

8. Grandmaster James Tarjan Shares his Memories of Jacqueline Piatigorsky

Recorded: September 13, 2013

Grandmaster James Tarjan was the star pupil of the Student Chess Club of Los Angeles, one of the first juniors-only chess clubs in the United States, which the Piatigorsky Foundation ran through the Steiner Chess Club. He participated on five U.S. Chess Olympiad teams, earning four team and three individual medals. Tarjan's career record of 38½ points from 51 games, 75.5 percent in Olympiads, is one of the very best ever achieved by an American player. Here, he shares his memories of Jacqueline Piatigorsky, and her efforts in promoting chess among young players.

John Donaldson: Mrs. P., if I'm not mistaken, she arranged a match for you to play with Walter Browne, maybe like around '67, '68?

JT: I think I was, I'm remembering I was sixteen, so that was probably late in '68 or early in '69, that's correct. Yeah, that was another event, Walter... Walter had actually, we had flown together from New York after one of those U.S. Junior Championships, I think [it was] a year he won, and he said, "Well, I want to move to California [and] he got a ticket on the same plane with me, and we flew back and he spent the night with my parents and then my mom drove him down to Santa Monica, and he got a room and he lived in L.A. there for, I don't know, a year or two, before he moved to Berkeley, playing in the tournaments and stuff in L.A. so that's absolutely right, Mrs. P. arranged a match between the two of us, six game match.

JD: So, really pretty much all your, a lot of your early che- important tournaments were events that were affiliated, as you said, I mean the ... California Junior Championship you won, and then all these U.S. Junior Closed that you played in, and also this match with Walter Browne, but it seems to me that your involvement with, your interaction with her didn't end at that point. It continued on, didn't it?

JT: What are you think- well, I'm not sure, what are you thinking of?

JD: I was thinking that she provided some support in the... I want to say in the early 1980s, I think maybe when you played in the Interzonal, or maybe it was after that in the, 'cause that would have been '79, but after that -

JT: I think in those years, again this is all sort of... She didn't need to be known for these things, but the gossip around at the time, was that she was supporting a number of things, the Closed U.S. Championships, maybe not singly, but importantly. I wouldn't be surprised [if she supported] an event that doesn't exist anymore, the Student Olympiads.

JD: Yes, she also supported that.

JT: The Student Olympiads. Sending the U.S. team there is a chunk of change. You probably could find this out in your records, so I was playing in both those events, while [she] was involved. The U.S. Olympic teams, probably... starting in - when was my first one was seventy...

JD: You played in '76, but did you play in '74?

JT: In '74, yeah. Gold medal on the second reserve.

JD: You had phenomenal results. I think your lifetime winning percentage is one of the top three or four players ever for the U.S.

JT: So, yeah, she was supporting all that U.S. Master stuff behind the scenes. That was the time I was playing in those events, absolutely. I also played [when the] Student Club [of Los Angeles] had entered a team. This is an institution that has come back with the Chess League now. They're playing by computer, I suppose now, between cities, but in those days there were city leagues, right? And there was a league, the chess clubs playing each other in the L.A. area, and we had - I'm not sure that that really required a backer to get that going, but I certainly played on the Student Club for a couple of years. It was fun, we had a team, and we were winning. We won a couple of times, you know by- there wasn't, there were a lot of good players after a few years in that Student Club, and we were beating up on our elders.

JD: If I'm not mistaken, Alan Pollard, and Kim Commons, and Jeff Kent, I think those were all fellow members of that club.

JT: It went on, the club went on past that Cashio location, for quite a number of years, but I left L.A. in '70 or '71 and moved to Berkeley, so my involvement with the L.A. chess scene was less after I moved out of town, of course.

JD: Now, when you first saw Mrs. Piatigorsky and you went to the Steiner Club, you mentioned you were just in your early teens and you know, you were just a young boy, but later as you got older, did you get to know her better any, did you maybe by the - sometime in the 1970s you might have crossed paths? Did you ever have a chance to talk to her when you were an adult?

JT: You know, once or twice, I remember a dinner, or an event lunch, like going over to her place in west L.A. there in Brentwood, with Arthur [Drucker] and Pal Benko, and looking at her sculptures and so forth. I must have been older at that point. She was always, you know, a very courteous, person. You know, obviously she loved chess, and that was kind of that.