

# Searching for Excellence: An Interview with Josh Waitzkin

THP editor Jeff Danielian interviewed Josh Waitzkin, known throughout gifted circles as the one who searched for Bobby Fischer. He is the author of *The Art of Learning* (2007, Free Press). Josh will be the keynote for the NAGC convention opening general session in St. Louis.



**Q** You make reference to creativity in your book stating that one must “Study form to leave form.” You recognize adversity as a tremendous source of creative inspiration, and you say that you find yourself in “Flow” at times. What advice would you give to teachers looking to have students experience and develop their own creativity?

**A** In my mind creativity is primarily an act of self-expression. The greatest artists and performers I have known or studied—in fields as diverse as chess, martial arts, business, finance, professional sports, music, medicine, philosophy, writing—have worked tirelessly to understand who they are and to embody it in their work. They live and create in harmony with themselves. What is essential for these virtuosos is not the accumulation of knowledge so much as the release of obstructions to their natural self-expression.

You mentioned my principle of “form to leave form” or “numbers to leave numbers.” Well, this is where it comes in. Students need to have a technical foundation in what they are learning before they can integrate ideas into creative acts of self-expression. I come from the world of chess, which demands tremendous technical solidity, so I would never deny the need for a sound foundation. A major problem with our educational system is that it has gotten so consumed with the accu-

mulation of knowledge that it has neglected that beautiful crystallization experience that high-level learning and performance are all about. Students are being force-fed information, but they’re not being taught what to do with it, let alone how what they are learning can become an extension of who they are. Another way of putting this is that it is not memorized trivia that will stick with us in life, but the experiences that hold things together. This “glue” is also what is exciting, and students need to spend as much time as possible utilizing it.

**Q** It is often said that what most gifted students need most is a friend. You attended the Professional Children’s School. I’m wondering if PCS was a positive or negative experience and what, if anything, you took away from it?

**A** PCS was tremendous for me. And you are definitely on to something because the empathy of the school’s very premise did a lot to relieve the isolation I had felt at Dalton—an elite private school in NYC that I had attended previously. Dalton is a school that many Manhattan parents are ravenous about getting their kids into, but it was not well-equipped to deal with the unusual nature of my life. For example, once I traveled to India for 3 weeks to represent the U.S. in the Under-21 World Chess Championship,

and when I returned my 10th grade math teacher made me take the test my first day back, even though I had not been in class for one day in which the material was covered. This kind of rigidity can kill the spirit of a child with an unorthodox life or learning style. It can also teach the wrong lessons—I got very good at bluffing through tests, but this should not be what students are forced to do.

PCS was flexible. When I traveled to a tournament teachers gave me material to work on abroad, and allowed me to catch up when I returned. This was a school attended by the city’s top actors, dancers, musicians, young entrepreneurs, athletes—a melting pot of driven, eccentric, passionate kids. We all had our strengths and our weaknesses. There was no conformist mold other than perhaps nonconformity, and there was a profound sense of community centered on being both driven and haunted by our passions. As for teaching style, my favorite high school experience was a tiny creative writing class taught by a woman named Shellie Sclan. Let’s just say that we were learning to write by learning about ourselves.

**Q** Speaking of teachers, you speak about educators and their role in helping students understand their own energy and self-efficacy. Two quotes from your book speak to many in the

**field of gifted and talented education: “As children, we might be told to concentrate by parents and teachers, and then be reprimanded if we look off into the stars. So the child learns to associate not focusing with being bad.” And, “He had to teach me to be more disciplined without dampening my love for chess or suppressing my natural voice. Many teachers have no feel for this balance and try to force their students into cookie-cutter molds.” How might we throw away the molds and seek to provide individualized instruction?**

**A** In my opinion this is the single biggest question in education. Students need to search for who they are as both learners and performers, and from that process of discovery the creative act can emerge. The primary advice I would give to teachers is to develop their listening powers. Don’t teach at students. Don’t jam them all into the same mold. Listen to them and help them learn how to listen to themselves. A teacher should be a guide in the journey of self-discovery, not just an information pump. Of course when you are dealing with gifted children, and I use that term understanding its huge range, this idea becomes even more critical—students must learn how to embrace the nuance of their minds.

One problem I see continuously with teachers and parents is that they talk one talk and walk another walk. Smart kids see through this hypocrisy and trust is often lost. So you’ll have a parent, for example, who talks about process but focuses all feedback on results and is clearly reacting emotionally to short-term results over quality of effort (both in their children’s lives and their own). Similarly, teachers may understand the importance of different learning styles, but will fail to work tirelessly on the consistent presence and improvisational spirit it takes to run a classroom with the listening-first philosophy. So they’ll speak about visual, auditory, and kinesthetic learning, but they will only teach in language associated with their own learning style—which by definition will alienate over half the classroom,

especially when teachers tend to favor students who are similar to them (a real shame, but sadly prevalent). So if I had to boil down my thoughts on this subject to one phrase for teachers and parents, it would be: *Walk the Talk*. If you truly listen, students will learn to listen. If you truly focus on process over short-term results, so will students. If you are willing to admit your mistakes, kids will see that it is okay to be imperfect.

**Q** **Many high-ability students often find themselves in situations where they have pushed themselves too hard, which can lead to a meltdown. I know you speak of a “careful balance” associated with this and I wonder what you would say to students who feel that there is too much on their plates.**

**A** This is such a tricky question to answer without treating each case individually. That said, in general, I agree that many high-ability students have too much on their plates. Whether the pressure is internal or external, the result is a loss of love for learning, which is a tragedy. There is no question that we need to push our limits to grow, but we can’t push so hard that we melt down. Here are a few fundamental principles I would mention: 1) Meltdowns often happen when we are either not doing what we love, or are not doing things with a process that we love. 2) Be sure to exercise. 3) Simplify! Take on less at once and do it with more depth. This both reduces anxiety and is a much healthier way to learn. 4) Don’t forget to have fun! Perhaps this is the most important idea. Play should be a part of everyone’s life, but, unfortunately, driven children and the people around them have a habit of forgetting this.

**Q** **One of the toughest challenges for teachers in the field is the selection, modification, and delivery of curriculum. You speak frequently about understanding the fundamentals and foundation of a certain discipline in order to achieve mastery. One of the**

**many exciting “principles” in your developing coursework deals with these ideas under the tentative heading Advanced Learning. I wonder if you could elaborate on what the introductory discussion for the start of a class in this area would look like.**

**A** Developing non-prescriptive curriculum is a huge challenge, almost a contradiction in terms, and I am still very much a work in progress on this issue—so forgive me for answering this question somewhat abstractly. In essence, advanced learning centers around dissolving false constructs, dogma, and the artificial barriers we have created between the various aspects of our lives. Once these walls come down, thematic connections begin to emerge. We combine ideas in ways that we hadn’t previously considered. The intuitive mind takes a primary role, and growth in one subject translates into growth in other subjects—this is when things get really exciting.

So developing a nose for thematic interconnectedness is the goal, and the gateway is learning how to draw principles out of complexity. All this is moving towards the idea that any curriculum I would endorse or create would be centered around using a discipline (math, science, chess, music, athletics, or literature for example) to explore principles that connect to other disciplines. So students would simultaneously be learning about a subject and about learning itself—and most importantly, they would be actively engaged in the creative search for meaning.

**Q** **We look forward to hearing you in St. Louis. Any final thoughts to add that may help us prepare for your presentation?**

**A** One thing I would say is that I don’t intend for this to be a one-sided talk, but a dynamic discussion. The more people come with burning ideas, challenges, and questions, the more we will all get out of it—I greatly look forward to diving in! ■