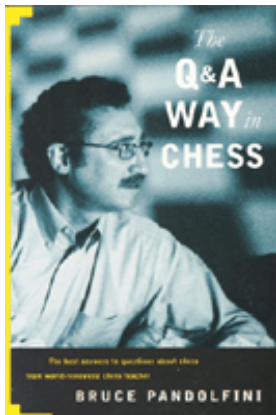




COLUMNISTS

The Q & A Way

Bruce Pandolfini



CHESS THEATRE

What if "Endgame" Were "End Game"?

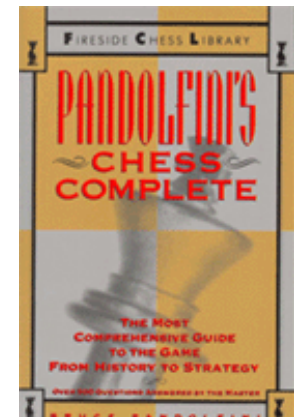
Question In Samuel Beckett's book *Murphy* he has an actual chess game in Descriptive Notation. The game does not seem very good, and I do not understand why he included it. But he also wrote a play called *Endgame* (notice, he didn't call it *End Game*), so he must have been a player. He also refers to chess in *Waiting for Godot*. Do you know anything about that, whether he was a chess player or not? He must have had some interest in it, don't you think? **Harold Wain (USA)**

Answer Perhaps he was using the game as a metaphor for lifelessness, sterility, artificiality or death. But, as you say, it's not a good game. In fact, it's a ridiculous game. I enclose a [link](#) to it for the amusement of the readership. Maybe you also have a point about the title. He could have called it "End Game." And true, he might have had an interest in chess, the kind needed to motivate a writer of English to translate his stuff into French and then back into English. Maybe that means he played chess, maybe not.

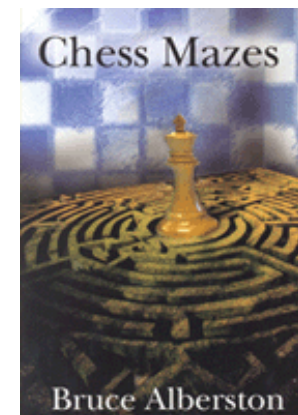
Question The expression "critical square" is used very often in new endgame speak. As hard as I looked in Reuben Fine's *Basic Chess Endings* and several other endgame texts from the past, I could not find this term. What I have been able to figure out is that both sides try to occupy these squares. Can you say something about what is a critical square and its importance? How come Fine doesn't mention it? Did Lasker, Capablanca, Rubinstein, Reshevsky, and Alekhine rely on critical squares? Thank you. **Reggie Wilcott (USA)**

Answer Some people call them critical squares, others call them key squares. The terms refer to the same ideas. A critical or key square is one such that its occupation by the aggressive king ensures victory. Every passed pawn has a series of critical squares relating to it, but the term also

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has relevance in more intricate situations, such as basic outflanking positions, or others with fixed pawn complexes and corresponding square landmines. For the most part the side attempting to win aims to occupy a critical square. The defending king doesn't have to occupy that square. Rather, by use of the opposition and timely maneuver, the defending king tries to prevent the other side's king from such occupation.

You can find good explanations for the concept in Averbakh's *Pawn Endings*, as well as in *Dvoretsky's Endgame Manual*. But you're right: it doesn't appear in Fine's *Basic Chess Endings*, including the revised version done by Pal Benko. Understandably, adding critical square theory would have required Benko to rewrite a section of the book, changing the arc of Fine's classic. Why didn't Fine include the concept in his presentation? While the idea was already out there (Durand in 1860 and 1874; Dedrle in 1921 and 1925; and Grigoriev in 1922 – all wrote about it), maybe he didn't know of the concept's existence. On the other hand, one doesn't need a foundation in critical square theory, as nice as it is, to play most king-and-pawn endings correctly. Fine reached the top without it. I suspect that Lasker, Capablanca, Rubinstein and Reshevsky didn't necessarily know much about it either, and they certainly were true masters of the endgame. I wouldn't, however, make the same statement for Alekhine. Like each of them, he was also an endgame wizard, but unlike the others, he seemed to study and know everything.

Question Through patient work, and various recent articles and endgame books (Karsten Müller's *Fundamental Chess Endings*, for example) I think I have finally learned how to play the bishop-and-knight basic mate. But I still can't figure out the win with king and queen vs. king and rook. I think I understand the stalemate shots, and I know how to win from Philidor's position, but the rest of it seems to be a tactical mystery for me. Why is it so difficult? What can I do to get better at it? It's been humiliating, to say the least. **Robert Henderson (USA)**

Answer Yeah, it is fairly difficult, even after you "know" what you're doing. As a rule most players have been taught to keep the rook close to its king, so that it wouldn't be lost. But for quite awhile analysis has shown that the rook can indeed leave the king's protection at crucial moments and threaten havoc or merely become pesky. It can, for instance, establish fourth, third, and second rank cutoffs that are not so easy to handle, if you're not careful and attuned to niceties in the position. There are also a number of counterintuitive queen moves, where the queen doesn't automatically try to get up close to the enemy king, but instead

by Bruce Alberston



[Common Sense in Chess](#)

by Emanuel Lasker

seeks a somewhat distant placement so that by a series of checks it can more easily connect lines with a remotely positioned rook, separated from its king, and thereby pick it off with a forking check. Actually, the book you've already recommended by Karsten Müller is excellent for outlining some of the key positions (try pages 331-333 for starters).

