

**GUEST: VISWANATHAN ANAND**

LSS 608 (LENGTH: 27:46)

FIRST AIR DATE: 10/30/12

**So when you're playing chess, how many moves ahead are you thinking?**

Depends on the position. We usually compare it to a tree. So, if there's a straight tree, very few branches or no branches, then you can go very, very far. So, essentially, if I have one move, you have one response, I have one response there, you have one response there, I can calculate fifty or seventy moves. It doesn't really matter. But where it gets tricky is when I have four possibilities, you have six responses, then I have another five, and you know, that's when the tree becomes very dense, like a thicket. And there, it's difficult to see very far.

**When you think of a champion, who comes to mind? What if it were a world champion, an Olympian? How about an Olympian of the mind, like world chess champion Viswanathan Anand?**

Long Story Short with Leslie Wilcox is Hawaii's first weekly television program produced and broadcast in high definition.

***Aloha mai kakou.* I'm Leslie Wilcox. Have you ever wanted to play the piano? I mean, really master it, to do something more with those black and white keys than stumble through Chopsticks. Playing chess is kind of like playing the piano. Most of us know what the individual pieces can do, but the strategy, the visualization of every move before it even happens, and what that will do, that takes a special skill. Viswanathan Anand, born and raised in India, is the chess grand master, and as I speak in 2012, he's the reigning world chess champion for the fifth time. Thanks to Halekulani Corporation, which brought Viswanathan to Honolulu for a series of special events, we had an opportunity to sit and talk with him in Halekulani's Royal Suite to find out what it takes to play a complex game at his level, and sustain that level of performance.**

Chess seems to attract prodigies. I think I would compare it to a language. It's something that you just pick up. It's much easier to pick up languages when you're young, in the same way I think it's easier to pick up chess when you're young. And you can get very good at it, very fast.

**Well, let's talk about when you were a little boy. Let's go back to your childhood, if you would. Tell me about your growing up days, your early life with your family.**

Okay; so I was the youngest of three children. My brother was thirteen years older, my sister is eleven years old. So, I'm by far the youngest.

**Were you spoiled?**

Pretty much. I mean, I had two sets of parents, like. [CHUCKLE] So, my older brother and sister practically also used to pamper me a lot. Then, my father used to work in the railways. So one of the advantages is that we got to travel a lot. So then, my father would go on inspections, tours along ... well, basically the geographical region he covered. And my mother was the one who taught me how to play chess; so her family used to play chess. Some of my uncles played chess in university, were university champions and things like that. And I learned it from Mom when I was six. Then I started to go to a chess club, played a little bit. And then, when I was eight, my father got posted to Manila on a project for the Asian [INDISTINCT], so we went to live there for a year. And at that point, the Philippines was, I would say, a sort of hotspot for chess. They even had a chess program on TV, one hour every day, but it was from one to two. So, I was at school, of course, at that point. So my mother would write down everything, the game they showed, and the puzzle they gave at the end. So, my mother would write down the puzzle, then when I came back from school after I'd done my homework, we would go over the material. And then, we'd solve the puzzle together and send the answer to the TV station.

**And your mom really enjoyed chess too, right? 'Cause she was actively playing with you.**

Well, that's too strong. The thing is, she was very, very busy raising a family, so she didn't get a lot of chances to practice her chess. And in chess, it's important to keep practicing and playing often. And my mother never had time to go and play in a chess club, so it's something she did at home. So, I would say, in fact, she was not able to take her chess as far as it could have gone. But she was very involved in my career; she was traveling with me for many, many years.

**She identified that you really enjoyed it and had skill in it, and helped you move along.**

Exactly; basically. And so, in the Philippines, when we finished these puzzles, we'd send them in. And then, one day the TV station—and you could go to the TV station, they'd announce the winner, and then you could pick up a free book. So one day, they took me in the library and said, Help yourself, but don't send any more entries.

**Because you were winning every time. [CHUCKLE]**

I was winning quite often. And they said, Well, it looks like you're the only guy taking part.

**[CHUCKLE] Now, were you interested in chess to the exclusion of other things in childhood?**

No, not at all. When I was young, I used to play tennis, table tennis, badminton, I used to go swimming. So, I was doing a lot of other sports as well. But, chess was the one that kept taking more and more of my time, and that I really focused on. So it's the only thing I really did competitively.

