

The Turkish Chess Federation is one of the most active federations in FIDE, having organized many international events. We interview Mr. Ali Nihat Yazici, president of the Turkish Chess Federation. Chess leaders around the world may find it useful and apply the Turkish formula for success in their own national federations.

Q: When were you elected president of the Turkish Chess Federation?

I was elected just one week after the Istanbul Olympiad. Very strange but, even with such an event the former president, Mr. Olgac, could not win the election. I was a candidate three months before the Olympiad. In Turkey the government gives much support to chess and we were working as volunteers with my team and we could not make the federation follow our ideas for chess in Turkey. Therefore, we challenged them and after the Olympiad I got more than 60% to win the election. I was active in chess long ago but my presidency started one week after the Istanbul Olympiad, on 20th of November 2000.

Q: What is your profession?

I am not professional in chess and by Turkish law and by the regulations of the Youth and Sports General Directorate, it is not possible for any president of a sports federation to receive financial compensation. All presidents of amateur sports organizations should be volunteers. With the exception of the president, all other workers may be professionals. I was working as head of the TV department of Turkish Broadcasting Corporation which is a very big public broadcasting company not only in Turkey but also in comparison to other such companies abroad such as BBC, ARD. So when I was elected president, I had a very good position in my broadcasting career. But I could not continue like that because I could not realize my dreams for chess with another job. So I requested to change my position to a titular position in my company, with lower pay, so I started to work for chess full time. So they gave me permission. You can, therefore, consider them the biggest sponsor for Turkish chess because I am working now 24 hours a day for chess.

I am an electronic engineer, graduate of Istanbul Technical University. I understood that being a creative person and working as an engineer is very big conflict. An engineer's work is very technical and you don't have power to realize your dreams. So I completed a Master of Business Administration degree in Middle East Technical University and Master of Broadcasting Administration degree in Switzerland in the European Broadcasting Union. And I also started to get a PhD in broadcasting.

As all chess persons, I have a very great ego so to satisfy my ego there should be a lot of problems to solve.

Q: What international tournaments have you organized in Turkey in your presidency?

In 2001 I could answer you very easily, four or five. In 2002, I could count but now I cannot because I don't know how many. Currently every week we organize an international tournament.

I have organized during my presidency the World Youth Under-16 Chess Olympiad. I am proud of organizing the strongest open, the European Individual championship for men and women last year.

You say we are very successful but I still don't think we are very successful. These are all peanuts. The next four years will be fantastic. You cannot compare the last four years with the next four years because now we have power as an autonomous chess federation. It is the biggest honor for us because we are accepted as the first autonomous sports federation in Turkey on the 7th of May. We have more money with government support.

Q: Do you mean that in Turkey chess is the most popular sport after football?

Okay, let's say like that. When I was elected in 2000 after the Olympiad there were only 2,800 members of the federation. In comparison with the population of Turkey which is 70 million this is very stupid. What we did was that we popularized chess all over the country. Now we have 35,000 members. To increase membership ten fold in four years is unbelievable, but it was not so difficult. By 2005, we expect 100,000 to 150,000 players.

Q: Do these players pay membership dues to the federation?

Till now, no. It was an amateur sport and in Turkey if you are not an autonomous federation you cannot collect any money. In Turkey the sports system is very much under a high level of bureaucracy so that is the reason we became autonomous. It is a milestone in Turkish chess – 7th of May 2004. After this everything will change in Turkey. You will forget what happened in the last four years. Everything will be fantastic. So now in 2005 we are going to collect membership.

Q: Are these players individual members of the federation or members of clubs?

Both. I believe that without authorized licensed Arbiters and authorized licensed Organizers you cannot hold tournaments. Membership is one level below a license. We don't speak in Turkey of membership, we have a license system. You apply and follow procedures and become a sports person. You pay something and then play chess. Without a license you cannot play even in a simultaneous exhibition.

Q: How did you increase your number of members so much in four years?

Our formula is work, work, work. Fantastic work. Secondly, very important for the future is chess in schools. To make chess attractive for the media, for the people, we have to teach them, to create spectators. In chess is it possible to teach a person in one hour. I don't believe that chess is a highly sophisticated sport very difficult to learn. The idea is to teach everyone chess and then to find more sponsors. It is like a circle.

Q: This is the mass base. How about your top players?

For such a country, it is a shame to say that we don't have any grandmasters. When I was elected we had three International Masters. Now we have around ten. In three years we have tripled the number. We have young IM's, very strong, and they will be grandmasters very soon. I am sure in two years we will have three to five GM's.

Our second aim is to generate a kind of youth crop of under-14/15 masters to become like Radjabov, Magnus Carlsen, Nakamura. This is our second step.

The problem is bureaucracy. We are getting from the government fantastic support, let's say \$400,000 per year. I can organize an international training camp in Brazil, paying for travel, high class hotels, but I am not allowed to hire a coach. It is very bad, unbelievable. But by being autonomous, we have now the power to hire any coach we want. The idea for the first four years was quantity. The idea of the next four years is quality. Now we will focus on quality and you will see that in Turkish chess very soon. In two to three years we expect grandmasters under-18.

