

Interview Oscar Panno by Anna Rudolf

You have had a great career as a chess player and you've been teaching chess for more than half a century. How did you react to the news that you were honoured by the Judit Polgar Chess Foundation as a Goodwill Ambassador for Chess in Education?

'I was pleasantly surprised by the nomination and I consider the award a huge honour, especially since it's coming from a great friend and an outstanding colleague who does so much for chess.'

Can you tell us about your activities in Argentina and how you started your program Chess with Panno (Ajedrez con Panno)?

'I started as a chess teacher at the River Plate chess club in 1973 and from then on more and more chess clubs joined and I also started teaching at educational institutions, such as in 1982 at the prestigious "Colegio Nacional Buenos Aires". This experience at the College was very valuable as I discovered the significance of chess as an educational tool. As from 1996 we had a complete chess course for schools, first on paper, but thanks to the Internet we could enlarge it and triple the content. We wanted to create a flexible program that can be adapted to the different requirements of the schools, it's very difficult to have one solution for everyone. The program is based on a teacher's guide and a self-study training course for the pupils.'

You were Junior World Champion, the best Latin-American player in the 1970s and playing against such greats as Spassky, Botvinnik, Petrosian and, of course, Fischer. What memories do you have of those times?

'It was difficult to be a competitive player in that era as it required staying in Europe and leading a nomad life, far away from my family and friends. And giving up my career in engineering. The brilliant Bobby Fischer needs to be acknowledged for all the improvements he achieved for professional chess, but at that time I already had decided to finish my university studies. The country was more in need of engineers than of chess players.'

Judit told me that you had a great time in Aruba in 1992 during the Veterans against Women tournament and that the two of you were training together there.

'The match tournament in Aruba between the best female players and the top veteran players was a very pleasant experience. Then next, a few days after the tournament, together with GM Bent Larsen and Sofia and Judit Polgar, we had a training session and perfected some lines together, which was very satisfying.'

Why do you think chess is a unique educational tool?

‘Chess, besides being a great game that learns you how to improve yourself, is a powerful tool for the intellectual development of the youth. While it may look like a pastime, it has all the characteristics of an organism of pure strategy. It’s a battle between trained opponents that has so many similarities with other human activities. Each player has a clear objective and has to follow clearly established rules to solve a series of problems created by the path you choose. While it’s an enjoyable game, this structure and method and the responsibility that comes with it, makes it a perfect tool for training and the building of the intellect.’

What do you think about the computer that recently changed the game of chess, AlphaZero?

‘The computer has had a major impact on chess, more than on any other sport. The developments in information technology had an impact on chess early on when the first chess programs appeared, which initially invited derogatory comments from the great players. But the computers kept gaining ground, at first only through brute force calculation and the speed of processing, which reached a peak in the match where Deep Blue defeated Garry Kasparov. Recently AlphaZero appeared and it’s said that it learns from its own experiences in a learning process with seemingly unknown limits. Due to these developments, it’s possible that we are going to see the rise of a chess variant, such as Fischer Random.’

How has the pandemic affected you?

‘The pandemic has in fact increased my workload. Chess and the Internet were made for each other, at least when it comes to the study of chess, and we have relaunched the chess lessons at the River Plate chess club online. On Saturdays at 4 pm I live-stream on our YouTube channel.’

How do you see the future of the game as a sport?

‘Chess as a sport has undergone quite a big transformation, which makes me not feel so sorry about being away from competition. And strengthens my belief that chess should be made the most of as an educational tool.’

How do you think kids can benefit from the game? What is the feedback you have from schools using your program?

‘If you look at everything that has been written on the topic, I would like to highlight the development of the capacity of taking responsibility for one’s decisions. This is what playing chess teaches you, just like life teaches you as you suffer its blows.’

The feedback that we have received comes directly from the teachers and not the “Colegio” as an institution, and has been very flattering and motivates us to continue on our path. It helps the children a lot with their behaviour in the classroom and their scholastic performance. The teachers use chess as a reward, on Fridays at the end of the week, when the children want to play and solve problems. It is in the poorest parts of the country that we had some of the best results and the children were most interested in the game.’

What is most unique about your program Ajedrez con Panno?

‘The weakest link in any big program is the human and the budgetary factor. For a program to be really democratic the opportunity has to be offered to everyone. We know of plenty of scholastic chess programs in different regions of Argentina and in other countries, with the exception of Armenia, that don’t fulfil this requirement. In Armenia chess in schools is compulsory, while in our case it’s optional. My daughter-in-law Ana is a school teacher and understands the problems involved since she gave lessons at public schools in poor areas, and she forms part of the team. Reaching as many schools as possible is crucial as primary school teachers are the executing arm of the program. Their pedagogic training helps them to teach different subjects, mathematics, language, geography, history etc. without being a specialist. An educational guide has been developed for the teachers for their work in the classroom so that they can be motivators and work on the ‘chessic alphabetisation’, promoting the integration of chess, spreading it in families and in society.’

Is it available only in Spanish or is it also available in other languages?

‘At the moment it’s only available in Spanish, but we are in the final stages of perfecting the Portuguese version and later on it will also be translated into English.’

What numbers can you mention about your program? How many years have you been running it, how many kids are involved, how many teachers?

‘We started in 2012 in a modest way, having pilot programs in some of the regions and schools. The most important one was at the “Universidad de La Punta” in San Luis, the place of the 2005 World Chess Championship, where we were invited by WGM Claudia Amura. Later on it was made accessible to about one hundred schools in the city of Buenos Aires, where at that moment chess was already taught at 145 schools out of the almost 500 schools. In 2016 we signed an agreement with the National Ministry of Education to distribute the teacher and student scholarships in the different regions and that year 4000 student and 2000 teacher scholarships were granted.’

What is your advice for the next generation?

'To learn and to be trained is fundamental. Chess fosters fundamental virtues of one's character. Their knowledge will allow them to take their opportunities and a healthy thought process will make them free.'