

Silman Interview 7/29/01

(Caesar's Palace, Las Vegas - During Continental Open)

MJ: Why do you think your chess books are so popular?

JS: I think most books are written for stronger players. A grandmaster that writes a book is looking at things from a grandmaster's perspective. He expects you to know basic plans and ideas, and he gives page after page of analysis on one move. Are you going to look at this analysis? Nobody does. Nobody wants to look at that junk! The truth is, most people can't learn anything from this kind of "writing from the heavens," though it sounds very impressive.

Books for non-masters should try to teach you something. Unfortunately, most "instructive" books give you various positions and they say "Find this!" or "White won this way." but they don't really explain anything in depth. Once again, the student isn't given anything to hold onto and, as a result, he fails to improve.

I try very hard to painstakingly explain things, to share concepts and ideas that the student can make immediate use of, to add some humor, and make it readable. I try to tune into the mind of the under 1800, because I was once 1100 and I still remember what it was like.

So this is why I think *How to Reassess Your Chess*, *The Reassess Your Chess Workbook*, *The Amateur's Mind*, and *The Complete Book of Chess Strategy* sell so well, because people say, "Hey, he's actually talking to me."

MJ: You would think other chess writers would catch on and try to emulate what you do so they too could write top sellers. Yet, it seems that nobody else out there has really been able to put out books that can match yours for humor, instruction, and overall readability. Why do you think that is?

JS: First off, it takes a lot of work. My new book, *The Reassess Your Chess Workbook*, took nine months to write. For example, I spent four days analyzing the game Adams-Bronstein; four days on one position! I changed most of the analysis that Adams published; he was just wrong about his own game!

So, I have to be willing to work like a dog and explain things very clearly if I want a book like this to live up to my own expectations. I have to

look at it again and again, make countless changes, and ask myself over and over, “Is my explanation for this example going to help the student?” If it’s not, then the position or game has to be tossed out.

The Amateur’s Mind, which is for those under 1800, is a very personal book. It took years to put together, and in many ways I consider it to be the most instructive book I’ve ever done. Most people want to just crack out a book and make some profit; you can’t do it that way if you want the book to achieve its aim. This is why so few authors write truly instructive books: You are not really making anything money-wise because you’re putting so much time into it. It’s just not financially viable.

MJ: While most of your readers love your humor, there are a few who have felt you’ve gone too far in picking on your students. For example, on page 87 of *Amateur’s Mind*, you say, “This incoherent litany shows why he doesn’t do well in tournaments.” And on page 95 you write, “This is just terrible! After several weeks of lessons, 1700 thinks that imbalances are weaknesses.” While I find these stories amusing, what do you say to those that find them offensive?

JS: The truth is my actual students never feel this way. When I’m doing this with my students, there’s always a context to it. I always try to make them laugh and have a good time while they simultaneously learn. Usually when I teach this way, I’m doing whatever I can to make them open up to new ideas. I’ll scream, shock them, wave my arms, sing, or beg—anything to get my point across.

I honestly want to make them better players or, at the least, able to enjoy the game more by seeing nuances that previously eluded them. The reality is, most people aren’t going to get better because they don’t want to lose, they don’t want to work, and they can’t take criticism. And that’s up to them. So, they want to have everybody be polite and tell them how well they’re doing, but it’s bullshit. If they come to you and say, “I want to get better,” then you have to be honest with them and reply, “Listen, you’re terrible in this area of the game, let’s try to fix you.”

One guy in a book review said, “Why does Silman hate us amateurs?” I don’t hate amateurs. I’m writing these books for amateurs! It’s all for them. I’m writing to help them enjoy the game better, to have a better understanding of it, to replace their feelings of powerlessness with a sense of control.

It's sad, but people don't have a sense of humor. I wrote an article in *Chess Life*, and said, satirically, "I like to zap my students with a cattle prod every time they get an answer wrong." Somebody wrote to the editor and said I had to be fired and banned from chess worldwide because how dare I physically abuse my students. Give me a break!

