



A PERSONAL PERSPECTIVE

Due Process

Part II

■ By Pete Tamburro

The information provided to me by sources that are presented as facts in this article was affirmed to me by an officer of US Chess. All those communicated with have requested anonymity.

Our readers will remember my “Due Process Anyone?” article from over a year ago on the Hans Niemann affair. I was disappointed that many members of the chess community had descended into the same swamp of public accusations and even over the top character assassination generally reserved for the national political arena.

When Jennifer Shahade posted her now famous tweet followed shortly by a *Wall Street Journal* exclusive accusing GM Alejandro Ramirez of sexual assault, it brought into the view of the general public yet one more chess scandal chess didn’t need to tarnish its image even further. The issue, however, is a critically important one for the health of chess as evidenced by the recent January 2024 revised version of the Safe Play rules that were put into place by the national organization under Carol Meyer’s leadership back in 2019.

My first thought in terms of due process was what due process was the accused going to get in this and how the accusers would also get their day in court without their getting attacked as well. It’s a difficult business. The *Me Too* movement has encouraged women to step forward to not suffer in silence; however, in its wake, the dangers of unfounded accusations also washed up on shore. A Supreme Court nominee was accused by several women, two of whom, after they testified, eventually recanted their testimony and the credibility of the main accuser frankly depended on whether you wanted the man on the bench or not. A major league baseball player was suspended from baseball, but later was cleared of wrongdoing. He lost not only his reputation but playing in his peak years.

One of the unfortunate consequences during those uproars is that there emerged the idea that everyone was obliged to believe

whatever the accuser said. That throws due process out the window and lends itself to its own kind of abuse. There has to be a process and a search for evidence as well as there being a chance for both sides to tell their story.

American Chess Magazine felt that Jennifer Shahade should be able to tell her story. *Chess Life* could only, for understandable reasons, present a short “We wish you well in your future endeavors” piece. After all, her accusations not only indicted US Chess governance, but specifically targeted Executive Director Carol Meyer, who had spearheaded the Safe Play standards from the beginning.

Although the featuring of Jen was very complimentary to her and her cause, there came nagging questions that always come with such stories. Is there another side? What about the “accused” side of the story? Were the *Wall Street Journal* article, the chess media sites all giving a balanced view in light of Jen’s accusations?

You see, although I had gone into it with the idea of getting the Ramirez side of the story, it became readily apparent that there were other accused involved in this narrative: US Chess and Carol Meyer.

Also, at first, I was concerned about emotionally and legally charged phrases like “sexual assault.” In my home state, sexual assault is defined in our statutes as rape, whereas “sexual contact” involves the “lesser” charges. To be clear, any unwanted physical contact, generally in the “strike zone” (baseball analogy) was covered under the contact laws. It varies by states. And how does something like that happen a second time? I was curious to know what Jennifer’s reaction to the events was and what she did about it at the moment. I thought that, in her various posts, it might be useful to talk about it as dealing with such matters is often confusing to the victim and this might help other girls or women deal with this possibility.

As I delved deeper into the issue, I was satisfied that Ramirez had received due process as he had an attorney during questioning by the US Chess investigators and that he had felt it best to resign and not fight it considering the presentation of the charges before him.

But what about the role of the organization and the Executive Director? Was there such malfeasance as claimed by Jennifer? Was this public excoriation by her warranted? Did the websites of lichess and chess.com break off relations with US Chess based solely on her accusations? Was US Chess advised to not say anything to anybody?

Before Jennifer’s interview was published, I decided to get in



touch with both Carol Meyer and President Randy Bauer. I told them about the upcoming article and wondered if we might do an off-the-record interview. Carol did not reply. Randy said he would. When the article came out, he changed his mind, saying the damage had already been done, so what was the point? I understood that Randy was perhaps battle-weary, because part of the savaging of the federation online involved a host of “spectators” attacking him and calling him names I won’t repeat here. For a guy with daughters and granddaughters, to be attacked as insensitive to women’s issues shows us how nuts this gets. He really got into it with one person, and they argued over several different platforms. He apparently finally got fed up with this person and lashed out at his adversary. That was unfortunate because people new to the “dialogue” thought that was uncalled for, to put it as nicely as I can. Randy apologized for letting his frustration get the best of him.

