



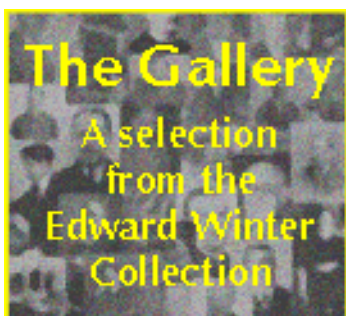
*The Q & A Way is based in large part on readers' questions. Do you have a question about preparation, strategy or tactics? Submit your questions (with you full name and country of residence please) and perhaps Bruce will reply in his next **Chess Cafe** column...*

Yes, I have a question for Bruce!

COLUMNISTS

The Q & A Way

Bruce Pandolfini



It's Not What, It's How

Question I am 25-years-old and I have only been playing tournament or rated chess for less than a year. My rating is low right now. My goal is to one day become a national master. Do you feel this goal is attainable for someone getting started this late? **Randy Hunter (USA)**

Answer A friend of mine didn't learn the moves and rules until he was eighteen. Within a few years he had become a strong master. Of course your goal is attainable. Human beings can do almost anything. But you surely have an obstacle-ridden path ahead of you. It's also not clear what you mean when you say your rating is "low right now." Some people would find a rating of 2,000 to be quite low, so your assessment doesn't help much. It does tell me something, though. It tells me you have considerable doubt, and it's terribly hard to succeed when one is plagued by lack of confidence. In order to attain your objective – chess mastery, whatever this really means -- you must start with the conviction that you can do it. I'm also not sure that your emphasis is on the right target. Rather than thinking of achieving a certain skill level, one very far down the road to say the least, why not set yourself more sensible goals, realizable ones that are well within your grasp. Emboldened by these measured but steady gains you'll have a decent chance to get somewhere. Yet even better would be to ignore ultimate aims altogether and just get into the happening itself. Play because you love it and the experience is its own reward. Besides, when you love something, it usually winds up loving you back.

Question Hi Bruce, I am a very beginning chess player. I started mainly because my sons wanted to play. My eldest son Connor started when he was 5 and at 8 he comes close to beating me. I have read all



of Bill Robertie's books and several of yours. I love the zaps and traps and wish I could remember them all. So many times I find that I realize an opponent has made a mistake and I can almost see your zap, but can't quite remember how to punish the mistake. Anyway, I mainly wanted to just let you know that I appreciate your style and humor in your books and I was curious about what ever happened to the kid from "Searching for Bobby Fischer." Did he stick with chess? Is he a national champion or anything. We all loved that movie. I hope the actor did you justice. **Shawn Farrell (USA)**

Answer Thank you for your kind words. If you're asking about Josh Waitzkin, he's doing quite well. After becoming an international chess master he's taken a hiatus from chess competition to pursue other interests. He is currently studying literature, history, philosophy, eastern religion, and Tai Chi. With regard to the latter, he has already won a national championship after only two years of involvement! Josh is truly an incredible individual who would succeed at any endeavor he pursues. As far as the film "Searching for Bobby Fischer" goes, it was great fun working on it and all the principals were true professionals who tried their very best. Sure, there were times we were trapped and zapped, but those are the experiences to be treasured most.

Question I have been playing chess for twenty years, since the age of about eight. In that time I've been playing just for fun. Back in my college days I would often spend a Friday night with friends going out to bars in Hollywood, followed by a visit to a coffee house in Santa Monica that was open until four in the morning and had chess boards available. Two of us would play while we visited and when the place closed we would head to my place and continue until sunrise. I always enjoyed these times because my opponent and I were very evenly matched. We would each win about half the games in the long run, hopefully each pushing the other to new levels of competence. In the last few years I've played very little.

Having grown apart from that group of friends, I had begun trying to teach my wife how to play, hoping that we might enjoy playing each other. But her skill level has been slow to approach mine, although she does enjoy the thinking and the puzzle of the game. Mostly I've been playing the occasional game on the Internet. I'm just now learning of the deeper iceberg to this game. I've owned a copy of Yasser Seirawan's *Play Winning Chess* for years, but have only gone through the whole book in the last week. I found that I enjoyed learning the ideas in it (which were for the most part new to me) and I enjoyed the analysis of games that came near the end of the book. This was the first time that I had read anything of this sort, pulling out a board and playing someone else's game.

So I searched around on the Internet and found a bunch of sites, including The Chess Cafe, and then to your column. Now I'm reading

about Sicilian openings, tactics, positional games, masters, and Bobby Fischer. All I know about Bobby Fischer is that someone was searching for him.

