



# Women's Chess Grandmaster **JENNIFER SHAHADE**

**Itzel Lopez & Londyn Malcom**

**Mentor: Mr. Stovall**

Hello everyone! In this article, Itzel Lopez and Londyn Malcolm interviewed Jennifer Shahade. Jennifer is a two-time United States Women's Chess champion, a women's grandmaster, author, chess commentator, public speaker, and an inspiring individual. We had the privilege of asking her questions about her childhood, college, her chess playing career and accomplishments.

**Itzel:** Where did you grow up and what elementary school did you go to?

**Jennifer:** I grew up in Philadelphia, right in the city and I went to my neighborhood elementary which is called Greenfield elementary.

**Londyn:** Who taught you how to play chess and when did you learn to play?

**Jennifer:** My father taught me how to play chess. He is a four-time PA state champion, and he taught me really young, I believe I was around five. There actually is a picture of me when I am two playing chess. I am sure I did not know the rules at that time, I was posing for the camera and my brother who was four at the time probably knew a little bit.

**Itzel:** What made you want to play chess and what age did you discover the art?

**Jennifer:** I wanted to play chess because when I was young, I saw it as a chance to meet people and to travel. Later, I became really engrossed in it because I saw it not just as a competition but as an art, a challenge, and as a way to show my intelligence. Maybe in high school is when I really started to take it super seriously. Londyn and Itzel, you girls are in fifth grade and that is a really important year for girl chess players because a lot of them quit around that age or maybe a little bit older and actually that kind of happened for me too. I didn't entirely quit, I started taking chess a lot less seriously in like 7th and 8th grade, and luckily for me I picked it back up in high school and it became a major part of my life forever. So, I hope that people who stop playing for a year or so do not leave it forever.

**Londyn:** Who are your favorite chess players? What do you admire about them?

**Jennifer:** I would say the Polgar sisters for sure. They were coming up at around the time that I started to take chess seriously and I just devoured their games, especially Judit because she was the top female player in history, she had this amazing super aggressive style that I wanted to have. I would also say Garry Kasparov because he was also aggressive and so well prepared, and such a great thinker outside the game, and the fact he transitioned to a career in human rights after he stopped playing chess professionally. I think this is really inspiring when chess players use their skills and influence they have accumulated from their lives to try to make the world a better place. I think there is no better path.



**Itzel:** What college did you go to? Why did you choose that college?

**Jennifer:** I went to New York University, and I chose it because I love New York City. I grew up in Philly, but I got a chance to go to New York a lot because of chess. I was one of those people who the moment they got off the train in Penn Station, I was like this is amazing. I'm in New York, it's already a great day and when am I going to live here? I knew in my heart that I had to live in New York at some point of my life. I lived there for eight or nine years.

**Londyn:** Did you continue your chess education throughout college?

**Jennifer:** Throughout college, it wasn't hard to balance high school. First, NYU is a few blocks away from the Marshall Chess club and a few blocks from Washington Square Park. There are a lot of great chess players in New York. During the summer vacation because I was such a strong chess player, I was able to get work teaching at chess camps and I taught at Chess in the Schools in college. I felt like that was a really great set up for me because I could work teaching chess and then work on my own game and play in tournaments. In college was where I had my biggest chess achievements. I won my first United States Women's championship, and I was the first female to win the US Junior Open.

**Itzel:** What is it like to travel to different countries to play in a chess tournament?

**Jennifer:** Oh, it is great, that really addicted me to chess in a lot of ways. I played my first International tournament in Brazil when I was 15 years old. It completely opened my eyes to new cultures and the ability to just see the world through chess. Soon thereafter, I got invited to a tournament in Iceland and I think it really motivated me to work harder on my game. I saw chess as a way to meet people and deepen my understanding of the world, not just the game itself but also the world around it.

**Londyn:** What do you do to prepare for these chess tournaments?

**Jennifer:** For chess tournaments, I did a lot of mental and psychological preparation to feel confident. I always work on a lot of tactics before a tournament. I would tend to err on the side of doing easier tactics because you want to build your confidence and get a lot of repetition in because in the heat of the moment it is easy to miss something simple.

I didn't always study openings that much in general training but right before a tournament especially the ones that I won like the US women championships, when I knew exactly who I was going to play I would study very seriously for the openings. I would have a file on each player, and then try to figure out what I was going to play against them with either color.



**Itzel:** What was one of your proudest chess games? What is your greatest achievement?

**Jennifer:** I think my biggest achievement in chess was winning my first US Women's Champion. It was actually the first year that they combined women and men into the same field, and so in addition to winning the championship, I got my first International Master norm. So, that was very significant to me, I gained a lot of rating points, and I was up there in the top boards with this combined field. I felt really great about that. The game that clinched me that victory was very significant. This was the penultimate game was against an Armenian coach Armen Ambarcumjan. That one was really memorable.