As far as learning it better, I would rely on lots of diagrams. Starting with final positions, and reducing them to small sequences, I would diagram every single idea and work backwards, going from the last move of the series to the forcing situation where it begins. You can cut out and paste or tape these diagrams to notebook pages in succession. Just keep adding to the mountain of material, always working backward and extending the chains further, until you really become familiar with many of the notable branching points. If you need a second or third book, that's fine. As you repeatedly view the linked concatenations don't be surprised if you find your skill increasing as well. Finally, you can practice your growing expertise on the ICC. It offers an option where you can play out random queen vs. rook positions against (I believe) its super Fritz program. Try that a few times and learn what real humiliation is. But do it often and I defy you not to learn much more about the queen vs. rook ending.

Question I am having trouble finding chess games to study. Grandmaster chess games are hard to understand. I never get into those positions. (I am about a 1400 player.) The notes, when there are any, are full of long variations I cannot play out, and when I play them out anyway, I cannot understand them in many cases. I have so many questions that are never answered by what happens afterwards. Yet everybody says to play over the games of grandmasters. It seems to me to be wiser to play over games between amateurs, who get into my usual openings and middlegames. Which are the best games to play over: those between amateurs or those between grandmasters? Thank you for your time in considering this question. **Thomas Grimes (USA)**

Answer Neither. Nor does every authority suggest that the best kinds of games to play over are those between grandmasters. Many average players complain about such recommendations. They typically say that the games of grandmasters, with few exceptions, are so full of subtlety that it's impossible to understand them. Furthermore, so much is taken for granted, and left out of the notes, that it becomes a jigsaw to puzzle out the inner coherence of play. Moreover, the kinds of mistakes that amateurs tend to make almost never occur in contests between strong players. Practically everything that appears in grandmaster play, from the

cutting edge sharpness of opening give-and-take, to the global consistency of middlegame planning and logic, to the artfulness of goal-oriented simplicity and precise execution of endgame themes, are alien to games played between average players.

But the games of amateurs, while closer to home, don't really provide the answers either. Those encounters are fraught with similar looking positions and notions – the very kinds likely to materialize in one's own play – yet those circumstances are often the wrong paradigms to emulate. And when mistakes are made, errors from which it might be possible to learn with exact response, the proper refutations are often overlooked, so that there's little education to be garnered from such aimless meandering, with its missed opportunities. Without pertinent exploitation, don't count on meaningful education.

Rather than games between grandmasters, or games between amateurs, it's long been known that the best examples to play over and study are mixed games – that is, games between an amateur and a strong player. The amateur is likely to play into familiar circumstances, and the strong player is probably going to exploit wrong or casual activity. Thus you can identify with the play and also learn from it by virtue of how the strong player takes advantage of it. That makes for powerful learning, and accordingly those are the types of clear-cut chess games that one should endeavor to see and play through.

But there's a problem: there aren't so many chances in life to see strong players crush average or weak ones. Few books bother to dwell on those kinds of imbalanced battles. Some of the Reinfeld books explore how the amateur thinks. And there are also those Euwe and Meiden books, which actually show the development of a non-master to the extent where he eventually beats the master. The two books I recall in particular are *Road to Chess Mastery* and *Chess Master vs. Chess Amateur*. You might check out those titles, since both offer the types of examples we've been talking about.

You could also try tuning into a version of chess-play that many of us ignore for its qualities: chess exhibitions. They generally enable ordinary players – and observers – to face off against and/or learn from strong players, such as masters and beyond. While the play doesn't always reflect the best chess, mainly because of the lack of time for careful analysis, it does furnish lots of, albeit, superficial but typical exploitations of blunderous and inexact play. That is, for most instances, the strong

players being unable to analyze for too long, usually reply in ways that are known to be right in principle, that address the overwhelming bulk of situations similar to the ones before them. Naturally, even strong players, if they don't analyze as carefully and precisely as they should, not having sufficient time, risk missing good moves and increase chances to fall into traps. But for the most part, by relying on principles, flexibility, and impregnable structures, strong exhibitors generally make sound decisions, enabling them to save time by having to analyze less. So, when such possibilities exist, and you know of an upcoming exhibition, it makes sense at least to observe the expected twenty, thirty, or forty or so odd boards most exhibitions include. You'll be surprised at how much you can learn.

