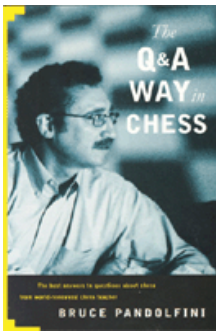




COLUMNISTS

The Q & A Way

Bruce Pandolfini



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Standing on the Feet of the Past

Question I had some keen interest in chess at high school but after raising three children and a busy career, chess went off the radar. Now that I am in my middle age, and the children have grown up and left home, I have got interested in chess again. I attended a couple of local tournaments but was rather disheartened at the number of younger children competing in the adult grades and winning. There is much talk of children being professionally coached at ridiculously young ages now. I also noted that a competitor at the world youth championships was seven years old and had a rating of 2012, this makes my 1400 pale in comparison. I was wondering do you know of any player taking up the game in middle age ever rising to the title of IM or grandmaster or are older players like me doomed to a steady decline in ratings and brain cells (at least Korchnoi gives me hope). **Savern Reweti (New Zealand)**

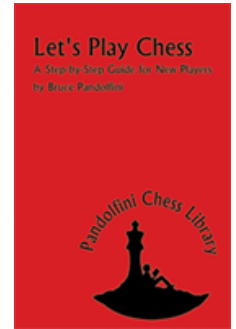
Answer First I'm afraid I'm going to say a few things that might disappoint you. I don't know of anyone taking up the game in their forties and beyond who went on to become a titled player (I'm specifically referring to GM or IM). That doesn't mean it can't be done, and if it could be done, that doesn't mean it would be easy. To be sure, it would verge on the miraculous. But as a chess teacher the last thing I'd want to do is put a damper on the human spirit. I like to think humans can do almost anything humanly possible.

I empathize with your complaints. It does seem that kids are getting stronger and stronger. It used to be that the accepted definition of a prodigy, particularly in chess, was anyone playing at a serious adult level, with real skill, before the age of ten. Somewhere in the 1990s that definition went through a metamorphosis, so that the age was lowered to eight. Now it's practically down to seven or even six years of age. Not only is it harder for older adults, it's also become more difficult for prodigious kids to be considered as such.

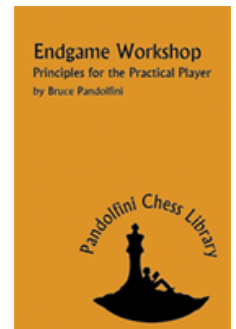
A batch of recent advances account for this, including the rise of school programs, the proliferation of chess literature and software, the lure of the Internet and the vast numbers of people having access to it, the general dissemination of instructional techniques, and the concomitant development of an entire class of specialized trainers. It also didn't hurt that Fischer, Karpov, Kasparov, and a few others, became larger than life characters impacting society well beyond the sixty-four squares. Naturally many more young and talented people have been drawn to the game and it's making it harder for the rest of us, regardless of age.

But there's a good side to all of this, too. The game we all love has become more important in the public eye, and with so many adept young people learning the principles and fundamentals so much earlier, that's got to redound to our advantage. These enormously aspiring talents may raise the art form to new heights never thought possible a hundred years ago. Meanwhile, maybe some of us (me included) won't be winning a ton of games in the future. But that's never been the sole reason I've played chess, and I suspect losing isn't going to stop you much either. Hey, though garnering the GM and IM titles may be a stretch, there's nothing wrong with going from 1400 to 1800. An "A" player is the first class of good player - that is, has the skill to

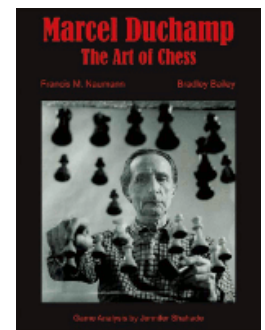
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win won games consistently. Prepare the right way and you may be able to get somewhere soon enough. Just don't ask me what the right way is. I'm still trying to figure it all out, but that's another column and a few more questions away. Good luck and have fun.

Question Because of the high level of development in opening theory, playing competitive chess has become prohibitive to those who are good chess players but have not time to study and learn openings. What is the solution? Do you recommend any opening system that is simpler to study or was not studied so much? With thanks for your great contribution to chess.

