



*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



Touch Move

Question I teach chess in the public schools to elementary school kids and middle school kids. Some of them are quite affectionate, and they are used to touching and being touched, the younger ones in particular. As a chess teacher, and a male chess teacher at that, I am concerned about touching students during lessons. I feel that often it is desirable to give the student a reassuring pat on the shoulder, yet in today's world such affection is often misunderstood. It also seems that women teachers are much freer to touch than men. I have had this conversation with many other teachers and each of us has our own thoughts on it. To what extent do you think it's all right for a chess teacher to touch students during class to show approbation? **Michael McAdams (USA)**

Answer Your question, though not really about chess, is one that's vital to all teachers, including those who teach chess. It brings to mind the story *Hands* from Sherwood Anderson's *Winesburg, Ohio*. Forgive me if you're already familiar with it, but it's about a teacher named Adolf Myers (a/k/a. Wing Biddlebaum) who is best able to show his love for teaching and people by touching. The students adore him and his articulate hands, though one day a misguided youth spreads a false rumor about Adolf and the townspeople wind up driving him away and ruining him, so that he's never able to teach, or touch, again.

Touching is most definitely a type of communication, and young children often express themselves by feeling and holding. Many also view touching as a sign of acceptance. Furthermore, for some teachers, as with the Adolf Meyers character in *Hands*, touching and body language are an integral part of their teaching. It's their way of displaying the love and approval most students need.



Nevertheless, touching isn't the only way to convey empathy. It's usually transmitted without touching at all. Just think about the nature of chess itself. Other than to shake hands, chessplayers never touch while playing. Yet even though there's no physical contact, chess is an incredibly intimate game. In the process of sitting so close to our opponents we tend to learn a lot about them. In particular, after a few hours of tightly inhabiting the same space, we usually come to know if we like or dislike them, whether it's from the way they move the pieces, their facial expressions, their posture, or from other forms of powerful, though indirect communication.

Of course, playing chess is not the same as teaching it. Specially in the case of teaching young children, some touching, such as a tap on the shoulder or a pat on the head, may possibly be permissible when trying to reassure or encourage. It's also true that society has traditionally been more tolerant of women who touch and less so of men. Not surprisingly, the thinking on this has changed slightly in recent years as more men have entered the profession and proved their worth as teachers, which could be deemed pertinent to chess, where overwhelmingly most of the teachers are men.

But whether male or female, teaching chess or other subjects, I don't think teachers should touch students if there's any chance the touching could be misconstrued or potentially injurious to the students. I think there are other ways to impart information or show support, and the experienced teacher knows them by training and nature. Smiling genuinely, using a certain tone of voice, saying suitably complimentary things, or any number of other skillful responses can also get the point across, and they all avoid touching's maelstrom of potential trouble.

Question I am an elementary Special Education teacher in Indianapolis, Indiana who also runs the chess club. I am a below average player who doesn't play in many USCF tournaments, but I love working with the children and seeing them grow to love chess. I was wondering if there are certain methods and/or materials that would increase my level of effectiveness in working with 1st through 5th graders. Thank you so much. **John Weichert (USA)**

Answer You're possibly already doing many things that work, but if you need a shot in the arm, you might start by building a small library of books that special education kids could actually use. You could begin the process by turning to the ChessCafe.com's online catalog or a comparable service, purchasing a few items that seem to the point. Remember that chess is highly visual, so you should emphasize acquiring children's books with large diagrams and minimal text, where the material is spaced proportionately and distinctly. Probably you should get one or two source books for yourself, such as Lev Alburt's *Comprehensive Chess Course* or Laszlo Polgar's *Chess*, both