I've opened the door to a new world (or at least opened the next door to the world I'd already visited), and I realize I don't speak the language nor do I know the landscape. And I have neither a dictionary nor a map. Everything I see seems to assume that I already know more than I do. I hear about the many books available (including a two-volume set on variations of a single opening?!?), but I don't want to waste time getting into one that is above my head. Where can I go as the amateur who doesn't want to become professional but would like to become better? Where is the introduction, not to chess, but to the culture of chess? **Chuck Ross (USA)**

Answer Frankly, as long as you approach your chess with real excitement and energy it's hard not to profit. I think your past background is an excellent foundation from which to springboard to new levels of enhancement. Where should you go? You can go practically anywhere: to books, chess clubs, the Internet, videos, chess software, parks, magazines, tournaments – just about anywhere the game is played and esteemed, as long as you're doing it just for gratification and natural improvement. This is partly the joy of it; you don't have to do anything definite. There are no requirements to be met, no assignments to be completed, no tasks to be performed. If you start something that displeases you, you can simply move on to something else.

Almost any chess book treating material beyond the moves and rules should be beneficial. You can't really veer off course, for virtually all chess books say the same things anyway, even if they say them a little differently or inconsequentially better. Most introductory manuals advocate playing for the center, developing your pieces, getting your king to safety, not wasting time, and so on. It's not likely, no matter how badly written or constructed some chess books are, you'll ever encounter one that recommends playing for the corner, staying undeveloped, exposing your king early, and wasting time. So you can't really go too far wrong.

Moreover, as a sentient, mindful being, you'll know when something's not working for you. So good books and even bad books, non-grandmasters and even grandmasters, can help you improve. And if they're not helping you, you'll sense this and change sail. Nor can I imagine any chess activity being a total waste if you're checking with the proper barometer: your pleasure index. If you're enjoying the pastime, you'll learn from it naturally. This is the way it is because life is usually fair, despite what those opposed to this view say. To measure yourself against any other factors would defeat the amateur's purpose, unless your ambitions are greater than your e-mail states.

But if it's specific titles you want, why don't you eschew opening treatises, even marvelous two-volume sets on particular variations, in favor of the great books of the old masters. How bad can they be? You can only gain from *Capablanca's Chess Fundamentals*, Tarrasch's *The Game of Chess*, Lasker's *Manual of Chess*, Nimzovich's *My System*, Reti's *Modern Ideas In Chess* and *Masters of the Chessboard*, and Knoch's *Pawn Power In Chess*. Throw in Reinfeld's *The Human Side of Chess* and you'll be well on your way to playing superior chess as well as increasing your chess culture. I would also explore other chess sites on the Internet and a few issues of *Chess Life* magazine to find out about current events. But don't get caught up in acquiring "culture" by making sure you learn the right things in linear order. Culture is not just knowledge. It's also a state of mind. If every time you play the game or read about chess you do so with burning interest and respectful appreciation you will surely increase your chess culture and enrich your play. It's also nice that you have a sympathetic wife. There are chessplayers who would pay to be where you are, wherever that is.

Question Many years ago, when I was a kid, I came upon a cute chess problem (mate in 7 forced moves). The game was played around Xmas time with appropriate wagers between Santa Claus and the devil. At the end of the problem, and with the devil winning, a perfect CROSS was formed by the piece arrangement and you know how the devil feels about crosses -- I've lost that problem, any idea where to find it? Hector Aldape (USA)

Answer I'm not at all sure what your problem is, though I have an idea. It sounds as if it has to do with a cross-pin. Perhaps the final position is similar to this: White queen on a7, White bishop on b2; Black king on h8, Black queen on g1, Black bishop on d4. Of course, as always, it would depend on where the other units are, but here Black's d4-bishop is pinned two ways and this is troubling. I hope this rings a bell. If it doesn't, perhaps some of our readers will be familiar with it and inform us accordingly. If so, I'll let you know. If not, maybe you should turn to Santa. And if that fails, you can always go to the devil.

