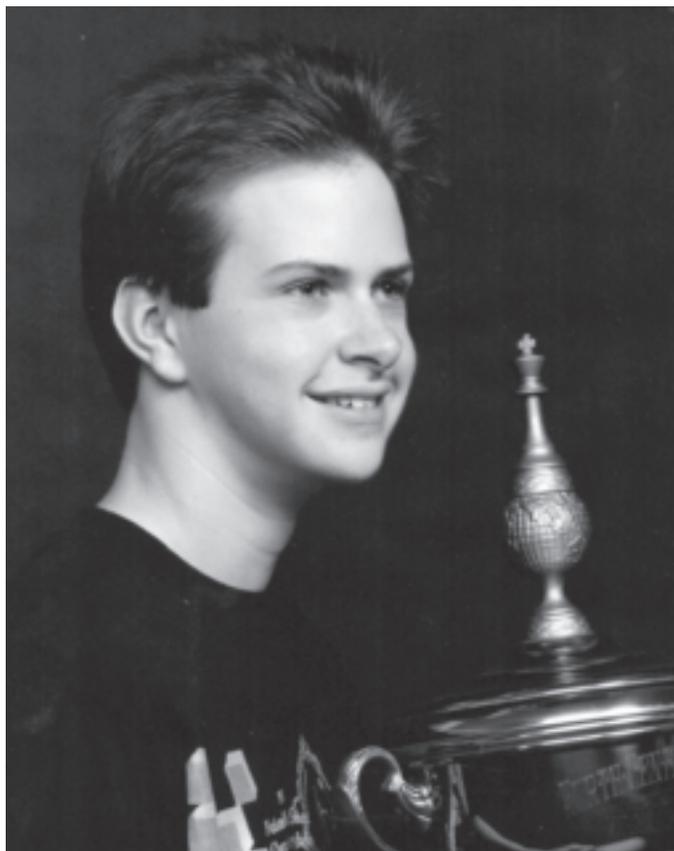
Because of the way he was schooled, he knew how to take a subject he was interested in and study it relentlessly. In addition to studying from chess books, and with the support of his parents, he sought out intensive private instruction, first from Webster, and later from Wisconsin's Steve Odendahl and Illinois GM Dmitry Gurevich. "It's the most effective way to learn something when you're at a high level," Manion said. "You need to be working on your weaknesses and studying where your gaps of

understanding are, and those are completely unique to you."

He burst onto the tournament scene with an expert rating, and in a little over a year was over 2300. His parents started taking him frequently to play larger, more competitive events in and around the Chicago area, where he became known locally as a wunderkind, as well as to national events. One of his early tournament victories was tying for first at the 1992 U.S. Junior Open in Bradford, Pennsylvania, allowing him to qualify for the next year's junior invitational event. His parents reflect back on Josh's teenage years playing chess as one of incredible growth, not just intellectually, but personally and emotionally, learning how to deal with the ups and downs of high level competition and how to bounce back from some crushing losses. His dad Dale, recalls Ruth, "would help him deal with his disappointments, and they'd kick tires in the parking lot and walk around and get rid of some of the tension. It was a great bonding experience."

Manion says that playing at that level and studying with great teachers also helped him develop an attitude of not being satisfied with performing merely good enough. He recalls one lesson with Gurevich where they reviewed games from a tournament in which he had a perfect score, and Gurevich pointed out errors he made in one game. "I actually played really badly, but my opponent played worse," recalls Manion, adding that "Dmitry told me the only good thing I did in the game was win, but other than that, it was a complete disaster." The lesson, he said, left a deep impression on him. "Left to my own devices, and going 6-0, it was easy to be content," Manion said. "But when I looked critically at it, I was able to see the truth (of the game). The beautiful thing about chess is there is a truth to it—there is no luck or randomness."

Profile



The teenage champion.

From chess player to chess entrepreneur

Manion's life as a teenager changed dramatically through chess, not just from his experience as a player, but also when the chance presented itself for him to start a chess-related business. As a 17-year-old, Manion had a leadership role in founding and developing what became a nationally renowned summer chess program called WisChess.

It started serendipitously, when he met University of Wisconsin Whitewater linguistics professor Mark Lencho, who was looking for a way to rekindle his teenage passion for chess that he developed growing up in Chicago.

