



COLUMNISTS

The Q & A Way

Bruce Pandolfini

*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!

Young At Any Age

Question I too am a great fan of yours ever since I saw the *movie Searching for Bobby Fischer*. I have only been studying chess for a short time, although, I have been moving pieces for many years. I am retired Navy. We "played" chess on board ship for years without getting deep into tactics, etc. My question is probably the dumbest question you have ever heard. I am 70 years old and find my biggest problem is concentration after about 15 moves. Is there a way to develop better concentration? I have been a pastor for over 30 years now and have no trouble memorizing Scripture and preaching with only an outline, so I must still have a good mind. I know it is not the love of the game because I truly love to play. I win my share of games against my equals, but never against stronger players. I play in the World Open each year in Philadelphia and local tournaments, when not on Sundays. Any help would be greatly appreciated. **Hank Haubold (USA)**

Answer One of the first things to go as we start to get a little older is our ability to concentrate. It's very much a physical thing, which is why younger players often are able to focus for greater periods. You can somewhat offset the disadvantage of aging by being mindful of the problem and by trying to pace yourself while playing.

Obviously you have a good head, and playing chess is a terrific way to keep it sharp and productive. I wouldn't change your excellent program at all, so continue to play in the World Open and local tournaments. But when contesting longer games it might be prudent to take short respites during play, where you let your mind shut down for a minute or so, kind of like taking an afternoon nap. Since this may be hard to do at first, you might help the process along by actually

removing yourself from the board. Just walk away and find a comfortable place to sit. Close your eyes and try to relax. Do this a couple of times a game and you'll be amazed how much stronger you feel and how much easier it is to call upon reserves when you really need them.

Will this solve the problem completely? There's no magic elixir for any drawback, but it's usually better to be proactive, taking action ahead of time to avoid or counter rather than reacting afterward to lessen or accept. To this end it really helps to believe in ourselves and in the idea that we can favorably influence the future. There is great power in such thinking, and typically great success for those who think it. I suspect you already know this.

Question My father is going to be eighty years old and he loves to play chess. He has trouble with all the pieces on the board. Should his strategy be to trade pieces so that it becomes easier? I have been advising him to do this but he obstinately disagrees with me. What should I do? **Pat Zunker (USA)**

Answer Let him be. Your father is right. One should trade when it makes sense and avoid trades when it doesn't. Having fewer pieces on the board doesn't mean that the position automatically becomes easier to understand. In fact some trades can actually lead to positions of greater complexity, where all kinds of intangibles assume importance. So it would be a mistake to continue advocating this concerned but misguided piece of wisdom, to exchange merely to simplify. You might as well tell your father that old chessplayers never die; they simply trade away. My advice is to admit your error and let your father think for himself. Fortunately, it's clear he already does.

Question I am about your age, but I only took up chess a few years ago. I am very keen about the game but remain frustrated and embarrassed about not being able to crack out of the 900's in rating. I do not play in many tournaments or rated games because of this frustration. Youngsters move ahead by leaps and bounds. I believe that I am learning a lot and growing as a player, but I am saddled with very slow outward progress. I play the French as Black and either try for a Four Knights' Game or else play the Colle as White. Most of my play lately has been on ICC. Since I do not know how to reach you by direct e-mail, I chose this approach. **Ed Colleti (USA)**

Answer I'm surprised that you know my age because I've been trying to keep it secret. Your "question," however, seems to keep some of your own vital facts hidden as well. It would be helpful to have you respond to a few probing questions before making any suggestions.

For example, how many rated games have you played? What kinds of tournaments do you play in? Do you often play against youngsters, or do you mention them merely for comparison? Why are you surprised

that young people improve faster than adults? Weren't you once younger yourself? Why do you believe you are learning a lot and growing as a player if you are saddled with very slow outward progress? Because you are studying and reading chess books? Or for other reasons?

