



Interview with Mark Funkhouser By Tim Steiner

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Mark Funkhouser was recently elected Mayor of Kansas City, Missouri, after 18 years of service as City Auditor. Mark is an avid chess player and a big advocate of chess and its benefits. Mark regularly attends a local chess club in Kansas City, the Westport Chess Club (www.westportchessclub.org). The interviewer is a local Expert and runs a chess instruction company (www.midwestchess.com). This article is courtesy of the Kansas City Scholastic Chess Organization (www.kcchess.org).

I interviewed Mark on April 24th. It was a slow night and I didn't know Mark very well so I challenged him to a game in order to have some time to get to know him. I'd seen Mark many times down at the club but I had never played him before. I was able to get an advantage early, but Mark kept fighting and before long he was in an equal position. Soon after, Mark was able to whip up a vicious attack against me. I was obviously asleep at the wheel. I thought Mark's rating was around 1200, so I tried to match his rating. About half way through I felt strange. This guy was no 1200. This guy played like a 1500. Lo and behold, during the interview I found out that Mark had actually been to the 1500 level, so I had a private chuckle.

Mark had approached me once after one of my young female students pulled off a difficult but very pretty combination to force a draw with him. Mark immediately wanted to know how this happened and my student chimed back that she had an instructor. "Oh really", I could hear Mark saying as if he was surprised. And that's when I met Mark. Funkhouser was very gracious to my student (900 USCF) and he was complimentary towards me and my efforts.

I had spoken with Mark on a few occasions about six months earlier. I noticed that most of the members seemed excited about the opportunity to speak with Mark. Most of the members would say they saw him on TV today or that they read his comments in the paper about a particular issue. He was the closest thing our club had to a celebrity (besides our resident International Master Michael Brooks). The bottom line is that Mark is fairly gregarious with folks and quite the charismatic person.

A few weeks later, a few of the members were engaged in a discussion with Mark about some of the things that go wrong in the city government and how to address them. I found it incredibly refreshing to meet a public servant who didn't provide canned response and who was open to discussing politics with the any common citizen. How many of you have found it this easy to approach your city officials, your state's Congress and House members, or your state's Governor? This is truly something to be admired. A few months later, someone from the club told me that Mark was going to run for Mayor. I was shocked. I thought I had Funkhouser figured out. I knew he was a public servant, but I didn't know he wanted to be a public figure. I thought for sure that Mark had his fill after years of city officials chiding him for doing his job well. I learned something new about him. So I took the opportunity to find out a little more about the man they call Funk.



When did you first learn the game of chess? Oh, I can't remember, I must have been 17-18 years old. My brothers taught me.

What led you to the Westport Chess Club? I had a long hiatus where I didn't play chess. I taught my kids to play. They wanted to go to a chess club when they were 6-9 years old so we attended a chess club over on Lee Boulevard over in Overland Park and somebody there told me about this chess club when it was stationed over at Pyramid Pizza then I started coming.

How long have you attended? Maybe 6-8 years.

What do you like most about the club? A good group of folks, beer, cheeseburgers, 2 for 1. I like it because it has all different ages and all different qualities of play.

I see you have a rating of about a 1200. Do you want to become a better player? Oh, I used to be a much better player, I think I was rated 1525 or something like that at one time, cause I don't have the time or the energy to be any good.

What rating would satisfy you? 1200, I don't care. I don't care what my rating is.

During 2005, I see that your rating jumped up a few hundred points. How did that happen? You know we went to Des Moines, to a big tournament and I played extremely well and I have no idea why. The thing about it... I'm 57 years old, and I was decent like 30 years ago, so like every once in a while a little synapse falls together and I remember how to play, (chuckling).

Do you ever take time to study? Way back when, when I was in my 20's...I played tournament chess back then

Looks like you play mostly in events down at your club. Have you wanted to be a more active player or play in other local tournaments? I'd like to play in more local tournaments, I'd like to do it a couple of times a year if I could, but it's really hard to get an entire weekend like away, and I can't sustain it overall

Your children play chess at the club. Have you tried to instill the value of chess in their lives? Oh yeah. No, I want them to play chess. I think chess is like...I'm a believer. I think it's a great game for kids...the mental discipline...analysis...I want my kids to play... both my kids play and I encourage them to play. You know, it beats the hell out of video games.

