

# Meet FM

# ANDY

# Woodward

**He's 12.** And he's currently rated **2454 FIDE.** How'd he do it?

BY JOHN HARTMANN

**T**HIS SUMMER FM ANDY Woodward forced the chess world to take notice when he shot up the FIDE rating list, gaining nearly 100 points to reach 2486 after spending much of his summer playing norm events here and in Serbia.

And people did take notice. Appearing on the C-Squared podcast, GM Hikaru Nakamura recently named Woodward as someone to watch, knowing the story of his rapid ascent despite not being able to recall his name!

So just how did a pretty normal 12-year-old earn three IM norms in a matter of months? After we asked Andy to tell us “what he did on his summer vacation” — an essay you can read at *Chess Life Online* — we wanted to know more. Here, in this interview from September 21, we learn about Andy's early days in chess, how he works on his game and stays focused, and why he thinks the classics are important.

**Chess Life: How did you start playing chess? What were your first moves in the chess world?**

Andy Woodward: I got a chess board when I was five, for my birthday. It had checkers and a few other games, and I played all of

them, but I liked chess the most and stared playing by myself on the window sill. I would just play against myself.

My dad taught me how to move the pieces, and then I found out about *ChessKid.com*. I finished all the lessons on ChessKid at that time, although they added a lot more later.

**When did you make the jump to US Chess rated events?**

I think when I was seven.

**When did you start to realize that you were pretty good at this game?**

Probably when I beat my dad for the first time. Of course, looking back, I couldn't evaluate the position at all. I thought I was winning if I was up a pawn!

**I looked at your rating graph on *uschess.org*, and over the last couple of years, you've just zoomed up the ratings list. When did you make the switch from just enjoying the game and playing tournaments to taking it really seriously and putting lot of work into it?**

I think I was 1800 and then I got stuck for a long time and I got really disappointed. I could tell that for about a year, I was flattened out of at 1800 or 1900 and then just

traveling around. I really wanted to improve, so I worked on my openings for the first time in my chess career.

**Aside from working on your openings, what do you think helped you get to the next level at that point?**

Probably tactics and traps. Mainly fundamentals, but some difficult [puzzles] here and there. I read this book — I think it's called Blokh's *Combinations*?

**Is it green? Maxim Blokh's *The Art of Combination*? I know that book. Some of it is very hard.**

It took me about a year to read it and do all those puzzles.

**When I watched your YouTube interview with 1000 GMs, you said that you consider yourself a positional player. That surprised me, because it seems like the material is always unbalanced in your games, and there's always a lot of action on the board. You're not playing quiet, positional chess, so why do you say that you're a positional player?**

Well, I try to get slow positions when I'm playing lower rated players. When I'm playing higher rated players, I like tactical posi-



*“Some games I get really lucky and I get positions that I know how to play really well.”*

tions because that’s when I can win. When I’m playing people who are higher rated, it’s hard to squeeze and outplay them, so I try to play tactical positions against them.

**You said you used Blokh’s book to get better at a certain point. What do you do now to work on your tactics? How do you improve that?**

I don’t really do much on the Internet. I still use books, but probably I mainly work on calculation. I do this.. I forgot the title, but it’s a slightly simpler book that’s good for pattern recognition. [Based on a later email, I think he was referring to either Ivanchenko’s *Manual of Chess Combinations, volume 3*, or *The Woodpecker Method* by Smith and Tikkanen. ~ed.]

**It’s interesting to hear you say that you use books, because I think a lot of older chess players who read this interview might think, “Oh, here’s this kid who’s 12 years old, and he’s rated almost 2500. He probably uses Chessable and does everything on the computer.” But it doesn’t sound like that’s the case with you.**

I do use Chessable, but not the majority of the time.

**So what kind of books are you working with, and what have been some of your favorites along the way?**

Recently I started *Dvoretsky’s Analytical Manual*... my mom quizzes me as I go through

the games. I also am reading *Improve Your Chess Calculation* by GM R.B. Ramesh. I also liked *Perfect Your Chess* by Volokitin and Grabinsky.

**You’re also a member of [the online training platform] Killer Chess Training, correct? Do you do the homework each week?**

I try to!

**You played Evan Rosenberg at a Charlotte norm tournament, and he told me what impressed him most about you, besides your being a very nice guy, was that you were just a calculating machine. He felt like you just saw everything. Do you feel like calculation is a strength of yours?**

Not really. I make a lot of mistakes and blunders. Some games I get really lucky and I get positions that I know how to play really well. In some games it’s just pure preparation, and then in others, I get lucky combinations at the end.