Dan Motet (USA)

Answer It's true, it's getting incredibly hard to play mainline systems without encountering real problems. With entrée to advanced opening study, such as huge databases and analyses of key games virtually as the games are played, equipped players can easily overtake much stronger but unprepared players right in the initial phase. Get a losing game in the first ten moves and it won't matter how good a player you are: you're probably going to lose. So it does make sense to select your opening variations very carefully.

One tack often chosen is to seek out those variations that were once accepted but then fell out of favor, and not necessarily because they were refuted. Perhaps certain leading players stopped playing them and chess fans, typically influenced by what the gods of the game essay in major events, followed suit and stopped playing those lines as well. Many of those ideas might still be worth a try, and since the lines have a grounding in our youth (the past) we may already have enough familiarity to readopt them successfully. It might require nothing more than a little study and a couple of revitalized shots or minor improvements.

Another course of action, relied upon by many tournament grapplers, is to economize, playing setups that are essentially the same for White and Black (naturally with slight differences and extra difficulty for Black) so that each game gives more experience with comparable lines. Thus you still have to study and prepare but the investment time is a bit less and the practical gains may be significant. Accordingly, the tournament world sees from time to time a spate of King's Indian Attacks and such. But there's no real panacea here. In today's world, weaker players can have specialized knowledge in every line that exists, so selecting a basic, simple, standard setup, or falling back to an obsolescent system, may not be the answer. But, pragmatically, it offers as good an approach as any other, and maybe better. Considering your time restrictions, it's likely the best you can do under the circumstances. If I were to give one final piece of advice it would be to make certain that you play the first few moves with great focus and really work at getting through the opening phase with a decent position. Too often we play the first few moves mechanically, in no time at all, and suddenly find ourselves with a hopeless game. At that point, it's too late. So please consider taking your time, even in simple beginning positions, because they may not be so simple at all.

Question You provide frequent advice for young/aspiring chess players. How do you see the role of chess (motivation, training, objectives, etc) for middle age and older non-professional chess players? **Jaime Fernandez (USA)**

Answer Young players don't automatically have all the advantages. No matter their talent, they may have insuperable learning problems, and their immaturity may prevent them from advancing beyond a point. Sometimes young people won't take any advice at all, remaining insistent on following their own ideas, regardless how emotionally or superficially those ideas were received. Many young players refuse to do work of any kind, especially if it's mental. For them, it's tormental. They simply want to play and that's that. Or maybe they can't keep their attention as long and give up analyzing just when it's getting interesting, if they analyze at all. What can we say about their objectives? Other than winning every single game, and satisfying their incapable-of-being-gratified egos, some of them never look past the moment.

On the other hand, older players, those perhaps without the same promising futures, are hopefully more experienced and mature. They can take advice better and listen more attentively. They are more willing to give up on a bad

idea for a new, more reasonable one. They are more able to spend time working out a problem without becoming frustrated. They understand that growth and improvement may take time. They can stay with a problem longer and better, going over their analysis again and again, to make sure it's right and obstacles have been overcome. What can we say about their objectives? They may not know entirely where they're going either (I mean, who really does?), but their life experiences may help them cope with the tough times. They've seen the worst and they're still here, happy to have the opportunity to play for sheer joy, mental stimulation, and time well-spent in the presence of diverse intelligences, human and otherwise. Those are messages older minds can benefit from much more than callow, fragile ones can. Sometimes you have to age well before you can appreciate the beauty of simple pleasures and all that life has to offer.