**Tell me more about your father's influence on you.**

Well, he didn't play chess, so I think his role was more supportive. But my mother could actually sort of teach me how to play and could help me play. I think he was very open-minded, because in those days in India, parents were very conservative. They were worried about their kids playing sports, because they thought, Well, but you need to study well and get a good job. That was the obsession. So, I don't know, tiger dad or whatever. But my parents were very open to the idea of me playing chess, and even letting me play chess tournaments the nights before an exam. So they were really very flexible. And that's important, because I think if you're going to do well, then you need this feeling that people aren't against you at home. And besides that, whenever my mother couldn't accompany me, my father would come as well. But I think his influence was more general.

**And he would just encourage you generally; he couldn't give you feedback on what you were doing.**

Not too much. One thing I remember him telling me was to not—because I used to play very fast when I was young, and many people would keep trying to tell me to slow down, and my father, I remember, was telling me very often, No, don't bother, just be yourself. So, that's one thing I remember he told me.

**Well, that's important advice.**

Sure.

**Vishy, as his friends, family, and fans call him, won the title of world chess champion in the years 2000, 2007, 2008, 2010, and 2012. But it was back in 1988 that Vishy Anand became India's first grand master of chess, a title one holds for life, at the age of eighteen, an age that he now considers to be too old.**

**And I've heard you say that if you're not a grand master by the time you're fourteen, then curtains, baby. I mean, you have to start young and achieve young to really make it in the sport.**

I think so. Probably it's too strong, to say it's curtains, but the world record, I think maybe eight or nine years ago, was at twelve years to become a Grand Master. And then, it started dropping. But obviously, by months. So it was first twelve-year and nine months, and then it became seven months, and then I don't know where it currently stands. But there's already five or six people who have become Grand Masters at the age of twelve. So, you know, that's the bar you have to beat these days.

**There are those who don't chess to be an athletic endeavor. But to hear Viswanathan Anand tell it, the game of chess is physically as well as mentally consuming. Just because chess players sit in chairs doesn't mean they're not active competitors.**

**How do you preserve your stamina? Is it brain food? Is it exercise? How do you do it?**

Basically, it's exercise. You try and get a lot of exercise in when you're training. During tournaments, you don't exercise very much, because you'll be very fit, but you'll be sleeping. So, during tournaments, you try to take long walks, things that calm you down and make you feel better. But when I'm not playing tournaments, then I try to pay some attention to my physical training.

**When you're in a tournament, you're consumed days on end. What do you do between games?**

Well, it depends when the game is. So, your day will revolve around that. So the game starts in the early afternoon, late afternoon, then you plan your schedule accordingly. But typically, in the evening, you'll prepare a little bit for the next day's game, do some preliminary work, then you might watch a TV show or something.

**When you say preliminary work, are you mapping out your first moves, are you studying your opponent's recent games?**

Very much. You look at your opponent's recent games, you think these are the things he's done so I can target maybe these two areas. And then, you try to narrow it down to the final decision. But you may not want to work through the night. Some people do. I prefer to work 'til about eleven, and then I might relax watching some TV, or you know, thinking of something else, whatever.

**What kind of TV? Really mindless TV?**

Mindless TV, or some other sporting event is nice to get your mind off chess. Or you may watch something on your computers, or play a game. Whatever. So, not a game of chess, obviously some other game, just to get your mind off the game, then go to sleep. And the next morning, you prepare in your bed.

**Is it better when you have family near you when you're playing at your world champion best, or you know, what do you prefer? Do you prefer to have people close to you, or do you like to go it alone?**

Generally, I like to go it alone. My wife is very close to me. I mean, she used to travel basically since we got married. She was traveling to most tournaments with me, and she's been very, very heavily involved in my career. So, she knows her way around me and during tournaments, and so on, so that's different. But otherwise, generally during a tournament, you try to be left alone and focus on the game a little better. It's difficult to explain. You're not very social, you're not able to make small talk, you're just in a situation where you're not ... well, you're simply not that social and you can't handle those kinds of things. So, it's difficult to have people ... I'll give an example. When you're very tense, even someone

saying, good luck, will kind of flip you out. And I can't really explain why, but when you're tense, you're just tense.

**What do you mean luck? Luck has nothing do with it. Is that the kind of thing you might think?**

That or, I wish you hadn't told me, because now I don't know what to think. It's that sort of thing. The worst sort of thing is, you're going to play a guy, and then somebody comes and says, Oh, you're going to crush him. And then, this freaks you out, because if you lose, then you feel even more stupid.

