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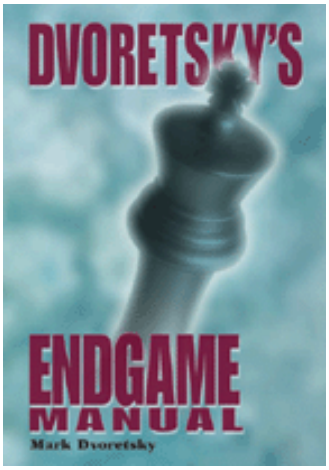

A Conversation with Hikaru Nakamura and his Stepfather, Sunil Weeramantry

by Howard Goldowsky

Hikaru Nakamura

In April 1998, Hikaru Nakamura, at the age of ten years and four months, just three short years after taking up organized chess, became the youngest national master in the history of the United States. At that time, it was possible to rationalize this incredible feat, because Nakamura's stepfather is Sunil Weeramantry, one of the best scholastic chess coaches in the country. An accomplishment like this by one of Weeramantry's children seemed reasonable, even almost expected.

Six and a half years later the truth is beginning to present itself differently. Now nearly seventeen years old, Nakamura is the number three ranked player in the United States, and among juniors born after December 1987, the number one ranked player in the world. In the time since he has surpassed his stepfather's ability, he has studied chess Fischer-like, mainly on his own, and his recent success can now only be attributed to magnificent individual talent. Nakamura's accomplishments have occurred despite his stepfather's coaching ability, not because of it, and Weeramantry could not be more proud.

In July, Nakamura made it through to the sweet-sixteen of the FIDE World Championships, and in one week he will be one of the favorites at the 2005 US Championships in San Diego. It is difficult to say how far this young man will progress during the next few years, during the critical development period of his late teens, but a few things are certain: Nakamura has the overwhelming support of his parents, and a competitive drive second to none. He is prepared to enter the middlegame of his chess career poised to become the homegrown world-class player the U.S. has been waiting for.

Recently, I spent some time with Nakamura and Weeramantry at their home in White Plains, NY, where we discussed Nakamura's upbringing, his approach to chess psychology, and other general topics relating to his young career. What follows is an edited version of that conversation.

Howard Goldowsky: Did your parents expose you to a lot of different activities and you picked chess, or did you always know you wanted to be a chessplayer right from the beginning?

Hikaru Nakamura: I did some other things before chess. Of course, both my stepfather and my brother, they both played. So when I was seven, maybe younger, we went to the '94 US Open in Concord, CA. This was the first tournament I was around. When I was there, I went to the Skittles room and I played. That's basically how I picked it up.

Sunil Weeramantry: He'd hang around the Skittles room, and people would come in and play. You know, he really wasn't playing seriously at all. His first tournament was in February '95, after that. He played in the '95 National Elementary in Little Rock, AK. Hikaru had a pretty low initial rating, somewhere in the 700's. [According to the USCF MSA site, Nakamura's first published rating came in at 788, on the April 1995 list.] They needed a fourth player for his school team, and they couldn't find a fourth player. Hikaru offered to play (in the Championship section). That's how it got started. I think he managed two out of seven or something like that.

HG: What's your relationship like with your brother, from a chessplayers perspective?

HN: Before I was a "real" chessplayer, he was the best chessplayer for his age and younger. When I started out he was better, and once I got to the age of around eight or nine, I started playing seriously. Then, of course, when I was ten I broke the record for the youngest master. That's been well documented. Nowadays, he doesn't really play chess that much. He's off at college right now. [He's studying at the University of Pennsylvania, Wharton School of Business.] If he wants my help with chess I'll help him, but usually he doesn't.

HG: During those years between the ages of seven and ten, when you developed to the strength of your stepfather, was there any sort of specific guidance from him? Was it more life skills or was it specific things, like getting help on rook and pawn endgames?

HN: It was more general advice. Mostly on openings. When I went from 1800 to 2200 or so, he was helping me. I actually wasn't doing stuff on my own back then. Once I broke 2300, from there to where I am right now, I've basically studied on my own.

SW: Hikaru, you can correct me if I'm wrong – I think one of the things I tried to do was to let him play whatever it was he wanted to play. Now, if you look at Hikaru's games, he's a pretty versatile player in terms of what he can play, either as white or as black. And I've tried to encourage him to explore on his own, and to play what he wants to play when he feels like playing it. I mean, I used to say, "Don't worry if you play a bad game and you look stupid." You know, this is the only way you can really progress. It's bad if you get set into a particular mode or format early on, and you don't want to break out of it.