We have the good example of what happened in Greece, in Azerbaijan. We were beating Greece every time in the Balkan championship before Makropoulos became president. You cannot say that we are sorry that Makro became president. I mean he is my teacher. He taught me all secrets of what to do. You have to ask Makro about increasing the popularity of chess in the country. We followed the good examples and avoided mistakes in other countries.

What do we do now? First of all, Turkey has fantastic infrastructure for chess. On one side, we organize a lot of international tournaments with very good prizes for everyone including free hosting. For example, we organized the Balkan championship, Mediterranean championship and we gave free hospitality to all participants.

Q: Do you have private commercial sponsors for these tournaments?

We found some but cannot compare with the sponsorships of other sports. I think that for any sport, first of all the biggest sponsor is government. It is an obligation for human beings to be healthy so by social law the government should spend more and more for sports for its citizens. That is the reason we are very lucky in Turkey.

Q: How many work for the chess federation?

Professional staff paid by the government number eight – General Secretary, chief of staff, three functionaries and three sports experts. We will double this number next year. We will get a Marketing Manager, a Public Relations Manager, a Website Manager and Tournament Directors.

In Turkey we have a fantastic Arbiter system, better than FIDE, I think We have around 1,600 Arbiters. They are well educated through the system. We don't apply with FIDE for an International Arbiter title for a person who does not pass a very tough examination.

So all Turkish arbiters are very well educated and speak different languages. At the same time Arbiters are organizers.

Q: Does the federation organize all tournaments in Turkey?

No, the federation is an umbrella consisting of city representatives. Each president is responsible for giving permission for any organization that happens in their state. As the national organization, the federation is in charge. Any sport event cannot be organized in Turkey without permission of the federation because you need an Arbiter who is impartial and assigned by the federation.

Like in football. And chess is now the second sport in Turkey by the number of active licenses. In our license system you have to renew every year in January. By total licenses we are third after basketball. We were 41st in number of licenses when I was elected. We want to be number one with 200,000 to 250,000 licenses.

Q: Is chess development spread out or only in the major cities like Istanbul and Ankara? Do local governments support chess?

We organize in different places. The key word is municipality. They are the most flexible to spend and they are elected. So they have to serve their citizens. The great support is coming from municipal mayors. They are very interested in chess. It is very strange but Istanbul and Ankara are not the top cities in chess. There are some cities where one per thousand people are licensed for chess. We can say that one per 50 students know how to play chess. And the key was the chess in schools. By 1st October 2002, we persuaded the government to make chess an optional course for students and an obligation for schools. In every primary school in Turkey there is a chess course. Teachers receive more salary when they teach chess. So there is a very big demand from the teachers to learn chess and to teach. And we start to get money from this because every training seminar we charge every teacher for the seminar to give them a license. Now we have a big demand in Turkey for 10,000 to 15,000 teachers because the population in primary schools is 14 million.

Q: How did you convince your government to introduce chess in schools?

On 29 July 2002, we gave a report to the Education Ministry committee which reviews applications for disciplines as courses in primary schools. This is a very tough government committee and normally does not accept new courses. It takes at least four years to process. We collected all FIDE reports by the Chess in Schools Committee of Palladino, translated to Turkish, summarized and prepared a booklet of about 30 pages and we showed that, based on research around the world, such as in Venezuela and India, that if you attend a chess course, your problem solving skills improve. We showed that the improvement depends on the age and a very young child can increase his analytical skills by about 20%. This is a very big percentage and we submitted evidence to the government.

By the 1st of October, the government approved chess as a course in schools – two and a half months after we submitted our application! Then we had a problem because we did not expect such a result so fast. We did not have chess teachers and it was like a bomb which exploded and engulfed us. Everyone wanted to be chess teachers and suddenly there was a great demand. Now with 35,000 registered players, 90% of them are under 14.

This is a long term project. We are creating a teaching system for Turkey. Every week you get a one hour chess lesson, from kindergarten among 5 and 6-year olds. We created our own books. We tried to contact other countries but we saw that it was either too expensive or it was not suitable for the Turkish system. In every country there is a different system and I think each country should create their own system. My idea is not to make a student into a grandmaster, such as in the Venezuela system which says that a child can reach an Elo of 1600 by a certain age. We designed our system only to create a chess culture. We shall try to make a report for FIDE for distribution around the world.

The other thing we did was we created a small book of eight pages as a prospectus for parents. We thought that without training the parents, it would be impossible to train the students because most parents think that their child is the most intelligent in the world, they want their children to become grandmasters in one month – impossible.

At the same time we made big advertising, to professionally promote chess throughout the country. Our goal is to get every year five percent of the students, let's say 700,000 people, and if you get \$1 from each, we will be the richest federation in the world without entry fees or license fees.

By this figure you will see that the future of Turkish chess is fantastic.

*<i>Interviewer's note:
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The tools for development are available for everyone. But it takes leadership to put these tools to good use. And Turkey is fortunate to have a leader such as its president, Ali Nihat Yazici.

Casto Abundo

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