of which could also be used by the kids. You might also want to find software that enables diagrams to be made, so you could print your own examples, serving your own purposes. You might then prepare blocks of related illustrations, most likely with no more than four to a page, though two per page would be better and less confusing. You could then take many of these diagrams and create flash cards, possibly laminating them, with each one posing a problem on one side and its answer on the other – both diagrammed. And don't be afraid to draw arrows over the diagrams, kind of like a football coach does with a playbook. I would also procure a demonstration board and enough standard chess sets of hard plastic to accommodate a full class. Maybe you should get two extra sets just to be safe. You might even want to obtain an unusual set, with bright colors, which you'll use at special moments to gain attention or shift focus. Furthermore, since chess is so visual, you might put on view chess art and summary charts of key chess concepts as memory-jogs. Lastly, you could equip yourself with videos and films that teach chess and show it in positive light and dark.

Question I am a great fan of chess. I have been to many tournaments and wanted to ask you a question. What is the best way to prepare to play in tournaments? I have been told that computer play is adequate practice and have also been advised that chess club play alone is not enough to enable one to do well in the tournament. I want to better my game and would like your advice. **Jill D. Klevan (USA)**

Answer I think you've already laid the groundwork by having visited many tournaments. I suppose it wouldn't hurt to acquaint yourself with the rules of tournament chess, use of the clock, how to record, and some general background information. Maybe you could take one or two friendly tournament veterans out for coffee. Get them to talk about the tournament scene, making sure to touch upon those questions that concern you.

If you'd like to learn more about the game itself, you might want to get your hands on a few chess books. You could absorb some things about the openings from Reuben Fine's *Ideas Behind the Chess Openings* or from a comparable book, such as *How to Open a Chess Game*, by seven different grandmasters (Larry Evans and company) and edited by Burt Hochberg. To become *au fait* with contemporary chess thinking, especially with focus on the middlegame, you could take a stroll through Larry Evans's *New Ideas In Chess*, or Jeremy Silman's *How to Reassess Your Chess*, or any books that look like them (check the insides). And if you'd like to complete the customary three-phase tour, why not introduce yourself either to Yuri Averbakh's *Chess Endings: Essential Knowledge* or Lev Alburt's *Just the Facts!*.

As for computer play and club competition, these activities are fine. You can find decent opposition in both spheres, though there's really

nothing quite like sitting on the edge of an abyss, directly across from a real opponent, in an actual tournament. And that's the point. If you want to prepare yourself to play in tournaments, just start playing in tournaments. What better preparation than experiencing the thing-in-itself?

Question Has there ever been a study on what is the best approach to teach chess to

children and/or adults? If so, what is it? Is the study available as book, paper or on line? Lastly what is your assessment of the study? Thanks ever so much for your columns and books. **Warren Nyack (USA)**

Answer To my knowledge there are no such studies, and if there were, they and their authors would be subject to verbal abuse from dissenting chess teachers. It's commonly understood that there are many ways to teach chess. Nor is there anything like a must-curriculum. There is general agreement on some things, but particulars vary from teacher to teacher. Certain teachers emphasize certain things and other teachers other things. But most teachers are in tacit agreement on at least one thing. They more or less agree that it can't hurt to do as much as you can in your head, analyzing in your mind every chance you get. Most teachers are also apt to concur that it's beneficial to play against challenging opposition on a regular basis, and that when you play you should give it all you've got, with your mind focused directly on the game before you. They may see eye to eye on a few more things too, but let's not press our luck .

Question I am a strong beginning player with a rating of around 2100. I enjoy the competition of tournament chess, but am unsure of club chess. I have been to a couple of club meetings and I am unsure how this type of play will affect my strength. What do you think? **Edward Harmen (USA)**

Answer I don't know of many beginning players who have ratings around 2100 (actually, you're the only one). Nonetheless, I don't think it matters so much what your rating is, or where you play. Much more important is who you play, and you can find challenging opponents practically anywhere. So if you're unconvinced about the caliber of opposition at your local chess club, just give it a try and see. If it proves not to be up to your plane, you can go back to tournaments all the wiser. You may be surprised, however, especially if you start losing a bunch of games to club regulars below your own numerical strength – you know, those ordinary 1600, 1700, and 1800 players. It's amazing how good some of them can be, even with unremarkable ratings.