Looks like you play in mostly quick time controls. Do you prefer the slow or the fast time controls? Oh I prefer the slower.

Why? You know, it's what they play here. But in my mind, the idea of a 10 minute game is really, really fast for me.

You had your run-off election night watch party at the Westport Flea Market, where the Westport Chess Club meets. Why? Well Tuesdays are election days. Well, yeah, I chose to be here, yeah.

Were you trying to make a kind of statement? We liked it, it was a comfortable place, so we were gonna do it here. (Mark then goes on to tell me an interesting story) The chess guys might be interested. So that night Mike Sanders who is the county executive showed up because he like on my side in the election and so I'm in here and Mike's in here and he was playing (John) Quimby (1800 USCF), and he (Mike) beat him (Quimby) twice and I think Mike's a pretty good player, and my guess is he's rated around a 1700-1800 player...so it's kind of interesting...so I'm getting his attention for being a chess player elected official when I'm a schlepper... when I think Sanders is trying to get me to play him and I'm pretty sure he's A LOT better player than I am so I didn't play him, you know

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You have many choices when it comes to your free time and hobbies. Why did you choose chess? Or did chess choose you? I have played it since I was 17 or 18...you can play it forever, you know, there's no equipment to speak of...all you need is a chessboard. It's the only hobby I have. It's the only fun thing that I do.

In your interview by the Kansas City Star dated March 25, 2007, the journalist stated chess is an individual game. Would you be surprised to learn that I tell my students that chess is a team game? Thoughts? Oh, I wouldn't be surprised by that at all. You know I don't make as much out of the individual thing though, they were chasing me politically on this.

The article also went on to say that you don't (or didn't) put much planning and strategy into your life, yet you've been successful. Most strong chess players would argue that a majority of chess is raw calculation and sound orthodox play. Then there's the group that says that chess should be played with more intuition or instinct. It sounds like you subscribe to the latter. Which is more important: calculation or instinct as it applies to life? I think instincts count for a lot, but what I think...I would actually talk about chess you know metaphorically, I think that chess from my approach I can't do deep analysis... I'm not that disciplined, but certain moves are sort of sound positional moves and developmental moves and that's how I've run my life. You know I did not grow up planning to be an auditor for example but getting more education was a sound positional move. You know I've got 4 college degrees...you know it was always developmental... you know more options... it was the most logical move, but not with some clear strategy... you know what, when I'm 57 I'm gonna be Mayor of Kansas City...that was not the plan.

Did you view your entire campaign as one big, long chess game? Could you draw some parallels for me? Oh yeah, through my own thinking there are lots of parallels. For example the way I played the campaign was positionally...we adapted...quickly...then we realized... we learned quickly...and I said initially...and people were telling me that I was going to need hundreds of thousands of dollars and I thought I would be really conservative and careful so I said I'm gonna raise \$150,000 for the primary and within a couple of days I realized that was absurd...I couldn't remotely raise that kind of money...and so I made adjustments. Now other people hired a campaign manager...I did not hire a campaign manager. At the end of the first financial filing, I was dead last in money. So the newspapers and the pundits...they all told me... "well, you're gonna quit, right?" Well no (laughing) I'm not. So we had to adapt and we did stuff with the web and simply because it was free (laughing). The other thing about chess...I've got a brother who...they are all better than I am...I've got one brother that's like 2150...he's been the West Virginia chess champion now like 8-9 times...but one of my brothers has this saying...you know... "don't put your pieces in the center until they'll stay there"...So when I declared for Mayor everybody thought it was some kind of ploy. If I didn't think I could win, I wouldn't have put my pieces....I wouldn't of quit my job and done all this if I hadn't counted or calculated that I could win.

Most people say that math and chess have strong ties. You have a math background. Do you think that math has helped your chess game? Do you think that chess has improved your auditing abilities? You know I think logical analysis which is sometimes math, you know I hope they help my chess game...but I believe in different facts and data...you gotta look at the position on the board. Sure in the sense that it's about logic and analysis...absolutely.

