



*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



Memory Schmemory

Question Hello. I'm 41 years old. My fide Elo rating is greater than 1750. I love the game very much and have a good memory for numbers, but for chess, it's hopeless. Even to memorize sometimes the mainline of an opening that I saw one week ago. Is it first of all a lack of understanding of the positions, and is there a certain method to improve that way? **Patrick Vanhamme (Belgium)**

Answer There are things you can do to memorize better, but to my knowledge nothing can be done to better your memory. You have what you have, though your memory might not be the problem. Maybe you're not remembering because you're not understanding. So the next time you're engrossed in an opening line, don't just try to commit the move order to memory. This is a dead end, for chess is a game of reason, not rote. Instead try to appreciate why each move is played, what the aims of the opening are, how your opponent can thwart you, and so on. If you can't get these ideas on your own, make a pest of yourself and ask others who know what they're doing why certain moves are played. You could also have your play analyzed by a master or teacher and see what he or she recommends. You'll probably go farther digesting their suggestions than you would by memorizing the main line of a randomly chosen defense.

Question I play in Canada and have a rating of 1736. My schedule is quite busy, but I greatly enjoy a slow game of chess once a week against the computer program Fritz 6. I would like to get better and find the time for a tournament again. I wonder what your thoughts on improvement and the chess computer are. **Harvey Caron (Canada)**

Answer The best way to improve is to play strong opponents



regularly. Computers can be very strong, and they typically have useful features, such as a range of playing levels and a take-back function. I suggest if you continue to play against Fritz that you find an appropriate level, probably one about 200 points above you, so that winning is a challenge and losing isn't too discouraging. And if you want to learn even more from your efforts, don't be afraid to use the take-back function discriminately. But don't swear off human opponents completely. They do so far what computers can't, and they'll make sure you don't abuse the take-back key.

Question I am a French chess player rated 1710 ELO. I try to improve my tactical ability by solving chess tactical puzzles. But, by repeating the exercises at different times, I noticed that I am not able to solve the problems I didn't solve 6 months ago. So, it seems that I am not making any progress and that my methodology is not the right one. Could you propose another one that would be more efficient? Please, take into account that, as an engineer with a family, I have not a lot of time (about 4 hours per week) to devote to chess instruction. **Franck Devisse (France)**

Answer Since you apparently haven't solved certain problems at all, perhaps you're working on tactical examples beyond your direct experience and comprehension. It might be that you wouldn't necessarily be able to solve these puzzles at any time, past or present, regardless of method. There are dozens of adequate tactical books out there, so why don't you find one with easier problems? Simply track down an appealing tactical tome that grades problems by degree of difficulty. When it's clear that you understand a particular group of them, you can move ahead to slightly tougher problems in the next level.

With regard to your methodology, I'm not sure you're doing anything wrong, though I wouldn't want to comment before I've seen you in action and knew more about you. Why don't you take a few lessons with a chess teacher in your area - not for ongoing purposes, but to have your play evaluated. You'll also want to get feedback on what you're currently doing. This course of action makes more sense than striking out on your own. It should provide direction, alleviate some of your frustration, and possibly save you enough time for family and further engineering.

Question I am 33 years old. I played chess a lot when I was in my late teens. I read many great books like *My System*, *The Art of Attack in Chess*, etc. I played in one beginner tournament at the Manhattan Chess Club and won three out of four games to amass the enormous provisional rating of 1374 (and made a whopping six dollars in a five-way tie for third place). In other words, I had a great interest in chess but proved to be anything but great on the board.

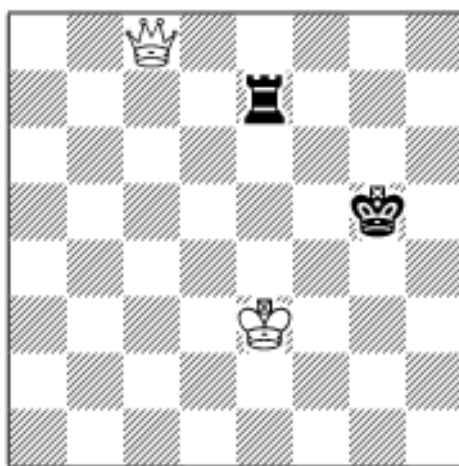
Eventually I began to develop a fear about playing. I felt a desire to play but on the other hand I dreaded the idea of sitting down and actually playing. I feel the most fear in relation to the opening. Yes, it would make sense to therefore learn more about openings.

Unfortunately, I have never been able to do that. Probably because of my lack of overall chess ability. What is a patzer to do?

In reading *Searching for Bobby Fischer*, Fred Waitzkin indicated that you had some fear or discomfort in playing chess. Or at least I think that is true. (If not feel free to call me anything you care to.) I have two questions. Can you talk at all about fear in relation to playing chess and how to overcome it? Also, can you address the topic of learning openings? **Nick Briglia (USA)**

Answer My uneasiness in playing chess had less to do with the fear of losing and more with the anxiety of winning. Of course, I didn't look forward to losing. But I also derived little pleasure from winning. Either I'd be embarrassed or feel too much empathy. So there wasn't very much in it for me, and I must say that I've derived more pleasure from some successes of my students than my own victories.

How should you cope with your problem? There really isn't a remedy for it other than to hope that time and total immersion in competition can assuage your fears until they gradually dissipate. So play every chance you get, against the very best opposition you can find, and eventually this should help. As far as your fear of the opening goes, take it to a computerized chess program and play hundreds and even thousands of fifteen-move games against the machine. If this doesn't do the trick, at least you'll learn something about openings. There's also a chance it will render you insensate and you won't be able to feel anything anyway, fear included.



