

An Interview with the Red Bandit



Three-Time Connecticut Champion and RedBandit Chess Founder, NM Ian Harris.

Born in Maryland, Ian Harris began playing chess at eight years old. Ian played at many clubs over the years in Norwalk and won the Yazgoor/Musicant tournament in 2001. His name is etched on the library's trophy.

Ian attended Norwalk High School and represented Connecticut at the 2005 Denker Tournament of High School Champions as that year's Connecticut High School Champion.

Ian would go on to attend and graduate from the University of Maryland, Baltimore County. During his time at UMBC, he was President of the school's prominent chess club and a member of the chess team from 2005-2009. During those years,

UMBC won the President's Cup twice and twice was the competition's runner up at the Collegiate "Final Four". He graduated with a B.A. in Psychology.

In 2010, Ian became Manager of the Chess Club of Fairfield County. From then until his departure from CCFC in August 2020, he directed over 550 rated tournament events and many unrated events. He managed and led many aspects of CCFC operations, including chess education and promotion.

In 2013, Ian co-authored the second edition of *Mastering Chess*, by the late IM Danny Kopec. The same year, he won his first of three Connecticut State Championships, which he

followed up with back-to-back wins in 2015 and 2016.

In 2016, Ian married Melissa McFadden, a special education teacher in the Norwalk Public Schools district. They are now the proud parents of two boys, Theodore (4) and Finnegan (3).

In September 2021, Ian became a Senior Tournament Director, the third tier certification recognized by the US Chess Federation, enabling him to direct chess tournaments with up to 360 participants.

In April 2020, Ian co-founded Sixty Four Squares, LLC with Jason Sunshine, a fellow chess player and enthusiast.

In September 2020, in middle of the ongoing pandemic, Ian founded and began building RedBandit Chess, LLC, his own chess education and services company. While many Connecticut chess organizers and programs discontinued activities, the Red Bandit developed an online clientele and adjusted to available opportunities. The company now teaches students, both children and adults, across the country.

On December 4, 2021, the CSCA awarded Ian Harris the title of Coach of the Year for his success and devotion to coaching in and for the Connecticut chess community during difficult times.

Recently, Ian took a moment to field some questions for our readers.

CSCA: How old were you when you started playing chess?

Ian: I was about eight years old. My family taught me how to play. I was very fortunate that my third-grade teacher, Ken Wood, was an avid chess player. We would play each day during snack time. He beat me every game. It was not until a couple of years later, after having taken some private lessons and starting to play in tournaments that I was able to come back and defeat him for the first time.

CSCA: What were your first club and tournament?

Ian: In elementary and middle school I spent many hours playing at the bookstores and Norwalk Library program run by Robert Musicant and Chris Potts. Robert Musicant was my first official coach, who helped me progress from beginner to intermediate. This experience had a tremendous impact on my development and love for the game.

My very first tournament was a small scholastic event run by Musicant in 1997. I managed to win first place and to this day I still have the medal I earned.

CSCA: Have your children shown any interest in chess?

Ian: Yes, they like chess and even know some of the rules and how the pieces move. They get excited to see me play and sometimes play with me or on their ipads. I have not made a serious effort to teach them yet as I would prefer to play the role of father rather than coach. I also want it to be their decision to learn and play chess. So we will see what happens when they are a bit older.

CSCA: What are the origins of the “RedBandit” name?

Ian: RedBandit is a nickname that I have used ever since I was a kid. Even some chess players that I know in real life have

been known to call me the “Red Bandit.” The first part of the name stems from my red hair and the second from my chess playing style, which often finds me in a situation where I come up with a crafty way to outfox and/or swindle my opponents.

CSCA: When and why did you decide on a career in chess?

Ian: After I graduated college I dabbled in chess teaching while I considered where to go next. I was approached by Melvin Patrick, an acquaintance of mine from my high school days of playing chess at the various clubs in Norwalk, to work for him at the Chess Club of Fairfield County (CCFC) that he was planning to open. I was very fortunate to have this opportunity, not only to work doing something that I love, but to have Melvin as a mentor throughout.

I learned a lot about what it takes to run a business, how to make difficult decisions, and about myself. I discovered that I have a natural ability to teach and that I can use that to share my knowledge with many future generations, just as the people who taught me over the years have done.

CSCA: Why did you decided to strike out on your own?

Ian: There are many reasons that led to the decision. I am very proud of the 10 years I

spend working at CCFC and I look back very fondly on my time spent there, the people I met and worked with, as well as the events we ran. Ultimately, I felt that I was ready for a change.

CSCA: What is RedBandit Chess and what does it seek to do?

Ian: RedBandit Chess is the company that I founded to enable me to continue doing what I have been doing ever since graduating from college: spreading my love for chess to as many people as possible. Most of what I do now is remote (though more and more is now in-person), giving me the flexibility to work from anywhere. Last summer, I spent seven weeks in Vermont with my family without the business slowing down.

CSCA: What part of the Connecticut chess community does RedBandit seek to serve?

Ian: I am here to serve anyone that is interested in chess. My students range from children four years old just learning how to play, to adults and serious competitors looking to take their games to the next level. Surprisingly, my biggest source of students now are adults who have either started playing chess or had their interest rekindled due to the pandemic/Queen's Gambit.

