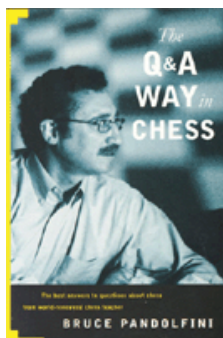




COLUMNISTS

The Q & A Way

Bruce Pandolfini


CHESSTHEATRE

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Compute This

Question I've been searching the Internet for a few hours and haven't found anything directly answering my question. Is it more helpful to play against computer players rated 200 points more than you, or 400, or 800? If I feel up to it, and I'm not getting discouraged in the least, will I learn much from playing against my computer on the strongest level? My only concern about that is that I would get good at seeing tactics against me, but not seeing tactics I can play against my opponent. So even if I did play the strongest computer players I would try to keep a healthy mix. Of course, it's hard to get games with rating differences that enormously huge in real life. **Chris Capel (USA)**

Answer I wouldn't distinguish between computer opponents and human opponents, whether they pass the Turing Test or not. The best players to practice with, human or otherwise, are those about one USCF class above you. They know more than you do, but not that much more (I'm trying to be optimistic) and thus provide a meaningful challenge. Yet, you still have a chance to beat them, and for the archetypal chess player, that's sufficient incentive. Furthermore, the things you have to learn to get to their level (that is, one 200 points above you) are probably going to become evident from their play.

Thus, you'll begin to see close up what those slightly more advanced notions are. It's likely, if you play enough, you'll even begin to make use of some of those ideas as you also learn to cope with those concepts better when they're unleashed against you. So we're suggesting that you seek opponents, whether human or computerized, real or imaginary, something like 0-200 points above you. Players stronger than that are generally too strong. You won't necessarily understand all the reasons they're beating you, and you won't beat them either. Sure you can mix it up, like real life, but for the most part, stay within a differential of roughly 200 points.

Question I am new to chess and looking for a good software package to assist me in my studies. Could you explain some of the differences in some of the most commonly used programs? **Tony Hendricks (USA)**

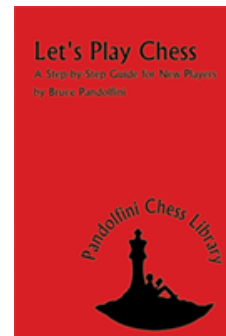
Answer This domain, like many others related to the game of chess, is a little beyond me. Nevertheless, there are many fine products out there and they offer a variety of different uses. Some give you the opportunity to play chess, others to study and practice chess, and some to teach and organize chess activities.

For playing, many people have enjoyed the *Chessmaster* series of products. Besides a range of playing levels, they also offer a bunch of helpful tutorials. Others like *Fritz*, which combines a powerful playing engine and is aligned with *Chessbase*, is an extraordinary search weapon to be employed for study, enlightenment and pleasure. Then there's Chess Assistant's *Rybka*, which has won wide appeal recently, and many strong players use it as an integral part of their program. The Informant series is pretty good for preparation, and so is *Chess Mentor*. To teach or set up and run school programs, give Think Like a King serious consideration. If you want to find out more about these products, simply go to an [online service](#), such as that of the ChessCafe.com, and see what's available. Some aficionados, perhaps misguidedly, have bought entire catalogs of these offerings. I've heard about these people, and I think I've even met up with a few of them in my daily doings, but I don't feel it's right to name names.

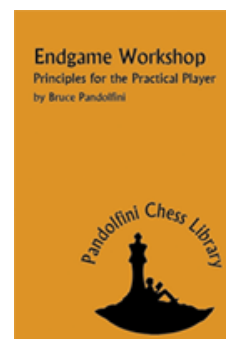
Question I am a B player (1720). Do you think that the wide variety of chess DVDs on the market today and wide variety of books can take the place of an instructor? I live in an area where there aren't any that I know of. I have heard of online teachers and wonder if that is something to look into. I would appreciate your comments. Also I regularly read your column and have many of your books, which have helped me a lot! **Jim Thomason (USA)**

Answer I'm not sure that anything can take the place of a good instructor, sitting across from you on a regular basis. But then a face-to-face human instructor, regardless of his or her ability, can't take the place of excellent software. The software is faster. It's more organized. It generally has larger databases to draw upon. It doesn't make trivial mistakes based on oversight or forgetting. It's tireless, and never shows up late, inebriated, or with the flu. It's willing to help you at any time of day or night. It

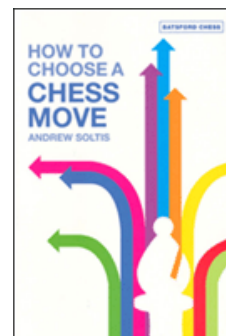
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[Let's Play Chess](#)
by Bruce Pandolfini



[Endgame Workshop](#)
by Bruce Pandolfini



[How to Choose a
Chess Move](#)
by Andy Soltis

doesn't mind doing the same things over and over, till you get it right or for your satisfaction. Its feelings are never hurt no matter what you say or how badly you act. You don't have to pay for it again and again. You buy it and you own it. There are no human instructors like that.

Still, why rely on just one or the other, just instructor or just software? You can take occasional lessons on the Internet to supplement your other work and to ask pertinent questions arising from your other efforts (jot down ideas, questions, and problems as they arise so you don't forget them). Who should you take Internet lessons from? I would try a lesson or two with several different teachers and see how it goes.

If you like the lesson, stay with that teacher and follow-up on some kind regular basis. If you don't like it, try someone else. It probably won't be a waste, even if it doesn't wind up being appealing. Practically every chess teacher, even an incredibly clueless one, will probably have at least one good lesson in the arsenal, and that's usually the first lesson presented. Besides, if the lesson fails, you will definitely learn something anyway: that you shouldn't take any more lessons with that teacher.