HG: You have progressed very quickly. How much of an importance do you put on rating, and if you don't put a lot of importance on rating, how do you generate a metric to determine your progress?

HN: That's very difficult. If you don't look at the rating at all, it's hard to set goals. Otherwise, you're just playing a game and there's really no purpose. So there is definitely some emphasis on the rating. But usually, I just try to play better, keep improving. If your rating goes up, great. If it stays the same, that's just what happens. Basically, it just comes down to trying out your stuff, playing everything, and just trying to improve.

HG: So I take it that you don't have a big fixation on your rating?

HN: No, not really.

SW: [laughing] And I suppose when you don't fixate on it you tend to do well. I was just joking with Hikaru before you came, and it looks like the MSA site right now has him at 2698 (USCF), and there are a number of tournaments that he has won lately that have not been rated. [Most notably, Nakamura won the Reno Western States Open in late October, where he defeated Wojtkiewicz, Kudrin, and Yermolinsky, in succession.] So he's easily over 2730. He seems to have very quietly done that. He has certainly won his share of tournaments – very quietly.

HG: As your Dad says, you've snuck up on a lot of people on the rating list. Do you feel any pressure at all, getting so good, so fast? Do you feel people are out to get you now, now that you're on the radar screen?

HN: Not really. I haven't felt pressure. Why should I feel pressure? You know, I'm not the top player, so…I've slowly climbed up. I haven't won any big tournaments.

HG: Do you feel any rivalry with other top juniors throughout the world, like Radjabov?

HN: Most of them I haven't played, actually. So no, not really…

SW: Radjabov is what, nine months older, right? Right now on the rating list, if you look at Hikaru's age, it is pretty clear that he is number one at his age and below.

HG: The FIDE World Championship was somewhat of a breakout for you. Did you prepare in any special way before going there?

HN: I did prepare, of course. I think I knew about a month before who I was going to play in the first round. So I studied quite a bit for my first round opponent, who was Volkov.

HG: And how did it feel to be the underdog in four straight matches?

HN: Well, probably in the third match I wasn't. The first two and obviously the last one, I was the underdog. But basically you just have to try and win. This format of the FIDE World Championship definitely favors the underdog because it gives you a better chance in the shorter match. It's funny, because the first round match was probably my most difficult match, which was pretty interesting. I lost the forth match, but if you look at the other two matches, they were two games each, and pretty easy. Before the tournament, I was hoping to make it to the third round. That was my original goal.

SW: [laughs] I had to keep changing the airline reservations!

HG: Are you preparing in any special way for the US Championships? I'm sure these opponents are much more familiar to you.

HN: Yea. More or less I'm studying my openings, just trying to prepare my openings, middlegames, endgames, as opposed to specific opponents. I'll probably end up playing them, but right now I'm just focusing on openings.

HG: What does your schedule look like after the US Championships?

HN: Right now it's pretty open. [Sunil reminded Hikaru that a few days after the US Championship he'll be going down to Mexico.] Oh, yea, that's right. I'll be playing a match with Karjakin in Mexico. The details haven't been quite worked out, but it's going to happen.

HG: How do you feel about not being selected for the US Olympiad team?

HN: The formula [they use for selection] is just not good. I believe there is an article on the ChessDrum site [http://www.thechessdrum.net] about this. The formula is not good because it basically prohibits juniors from making the Olympiad team once they reach the highest level they've ever been. Take me for example. I was 2500 or 2550 (USCF) a year ago when they took the rating, but now of course, I'm right around 2700 (USCF). So what they should probably do is take ratings right around the same time when the Olympiad is. For example, take the June list or something like that. They should take that, and not take the peak ratings, because if you take peak ratings someone could have had a rating of 2650 and now they have a rating of, oh, 2580, or something like that. Basically it only helps the older players. It's just a way of stopping the juniors from playing.