**You play a lot of really sharp contemporary openings, including the Najdorf and Grünfeld. These are openings that require a lot of preparation. How do you go about doing that, and how do you get those moves into your head?**

Before every tournament and game, I review my opening files in training mode in Chess-Base. I play some practice games with my coach, GM Yaroslav Zherebukh.

**Do you build your own opening files, or does he do the preparation for you?**

It’s both. We work together. He shares his opening ideas with me, I work with them, and we analyze.

**You mentioned your current coach. Who else have you worked with along the way?**

My first coach was GM Babakuli Annakov. I worked with him until I got to 1700 or 1800. We did a lot of puzzles. Then I started working with GM Mesgen Amanov, beginning with the World Cadet Championship in 2018. He helped me a lot with my openings.

Right before the 2019 World Cadet, I switched to GM Rashad Babaev, who helped me with middlegames. Then it was GM Melik Khachiyani, and I worked with him for nine months, mostly on calculation. And then I started with “Yar.”

**A lot of your growth took place during the pandemic. How were you keeping sharp? Were you playing on the Internet? Were you doing online courses?**

Definitely I was doing a lot of work in Chess-Base during the pandemic. But here in Texas, there were a lot of local tournaments going on, beginning as early as the summer of 2020. So I’d play over-the-board, get some training games in that way, and I worked on my openings. I found a lot of new ideas and tried new lines.

I also did some online camps organized by the Charlotte Chess Center and the Pacific

Northwest Chess Center. And I've been a member of Killer Chess Training for more than a year now.

**This past summer you went to Europe and played in a number of norm events, something that our *Chess Life Online* readers may already have read about. What was it like to go halfway around the world to play chess?**

It was a lot of fun. I had a lot of experiences, and there was lots of good food. For the chess part, all of the players were strong, because lots of people went to Serbia to play against each other. I think I played against people from 11 federations.

**Wow! Did you notice anything about the style of chess that was played in Europe, as opposed to what you're used to in American swisses?**

Well, we didn't play on DGT boards. We'd just play on plastic sets. After the game, we'd have to put the moves into ChessBase, and they'd send the games to FIDE.

Also, there were no cars. We had to walk everywhere! Luckily the walks weren't that long.

**Where did you stay? Apartments? Hotels?**

Both. Mainly apartments, but we switched every week or so. We found a few good places for next time.

**When you were interviewed for the 1000 GMs YouTube channel, you said that on a school day you work three to four hours, but on a weekend, it's more like six or seven hours a day.**

Actually, it's probably less, because a lot of times I get distracted quite easily. So I have to stay focused.

**Is it hard to motivate yourself to focus and do all that analytical work? And how do you re-motivate yourself if you get distracted?**

When I do chess work for quite a bit of time... doing the same thing for a long time, it can get kind of boring. Then you get tired, and you don't want to do it anymore.

Sometimes I just take a small break. I don't really do anything... I sit around, or I play some ping pong, and then I go back to work a few minutes later.

**Ping pong! What other hobbies do you have?**

I play piano, and I like math.

**I did want to ask you one last question.**

**You said in the interview with 1000 GMs that one of the players you most admire is [GM Svetozar] Gligorić. Just listening to you now, and knowing you a bit from Killer Chess Training, it's clear that you have a real interest in chess history.**

Yes.

**Do you think it's important for young players to learn about history, to look at the games of players like Gligorić, or Spassky, or even someone like Kasparov?**

The only reason you would do that is if you're motivated to get good at chess. If you don't really care, then I don't see much purpose in learning important classical games. But if you take it seriously, and you want to improve, then it's a really good idea to learn the classics, to get trained well, and to study.

**Why does knowing the classics help your game?**

Because it can show you some ideas that wouldn't otherwise be found, because the great players of the past played before engines came out. They had to make the ideas by themselves, along with their friends. The classics can show you interesting ideas for practical human play without using engines, because sometimes, if you look at engine games and evaluations, it shows you things that don't make any sense to humans, but make lots of sense to engines. So sometimes the classics can help you understand human ideas and use them in your games.



After Andy sent me his report on his trip abroad and his norm events some weeks ago, I started looking at his games in the database, and came across this absolute stunner. The *dénouement* was so stunning that I asked Andy to sit for an interview and annotate his game for *Chess Life*. The result, as the young people say, speaks for itself.

For more on Andy, check out his account of his Serbian adventures on *Chess Life Online*.

