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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



## Play Studiously and Study Playfully

**Question** I have recently gotten back into chess and have started amassing a chess library. I do want to get better, of course, but I just like playing over games and reading for the pleasure of it (call me strange). Anyway, I was reading an article in a chess magazine and the grandmaster had his readers send in games for him to discuss. I found this to be extremely instructive and entertaining. There were all kinds of games between 1400 players, 1800s, etc. So my question is why aren't there more books that offer a grandmaster view of club games? There are plenty of GMs annotating GM games but never a GM annotating beginner and intermediate games. It seems we're always using GM games as a model (as we should) but these games are not realistic to 99% of us out there. Most of us just play moves that we memorized without any explanation. Of course, there is Chernev's move-by-move book and books like Sunil's *Chess Coach*, *Amateur Mind*, and your books. But I wish someone out there (perhaps you) could write extensive annotations to ALL types of games (not just GM vs. GM) and would consider and discuss different possibilities for moves, no matter how bad the move looks. I think nothing should be taken for granted. I always find myself asking why this or that move wouldn't work. And if my move isn't mentioned, I assume that the move is weak but without explanation. I could give countless examples when this happened but this question is already too long. If I



were a GM, I would write multiple volumes of helpful annotations for the common folk. **Joseph P. Owens (USA)**

**Answer** Probably you would benefit from regular lessons, just to have your questions answered. But with or without lessons you could still turn to books for sustenance. These days there are plenty of them in which grandmasters and other strong players analyze games played by amateurs. Some of the best ones explain ideas from both perspectives, the amateur's and the professional's. Euwe and Meiden produced a number of seminal texts that took this approach, including *The Road to Chess Mastery* and *Chess Amateur vs. Master*. I don't know if they're still in print, but if you can hunt them down, you'll see why they're so pursuit worthy.

**Question** What are your suggestions for people around 2000 rating who want to purchase the top middlegame books (now available on the market), which will give them the extra knowledge needed to reach their master title? **Enrique Martinez (USA)**

**Answer** No book in itself will get you to 2000 or any other lofty skill level. Becoming an expert is more a matter of acquiring relevant know-how. The ideal way to get this know-how is by direct playing experience, against challenging opposition, over the course of time. Nevertheless, books can help. There are many titles, some focusing on tactics, some on strategy, and some on both. It's almost pointless to recommend specific tactical books. They are too numerous to name, and bad ones still do the job: they offer tactics to solve, and even imbecile writers usually get the answers to such problems right (they've probably just copied them from the published analysis of other strong players).

Good books on chess strategy are another matter. The choices are not yet as great here, but they're starting to mushroom as well. There are a bunch of strategic books that ninety percent of masters and teachers endorse, probably by force of habit, or because these books are supposed to be great. For example, practically everyone recommends Nimzovich's *My System* and *Chess Praxis* without thinking about the student's particular needs. You might want to take a look at them, as

well as Kmoch's *Pawn Power in Chess*, *Development of Chess Style* by Euwe and Nunn, *Pawn Structure Chess* by Soltis, *Modern Ideas in Chess* and *Masters of the Chessboard*, both by Reti, *The Middlegame Books* by Euwe and Kramer, *Judgment and Planning in Chess* by Euwe, *Petrosian's Legacy* by Petrosian, and Silman's *How to Reassess Your Chess*. You should also get your hands on Romanovsky's *Chess Middlegame Planning* for strategy and his *Chess Middlegame Combinations* for tactics. A few of the classic game collections could also prove beneficial, especially *My Best Games of Chess* by Alekhine, *One Hundred Selected Games* and *Soviet Chess Championship* by Botvinnik, *The Chess Struggle in Practice* by Bronstein, *My 60 Memorable Games* by Fischer, and Tal's brilliant account of the Botvinnik-Tal World Championship of 1960. Finally, you might consider acquiring copies of the new books by Yermolinsky and Watson, both of which are fast becoming classics in their own right.

**Question** I am just beginning to take up chess seriously. My opponents on both the Internet and in person often complain my moves are too time consuming. I want to think the position out. I want to contemplate what my opponent's reactions may be to the moves I am considering and, after that, what my response will be. I usually spend about 1.5 to 5 minutes in games with no time limits. I get such comments as, "The more time you spend on a game, the fewer games you play and the slower you'll improve. The more games the better." So I ask what is an acceptable length of time in casual games? Am I spending too much time? **Frank Davis (USA)**

**Answer** If you'd like time to ponder, 20-30 minutes per side, per game is a typical time limit for casual play. Of course you can take longer than this, but then the games are no longer casual. Moreover, less time than this doesn't really give you enough time to think things out. The "advice" you've been getting from opponents is questionable. True, the more games you play, the more different situations you'll experience. But this doesn't mean you'll learn anything under those conditions. Some things are counterintuitive, and need time to be investigated. Other ideas only come out through analysis. How are you to discover them unless you have the opportunity to think? So while your opponents may have a point, I suspect it would be to their advantage for you to move quickly. My suggestion when playing them? Slow it down even more. They will find this unbearable, move impatiently, and throw away games left and right. It's all about control, and this could be the way for you to seize it.

