



## COLUMNISTS

# The Q & A Way

Bruce Pandolfini



*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!*

## The Play's the Thing

**Question** I am a chessplayer with an Elo rating of 2000. I must play in three months a very important tournament with rivals 200 points more than my rating. How must I prepare? I want to win. Actually, I am playing twice per week, and solving tactical problems everyday. Could you advise me on a method of training? **Ledgar Coloma (Chile)**

**Answer** The best way to prepare for upcoming games with 2200 players is to play 2200 players now. Every other course of action pales before direct experience. Furthermore, if you want to support your effort with study, it makes sense to analyze these training games in detail, preferably with the aid of a strong player. Then you can work on the areas most relevant to your needs, based on the results of your practice and subsequent analysis. This is what I would do if I were you, and with the tournament only three months away, I'd start my program today.

**Question** I'm 36-years old and live in Halifax, Nova Scotia. I've been playing chess competitively in Canada for 8 years and my rating is around 1600 CFC. My question is this: Is it better to study your own games or someone else's? I have a chess coach and our study method of late is for him to show me one of his games and assign me written homework questions about its strategies and tactics. We used to have me annotate one of my own games, but I've found that studying his games has made me sharper in my own! Maybe I'm wrong, but it sure seems that way. Any thoughts? **Ken Cashin (Canada)**

**Answer** Most teachers prefer reviewing the student's play and to study openings, examples, tactics, themes, and so on, germane to the student's ostensible needs. Nevertheless, virtually any method or material can succeed when employed by a skilled teacher, so there's



nothing inherently wrong with looking at your coach's games. And since you feel as if studying his play has actually helped, why risk changing things? If it's not broken, don't fix it.

**Question** I am weak class C player, and I have had a great deal of trouble as Black with the B90 Sicilian Najdorf with Be3 e5. Do you have any advice on this line, or any comments on its main ideas? Also, would you recommend this game for speed chess (<10 min games)?  
**Will Davis (USA)**

**Answer** Since you admit having difficulty with this variation, it makes little sense to stay with it. But without commenting on you in particular, surely weak C players shouldn't be wasting their time studying sophisticated opening lines before understanding more about opening concepts and principles in general. This advice also applies to strong C players. Your efforts might be better served, it seems to me, by first playing over a couple of hundred well-annotated games to see what's out there. That's when you can try to be selective, once you know more about what the options really are.

**Question** I learned to play Chess when I was about 6-years old, but never learned anything other than how the pieces move. I'm 18 now and about 6 months ago I saw Chessmaster 5500 in the smart saver shelf at the store and decided to pick it up, just for the heck of it. I started by taking the tutorials as a refresher, to make sure I remembered correctly how all the pieces moved. I felt pretty confident and tried a game against the computer on the moderate level, as I thought, I'm not stupid, I should be alright. Well, I sure wiped out. I mean, I got blown off the board. So much that I was kind of sorry I got the game.

For some reason though, I kept playing the game quite often for about a week or so, and found my self rather hooked. I decided to put a little work into it, and try to study the game a little bit, and after a few days, that's when I fell upon the wonderful world of Chess. I had no idea how infinite the game was until I tried to learn it. Since then I find myself studying or playing on the average of 10 - 12 hours a day. Not just to try and get a higher rating to be proud of, but because I can't help but too. I think it's amazing to watch a game between two great players unfold, like a good book, or movie. Well, I am rated about 1470 USCF. I touched base on about 7 or 8 openings, but only 2 as White, and 1 as Black that I am confident with. I know the basic opening theory, basic tactics, and some minor theory on the endgame. What should I do, or keep doing the most to improve. I am a musician, so I have plenty of time to study. I basically work on weekends. I have since found that Chess and music are very much the same, as are the people that play it. Some are artists and others just move pieces around (and often quite well) on a board. Should I study the openings more? Or tactics? Or just keep playing? Also, what is the best method to

learn. I don't have too many books. I mostly study on the computer. I joined the Chesswise 6-month online course, and am enjoying it.

