



*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



Thirty Something

Question I have been playing competitive chess for 30 years, but I now find that I am becoming increasingly tense and nervy whilst playing, and am now reduced to playing 10-minute games over the Internet. This nerviness and lack of confidence in my own ability have been affecting me for the last 10 years, and although I have laid off playing, the situation is not improved. I am losing to players who are weaker than myself. My grade is 142 Elo. Three years ago I was 163 and that was my highest grade ever. Thirty years ago I was Elo grade 140. Any suggestions?? I play bridge over the Internet and have no such problems. **Dave Redfern (England)**

Answer Why are you reduced to playing 10-minute games over the Internet? If you insist on avoiding face-to-face confrontations with real people, and if you continue competing on the Internet, surely you could still play games with longer time controls, so that you have more time to think and might feel less pressured. It also sounds as if you're placing emphasis on the wrong things, such as rating points. Stop focusing so much on ratings (and victories) and start savoring more the simple experience of playing. That is, try to revel in the game's beauty: in its logic, patterns, themes, and ideas. Besides, results don't always tell the story, especially in chess, where you can play a good game and lose, or a bad game and nonetheless win. Obviously, it's great to be a winner, but it's no fun to win if you don't deserve it.

The truth is that neither ratings nor results are totally reliable measures of playing strength. Perhaps you actually have been playing beneath your level, possibly because of anxiety or something like it, or maybe those "weaker" players who've been beating you are in reality stronger than you think, even with their abysmal ratings. No matter what, it's



clear you need a change in viewpoint.

I suggest you stop being so number based. Instead of becoming stultified over the loss of games and rating points, start playing more for the sheer fun of it. You might consider taking another break from competition. But this time, after you come back refreshed and eager for action, why don't you play some casual chess, across from live human beings, without an interface? Perhaps with nothing serious at stake, under light and social circumstances, your nervousness will abate and you'll once again begin to appreciate chess as the stimulating pastime it really is. But if you can't quite do this, and remain too anxious, you can always take solace in your other love – bridge -- where apparently you have no such problems.

Question I am a 1650 player from Melbourne and have been playing for about 30 years. Perhaps an indication of my improvement is that over one 10-year stretch my rating went down one point! I play in regular Friday night tourneys and have a good grasp of openings, preferring the more tactical as opposed to positional style. However, my colleagues often comment that playing something like the Torre or Center Counter doesn't suit. The issue I have is that I seem to make simple mistakes against higher rated players, which allows them to grind out the win, and often have difficulties with the lower rated. Could you please give your thoughts on how a middle-ranked player like myself could improve? **Norm Wilson (Australia)**

Answer Not to question any of your colleagues, but I'd look dubiously on opening recommendations offered by those who fail to discriminate between the Torre and the Center Counter. I also suspect that you may not understand the opening phase as well as you suppose, especially since you seem affected by the advice of those very same colleagues. As far as losing to higher rated players because you make simple mistakes, you might be committing the same types of errors against lower rated players, too. It's just that these lower rated players could lack the skills to exploit such errors, so it might seem as if you're not making the same kinds of mistakes when you actually are.

Nevertheless, we're not even sure of this, and that's the point. We don't know enough about you to offer sound guidance, and you may not know enough about yourself to make objective statements about your own play. My advice is that you get your chess evaluated by a competent player, one at least 400 points stronger than yourself. (It shouldn't take more than a few sessions.) After hearing the diagnosis, you'll probably have a better sense of why you've been at a standstill, and that's when you can take meaningful steps to remedy your situation.

Question I am eighteen years of age and have been playing chess for only ten years. It was my father who introduced me to this fabulous

game of logic, which he has been playing for 30 years, and whom I have already surpassed in skill. I do not know my current chess rating, but I have read many books and I am now currently reading your book *Weapons of Chess*, but wish to improve my game even further. Seeing about five to seven moves ahead, I would like to better this ability, and I also currently have difficulty on occasion losing concentration on the game while playing. What even makes it more difficult is I am a very nervous person, and with many distractions, I tend to lose sight of the real aspects of the game. Could you please respond as to what I may do to correct deficiencies in my play? **James Rankin (USA)**

Answer Why would you want to see further ahead than seven moves when the overwhelming bulk of chess situations require that you do not look that far ahead? To be sure, in telling me this, you betray what the real problem may be, that you're stressing the wrong thing. You seem to confirm this by saying that you "tend to lose sight of the real aspects of the game."

Instead of increasing the length of the lines you look at, you should be learning more about how to determine which lines are worthy of being investigated to begin with. As you do this – that is, as you learn more about chess and what's important in a chess position– you'll naturally develop your analytic skills without especially having to work on them in particular. This in fact is what most chess teachers will tell you, that if your overall game improves, individual parts of your game are likely to improve correspondingly.

Nevertheless, if you feel visualization is an area you wish to work on, why don't you try solving a couple of tactical problems in your head every day. In doing this, practice analyzing without moving the pieces, no matter how hard or lengthy the variations become, at least until you've invested enough time to give the process a chance to succeed (10 or 15 minutes a problem is probably sufficient).