"When I look back at my intellectually formative years, the thing that really mattered for me and introduced me to interesting people and an intellectual dimension to life wasn't so much school, but connections that I made playing chess," recalls Lencho, who had the opportunity as a young teenager to hang out with University of Chicago graduate students, instructors and professionals who comprised the Chicago chess scene at the time. Like many, he gave it up when he went to college, and later entered academia, married and had a family. But when his kids reached an age where they could develop an appreciation for chess, he had a vision of creating a weeklong chess camp for both children and adults, where deep and lasting social bonds could be formed. "The concept was to bring a bunch of people together not just to play chess, but to live with one another, so people could develop chess relationships and develop larger social relationships that would be mutually supportive. The chess would advance a larger social connectedness."

Lencho knew he couldn't pull it off alone, and said he sought out Manion, who was "legendary in Wisconsin as a chess prodigy." Manion was at once enthusiastic, and agreed to play a major role. Lencho took care of the logistics involving the university, like dormitory housing, meals, participant

Manion Over the Board

Symmetrical English (A30)

Josh Manion
GM Dmitry Gurevich
Midwest Class (5), 1997

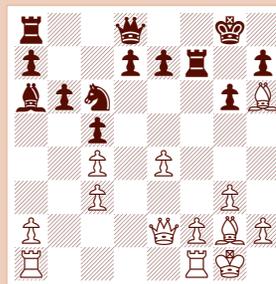
1. Nf3 c5 2. c4 b6 3. g3 Bb7 4. Bg2 g6 5. 0-0 Bg7 6. Nc3 Nh6
7. e4 f5 8. d3 0-0 9. Qe2 Nc6 10. Be3 fxe4 11. dxe4 Ng4

Another try is 11. ... Nd4!? 12. Qd1 Nxf3+ 13. Bxf3 Nf7.

12. Bg5 Nge5 13. Nxe5 Bxe5 14. Be3 Bxc3?!

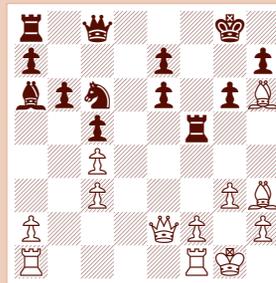
Better is 14. ... Nd4.

15. bxc3 Ba6?! 16. Bh6 Rf7



After 16. ... Rf7

17. e5! Qc8 18. e6! dxe6 19. Bh3 Rf5



After 19. ... Rf5

20. Rfe1

Also good is 20. f4.

20. ... e5 21. Rad1 Qe6 22. Bg2!

"Winning" the Exchange with 22. Bxf5? gxf5 helps Black.

22. ... Rf7?

However, Black is in trouble after 22. ... Bxc4 23. Qxc4 Qxc4 24. Bxc6+- Qxc3 25. Bxa8 as well.

23. Bd5! Qc8 24. Bxf7+ Kxf7 25. Qf3+ Kg8 26. Qd5+

Winning on the spot is 26. Rd6! exd6 27. Qd5+ Kh8 28. Qf7.

26. ... Kh8

Black survives longer with 26. ... e6 27. Qd7 Qxd7 28. Rxd7 Bxc4 29. Rg7+ Kh8 30. Rd1 Bd5 31. c4 Be4 32. Rdd7 g5 33. Bxg5 but the result is the same.

27. Rxe5! Bxc4 28. Qe4 Qe8 29. Rd6! Bb5 30. Ree6! Kg8 31. Rxc6, Black resigned.

More elegant is 31. Rxg6+.

registration, while Manion took charge of devising the instructional program and recruiting and hiring top chess players as instructors. They ran it together for several years, and at its heyday in the late 1990s, the camp attracted nearly 400 campers, and had 22 chess instructors, as well as a large number of support staff.

Lencho says it succeeded in large part due to Manion, who he describes at age 18 as a “poised, responsible, athletic and well-spoken,” and who commanded the utmost respect from an instructional staff made up for the most part of grandmasters and international masters many years his senior. “I always felt about him as a colleague,” says Lencho. “I was many years older, but he could do anything as far as dealing with all the various problems and challenges that occur with dealing with a big, heterogeneous group of people.”

During the same time period that WisChess was running, Manion finished his schooling (he was homeschooled through high school), and decided that in lieu of college he would pursue chess professionally, and set his sights on an international master title.

Just getting invitations to IM norm events was a hurdle, recalls Oberweis, who was dating him at the time. Attaining the norm required more than playing the best chess of his life, it also required the perseverance and patience “to go through the politics to get those invites,” Oberweis said. “It’s way more political than you would think.”

She recalled one particularly heartbreaking tournament in Bermuda, when Manion had a chance to earn his third and final norm in the event’s final round. His opponent was lower rated, and he needed just a draw, but lost both the game and the norm opportunity. Some folks may have packed it up at that point, but Manion persisted and got his third norm at a later event. However, he also concluded that professional chess was not his long-term future.

