

10. International Master Anthony Saidy Shares Memories of the Steiner Chess Club

Recorded: September 12, 2013

International Master Anthony Saidy played in numerous U.S. Championships and authored the book *The Battle of Chess Ideas*. He shared his memories of legendary player Bobby Fischer in the 2011 documentary *Bobby Fischer Against the World*. Here, he reflects upon the legacy of the Piatigorsky Cups and the Steiner Chess Club.

John Donaldson: When did you first join the Steiner Chess Club and what is your initial memory of Mrs. Piatigorsky?

International Master Anthony Saidy: I came to Los Angeles in the middle of 1962 in order to become a medical intern, and contrary to the conventional wisdom, I didn't stick to medicine. I had to play some chess, and there was the Steiner Chess Club Championship that year, and for sure, I had to take part in it. My patients had to wait until the game was over, until I got back to the hospital in West L.A. I don't think I formally joined the club but I played in the Club Championship.

JD: And, if I'm not mistaken, you also won the Club Championship?

AS: Yes, I did. Undefeated.

JD: So, is that the first time you had seen Mrs. Piatigorsky, or you had seen her earlier when you were living in New York, and she had been out there to play in one of the Women's Championships or some other event?

AS: I may have met her at a U.S. Open, but I don't remember.

JD: You definitely got to know her when you were out in Los Angeles?

AS: Yes.

JD: In fact, if I'm not mistaken, you were a guest at her home on several occasions?

AS: That's correct. I had that pleasure.

JD: And did you remember anything about those meetings in her home? Did you give her lessons, were they parties, were they recitals of Gregor's? What exactly brought you to her - ?

AS: I think there was a reception for the participants in the second Piatigorsky Cup. I don't remember any music. My memory's a little vague, but I do remember the home on South Bundy Drive quite well, and I remember Gregor Piatigorsky and his scintillating personality.

JD: Now, if they're one and the same, the reception for the players was the - there's that famous cover of either *Chess Life* or *Chess Review* where [Bobby] Fischer is across the board from [Wolfgang] Unzicker, and they're replaying a game, and on their shoulders, taking in the surroundings are some of the other participants from the event. I think [Lajos] Portisch is one of them. But I'm curious, it sounds like those were the same events. There's always that famous blitz game that was played between Bobby Fischer and Bent Larsen that's given in *60 Memorable Games*, the one where it's Alekhine's Defense, and Fischer plays after Knight d7 he plays Knight takes f7. He actually goes for it instead of playing like [Mikhail] Tal did against Larsen, chickening out with Knight d7. I'm curious, by any chance was that blitz game played at that party?

AS: This I cannot confirm. In fact this particular party is muddled in my mind with a separate party that my friend, Sy Gomberg and his wife organized in Brentwood for the players, not being chess fans at all, but being great supporters of international peace and cooperation. That party I really remember better.

JD: And were pretty much all the participants for the event there or was it more like the western European players?

AS: I think most of the participants were there. I don't think Fischer was there. I think everybody was relaxed and having a good time, in an upscale West Los Angeles home with a swimming pool and Hollywood vibes, pictures of stars on the wall, reminiscences about the heyday, the Golden Age of Hollywood, stuff like that.

JD: Now when you played at the Steiner Club, and you were winning the Club Championship, do you have any memories of that, what that was like on the inside of it, I mean how it was furnished, how large it was, that sort of thing?

AS: Well, it was commodious. It was unlike the chess clubs in New York, which by comparison were cramped, and were not spick and span the way the Steiner Chess Club was. It was in a residential neighborhood. Different world from New York.

JD: And, did you happen to see who was the driving force behind it? Was Mrs. P. at the club the times when you were playing the Club Championship, or was she sort of behind the scenes?

AS: Mrs. P. was not a noisy, boisterous person. She had a way of organizing things, and getting things right without making a fuss. In fact, I wouldn't be surprised to see her picking up lint from the carpet, just so things looked right.

JD: So she was a real perfectionist?

AS: I would say so, yes.

JD: Now, when they had the tournament, the first Piatigorsky Cup in 1963, did you have anything to do with that tournament? Were you in Los Angeles at the time?

AS: I was out of the country at the time, so I really had no connection with that tournament. The second Cup was very important in my personal development because I was toying with the idea of being a chess professional, and here was these professionals doing their thing, and I was torn between devoting myself to medicine and my true love, which was chess.

