



*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



Too Practical Is Not Practical

Question I am a 14-year old with a 1380 rating. I am trying to improve by reading Bronstein's *Zurich* games and doing problems from Laszlo Polgar's book *Chess*. My question is about the latter. About a third of the way through the book, the problems become all study-mates (eg, White has a queen, two pawns, a knight and a rook vs. a king and maybe a few Black pawns. Find mate in 2.) I am wondering, is it worth my time doing these problems that probably won't come up in a game, and are obviously won for White anyway? Or should I skip the study-mates and go on to the more life-like problems later in the book? **John Bninski (USA)**

Answer If you're seeking to speed up improvement, it's better to work with tactical positions that are more likely to pop up in your own play. Nevertheless, don't automatically equate how often a situation occurs with its practical worth. Very rarely will you get a chance to mate with a lone bishop and knight. But knowing how these two minor pieces coordinate can be of immense value, and you might not appreciate this until you've actually invested time and studied the bishop-and-knight basic mate itself.

The same is true of chess compositions. It might seem that the actual positions never arise in everyday play, and working on them may require enormous effort. But don't rule out trying to solve composed positions altogether, especially endgame studies. They often touch upon essential themes and radiate great power. Moreover, it's thought that regularly trying to analyze these aesthetic conceptions may stimulate creativity. Indeed, the best ones show the art of the game in its purest form.

There is, however, another question that must be considered. Why do



you play and study chess? Is it just to get better at the game? Or is it also because playing the game provides great leisure time, with the opportunity to experience the high plane in a satisfying and inspiring way? Probably you play chess for many reasons, and improving the quality of your play is merely one of them.

You're obviously a very perceptive young man, capable of making intelligent decisions on your own future. It seems to me you can trust your own judgment and skip over the study-mate problems in Polgar's book if you like. That is, with an eye to advancing your skill, it's okay to move ahead to the book's other practical sections, such as its wonderfully organized collection of 600 games. But I wouldn't turn off to composed problems completely. They offer truth and beauty, and seeking these two ideals needs no special justification.

Question I'm an 1800 player and I've been playing over miniatures from Chernev's *1000 Best Short Games of Chess* blindfold. As I practice my ability to visualize positions without the men and board, I've found little or no corresponding improvement in my actual over-the-board tournament chess. I was wondering what your views on blindfold chess as training are. **James Drebenstedt (USA)**

Answer I don't believe a correlation has ever been established between over-the-board chess and the ability to do blindfold chess (forget about multiple blindfold games played simultaneously, which clearly requires additional skills). Even so, most good players should be able to play a solo blindfold game more or less. And certainly, in typical headwork, they have to be able to see reasonably lengthy sequences without moving the pieces.

The short games in Chernev's book fit the bill. Playing over them in your head should be an excellent way to sharpen your analytic aptitude, but only if you also comprehend what's really happening. So herein lies the problem. Don't make the mistake of thinking that remembering the moves is the same thing as understanding them. It could be that you've emphasized memory over logic, and if so, this might explain why you've shown no improvement in your regular play.

But let's not place the blame entirely on what you've been doing. You may have reached a plateau, and no matter what you do, real progress from here might not be made without substantial effort and specific purpose. I suggest, therefore, that you get your play reviewed by a competent and sympathetic observer before committing yourself to any definite plan of study. To get through the black-and-white jungle, it can't hurt to have the assistance of an experienced guide.

Question My son is six years old and has a rating of 960. He has never had formal lessons - he resists the idea fairly strongly and lectures bore him to tears. He just loves to play, including chess variants, mostly on

the ICC (where his rating is around 1200). My questions are: How do you introduce the idea of lessons and still keep it fun? Do you feel that playing variants (losers, monster chess, etc.) impairs or assists chess development? I have been told that "it is criminal to not give such a talent lessons" but I am concerned that formal instruction can detract from what for him is fun at this age. (Along these lines, perhaps you know of an excellent teacher in the L.A. area who can walk this fine line.) **Michael Lemkin (USA)**

Answer Instead of forming a relationship with a particular teacher right away – and there are plenty in the Los Angeles area who can satisfy your son's needs – why don't you let your son take individual lessons from a few different teachers, with you casually sitting in on each lesson. (Once the lessons start with a steady teacher, find a way to remove yourself naturally.) Make it clear to each teacher that your son does not yet want instruction per se, and that the teacher should keep this "one-time" lesson on a playful basis.

The truth is initially most chess ideas a child needs to know can be integrated into instructionally fashioned games, and veteran teachers intuitively do this. Obviously, any teacher who objects to your concerns is not the right teacher. Later on, after the relationship is firmly established, the teacher can bridge into more formal coaching without making a big thing of it. Since the best lessons actually simulate real-game play, this is why your son doesn't necessarily need a teacher if you can keep him nourished on a weekly diet of challenging games.

As far as playing chess on the Internet goes, this is fine, though try to steer him away from ridiculously fast time controls. Probably he should be playing games with limits between 15-20 minutes. With regard to chess variants, some teachers would prefer their students not being exposed to them, for they can be addictive, and it's hard to stop kids once they've had a taste. Yet other teachers counter by saying it's best to let the student partake of these diversions anyhow, especially because they can be fun, and fun is what it's all about. Furthermore, a smattering of these variants may even have some value, particularly for stimulating imagination and heightening tactical invention.