The truth is that, no matter who you are, if you're in the public eye—and I am in a very small, little way—you're always going to find people who for some reason hate you. You can't avoid it. You could be Mother Teresa, and there are going to be some people who want to smash you flat. It's just par for the course. I get threats and hate mail from people I don't even know!

MJ: Do you take these letters personally? Do they bother you?

JS: No, I love hate mail! I collect it and laugh at it. I show my friends my "hate" collection, and I'm always happy to add to it with a juicy new specimen.

MJ: These people are truly in the minority as many consider you the best lecturer in chess and the most charismatic. Why do you think people are drawn to you?

JS: Basically, I just try to be honest. I talk to people in a personal manner and try to make them comfortable. A speaker can't be egotistical about anything, because ego is nothing more than delusion. I can't stand these people who walk around with their chests puffed out, trying to make an impression. I'm just there to make people feel like they belong, to teach them something, and to help them laugh at themselves. That's all there is to it. I mean, I don't find myself charismatic. I look in the mirror and I'm horrified!

MJ: Jeremy, your sense of humor comes through in all your writing. Where did you get that from, your parents?

JS: Not from my parents! I think you get a sense of humor when you realize how totally ridiculous life is.

MJ: Did you figure this out when you were a kid, or were you a serious kid and then had some sort of "enlightening experience," where you suddenly began to see the world differently.

JS: Actually, I was very straight and serious growing up. I was a hermit. I was reading Hesse and thinking about philosophy. I didn't have anybody to talk to about these "weird" thoughts. Then I started running into strange people. First off, when I was fifteen, I ran into an ex-rock & roller who had me teach him in his beach house for hours on end. I was introduced to all sorts of bizarre sexual situations, and some really insane things happened. Then I moved to San Francisco and ran into people with amazing "abilities." I was basically shown the nature of reality. They said, "Here, this is what is going on." And what are you going to do? You just start laughing. You realize that we are all completely insane. And from that moment on I couldn't be too serious about anything.

MJ: How old were you when this all happened?

JS: 19

MJ: So, basically you "lightened up" at the age of 19?

JS: Yes and no. I was young and thought highly of myself. It took years and years to break down my pride. But I was fortunate to experience all aspects of life, and having your face pushed into the highs and lows gives you real perspective. I've been a street person; there was a time when I was living in the park. Late at night I'd cower under a bench and hope that the people walking by wouldn't notice me. I remember that two headless bodies were found in that park, and I didn't want to be number three! On the other hand, I've been the guest of politicians and dictators and famous actors and movie moguls. So, it's been this amazing spread from being in situations of incredible wealth, to living in the streets and only owning a blanket.

MJ: This is all true? These things really happened to you??

JS: Yes, of course. We all have our own strange stories to tell, and this happens to be mine.

MJ: I heard you were at the American Open in 1972 when Fischer showed up right after he had won the world championship. What was that like?

JS: I was playing Tibor Weinberger. I was a kid, of course. Everybody got up from their tables and rushed to the entrance. I didn't know what was

going on, so I asked someone and they said, “Fischer walked in!” So I walked over and saw Fischer surrounded by dozens of people yelling, “Bobby, Bobby!” The poor guy was just looking around. He wanted to see a few of his friends. All of sudden he dashed madly out of the place. Everybody started chasing him and he ran into the street, jumped into a cab and drove off! He was only there for a few minutes, but the whole episode somehow seemed surrealistic.

MJ: How has being a chess professional changed from say, back in the sixties and seventies?

JS: It’s changed a lot. The game is getting ruined.

MJ: The game is getting ruined?! How?

JS: For the professional, things have become very hard. You’re forced to put in unbelievable amounts of time studying openings. You have to go online and look for games played that day, for fear of missing out on a newly discovered key move. The masses of information have made chess more of a science, and taken away a lot of the artistic elements.

To me—and not everyone will agree with this!—a large part of the game’s charm was adjournments. I used to love the behind the scenes work that went into an adjourned position. That has been destroyed by computers, and adjournments are a thing of the past. Faster time controls are another curse; quick games don’t bring in more spectators, all they do is lower the precision of the games.