“To be honest, once I started playing professionally and had to make a living at it, it became less fun,” he said. By that time, he was deeply in love, and he saw that a chess career wasn’t going to allow him to support a family or live a lifestyle that he wanted. He was ready to trade in his chessboard and nomadic lifestyle for college, but making the initial move out of chess required no less than the planning and strategic skills of a top-tier chess player.

With no high school transcript and no grades, he was hardly the typical college applicant. Adding to the challenge, his standardized test scores were unimpressive. “I was highly talented academically, but it didn’t show up when I took the SAT,” said Manion. “What did show up was that I was sort of naïve and easy to trick with multiple choice questions.” The University of Illinois, where Julie was a student, rejected him, even after he spent some time at a community college where he got straight A’s.

Undeterred, he applied to the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, and convinced the admissions office to look beyond his spotty paperwork and consider his chess success, his stellar references, his humorous essays explaining his homeschool background, and his entrepreneurial drive. They offered him a spot.

His chess career was over, but opportunities to translate the lessons he learned from it into other endeavors were just beginning. As a student majoring in information technology with an emphasis in entrepreneurship, Manion and a college friend started what was his first non-chess enterprise, a website which allowed amateur athletic groups like little league baseball and soccer associations to host their schedules, rosters, and team communications. They later sold the company to *myteam.com*, and worked there until it was bought by a larger firm.

After graduating, Manion and Oberweis, who were married

in 1998, moved back to the Midwest and started a web analytics company out of their home called Stratigent. It now has about 30 employees, partners with industry giants like Google and Yahoo, has big-name clients like United Airlines and Visa, and is considered one of the top web analytic consulting companies in the country.

To successfully build the business and attract clients, Manion and Oberweis both give a lot of credit to chess. When they first started Stratigent, “we had so many business setbacks and obstacles to overcome,” but the inner strength that they gained in chess to persist and bounce back from defeat stood them well in business, Oberweis said. “We use chess analogies all the time when we talk about our business.”

Thinking critically, anticipating future steps and responding to mistakes and setbacks are all things Manion says he learned at a deep level through chess and has applied to growing his business. “It was wonderful preparation for business, especially on the strategy side,” Manion said, particularly the concept of learning from mistakes. “How you respond to those in the microcosm of an individual game—is there an opportunity to recover from it—or how you respond to that in the bigger picture—I’m going to learn from it and not make the mistake again—are things that are highly analogous to chess.”

It’s not surprising that Manion was able to take his talents at chess and apply them to his business endeavors, said Lencho. To get to the level Manion did at chess “required and rewarded a lot of very disciplined hard work, and that kind of sustained effort to do something that’s technical and hard” can lead to a powerful routine that carries into adulthood.

Oberweis adds that Manion’s systematic approach to getting big clients to buy his company’s complex services comes straight from chess. He is able to size up a company, “quickly learn how people interact with an organization, and then understand how he needs to interact with those people,” in order to close a deal, she said. Intuitively, he knows how to work his way through a potential client’s organization, making the proper intermediate moves, and lining up all his pieces on the right squares (i.e.—figuring out who in the company to approach, where to tread lightly and where to put more pressure), in order to execute the final goal, which in lieu of checkmate is a sales or partnership agreement. “It’s intricate, and he’s so subtle about it that it’s very impressive,” Oberweis said.

And Manion is continually thinking of the next move. When he saw his Stratigent clients all faced a particular obstacle to efficiently running their large websites, he created a team at his company to formulate a solution. This led to the creation of a second company, and resulted in a literal move for the whole family to Mountain View, California, where their latest venture, called Enshigten, is now headquartered. Enshigten sells a software solution called tag management that allows companies with big, complicated websites to effectively manage all the third-party software they use. “It’s a new category that we’ve invented, and we’re getting a lot of interest,” Manion said. When he spoke in September, the company had 15 employees, and was looking for at least six more, and he soon expected it to dwarf Stratigent. A website that covers his industry recently identified him as a “rock star” of his industry.

With three young children and two companies to run, Manion no longer has time for chess, and although he misses it, he says he’s found “there are so many other aspects of life that I can apply the same principles to that allow for the same sort of experiences.”

For young players who want to pursue chess full-time, he encourages them and has some practical advice. “Go for it,” he says, “but also be flexible and be willing to pivot if it turns not to be what you want. Just know that the skills you learn from chess are going to benefit you in many other areas of life.” ■