



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 *Chess Cafe* column...

Yes, I have a question for Bruce!

COLUMNISTS

It's Hard to be Good

The Q & A Way

Bruce Pandolfini

Question I just finished reading your column as I do every month and, as usual, was pleased with the responses that you provided on a variety of questions. I was prompted to write this note to, perhaps, help lay to rest the many questions that revolve around becoming a becoming stronger player and the omnipresent under tone of “How to become a titled player.” In short: “hard work and discipline over time!”

In general, there are no quick fixes, i.e., study a specific 10 books or 100 books; play 12 tournaments a year; read this specific tactics book; work through these exercises; learn these “secrets”; drink this special tea. We all fall victim to these traps because we want to believe that chess is easy. Well it is not! It’s hard work. There is disgust and disappointment when we lose. There is joy and euphoria when we win. There is gut twisting pain when we miss a mate in one. There is the fear when we know our king is under attack. There are all these components and more in chess and all these scream the need for “hard work and discipline over time.”

I realize that this is not the answer that most are looking for. Most want the “silver bullet.” That is, if they simply do this special thing, in this special way, they will become a grandmaster. Hard work, discipline, over time: let’s face it, this is just not sexy and sleek enough for most. It reeks of old world stodginess. It’s just hard! Well that is certainly true, it is hard but it is the only way for us mere mortals, i.e., non-grandmasters, to maximize our chess potential.

So why not accept this as the surest path to improvement? This is clearly the accepted path that doctors, lawyers, and most professionals are expected to take. Why should this not be the case with chess? I suspect it has to do with the built in desire for the easy life. But unfortunately the cold hard reality is that chess improvement takes “hard work, discipline, over time.” I will send you a note in



52 years to let you know how this study plan worked out for me. I will be 82 and if I am not grandmaster by then, I suppose I will have to accept that I might not be able to make grandmaster. There is always international master though!

Jonathan Allen (USA)

Answer I couldn't agree with you more. Few of us can escape hard work and discipline over time, if we are to accomplish anything meaningful. I worry about one thing, though. You may be around to send me a note about your success in 52 years, but I'm not likely to be here to receive it. In case the year 2058 rolls along, and I'm no longer answering queries for this column, allow me to congratulate you now on your triumphant chess program, as well as for your delightfully charming and persuasive email.

Question How does one become very good at tactics? The well-known answer is to solve many puzzles (with various tactical themes in them) and perhaps look at some games with a degree of tactical complexity. Can you provide a deeper insight? I was intrigued by de la Maza's method, which involves solving a set of a thousand problems 3x at increasing speed. It is intriguing because it is designed as an actual program with goals, and adds a creative element to the time honored method above. Can you suggest other "methods" to improve tactical ability for intermediate/strong players? **Jaime E. Fernandez (USA)**

Answer The well-known answer you've offered is a good one. As you say, a tried and true method to improve your chess tactics, a la de la Maza (whose book [*Rapid Chess Improvement*](#) seems imaginative and thought-provoking), would be to solve many puzzles, of increasing difficulty, on a regular basis, under timed conditions, without moving the pieces. Over time, if applied with dedication, it should make you tactically more receptive and generally stronger.

Unfortunately, I don't have anything like a deep insight to offer here. Even if I had one, someone has surely thought of it before, and it's likely it would still take diligence to implement, no matter how ostensibly original and simplifying. It's as Euclid told Ptolemy I, Pharaoh of Egypt, who wanted a quickie course on understanding mathematics: "There is no royal road to geometry."

On the other hand, if you want to broaden your approach, in addition to doing books of puzzles, you could read through treatises investigating the theory of tactics and attack. You could analyze particular types of attacks characterized by their tactical nature, such as the classic bishop sacrifice. You could employ sharp openings, possibly gambits, especially plausible ones, in tournaments and practice sessions alike. You could play speed chess, with the express idea of getting into aggressive positions requiring greater resourcefulness. You could familiarize yourself with the tactics most likely to occur in your own openings, middlegames, and even endgames. To be sure, your openings may produce specific pawn structures in the middle and ending phases, and those may generate a group of corresponding tactics that can be kept in mind and tapped appropriately.

Turning to more of the same in a new paragraph (to make it easier on the eyes), you could review games contested by players famous for their tactical prowess. You could play through games at a faster pace, with less emphasis on analysis (though still focused), so that you start sensing moves in a way that approximates (but never quite equals) real intuition. You could use software posing tactical problems for solution, taking advantage of any features enhancing the experience. You could input tactical positions for which you've had trouble, seeing what Fritz or some other algorithmic wonder has to compute about them. You could print out diagrams of tactics worthy of being committed to memory and paste them in a book or make up flash cards. You could study with a teacher, primarily to develop your tactical ability (tell him or her beforehand so that you don't wind up spending most of your money on positional chess). You could arrange matches with strong players, agreeing ahead of time to take the games down tactical roads, analyzing them together afterward. Or you could strike a deal with the devil so that you acquire a true facility for tactical play. Of the above suggestions, only the last one is guaranteed to work.

