



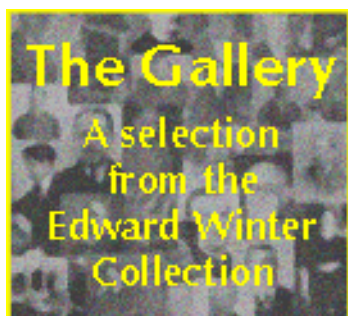
*The Q & A Way is based in large part on readers' questions. Do you have a question about preparation, strategy or tactics? Submit your questions (with you full name and country of residence please) and perhaps Bruce will reply in his next **Chess Cafe** column...*

Yes, I have a question for Bruce!

COLUMNISTS

The Q & A Way

Bruce Pandolfini



Ratings: It's What's Happening

Question Thanks for your column. I'm rated about FIDE 1600. I am interested in what you think are the most important features in club-level games. I often get into a better position (i.e. more space, better pawn structure, etc.) but often finish up losing games. Grandmaster strategy doesn't seem relevant in my games. **John Midland (United Kingdom)**

Answer At your purported level by far the most critical feature is tactical skill. For the 1600 player everything else is secondary. The faster you spot tactics, the more accurately you calculate them, the more sensitive and creative you are in using them to your own ends, and the more alert you are to warding them off, the better all-around player you'll be and the more success you'll have.

Most games between 1600 players are decided tactically in the opening or early middlegame and typically wrapped up by tactical simplification to a winning endgame. Of course you should also think strategically, with concern for space, pawn structure, and so on. But too often 1600 players exaggerate the importance of strategy, thereby blundering material and hanging mate. Now, I don't know much about you, but if your assessment is correct, that indeed you are a 1600 player, then I agree wholeheartedly with at least one thing you say. This is, that grandmaster strategy is probably not very relevant to your games. Pay less attention to abstract theory and more to tangible tactics and you should be able to play respectably at whatever club you frequent.

My suggestion? Go to any online chess catalog, pick out a couple of



books from the tactical section that seemingly meet your needs, and obtain them. If they end up being too hard, keep them for the future or give them as presents. If they turn out being too simple, blitz through them for review and then give them as presents. Either way, you're okay. Have a good day.

Question I have recently started to play chess. I have some understanding of opening principles. At present I can easily win against a player of rating up to 1500. What opening system should I adopt so as to increase my understanding of the game? **Junaid Farooq (Pakistan)**

Answer Your question is difficult to answer as posed. For one, you say you can easily beat 1500 players. I don't doubt this, but this assertion doesn't tell us enough. It doesn't pinpoint whether you are a 1600 player, a 1700 player, an 1800 player, or a what, when each of these classes would benefit from different counsel.

You also seem to think that one's understanding of the game and quality of play can be improved merely by adopting a specific sequence of opening moves. You may indeed wind up choosing precise lines as you achieve greater comprehension and acquire further expertise, but it doesn't necessarily work the other way. That is, playing a specialized opening doesn't in itself mean that you will grasp the game more deeply and therefore play better.

And there are other factors which also might affect my response, such as your style, your ability to study, the conditions under which you play, and Caissa knows what else. Nor does it appear you've thought about your opponent's possible replies or even for which color you seek advice, White or Black. Don't these things and other unexpressed issues matter too? Surely the whole dynamic must be considered to respond to your question satisfactorily.

Maybe you were thinking in terms of the White pieces, not so much considering opening complexes, but merely what first move to play. In this case, instead of playing the so-called best opening move, whatever that is, why don't you start most games by playing a questionable move, such as 1. a2-a4? Sure, you'll increase your chance of losing significantly. But to avoid subsequent losses with your new pet opening you'll have to become more resourceful, and this, perhaps more than anything, could expedite your development as a chessplayer. It's a thought.