**What about styles that aren't chess styles? They're personal intimidation or psychology of the game type. Moves or comments, our sounds that are meant to take you off course.**

That's the other problem, because you're playing someone, and even the best behaved opponent is going to affect you in some way. I mean, if he or she is fidgeting, or there's a certain nervousness which they cannot hide, or you hear their breathing, you know, they're breathing a bit more loudly, anything like that gives you some information, some clues as to what they're going through. So you're affected at a very basic level, no matter what. But of course, there are opponents who try to drive you nuts. Some on purpose, and some succeed even without trying. And in those cases, you have to make an effort to think about it. So, it's important for me to know that if I'm playing this player, that there are going to be some unpleasant things to deal with, and to know at a certain moment I'll have to keep control of myself.

**And I've heard that other chess champions really like playing you, because it's all about the game, it's not about tactics of intimidation or playing with somebody.**

Yeah. In general, I've felt that if I tried to do something to wind up my opponent, it will probably backfire. Because I like to play when, you know, it's just all the action is happening on the chessboard, and kind of focus there. So, at the very least, it seemed to me just to be a good strategy to play like that, because I thought any other approach would backfire. I wouldn't be comfortable with it.

**Have you tried it before? Have you tried intimidation or being obnoxious or irritating?**

No, but you can sometimes, if your opponent, for instance, is short of time, then you can get very excited by looking at his clock, and you can affect them even without meaning to do so. So, I've never consciously tried to upset anyone, but of course, when I'm nervous or irritated, then you can't control yourself.

**In April of 2010, a volcanic eruption in Iceland shut down airline traffic in Europe and nearly prevented Viswanathan Anand from competing for the world chess championship that year. But Vishy showed that in life, as in chess, there is more than one way to win.**

**You've gone through some real pressure to even arrive at a chess tournament. Could you tell us about that time that the Icelandic volcano was going off, and it resulted in your flight being canceled? And so, what did you do?**

Yeah. This was funny, because we had arranged it so that I was leaving on the 14<sup>th</sup> of April. On the 15<sup>th</sup>, I arrived in Frankfurt. On the 15<sup>th</sup>, I arrived in Frankfurt, and then I thought on the 16<sup>th</sup>, I'll catch the Frankfurt-Sofia flight.

**Because the championship was in Bulgaria.**

Yeah; the championship was in Bulgaria, and it was due to start on the 23<sup>rd</sup> of April. So typically, you get there a week in advance to acclimatize and get settled in, and so on. So, we all planned to leave on the 16<sup>th</sup>. On the 15<sup>th</sup> night, we started to get a bit worried, because one of my Danish trainers called me and said, Actually, all flights from Denmark have been cancelled. And he said, But I'm going to take a night train to Hamburg, and then I'll catch a flight to Frankfurt and join you. Then a bit later, he called me and said, The cloud has moved over Northern Germany, so Hamburg Airport is closed. And then, we knew we were in a crisis. So we waited, the 16<sup>th</sup>, then the 17<sup>th</sup>, and waiting for this cloud to pass so that we could start flying again. And this was really annoying, because you go out, and you look up at the sky, and it's the most beautiful sky you can imagine. Apparently, these particles are very, very high up, but they had the effect of clearing clouds, so it was just a glorious day, but we couldn't move. But on the 18<sup>th</sup>, we decided we couldn't wait any longer, so 18<sup>th</sup> around noon, we just hired a van and went. And there were horror stories, as you can imagine. The whole of Europe was shut down, trains were booked from weeks and months. I mean, even taxis were overbooked.

**And did anyone consider postponing the chess tournament because of this?**

Well, we asked for a postponement. We said, give us three days, that's reasonable, since we've arrived four days late, you can ... but the Bulgarians refused.

**Is that because they wanted just the Eastern Europeans to be there?**

Well, my opponent was Bulgarian, and his attitude was, Well, so you walk, I mean, what's the big deal. Not very sympathetic. But then we finally mentioned the rules. There is a clause called *force majeure*, something beyond your control, and we told them, Well, we're really going to insist. And we settled for a one-day postponement.

**How much time did that give you time to acclimate?**

Well, that it would give me about four days to get ready. So we actually got into our hotel on the 20<sup>th</sup> at 4:00 a.m. We left on the 18<sup>th</sup> at noon. And this was a fun ride because—

**And were you practicing on a computer during the bus ride, the van ride?**

We started out, I mean, we pretended we were serious, we put a chessboard and, and we tried to analyze. And then, we realized this was ridiculous. While you're going in a bus to do some serious work, nobody's able to concentrate. You aren't able to get any real work done, so we're just working so you don't feel guilty.

