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*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



## There Is Nothing to Fear

**Question** For years I've hovered in the 1850 - 2000 range (highest rating 2040). I've been frustrated by not being able to stay above 2000 for any length of time. In most of my tournaments I enter the U2000 section. I'm beginning to think that I should be entering the U2100 or even the Open sections so that I can learn by struggling against stronger players. Maybe I should drop my ego and not be afraid to get pasted by these guys so that I can benefit from their knowledge. Any thoughts would be appreciated. **Rick Garel (Canada)**

**Answer** You're not going to get to the market if you don't leave your house. To make real gains you should be contending against stronger opponents. Why don't you aim to vie with players somewhere between 2000 and 2200? No matter your results, and surely some will be positive, you'll be confronting serious opposition in meaningful situations, and this is typically the best way to improve one's play. It's time to overcome your fear of trying.

**Question** I am an average tournament player (rated about 1600). I have a limited amount of time to devote to chess. What percentage of my time should I devote to studying as opposed to playing? **Ben Roberts (USA)**

**Answer** If you have a limited amount of time to pursue chess activities, concentrate on playing. It's a game, not a course in college, so it should be played more than studied. You can combine fun and



profit, however, by playing opponents in the 1600-2000 range. You'll surely win some games, and occasionally players will immerse you in situations that raise you to new heights. Every one of those hills you climb should offer new perspectives on the game and raise the quality of your play commensurately.

**Question** Hello Sir, I am Tejendra. I have played in many tournaments. But in every tournament I do feel uncomfortable. How can I feel tension free? Another thing is I am 20 years old. I have a will to become a GM, and I don't have a rating. Should I think about GM norms? Please guide me, Sir. **Tejendra Garge (India)**

**Answer** You can't avoid tension completely, not when playing a game like chess. I'd suggest that you stop worrying so much about ratings, but since you don't have one, it's doubtful this advice would be relevant. Nor is it clear how you were able to play in many tournaments without getting a rating. Perhaps you mean an ELO rating, in that you seem to be dreaming about GM norms and related fantasies. My advice is to stop playing chess to achieve results and lofty titles and just let go. Instead, try playing for fun and mental stimulation. Start enjoying the game more and I wouldn't be surprised if the tension problem took care of itself.

**Question** Hey Bruce, what's your opinion of playing online? And what software would you recommend for improving. Thanks. **Tony Kepler (USA)**

**Answer** Playing online can be great. You can play any time of day, against all kinds of opponents, under a range of conditions. If you're not sure which circumstances are best for you, try different ones until you feel you've achieved the right blend of challenge and pleasure. As far as the software goes, there are so many wonderful products to choose from you could hardly go wrong. Check out the **ChessCafe** online catalog and see for yourself.

**Question** I am a French chessplayer rated 1780 ELO. I would like to know what are, according to you, the three best endgame books to buy to reach an ELO level of 2000. **Franck Devisse (France)**

**Answer** I don't know what the three best endgame books are, and surely no book in itself is going to raise your rating one single point, though many books could help you if you used them well. Even second-rate endgame texts have something to offer, for they also tend to provide stock examples from the endgame lexicon. But if it's titles

you want, why don't you obtain Averbakh's *Chess Endings: Essential Knowledge*, Euwe's *A Guide to Chess Endings*, and Hooper's *A Pocket Guide to Endgames*. These three can't hurt, assuming you don't do anything funny with them, and all three are shelf-worthy.

**Question** This may be an unfair question if you, yourself give lessons over the internet, but here it goes anyway: what do you think of chess lessons over the internet? Can they be as good as face-to-face lessons? Does it depend on the age of the student? **Donald Mihokovich (USA)**

**Answer** If one is going to take lessons, it makes more sense to do so in face-to-face situations, where questions can be asked and answered without effort. In such person-to-person lessons, moreover, subtle expressions and intonations can be more readily perceived. This is particularly true for young players, who otherwise must expend considerable energy in typing their thoughts and variations while also trying to think. Some variant lines may cause confusion, and too much energy might be wasted on the wrong things. Some of this can be compensated for by simultaneously speaking on the phone. It could also be reinforced by written material and by working out of a textbook beforehand. But even this broadened state of affairs is not quite comparable to having a live teacher in front of the student. Of course there are certain benefits to be obtained by working on the Internet, such as being able to study at unusual times and from faraway places, and young students thereby tend to learn notation faster. Furthermore, almost any kind of lesson given by a good teacher is better than no lesson at all. But are Internet lessons likely to have the same impact as face-to-face lessons? Most chess educators will tell you no, though don't let this discourage you from using the Internet to connect to a great teacher, especially if there are no other practical ways to meet one directly.

