



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!

It's Got To Be Fun

Question I was truly inspired by you and your story that appeared in recent editions of *Chess Life*. I think what you are doing is vital to the lifeblood of American chess and beyond!! Keep it up!! I enjoy chess, play online, and play 1 or 2 tournaments a year. I have a five-year-old daughter who is fascinated by my love of the game and we play once a week. She's very excited about chess too, but I don't know how to teach her and keep it interesting (which is so important at this age). She enjoys playing on our Apple computer. Can you advise on how to take her interest to a higher level? What about any good chess computer programs (for her age)? (**Scott McLaughlin, USA**)

Answer There are many terrific chess books for children. Also available are plenty of software products, with undemanding playing levels and specific features just for kids, which means it shouldn't be hard to find lesson material. But possibly the best thing you could do is simply to show your own love for chess. Your daughter will surely want to share these feelings with you, so continue to grant her easy access to the game, and encourage her to play fairly often. You might consider leaving out a chess set in a prominent area of your home. Such a display could provide abundant opportunities to talk about chess and its exponents in captivating ways.

You can show your ardor for the game by having her join you in your chess activities. When looking at a game or puzzle, for example, invite her to sit at the table and make it seem as if you're on the same team, examining or solving together. And if you usually read together, there's no reason a few of the books couldn't be about chess. Then there are instructional videos and even movies, some of which have chess themes or chess in the background. You could sneak in a few of

these and work chess into your discussion of the plot.

Let's not forget computers. Since she's already starting to toy with the Apple, get her to be your partner in playing against it. Now your team might lose, and this could be discouraging, but you can lessen the hurt of such defeats by experiencing them together and laughing them off. She will learn a little chess while assimilating valuable life lessons from your carefree responses to these setbacks. And when your tandem manages to win, emphasize her contribution to the effort, pointing out real things she did to bring about the victory.

Of course it's wise to buffer her from feeling the full weight of defeat. But this doesn't mean that, if you're playing against her, you shouldn't play for real. You can always find an instructive way to assuage the pain of losing, regardless how one-sided a game becomes. For instance, if you're on the verge of beating her, change sides and help her find how to beat you with evocative questions and indirect suggestions. If she finds the right moves, she wins. If she doesn't, give her other opportunities by asking more leading questions, until a satisfactory resolution has been achieved or she at least discovers something useful or germane to the answer.

There's nothing astonishing about this. It's very much in line with what you probably already strive for as a concerned and loving parent. Just do it together, show how much fun you're having, and I wouldn't be surprised if one day she beats you on her own. Once again you'll laugh together, no longer in stoical acceptance, but in mutual appreciation.

Question I am a sophomore in high school with a provisional rating of 1100. I have been playing for about two years and have slowly progressed in skill. I feel that I am now at a point at which I need to begin to develop an opening repertoire. I have read that it is good to have a pair of White openings and a pair of Black defenses. I have studied queen-pawn openings (Queen's Gambit) and have enjoyed some of the positions at which I have arrived. What would you recommend that I put in my repertoire? Also, what books do you recommend in this area? (**Stephen Tyree, USA**)

Answer I don't know how you've arrived at your proposed program, but I think it ill-advised to memorize specific openings too deeply at your level, so I won't recommend anything in particular. Furthermore, it would be imprudent for a player of your rating to plan on satisfactorily playing radically different opening moves, such as 1. d4 and 1. e4, on an alternating basis. It would entail a great deal of narrow study, spending the better part of your free time memorizing – much of it by rote, and most of it terribly unnecessary – even just a few of the reasonable possibilities stemming from these disparate beginnings. Then there are the Black pieces. At the very least, you'd have to arm

yourself with viable lines against 1. d4, 1. e4, 1.c4, and 1. Nf3, and even these preparations wouldn't leave you fully covered.

Rather than investing your time in specialized and possibly frivolous study, why don't you pick up a manual presenting some of the ideas important to the opening phase in general, such as Richard Reti's *Masters of Chessboard* or Reuben Fine's *Ideas Behind the Chess Openings*. After going through either or both of these volumes, or works analogous to them, you'll have a much better sense of which variations work for you. And if you're still uncertain, you might consider having your game overhauled by a strong player before committing yourself to a strategy replete with potential problems.

Question Do games by non-masters get published in key chess books like *MCO* 14, *BCO* 2 and *Nunn's Chess Openings*? Or are only masters and the most talented and original experts "allowed" to have their games included in the "professional" chess books? (**Lev D. Zilbermints, USA**)

Answer Emanuel Lasker said something to the effect that at least a third of the variations published in opening encyclopedias were wrong, no matter the strength of the analysts and contributors. Although many people think it helps to have a title, there's lots of room for inclusion in these tomes, regardless of one's talent and originality. But while practically anyone can be published in such compendia, clearly **The Chess Café** takes a different stance. Here, a certain degree of discrimination is exercised.