To continue, why do you play the French Defense as Black? What do you play against d4? When you have White, why do you jump back and forth between the Four Knights' Game and the Colle? Did someone advise you or did you decide this for yourself? What time controls do you usually seek on the ICC? Do you go on as a guest or under an account name so that the games can be rated? Why do you want to reach me directly? Because in person you think I wouldn't ask these types of questions?

My advice is to get your game evaluated by a sympathetic master or teacher. For starters, find someone to give you a four-session overhaul. He or she should critique your openings, suggest books and material with which to work, steer you into appropriate tournaments and practice play, and put together a general plan for you to follow on your own. Moreover, be sure to schedule in periodic review. At least this program should point you in a new direction, which is better than no direction at all.

Question Hi my name is Erick Toribio and I live in Brooklyn, New York. How can I improve in chess by myself just with some chess books. And I would like to know if Bruce can give me private lessons? Mr. Pandolfini, if you are interested, could you please e-mail me? Also I'm a member of the Marshall chess club, and my rating is almost 1400. Thanks. **Erick Toribio (USA)**

Answer Most improvement is self-improvement. So of course you can get better by yourself. This is what people ordinarily try to do. One way you can attempt to improve on your own is by reading chess books, good ones as well as bad ones. Don't worry so much about investing time in so-called bad books. Even bad books are not that bad, in that at least they almost always contain useful chess positions, no matter how well they're presented. Besides, as you acquire experience, you'll know when a book isn't working and it's time to shift to another.

But reading chess books usually isn't the best way to improve. There's something artificial about it. It's reminiscent of a character in a Stefan Zweig story, *The Royal Game*, who, imprisoned by the Nazis, learns to play chess from a single chess book. He memorizes the book, is capable of recognizing a position played by Alekhine, but can't really play chess. If you studied baseball but never played, do you think you'd be a good baseball player? You can argue that chess is more mental than baseball, but it's still a game and has to be practiced.

Generally the best way to improve one's chess is to play against challenging opposition on a steady basis. Luckily you're a member of the Marshall Chess Club. Its weekly tournaments are frequented by some of the top players in New York City. Beyond play, you could connect with one of the club's teachers or masters for lessons or occasional analysis. I am booked up, and totally unreliable, though I'd be happy to advise you. My advice is that you find another teacher, one you can rely on, perhaps at the Marshall. He or she will probably tell you the same thing anyhow, that the surest way to increase your strength is to face tough players every chance you get.

Question I am currently a fourteen-year-old student residing in New York City. My USCF is around 1328, but I estimate myself to be more around 1500, as the aforementioned rating was provisional. I cannot seem to find any dedicated and sufficing teachers in New York who have an open position for a student. I have resorted to book studying, but that path has not garnered much results. What do you recommend? Do you know any teachers in New York who are affordable, and are still available for lessons? **Owen Li, (USA)**

Answer The most worthwhile lessons are those you get for free or practically nothing by playing against good opposition on a regular basis. You will derive far more from a steady diet of rigorous opponents than from any books or chess teachers, even good books and good chess teachers.

One thing, though, I'm not sure what you mean by saying you can't find a chess teacher who is "dedicated and sufficing." If you mean they charge too much, or are not willing to work for a reduced fee, this is very unfair. Successful or not, they have to earn a living, and chess teaching can be an extremely demanding enterprise. If they jettison their time they will have much less to offer other students to whom they may already be committed. These students, too, might have difficulties paying teaching fees, but somehow they find a way, which can be a real hardship. Nonetheless, many chess teachers wind up donating their time to dedicated students anyway. So I will join these professionals in spirit and extend to you a free lesson to evaluate your play and lay out a course of study. This way we can mutually judge firsthand how dedicated and sufficing the other is.