**Question** I have been playing assiduously and studying intermittently for around five years. Rarely do I have an opportunity for OTB play – almost all of my contests are against computers on the ICC, where my standard rating wavers around 1400. That rating has been virtually unchanged for a long time, and I've talked to a couple of more experienced (well, their ratings are higher, anyway) players who have suggested that I might help my performance by breaking my vow never to play blitz. I have noticed that if I don't give myself at last 15-20 minutes per game, my percentage of decently-played games drops clear out of sight. I have never developed a healthy attitude toward losing, and long ago swore off fast games. I am told, however, that blitz is good openings training – if stuck with it, it will virtually force one to learn openings more thoroughly, simply so that one will have

some time left for the middle and endgame. What do you think? Am I better off listening to my gut (or my fears?), or should I grit my teeth and force myself through a period of fast games in the hopes my friends are actually right. **David Graham (USA)**

**Answer** Playing speed chess has the virtue of inundating you with more moves for your invested time, but it also tends to be superficial. Blitz will not teach you openings more thoroughly, for true understanding requires serious analysis, and you're not going to get that with your time running out. Indeed, the essence of being a good speed player is to keep making immediate threats, hoping to catch your opponent off guard or force him to overstep the time limit. But you can benefit from speed play, and this is by reconsidering many of the ideas encountered during blitz sessions afterward, in the quiet of your own home. There you'll be more relaxed and have enough time to try out variations and see what published theory has to say. And so this is how you could use speed chess: to generate ideas for further study. I recommend you at least give speed chess a chance. If it doesn't work out, you can always make amends with your gut and see where it gets you.

**Question** I am a casual chess player far away from any club in rural Alberta, but I often introduce others to chess. However, they usually get weary of being beaten in the learning process, so I spot them a queen or whatever to make it a challenging game for all. I heard a reference to a detailed chess handicap system (similar to the formal Japanese Go system which I also play), but never found any more information. Does such a handicap exist and if so, how does it work? If a "formal system" exists, then my opponents won't feel I am just taking pity on them, but using a recognized system. Even if such a system does not involve eliminating pieces, it could be, say, 3 free pawn moves or whatever. Any instruction would be a help. Just a general question from a former member of both chess and go clubs: is the popularity of go catching up to chess? **Frank Skinner (Canada)**

**Answer** To my knowledge no such formal system for handicap chess-play exists. Besides, chessplayers usually look upon giving odds unfavorably, thinking it distorts the nature of the game. But I see nothing wrong with what you're doing. If this helps you introduce people to the fold, I'm all in favor of it. With regard to the actual handicap, most chessplayers who specialize in these contests give time odds, not so much materials ones, though they offer those too. Chess may not exactly have a nine-stone handicap, but it enables the odds-giver to offer a knight, a rook, or even a queen. The standard way of playing such games in the old days was to offer pawn and move

(usually the f-pawn). One player I know offers pawn and two moves, though not necessarily to all comers, for such circumstances practically lead to a forced loss. Is the popularity of go catching up to that of chess? Maybe so, but as chessplayers we don't have to believe it (thank you, Edward Lasker).

**Question** I know that my question may seem incredibly frivolous in light of the recent events in New York and DC, but I have been needing a distraction of late. While Nabokov wrote that the composition of chess problems was "his last resort in this business of relaxation," I do not have his faculties (on any level) – so I tried renting a movie: the original version of *The Thomas Crown Affair*. I found its famous chess game seduction scene profoundly disappointing. Do you recall any other movies with famous chess game sequences (not movies that are necessarily about chess or games necessarily involving seduction)? Also, if you have seen the original *Thomas Crown Affair*, what do you make of the chess game that they played? Do the chess moves made correspond appropriately to the actors' reactions, or are the moves of the reactions improvised/manufactured to suit the story? And what do you make of the chess games played in the movies that come to mind (if the board is shown well enough to decipher the moves)? By the way, the closest reference I could find to the original movie's chess game in the recent remake of *The Thomas Crown Affair* was one of the character's comments (which I hope I'm remembering correctly): "I'm all checkmated out." Can you remember any other movie references to chess that are interesting in and of themselves? **Eve Kendall (USA)**

**Answer** I'm not all moved out, so I've never seen either version of *The Thomas Crown Affair*. Many films, going as far back as the silent era, have had tangential chess scenes. Some of the more outstanding examples were covered in a series of articles done years ago by Frank Brady for *Chess Life* (I think in the early 80's, though I'm not sure). In most movies where chess is included, the chess is quite ridiculous, so we have to rely on the cinematic qualities of the film for aesthetics. For example, in the remake of *The Thing* (which has become a kind of cult film), there is a scene where Kurt Russell is playing against a computer. There's a split second cut to his face, and then back to the screen, and the second position has zero to do with the first position, as if the film had jumped to warp drive and gone through a worm hole. Kurt Russell smiled impishly when I later asked him about it. John Carpenter, the film's maker, went on as if no question had been asked at all – and I even liked the film. If I had to pick out one film with a good chess position it would be the James Bond flick *From Russia With Love*. In an opening scene the filmmakers present a famous setup

from a Spassky-Bronstein game and end with the real moves.

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