I began reading everything and even subscribed to the *Wall Street Journal*. Then, a funny thing happened. I started getting phone calls after the ACM interview issue came out. People were telling me that there was indeed another side and that I should talk to so-and-so about it. I did — several so-and-so’s. I learned there were lots of questions to be asked about the prevailing narrative.

Then, though Ms. Meyer still declined to discuss any of this, I was contacted by someone else who would provide me with evidence to better understand the history of the whole mess and give the other side of the story. It had to be without attribution. In fact, several calls I got also requested anonymity, because if you doubt the prevailing narrative, you are often smeared as anti-woman, a psychopath or in “a very dark place.” That last one was attributed to the location I was presumably inhabiting when I pointed out online that we should not use the phrase sexual assault without specifics because it is a highly charged phrase that could conjure up the worst thoughts that didn’t accurately represent what happened. “He forcibly kissed me the second time without my permission” doesn’t quite conjure up the same image that “sexual assault” does.

It’s taken me quite a few words to give this background, but I felt it was necessary. I am writing this op-ed because one person’s narrative shouldn’t be the only one. Jennifer’s historical place in women’s chess history is secure regardless of this particular issue. Jennifer made judgments. US Chess and individuals inside the organization made judgments. It is important to note that not one “inside” person says that Jennifer was making the Ramirez incidents up — or any of the others of sexual misconduct for that matter.

Here is what I was told by various people who not only provided information, but asked questions themselves. Yes, we felt an obligation to have Jennifer tell her story. We also feel an obligation for others to tell theirs.

In order to address this matter, we have to treat it as a kind of timeline to help us think about the conflicting comments that I received. As I wrote in the Niemann article, we are not taking a side. We just want to know both sides and who’s putting what spin on events. The irony of all this is that it may come down to a classic “he said/she said” situation with the Jen version vs. the US Chess version. The readers can decide for themselves.

It all starts, for these purposes, in 2011 which is the year Jennifer alleges that Alejandro made his first of two advances on her. (She was a US Chess employee from 2011 to 2023) By 2012, they were posing, all smiles, for a United Way Chess Carnival photo. How was the incident handled by her at the time? We don’t know. It was also during this period that accusations were brought years later that Ramirez had tried to become involved with a 15-year-old girl at a chess camp, and later with another one alone to celebrate in a hotel room at a World Youth event. This all comes up later, but

it does raise a general question as to where the parents are and where is the old Boy Scout rule about no adult should be alone with a child — ever. Obviously, parents, if they can’t travel, had best be sure that rule is written policy and strictly enforced.

In 2013, we have Ramirez allegedly confessing having feelings toward a girl in a supervised group. We are told that Jennifer told him he shouldn’t be with any girls’ program or team. Did she tell US Chess then about her concerns in any documentable way? No. Did she feel an obligation as a US Chess employee to report it? Did she file formal complaints? If not, why not? In 2014, Jennifer alleges that she was in a private get-together of four people and while the other two were not around, Ramirez slammed her against the wall and “forcibly” kissed her. Again, we have no documented evidence of action on Jennifer’s part at that time.

The next item we ran across was a You Tube selection documented as seven years old — about 2016. It can be found at www.youtube.com/watch?v=MEvibTlygSg&t=60s. It is Greg Shahade playing 5-minute blitz game with Alejandro Ramirez surrounded by the boys and girls’ of a chess camp, so there are a good many unanswered questions there. Off the top, why would someone, who assaulted his sister twice, be hired to work in a chess camp with her brother? By 2021 Greg said he contacted US Chess about Ramirez and a 15-year-old, but US Chess, I am told, has found no record of that. Missing email? Who knows?