You've been accused in the media of being too outspoken and that the degree of your honesty is a handicap for you, that your aggressiveness in purporting the truth should land you in political ruination. Would it surprise you to learn that ex-World Champ Garry Kasparov has on numerous occasions cited that skilled risk taking and bravery over the chess board are essential to top level chess? That you must risk losing in order to win? Many players essentially boil down chess as the ultimate search for truth. Do these parallels ring true with you? Comments? I've found that in my own play, for years, particularly when I was playing better, the more aggressively I played the better my results. The more carefully I played... the more conservatively I played the more likely I am to lose. Whenever I would win an exceptional game, like in Des Moines...I actually beat several players rated



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several hundred points higher than me, it came from absolute naked aggression. I guess one the reasons my rating isn't very good any more is because I blunder...if I don't make really stupid mistakes and I'm just absolutely aggressive... and you catch them on their heels early...and I know when I'm playing a really good player, that if I let him off the ropes for a second...he'll beat me... you know because he's better...but if I catch him off-guard and I basically slit his throat I guess (laughing)...so I would find...I actually kept track in the notation...if I won a game, I won it within 24 moves...if the game went 30,40 ..50 moves... certainly way into it...I'm gonna lose...particularly late endgame; I could never really handle a real endgame... when I was in one.

Does it surprise you to learn that Kasparov is using his influence and celebrity status as a tool to help the common people of Russia, not to mention risking his own life? Well I've noticed he's very politically active. No I was not surprised about Kasparov...I've read that.

Is this noble or is this stupid? I don't know that it's noble, but it's not stupid...

Somewhere in between? Yeah...it's not stupid.

Over the past 6 years I have been very active in the chess community especially with scholastics. To all those parents and children who are considering taking a dive into chess as a worthwhile activity, what would you say to them? How would chess enhance their lives? Aside from the pure entertainment and fun...the camaraderie of hanging out with folks... there are lots of interesting smart people playing chess...but for children, it's everything that you want...there are lots of studies that show that children who play chess are better students...they pay attention better...it's a very good game for kids...you know a lot better than almost anything I can think of.

Over this same time period I have tried to promote chess at the scholastic level. The game suffers from major PR problems. Chess is perceived by youth as geeky or nerdy and the public school systems do not recognize the educational benefits of chess. You were the candidate that nobody gave a ghost of chance for winning the election. You had some of the least campaigning funds and most of the other primary candidates endorsed your opponent. How did you win against all that perceived negativism and overcome the PR issues? I think we ran a really good campaign...we were really creative...but like I said....I thought I would win...and the fact that the other people...you know its completely irrelevant to me what other people think...people don't take a vote of whether $2+2=4$. If 14 morons in a row all think it's 5...it's still 4...it is what it is....I looked at the data...I've been surveying citizens for at least 13 years... and I've heard these stupid political pundits on television talk about how unscientific those surveys were. Well I'm a fairly bright guy and I have good, competent people working for me...real smart people and we put every thought and energy into making those surveys as scientifically rigorous and sound... I knew we were right... I knew that tens of thousands citizens thought... I knew what they thought...from the surveys.

Was that one of the biggest advantages you had? OH SURE. I was looking at facts...they were looking at hype and baloney...

You seem to be able to shape public policy and opinion...how would you go about correcting the promotion of chess to children? There are really good teachers and advocates for chess.... I think through the park systems...school systems...I can encourage.... You know I've already been encouraged to encourage...I've had people from the African-American community for example you should do this, you know...and it's low cost...I think it will not be difficult to do that ...I think the image of chess isn't as bad as people think it is. I think there's a lot to be said for disciplined focused thought and well-behaved children...I think that works.



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Scholastic chess has grown over the years but there are still major areas where it hasn't taken hold yet, for example, Kansas City. I know some of the reasons why it hasn't but do you think there could be some type of state or city level form of involvement to help scholastic chess flourish? Do you see some sort of initiative being launched for your city as has been launched in other major cities across the US? Oh yeah, I think we could do it here... and you know one of the equalizing things about chess right now...I mentioned to my brother that plays well....we both went to a tiny college in Pennsylvania called Thiel College and when we were there Thiel won the Pan-Am games...you know beating schools... Stanford...Harvard...we had a really gifted teacher...a Russian emigrant named Ivan Romanenko...and we could win...and there's no reason why we couldn't compete with the best players in the country.

Were you aware that a large national scholastic event was held in Kansas City last weekend? I only found out about it as it was happening, and I don't understand why it wasn't promoted more.