With regard to your nerves, I don't have anything miraculous to offer. Some of the nervousness may stem from uncertainty over the board, and as you gain in strength you might indeed become less tense. But it would also help if you simply put aside your fears and started playing for pleasure and entertainment. This of course you could hear from either a shrink or a chess teacher, and both might very well recommend the same therapy if your fears didn't eventually dissipate – to take up another game, such as bridge. But you wouldn't need to consult either of these fine professions if you just changed your outlook and got into the spirit of facing the monster for the mere fun of it.

Question I play CC up here in Canada, and we are now allowed by the rules to use computer analysis in our games. This hasn't been a problem with me though because until six years ago the programs that

I had were not that strong. So if I saw a better positional move, I played it, while in losing positions I have played sacrifices to get a positional draw, which my programs didn't see. Now however I have Fritz6 and this program is so strong that it suggests sometimes the move I intended, or a better one. I am learning better chess, but feel that Fritz6 is so strong that I wonder if I dare contradict it. I wonder what you would suggest?

Also I have found that playing Fritz6 at a reduced level (but better than I) in a rated game has greatly improved my tactical skills, which is one of my weak areas. I sometimes trade down to king-and-pawn endgames, but Fritz6 seems to find that crucial loss of tempo against me which wins. I need more endgame knowledge too. I'm glad I got the program, but could you suggest things I could do with Fritz6 for both my CC and OTB? I can't afford a chess coach. **John Boyd (USA)**

Answer Since Fritz evaluates how you stand at each point, you can augment your understanding of certain types of positions by playing them out against the program. If, for example, you're failing to win won games, work with positions in which you already have an advantage. Whenever you make a move that reduces your numerical superiority, take it back and play another move that essentially retains your edge, at least according to Fritz.

Of course it's okay to question Fritz and play your own ideas. In such cases, either you'll be right, and triumph, or be wrong, when Fritz will refute your idea and teach you something. Anyhow, practicing this way should ultimately improve your technique and general strength, even when you're not quite sure why certain moves are preferred. Eventually all this constant down-and-dirty combat will supply the explanations, and there's no better way to learn anything than by actually experiencing it for yourself, albeit with Fritz's help.

Question I wondered what you thought about composed problems. Some composed problems may never happen in a real game, so do you feel they are of any real value?

Do you use any composed problems in your teaching? One of our club members made up this composed problem: "What is the earliest possible move in a game when the White player can castle either side?" The answer was: White on his 6th move can castle either way by the following moves. 1. e4 Nf6 2.Bc4 Nxe4 3.Nf3 Nxd2 4. Qe2 Nxb1 5.Bd2 Na3. There are more solutions that involve White making different moves but Black is required to make the same moves. Of course this will never happen in a game. **Sam Breaux (USA)**

Answer While some composed problems have no didactic value whatsoever, the best ones can be truly illuminating. Certainly I would use them if they worked in a particular lesson. Furthermore, most of us

turn to chess not just for engaging competition, but also to experience the beautiful and the sublime, and these qualities are given their defining shapes and forms in the great chess compositions. Occasionally they give us a good chuckle, too, as does the composition offered by your inventive club member. Thanks for sharing it with us.

Question I am a novice female player. About seven months ago I started playing chess at a nearby chess club. I had not played since I was a teen but thought it would be fun and a nice social outlet. I was given a novice rating of 750 and placed on the club's ladder (literally at the bottom) for weekly play. I became totally enthralled with the game and spent hours on my computer with ChessMaster, studied openings, your endgame book and tactical puzzle books. After all of this I believe I understand the game much better and, in spite of the fact I very seldom win, I enjoy it. Nevertheless, my interest is beginning to wane as I have made no progress in playing better and my rating is now 745. I don't need a chess teacher. I need a chess therapist! Can you offer any encouragement for those of us who are starting out but apparently don't have an aptitude for the game. I went through this same process when I took up golf. I am now an 11 handicap so I know that somewhere along the line I will break through in chess (particularly since my goals are modest). When does that usually happen? What should I do to keep my enthusiasm up? **Pamela Lee (USA)**

Answer Chess improvement doesn't happen just like that, and seven months isn't necessarily a long time to wait to see results. It's an individual thing, and sometimes advances can take years. This you must realize from your efforts at golf, and it helps that your goals are reasonable and modest. If you stay with competition, think less about how you fare against others and more about getting something out of the experience to better yourself.

Right now you're probably on a learning plateau, where you're steadily acquiring ideas and techniques that won't become manifest until you reach the end of the plateau. At that point you'll be able to see the next level, with a realistic chance to jump ahead, but before then it might seem as if you're not making any gains at all, even though you're clearly learning and encountering new challenges.

I suggest that you stay with the game, continuing to do those things that have given you pleasure, rather than seeking panaceas and setting yourself lots of burdensome tasks. So just keep playing ChessMaster, and it's perfectly satisfactory to study openings, endgames, and tactics if these activities afford you real intellectual excitement. When you love something, it usually loves you back, and if you continue doing chess for the right reason, because it pleases you, it's certain that you'll climb the ladder of life if not the ladder in your nasty chess club.

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