By 2019, another player entered the scene when a formal complaint was lodged with the US Chess Ethics Committee that involved the actions of Timur Gareyev. He was eventually suspended for two years, then when further charges were brought to light, he was suspended for life. Thus, the formal process was working. By the way, you can find a list of sanctioned members on the US Chess website. Worth pointing out is that since 2019, when Safe Play was begun, there have been 17 complaints filed, including the ones against Gareyev and Ramirez.

When 2020 rolled around, Jennifer reported that she informed US Chess and the Saint Louis Chess Club about various charges that she had now heard about. We are told that she was not willing to file formal charges at that point nor provide any facts to support her allegations. To make her point, she had been set to be a co-commentator with Ramirez at the US Junior Girls competition and talked him out of appearing with her, although she said she had forgiven Ramirez by then. Carol Meyer and President Mike Hoffpauir informed Jennifer that Ramirez would not work at US Chess youth events or scholastic events. Both sides agree on that as it is stated in her Safe Play complaint. The Women’s Olympiad, an adult tournament with some under-18 players (not the U.S.), was not mentioned.

2022 has received attention because Ramirez was “tapped” (WSJ) as coach for the US Women’s team. I ran across a Roget’s Thesaurus of words and phrases on his getting that position. There was just the hint of it being bureaucratic. Here’s the actual process: There is a call for applications. The applications are directly turned over to the team members. The team votes. US Chess doesn’t interfere in that. The team was composed of GM Irina Krush, IM Carissa Yip, IM Anna Zatonskih, WGM Tatev Abrahamyan and WGM Gulrukhbegim Tokhirjonova. Another unresolved question is why Jennifer did not contact the women’s team. She must have known Krush for almost 20 years. Abrahamyan was at one undetermined point in a relationship with Ramirez and another was on the Saint Louis University team Ramirez coached. We are not privy to what the team discussion was or what the vote was.

One interesting item that needs a place in this report, from which the readers may draw their own conclusions in terms of its place on the timeline, is that a couple of weeks before the Women’s Olympiad team chose Ramirez as their coach, Carol Meyer and Mike Hoffpauir nominated Jennifer to FIDE as “Outstanding Game

Changer” for “her endless positivity and willingness to speak up for women...[which] sets her apart from others.” She won the award as announced at Chennai (Year of the Woman in Chess Awards Granted in Chennai). FIDE rules require the letter be shown to the nominee.

A lot of this happened in June. Both Jennifer and US Chess agree she informed the organization about rumors of unacceptable activity, but, again there were no, according to US Chess, names or facts provided. She was asked to file a written complaint, which she did AFTER the Olympiad in September 2022. It seems neither side decided to informally contact the team members to ask them to reconsider their vote in view of, at that point, unsubstantiated yet worrisome allegations.

In December 2022, three months after Shahade’s formally submitted Safe Play complaint, Ramirez went with the Saint Louis University team for the Pan-Am games in Mexico; however, the US Chess Federation had no jurisdiction over that.

Thus, briefly, Jennifer told Carol Meyer in 2020 and 2022 about her concerns and both times she was told to file a formal complaint – things like the offense, names, dates, places, etc., I would imagine. Once Jennifer’s formal complaint was received in September of 2022, then an outside investigator was hired, and they started in October of 2022. Jennifer was interviewed, Ramirez was interviewed, those who came forward were interviewed (requesting anonymity).

US Chess told Jennifer, still an employee, in February 2023, that the investigation was wrapping up and a report was imminent. She sent out her famous tweet a few days later. Thus, the question arises is how can one say the tweet caused concrete action given that the complaint was filed in September of 2022, the investigation started in October of that year and the report was to come out in February 2023?

In 2023, the *Wall Street Journal* came out on March 7th – days after the tweet. Remarkable timing. And where and how did the WSJ find these eight women? All this, of course, delayed the investigative report because now there was more to investigate! It would eventually come out in May of 2023. Only three of the eight filed complaints with US Chess. Between the tweet and March 7th, Ramirez had resigned or been dropped from his various chess positions. In July, Jennifer repeated her assertion that she contacted US Chess four times about Ramirez, which is disputed above, although there was another US Chess person in 2021 or 2022 that was also informally complained to at least once. The issue revolves around what the organization should do when no formal charges are brought.