Question I am a chess enthusiast from California and I play chess just for enjoyment. Many times, the fun that I would otherwise get, is spoiled by my mistakes in

calculations. I don't make beginner's blunders, but when I calculate I often miss a reply on the 3rd or 4th move. I have read books on tactics

and I am familiar with all the themes and motifs. It's not that I lose my queen to a fork, but I cannot adequately evaluate the position that would arise after the moves in my calculation. Especially when the depth is more than 3. I don't know what my rating is as, due to lack of time, I haven't played in any tournaments. I sometimes play rapid chess on the Internet, and there my rating is around 1500. At this level, what should I do to improve my calculations? **Abhay Avachat (USA)**

Answer By "calculations" I presume you are referring to seeing variations in your head. If this is what you mean, as a rule you can improve your ability at it by always trying to analyze without moving the pieces, regardless of your level. The more of these analytic calisthenics you do, the better. You should probably try to solve a couple of tactical problems in your mind every day. Moreover, make sure not to become lazy about it. If you're having trouble resisting the urge to moving the pieces when considering a puzzle, avoid temptation by working from diagrams rather than from positions set up on an actual board. You can find serviceable diagrams in practically any good combination book. Furthermore, when mulling over a problem, unless you get the solution instantly, give it at least 5-10 minutes of focused thought before turning to the answer. Better yet, don't turn to the answer at all, at least not before you've invested a little piece of yourself. When you're not getting anywhere, simply close the book and come back to the problem refreshed at a subsequent point. You'd be surprised how often the answer suddenly materializes after an interim of unconscious contemplation. And if you still don't get an insight, put the book down and once again return to the challenge at a later time. Even if you never get the right answer, more important is cultivating the proper mindset, which is manifested by dogged determination. For many, though of course not all, it's a sure way to become a winner.

Question Please, I wish your advice. I have studied and played chess ten years,

more or less, however I cannot improve my Elo rating of 2100. I normally have an advantage after the opening, however I often cannot win and a lot of the games finish in a draw or are lost. What is the method for improving? **Edgar Camacho (Peru)**

Answer Playing serious games, on a regular basis, and having your play critiqued just as regularly, is the best way to improve your skill. I suggest you find an experienced chess teacher in your area and have him or her analyze your games every week. Either that or actually play the chess teacher, going over your games after their completion. Combining praxis and theory can be very effective.

It also sounds as if you need work on your ability to close out superior positions. As an exercise, and if you're okay with computers, why

don't you set up materially winning games and play out these situations against a decent chess program. If you don't at first win a definite example, go back to the move at which the computer last evaluated your position as being decisive and play from there. Keep this up until you gradually gain the point, playing and replaying, again and again, until you eventually win. If I were a player (nothing wrong with a little fantasy), I might just go this way myself.

Question I have been a great fan of yours for quite some time. I am not doing well with my endgame. Although my rating is not that high I usually hold my own until the end, and then everything seems to fall apart. Please advise me what book you think would be the most helpful. Bear Meade (USA)

Answer There are many excellent endgame books, some of which are basic and clear. Why don't you take a look at Averbakh's *Chess Endings, Essential Knowledge*. It would be hard to locate a better introduction to the final phase, and few critics doubt the authority of Yuri Averbakh. You should also find a copy of *Silman's Essential Chess Endings Explained Move by Move*. Just about anything by Jeremy is first-class and beneficial, and you won't be disappointed here. If you want to go a little deeper you could try *A Guide to Chess Endings* by Euwe and Hooper. It's somewhat more complex, and it may be out-of-print, but it too is a fine book. You might also consider exploring the endgame works of Edmar Mednis. He generally presents his material instructively and systematically and his writings are sprinkled with discernment sharpened by years of personal chess combat against some of the best players in the world. Finally, if you're willing to veer from the world of books, you should sample whatever endgame software you can come up with, particularly if keyboard study suits your disposition. I believe Silman has produced some helpful tutorials in the Chess Mentor series. It couldn't hurt to give them a try.

Question I am a relatively new (adult) recreational player. In my studies, I have come across a statement that in an endgame of only two knights + king vs. a bare king, there is no forced checkmate. Is this true? If so, does that mean there are hypothetical games where one side (say White) has the large advantage of two pieces (knights) in the endgame, and still the game is a forced draw? Obviously, careful play is needed on the part of Black to avoid checkmate, but a draw could be had simply by a 50 or 100 move rule. Has such a draw ever been reached in any recorded game? Matt DeMonte (USA)

Answer It's possible to set up a checkmate with just two knights and a king vs. a lone king, but the win can't be forced. Either you would need your opponent's cooperation or the situation would have to arise from entailed tactics, with other forces playing a role. It's possible with a king and two knights to drive a lone king toward a corner, but

one move before delivering checkmate stalemate would raise its hideous head. For this reason there are all kinds of remarkable studies where the defender is allowed to keep a single, often blockaded pawn so that stalemate can be dodged at key moments.

