



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!

Either Or

Question I have been studying chess for about 4 years and have reached a point where I am uncertain of how to carry on. I have read over Silman's middle game books and more recently have been studying Lev Albur's popular series of books. The two authors seem to have different methods for improvement. Silman seems to prefer a scientific breakdown of "imbalances" and a positional game. Albur recommends the study of tactics and endgame leaving positional analysis a distance behind. In other words, the attack and tactics are the primary skills for Albur but planning and breaking down the position scientifically are Silman's way. Ideally I would study and have mastery of both. But they are different ways of thinking and when I try to be both the tactician and positional player I often get overwhelmed, mix plans and ideas and end up with nothing while running short on time. I realize there are people who make a living at chess with tactics and there are those who do the same with a positional game and finally those we call "balanced." Getting to the heart of my question now... I have tried to play Silman's game and Albur's game and have performed fairly well with each method in isolation but do poorly with a mixture. As a "C" player that hopes to improve (with limited time available for study) I am considering three options: Go with Silman and his "thinking technique," go with Lev Albur and spend the great majority of time studying tactics and endgame, or continue trying to be both and hope to blend the two schools in time. What do you recommend? **John Patten (USA)**

Answer Chess is often described as being 95 percent tactics, so Albur's method is more traditional. It can't hurt to go on studying the various ways to mate and win things, especially since 1400 players are deficient in tactical skill practically by definition. Besides, even the

world's foremost players continue to solve tactical problems just to stay sharp. Silman's approach, as brilliant as it is, is more personal. He's a wonderful writer, who's helped many middle-range players hurdle their difficulties, but what you say he proposes might not satisfy your special needs at this time. Tactics, on the other hand, are always important. Nor should you neglect the endgame, the fundamentals of which you must know to compete successfully.

Accordingly, if I had to lean one way or the other, given the way you've posed your dilemma, I'd decide in favor of Alburt's approach. Now some things go unmentioned here, such as opening study, and this and other unspecified areas should also be integrated into your regimen. Yet rather than committing to either Alburt or Silman, why don't you find a nearby teacher and have him or her size up your game for more pertinent advice. Generalities can take you only so far. But I wouldn't fret. If after seeking help you're still uncertain, just go with what pleases you and at least you will be spending your time in stimulating leisure. This is usually the better road for a veteran 1400 player to travel.

Question I am a grade 5 teacher and incorporate the game of chess throughout my class curriculum. I am looking for 2 things really: a good internet chess site that you could recommend, where my students can play against other opponents; and a school teacher's guide for the incorporation of chess into the classroom (if you know of any such books/texts). **Mary Beth Osburn (USA)**

Answer There are a number of Internet sites offering live chess, such as the Internet Chess Club, the USCF, Its Your Turn, and Yahoo. Why don't you sample a few of these and see which one appeals to you the most. For guides you can try either the U.S. Chess Federation or Chess-in-the-Schools, both of which should be able to provide help and suggestions on literature. You might also take a look at Dan Heisman's excellent new work, *Everyone's 2nd Chess Book*. It has all kinds of useful suggestions for learning and teaching the game.

Question There are many fine chess players, by this I mean authors, who do NOT seem to play the game. For instance, Larry Evans and yourself, or do you play competitively and I am just not seeing the results. If you don't play, why not? **Roger Daniel Pagel (USA)**

Answer I can't speak for anyone else, but I'm not a player, let alone a fine one. I guess it's okay to call me an author in that I've published books, but you don't have to be a good player to publish chess books. You don't even have to be a good writer. No, I'm just a teacher, plain and simple, and I teach because I love it. Why don't I compete anyway? No particular reason, but if ever I do, I'm sure it will be easy enough to find the results and draw appropriate inferences.

Question Hello. I am an A-player from California and I have a

question about the opening 1...d6 for Black. A friend plays this exclusively and has achieved expert status. I noticed Kasparov used 1...d6 against Deep Blue in their tragic match and achieved a draw. The opening seems very flexible and most often leads to equality, yet is not systematically analyzed in the MCO and other publications, particularly variations involving d6, c6, Nf6, Bg4 and Qa5. I am looking for some games or literature to plot an attack against this defense-- any thoughts on this opening? **Jonathan Gardner (USA)**

Answer That your friend achieved Expert status relying on 1...d6 and Kasparov used it to draw with Deep Blue doesn't prove the worth of this defense. Your friend might have become an Expert no matter what and Kasparov is Kasparov. He could succeed with anything. But the move 1...d6 is quite flexible, offering many transpositional possibilities, and there's also abundant material available on it. Just consult **The Chess Café** or USCF catalogues and you'll see what I mean. You'll even find sections on your proposed variation. You could also investigate some of the huge electronic databases, such as what's offered by ChessBase. You'll find plenty of related games to play over and ponder. But rather than striking out on your own you might want to have your game assessed by a strong player and have him or her suggest openings and lines that are possibly better suited to you. You could still reject the advice, and go your merry way, but at least you'll have greater insight into the potential problems that lay ahead.