Question I always enjoy your column and books. As a chess instructor in Toronto, I would be interested to read your observations on playing Blitz chess. Is it beneficial for your game? I understand moderation is good. Playing unusual openings is good. What about chess 960? Can it be beneficial? **John Henry (Canada)**

Answer It's thought that excessive blitz chess can be a problem for a number of reasons. It typically doesn't afford one enough time to think and analyze, especially at the ridiculously fast controls of 1-3 minutes. It encourages superficial, reactive play, a kind of stimulus-response thing, better suited to pastimes like tic-tac-toe. By emphasizing speed over content, it negates what chess is supposed to be about: cool and calm reflective thinking under fire. Play it too much and it may instill permanently bad habits that plague one's serious game forever and ever.

On the other hand, blitz chess gives one the opportunity to play many more games in a session, with all kinds of increased learning possibilities. When used for training purposes, it can serve as a laboratory for new ideas, particularly to practice and try out unfamiliar, yet unexplored variations and systems. You mention unusual openings, and it's the realm of blitz chess that can allow you to take chances and see how things go. Then there's plain old fun. Blitz can afford many pleasurable moments, where one can hang out with a group of friends and have a good time. Maybe you've hit upon the right idea when you talk about moderation, aiming for Aristotelian mean and balance. That is, it's okay to play blitz, but not all the time, as if it's the only chess in town. Don't rely on it, and don't play too much of it immediately before entering important competitions (assuming you're about to play in a blitz tournament). Otherwise, the carry-over effect could be devastating.

You also ask about chess960 (also known as FischerRandom Chess). What about it? Surely, in order to play it well, you still have to draw upon sound principles. And, like regular chess, you're not going to be successful at it unless you look ahead and constantly analyze, relying on planning, logic, and directed play. Moreover, when playing under these different setups, things can't be taken for granted as much and one is forced to be more attentive.

Yet here too one should be careful. Play it too much before standard tournament activity and it may exert a deleterious influence, where one forgets which game he or she is playing. But look, what's wrong with normal chess. I hear that can be fun, too, and playing normal chess doesn't entail any baggage that might impair one's normal chess. Hey, I think I'm going to go and play a few games on the Internet. Yeah, at ludicrously fast time controls.

Question I am a chess player from South Africa with a rating of about 1600. I play a lot of Internet chess games, as there aren't any clubs close to where I live. I do play in a tournament about once a year, which I enjoy. At these tournaments, I see a lot of average players practicing and evaluating their openings quite deeply. My thoughts on this are that if your basics are strong and you can apply the fundamentals in the middlegame, you don't have to have such a deep opening knowledge against other average players (1500 to 1700). Am I mistaken in thinking that? I do have my fair share of opening books, but I only read them in bed, so no real playing it out. In fact, I once played a 2100 rated player on only my basic opening knowledge, and the game came to a knife's edge at around move fifty-three, where I chose the wrong square for my king, but the game could have gone either way. This just strengthens my suspicions that deep analysis of openings is a bit overrated for average players. What are your thoughts on this? **Michael Visagie (South Africa)**

Answer Essentially, I agree with you, but with a clarification. If well grounded in fundamentals, you should generally be equipped sufficiently to work your way through most openings to reach a playable middlegame,

without having studied the opening variation at hand deeply, though I would have concerns. For one, I'm not certain what's meant by "average player." If 1700 reflects average play, as you suggest, (which it doesn't), perhaps you're right. More likely what you're saying applies more to 1500 players than to those at around 1700.

Beyond that, if you're planning to get by merely with a grasp of essential principles, you're still going to need time to analyze to be sure you haven't, or aren't about to, fall into an irredeemable situation. So if you're going to rely on an understanding of basics, I recommend that you play at slower time controls. That way you'll have enough time to analyze adequately, in order to get a handle on the nuances of the sharper lines certain opponents may hurl at you. At the faster rates, if you depend on the so-called principles, it's very easy to play too mechanically and stop applicable thinking altogether.

So while I concur that one may be able to manage without having studied specific opening variations exhaustively, this is only true if one compensates for it by analyzing carefully and thoroughly while playing. You know, really thinks. Too often when we defer to principles, we fall back on misapplied or empty bromides that have no specificity and nothing to do with what's really happening on the chessboard, or, for that matter, on what's going on in the universe. Consequentially, you can get along by avoiding the deep study of opening variations, but only if you apply yourself in context. The truth is, most games between average and club grapplers are decided by one player being and remaining more focused than his or her opponent, regardless who knows what.

Question of the Month

The best answers will be published in the next column.

When do you play your best chess?

Reader's Responses from Last Month

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

Which chess column, regardless of forum, is the very best?

Among the many interesting replies were the following:

Winifred Bass (United Kingdom) writes: In my day the top chess columnist was C.J.S. Purdy. He had many practicable ideas and was a great chess teacher and enthusiast. You probably know this already, but I nominate Purdy.

Joseph Bandi (USA) writes: The very best chess writer is Andy Soltis. What I like about his column in *Chess Life* is that it appeals to everyone, novice and grandmaster alike. I also have many of his books, which I just adore.

Sandra Rogoff (USA) writes: To my mind the leading chess reporter is Yasser Seirawan. I thought his [Inside Chess](#) did much for chess in America and across the world. I'm really sorry he doesn't write anymore.

(BP-You can still read Yasser's wonderful pieces and experience his outstanding journalism here at [ChessCafe.com](#), which republishes some of his superb material every month.)

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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