SW: Yea, it definitely favors the established player. It's very difficult to break in to that inner circle. Hikaru came awfully close. The other thing, looking at it from a parent's point of view, is it seemed a little unfair. In the months of January and February, Hikaru played a lot over-seas, so he wasn't able to play in the states. He played in Pamplona, he played Corus, he was over in Europe. The cut for the April supplement is usually February 28th. He wasn't here in February. They caught him without any USCF rated games in that period, so they caught him at a real low. You know, his peak rating was something like 2650, and yet if the games he had played in Europe at that time had been rated, (and he was quite successful at Corus), his [USCF] rating would have been 20, 30 points higher. So it was almost as though he was penalized for being out of the country and playing out of the country in stronger tournaments. He didn't get any credit

for it. Of course, a formula is a formula.

HN: They should probably just take current ratings instead of taking peak ratings. And also, it seems there really should be a rule where you have to play a certain amount of games.

HG: According to the USCF MSA site, Boris Gulko hasn't played a single regular rated USCF game since July 2003. A rating is only accurate if you have a large sample set to go by. That's just the nature of probability theory.

HN: [nodding] Yes.

HG: On to some different topics. What has been your most enjoyable experience as a chessplayer?

HN: My most enjoyable experiences have not been after I've won a tournament. They are usually the ones when I'm socializing with people, when it's just fun. I'll characterize it as that.

HG: What drives you to play chess? Why do you enjoy the game?

HN: Well, I'm very gifted, as my rating shows, and of course [I have the GM] title. [What drives me] is just trying to get better. I think that's the way it is with anything. You just try and get better. Like in baseball: A pitcher can win ten or fifteen games his first year, and then the purpose is to win twenty games the next year. It's just trying to get better. It's that way with all sports.

SW: One of the things that I'd like to mention is that when you break the 2600 (FIDE) level, I think that's a significant achievement. Most people consider 2600 to be the rating of a distinguished GM. I still have a tendency to look at a list of GMs and say, "Wow, look at him, he's 2580, he's 2590, and then there is my son." [laughs] It's surreal, because I have known many of these high rated players, and it is hard to believe that Hikaru has passed them…I have known Hikaru since he was five. It really was before [he started playing] chess.

HG: Is there something about chess that has made the game natural for you?

HN: Of course my talent has helped me, otherwise I don't know if I would find chess quite as enjoyable. Probably not. This is a difficult question.

SW: Strong players throughout history have had different reasons for playing. They've had different reasons that have turned them on about the game. Hikaru is still very young, so it is hard to say. But I think from my perspective what was interesting was that everything just seemed to click all of a sudden at a certain point. I was not convinced that chess was necessarily something that he would pursue or that he liked, and then one day, I don't know, he seemed to see the board differently. And then it was just straight up from there. There was no looking back…Once you're a chessplayer, and you enjoy it and you like it, it

does have that pull. I don't have any illusions of getting up to Hikaru's strength, but I think most chessplayers feel that they can get better. I know that a really good game can sustain you emotionally for a really long time.

HG: Please tell me a little about your style. Would you play a risky move that you know your opponent will find difficult even though it might not objectively be the best move on the board?

HN: At the level I'm at, usually when you go in, you already know what you're going to get in the openings. You're pretty certain what you're going to play. But during the game, it usually depends on several factors. Usually it depends on what the time [situation] is like in the game, what the overall picture is, how you're doing in the tournament. If it's late in the tournament and you have to win a game then it's much more likely that I'll play something like this risky move, as opposed to just playing the normal move, which is just equal. It really just depends on the situation.

SW: In general it would be fair to say that Hikaru is a fighter at the board. He works hard to try to convert. You know, he'll play even positions, sometimes even slightly worse positions. He drew the last round of the World Open and if he won he would have tied for first. It was a very tough game, and he was nearly a little worse, objectively, at one point. When the opponent offered a draw, when Hikaru was worse in the position, Hikaru refused. The game was on the ICC, and spectators were going nuts.

HG: In general, do you think that being a nice guy, having too much empathy, is a handicap for being a good chessplayer?

HN: That's a difficult question. If you look at Anand, he's the nicest guy around as far as grandmasters go. You probably won't find someone nicer. But it has hurt him. It *seems* that the nice guy is never really the top player. [laughs] You look at any sport, and it always *seems* to be that way. It probably is a handicap because if you have all this empathy towards people you probably aren't as aggressive in the way you play.

HG: When you sit down at the board, do you change your personality to allow that aggression to come out if it needs to?

HN: Sometimes. Not always.

HG: What affects you more: The positive feeling of a good win, or the negative feeling of a bad loss?

HN: Depends. Wins feel really good but usually from losses you learn more. With wins, basically you just outplayed the other person, or they made the blunders, and you didn't make the blunders. You definitely learn more from losses, that's clear.