Question I'm coming back to chess after thirty years at age fifty and really enjoying the learning and relearning, but one thing puzzles me - ratings. Can you explain for a beginner, what they mean? How do you earn them? ECO, or is it Elo (not the band)? **Edward Dybala (USA)**

Answer A rating is a four-digit number, though not necessarily (there are many three-digit ratings, particularly in young children and other rank beginners), which reflects your relative playing strength. The number is based on who you play and how well you do against them. If you win, your rating goes up; if you lose, your rating goes down; and if you draw, your rating goes up or down based on the difference between the two player's ratings. If you draw with a higher rated player, you go up. If you draw with a lower rated player, you go down. For the first block of games (24 games, 30 games, or some other number, depending on the system computing the ratings), your rating is provisional, and subject to much greater swings. Thereafter, you're bound by the formulaic changes sketched above. People put too much emphasis on ratings, to the extent of focusing solely on them and not the actual play. Think merely in terms of your rating and you become a number, and not much more. ECO refers to the Encyclopedia of Openings, such that every single possible variation can be classified in terms of a letter (A-E) and a two-digit number (00-99). It was originally worked out by Yugoslav opening theoreticians, especially Braslav Rabar. An ELO rating is an international rating and is named after professor, Arpad Elo, who helped improve many aspects of the rating formulas, nationally and internationally. The truth is I was more prepared to talk about the band.

Question Do you think the new stars of chess, using computer software for advanced theory and other tools, are playing better chess than the old masters, like Alekhine, Reti, Keres, Tal, etc? Following many tournaments of the top players, sometimes I think they know much more than the old generation, but, on the other side, I feel their games are too technical, without the romantic emotion and aesthetic pleasure that I felt playing through old splendid games. Thank you in advance. **Almerio Castro (Brazil)**

Answer Yes and no. Surely, in a knowledge based, scientific and technological sense, civilization keeps advancing, and playing off Isaac Newton's "If I have seen a little further it is by standing on the shoulders of giants," a line in Newton's 1675 letter he sent to Robert Hooke, it's logical to conclude that today's players have the advantage over their predecessors. Actually, Newton wasn't the first to say it. The twelfth century theologian John of Salisbury used a version of it in an 1159 treatise ("We are like dwarfs sitting on the shoulders of giants"), and knowing Newton's general interest in mystical and religious writings, and his tendency to appropriate other people's thoughts and put a Newtonian twist on them, it's likely he had seen the earlier line. To be fair, it's probable that John of Salisbury in turn had also probably borrowed an earlier idea.

It's understandable that older players, such as myself, and others who write columns like this, feel a certain affinity with the icons of our youth. To be sure, beyond the ABCs of chess (Alekhine, Botvinnik, and Capablanca), there were several groups of players from the 1930s to 1970s, of different nationalities and backgrounds, who seemed just as amazing. Furthermore, each one appeared to be a unique talent, with a personal style and special set of characteristics. Today's outstanding players, however, superficially get lost

in information and details. But, as I've indicated, that's only on the surface. As you explore the intricacies of individual playing traits with greater sophistication, you will find the same kaleidoscopic variety and greatness. The problem is not their play so much. It's that the ordinary observer doesn't have the tools needed to interpret our brave, complex, and cold new world. Today's giants are as wonderful and human (petty, for instance) as those of the past. But it's not unreasonable to advance the idea that indeed they are better players. They've seen what the earlier creators have made and left, with essentially equal intelligences, and taken us to heights where we too, can see further. That doesn't mean all of us can figure out what we're seeing.

Question of the Month

The best answers will be published in the next column.

Are today's top players really better than the top ones of the past?

Reader's Responses from Last Month

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

What chess question would you like to be asked?

Among the many interesting replies were the following:

Réjean Daigle (Canada) writes: In fact there are a many questions I'd like to be asked but the first one that comes to my mind is "How many moves can you foresee when playing a chess game? To what I always answer that I can see up to fifteen moves ahead, but never had the chance to reproduce them on the board.

(BP-Funny, very funny.)

Lain Reeve (England) writes: I have several: "Would you like your winner's cheque made out in dollars or pounds?" "What does it feel like to be the first human player to break 3000 ELO?" "Now remind me, which way does the horsey jump?" "Do you, Iain Reeve, take Alexandra Kosteniuk to be your lawfully wedded wife?" (My wife will kill me for that one!) "Do you get embarrassed when journalists compare you to Morphy?" "How quickly do you intend to defend the world championship?"

(BP-The above writer, a very funny man indeed, is also known as "Once" on Chessgames.com)

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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!](#)

Comment on this month's column via our [Contact Page!](#) Pertinent responses will be posted below daily.

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