



Varuzhan at the  
2002 National Open

## IM Varuzhan Akobian Interview

“I want to be successful at chess.”

-IM Varuzhan Akobian (with 2 GM norms) FIDE: 2530 USCF: 2621

I met with IM Akobian twice (9/23/02 and 10/11/02) in order to do this interview for Chess Life. There are two things about this young man that stand out. First, he is one of the nicest human beings you will ever meet. The typical ego that we have all run into amongst titled players simply does not exist in Varuzhan, or Var, as his friends call him. And secondly, he is extremely talented at chess. It will be interesting to watch his progress over the next few years to see just how far he can go. Here is our interview:

**Michael Jeffreys:** Var, you just won the Imre Konig Memorial at the Mechanics Institute in San Francisco, beating 3 GMs along the way, and before that you tied for first at the World Open in Philadelphia. Why do you think you've been so successful?

**Varuzhan Akobian:** A lot of people don't take their chess seriously. You have to decide, do you want to have fun or do you want to have success at chess? When I'm at a tournament, I only think about the game I'm going to play. Every game you have to give your full concentration, no matter what the rating. You should never underestimate your opponent, even if they are lower rated.

**MJ:** Whenever I see you at tournaments, you always look very confident. Why is this?

**VA:** I'm prepared and that gives me confidence. I'm always checking out my opening preparation. It's important to find the newest games. I go to [chesscenter.com](http://chesscenter.com) and download their games into Chessbase. I go over the top GM games. For example, today I was looking the game Adams vs. Banikas, where Adams couldn't win with the White pieces. Michael Adams is 2750, however, even though his opponent was much lower rated, he played solid and Adams had to take the draw.

**MJ:** You recently were selected as the 2002 Samford Fellowship Award Winner. How has this changed your life?

**VA:** Without my Samford Fellowship, I would not have been able to get my 2 GM norms. The cost of airfare, hotel, meals, etc. would have prevented me from going. I was also recently able to buy a notebook computer, which in the past 5 years I could not afford. Now I am able to study even more because I don't have to work full time. It makes a big difference. Since they selected me, I want them to be proud of their choice, so I am working very hard. Also, I am happy to be living here and representing America. Next year, I am looking forward to playing in the Under 20 World Jr. Championship.

**MJ:** And your family... how have they helped you?

**VA:** My family is very important to me. Without them, I couldn't have had success in chess. For example, back in Armenia my father used to ask people to sponsor me... it was very unpleasant. I'm glad he doesn't have to do that anymore. My sister, Armine, helps me with everything. And my friends and relatives, I always feel their support, even when I'm away at a tournament. My friend Rob Eilbacher has been very helpful to me since I've been here. And the USCF, as well as Tom Brownscombe have been very supportive.

**MJ:** How do your parents feel about your chess?

**VA:** My dad expects me to win. If I don't, he wants to know why? Was I tired? Did I get enough sleep? My mom is the optimist. She encourages me and tells me, "Don't worry, there are still a few more rounds."

**MJ:** How old are you?

**VA:** I am 18. I was born November 19, 1983.

**MJ:** How did you get so strong at such a young age?

**VA:** I'm the kind of person that does something 100%. I always want to give my best. I feel I have a strong personality.

**MJ:** Who do you train with?

**VA:** I train by myself.

**MJ:** What software or books do you use?

**VA:** I use Fritz 7, Chessbase 8, and good chess books like Informant 84. I look at the most recent games in my lines. I also like to solve tactical training puzzles. Not just mates, but winning tactical continuations.

**MJ:** Do you have any chess heroes?

**VA:** Anand!

**MJ:** Why?

**VA:** I like his quickness, his personality... I think he is a gentleman.

**MJ:** What advice do you have for those players who want to improve?

**VA:** First of all, you have to study hard. It helps to have a coach. My coach was IM Ashot Nadanian. I worked with him back in Armenia for 6 years. We had a very good relationship, not just teacher-student, but friends too. We would go to the same tournaments together.

Having a coach helps you in many ways. He can answer any questions you may have about certain positions that you don't understand. We used to play training games, to check out my opening lines... to get more experience with them.

Also, you have to have good physical conditioning. This will allow you to come back when you are not playing your best. You have to be the kind of person that doesn't give up.

**MJ:** How old were you when you first started playing chess?

**VA:** I started playing when I was 5 years old. We lived in Mongolia, where the conditions were very harsh. Since it was so cold there, my dad would keep us inside... he taught my sister and me to play chess to keep us occupied.