Question It's been a year since I took on chess studying with a more serious approach, I've been playing a lot on the Internet and on every site my rating is around 1400 (we all know that Internet ratings are

quite a bit higher than the real ones), but I'm just not satisfied with it. I would like to have at least a 2000 rating on the Internet, and then I will be able to say that I'm on the right track. Right now I've been solving hundreds of puzzles of varying difficulties, but that doesn't seem to be getting me anywhere. My biggest problem is still that I make too many tactical mistakes in my games. Usually I can see some crushing move, but fail to see the crushing move my opponent has already begun to play on me. Am I missing out on something when I solve the puzzles or is there something that I must pay special attention to? What else can I do to correct this weakness of mine? Thank you very much for your help. **Sergio Romero (Mexico)**

Answer Studying tactics may not yet have solved your problem, but it's still a sensible recourse. It's tautological. If you've been having trouble with tactics, you should be working on tactics. And how do you know it hasn't gotten you anywhere? This kind of thing takes time. You may well be on the way toward improvement, possibly getting stronger everyday, and still don't see gains because pieces of the puzzle are yet to be placed.

From the way you've described the situation, perhaps you need to concentrate more on defensive play, and there are a few excellent books dealing with this part of the game. *The Art of Defense* by Soltis and *The Art of Defense in Chess* by Polugaevsky and Damsky come to mind. There's also a very good chapter entitled *How to Defend Difficult Positions* in *The Art of the Middle Game* by Kotov and Keres.

An aspect of defense is perspective - that is, how the board is perceived. You can cultivate a better defensive attitude if you practice trying to imagine yourself as being your opponent. This means, especially when your opponents are on the move, and your mind can wander more freely, pretending you're sitting in the opposite chair, trying to determine the best moves against you. Do this often enough and you might discover that anticipating your opponent's resources suddenly becomes much easier, as you gradually integrate such vigilance into your overall approach.

We should say something about ratings. There's nothing inherently wrong with establishing goals, but we don't have to be entirely statistical about it. We can push numbers to the side and plan on reading a specific book or taking part in a certain tournament for the sheer joy of experience. Nor if we feel a need for measured improvement do we have to set the bar so high, so that we have to gain 600 points by the next rating list. If you're going to live and die by the point, you still can be modest and reasonable about it. Before you can conquer 2000, recognize that you must first reach 1500, and then 1550, and so on. Set yourself more attainable goals and you may actually achieve them. Establish impossible ones and you're setting yourself up for failure. But the choice is yours.

Question Hi, I am considering lessons/tutoring but I don't have a good idea of how to go about selecting an instructor/tutor. My experience in teaching other subjects persuades me that simply finding a strong player doesn't mean you've found a good instructor. So my question is this: what do you think a class A/B/C player needs to look for in a coach/instructor/tutor? What are the telltale signs of someone who has given some thought to the question of how to teach effectively, and is there any way to objectively compare instructors? In short, how can the amateur shop for an instructor so as to reduce the chances of wasting time and money? **John Gear (USA)**

Answer You should be looking for the same qualities in a chess coach you'd seek from coaches in other disciplines: expertise, experience, communication skills, solicitude, reliability, affordability, and sufficient time for thoughtful preparation. With regard to the latter, be wary of hiring a coach who is overbooked or who has very important students. He or she might not be able to give you adequate time and consideration. I would also avoid teachers who present immutable systems. This usually means they are more concerned with displaying their own ideas rather than finding out about you as an individual. I suppose some concepts are set in stone, but people tend not to be, and teachers should never be.

