

Mark Rivlin talks about chess coaching with IM Lorin D'Costa, FM Bob Eames and CM Rob Willmoth.

IM Lorin D'Costa has been a full-time coach for over ten years, working with beginners, juniors, schools, England Youth and England Women's teams. Recently he has set up a free girls chess training and tournament on the Lichess server since lockdown, with a view to setting up a UK girls charitable chess project called *She Plays To Win*. Please contact Lorin here sheplaystowinuk@gmail.com for more details on how girls can get involved, or if you are interested to support the new project. Read more about Lorin on his personal website: <http://www.lorinchess.com/about/>

FM Bob Eames started playing chess at four years old and started one-to-one coaching at 18. Four years ago he took voluntary redundancy from a supply chain job he had been working for 18 years. He has been combining one-to-one coaching with sessions in primary schools. His email is bob64eames@hotmail.com or message Bobbybunny on Lichess

CM Rob Willmoth's coaching career really started informally at university in 1987. After a successful career at Barclays Capital In 2010 Rob accepted an early redundancy package and took the plunge into self-employment coaching chess in four schools. Later that year, he had filled all his slots and took over coaching the famous Barnet Knights junior club. Ten years on with a roster of 50 schools, Rob says: "It's a job I love, and I wish I had done it professionally 20 years earlier." He can be contacted through www.barnetknights.com and www.chesscoachingservices.co.uk

Qualities required to be a good coach

LD: I try to teach and enthuse the children as I would myself have liked to have been taught. Are they learning, enjoying and having fun at the same time? What will keep them into chess as they move on into Secondary School?

BE: I think you have got to love playing chess and to like people in general. You need a lot of patience, and in particular with teaching chess in school classrooms, a teacher should inspire and instill self-confidence and a sense of self-worth in the children, and it should be engaging and fun! Chess is a great game that can benefit people mentally throughout their lives, irrelevant of how good they become at it, much in the same way that the physical exercise of other sports increases physical health.

RW: An ability to maintain control in a classroom certainly is important. I try to quickly work out the levels of children and coach at the required level. I have seen many examples of strong players coaching at what they think is the correct

level and seen the children staring into oblivion.

Making a living from coaching

LD: I guess the main angle is whether to do private one-to-one lessons, or school/group coaching. They require different skills, though of course it is definitely possible to do both! A prospective coach who wants to do it for the money only is probably advised to do something else. You are giving yourself to the children and parents, it comes with the territory.

BE: I am a full-time freelance coach providing one-to-one lessons in person and online. I work with as a tutor in schools with Premier Chess Coaching, Chess in Schools and Communities (CSC), Richmond Juniors and Meri Grigoryan's Organic Chess.

RW: I have a team of staff working in around 50 schools. If you have a big network you can get by on one-to-one coaching alone. I find this harder and work in schools is more profitable. Online coaching is a new income stream that can be utilised once we are back to normal for group or one-to-one coaching.

Differences between online and face-to-face coaching

LC I'm a bit old school and always preferred face-to-face lessons. However with the enforced change to being online I think I, and probably many others, have been quite surprised as to how effective being online can be. Previously you were limited to a coach who lived in your area. With the online boom you can have your pick of almost anyone in the world, though finding the right fit might be harder.

BE: We have all been forced into teaching online. There are some advantages like using shared screens which allows viewing of stored database material on *Chessbase* as well as internet websites. Also there is no geographical restriction online in that there is no need to travel anywhere, only restricted by which time zone and what time of day it is! There are drawbacks of online teaching as well, as it is more difficult to communicate as clearly, as well as the danger of the technology failing and disconnection.

RW: I actually don't think there is a great deal of difference. A good coach can work on any medium. I have found that I can actually teach more online, but on the flip side there is less interaction with the children, as I would normally get in a demo board in a classroom and subsequently walking around a classroom

How important is coaching for improvement

LD: I am reminded of a parent who once said: 'I would never dream of letting my

child learn the violin by themselves, is it the same for chess?' Never having had a private coach, I can't say if having had one growing up would have made a difference for me or not. I learned with books, playing tournaments and slow play club games. However, there aren't many who have the drive to do self study in the modern era especially when there are plenty of coaches around to suit your budget or level, regardless of age. I have seen some juniors improve immensely with one-to-one sessions with a coach, and others not. Parents need to ask themselves – will this benefit my child?

BE: The key to improvement is to study and practice. Ultimately, improvement comes from within. You could have a player who endlessly plays blitz chess on the Internet and who never improves because they do not ever find out where they could have done better, or alternatively somebody who reads a lot of books or watches videos but does not play any games, and so their information does not get put into practice and remains abstract. There are examples of players becoming very strong without using a coach – world number three Ding Liren works alone. This requires an enormous amount of self-discipline!

RW: I would say 90 percent playing and self-teaching and 10 percent coaching for fine-tuning

Does a coach have to be a strong player?

LD: No, although I found it a good way to get into coaching initially. Parents often opt for titled players when it is probably how experienced the coach is and what success they have had with other pupils. Having said that, hiring a young coach who will have more time to give and is also very motivated to get on the coaching ladder could reap benefits too. I know some coaches around 100 ECF who teach beginners and do a great job of teaching the young and up and coming kids to a certain level.

BE: No, but it helps! Teaching ability is more important than playing ability, but one does aid the other. The late Mark Dvoretsky was often punted as the world's best chess coach, and yet remained an IM rather than GM. Sir Alex Ferguson was an average football player and yet one of the most successful managers.

RW: Whatever the level, a structured form of learning is required. Strength is not an importance factor – a player graded 60 grade can happily teach a class of Year 2.

How to cultivate natural talent

LD: There are of course plenty of obstacles for anyone who wants to become a strong chess player. Somehow a coach needs to guide those who show something to try and do some work on their game to improve and do it

independently. Many coaches are concerned the switch to being online has meant kids are playing a lot of chess, but it is meaningless bullet or blitz games. This can be helpful but Malcolm Gladwell's deliberate practice idea holds true here. Sites like *Chessable* are new ways to try and encourage learning – children simply don't use books anymore!

BE: I strongly believe in nurture, not nature. I do not believe there is any such thing as natural talent, in that it is not natural! Nobody is born with the ability to play chess; it is a skill that is learnt. The Polgar sisters, who were home-schooled, are perhaps the best-known example of this. Some rare people are sometimes described as geniuses because they are able to make something that is extremely difficult to do look ridiculously easy. A big component part of a player's talent or aptitude is their work ethic and their ability to work hard, without which any ability will be wasted. Again, a player's progress will ultimately depend on their own motivation, and so to cultivate this people need to be encouraged to practice and to study and be provided with excellent material to do this with.

RW: The first thing to do is get the parents on board, then construct a playing schedule advising suitable tournaments for that person to gain most from. Then set a specific coaching schedule tailored to the strengths and weaknesses on the child and constantly monitor improvement.

Editor's note: The views expressed by Lorin, Bob and Rob are their own, and not necessarily those of people who may employ them.