When we came back from Mongolia to Armenia, my dad brought me to the Tigran Petrosian Chess School when I was 6 years old. In order to get into the school, they had me play against a student who had already been there for 5 months. I beat him! And then they said, "Okay, you're in!" (laughs) We took lessons 3 times a week for 3 hours, and they gave us a lot of homework to do.

**MJ:** When did you first realize that you had a talent for chess?

**VA:** When I was 9 years old, I had my first success in chess. I became the Armenian under 10 junior champion. This gave me the opportunity to represent Armenia in the world junior chess championship in Bratislava, Slovakia in 1993.

**MJ:** When did you beat your first GM?

**VA:** It was in 1997, I was 13 years old. It was in Georgia... I was playing in an open tournament, I won the last round with the black pieces against world woman's 5 time champion GM Nona Gaprindashvili.

**MJ:** How tough was it getting the IM title?

**VA:** For me it was hard to get my first IM norm because of the pressure. Two times I only needed to draw in the last round, but both times I lost. Once I got the first norm, then the other two came very fast.

**MJ:** And your GM norms, how did these come about?

**VA:** I got my first one at the 2002 World Open in Philadelphia. I had a very tough game against GM Ilya Smirin, 2794. It was very important for me to score against him in order to achieve my norm and tie for first place.

And the second norm came two months later at the Imre Konig Memorial 2002. This was the strongest round-robin international tournament held in the United States since 1996 (8 GMs and 2 IMs, for an average rating of 2538).

My start was not very promising. I had 1.5 out of 4 points. And I needed 4 points out of the next 5 rounds to achieve my second GM norm. But, I didn't give up. In round 5, I won my game against GM Yuri Shulman. This win gave me a lot of confidence that I would achieve my goal.

My next game was against IM Hikaru Nakamura, which was a very difficult game as he too was going for a GM norm... I was happy to win it. After that I faced 6 time U.S. Champion GM Walter Browne and was able to beat him with the White pieces and take the lead in the tournament. After that I met GM Suat Atalik. I had the Black pieces and was able to hold a draw. And then in the last round I drew with GM John Fedorowicz, which gave me clear first place and my second GM norm.

So far, these two tournament victories have been my greatest results.

**MJ:** Thanks for the interview Var, and good luck in getting your third GM norm.

**VA:** Thank you very much.

Here are 3 of Var's recent games:

