

# Jack Peters Interview

by Michael Jeffreys

**Michael Jeffreys:** How close have you come to earning your GM title, and are you still interested in attaining it?

**Jack Peters:** I've made no effort at all to get a GM title for 15 years now. Back in 1978 I had ambitions to become a GM, I thought it was a very reasonable goal. For the next three years I played in several tournaments where there were opportunities to make a norm for the GM title. And those have to be special International tournaments and you have to score a certain percentage of points. I did okay in them, in fact I made two GM norms. At the time, the rules said you had to make two or more norms totaling 24 or more games. Well, my games were in tournaments of nine and 10 rounds, so, I needed a third norm.

I came awfully close in a tournament in Philadelphia, after the World Open, in 1979. In the last round I needed to beat Michael Wilder, and he needed to make a draw to get an IM norm! So, it obviously was going to be a hard fought game. I got the advantage; I won a pawn. Then I got a little greedy and took a second pawn, and gave him a little counterplay. And even though we were in an ending and I had two extra pawns, I was in a bit of trouble and wasn't able to convert my advantage to a win. It came out a draw. That's how close I came. A few good moves away from making a third GM norm.

I didn't really think much about it at the time because I just assumed that the next tournament or the one after that I would get it. But I missed a couple more times.

Then there were two things that really changed my mind about it. First, I saw how the GM titles were given out. There was a lot of corruption involved. People would really want to make norms, and so they would buy and sell points. And if sometimes players didn't make norms, they would have someone from their Federation argue their case.

GM titles were handed out by the qualifications commission of FIDE. On the commission there would be representatives from many different countries and it was common practice for some player who didn't quite have all the requirements for a title to have his federation leader talk to the federation leader from some other place. "Your player X is a good player and he deserves to be a GM, and our player Y is in the same situation. I'll vote for your guy if you vote for mine."

*Jack Peters is the chess columnist for the Los Angeles Times.*

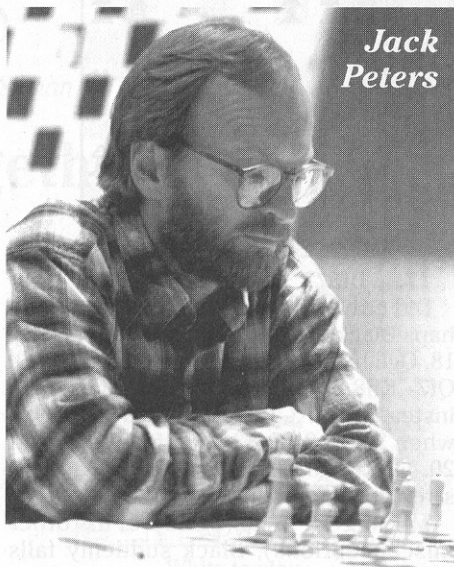


Photo by Al Pena

This was discouraging to me because you can only become a GM once in your life; it's a lifetime title. Why would anybody want it if they don't deserve it? It bugs me. So, now I had decided that the GM title had been corrupted, and it was not such a worthy goal.

The second thing that upset me was the tournaments themselves. It's hard to get invited to international tournaments that offer GM norms. For an American player in those days, you almost always had to go to Europe and that's a lot of money. I didn't have any income; I was teaching chess! My original fee was \$10 an hour for lessons, and I wasn't working 40 hours a week, I can tell you that!

Anyway, I played in a few tournaments and I really didn't enjoy them. That was the thing that bugged me the most. I would have ignored the corruption and the disillusionment, except that I didn't like the tournaments! They were expensive and when you got there all people cared about were norms, they didn't care about who won the tournament or who played good games.

So, I lost interest in the whole thing. The only reason why I'd like to be a GM now, and this is the absolute truth, is so people wouldn't ask me, "when are you going to be a GM?"

By the way, I think that there are far too many GMs in the world. Part of the reason is the title inflation; so many people got their titles without making the requirements.

Also, when the GM title was originally awarded by the Czar of Russia, there were only five people who got it! Even when FIDE took over in 1951, they decided they would issue GM titles retroactively to a lot of players who were still alive. And so they had about 50 GMs. And

that seems to me about the right number in the world. I feel that anyone who is a GM is someone who in any given game would have a small but significant chance of defeating the world champion.

And right now, I'd say that there are only a couple of dozen people in the world who can really claim that. That they would have a good chance to beat Kasparov in a single game.

**MJ:** In your interview with Jerry Hanken from the February 1978 issue of *Chess Life & Review*, you mentioned that you started playing chess at age seven.

**JP:** It was either seven or eight, I don't remember the exact age. My father taught me how to play. He was just a beginner. I played some of the kids in the neighborhood, but I didn't think much of it. I played all sorts of other games too. I probably spent more time playing baseball than anything else.

Then when I was 14, I was in a bookstore and saw a couple of chess books. I got *Rubinstein's Chess Masterpieces* and *Streamline Chess* by Hanauer. It was in algebraic notation, which I thought was strange, because I was used to descriptive already.

Then I saw the chess column in the *Boston Globe* by Harold Dondis. He still writes it today, 35 years later! I wrote a letter to Dondis, and he told me about a chess club at the Quincy YMCA, which was about 10 miles from my home. I went there and played, and found out that there were real tournaments I could play in. This was news to me.

I played in one in Boston, and my first round opponent was Harold Dondis! (laughs). He was rated 1804 — I had no idea what the ratings meant — but I just assumed he must be a tremendous player because he's the guy who writes the local chess column. And I beat him! For me, it was a typical game. I lost a piece in the opening and then I set a trap and won the piece back. We played on even terms for a while, and then I had a trick and I won a rook. And the only thing strange was that he resigned! I mean, I was only a rook ahead ... he probably would have beaten me if he kept playing.

He had a reputation as someone who liked to lose to kids. He was always looking for that next kid who was going to be a tremendous player. So, he instantly became a fan of mine. Since I beat the local chess columnist my first game, I figured, I must be a master (laughs).

The next game I was a piece and a pawn ahead against the guy who went on to tie for first in the tournament. I got so