Question I want to tell you that your articles are very instructive. I'm 33 years old and play chess by e-mail. I have two questions for you: What's is your opinion about *Nunn's Chess Openings*? What do you think about correspondence or e-mail chess? (**José Briceño, Venezuela**)

Answer Anything by John Nunn is usually quite good. He is a true scholar, who typically gives his heart to a project. Correspondence chess is a fine way to play the game, but most people find it a little slow for our world. The majority of players now prefer faster games on the Internet. So it depends what you want. If you want to experience many games over short compass, go with Internet chess. If you want to really think about your moves, and therefore play higher quality games, go with correspondence chess. In either case, chess is chess, and you can't go far wrong.

Question I am an intermediate chess player. I love the game very much. It insures endless amazement in me when you get to the point of the game (10th or 12th move), when there are endless possibilities ahead. I have studied openings through and through, but I always find myself in a position where I have a superior advantage over my opponent in position, but I just don't know where to move. The end

result is ultimately catastrophic. I was wondering if you had an idea on why I can open very strongly but end up in a very bad position in a few moves ahead. Your response will be greatly appreciated. (**Joseph Morman, USA**)

Answer Probably you need to work on the middlegame and endgame. You can do this with books. Why don't you take a look at Romanovsky's *Chess Middlegame Planning* or Silman's *Reassess Your Chess*. Either of these, or any number of similar volumes, should provide you with the fundamentals of middlegame play. For the endgame, Averbakh's *Chess Endings: Essential Knowledge* is not a bad text with which to start. But these suggestions are superficial. The best thing to do is to have your chess evaluated by a strong player. See what he or she has to say and proceed from there.

Question Here is a hypothetical: Two people of equal intelligence and dedication (let's call them Andre and Wally) decide to learn chess. Wally is very social and joins a chess club. He plays often against good competition, makes progress and succeeds in finding a good teacher to help him improve. Andre is a more of a stay-at-home type. He reads chess books and buys a good chess program (e.g. Chessmaster XXXX), which he plays against constantly, at increasing levels of difficulty. His game improves steadily over time. Now the question I have for you is this: if Andre and Wally both stick to their programs, will either one have an intrinsic advantage over the other? To put it another way, how important is psychology to chess? If you remove emotion from the equation, isn't what you are left with simply a process of calculation? And if this is so, why couldn't a person learn everything he needs to know about chess from a machine? Just wondering. (**Stephen Jackson, USA**)

Answer I think Wally has the advantage in over-the-board play, and Andre would do better at home in studying and playing the computer. Both would have intrinsic advantages in their area of expertise. Then there's your question about psychology. Naturally it plays an important role in head-to-head chess. With regard to your question about removing emotion from the equation, and wondering whether this would reduce chess to mere calculation, I'd have to disagree. If you remove emotion, calculation is not the only thing remaining. Chess is far more than the combination of these two elements. Not only are there other factors, such as judgment and intuition, but here the whole is clearly greater than the sum of its parts. Add everything up and something would still be missing from the explanation. Concerning your final question, perhaps one day both Wally and Andre would indeed be able to learn everything they need to know from a machine. Andre, of course, might have an intrinsic edge, but this is only hypothetical.

Question As a public school teacher who tries to teach chess, I am

constantly trying to explain the value of chess to other teachers, administrators, parents, and people in general. It's not always such an easy task. I figure you, with your many years of experience, have had to justify the value of the game many times. What kinds of reasons do you give for playing chess when trying to sell it? In other words, what do you tell people that chess players do when playing chess? (What talents do they need to play the game, etc.) I respect your opinion on this question maybe more than anyone else's. (**Michael Rosetter, USA**)

Answer In some ways I feel the game sells itself. Just watch kids playing chess and you'll be left with little doubt. But I wouldn't echo the former position of the U.S. Chess Federation, which used to advertise "chess makes kids smart." I found that educators were almost always repelled by these words, purposely rejecting chess once they heard such ideas espoused. Rather than saying that chess makes kids smart, I'd argue that playing chess gives kids practice at doing things that some smart people do. Few educators would object to this, it happens to be true, and it gives critics a convenient out, so they can claim that some dumb people play chess, too. But I'm not a cognitive scientist, so instead of stating what chess does for a person, I'd probably prefer to describe the apparent skills chessplayers enlist when playing the game, as I see it from my unscientific, anecdotal teacher's point of view.

So what is it that chessplayers do when playing chess? For one, it seems to me that chessplayers commonly draw analogies between things. They're constantly comparing and contrasting. At least through some unconscious process, if not indeed mindfully, they're looking at positions, investigating how situations are alike and how they differ. Moreover, chessplayers typically adapt the solution of one problem to solve another, and another, and another.