**(1829145) Nakamura,H 2494 IM – Akobian,V IM (2486) [C10]**

Imre Konig Mem San Francisco USA (6), 11.09.2002

*[Akobian Varuzhan]*

**1.e4 e6 2.d4 d5 3.Nc3 Nf6 4.Bg5 dxe4 5.Nxe4 Nbd7 6.Nxf6+ Nxf6 7.Nf3 h6 8.Be3** [8.Bh4 c5; 8.Bxf6 Qxf6 9.Bd3 Bd6 10.0-0 0-0] **8...Nd5 9.Bd3 Nxe3 10.fxe3 Bd6 11.e4** [11.0-0 Qe7 12.c3 Bd7 13.Qb3 0-0-0=] **11...e5! 12.dxe5** [12.Nxe5 Bxe5 13.dxe5 Qg5; 12.c3 exd4 13.cxd4 Bb4+ 14.Kf2 0-0 15.Rf1 Bg4; 12...Bc5 13.Bc4 [13.Bb5+ c6 14.Qxd8+ Kxd8 15.Bc4 Ke7=] **13...Qe7 14.Qd2 0-0 15.0-0-0 c6 16.Rhf1 b5 17.Bb3 a5 18.a3** [18.c3 a4 19.Bc2 Be6 20.Kb1 b4; 18.a4 Ba6 19.Rh1 Rfd8; **18...a4 19.Ba2 b4 20.axb4 a3!?** [20...Bxb4 21.c3 Bc5 22.Nd4 Bg4 23.Rde1 Qxe5 24.Nxc6] **21.b3?** [21.c3 axb2+ 22.Qxb2 Be6 23.Bxe6 Qxe6 24.bxc5 Rfb8 25.Nd4 Qc4 26.Qc2 Ra1+ 27.Kd2 Ra2; 21.bxc5! axb2+ 22.Kxb2 Qa7 23.Bb3 Qa3+ 24.Kc3 Qa5+ 25.Kb2 Qa3+=] **21...Bxb4 22.c3 Ba5** [22...Qc5! 23.Kc2 Ba6 24.Rfe1 Rad8 25.Qe3 Rxd1 26.Qxc5 Bd3+ 27.Kxd1 Bxc5 28.Nd4 Bxd4 29.cxd4 Rd8 30.d5 cxd5 31.exd5 Rxd5; **23.b4?!** [23.Qd6 Qa7 24.b4 Ba6 25.e6 Bxf1 26.Rxf1 Rad8 27.exf7+ Kh8] **23...Bc7 24.Nd4 Qxe5 25.Nxc6** [25.Rxf7 Rxf7 26.Rf1 Be6! 27.Bxe6 Qxe6 28.Nxe6 Rxf1+ 29.Kc2 a2 30.Qd7 Rc1+ 31.Kd2 Rd1+ 32.Kxd1 a1Q+-+] **25...Qe8 26.Nd4** [26.b5 Bg4 27.Rde1 Bxh2 28.e5 Bg3 29.Re4 Be6; **26...Bg4 27.Rde1 Be5 28.h3 Be6 29.Nxe6 fxe6 30.Rf5** [30.Rxf8+ Kxf8 31.Rf1+ Kg8] **30...Bf6 31.Kb1** [31.Qd6 Kh7 32.Qxe6 Bxc3 33.Qxe8 Rfxe8 34.Re2 Bxb4] **31...Kh8 32.Rf3 Be5 33.Rd1** [33.Rxf8+ Qxf8 34.Qd3 Rc8 35.Rf1 Qe8 36.Bc4 Qc6; **33...Qc6 34.Rd3** [34.Qd7 Qxe4+ 35.Qd3 Qh4 36.Qc4 Qg5 37.Qg4 Qxg4 38.hxg4 Rxf3 39.gxf3 Bxc3; **34...Rac8 35.c4** [35.Qe3 Qa4 36.Rg1 Rc6 37.g4 Rfc8; **35...Qb6! 36.c5 Rxc5 37.Rxa3 Rcc8 38.Rd3 Kh7!** Diagram

[38...Rf2 39.Rd8+ Kh7 40.Rxc8 Rxd2 41.Rxd2 Qxb4+ 42.Kc2 Qa4+ 43.Bb3 Qxe4+; **39.Rb3 Rf2 40.Qd3 Rxc2 0-1**

**(1828332) Wojtkiewicz,A 2555 GM – Akobian,V 2486 IM [D34]**

Imre Konig Mem San Francisco USA (2), 05.09.2002

*[Akobian Varuzhan]*

**1.Nf3 e6 2.c4 d5 3.d4 c5 4.cxd5 exd5 5.g3 Nc6 6.Bg2 Nf6 7.0-0 Be7 8.Nc3 0-0 9.b3 Ne4 10.Bb2 Bf6 11.Nxe4** [11.Na4 b6 12.Rc1 Ba6 13.dxc5 Bxb2 14.Nxb2 bxc5] **11...dxe4 12.Nd2 Bg4!?** [12...Bxd4 13.Bxd4 Nxd4 14.Nxe4 (14.e3 Nf3+ 15.Nxf3 exf3 16.Qxf3 Rb8 17.Rfd1 Qe7 18.Rd2 Be6=) 14...Bg4 15.f3 Bf5 16.e3 Bxe4 17.exd4 Bc6 18.dxc5±] **13.h3 Bh5 14.Nxe4 Bxd4 15.Bxd4 cxd4 16.Rc1 Qe7 17.Re1 Rac8 18.Qd2 Rfd8 19.Nc5 Bg6 20.b4!?** [20.Nd3 Be4=] **20...b6 21.Na6?!** [21.Nb7 Qxb7 22.b5 Qe7 23.bxc6 Be4=; 21.Nd3 Be4=] **21...Ne5!** [21...Be4? 22.Bxe4 (22.b5 Bxg2 23.Kxg2 Ne5 24.Rxc8 Rxc8 25.Qxd4±) ] **22.Rxc8 Rxc8 23.f4** [23.Qxd4 Nd3 24.Rf1 Qxe2 25.Qd7 Rf8 26.Qb5 Be4 27.Bxe4 Qxe4±] **23...Nc4 24.Qxd4 Ne3 25.Bf3?!** [25.Qe5 Qxe5 26.fxe5 Rc2 27.a4 Nxg2 28.Kxg2 h5±] **25...f6!** Diagram