CSCA: What kind of services does RedBandit provide?

Ian: When it comes to chess there really is no limit. Currently my focus is on chess instruction, both private 1-on-1 lessons, classes for kids or adults in online or in-person settings. In addition, I direct tournaments and have a few other chess-related side projects.

CSCA: How is RedBandit different from other in-person or online chess educators or organizers?

Ian: I have many years of experience as a coach and organizer, and I think many of my students appreciate my style. My approach to teaching is perhaps a bit different than other teachers out there as I recognize the importance of chess as a tool to teach Executive Functions. I make direct connections between chess practice and skills, and the life skills such as impulse and emotional control, flexible thinking, working memory and organization that are crucial areas of development.

I strongly believe that you do not need to be a genius at chess or reach a high rating to reap the benefits of learning the game.

CSCA: Will you continue your tournament directing services as part of RedBandit?

Ian: Yes, I enjoy playing in and directing events. I love the community that chess creates. Not being able to participate in tournaments, in one role or another, as much as I would like during the pandemic has been a major disappointment for me.

CSCA: When was the last time you competed?

Ian: The last over the board tournament I competed in was the 26th Bradley Open in Hartford, CT in July 2021. Prior to that, the last over the board event I participated in was the Top Dog Challenge at CCFC in March 2020.

Since starting my job at CCFC about 12 years ago I have played in about 400 tournaments! So, only doing one per year the last two years has been a major change for me. However, I am excited to play at this year's US Amateur Team tournament Parsippany, NJ. My team, representing CT, will be one of the highest average rated teams in attendance. I have participated in this event many times over my chess career, and it will feel good to be back. I have a special fondness for team events.

CSCA: Do you plan to compete for the Connecticut State Champion title once more?

Ian: Absolutely, though I don't know if I am ready to risk my perfect 3/3 just yet!

CSCA: What was your most memorable game as a scholastic player?

Ian: I cannot think of one memorable game in particular. There have been many good ones. Winning the CT State High School Championships was one of the most memorable experiences. It was an honor to get to represent the state at the Denker Tournament of High School Champions.

CSCA: How about at UMBC?

Ian: At UMBC, I have many fond memories of travelling with my classmates to tournaments all over the country. We participated in the Pan Am Collegiate Championships and US Amateur Team many times. One memorable game was when I defeated Grandmaster Timur Gareev, one of my teammates, in a blitz game using one of my favorite openings in the Ruy Lopez.

CSCA: And on the way to your three State Championships?

Ian: Each of my state championship wins had a bit of luck that helped me get there. I do not feel that any of the games were particularly notable. In 2013, I was second seed behind IM Bogdan

Vioreanu and I did not feel I had a good chance to beat him for the title. Fortunately for me, he faltered earlier in the tournament and we never met over the board.

My 2015 championship was the toughest competition I faced in all three events. I played a master every round and each game was extremely hard fought. The most memorable game was my last round victory against future GM Hans Neimann, a critical win.

I also faced tough competition in 2016, but the games seemed to go very smoothly. By luck I was again not paired with the top seed. The crucial final round game was rapidly heading toward a draw and a tie for the title when my opponent blundered a piece very simply in one move to end the game in a very anti-climactic way.

CSCA: What was your most memorable tournament as organizer or director?

Ian: There were so many that I helped organize that it is very difficult to pick a most memorable one. At CCFC we would often host Grandmasters for our larger prize fund events. It is always fun to see them in action!

CSCA: Have you organized or participated in online tournaments? How do these

differ from the in-person experience?

Ian: They do not compare. I find over the board chess to be far more enjoyable.

CSCA: What can you tell us about *Sixty Four Squares*?

Ian: Sixty Four Squares is a business I helped to co-found with the goal of helping people improve at chess. The idea is to help people identify their specific areas of weaknesses and maximize their training efficiency by focusing on those areas that need the most work. We started with a pilot that is still available on the company website. For me, one of the best parts of the project has been the opportunity to partner with interesting and smart people all over the world with similar interests. The team of people contributing to the project range from California, Colorado, North Carolina, Connecticut, to Germany, England, and as far away as Australia. Each brings a unique skill set and point of view to the project. We are looking forward to launching our app with many exciting and unique features soon!

CSCA: What do you think of the pandemic's "online chess rush"?

Ian: It has been a boon for chess. I just hope that the chess boom will last and eventually

translate to more people playing in over the board tournaments, as well as many new and exciting events.

CSCA: What should the Connecticut chess community expect from RedBandit in the foreseeable future?

Ian: I have some ideas for unique events in the future that will help elevate the game. We will have to wait and see!

CSCA: What role would you like RedBandit to play in the chess community?

Ian: I hope to continue to be a resource in whatever role I am needed for anyone that shares my passion for the game.

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Ian also annotated three selections from his competition collection to share with our readers:

[*Harris v. Lu*](#), 2021 US Amateur Team East on ICC

[*Harris v. Allen*](#), 2018 CCFC Fall Team Championship

[*Harris v. Niemann*](#), 2015 Connecticut State Championship

RedBandit is accepting registrations for a March 12-13, 2022 retreat. For more information, please follow the link from the CSCA [events calendar](#).