



(Photo: Luke Velloti)

What Makes You So Smart, Teenage International Chess Master?

BY NOAH DAVIS • March 19, 2014

Luke Velloti is going to rule the world.

This is the partial text of an email I received while trying to schedule an interview with University of California-Los Angeles freshman Luke Velloti:

"I am taking 23 credits, so there is always homework or a test to study for. I also train the chess team, and I am the treasurer of the Stamps Scholars Society (which gave me my merit scholarship to study here at UCLA), and I am a member of Engineers Without Borders with a project to work on."

Luke Velloti is an international chess master (one step below grandmaster), a three-time national champion, and a double major in math and computer science. He wants to be a doctor.

Luke Velloti is 14 years old.

Was there a time where you remember not being one of the smartest people in the room?

I don't think so. I went to a gifted school, and I was the youngest student ever to enroll in it. I was the only kindergartner. When I was in elementary school, I was always separated from the other students in math.

Have things always come easily to you in an academic setting?

Math and science aren't that hard for me. I struggle with English. For chess, I've studied so much. I started playing when I was four, and I've studied probably for at least two hours a day every day since then. It's a lot of hard work.

"I think I might be able to be one of the strongest chess players in the world, but I don't feel like I'm actually helping humanity by doing that. I feel like I could help people a lot more than by becoming a chess player."

What do you find difficult about English?

I actually have an English paper due today. It's hard for me to come up with ideas. I don't know why. It's just not my thing.

But you're still pursuing it and still trying to improve?

I want to be good at as many things as I can. I have to work very hard with English to try to make my papers good and to be a good writer.

Is UCLA hard for you?

The classes are hard. I'm taking two math classes that are honors classes. There are only 20 students in them as opposed to 300 in the normal class, so it's a lot harder. I like

that because I'm with the smartest people here. I'm taking physics—that's pretty hard but not too bad. The computer science isn't too bad. I'm also taking some online classes. I'm able to take more classes than I was in Boise, and I can go as fast as I want. That's why I wanted to leave Boise at a young age. If I had stayed in Idaho for four more years as a normal student, I would have had to take art classes, which I don't really enjoy. I wanted to come here because I knew I could take the classes that I would enjoy the most.

You're majoring in math and computer science. Will you specialize in those as you get further along toward your degree?

The only reason I'm taking English is because it's a requirement. I'll probably specialize. I'll take some biology classes, too, because I want to go to medical school. Math and computer science, especially computer science, have become much more common in medicine these days with things like medical imaging.

I don't want to become a professional chess player. I think I might be able to be one of the strongest chess players in the world, but I don't feel like I'm actually helping humanity by doing that. I feel like I could help people a lot more than by becoming a chess player.

How far do you want to take the chess? You can only divide and conquer for so long.

I want to become a chess grandmaster. Right now, I'm an international master, which is one step below grandmaster. After I become a grandmaster, I'll probably continue to play but not that much. In September, I'm going to go to the World Youth Chess Championships in Durban, South Africa. I'll be playing in the under-16 section. My goal is to study enough for that to be able to win. I have never been able to go before because it has always been during the school year and it's three weeks long. It's really hard to miss three weeks of school. But UCLA starts in October this upcoming year, so I should be able to make it.

You keep really busy. Do you get bored easily?

If I'm not doing something, then I do get bored. I like to keep busy. Whenever I was done with schoolwork, I would study chess. I feel like I can learn a lot of things, so I think I should learn as many things as I can. Before I went to college, a lot of my teachers said I would figure out something that no one has ever figured out before. I don't know what that is yet, but I want to learn a lot of things to know what that's going to be.

Is that a goal?

Yeah. To figure out something no one ever has.

[above picture](#)

[Luke entered Treasure Valley Math & Science Center as a third grader, and quickly rose to the top of his class.](#)

Your family has been really supportive, moving out to Los Angeles when you went to school. And your brother is a freshman as well.

My mom lives with us. We live in an apartment a little south of UCLA. My parents have been extremely helpful. My dad was the one who taught me chess initially. He started teaching me when I was four. It would seem like it would be hard to get a four-year-old into chess, but my dad was able to make it really fun for me. We'd play games like Monopoly chess, or I'd solve a chess puzzle and then we'd play a round of Monopoly. We did a lot of adventure stories. He's continued to help me throughout my entire chess career, although now I'm better than him—but he's proud of me. My mom doesn't play that much chess, but she's really supportive.

It's really nice having my brother here at UCLA. It would be hard without him here. It's good to have him here. We are really close.

How would it be hard without him?

He's a lot more sociable than me. He has a lot of friends. He introduces me to them. I don't know if I'd be able to do it without him. Sometimes we help each other with homework. Last quarter, we were taking a chemistry class together. We were always helping each other.

It sounds like he's a pretty smart guy as well.

He's a bioengineer at UCLA. He's the normal age, but he's still really smart. He's the reason I was able to go to college so early. When he was in fifth grade, he took a test to get into a special school. The next year, my parents decided that I should take the test as well. I got in as a third grader, but a lot of the classes I was taking were really hard for me. He was really helpful. He's a great brother.

Are there any subjects that intimidate you?

I've been able to master pretty much everything that's been put before me in the past. If I work at something for long enough, eventually I'll get good at it. I've never been that intimidated by anything; I just want to learn as much as possible.



Have you failed at anything academically?

I don't think so. The worst I've ever done on a test was a math competition. There was an introductory round and then the top five percent in the nation went on to take another test. They took the top five percent of that test, and gave us another, extremely hard test. You got nine hours for six questions. I didn't do very well on that. I wouldn't say I failed because I still made it to that point, but it was the worst I've ever done. Out of the 42 points on that test, I only got one. I still beat 30 people out of the 200 people who were taking it.

Who should I talk to next?

Jim Grossman from Sun Valley, Idaho. He is an extremely successful businessman, a world gold medalist kayaker, a photographer, and he loves chess—so he has to be smart, right? He also organized and ran the 2009 Winter Special Olympics in Boise.



Noah Davis is a writer living in Brooklyn. Follow him on Twitter [@noahedavis](https://twitter.com/noahedavis).