Did you know it set an attendance record? NO.

Did you know that almost a quarter of all the participants were from either Kansas or Missouri? NO. NO. I don't know why that wasn't widely known...why the visitors and convention centers hadn't made that known.

Did you know that the K-5 Missouri State Champions for 2007 are in your back yard from the Pembroke Hill School? No, I did not.

Did you know 15 players from that squad will be traveling to Nashville next month to represent their school in the Elementary Nationals? No

Do you see these kids as representatives of the city? Sure.

What if a group of them came back with a team trophy for a high placing? Then the Mayor might welcome them home somehow.

Not a lot of people knew about the National HS event here last weekend. The local media outlets didn't seem to cover it at all. No write-ups, no pictures except one in the Local section. Webkins was apparently more newsworthy of exposure on the front page. Given your experience with the media, do you sense the media reflects the beat of the city or do you feel it's mostly driven by special interest groups or political factions? Well its not special interest groups or political factions, it's the focus group of the day. We could fix that. We could get chess in there.

Do you think it's a shame the media didn't do a better job of reporting on this intellectual activity? Oh my God yes, YES. Here's a parallel story. ... I also happen to like bagpipe music...there has been an event called Winter Storm which is one of the biggest bagpipe events in the world...world champions are competing...and its right here in KC, MO... every year....and it got no press at all.... But next year, the Mayor's going to welcome them to town...and by God we are gonna get some press.

Do you think that large institutions like public school systems and media outlets place too much emphasis on athletics and social endeavors rather than promoting intellectual pursuits like National Merit Finalists, or spelling bee champs or geography bee or even chess? Yes, OF COURSE.

Why is this? Because there's money I guess in football and basketball...I've never understood why really good chess players aren't as well known as a really good football player... and I've played... I was a jock... I played all kinds of sports.

Which is your favorite chess piece? Well the queen (laughing).

Why? I like power.



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If you could be a chess piece, which one would you be and why? I like the knights a lot

Who is your favorite player, local, national or international? No I don't follow anybody

What is the highest ranked player you ever beat? I don't know...it might have been at the Des Moines tournament... probably an 1800.

I once read a study that said tall people do well in all walks of life, especially with public elections and job interviews (for the record Mark is 6'8"). There are psychological reasons for this of course. The article said that the height issue was related to trust; that people instinctively had confidence and trust in taller than normal individuals. Is there any truth to this? Do you think your height helped you win the election? It has been as a young person up until a teenager, it was a real disadvantage to be tall...socially it was really bad...but from 20-something on it's been a real advantage...and of course in the election...aside from the psychological reasons...you want to stand out from the crowd it helps if you're a foot and a half taller.

Do you think your height intimidates other people when you play those chess? NO. The average 9 year old that beats me is not intimidated by my height.

Can you dunk a basketball on a regulation goal? Thirty years ago I could. I can't even touch a regulation goal right now. But there was a time (smiling)

You've been fairly vocal with the media about your passion for chess. Do you think they take you seriously or are they just patronizing you when they ask chess related questions? Oh I think they take it seriously...I think they are fascinated by it...you know I'm supposed to be a dumb geek...to them...it's an interesting conundrum.

Do others look down on you for your involvement with chess? Do you take ridicule? Oh I don't think so.

Most people would feel too self-conscious or perhaps embarrassed if people found out. How do you feel about this issue? I've never thought that it was something socially unacceptable.

Most scholastic players growing up take a lot of heat for being chess players because it's not perceived as being cool. What would you recommend to these kids? I don't know... being good at something is... well good...well don't talk to those people...talk to other people...they are obviously...well... jealous

Besides being a man of great character, much like Abe Lincoln, do you perhaps see yourself as a role model for chess give that you have now increased your public visibility? I hope that good players are role models for chess (laughing)...I believe in the benefits of chess...and if I can use my position to push that ahead, I'm going to.

Should we leave this to the professionals? I think you could do both...you know if you have a really good chess player come to town...that's really good promotion...I think I could do it too.

We once had Priest Holmes (famous running back for the KC Chiefs) espouse his love for the game, but nothing ever serious stemmed from this, just a bunch of sports media banter. Is there a chance that, after you are done fixing the major ills of the city, you might serve as a beacon of light for us lowly chess players? (Laughing) I guess so.