If I were trying to find a teacher I'd ask around. I'd try to locate current and former students and hear what they have to say. I'd also try to speak at least to a few different teachers themselves, and I'd probably ask some similar questions to compare their reactions. I'd ask about how they teach and I'd see what questions, if any, they ask me. I'd want a teacher who manifests interest in me as a person, one who is willing to cater a program to my needs and within my budget. And if the teacher objects to answering my questions, or if he or she treats me like one of the herd, I'd drop him or her from my short list. Who needs to pay to be near someone like that?

But mistakes are still possible. You may enlist the help of someone who seems promising but turns out wrong for you, or you may initially reject someone whose true worth doesn't show on first contact. Fortunately, you can give it a fresh start and seek a new teacher (you actually have that right), armed with the knowledge of experience. This time, though, you'll have a better sense of what not to do, as well as greater sensitivity for hidden qualities that are often missed. It might cost you something, but you'll get it all back later, with interest.

Question From some experience of teaching chess over the Internet, as well as from reading your column, I have noticed that many players are extremely performance-oriented. Most complain about not being able to break a rating limit. So they set concrete goals of reaching a certain rating within a given time period. I am a little perplexed about the reasons why chess students would willingly put themselves under

such pressure. Unless we go into discussion of the professional chess world, individual ratings have no practical significance in terms of individual standards of living or even opportunities open to them in the chess world. Anyone can go into the open section of the World Open and have an excellent chance of playing with a grandmaster in the first round. And with the development of Internet chess anyone can play with a GM online for a few bucks.

Meanwhile, under the pressure of getting rating points, students try to find some reliable laws and guidelines in chess that would help them win. This leads to over-simplification of chess, standardization of ideas which, in itself, in my opinion, is the strongest retarding force for chess improvement. It seems to me that some players undertake chess study not so much to improve their play, but to ease the burden of having to think for themselves! This completely annihilates the very idea behind playing chess. Instead the game is entirely turned into a means of achieving nothing but gratification of one's ego (unless of course that is the point!). I am wondering to what extent you consider these observations correct. And if so, do you believe that this extreme performance orientation among weak players is due to ignorance of the game or just overall spirit of competitiveness that permeates American society (or any society for that matter)? **Sergei Kanevsky (USA)**

Answer You've said a few things, the spirit of which I embrace. We do tend to place too much emphasis on arbitrary achievements and too little on real gains in ability and comprehension. We do place too much urgency on immediate success rather than giving ourselves enough time to mature naturally. We do wind up doing things for the wrong reasons, such as for status, instead of for positive ones, such as for enjoyment and personal growth.

We're also particularly obsessed with numbers and ratings, as if ratings were an exact measure of intelligence. Clearly many chessplayers seek an easy way out, trying to get to specific rating levels quickly, hoping to circumvent the exertion it takes to understand the game properly, let alone master it. This somewhat is why we try to apply rules of thumb instead of investing the effort needed to calculate concrete variations. To be sure, unschooled players are more prone to place undue weight on superficial considerations, and much of this is because they don't yet know enough about the game to appreciate its subtle art. But the truth is, strong players have their own false gods. They too mislead themselves, albeit at a more sophisticated level of deception, thinking that their narrow expertise confers truth and understanding when in reality they have neither. They simply play chess better than the rest of us.

Finally you raise the point that this quest for shallow attainments may have much to do with society and the pressure it exerts. Surely, there's

some merit to this contention. American society is very competitive. But people are people, and competition is a way of life everywhere. Deep down we all have the same primitive needs and urges, and we're all trying to stay alive. This is what Thomas Hobbes laid the groundwork for in the *Leviathan* when he portrayed life as being "nasty, solitary, brutish and short." This is what Herbert Spencer and Charles Darwin meant when they talked about "survival of the fittest." This is what Emanuel Lasker gave a chessic turn to when he described the game as being "a struggle." And maybe this explains why people seek chess improvement for its own sake. They can't help themselves because they're always competing. I'm not sure what we can do about it, but we can be aware of it, and mindfulness of the situation is often the first step taken in trying to move ahead.

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