**LONG STORY SHORT WITH LESLIE WILCOX (GUEST: VISWANATHAN ANAND)**

**Did you feel like this was gonna hurt you, because you really couldn't prepare in the way you normally do?**

Well, it is what it is. I mean, by that point, it's better to just accept that we're going to get there on the 20<sup>th</sup>, and probably not by 20<sup>th</sup> evening, we're not going to be able to do any real work. But that's life, and at some point, you have to accept it. So anyway, we started out by watching Dr. House. And after we had enough of diseases, we put on Lord of the Rings. And then, we watched the full extended version. And finally, when we got to Sofia, I mean, people had started to report on it a lot, there was a lot on the news. But in the bus, we actually had a good time. It just felt like one of these school picnics. And the thing is, you're not really in control. I mean, I can worry about the match, but it's not going to improve my chances any. So we decided to stop worrying, and just make a trip out of it.

**And did the Bulgarian opponent smell victory because you'd been knocked off your normal routine?**

Well, I think he genuinely was not very sympathetic to my plight. He just thought, Well, you could have taken a line on the 16<sup>th</sup>. So, I don't know how much advantage he thought he was getting. I think his point was simply, I'm going to stand for the rules, and I don't want any bending. One day helped me a little bit. Though, when I lost the very first game, and by forgetting what I was supposed to play, then you start to think. But very quickly, the very next day I equalized, and then, well, the match took over. So I don't think it had any consequences by that strategy.

**And who won?**

I won.

**For Viswanathan Anand, is life truly like a game of chess? Does he anticipate the twists and turns that life takes, and predict the consequences of each move? And if he can plan two, or fifteen, or fifty moves ahead, what does he foresee for the life of his young son?**

**And in your non-chess life, how many moves ahead are you? Are you always calculating variables, and if this, then that, if that, then this, if that, then this?**

I think it does influence your thinking at some point. For instance, I have the strong feeling, and I think many chess players do, that doing something has consequences down the line. This is something you learn in chess. So we tend to think, Well, if I do this today, then you know, somebody else—not my opponent, I was about to say my opponent, but okay. Some other person might then react to that in this way, and then how would I react to that, and you tend to think along those lines. But, I would say that we are good at doing this in chess, because it's a very controlled game. There are rules, all the action is happening on the chessboard, and so on. In life, this sort of planning is more hit and miss.

**I'm thinking, you have a young son, and if you start to think about variables and factors, and what happens here, and what happens there, I mean, you would drive yourself crazy.**

Well, he's obviously keeping me very, very busy, so both of us have to watch him all the time. He's sixteen months now, so that's the particular age when they seem to have a sort of death wish. I mean, he goes around trying to eat everything, put anything into his mouth, and he has no sense of danger. But he's figured out now that if he jumps from a chair, it's going to be painful, so he tries to measure the height or the depth, and so on, before getting off. But in some other things, it's just insane the kind of risks he takes. So, you have to kind of watch him, and so on.

**And do you find yourself extrapolating into his future as you plan for your son?**

Not yet. I mean, I also feel that some things will just happen. I mean, I'm waiting to see what he's interested in. I mean, one of my plans is, maybe like in a year or two, to leave a chessboard and pieces near him and see how he reacts to that. So, you know, if he has some interest in chess, then I could take that further. But in general, I think I'll just try to expose him to lots of different stuff. I mean, chess is also pretty serendipitous. You start a game, it looks very logical and, you know, I do this, he does that, but very often, these sort of chains of logic are broken, and unexpected things happen. Actually, I think it's pretty similar in life.

**During his visit to Hawaii, Viswanathan Anand paid a visit to Washington Middle School in Makiki, where elementary, middle, and high school students were competing in the 2012 Summer Scholastic Chess Tournament. Where Vishy could walk the streets of Waikiki in relative anonymity, at Washington Middle School, he was a super celebrity.**

**You were at Washington Middle School yesterday in Honolulu, and those kids treated you like a rock star. And you've been treated like that many times before. What is that like?**

Well, it's very enjoyable. First of all, I like going to these events, because I remember playing in these school competitions myself. And I mean, the atmosphere is the same. You have these kids who are all worried about their game, and the results, and then you have their parents who are worrying there, but they can't play even. And it brought back memories of my own tournaments, at that stage. But it was nice. It was nice that they were very excited about it, and it's nice that there's a good chess scene happening here in Hawaii.

