

IN MEMORIAM: GREGORY HJORTH
1963–2011

Greg Hjorth suddenly and unexpectedly passed away on January 13, 2011 in Melbourne, at the age of 47, due to a heart attack. He was a remarkable person, a chess prodigy who competed internationally at a high level until his early 20s, then devoted himself to the study of philosophy and mathematics and went on to become a leading figure in the field of mathematical logic and its applications.

Hjorth was born in Melbourne on June 14, 1963, the son of Dr. Robert Hjorth, a neurologist, and Noela Hjorth, an artist. His sister Dr. Larissa Hjorth is a lecturer in the School of Media and Communication at the Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology. He went to school in London, while his father was working there, and then in Melbourne, where he attended Preshil School (roughly grades 4–8) and then St. Leonards College (roughly grades 9–12).

In his early teens, Hjorth became (in his own words) “madly obsessed with chess” and went on to compete in Australia and internationally over the next decade or so. At age 16 he got 2nd place in the 1979–80 Australian Championship and started his international career. In 1980 he played against Gary Kasparov, the later world chess champion (also aged 17 at that time), in Dortmund, in what was described as a hard fought game, which he eventually lost.

In 1982, 1985 and 1987 he won the annual Doeberl Cup, a major Australian Chess Tournament, and in 1983 he tied for first in the British Commonwealth Chess Championship. For a while he was ranked number three in Australia, with only two professional chess players ahead of him. Greg represented Australia in three World Chess Olympiads in the 1980’s and gained the International Master title in 1984. It is widely believed that if he had continued he would have inevitably achieved the title of International Grand Master. As far as I can tell, his highest FIDE rating was 2440, which would be among the highest ever achieved, at least in recent decades, by a professional research mathematician.

His friend and chess colleague Guy West described him as follows:

“Greg was a chess player with a deep appreciation of the artistic side of the game and he played games of great beauty and subtlety.”

One can also say that this characterizes much of his mathematics.