Question As a club player, I would like to know what openings you would suggest for club players to play please? I know a lot has been said about studying GM games to improve one's play and/or develop an opening repertoire? However, at the club (or even county level?), how many of us get to play these GM openings to the level that GMs play them? **Nicholas J. Hall (United Kingdom)**

Answer I'm not sure what you mean by club player. I wouldn't really want to identify the club player as a class, because many different types of players belong to clubs and play at these social establishments. Beginners and strong masters frequent these very same places, so we have to be careful when referring to the typical club player. It might make more sense to think in terms of particular rating classes, such as 1400-1600, or 1600-1800, but better still would be to treat your situation individually, because players in the same class have different needs. So if you really want to find the lines that work best for you, why don't you take three or four lessons with a strong player and have him or her make some pertinent suggestions. This is the way I would go before doing anything else.

Question Hi. I've been reading 2 interesting books on chess, *Secrets of Modern Chess Strategy* by John Watson and *Bishop versus Knight: The Verdict* by Steve Mayer. With regard to the first book, in the

beginning of the book he outlines chess fundamentals put forward by the old masters. In the second part he is able to thwart these ideas. My question to you is: Should a player still take the chess fundamentals put forward by the old masters seriously or should we try emulate the ideas brought forward by the new masters? Secondly, with regard to Bishop versus Knight, what is your verdict? **P.Difford (South Africa)**

Answer The fundamentals are the fundamentals. Generally it's still better to have more scope for your pieces, to avoid weaknesses, and to control open lines instead of abandoning them to the other player. A knight is still worth about three pawns, or as my teacher used to say, "a piece is a piece in any country in the world," as he pilfered one of my knights or bishops.

But while these ideas remain essentially true, there are always new and different ways to interpret them and the successful player must be aware of their corresponding applications. Moreover, all these general ideas have numerous specific exceptions, and innovative players are constantly looking for these exceptions, sometimes saving them for surprise effect. In the opening, for example, "new ideas" come along all the time. Sometimes they're not really so new. In fact, they may be quite old, and somewhere along the line simply fell out of style. It's not unusual for some of these reemerging ideas to succeed at first and then to be refuted or neutralized as subsequent tournament praxis employs them.

Other ideas have to do with certain middlegame strategies, such as temporarily accepting a poorly placed piece because of compensating advantages that equal or outweigh the problems incurred. In today's thinking it's *de rigueur* to assume hideous weaknesses to garner dynamic attacking prospects that stem from their acceptance. But these are not really new ideas. The older masters thought pretty much the same way. They simply had fewer examples from which to draw and the game needed much more accumulated experience before thinking about essentially the same things could evolve. Many of the most innovative opportunities were actually explored in the late 1800s and early 1900s but went unappreciated until contemporary eyes were able to judge them in hindsight and through new lenses.

Perhaps the area of chess we see the fewest changes in is the endgame. There are all kinds of new endgames theories but the way to win when up a pawn now is essentially the same as it used to be. Some original endgame analyses are added to the lexicon every year, and occasionally a clever resource is found in a tricky endgame, but Philidor's draw is still guaranteed. The outside passed pawn is still an advantage. The stronger king's position was important then and it's still important now.

As far as bishops versus knights, this is not in dispute either. Bishops

are better than knights in a majority of positions but there are many cases where knights come out on top. Even when a piece is not so effective it still retains some ability in the case at hand. If possible the player should try to understand the nature of the position looming ahead and realize which type of minor piece functions better in those circumstances. He should then play to obtain the right minor piece for the given position while trying to stick his opponent with the wrong minor piece. And if he winds up with the wrong minor piece he should then play to exchange it off for a good one. He could also try to strengthen his impaired minor piece or steer the position into a situation where the deficiencies are neutralized or the poor minor piece eventually acquires resurgent strength. I won't go into an analysis of which circumstances favor which minor piece, for these conditions are well known. But you can find plenty of explained examples in any number of books, old and contemporary. There are many more illustrations these days because so much more experience has transpired since Morphy, Steinitz, Lasker, Tarrasch, and Chigorin.

A final thought. Even though the new treatments may seem more relevant to you, because you see them more often in your own tournament practice, it still helps to understand how they came about. In fact, knowing the history of an idea is a very good way to understand the idea itself. So while what Watson says makes a lot of sense, you shouldn't think of the early ideas as being passé and of no value. The great players of the past provided necessary steps in the creation of the present. It's as Isaac Newton said: "If I've seen further than others it's because I've stood on the shoulders on giants."

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