Question Do top GM's study chess manuals, or do they do all their studying by looking over their own games and those of others? I know they probably look at opening monographs or tournament books, but what about advanced manuals such as the Dvoretsky/Yusupov series or John Watson's *Secrets of Modern Chess Strategy* for example? At what point do they feel they're 'beyond' studying *My System* and other such books? **Kelly Atkins (USA)**

Answer I don't want to speak for top grandmasters, for, as they would happily tell you, I am not one of them. But they are people, and though they mainly review critical games and analyses, especially in their

areas of interest, they too will occasionally turn to manuals. They might do this to check on a point, to see how another writer expresses an idea, to study difficult endgame positions or complicated variations, to see chess thinking analyzed at state-of-the-art levels, as in the best works of Dvoretsky, Watson, Nunn, et al, or for any number of other reasons. Sometimes they turn to more general compendia just for the sheer joy of re-experiencing familiar games and positions they've come to appreciate – to hobnob with old friends, so to speak. It's like watching a classic movie we know quite well. We may already have seen it many times, but this doesn't stop us from seeing it again and again. I once asked Viktor Korchnoy what and how he studies, and he replied: "I don't study; I create." Though there was obviously some truth in his words, we both smiled. I suspect even now he still might get a chuckle out of reading Nimzovich.

Question Many chess books recommend studying collections of games played by great players. Do you have any favorites that you recommend? Also, can you recommend any techniques for learning from these games? For example, is it better to try to put yourself in the shoes of one player and try to analyze his/her position move-by-move or to simply play each move and try to understand the rationale behind the move? Thank you for your help. **Trip von Minden (USA)**

Answer My favorite game collections are Alekhine's *Best Games of Chess* in two volumes, Botvinnik's *100 Selected Games*, and Fischer's *My Sixty Memorable Games*. But the truth is any collection of games played by a great player is illuminating and thrilling, even the "boring guys," who here shall go nameless. With regard to techniques for using this material, play through the games from the perspective of the great player in question. You can try to guess the upcoming moves, but more efficacious would be to understand them after you've seen them. If a particular analytic note seems daunting, just skip it and move on. For most players it's more useful to get into the flow of the game than to break everything down in minute detail. Doing this would make chess a chore, and that would countervail anyone's efforts.

Question Every chess player and teacher agrees that learning (i.e. understanding) endgame rules is the best way to improve. However when one look at Web Chess sites one can see (quite) a lot on openings but few on endings. How would you explain that? Could you give some good links to site with practical chess endings, exercises and teaching. I would most of all appreciate a site where the basic rules (like opposition, corresponding squares, how to draw with disadvantage, etc.) are highlighted and explained. **Michel de Vathaire (France)**

Answer I don't agree with your opening premise, that the best way to improve is to learn endgame rules. There are many ways to learn, including the learning of endgame principles. What works for one

person may fail for another, and I don't mean this in a trivial sense, or just to be contentious. We really don't know what's the best way to improve, and many of us who think we know something think quite differently. Most experienced chess teachers believe the best way to improve one's play is to have it analyzed on a regular basis. This is how you can come to understand your mistakes, and once you've understood your problems you can start to do something about them. There may be a better way to improve, but studying endgame rules, as valuable as this can be, isn't it.

Question Are you familiar with a theory that says chess came from ancient Egypt? I have been told that it comes from the snake game. Is this true? Do you know anything about this or have you heard such a theory? I would like to know what you know. Long ago I once had a teacher who had proof of this and I was wondering if you could help me. I am a terrific player of games and so history is important to me. Please help (assuming you can). **Dane Higgins (USA)**

Answer I'm not sure anyone could help you on this one, maybe not even your snake-bitten teacher. Some authorities indeed have tried to trace chess back to an earlier period, prior to the development of Chataranga. For instance, Otto Rank (1884-1939), described by Havelock Ellis as "perhaps the most brilliant and clairvoyant of Freud's many pupils," espoused a theory on the antediluvian origin of chess. Speculating on the work of Herman Rank and others, he concluded that chess could have evolved from a maze-like game found in the burial crypts of the Egyptian dead at the end of the Old Kingdom (c. 2000 B.C.). Called "the snake game" because of its serpentine design, its rules have eluded even the Book of the Dead (though you might want to check the last chapter). But clearly the snake game was a "race game," in which each player vies to achieve a certain goal first.

The purpose of the snake game, Rank theorized, was to provide a weapon against death on the journey through the Underworld. The idea was that if the player "lost" a game to death, he could always play another and another, thus indefinitely extending his life. Eventually the game's sinuous form evolved into a board with three parallel rows of ten squares each. The esoteric aim of this new version was to rob the opponent of his pieces (symbolically, his vital organs), the final coup being the head, or the king. Over all, the game stood for the inevitable battle between good and evil, or the eternal clash between the Egyptian gods Horus and Seth. Further differentiation led to the game of Senat, seen in an ancient wall painting of Nefertiti, found as an artifact in the tomb of King Tut, and now sold in commercial versions at many fine stores and art museums. Rank's hypothesis is certainly intriguing, but whether this diversion was the prototype for chess remains a mystery, like love, death, and the actual point of your question.

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