There is less and less sponsorship, less and less money, and more and more grandmasters. Tournaments are disappearing. I mean, it’s just really miserable. To be a successful professional you need to work your ass off, but where are the rewards?

It’s so bad now that even small events see big names fighting for meaningless prizes. You go to a little open tournament in San Francisco, maybe first prize is \$300, and there are four IM’s and a GM. What is that!?! They’re playing their hearts out for a few hundred bucks, all the while wondering how they are going to pay their rent. It’s pathetic. To make matters even worse, amateurs have developed a craving for big prizes. They feel that they’re entitled to \$10,000 class prizes. It sickens me to see an event where you have five of the best players in the world

tied for first and they get \$3,000.00 each, while a B player gets \$10,000. No sport would do that, it's insulting. Yet the B players think they deserve the money. There's no love of game, it's just a way to pretend that you're a real chessplayer.

MJ: Yes, but why shouldn't the amateur be allowed to make money? After all, chess is one of the few sports where the amateur can play right along side and even against the pros, if they enter the open section. Besides, if it weren't for all the amateurs entering the event, where would the prize money come from?! Certainly not from the 5 or 10 GM's, most who get to enter for free.

JS: Chess amateurs get all sorts of perks that don't exist in other sports, yet they also think they should be able to make money while the pros they watch starve. Of course, if an amateur plays in an open tournament and wins a top prize, then he should be paid—all the more power to him!

Actually, I like class prizes. It's fun for all the players, and it's exciting to win a check and a trophy. But be reasonable. When you see a beginner make more than a grandmaster, it's simply sick.

MJ: Jeremy, do you think FIDE is good or bad for chess?

JS: There's FIDE and there's the people who run FIDE. Any organization is only as good as the people who run it. Our sport needs a worldwide governing body, and FIDE was created to fill that need. Unfortunately, it's now infested with politicians who are self serving, want a nice paycheck, don't care about the chess players, and don't really care about chess.

The present FIDE is simply corrupt. In fact, they are out of control. They have policies to make the game faster and faster, and they're trying to blacklist other countries that have tournaments which don't conform to FIDE's dictates. I could go on and on, but suffice it to say that I feel that the people who control FIDE are despicable. In fact, the whole political situation in chess is falling apart. It's very bad.

To make matters even worse, FIDE is pushing for drug testing in chess. This is insane! There is no drug in the world that can make you play better chess. I would pay my opponent to drink 50 cups of coffee or take speed. I mean he would just go hyper and hang all his pieces! They say drug testing is necessary because they want to be in the Olympics. Well, it's not going

to happen. And if it does, then okay, test the people who are going to play in the Olympics, not everybody else.

Sadly, there are now cases of drug testing in normal European tournaments. They have ridiculous rules about some over the counter cough medicines, the amount of coffee you can drink, and on and on it goes. Basically, if you take any of these banned substances, you're thrown out of chess for a few years to life. Imagine having a cold and taking Nyquil, then finding that you've been banned from chess! I exchanged several e-mails with the drug czar of FIDE a few months ago, and when I pointed out the folly and sheer madness of his views, and how this policy will do nothing but humiliate a subculture that is already beaten down, he replied, "You don't understand, it's for the children." Needless to say, we didn't get along very well.

MJ: What do you think about the USCF?

JS: I have to admit that I've had a rocky relationship with them, also. The U.S. Chess Federation and I haven't agreed on much for many years. More recently, Redman's policies really sent me over the top, so much so that I withdrew my membership and refused to write for *Chess Life* anymore. Now Redman and most of his followers are gone, so we'll have to see if things improve there. I hope they do, and I hope the USCF is able to get back on track and perform their duties intelligently. Only time will tell.

MJ: How old were you when you first started playing chess and what got you interested?

JS: I was 12, and I played paddleball and handball a lot, and I was pretty good. One day this little fat kid came up and challenged me to a game of chess. I didn't know all the rules, but somewhere along the way I had learned how the pieces moved. Anyway, he crushed me and laughed at me. I got really pissed off and swore revenge. I swore I'd get that guy if it was the last thing I ever did! So, I took it very seriously and went on a long program to avenge myself.