Should I get more books or stick with the computer? I know asking these types of questions is kind of dumb. I used to help run a music store, and we'd always snicker at the people searching all over for what kind strings Jimi Hendrix used, or what gauge his picks were. I know there's no one answer, but what is some overall advice for someone with my current rating and time to study? **Justin Dumas (USA)**

**Answer** Sounds as if you're doing fine. Simply keep playing and having fun – that's the best way to learn. But if you find that occasionally you get stale, and need to do something different, it seems natural to change the mood by putting on a little Hendrix. Just move over, Rover, and let Jimi take over.

**Question** I am about a 1200 player and have been playing online via Blitzin2 on the ICC. I play at least a few games every day, have been up and down, but can't seem to advance much, or so it seems to me. I know I've made some progress but I would like to make more. I've been playing for many years and have quite a few books, but find it difficult to get into them or to get anything out of them. I enjoy playing over some of the shorter games of the old masters, but I'd rather play with a real opponent, whether online or OTB. Any advice would be very much appreciated. **Ray Juliano (USA)**

**Answer** It's perfectly okay to prefer play to study, though you might be able to do both without changing your style. That is, you could work out an arrangement where you regularly play a strong player and afterward review the games. The games wouldn't have to be analyzed in detail. It would be sufficient for your skillful opponent to go over key points so that you come away with a few useful ideas. This way you're not really working very hard, you're continuing to do what you enjoy most, and over the course of time you should be acquiring valuable experience. And if ever the games become too repetitive, work out another arrangement with a different strong player, especially one who can challenge you with exciting new lines and tasks. I know a number of decent competitors, who feel much the way you do, who've gained greatly from this approach.

**Question** Hello. I am a 11-year-old boy. I play in tournaments every week in a club named Academic Chess. There is an opportunity to get first, second, third, or fourth place. There is also a Snake Trophy if you hit 1,200 points, a Grand Lizard if you hit 1,300, a Grand Gator if you hit 1,400 points, and a Chess Monster if you hit 1,500 points. We don't use chess clocks. The person with the most wins gets first place. They play a round-robin style, and I am a fairly slow player. I often get results such as 6 wins 0 losses or 7 wins 1 loss at the top table and my current rating is only a wimpy 1,078 points. I am wondering why my

rating is so horrible. I almost never lose to anyone below 1,200 and I can easily defeat my friend, who has a rating of 1,256. I also defeated the best player in our club, who has a rating of 1,415.

I often think I have a hidden talent that is waiting to burst out, but I just can't seem to get there. I read through a book called *Reassess Your Chess*, by Jeremy Silman, and that taught me about the opposition, the Silman Thinking Technique, minor pieces, open files, etc. I understand the concepts fairly well but I can't exploit those new ideas into my play. When I try to do that, my play just gets worse, and I lose to low rated players, and don't get a trophy, and my rating hardly improves. Everyone in the club says I am better than my rating. I think the problem is that I always think about trophies, but I am not sure. I am also confused why many books say they are instructive, but never help me with strategic deployment. Some of my questions are: How come I can defeat many people with high ratings, but my rating is so low? Do you recommend getting a chess teacher with a rating of 1750? How thoroughly do you have to study a chess book to get fine results? And can you get better by plain experience in tournaments? **Brady Yoon (USA)**

**Answer** You have said a lot, and I admire your spirit and love for the game. It's not easy to do justice to your questions. I will tackle them in order, but I'm afraid I won't be able to answer them in the way they deserve. There may be several reasons you often beat higher rated players. The possibilities include that they could be weaker than their ratings, you might be stronger than your rating, or they might be taking you for granted because you're a kid. I wouldn't be surprised if you're getting stronger everyday. Furthermore, there's a good deal to be learned from veteran teachers with ratings of 1750. So, if you know one, go right ahead and take advantage of his or her knowledge and experience. Don't be fooled by ratings.

As far as chess books go, you don't have to read them from cover to cover to benefit from them. You can learn as little as one thing from your reading and use that information to improve your play or win an important game. Some quality chess books become good friends, and we keep them on the shelves to be sipped now and then, like fine wine. On the other hand, some chess books are so bad it can be hurtful or sickening to read too much of them. If you encounter a chess book like that, absorb whatever information might be useful and be done with it. Finally, you ask if you can get stronger merely by playing in tournaments? Of course! There's no better way to learn than on the job experience. Play strong players as often as you can. Be curious and try to assimilate whatever insightful things they have to offer. Give everything you have to enjoying your efforts, and I suspect there will be no stopping you.

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