**Londyn:** Have you ever felt stressed because of people watching you play, and looking forward to you winning?

**Jennifer:** Yes, I have felt stressed out a little bit but once the clock starts, I just get engrossed in the game and try not to think about what other people think. Sometimes the anticipation beforehand can be tough, but I'll tell you that being a little nervous is not a bad thing. I have a memory of that tournament in Brazil, I told you about. I remember I was so nervous before the game my stomach just felt like butterflies, but I did not understand that expression before. I even felt a little dizzy, but I played a great game and the rest of the tournament. I was not one of the favorites, but I did really well, and it was a groundbreaking feeling for me. Now, I give speeches to hundreds of people and I notice that feeling those butterflies at least a little bit, maybe not to the point of getting dizzy but feeling some of it is actually really good. It means that you care, at least for me it means that I care and that I am probably going to do well.



**Itzel:** How did you get involved in doing chess commentary? How do you prepare for these events?

**Jennifer:** I can't remember the first time I did it, but chess commentary has really changed a lot. It used to be more serious, you would try to work with another chess player and try to analyze a position together and just have people observe you. Now it is much more about entertaining and educating the average person in your audience and I love that shift. To see it now explode on Twitch and YouTube with those kinds of principles in mind, accessibility, growing the game, and teaching people who only know the basics, it is really beautiful to see.

**Londyn:** What made you want to write the book "Play Like a Girl"?

**Jennifer:** I wanted to write the book "Play like a Girl" because when I was a kid, I saw a lot of the same chess tactics over and over again. Chess tactics were beautiful and awesome, but they were just recycled a lot. I realized that all these great female champions that had been coming up in the last few decades, a lot of their tactics were not in the book. I thought these principles of discovered attacks, forks, pins, they can all be shown with the games of great women players too. That is why I wrote it.

**Londyn:** What are some major life lessons you have learned from chess?

**Jennifer:** I think an important life lesson that I learned from chess is that it's really important to look at all your options and all the possibilities in a situation. Sometimes when you are thinking you realize that you are not actually thinking about all your possibilities. You are just picking out your favorite one and trying to justify it. If you recognize those moments in life that can be really important too. The other thing that chess teaches you is you cannot obsessively think about every decision in chess. If you do, you will be burned out and you will run out of time. So, you need to figure out the times in the game that are critical. I think in life, you also have these moments, there are some big life decisions that are irreversible or hard to reverse. These decisions are the ones that you really need to think hard about. So, it is about like prioritizing when there is a decision that you really need to dig deep, and the ones where you can just relax and go with the flow.



**Itzel:** Have you ever doubted yourself in chess?

**Jennifer:** Oh yeah, absolutely in chess all the time. Usually, in the middle of a tournament if I lost the game I feel like, 'oh no' I am not playing well, I am not in good form. That would often be a vicious cycle because the next game, I would use more time and be more likely to lose on a time scramble. So, I did doubt myself a lot and to break that cycle is difficult during an event. It is very tough; you need a good coach and some good self-regulating practices to build yourself back up. I mentioned earlier doing easy tactics, exercise can be good for some people, and talking to non-chess player friends can be really good.

**Londyn:** Did anyone say to you "You can't play chess because you are a girl? Did that inspire you to write "Play like a girl."

**Jennifer:** Well, part of the reason that "Play like a Girl" came about is because when I was a kid, I heard people say, "you're playing like a girl" and it was an insult. Then I started analyzing games by the Polgar sisters, Vera Menchik, Pia Cramling, all these great women's chess champions. They were super aggressive, especially Judit Polgar, the ultimate attacking player. So, I really wanted to flip that on the head and show people that it was the opposite of what these people were telling me when I was a kid.

**Itzel:** Can you tell us one thing that nobody knows about you?

**Jennifer:** One thing that nobody knows about me is the only class I did poorly in high school was art class. I got a C in art, and now I have displayed my art in museums and galleries. I am even on the board of the chess museum in Saint Louis, it is also called the World chess Hall of Fame.

**Londyn:** Why do you love chess?

**Jennifer:** Oh, there are a lot of things I love about chess. I love the fact that it is totally absorbing, that you lose yourself and forget about everything else and all the trouble that you might be experiencing that day. I love its ability to connect us with people from all over the world as an international language. We can play back a lot of the games from the last couple of hundred years. I love the history, the art, the absorption, and the community. There are a lot of great things about this game.

