

Blast From The Past: Jay Whitehead

by GM Joel Benjamin

At 29, Jay Whitehead is young to be a "retired" chessplayer. In a short time, he piled up an impressive list of achievements. Many fans know about his IM title and two U.S. Championship appearances (1983 and 1987), but few know about Jay's unusual record: He is the only American to finish ahead of Garry Kasparov in a tournament! Whitehead's second place finish in the World Under-17 Championship in 1977 bettered the future World Champion by one spot. Jay's draw with Kasparov put him on a short list of Americans who have accomplished that feat.

Whitehead reached a peak of activity in 1987, when his consistent success in open tournaments garnered him first place in the Grand Prix. This result automatically qualified Jay for the 1988 U.S. Championship, but Jay declined. In fact, he has not played a tournament game in three years.

What makes a successful chessplayer turn his back on competition? This was one of the many questions I had for Jay when I spoke with Jay in June. I discovered that there are no simple answers where Jay is concerned.

Whitehead retired from chess soon after his last big result, a tie for first in the New York Open International "B." "I lost my ambition, my thirst for the game. I became more interested in chess literature than in playing." Jay developed other interests: "holistic healing, body electronics-- New Age California stuff."

Even while Jay scored successes in chess, he became involved in pursuits that ultimately led him away from the game. He spent much of his time with a monastic order. At the retreat, he lived a simple existence of early rising, prayers, chants, and meditation. Jay sought to "free [his] mind of worldly concerns" and work as a "servant of the whole." Indeed, the monastic organization inspired Jay during his Grand Prix victory year. Playing chess to help support the order enabled Jay to use "the fruits of [his] activity for charitable

cause." Jay's guru was present for many of the tournaments and Jay only suffered one defeat on those occasions.

Jay, who had always been an intense competitor, gradually lost his competitive fire. "When I won a game, I felt like it was God working through me; it wasn't me doing it. I was not the creative element in the game." As he became detached from the games, Jay felt his impetus to play wane. "Chess for personal gain was not sufficient motivation. I lost interest when chess was not connected with something spiritual."

Surely he must miss the game?

"Chess has positive qualities; it involves logic, intellect, and aesthetics. But I don't find it spiritually rewarding or deeply satisfying. I might indulge in it and feel an imaginary pleasure, a titillation of my brain. It's a relatively harmless direction of passion. But the pleasure from chess is not worth the output of time and energy that could be put into activities that enliven the soul."

If not chess, what's in store for Jay in the future? His ambition is to become a monk; he would readily abandon all worldly possessions and make a pilgrimage to India. Still, he faces the possibility that he may be better able to serve God by working in the world. He would be, as Jay puts it, "living in the world but not of the world." Jay's dilemma can be compared to that of a GM who might wish to spend his life accumulating knowledge on his own, but might be more productive writing books, lecturing, and playing.

As a longtime friend and colleague, I can only hope that Jay will bring his talent and former tenacity back to the chess scene. In any event, Jay is a soul of many complexities. Chessplayers tend to march to a different drummer, but Jay Whitehead's beat is as unusual and profound as any I have ever encountered.

White-Head-Lines

- ♦ 2nd World Under 17 Championship (ahead of Kasparov!) 1977
- ♦ U.S. Junior Champion 1981
- ♦ U.S. Championship participant 1983, 1987
- ♦ Grand Prix Champion 1987
- ♦ =1st New York International "B" 1988