## KING'S INDIAN DEENSE, PANNO VARIATION (E66)

FM Andy Woodward (2475)

IM Konstantin Kavutskiy (2401)

Hollywood Chess Norm Classic (8),  
08.06.2022

Annotations by FM Andy Woodward

1. d4 Nf6 2. c4 g6 3. g3 Bg7 4. Bg2 0-0 5. Nc3 d6 6. Nf3 c5

An interesting choice that is gaining popularity right now. I was prepared for 6. ...

Nbd7 and 6. ... Nc6, but I hadn't looked at this before the game.

7. 0-0 Nc6 8. d5 Na5 9. Nd2 e6



10. Qc2

I had played 10. Rb1 twice before, winning both games, but then when I got this position, I forgot that the rook move was best!

10. ... Re8 11. Rb1 exd5 12. cxd5 Rb8

I've had previous practice in this position. One game went 12. ... Bf5 13. e4 Bd7 provoking White to move his pawn to e4, and play continued 14. b3 b5 15. a4 (if 15. Nd1 c4!? 16. b4! Nb7 17. Bb2 a5 18. a3 axb4 19. axb4 Ng4 20. Bxg7 Kxg7 21. Qc3+ Qf6 22. Bh3 and White achieves a pleasant position) 15. ... b4 16. Nd1 Bc8 17. Ne3 Ba6 18. Ndc4 Nxc4 19. Nxc4 Ng4 20. Rd1 Bd4 21. Bf3 h5 22. h3 Qf6 23. Kg2 Nh2 24. Bxh5 gxh5 25. Bf4 Bxc4 26. bxc4 Be5 27. Bxe5 Qf3+ 28. Kxh2 Rxe5 29. Re1 h4 30. Rb3 hxg3+ 31. fxxg3 Qh5 32. Qf2 and here Woodward – Schitco, Richardson 2022, was drawn.

13. b4 cxb4 14. Rxb4 Bf5 15. e4 Bd7

I think things started going wrong here for me.

16. a4

I needed to play 16. Nb5!? Bxb5 17. Rxb5 a6 18. Rb1 b5 19. a4 Nd7 20. Ba3 Ne5 21. Rfc1 and hope for the best.

16. ... Rc8 17. Bb2 Ng4 18. Nb3?

Completely miscalculating his activity and tactics.

18. ... Nc4?

He meets a mistake with a mistake in return.

If he wanted to acquire an advantage, he had to play 18. ... Rc4 with much the same idea, but the rooks get off the board, and now there's space for Black's queen on b6.

19. Ba1 b6 20. Nd2 Na5?!

Here 20. ... Na3! looks horrendous, but the follow-up shows its worth. If 21. Qb3 Black



has 21. ... a5! 22. Rxb6 (if 22. Qxa3!? axb4 23. Qxb4 Qc7 Black is up the Exchange and winning) and 22. ... Nc2!! — Boom! Black threatens ... Nc2xa1 and ... Bg7xc3, while White cannot take the offered knight due to the hanging b6-rook. White's best option is probably 21. Qc1! a5!.

**21. h3 Ne5 22. Qb1 Nf3+ 23. Nxf3 Bxc3 24. Bxc3 Rxc3 25. Qb2**

Here I started to try and neutralize Black's edge.

**25. ... Qc7 26. h4**

Objectively not the best, but it caused some problems for his king. Better was 26. Re1 preparing for the push e4-e5.

**26. ... Qc5 27. h5 f6?!**



The engine says that 27. ... gxh5 was the only move retaining the advantage. I can see why he didn't want to take, however, because it opens his king. The position is unclear after 28. Nd4 Re5.

**28. Nd4!**

Taking my only chance. The knight prepares to leap to many squares, like b5, c6, and e6.

**28. ... Kf7 29. Rb1**

Down to 11 minutes on my clock, I needed to find some sort of counterplay. I decided to activate my queen and defend my rook with the lazy one on f1.

**29. ... Rc8?**

It's hard to see in advance, but this is a pure waste of time. Black wants to play ... Rc3-c1+, ... Rc1xb1, and ... Qc5-c3, getting a really pleasant position. Instead this move gives me a chance to strike.

**30. Qd2!**

The only move gaining the advantage, and one where I had to foresee the following continuation to make it playable.

**30. ... Rc1+ 31. Kh2 Rxb1 32. Qh6!!**



At first the engine calls this a ridiculous blunder, but then as it starts calculating it becomes clear that it is just a brilliant combination. And how often can you say that you out-thought the machine?!

**32. ... Rxb4**

The main defense. Let's analyze some of the possibilities first.