Question Whenever I read some important thoughts in a chess book I try to remember them, but I often forget or have trouble. Do you know any tricky ways I can remember paragraphs of chess principles and concepts better? You seem to be good at stuff like that, remembering Tarrasch and Lasker and some of the brilliant things they wrote. Also, if I forget what I read, will it hurt my game by mixing me up? I'm about a 1400 player, with many hurdles to jump over as it is. **Frank Carbone (USA)**

Answer I think you may need more than a few tricks to overcome the hurdles chess has apparently put in your way. Nor am I sure that someone isn't pulling a deft artifice on me. But in tribute to the good stuff put forth by Tarrasch and Lasker, I will play along and answer you, though without the deftness or prestidigitation you seek.

If you're really having difficulty assimilating ideas and wording on chess concepts, try the following. The next time you're using a book, be sure to read the material you're trying to absorb carefully. If you can, avoid all distractions. Then write down the gist of what you've just read. Go back to the original passage and compare. If you didn't quite get it, reread and rewrite. No matter how well you've captured the desired ideas on the first or second attempt, do the entire thing a third time for good luck (this works for a lot of tricks). The key, however, is not to copy what you've read, but to rephrase the considered section in your own words. Otherwise you're just remembering by rote without comprehending anything. Recalling word-for-word might have some value, but restating with true understanding is always better. Will forgetting what you read hurt your game by mixing you up? I know it mixes me up, and I haven't even forgotten what I've read.

Question How can I get some help on how and when to attack? **Otis Wilson (USA)**

Answer Off the bat you could try to solve lots of tactics, especially without moving the pieces. You could work with books that emphasize attack. You could read through game collections of players noted for attacking prowess. And you could take a few lessons with a chess teacher and ask him or her to improve your attacking ability.

But why stop there. You could play against strong players and afterward find out how they mount their campaigns. At clubs and tournaments you might ask certain competitors how they channel their aggression into awesome assaults. You could develop a friendship with Garry Kasparov, and perhaps get him to reveal a few things. Or you could simply become a character in the film *The Forbidden Planet* and take the Krull IQ boost. All of these might fail, especially the last two, but you might be able to get somewhere with the first four. That's where I'd start.

Question Which is the best definition of strategy? Thank you! **Henrique Marinho (Brazil)**

Answer In order to answer your question I would have to know all the strategy definitions. I don't, and since I typically use only one, this is the one I'll offer. There's nothing fancy about it. Strategy is planning. It's often contrasted with tactics, which are the individual operations used to bring about strategy. Strategy tends to be general and long term. Tactics for the most part are specific and short term. But it's not

like in neolithic times, where knowing the name of your adversary gives you command over him and his tribe. Chess strategy is a little harder than that.

Question Love your column. With all the world championship events coming up, I'm curious as to your opinion. By my last count there are several claimants to the title of World Champion, with the major source of dissent seeming to be over conditions of title defense. In other major sporting leagues around the world, leagues do not engage in outright title defenses. Instead, every competitor participates from an even start at the beginning of the next "season;" champions are not simply seeded into a final with all other takers vying for the opportunity to face off against them. I realize chess has a history of title-holders defending titles directly. However, I contend that it makes no sense for a World Champion to maintain his title simply because he beat one (albeit a very strong one) player in a one-to-one match. All this proves is they could beat that player, not that they are the best. To extend the analogy further, no other sport allows ties to count. In hockey, tied games are played to sudden death; in football (soccer), there are shootouts; in basketball, clocks are restarted until there is a winner. I would contend that it also makes sense to use the kind of "speed" and "blitz" tie-breakers in the World Championship qualifiers (dare I say playoffs?) and championship match. My wife says this question is already too long to be printed, so I'll stop now. Hey, maybe I'll send the ideas to Yasser, too. Cheers. **John Cucka (Australia)**

Answer Your question is not too long to be printed. It's too long to be answered, especially when I've foolishly left myself no time to answer it. Actually, I'm not sure what your question is, but you've said some interesting things, and you've said them well, so I really don't have anything to add. Maybe you should send it to Yasser. He may indeed have something to add.

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