Chessplayers also tend to chunk concepts together, in Gestalt fashion, so that one thing stands for many. This explains how they can look at a small portion of the board and by inference reliably assume where most of the other units are, as well as where some aren't. Accordingly, chessplayers often try to classify what they see. For example, they'll wonder from which opening a particular position was generated. When they encounter a tactic or stratagem, they'll try to name it. This can be helpful, because when something appears in a category it usually takes on a whole bunch of characteristics, so that suddenly many other things can be assumed by implication.

Chessplayers also naturally arrange facts in series, making sure everything follows logically. They learn fairly early on that many problems are solved by changing the sequence -- that is, by reversing the move order, or by playing the second idea first. Furthermore, chessplayers are receptive to the notion that reorganizing the elements

is a vital aspect of creativity, where some of the most interesting ideas seem to come out of nowhere, yet we sense they've really been in front of us all along. (Scrabble players typically experience these creative afflatuses when they rearrange the tiles on their racks.)

Then there's the way chessplayers refocus their lenses. They are cognizant that sometimes it helps to change perspective, to look at circumstances from the other player's vantage point or simply from a different angle. So, when trying to figure out how to defend, chessplayers often pretend it's the opponent's move. Occasionally chessplayers actually get up and change their line of sight, even to the extent of standing behind the other player, though here it might be sagacious to consider the size of the opponent before shifting anywhere.

This brings us to perhaps the most important thing chessplayers do, and this is visualizing moves and positions in their heads. Chessplayers not only try to envision the future, they try to control it to their own ends. Even here chessplayers rely on different approaches. Sometimes they must make sophisticated generalizations about the way things might go. This is an aspect of strategy. But most typically doing headwork implies calculating variations: you know, figuring out where to go if he or she goes there. You can't avoid this tactical give-and-take if you want to play chess. And still other solutions are achieved without seeing very much at all, where suddenly a player gets an insight that seems to come from the ethereal plane. This brings us back to creativity and intuition, to which most players are hardly attentivel, yet its value is undeniable to the spirit of play.

Chessplayers are also inclined to be target-oriented. Once they imagine their aim, they naturally look homeward, toward the starting point of the quest, similar to the way many of us try to solve mazes. That is, some chessplayers look backward, from the goal to the middle. Then they look forward, again toward the middle, hoping to bring the two lines of thought together, or close enough to link. The difference is that in chess the maze is more conceptual than actual.

Whoever you talk to, whether parent, teacher, or administrator, I'd tell them that chessplayers are fond of step-by-step procedures, and they appreciate a good algorithm. Moreover, they are prone to break complex ideas down into simpler ones. At the same time, they typically build elaborate structures of ideas, such as comprehensive opening systems and intricate middlegame strategies. Furthermore, though chessplayers love precise variations and clear reasons, they are not unfamiliar with the principles of generalizing. Still, they know that the most beautiful generalization can be destroyed by a single hostile fact, as in the case of an unexpected move that defies a theory or proves to be a valuable exception to it.

Then there's beauty, and chessplayers always seem to seek it. They value solutions that rely on aesthetic principles, such as simplicity, economy, proportion, and so on. They are usually repulsed by an idea that goes against the grain. But they also grasp that true beauty may contain a dash of the ugly, in that the real world naturally contains imperfections, irregularities, and unexpected chaos. It may be their feeling for aesthetics, however, that leads them to resign once the point has been made. But at the same time, their resourcefulness and practicality keeps them involved until the last chance to salvage a position has finally disappeared, for they know no one ever won by resigning.

On the human level, chessplayers appreciate psychology. They understand the importance of the will, and how the stronger tends to wear down the weaker. Chessplayers are idealistic. They naturally strive for truth, but they can be awfully realistic when the situation calls for it. They are aware that sometimes errors have to be admitted and plans changed. They will do whatever works in the situation at hand. They can be superbly optimistic, and they have great passions. They love beautiful combinations, resourceful defenses, grand strategies, precision, ingenious tactics, finesses, nuances, sudden turns and twists, and many more things, perfect and imperfect. They also want to feel part of a community. They recognize the value of participating in an intellectual environment, with its own universal language, that bridges many cultural differences. They learn to believe in themselves, and chess offers them a chance to stand on their own two feet. The game tells them that they must accept the consequences of their actions. Ultimately, it gives them focus and purpose, and once they succeed at chess they feel they can do anything.

I could say much more. Others could say it much better. But I'm also sure you don't really need anyone's advice to help you promote the game. As I said upfront, the game sells itself. And if some of us won't buy it, maybe chess isn't quite right for them. Some people love saying "no," and some will vote for the other guy no matter what. Funny thing is, in chess there's room for them too.

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