JD: And did you get to attend a lot of the rounds for that tournament? Because I remember that you were battling for first place for much of the U.S. Open in Seattle, and those two tournaments overlapped.

AS: Did they overlap? Wait a second. They literally overlapped in time, did they?

JD: I have to check on that. If they didn't overlap, they were in extremely close proximity, but something makes me think that they might have overlapped for a brief period.

AS: Well certainly I was there for the first round of the U.S. Open in Seattle. I only visited the Piatigorsky Cup for a few days with my then wife, who had Russian descent and therefore had a natural affinity for most chess players.

JD: Now, during that '66 event, I know that you were a very good friend of Bobby Fischer's. You kind of were almost like an older brother to him growing up, and you had actually accompanied him as a second or like a guardian at some events. I think one was, was it Zurich 1960, was it that you accompanied him?

AS: '59, yeah.

JD: '59. So, you know, you guys knew each other quite well, you'd played in many events. Did you have any dealings with him during the 1966 tournament by any chance?

AS: Well, that was one of our periods of estrangement. We were not in touch from 1959 to around 1970. So, no.

JD: Woah. So you're saying that for all fans of *Bobby Fischer vs. the World* that from 1959 to 1970, you and Bobby exchanged very few words, you met over the board, but other than that, you had little contact, and it was only like from 1970 that you renewed your friendship, and that you performed your fireman of the century award, making sure that Bobby would make his way to Reykjavik.

AS: Can that be a formal award in red?

JD: It should be, you know chess players all around the world owe you a huge amount for that. If you hadn't been around, Bobby probably would have never got on that plane.

AS: I thank you for recognizing that.

JD: So that's interesting. So you didn't really have any contact with him in '66.

AS: Well we played in the U.S. Championships several times. We were proper with each other, but we were no longer buddy-buddies during that time.

JD: So, what brought about the sort of reconciliation, if you will?

AS: I think it was a gradual thing.

JD: Was he spending more time on the West Coast maybe by that point?

AS: Yes, he was in Pasadena when he was getting ready to play matches to become the World Champion and, of course, I wanted him to be the World Champion in the worst way.

JD: Well, you did everything you could to make it possible, there's no question about that. Now, during the '66 event did you maybe by chance have contact with some of the other players that played? I mean, you mentioned the one party that your friend hosted, so you had a chance to meet with them. Can you say something perhaps about some of the other people that participated in that event? The ones that were better known to you.

AS: I was close to Bent Larsen, because we had met at various chess events, and when his sister came to the United States, my family sponsored her, that was some formality at that time. Now, I think they, the United States wants to get all the Danes that it can, they don't want me to sponsor Pakistanis for example, but that was one relationship we had. And [Boris] Ivkov was to become a good buddy of mine in the future, played me over the board a few times. Boris Spassky was a very affable fellow, and easy to befriend. And I played him in the Soviet Union in our one game after he'd lost the title. We were pretty close, and he was pretty frank about the Soviet system. I don't think I could call [Tigran] Petrosian a friend. I do remember that after I lost a game to him in San Antonio, his wife came up to me and said, "You overlooked Bd3, yes?" But when I asked Petrosian where I'd gone wrong in the game, he said, "I'll tell you mañana [tomorrow]." Mañana never came on that. I didn't have the pleasure of knowing [Miguel] Najdorf. I met him once, he was certainly an ebullient character and lots of fun. Sammy Reshevsky- you could meet Sammy I would say, twenty times, and not be his buddy. And that was about the situation with me. Let's see, [Wolfgang] Unzicker...I played him once. He offered me a draw, and I respectfully declined and I won the game. Uh, but we were not conversing. I don't think his English was very good. He spoke Russian. Let's see... Jan Hein Donner I didn't know. So that, [Lajos] Portisch I barely knew. He was too correct to be a drinking pal or anything like that. So that covers them.

JD: It does. Now, Mrs. Piatigorsky, besides being involved with the Steiner Club or organizing the two great tournaments, she also had a lot of other activities, chess related, that she was

involved with: her programs for disadvantaged youth, her chess for the blind, and what have you. Were you involved with any of those programs?

AS: No, I wasn't. I was still trying to pursue a medical career very seriously. Still torn between two careers.