One of the first things I calculated was 32. ... Rh8 but White can just play 33. hxg6+ Ke8 34. Ne6! Bxe6 35. dxe6 Rxb4 36. Qg7 hxg6+ (36. ... Qh5+? 37. Bh3! Qxg6 38. Qd7+ Kf8 39. e7+! Kg8 [39. ... Kg7 40. e8=Q+ Kh6 41. Qxh8 with mate to come] 40. e8=Q+ Qxe8 41. Qxe8+ Kg7 42. Qe7+ Kg6 43. Bf5+ Kh5 44. Qf7+ Kg5 45. Qg7+ Kh5 46. Bg4 mate) 37. Qxh8+ Ke7 38. Qg8! Qh5+ 39. Bh3 d5 (39. ... g5? 40. Qg7+ Ke8 41. Qd7+ Kf8 42. e7+ Kg8 43. e8=Q+ Qxe8 44. Qxe8+ Kg7 45. Qe7+ Kg8 [45. ... Kg6 46. Bf5+ Kh6 47. Qh7 mate] 46. Be6+ Kh8 47. Qf8+ Kh7 48. Bf5 mate) 40. Qf7+ Kd6 41. Qf8+ Kc7 42. Qe7+ Kc6 43. Qxb4 and White is winning.

After 33. ... Kg8? there is 34. g7! trapping the rook in a hilarious way. If now 34. ... Rxb4 White can choose his victory: (a) 35. Qxf6 mates on f8 or grabs the rook. (b) 35. gxh8=Q+ Kxh8 (35. ... Kf7 allows three mates!) 36. Qf8 mate; or 35. gxh8=R+ Kxh8 (35. ... Kf7 36. Qxh7 mate) 36. Qf8 mate.

If he plays 32. ... Ke8, I transpose to the game with 33. Qxh7.

**33. Qxh7+ Ke8 34. Qg8+**

The horrible 34. Ne6?? Bxe6 35. dxe6 Qxh5+ would be a sad way to lose a brilliant game.

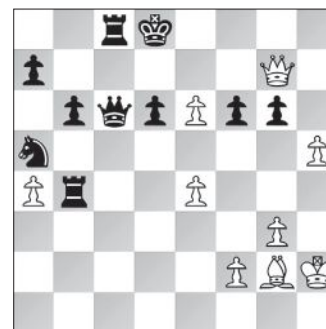
**34. ... Ke7 35. Qg7+**

It is important to include these checks because if I play Nd4-e6 immediately, he can capture the knight and then play ... Qc5xh5+, trading the queens.

**35. ... Kd8 36. Ne6+!**

This looks like a terrible mistake, but even though White is down two rooks, he is still winning.

**36. ... Bxe6 37. dxe6 Qc6**



**38. e5?!**

Nearly spoiling the win. I had the spectacular 38. e7+! and here (a) 38. ... Kd7 is the main move when 39. Bh3+! is the only winning move, i.e., 39. ... f5 40. exf5! Re8 41. f6+ Kc7 42. f7 and White's pawns are too strong. Here 42. ... Rxe7 43. f8=Q Rxc7 44. Qc8 mate is a beautiful way to finish the game.

Alternatives: (b) 38. ... Kc7 39. e8=Q+ Kb8 40. Qef7 is completely destroying with two queens!, while (c) 38. ... Ke8 is met with 39. Bh3 f5 40. hxg6 with Qg7-f8+ and Bh3xf5+ next, winning.

**38. ... Qe8??**

Once again, meeting a mistake with a mistake, and giving me a chance to redeem myself.

If he had played 38. ... d5 39. e7+ Kd7 40. exf6 (40. Bh3+? f5) 40. ... Rh4+! is the only saving move, and I had missed it when I played 38. e5. This would have been a sad way to ruin half a point and a memorable game! After a series of forced moves, Black saves the day with a perpetual: 41. gxh4 Qd6+ 42. Kg1 Rc1+ 43. Bf1 Qe6 and there's no escaping the draw.

**39. exf6!**

And now I have everything guarded, so it's time to prepare for a newborn queen.

**39. ... Rc5**

The last try, but everything is defended beautifully.

**40. f7 Rxh5+ 41. Bh3 Rxh3+ 42. Kxh3 Qxe6+ 43. Kh2 Qxf7**

If 43. ... Rh4+ 44. gxh4 Qe5+ 45. Qxe5 dxe5 46. f8=Q+ White gets a new queen and wins the game.

**44. Qxf7**

Now it's just mopping up.

**44. ... Nc6 45. Qxg6 Kd7 46. Qf7+ Ne7 47. f4 Rxa4 48. f5 Re4 49. f6 a5 50. fxe7 Rxe7 51. Qd5 Kc7 52. g4 Re5 53. Qg8 a4 54. Qc4+, Black resigned. ♠**