**Clearly, chess is not Olympic sport, possibly because it's not as visual as the others. But in your field, you are an Olympian. You must run into people who just go crazy about you, and then other people have no idea who you are.**



Yeah. I mean, you have people who know a lot about chess, you have people who might know that you're a chess player, but they don't know what that entails, and you know, people more removed from the game. Yeah. But that's life. One of the things I'm trying to do is to get it into more and more schools, because we've found that chess playing improves your academic skills as well. In moderation, obviously. But at school level, you know, students who play chess tend to do better in studies as well. So, I try to get it in a lot of schools. Inevitably, I think that way, you're growing the sport, because if you have a whole generation of people who learned chess in school, well, they're going to be able to follow the game at a much higher level and enjoy it. So hopefully, that way, we can keep the game going along.

**On this program, we often talk to people about turning points, when they've had to make big decisions. Maybe they didn't seem like a big decision at the time, but in retrospect, you say, Wow, if I'd chosen this way, I would never have done this. Did you have one of those turning points in your life?**

The biggest turning point for a chess player is the decision to actually play chess for a living. There'll always come a point where you think, Am I going to be able to make it as a chess player, and is it the lifestyle I want, or should I go for some other kind of job? I was lucky at those turning points because when I was in school, I had just become a Grand Master right after I left school. And that's a good sign, because when you're about to take decision like that, it helps to have some nice proof that you might actually do it. So not just make the decision, I think I could make it in chess, but you know, based on hope, whereas I could actually say, Well, I became a Grand Master, so I can't be that bad. So that was helpful. And then, by the time I finished my university, I had a degree in commerce. But when I finished, I had just played the candidates for the World Championship cycle, and I was in the top ten. So again, a nice confirmation when I knew that I'm going to stop studying now and just focus on chess. So those two milestones made it very easy for me at those turning points.

**And I mean, it seems like you've just had this long arc. Does it feel like a smooth ride to you?**

I would say basically, yes. I mean, there have been bad years, and things to overcome, and so on. But again, I didn't have moments when I actually had to question my chess. Not a moment when I suddenly thought, Oh, my god, have I taken the wrong decision? Nothing like that. And I always had the confidence—well, I mean, it looks bad, but I think with some work, I can solve it. So, in terms of a career, I would say it's fairly smooth. Yes.

**You obviously have such a passion for this game, beyond it being your livelihood. What if you hadn't found it? What if there were no chess; then what? What do you think your life would be like?**

I don't know. Well, my father and older brother were engineers, so I might have done something along those lines. But really, there's no telling. I mean, one of the things I've discovered that I enjoy is, I enjoy traveling a lot, but I wouldn't have known that if it hadn't been for the chess. So it's kind of circular. I like

astronomy, I like scientific fields; I could have easily gone into something like that. They're similar, in a way, to chess.

**Do you think you'd feel the same passion for it?**

That's unanswerable, in a way. But at some point, I also think, Well, when I stop playing as much chess as I'm doing now, then I'll have time for all my interests, and it'll be interesting to try lots of different things. But, I don't see some other field which will occupy the same space in my life that chess did.

**This conversation in 2012 took place in the Royal Suite at Halekulani in Waikiki, where world chess champion Viswanathan Anand was vacationing. He makes a very good living playing the game of chess. The way he plays is physical, as well as mental, and he's a repeat champion, which many athletes will tell you is the most difficult thing to accomplish. It turns out that the trash talk in chess is just as brutal as it is in any sport. Yet, Vishy Anand, competing on a global scale, remains highly focused and motivated to meet all comers. And he's still entranced with the game. Mahalo for joining us on this episode of Long Story Short on PBS Hawaii. I'm Leslie Wilcox. A hui hou kakou.**

For audio and written transcripts of this program, and all episodes of Long Story Short with Leslie Wilcox, visit [pbshawaii.org](http://pbshawaii.org).

Well, superstition, it's a thing that can grow on you, and if you don't get a grip on it, it can sort of swallow your whole day. I've noticed that there were tournaments where I felt that if I didn't get out of bed at eight fifty-three, get breakfast by nine, and have exactly these things at breakfast. I mean, if you get that superstitious, then your whole day, you're just trying to follow some plan. It starts to eat your whole day, and it can eat you alive.