MJ: What were the first chess books you read?

JS: I grew up on Alekhine's games and *New York 1924* by Alekhine. I started out as a tactical player, and it was only later in life that I became something I abhorred in my youth: a positional plodder. I remember playing

a twenty game 5-minute match with Benko a few years ago in Spain. After we split the series 10-10, he looked at me in horror and said, “You are the most boring player I’ve ever encountered!” These wise words of Pal’s encouraged me to give up serious chess entirely.

MJ: So, how did you get good?

JS: Personally, I never thought I was good.

MJ: No, no, no. You don’t get to IM and not be good!

JS: No, IM’s are weak, trust me. Compared to a really great player, I was an embarrassment. I remember my very first tournament: I lost all my games except for one where I had a back rank mate, but I didn’t know how to do it. So my opponent grabbed my hand, said, “You idiot, it’s mate, it’s mate!” and actually forced me to mate him! Then he got up and walked out. That’s how I won my first game. Then I went to another tournament and lost all my games. I thought 1400 players were gods.

Yes, I eventually became a fairly competent player. However, even when I won tournaments like the American Open, the National Open, and the U.S. Open, I never lost sight of the fact that I’d never be world class.

MJ: Where did you grow up?

JS: Europe. France, Germany and England. My parents are both English. Then, when I was 12, we moved to San Diego, CA. I’m the only American in my family.

MJ: Do you have any brothers or sisters?

JS: I have two sisters. They’re both hookers now... they make a good wage.

MJ: No, come on. Let’s get back to chess. So when did you start taking chess seriously?

JS: Well, I was taking it seriously right away. I fell in love with chess and all I did was study. I only went to school two days a week, and I would play through *Informant* games, up to 500 a day.

MJ: Did you study with anyone?

JS: No, not really. But in my third tournament, I had a big breakthrough: even though I was an E player, I won the C prize. I got my first check, for \$70 and I couldn't believe it. Then I played in another tournament and did real well and jumped from 1100 to 1680 in one rating jump. After that I played a bit more, went up to 1900 something, and then I got caught on a plateau. I was getting confused; I had no control over the direction a game would take. At 15 years of age I decided to quit chess and concentrate on archeology. However, I couldn't help playing in one more tournament, just to see if I was really as awful as I suspected.

In my first game my suspicions seemed justified, as my head overheated and everything seemed hazy. I still won, but I saw that it was hopeless. And then everything cleared. I guess my mind had been sifting through the information that I'd picked up from all those master games. I went to sleep, woke up feeling just as hopeless as always, and then the light bulb came on and I was better. It's just weird. Since then, I've seen the "plateau problem" strike many players. It can take years to get over it, or it can take two days. Everybody is different. I went undefeated in that tournament. I played a 2400 player and drew, and I beat several 2300 players. I even had a 14 move combination to beat one guy. I ended up coming in second in a major open. So I jumped from about 1900 to 2200 strength overnight. Then I went to San Francisco when I was 18 and instantly became 2300.

MJ: What was your greatest game?

JS: I have no idea... probably my win at Lone Pine against Defirmian. I played this brilliant tactical series and wiped him off the board with the Black pieces. It was a long time ago. Defirmian is one of my favorite opponents. I think I have 3 or 4 wins, one loss and several draws. I just recently played him and came close to winning, but he defended like a genius and drew. He's a great player, but somehow his style is perfect for me.

MJ: Do you ever play him on ICC?

JS: No.

MJ: What's your handle on ICC?

JS: I'm not telling. You see, I get heckled... people come on and start insulting me. You have no idea... endless attacks. I like to play 1 minute chess on ICC. It's usually 3:00 am, I'm half asleep, and I give away all my pieces. No one knows who you are and it's fun, it's total relaxation. If people know who I am, they take it seriously and say, "Oh, you're an idiot; you're hanging your queen!" I don't need that! I want to hang my Queen in silence!

MJ: Thanks for the interview Jeremy!