JD: But I think you still found time to like give simuls for like the Steiner Juniors, that sort of thing, I believe.

AS: I didn't give any simuls at the Steiner Club. I gave one at the Santa Monica Bay Chess Club, one or two. I don't remember, but my best memory of the Piatigorskys - the happiest one - was when Gregor invited me to a lecture he gave at U.S.C. on music. And at the close of the lecture, a student stood up and said, "Maestro, don't you think that playing the beautiful heart of music for a filthy dollar is a form of prostitution?" And Piatigorsky immediately said, "But every prostitute is different!"

JD: I see, I see. So he had a good sense of humor.

AS: I think so. He was pretty much in contrast to his wife, who always seemed to be serious and a little uptight. She was such a stickler for proper detail, and that's of course the reason why her tournaments were so well-organized and went on so well.

JD: Now, did you ever have occasion to play Jacqueline in any tournaments?

AS: No, I did not. Let me ask you a question. Why was there no third Piatigorsky Cup?

JD: You know, that's a very good question. In the course of doing some interviews, and doing some research, I've received some contradictory information. One is that, you know, when you look back in time at the tournaments, it seems like everything was very orderly, that the events were planned out in advance, everything went according to plan, and nothing deviated from the original schematic. That really wasn't in fact the case. There were a lot of hiccups along the way. Even the number of participants for the two tournaments, both changed along the way, with the fields getting larger rather than smaller. And part of that was because of uncertainty about whether they would have the Soviet participation.

In Dallas '57, which was really quite a great tournament, with eight-player double-round robin, the problem there was they just couldn't get the Soviets. And so Mrs. P. had the advantage, she had the connections - not just through other individuals, but even in her family - Gregor, he lobbied for the participation of [Tigran] Petrosian when he made a visit to the Soviet Union, I think to judge a Tchaikovsky competition. So she had that plus, but, that said, the tournaments never quite - they were never as smooth as they looked - on the inside, they were never as smooth as they looked on the outside and there was a lot of work involved.

One of the people that was a friend of hers that was involved in the organization, he said that she just got tired of running the tournament. Just so many details. And in part, it was probably a combination of the fact that she was a real perfectionist and wanted everything to be just so, and on the other hand, the tournaments might have continued longer if she was willing to delegate more. But that wasn't her personality. You know, she was willing to delegate under certain circumstances, but she wanted things to just be so, and she knew that if she did them herself, they were going to get done to her standards. So that was part of it.

I think another factor that could have contributed to the tournaments not being held any longer was that she was starting to shift some of her interests and by the early 1970s she was playing a lot less chess. She had stopped playing in U.S. Championships around mid-60s. And I think that had happened when she had finished second in the U.S. Women's Championship, and she just got within like three or four points of the rate of 2000 and then her subsequent results brought her back down. I think for a lot of chess players, you climb the mountain, you're within a few inches of the top, and then to fall back down, it's hard to start climbing up again. So I think those are definitely factors. You know, she was going a different direction, you know, difficulty organizing the tournament. I think also another factor might have been that Bobby was on his World Championship run, and pretty much any tournament that was organized at that time would have been second fiddle to his march through the Candidates Matches. So it wouldn't have had quite the luster that it had had previously. And assuming that they had been in three year cycles, '69 would have been the next one, so that would have been a little bit pre-Fischer run. So, you know, it's still conceivable it could have happened, but—

AS: Well that's certainly a good summary of all the reasons.

JD: Well, it is, but there's one other one. And of course that's always the one that would suggest that the players perhaps didn't enjoy, show their appreciation for the tournaments as much as they can. That was one of the arguments I heard initially, but after hearing a lot of interviews and doing a lot of reading, it seems like everyone remembers what a wonderful time they had there and how much they appreciated it, so I tend to think it was other factors. And these sort of tournaments, two big tournaments like that, it's spending close to a million dollars, it's—

AS: Well, I do remember from the tournament book that the acceptance of Spassky and Petrosian was only received in person by Gregor Piatigorsky in Moscow when he was on a tour. The Soviets could keep you guessing until the last minute. I personally experienced that very behavior, when I organized a reception for the Bolshoi Ballet at Cornell Medical School around 1959, and two weeks after the invitation was extended we got an answer on the eve of the date of the event and we had to scramble to get the supplies. So they keep their options open.