Question I'm an intermediate level player from Columbus, Ohio who is intensely studying tactics right now (what else could I be doing, huh?) and had an interesting thought. Here's the schematic of a situation: In the diagram, Black has just moved his rook to e7, giving check. Which, to look at the rules through a beginner's eyes, means the White king could be taken on the next move, and since that is not allowed, White must move his king

out of danger or interpose another piece. Both actions are designed to remove the (theoretical) threat of rook takes king on the next move, right? So, here's the question: why does not the move Qd8, pinning the rook and rendering it unable to move, also get White out of check?

This move actually does remove the threat on the king as surely as moving the king off the file. I know it doesn't get White out of check, and allowing that would radically change the game, but I wondered if there was any history on this or if anyone smarter than I am had had some profound thoughts on this at sometime in the past. Just curious.

Adam Grimes (USA)

Answer I don't know what smarter people than you think, but why are you looking at this through a beginner's eyes? Beginners think all kinds of things, but you are not a beginner. You are something else, presumably something above beginner. The rule book indicates that if in check you must get out of check. It doesn't say the rule can be ignored if the opposing king would be lost on the next move. There are no last licks in chess, which is about as profound as I can get on the subject.

Question Could you tell me what you feel are some good books on positional chess? **Billy Schrader (USA)**

Answer You can't go wrong with Alex Yermolinsky's *The Road to Chess Mastery*, John Watson's *Secrets of Modern Chess Strategy*, and Jeremy Silman's *How to Reassess Your Chess*. These three books are thought to be masterpieces of contemporary chess literature, and all three offer illuminating insights into positional chess. You could also explore some of the enlightening strategic texts from the past. You might start with two seminal works by Nimzovich, *My System* and *Chess Praxis*. Hans Kmoch's *Pawn Power In Chess*, Euwe's *Judgment and Planning in Chess*, Kotov's *Plan Like a Grandmaster*, Bronstein's *The Chess Struggle In Practice* (a/k/a *Zurich 1953*), Petrosian's *Petrosian's Legacy*, and Botvinnik's *Absolute Championship of the Soviet Union* are certainly worthy of your efforts. Actually, any good game collection, buoyed by analysis and explanation, should prove helpful. But in particular, why don't you turn to the explained play of Capablanca, Rubinstein, Reshevsky, Petrosian, and Karpov – all positional giants. Just be sure the games are analyzed in both words and variations, so you have a better chance to understand what's really going on.

Question I am about an 1800 player, who is often discouraged when I look at chess analysis. They make it seem that these guys are perfect and that they see everything, and I haven't seen any of these things. Do they really see everything they say they do during the real games? How come these games always seem to work out logically, right down to the end? At least that is how the annotators make it seem. Isn't this what teachers do when they try to teach chess? They distort the truth, it seems to me. (I have had more than a few lessons.) Sometimes I wonder if some of these things are made up. Then I read these stories about Morphy and Capablanca, and how they never studied the game. This blows my mind. Is some of this made up? If it is, can any of this

help my understanding of the game of chess anyway? On the other hand, maybe it's true, and some of us do play more clearly than the rest of us, with a clear style that everyone can understand. It's almost as if they're not human, the players or the analysts, and I need to understand at the 1800 level. Is this what they feel they need to do to reach me? If it's not true, and they don't play as clearly as the chess writers say they do, how come they don't play more clearly? What is the theory on this? I'm really perplexed and could use some guidance.

John Colavito (USA)

Answer I'm also perplexed, and in need of guidance, but I will try to answer your questions, assuming I can figure out what they are. As a human teacher I realize that education often takes liberties with the truth. Many of the games used for teaching lack the original logic attributed to them. Competitive chess can be full of ups and downs, with the results in question until the very end. Even the best players doubt themselves and veer off course. But since unity and purpose are easier to study than the disarray and welter of bona fide battle, explainers tend to impose on their analysis themes that might possibly have eluded the combatants during the course of actual play.

Moreover, since players are concerned with surviving, not teaching, it's unreasonable to expect them to play with so much clarity that their ideas become obvious. This would be the surest way to lose, to play moves that anyone could understand. What this means is that annotations are often skewed and a little unreal, for they don't truly describe what went on between the two players. Nonetheless, tendentious retelling can sometimes be an acceptable teaching method, as long as the student is reminded that the perfect world of chess elucidation does not correlate well with the uncertainty of over-the-board play.

Students should also be made aware of how often chess history is distorted to make individuals seem more incredible than they actually are. Too many of us have come to believe that some of the most outstanding players never studied chess, and that they got as far as they did on "natural talent," whatever this means. Not only is this terribly dissuasive to ordinary chess students, but to foist and perpetuate such fables is insulting to all the other hardworking standouts in the chess pantheon. No one -- not even Morphy or Capablanca -- ever rose to the top of this stellar game without total commitment. But to say otherwise can make for a good story, and some of these fairy tales, when spun by expert fashioners, may actually broaden one's understanding of the game. At least that's the theory, but I can't help thinking how much stronger many of us might be if writers, analysts, teachers, and especially players, used their skills to tell the truth.

Most of Bruce Pandolfini's books (as well as the ones he mentions) are available at [The Chess Cafe Online Store.](#)]

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