Question My rating is 1725 USCF. At one time it was 1950, about 15 years ago, when I played frequently. I have never studied formally, just played plenty of club chess games and speed chess. I have beaten experts and low masters at 5-10-15 minute chess and have been beaten by them. My last tournament was 10 years ago. I feel that tactics training probably brings the fastest improvement in under-2000 rated players. What is your opinion of this? My age is 57 and I still play local friends at the coffee house weekly, when not golfing. I really enjoy your columns by the way. Thanks. **Jim Thomason (USA)**

Answer Some say that tactics is 99 percent of chess. Others claim it's no more than 95 percent. Since I lean toward the second, I suggest that you concentrate on tactics while not leaving the remaining percent out, just to cover yourself. But I'm with you on this. Probably one of the best ways to get back into shape is to run through a batch of tactical exercises. I would also pick up your playing encounters. Whether contesting games at the coffee house or on the Internet, you should start playing more often against challenging opposition. I would try to practice seven days a week, for at least an hour per session. That should afford you enough time to play a good nine holes every day, so your golf game can stay primed.

Question I sometimes wonder if you get bored, answering the same questions. How do I become a master/IM/GM good player etc? How do I achieve a rating of so many points? And so on. I appreciate the patience you show answering those questions time and again without being repetitive. My experience has shown that most people work hard at chess initially and after 6 months to 1 year expect to become very strong players. For most adults, it is not possible to become strong in that amount of time. One needs to continue working on the game for years, polishing the different aspects of the game and, most importantly, enjoy doing it. As Krishna said "Do your duty and don't worry about rewards, they will come." Most adults will require a tutor/coach if they wish to improve after a certain point and need to continuously play regular time

control games with stronger opponents, while polishing their skills. Most importantly they need to enjoy playing (win or lose) and studying. I hope you agree! Have a nice day! **Narayan Subramanian (India)**

Answer I can't believe how agreeable all of this is. I concur with you, every correspondent so far, and now Krishna. I also like your other point: in addition to working hard, one needs to enjoy the experience. Why bother with all the toil if it's not satisfying? Fortunately, Caissa, the chess player's main muse, has found ways for almost everyone to relish chess, whether playing, watching, or merely fantasizing. So choose your pleasure.

Question I'm sure you are tired of questions like this, but I wasn't sure if it was ever asked quite in this way. Many people ask how to achieve this or that status and if it's realistic. Obviously you don't know enough on a case by case basis to answer those (and probably this) question. But here goes anyway. I was wondering what the realistic "ceiling" would be for an adult (lets say 30 to 40 or whatever arbitrary top you want to use) to reach as far as rating. Again, I know every person is different and you can't measure everyone's drive and intelligence. But since most agree you aren't going to be a grandmaster if you weren't eating pawns for breakfast at the age of 5, then what is a fair and reasonable expectation? Class A? Expert? Lower? And, yes, enjoyment of the game is paramount. But winning doesn't suck! **Nick Briglia (USA)**

Answer Actually some winning *does* suck, though you hit the nail on the head when it comes to the types of questions this column often gets. And, indeed, I'd like to answer your question, but I'm reluctant to approach such a matter too formulaically or in a prescribed manner at all. Maybe the Pythagoreans knew something. Number might be the essence of all things, though it kills many of us to think they were right.

Anyhow, if we're going to play that game, I will say that a healthy, smart, motivated, but unschooled adult (let's say 30-40 years of age) should strive to reach Class A, the first plateau one must attain to be a strong player. That is, a true 1800 player has the ability to win a won game, which is a mark of competence. But you're not going to get me to place a ceiling on human achievement. Nature does a fine job of that already.

Question I help teach a small class of young children who lost their chess instructor because he moved away. So this year another gentleman and I want to help them continue to grow. They have the basics down but no real idea of opening knowledge. What would be some openings to start teaching groups from 1st grade to 3rd grade? **Bob Bentley (USA)**

Answer A typical approach would be to start them off on a few basic double king-pawn openings. You could begin by laying out the basics of the Italian Game, Spanish Game, and/or Scotch Game, though any presentation (asymmetrical king-pawn, queen-pawn, or any opening that appeals to you) that is clear, with well-defined explanations and goals should do. You might also

have on hand a book of essentials, just to lay down the law. Capablanca's [*Chess Fundamentals*](#), Tarrasch's [*The Game of Chess*](#), or some of the better Reinfeld books would serve admirably.