Nevertheless, if you can, aim to regulate your son's participation in bughouse and its relatives. As similar as these variations may be, they're still not chess, and allotting too much time to them can distort one's approach to the main game. But it's clear you already appreciate the situation, and the issues you've raised show you to be a knowing and sensitive parent. I sense that together you and your son will soon find the right way, with or without the help of a suitable chess teacher.

Question I'm afraid this question is not about preparation, strategy or tactics. I would like to know how much of the film "Innocent Moves"

was true to life. It is a film I have watched many times over the past few years, a firm favorite. What has happened to the young players involved? How far have they gotten? I have heard of Waitzkin (I bought Chessmaster 6000), but I find myself more curious. Your own career also interests. I apologize if this is out of turn. I don't imagine that it is easy to see oneself portrayed on screen to strangers and I'm sorry if this is intrusive. The intention is nothing of the sort, I was simply... charmed by the events on screen. **Daniel Lucraft (UK)**

Answer Josh Waitzkin really was a great kid, and has remained so as a young man, with diverse interests and true concern for the welfare of other people. Josh really did have a chess rival (real name, Jeff Sarwer), whom he met in the last round of the Nationals, in one of the most intense children's chess contests ever. Josh really did emerge as the third-grade champion. His father really did go through personal torment and soul-searching, trying to do the right things. His mother really did provide a measure of balance. I really did teach Josh for about five years, though much of the time I thought he was really teaching me. Josh really did learn a lot playing the hustlers in Washington Square Park. There really was a sticker book, where I gave him master class points. I always did insist that Josh analyze in his head – without exception – and Josh did have an early problem with handling the queen, which he eventually overcame and mastered. Finally, Josh and I really did play an unrelated board game in the first lesson, and it really was a terrific game.

But many things were different. Josh didn't actually beat his opponent in the last round, nor did he offer a draw in a winning position. The two young talents did draw, however, quite brilliantly, and the title was shared, though Josh won the first-place trophy on tie-breaks. There was no actual "Vinny" character. Rather he was an amalgam of two people: one who liked Josh and helped him by design, and another who was jealous of Josh and helped him by accident. Fred never chewed Josh out for losing, forcing him to stay outside in the rain and practically making him sick. Fred would never do anything like that. I am not as stern as Ben Kingsley's excellent portrayal, nor was I as good a player as the film implied, though I'm far more athletic than Ben Kingsley appears when playing catch. (You should see me throw a ball.) Moreover, I never swept the pieces off the board, though by now I wish I had. There never was a certificate scene, where Bonnie Waitzkin threw me out of her apartment, though maybe now she wishes she had. (Only kidding.) Nor do I resemble a character out of Beckett. I'm an ordinary Brooklyn guy, with an accent, who was fortunate to be in the right place at the right time.

What has happened to some of the principals since the movie's release? Josh wound up winning at least eight major scholastic events, including several more Nationals. Having attained the International Master's title, Josh took a hiatus from chess competition to pursue his

love for literature and philosophy and to master a new discipline: Tai Chi. After only two years of study he has won several American Tai Chi Championships. But chess remains in his blood, and for the past several years he has become a stellar spokesperson for his favorite game, especially at scholastic events around the country and for the Mindscape ChessMaster line of products.

Max Pomeranc, who portrayed Josh, did so much chess trying to seem authentic, that he actually became truly adept, finishing 6th in the third-grade Nationals the year of his appearance in the film. He went on to act in several other movies and television shows, including starring with Rosanna Arquette, and is now about to enter college. Supposedly he is some kind of computer wizard, as well as a terrific athlete. I don't actually know what happened to Jeff Sarwer, Josh's real-life rival, though he did go on to win the World Under-10 World Championship. Since his Fischer-like disappearance, I like to think of him as being a free spirit, traveling the world for experience and adventure.

Bonnie Waitzkin, Josh's mother, has since become an accomplished chess teacher. Her programs are greatly admired and she has helped thousands of young people play better chess. Joan Allen, who portrayed Bonnie, has become a star, and just this past year she was nominated as best actress for *The Candidate*. Fred Waitzkin has since written and published two other splendid books: one on Garry Kasparov and the other on his troubled relationship with his father, *The Last Marlin*. He also has the satisfaction of knowing that his visionary first book, *Searching for Bobby Fischer*, has become a virtual metaphor for the positive aspects of scholastic chess.

Joe Mantegna, the outstanding actor who played Fred, has appeared in many films and commercials. Curiously, he was actually the best chessplayer among the principal actors in the film (about 1200 USCF strength), though he didn't have to do any chess on screen because he portrayed Fred, who doesn't play chess at all. On the other hand, both Ben Kingsley and Lawrence Fishburne didn't know how the pieces moved before the film, but they did their homework and were quite convincing. Steve Zaillian, the film's director and screenwriter, did know how the pieces moved, yet this in no way interfered with his other artistic success that same year. His 1993 screenplay for *Schindler's List* won an Oscar.

It's a shame that both Fred and Steve weren't at this year's Super Nationals in Kansas City. Josh was the grand marshall for the event. He was constantly besieged for autographs, handshakes and advice, and was generally treated like a god. Then there was the music. At the start of each round the organizers had the score from the final sequence of "Searching for Bobby Fischer" usher the players into the tournament hall. It was eerie, and it almost seemed as if we were back

in the movie. Actually, maybe we were, and the scene couldn't end until Steve Zaillian said "cut," followed by fading to the black and white jungle of more than 2000 chess games.

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