Of course, there are additional ways to draw when behind by two knights. For example, such a game could be drawn by perpetual check or perpetual threat, which actually are sub-classes of drawing by threefold repetition of position. Sometimes, when behind by two knights, the defender might be able to hold it together by setting up a fortress (a kind of impenetrable barrier). A deficit of two knights could also be circumvented by the 50-move rule (there's no such thing as a 100-move rule), or even by one side foolishly accepting a draw in a winning position. And in speed chess an advantage of two knights or greater against a lone king would become a draw if the superior side forfeits on time. But for the most part, if you have the advantage of two extra knights, with other material still on the board, you can almost always force an easy win. Has such a draw ever been reached in a recorded game? Are you kidding? Come by any of my classes sometime and record for yourself.

Question I have submitted several questions to you about chess which you never bothered to answer though you promised to answer in your return e-mail. If it wasn't you it was probably somebody else who works for you, but I'm sure he shows it to you. You even asked me for my name and country. One of my questions was about fake chess masters who pretend they are big teachers and who write bad books about chess on topics they can't possibly understand because they are so weak. You answer everybody else's questions and not mine. Just answer me one question. I will never write to you again, but are you ever going to answer any questions of mine ever? **Jack Williams (USA)**

Answer I suspect I still don't know your name, but I'm willing to accept the United States as being your country of origin. Sometimes we say we're going to answer specific questions right away and circumstances force us to postpone their appearance. Usually the delay is only a month, but there are exceptions. I trust this addresses your most recent inquiry.

Question I'm hesitating to ask this, since it might be an unusual question. In my youth I was an enthusiastic chess player, playing regularly at the local chess club and tournaments and had some very good local tutors. But after leaving university, marriage and career become more important, and I more or less forgot about the joys of chess. Now some twenty odd years have passed, and I find myself drawn to chess again. I started to "relearn," or better yet, remember the things I knew by playing against computer opponents, training with Chess Mentor, and getting some books about openings, endgames,

tactics and strategy. And of course using the Internet (among which, your columns). In a few months I will be returning to my home country (the Netherlands), and I already contacted the local chess club, ready to start playing again. But, to get to the question, I find myself sometimes incapable of playing, sometimes even training, for fear of making a stupid move ('stupid' as in contrast with a 'less good' or 'bad' move). As soon as I get unintentionally behind in material or position, I more or less freeze, panic, and quit the game. Computers, of course, don't mind that. But it can be a bit frustrating for real people. Of course, one could say, "so, find another game," but apart from liking chess, I don't like running away from myself this way. Since I'm not that unique, others must have had such experiences as well. Do you have any suggestions on how to proceed to overcome this, for a chessplayer, rather difficult handicap? **Jerry van Dijk (France)**

Answer There are no easy answers here, and what answers there may be are possibly better sought in the world of psychotherapy. But I have certainly encountered this problem in my work. If you were one of my own students I'd try to impress upon you the importance of starting with a certain outlook. Speaking from your perspective, I'd want you to accept what you probably already know to be so, that no one's perfect, and losing is part of living.

Continuing with the obvious, I'd say that no one ever won a game by resigning. I'd add that successful players often get hopeless positions, yet somehow they fight to the very end, ostensibly becoming most dangerous when verging on defeat. Much of this survival quality is innate. But some of it has to do with training and experience, as well as learning to be mindful of what's going on. In all cases, I'd want my students to assess particular situations objectively before proceeding.

Once they've determined that the position before them is losing, I'd urge them to accept this dispassionately, without getting too emotionally involved. Of course it's hard to be so coldly analytic (we're not machines), but such an approach provides the best hope. So I'd try to encourage them to treat their losing positions as mere exercises. With such acceptance, they might start to feel unfettered, free to pursue the situation scientifically and rationally.

It would help, when plagued with doubt, if students had the self-possession to pose a directive type of question. However they phrase it, I'd want them to ask themselves something like: What can I do to make this position as hard as possible for my opponent to win? With this question should come a fundamental realization, that opponents want their winning games to finish quickly. They don't want to fight anymore. They want their adversaries to resign. Frustrating this by putting up stiff resistance is the wisest course of action. To be sure, it might save the game. But even if it doesn't it gives us an opportunity to hold our heads high. No matter the result of

an individual chess game we should want our opponents to imagine they've been through a war. The aim should be to earn their respect. We're not going to inspire much respect if we give up without a fight. Think about this before willfully abandoning your next chess game.

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