Much of what happened the rest of the year was an echo chamber of news reports, a few more women coming forward, and a great deal of outrage on the internet. The allegations against the federation were seen as gospel and the federation felt it was best not to get into a public mudslinging match.

In September of 2023, Jennifer posted at @JenShahade that “US Chess sent me a cease & desist [letter] demanding that ‘on behalf of its members’ I refrain from contact with scholastic/teen members. This would stop me from replying to girls who reach out about my books and work, who see me as a role model who prioritizes their success and safety.”

When I raised this issue with one source in writing this, I was given a summary of the “cease and desist” message sent:

- **In her last minutes as an employee, she had accessed member email addresses of minors in the US Chess database, copied them to her personal gmail account, and sent out a mass email from her personal gmail address.**
- **Jennifer’s email included a suggestion that the Cross Cultural Chess Club that US Chess developed in partnership with two other organizations belongs to chess.com.**

- **As a result, US Chess counsel sent Jennifer a letter that addressed three things: her ongoing obligations to honor the US Chess Privacy Policy; her obligation to return US Chess equipment and to delete any US Chess data from her personal accounts or devices; and the proprietary character of the Cross Cultural Chess Club.**
- **It was only in regard to her reference to the Cross Cultural Chess Club as ‘chess.com’s’ that the letter said ‘to the extent that you intend to utilize trade secret or confidential information belonging to US Chess regarding its Cross Cultural Chess Club on behalf of or for the benefit of Chess.com, US Chess demands that you cease and desist from such activity.’**
- **As to her contact with children who are US Chess members, the letter asked only that she delete the email addresses she had obtained from US Chess and refrain from future direct contact with members who are minors without first having authorization from their parents.”**

Then, in October, *American Chess Magazine* published the interview, which was very positive in support of her crusade. On December 7th, Jennifer posted this item online “I am on the cover of *American Chess Magazine*” with this quote: “A little over a month after this cover story dropped, on 12/6/23, US Chess announced that Executive Director Carol Meyer – who was in charge of the organization during the Ramirez complaints and aftermath – was stepping down.” The obvious implication was that this was the final nail in the corporate coffin of Carol Meyer because of her handling of the complaints. It is a powerful and well-crafted dramatic narrative to show the impact of the interview. The only problem is that the implication is not true. Ms. Meyer had let her intentions known a considerable time before that – in fact a year before in December of 2022. The intent was for the Federation to begin succession planning. The December 2023 meeting was not about surprise quitting based on a magazine interview.

The position of US Chess was evidenced by their consistent demand for formal complaints in this whole affair because the first question any accused would ask is “Where are your facts and your accusers? You’re acting on rumors?” They also instituted an investigation on Ramirez a couple of weeks after Jen filed her first formal complaint before the tweet. Nobody in their organization has said the allegations are false. They felt that without concrete evidence you can’t have concrete action. They have a conflicting view of the events as they unfolded. As we mentioned, it’s a “he said/she said” sort of thing. You can connect the dots to your own satisfaction.

However, keep in mind the premise that we started with back in the Niemann affair and right up to the present. Due process is the cornerstone of achieving justice. Concrete evidence, written statements, and both sides presenting their cases within a formal process is the best way to achieve a fair result. A lynch mob mentality on the internet does not reflect well on those who participate in that.

My fear is that the chess community will not learn from this whole episode. We seem to have a penchant for spectacle, for spinning things to get that extra edge, to chess fans making ridiculous disparaging comments on Facebook and X, when you don’t even know any of the principals involved. The great art that was missing in all the above was knowing when to do something formally and when to do something informally. Both sides can use a little better judgment in that.

Is the answer to this formal/informal business resolved by the newly revised Safe Play Policy (now applying to local and regional events as well) produced online on January 1, 2024? We will see. ■