[25...h6 26.Qe5 Qxe5 27.fxe5=; 25...Nc2? 26.Rc1 Nxd4 27.Rxc8+ Qf8 28.Rxf8+ Kxf8 29.Kf2±] **26.Qb2 Nc2 27.Rd1 Qe3+ 28.Kh1 Qf2 29.Qb3+ Bf7 30.Qd3"** [30.Bd5 Ne3 31.Bxf7+ Kf8 32.Rg1 (32.Bd5 Nxd1 33.Qxd1 Qe3 34.Nc5 bxc5 35.Bb7 Re8 36.Bc6 Qe6 37.Bxe8 Qxh3+ 38.Kg1 Qxg3+ 39.Kh1 Kxe8 40.bxc5 Qxf4±) 32...Rc1+ ] **30...Ne3" 31.Qd7** [31.Rg1 Be6 32.Nc7 Bxh3±] **31...Rf8 32.Rg1 Nf1 33.Qg4??** [33.Rg2 Nxg3+ 34.Kh2 Nf1+ 35.Kh1 Qh4 36.Qg4 Qh6 37.Rg1 Ne3 38.Qg3 Bxa2±] **33...Qh2# 0-1**

### **(1808650) Ivanov,A 2579 GM – Akobian,V 2480 IM[C11]**

World Open (8), 2002

[Akobian Varuzhan]

**1.e4 e6 2.d4 d5 3.Nc3 Nf6 4.e5 Nfd7 5.f4 c5 6.Nf3 Nc6 7.Be3 cxd4 8.Nxd4 Bc5 9.Qd2 0-0 10.0-0-0 Nxd4 11.Bxd4 a6 12.h4 b5 13.h5 Qc7** [13...b4 14.Na4 (14.Ne2 a5∞) 14...Bxd4 15.Qxd4 Qa5!? 16.b3 Bb7∞] **14.h6 g6 15.Kb1 b4 16.Na4** [16.Ne2 a5 17.g4 Ba6 18.Bxc5 Nxc5 19.Ng3 Rfc8=] **16...Bxd4 17.Qxd4 a5 18.Bb5 Rb8 19.c4!** [19.Bxd7 Bxd7 20.Nc5 (20.Qc5 Rfc8 21.Qe7 Bxa4 22.Qf6 Bxc2+ 23.Ka1 Kf8+) 20...Bb5 21.Nb3 Rfc8±] **19...bxc3 20.Nxc3 Nb6 21.Rc1 Qe7 22.a4** [22.g4 Bd7 23.Ba6 a4 24.Rhd1 Rfd8=] **22...Bd7 23.Bxd7 Qxd7 24.Ka2** [24.b3 Rb7 25.Nb5 Nc8 26.Rh3 Na7 27.Nxa7 Rxa7 28.Rhc3 Rb7 29.Ka2 Rb4=] **24...Nc4** [24...Rb7 25.b3 Nc8 26.Nb5 Na7=] **25.Nb5** Diagram

**25...Rxb5 26.axb5 Qxb5 27.b3 Nb6** [27...Rb8 28.Rh3±; 27...a4? 28.bxc4 Qb3+ 29.Ka1 Qa3+ 30.Kb1 Rb8+ 31.Kc2 Qa2+ 32.Kd1 Qxg2 33.Rg1 Qf3+ 34.Ke1+–] **28.Rc5 Qe2+ 29.Qb2 Qe3 30.Qc1" Qe2+田 31.Qb2 Qe3 32.Rxa5** [32.Qc1 Qe4 33.Rc6 Qxg2+ 34.Ka1 (34.Ka3 Nd7 35.Rc7 Nb6 36.Rc6=) 34...a4 35.Rxb6 axb3 36.Rxb3 Ra8+ 37.Ra3 Rxa3+ 38.Qxa3 Qxh1+ 39.Kb2 Qxh6+–] **32...Qxf4 33.Rc1 d4** [33...Nd7 34.Ra4 Qg5 35.Rc7 Nxe5 36.Raa7 Qe3±] **34.Rd1 Rd8 35.Rb5?** [35.Qd2 Qh4 36.Ra6 Nd5 37.Qxd4 Qxh6 38.Kb2 Qh2∞] **35...Ra8+ 36.Kb1 Qe4+ 0-1**