SW: I think you have to be willing to learn from a loss, right? A lot of people, they don't even want to look at a loss. I think that's the truth. I agree with you,

Hikaru, that you can learn a lot from a loss, as long as you're willing to look at it.

HG [For Sunil]: Do you still help Hikaru at all, in terms of general advice?

SW: Only if he asks me, and it depends. Every once in a while, you know, he'll ask me to do something specific for him, or he might ask my opinion on something. Just watching his progress, one of the areas he has really grown a lot in is he's making really good decisions about [his approach to the game and what openings] he should play against whom. And I don't feel as though I need to change that. He's really not made any decisions that I've disapproved.

HG: Your stepdad talked about how it was OK to look stupid when you were young. But how do you cope with setbacks today? For instance, at the Isle of Man tournament you were tied for first place going into the second to last round and then you lost your last two games. How did you deal with that?

HN: It's worth mentioning that I probably was not losing my last two games. I was winning my last round game but unfortunately I blundered. To answer your question, it's probably the fact of just playing whatever, basically learning to be fearless. You know, trying your best.

HG: Do you have any favorite chess books that you've read over the years?

HN: I think when I was younger, around 2000 (USCF), I looked at *Fischer's 60 Memorable Games*. I've looked at some other ones, but not many. I think I read a Tarrasch book once, but I can't remember. Lately, I really have not looked at chess books at all. Now I just use my computer.

HG: The fact that you can't remember any chess books you've read is very telling!

HN: [laughs] Yes, it is!

HG: You're a player who prefers to work alone. Do you find working by yourself to be the most enjoyable way to study?

HN: The main problem is that at the level I'm at, almost all of the top players [in the US] are foreign born. That makes it very difficult, because if you want to study with them, there is a possibility that they'll go on and show everything to their friends. There aren't really any "American" grandmasters that are really higher rated than me right now. That's actually why I still work alone. It's very hard to trust anybody.

SW: I think in time Hikaru will find who he wants to work with. You know, you just have to establish some kind of connection with somebody. It doesn't necessarily have to be the strongest player out there, but it is somebody that you can get along with, to go to tournaments with…I think the chemistry is really important. The fact of the matter is if you do somehow get up to the level where you're playing for the World Championship or something like that, obviously

you need a team. The composition of that team is something Hikaru will be able to decide in time.

HG: You don't think having any help at this point would get you to a higher level more quickly?

HN: I don't know. I just keep improving right now, so I don't see a real reason to do that.

SW: If it's not broke, why fix it. I've periodically asked Hikaru, and basically his answer is that he's improving. When he gets stuck or something then maybe he'll look for a little help.

HG: You're well known for your blitz prowess. Do you use blitz as a training tool?

HN: I treat it mostly as a completely different type of game. It's not the same as normal chess.

HG: Do you practice openings online?

HN: Not really. Usually I just play online for fun. Wherever I play of course, I'm very popular, therefore everyone sees my games, so it's not really wise to go play certain things and just give them away. It does keep me sharp, though. I use blitz [online] for two reasons: To [practice] moving faster, and to keep sharp.

HG: How do you balance computer training with non-computer training?

HN: For the studying I do, I actually use a computer. That's all I use. Occasionally I'll find a book here or there which is useful, but nowadays of course technology has advanced so much that everyone uses computers. You have to use a computer to keep up.

I admire these former champions because back when they played they didn't have computers. They had to play and study with a chessboard, write everything down. Now you just go work at your computer for an hour and just save it. This is so much more than you could do if you didn't have computers.

HG: In your interview at the FIDE Championships you said that you used to practice three to four hours a day, and that now you only practice two hours a day.

HN: That's being pretty nice. I usually don't even study that much these days.

HG: What takes up your time now instead of chess?

HN: You know, there are other things I'm interested in. I'm home schooled, but I still have to do a fair amount of work. I also play tennis and spend time studying the financial markets and how they work.

HG: What subjects interest to you at this point?

HN: Right now, probably math and history.

HG: Will you continue to play chess professionally, or do you want to focus more on your studies, like Kamsky did, and come back to chess later?

HN: I don't know. It just really depends on the next year or so. I'll try to keep improving and unless I get above the 2650 to 2700 (FIDE) range, I probably will focus more on studies as opposed to chess. But add a year, and we'll see what happens.

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