**Question** I am currently an unrated player, but I have been playing and beating players up to ELO 1700. I am having problems with the

opening. I usually play it with “common sense” moves. What is the best way to study an opening, and which openings do you recommend for open, tactical games? **Marc James (Jamaica)**

**Answer** King pawn-openings and double king-pawn defenses are usually tactically clearer. This doesn't mean they're really easier to understand, but many of the concepts relevant to them are direct and immediate, so students usually don't have to wait too long before seeing the point. In the same spirit, as a relatively new player, you probably should answer queen-pawn openings with double queen-pawn responses. But none of this is necessary. You can play any reasonable moves you want, as long as you're really trying to understand what's happening. If your opponents wind up zapping you along the way, eventually you'll find out why and your game will grow naturally. At least this is the theory.

To begin studying an opening a good approach is to collect 50-100 annotated games in that opening. Then play over the material, trying to absorb some of the fundamental ideas. As questions arise, spend more time on those situations and make notes about them for further study. As you accumulate a number of such problems, try to get them cleared up by a stronger player. Regardless, even without understanding as much as you'd like, just start playing the opening in offhand games to generate experience. Whenever you encounter difficulties, ask your opponent or other strong players about them afterward. Moreover, when you get home, go to the books and see what they have to say about pertinent positions and those similar to them. This may not be the ideal way to study the opening, but it's a good way, and it should increase your knowledge of particular systems while expanding your overall chess comprehension.

**Question** I am 40-years old and have made a commitment to become a solid chess player, in other words, to be able to make a good account of myself in most circumstances. I was given a copy of Chessmaster 8000 for a gift. I seem to be getting better as I use the training material and play personalities included in the game. What do you think of this program? Am I wasting my time? Or is it an OK place to start? If it isn't, what do you recommend? **Dave Smith (USA)**

**Answer** I think playing against chess programs and using their instructional material is an excellent way to improve your game, especially if you are unable to play live games with human beings. If you could play face-to-face with real humans, however, it would be valuable to add some of these contests to the mix as well. Computers

offer some things that people don't (such as the option to take back moves), and people provide some things that computers don't (such as the ability to answer specific questions). But whether playing machines or people, you should always give your all while doing. Furthermore, you should tackle the most challenging opponents within your level of understanding. This should fuel the learning process and eventually lift you to higher levels of competency.

**Question** I'm 22 years old, and have been playing for a few years. In 1996 I joined a club, and from 1996-99 made steady progress from near-beginner to around FIDE 1600. However since 1999 I've not made any real progress, and I've noticed that my games often drift into similar (and usually boring) closed positions, which I don't play well. I don't play very often, usually 0-3 times a week. I've recently acquired Fritz 6. Do you have any advice about how to improve my current stagnation, and to get more tactical/exciting games? Is it just a case of playing more frequently? **Anthony Lowe (United Kingdom)**

**Answer** Sometimes we have to put a fresh face on things to regain our edge. It sounds as if you're in a rut. First of all, you should make sure to play enough. If you're playing three times a week, this is more than adequate. But if you're not playing at all, that's a problem. Try to maintain a regular schedule. If you can't get to the club, play on the Internet, or use Fritz. Set up a playing schedule, and play games at suitable time controls (those with which you feel comfortable). You should also try to play more tactical openings. This should tend to steer you clear of the closed games you've been encountering. It should also keep you more alert. Perhaps you can play over game collections where games are won in 25 moves or less. You don't have to study the games in detail. Simply play over them lightly to whet your appetite for competition. To put greater bite in your play, start taking chances over the board. Don't be afraid to be a little shy of sound. It will force you to work harder at the board, and this could be a driving force for subsequent study and advancement. So sacrifice a piece if it seems promising, and grab a tricky pawn if chances are reasonable to hold it. Finally, in your studies, you should be solving tactical positions regularly and often (the more the better). Perhaps nothing determines chess strength more than tactical skill, so you can't solve too many of these real-game problems.

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