



## SKITTLES ROOM

### *From the Archives*

Hosted by  
Mark Donlan



*Chess Mazes*  
by Bruce Alberston

## From the Archives...

Since it came online over eight years ago, **ChessCafe.com** has presented literally thousands of articles, reviews, columns and the like for the enjoyment of its worldwide readership. The good news is that almost all of this high quality material remains available in the [Archives](#). The bad news is that this great collection of chess literature is now so large and extensive – and growing each week – that it is becoming increasingly difficult to navigate it effectively. We decided that the occasional selection from the archives posted publicly online might be a welcomed addition to the regular fare.

Watch for an item to be posted online at least once each week, usually on Thursday or Friday. We will update the **ChessCafe** home page whenever there has been a “new” item posted here. We hope you enjoy *From the Archives*...

The **ChessCafe** is pleased to welcome American Master Bruce Pandolfini as a regular columnist. Burce has been an active chess teacher since 1972. The author of 25 very popular chess books, he has taught the young and old, both individually and in classroom situations, though he specializes in private instruction. He occasionally talks about this in public, and sometimes he writes about it. Bruce loves what he does, whatever that is. He lives in New York City and will continue to do so until he gets a better offer...

## The Q & A Way by Bruce Pandolfini

### Answer the Question and Question the Answer

In this column I intend to answer questions from users on chess teaching and my experiences as a chess teacher. Since this is the first column in the series, I've chosen to present two questions posed to me during a recent Q & A session in Tulsa, Oklahoma.

With slight editing, the questions and answers are word-for-word what took place on that Saturday afternoon.

**Question** Your lessons seem to revolve around questions and answers. What was the most memorable answer a student ever gave you?

**Answer** Anyone with teaching experience has stories to tell about remarkable responses, especially if his or her lessons rely on asking questions. I for one often ask rhetorical questions to direct a student's thinking. Sometimes I ask a question to inject an element of surprise, and on other occasions I do it to be amusing, hoping to facilitate rapport.

In the mid 1980s, when Faneuil Adams and I were trying to establish the program that eventually became Chess-in-the-Schools, I found myself giving a lesson to a gifted eight-year old girl in the South Bronx, while a number of "critical thinking" experts from the New York City Board of Education skeptically observed.

"You're sitting at a chessboard," I said to the student, "and suddenly you realize that all four corners of the board are pointed South. How is this possible?"

The twist would be that she was positioned at the North Pole, and whether she got the answer or not, I was going to use her response as a vehicle to proceed.

I was not at all prepared for what followed. She gradually took hold of her head, slipped into a thinker's stance, and focused her attention on the board. Curious to see where this would lead, I let her go on in this state for awhile, but finally I had to say something (it's hard for a teacher to stay silent for long).

I was about to offer what I thought was a diverting aside, when a glimmer of awareness came over her face, which rang a bell in my head. I knew that there comes a moment in certain types of problem-solving situations when you know you're going to get the answer right, but you're not yet sure what it is. This can be very exciting, and this is what I presumed she was experiencing.

"I think I know," she said.

Pushing all the pieces to the side of the roll-up board, she folded the vinyl sheet horizontally in half, so that the first rank rested on the eighth. She then folded the board in half again, crosswise, so that the a-file was atop the h-file. Then, lifting the board up by what ordinarily would be the square h8, she directed the points of the four stacked corners toward Manhattan, which we all knew to be South.

What an original solution. Everyone was astonished, even the critical thinking authorities, who it seemed were beginning to warm up to the value of chess in the schools. I had started the lesson with wordplay, and this wonderful child had responded with insight. I'll never forget her or her incredible answer.

**Question** What about the opposite of that. Can you recall any answers in your experience that stand out as being surprisingly bad?

**Answer** Yeah, the one I'm about to give now. Actually, something does come to mind – the first time I ever taught the Orangutang.

Years ago, when I was introduced to the teaching trade, and before I understood the value of patience, I was inundated with adult students. Most were typical chess amateurs, a few were especially talented, and some were taking lessons just because they had been caught up in the spectacle of the 1972 Fischer-Spassky Match. Naturally, this latter group was my least favorite.

I particularly recall an annoying interchange that transpired in a lesson with a Fischer convert, who knew some of the fundamentals. He was okay with pieces (except the knight), but terrible with pawns (he had trouble remembering how they capture).

We were playing a game so that it could serve as a basis for interaction and instruction, a traditional method going back to the origins of chess teaching. We reached the following position.



Black has just played Ra8-b8, attacking White's undefended knight pawn along the half-open b-file. Inexperienced players can have trouble coping with this common threat, not knowing whether to move the pawn to b3 or defend it with a piece.

But the student didn't do either. Instead he just sat there thinking. After he had thought for several minutes (and the silence could be heard throughout the Marshall Chess Club), I decided to push the lesson along with a directive question. I asked the well-known query: "Am I threatening anything?"

"Well, maybe," he replied. "I think you want to take my pawn."

"Good," I said. "How should you respond to this threat?"

He seemed to think a bit more, and then countered by tentatively moving his rook at a1 to b1.

"That's not bad," I said – at least that's what I think I said. "And it does avoid weaknesses. But is there a simpler way to deal with the threat to your b-pawn?"

"Maybe," he said, and after a bit more thinking, transferred his queen to b1.

A little peeved by this (admittedly, I shouldn't have been), I suggested that he find another move. I wanted him to play b2-b3, of course, so that the a-pawn would protect the b-pawn, and I must concede that I was vexed by his failure to grasp the concept. Three other frustrating answers followed (Bg5-c1, Qd1-c1, and Nc3-a4, which were amazing defenses for one who didn't quite understand pawns), and I could no longer contain myself. Sweeping all of White's forces to the side (except for two, the pawn at a2 and the pawn at b2), I asked with

obvious irritation: “Can you defend your b-pawn now?”

He thought for a moment, and suddenly his face lit up. Then he played b2-b4, and that’s when I started talking about the Orangutang...



[TOP OF PAGE](#)



[HOME](#)



[COLUMNS](#)



[LINKS](#)



[ARCHIVES](#)



[ABOUT THE  
CHESS CAFE](#)

[\[ChessCafe Home Page\]](#) [\[Book Review\]](#) [\[Columnists\]](#)

[\[Endgame Study\]](#) [\[Skittles Room\]](#) [\[Archives\]](#)

[\[Links\]](#) [\[Online Bookstore\]](#) [\[About ChessCafe\]](#) [\[Contact Us\]](#)

Copyright 2005 CyberCafes, LLC. All Rights Reserved.

"**The Chess Cafe®**" is a registered trademark of Russell Enterprises, Inc.