Whatever you do, try to avoid showing them unsound sorties like the Scholar's Mate (1 e4 e5 2 Qh5 Nc6 3 Bc4, hoping for mate by oversight at f7). Beyond the repulsion the spectacle of it induces in veteran players, the fear is that some students might get away with those transgressions, encouraging them to violate the principles even more. They may never wind up learning how to play an intelligent game. But none of this is in marble. If some material or method of demonstration doesn't seem to be going that well, you can always change gears. I have a feeling your obvious sincerity and interest in helping the kids will get you back on track.

Question Hi! As a-whatever strength chess player, how should I study tactics? Is it better to search for "the move" as fast as you can? Or is it better to have a complete understanding of the position, all the variations and even the things in the position that really don't matter? **Benito Tonatiuh Rojas Mayorquin (Mexico)**

Answer You may have to do both, assuming the position calls for it and the situation is such that you can. As a rule, if you're considering a position for the first time, you really shouldn't look for specific moves before you've analyzed the overall setup. You need to find out what's happening, who stands better and why. Then you can determine what has to be done to realize your plans while squashing your opponent's. That's when you can more pertinently look for candidate moves to satisfy the position's requirements. And if you're already involved in an ongoing contest, you're still going to have to examine your opponent's last move to see if it responds to the logic of the game. If it doesn't, or doesn't do so adequately, then you can figure out how to advance your aims from there.

Generally, you'll want to sharpen your capacity to analyze quickly and relevantly, skipping over everything unnecessary to focus on the most germane aspects of a situation. Since most serious games are timed, you have no time to waste. Also, if your game is ever to become more natural, you'll need to sense certain things are right or wrong without having to analyze them. That doesn't mean you won't analyze as part of the normal routine, or if especially necessary or desirable. It does mean, however, that strong players are usually able to feel their way, often without much analysis at all (though, admittedly, a great deal of analytic thinking takes place on the unconscious level, at incredibly high speeds).

The ability to eliminate insignificant or peripheral ideas enables good players to get down to business so that they can devote their analysis to what's important. On occasion, this could lead to superficiality, and surprisingly strong moves might be missed. But strong players have built-in safeguards helping them avoid oversights and attune to unexpected opportunities. The truth is, you wouldn't

want to understand everything in a chess position anyway. Too many features (if it's even reasonable to call them that) are truly irrelevant and trivial. It would be impossible to spot them all, and terribly counterproductive to do so if you could. Good chess is practical chess.

Question of the Month

The best answers will be published in the next column.

What modern chess game is the most instructive?

Reader's Responses from Last Month

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

Could Bobby Fischer still help the game of chess?

Among the interesting replies was the following:

Gene Milener (USA) writes: I believe Bobby could still do something great for chess, by promoting Fischer Random Chess. Others call it Chess960. Bobby described Chess960 as a way to fix the growing problems with traditional chess, but a bigger reason to invite it into the chess brotherhood is for the many positives it delivers.

I believe the chess world, including noted thinkers such as yourself, have not yet realized or publicized how much genuine chess has long been hidden from us by our exclusionary adherence to traditional chess. There are too many examples to list here, but let me give a couple. Aaron Nimzovitch elucidated nine opening principles of chess, and all chess players accept them as gospel. But examining Chess960 forces us to revise our perspective on those principles, and in so doing educates us about chess in its purist form (biased to neither traditional chess nor Chess960). It turns out half of Nimzo's principles fail when applied to Chess960. The ones that still work well are thus elevated as true principles of fundamental chess. The failed principles are reduced to being mere tactical notes about one particular chess position, the static initial chess setup.

For another example, whole books have been published on how to attack a castled king with very specific tactics. But in Chess960, there are many different piece configurations after castling. It takes a clever mind to plan and design a king fort, while accounting for other objectives such as active pieces and pawn structure.

Chess960 not only differs from traditional chess in the opening phase, it also leads to a much richer variety of middlegames, both tactically and in positional terms. Although, at first odd looking, it must be admitted that these positions arise from the highly logical play of grandmasters (who play in Mainz Germany every August). Quickly enough one begins to see the beauty and cleverness in these refreshing positions. Chess has been hiding these too. Bobby Fischer is the biggest world wide media draw in chess. He can even draw in television.

Chess960 offers novelty to the media that is otherwise bored with traditional chess. The positives of Chess960 will excite the chess playing public if those positives are honestly discussed in chess forums like your **ChessCafe** column. If Fischer were to accept Karpov's challenge to play a Chess960 match it would be like a lightning bolt of energy. Fischer would thus help chess in general, because I have come to realize that Chess960 and traditional chess are both just chess.

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