Question Chess writers and masters often advocate studying one's own games and then annotating them. I have to laugh at this because I have no idea how to do it. Whenever I try analyzing my own play the results are ridiculous. I get bogged down in variations and I never know what to analyze. I wind up analyzing everything and that takes a year and I am still not sure that I learned anything or got any stronger because of it. How should I analyze my own games? How much time should I put into it? Is there a formula to follow that might help me? Help! **Johnny Munkievich (USA)**

Answer Why doesn't somebody ask a hard one? Actually, there are many ways to try to analyze your own games, and a method that suits one analyst may fail abysmally for another. Plus teachers in general don't like to lay out convenient formulas (actually, we do, but let's not get into that) which show how to play chess and give the student something like the feeling of power over the universe. So, as you might expect by now, I'm not going to attempt to do that here. Oh, I'm going to offer a step-by-step approach, but I must caution you that it only works when it does.

Perhaps you can try the following line of attack. After you've played a game (you know, when you're home), play through the game again. In doing this try to recall what happened, why you did certain things, what you were concerned about, and your thoughts as they come back to you. Play over it again, this time indicating on a notepad places you think to be more relevant for exploration and consideration, where you think it might be helpful to analyze further and comment upon. Don't worry so much at first. As you do more of this you'll get better at it, with a greater sense of when and when not to analyze more deeply. You will be aided in this adventure if you rely on a nice piece of software, such as *Chessbase*. It

will make your tasks more convenient and certainly clearer and more thorough.

Then play through the game another time, analyzing especially at the places you thought to be more relevant, filling in the variations (which, again, are easier to do with Chessbase or a comparable tool) and also making sure to insert verbal articulations of your ideas. This last step, putting your thoughts into words (as advocated by Alexander Kotov in *Think Like a Grandmaster* and elsewhere) is very important for establishing command over your thinking. As a rule of thumb, take at least between 5-10 minutes for each key position, though don't be afraid to go much longer if you're enjoying it and feeling as if you're getting something from the expenditure of time and effort. If you feel otherwise simply move on. After having done this, analyzed and filled in verbal commentary, play chess god and try to connect the ideas in a kind of narrative, so that it tells a story. I realize the story could be a horror show: worse, that it might make little sense at all. But it's a start, and it will incline you toward more organized and cohesive thinking.

Once you've fine tuned the effort, write a paragraph up front describing the game, as if you're introducing it in a game collection. That is, pretend to be grandmaster Larry Evans, whose brilliance in popularizing and clear summarizing expression enabled Fischer's *My Sixty Memorable Games* to be an even more wonderful masterpiece than it would have been. Then jump to the end and provide another paragraph expatiating on the game's fine points, what you got out of it, and what you think you need to work on. Conclude by giving the game a titling phrase that describes the experience, and finally play through the entire thing one more time for pleasure. While the game may not be glorious (who knows, it might be), there's no reason you can't enjoy the product of all your labors. Do this often enough, modifying the approach to suit your particular needs and style, and, to be sure, it's doubtful your overall game wouldn't improve, not to mention what it might do for your thinking and writing.

Question of the Month

The best answers will be published in the next column.

Is chess the world's best game?

Reader's Responses from Last Month

We received many responses to the [April](#) question of the month:

Of all true opening gambits, which one is the soundest?

Among the many interesting replies were the following:

Mark Bartzvi (USA) writes: What do you mean by opening gambit?
Aren't you being a bit obscure?

Terrance Jones (USA) writes: I certainly don't know all the gambits, so I speak out of relative ignorance. Of the gambits I know of, I would say the Evans Gambit is quite sound. I don't see the Piano played very often, especially at the higher levels, but the Evans seems fairly sound to me. "Soundest" covers a lot of ground of course. It seems I recall Kasparov using it a few times (about 15 -20 years ago?). I recall it caused a bit of a hubbub at the time. When I was first learning chess in the 50's, I wrongly thought it was named after Larry Evans who, of course, went on to become GM Larry Evans. It was many years later before I learned of Captain Evans. Side bar: Thank you for this question! It brought back a flood of memories for me. As a youngster I fondly recall traipsing around the neighborhood with my pieces and board playing chess with all the other kids. In fact there was a constant traffic of kids with chess boards roaming from house to house over summer vacation. I'd gotten one of those Lowe's renaissance chess sets (which I still have) for Christmas when I was about 8 years old - I was on top of the world! Most of my friends had those "cheap sets" from the dime store around the corner! Needless to say I was beaten more than a few times by players owning the "cheap sets," which of course is what I had before that Christmas. One house up the street had a grape arbor in the backyard and it was not uncommon for a group of us to be playing chess in the coolness of the arbor sucking on an RC Cola or Nehi Grape Soda without a care in the world. I grew up in an Eastern European neighborhood back East, primarily Polish and Ukrainian, and chess played a large role in our lives - well before the Fischer phenomenon. Oh to be young again!

The Q & A Way is based in large part on readers' questions. Do you have a question about preparation, strategy or tactics? Submit your questions (with you full name and country of residence please) and perhaps Bruce will reply in his next **ChessCafe.com** column...

[Yes, I have a question for Bruce!](#)

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