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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



## A Question of Age

**Question** What chance is there for older people, e.g., 40-something, to achieve a high level in chess? I read that an average of 10,000 hours is needed to achieve an expert level in music, math or other professional fields ("Genius Explained," Howard, Cambridge University Press). This is 3 hours a day for a decade. If someone, aged 40, has that amount of time and motivation, how high could they go? After all, there is no need for the physical development of, say, a concert violinist. Or should older people just settle for amateur status, i.e, be content with playing for fun. I personally wouldn't be happy with that, but don't want to waste my time on wishful thinking. Are there any examples of high achieving late-starters? **Russell Ward (United Kingdom)**

**Answer** I'd like to understand more about the older person in question before answering. It would help to know his or her present strength and experience. Let's say we're talking about you. If you're a rank beginner, your task could be daunting. But if you're a 1600 player, and you're willing to make the effort, you'd have a decent chance of getting somewhere. Some players have become experts well past the age of forty, so it can be done. Of course there are difficulties, and no guarantees. Chess is a demanding game, and we have no right to expect excellence without toil and by virtue of some automatic formula. I can empathize with your position, and how you might not want to play chess merely for fun. But why do you have to settle for no gain in skill? You should always be able to play for both pleasure



and steady improvement, even if you never reach the expert class. I hope you don't find these words too dissuasive. I have no expectation of getting any better, and I still love the game, even at my age.

**Question** I am a class B player with moments of class A strength when I devote significant time to chess. Over the past 18 months, I have read Rolf Wetzell's *Chess Master . . . At Any Age* and Michael de la Maza's article, *400 Points in 400 Days*. Both of these authors have used very similar methods to increase their ratings as adult class players. Has there been independent research to validate their claims? I know that once I read the article from at **ChessCafe.com**, it was difficult to get CT-Art 3.0 software. There must be groups of people who can validate or invalidate the described process. Soon, I will have much more time to devote to my chess game. I plan to follow a combination of both. Perhaps you can get reader feedback or give your own opinion. **Joseph Guth (USA)**

**Answer** I'm not familiar with Michael de la Maza's article, but I've always thought Rolf Wetzell's book seemed original and intriguing. It sounds as if you feel similarly. As far as validating the method expounded in his text, what more proof do you need than reading and liking the book? Perhaps you should consider this question when having one of your class A moments.

**Question** First of all, I would like to thank you for the excellent instructional column at **ChessCafe.com** and for your great chess books for amateurs. I have some questions for you. Here are three of them: (1) I am 31 years old and am back to studying chess 2 years ago. Currently I am about 1900 ELO and my skills are improving. I feel that my weakness is an evaluation of a position and strategic planning in the middlegame (and ending also). Could you please advise how to improve these skills. (2) I want to reach the 2100-2200 level within 2-3 years, and the 2300-2350 level within 2-4 more years. Could you please advise the good way to do it (keeping in mind my age). Currently I am studying chess about 10-15 hours weekly, preferably the middlegame and endgame. I am reading thematic articles and books, and analyzing instructive positions. Also I play 5-7 active games (20-45 min) in the Internet (FICS) weekly. Also my studying includes playing several e-mail games. Besides I am playing in the tournaments in the local chess club once a week, usually 1 slow game or 2 active games, which are quite competitive. Probably the best thing I can do is to study chess with a coach, but I am afraid it is impossible for me. (3) Could you please share your opinion about Chess Champions Club at KasparovChess.com. Is it worth \$60 per year? Are their lessons instructive? Thanks a lot for your time and help. **Victor**

## Chigorin (Canada)

**Answer** One of the best ways to develop skill at strategic evaluation is to examine the games of grandmasters noted for their positional understanding. The more of these exemplars you study, especially with good notes, the better. You could analyze, for instance, games played by particular world champions – say Capablanca, Petrosian, and Karpov (though any world champion or world class player should do). You could also turn to middlegame books noted for their strategic discussions, such as Nimzovich's *My System*, Romanovsky's *Chess Middlegame Planning*, and Euwe's *Judgment and Planning in Chess*. And there are many other titles that could also serve nicely. Finally, it can't hurt to play against strong opposition on a regular basis. Don't worry so much about the initial results. Just try to take something away from each encounter. Eventually, all this rigorous training should really begin to matter.

With regard to your concerns about specific rating goals, I don't think it's wise to place such pressure on yourself. Certainly, you'll want to show continual advances, but there will be occasional disappointments and your rating might fluctuate. Just keep reviewing the games of good players, analyzing hard tactics (without moving the pieces), studying endings and endgame theory, and regularly testing yourself against strong opposition in tournament play (preferably at slower time controls, though it's okay to mix it up). Take the entire approach with utmost seriousness, and this should provide a sound foundation on which to make real gains in ability. Is it worth it to pay \$60 a year for Kasparov's online service? I think so, but then we're not talking about taking a second mortgage on the house. Why don't you give KasparovChess a try?

**Question** How to spend my thoughts: I originally started as an attacking player, occasionally enjoying the sacrifice that worked - perhaps because puzzles / books appear to be from the attacker's point of view, and there were inspiring examples of great sacrifices. Now I find my lowly rating improves if I concentrate more on what my opponent is planning. My question is: has anybody written (or do you yourself have a feeling), as to how much of time is spent analyzing your opponent's possible moves and how much analyzing your own? Prophylaxis or attack, especially during your opponent's time. I used to spend that time wondering how to improve my position or launch an attack, very little on considering what move my opponent might make. Hmmm so . . . Analyze your possible moves, and when your opponent moves, then check if they are still viable or if there is a new threat to be dealt with first. Or, analyze your opponent's possible moves and try

to find a reasonable reply to each on and when he moves try and see if there is an even better reply or possible attack. **Peter Jeferies (United Kingdom)**

**Answer** I can think of no study that addresses your question the way you pose it, but it's probably counterproductive to think in terms of how much time is allotted for the attacker compared to the defender. You should take as much time as you need and the situation allows. Generally, the first thing you should do after your opponent moves is to figure out what your opponent's move is about. You'll want to know if it threatens you, if it responds to your previous play, if there's something wrong with it, and so on. Most people ask a set of internalized questions about the opposing move, trying to elicit information so they can determine how to proceed. You're going to have to do this regardless how much time it takes.

Nevertheless, there are certain things you probably shouldn't do on your time, such as letting your mind wander. Mental meandering should be done on your opponent's time. This is when you'll feel less hassled, when you can best consider non-specific matters. You'll be able to look for future targets, imagine promising maneuvers or plans, anticipate looming threats, become creative, and ask yourself all those questions you don't have the luxury of asking on your own turn because your clock is ticking. So, rather than focusing on the amount of time needed for analysis, think more about the kinds of things your analysis should cover in the first place. On your turn, emphasize particular, immediate issues, and on your opponent's turn, concentrate on general, future ones. Naturally, you don't have to break things down so absolutely. But this approach could help you organize your thoughts, enabling you to use time more efficiently.

**Question** I'm a Class A player, pursuing my present goal of Expert. I have a trainer (Soviet IM), spend time studying specialized openings for White and Black, study tactics as much as possible, play OTB (not often enough . . . not much tournament action where I live), and play ICC. I love ICC. It has replaced my former involvement with postal chess (not enough time in the week to work all angles of the game). Anyway, my question relates to ICC: Do you believe speed chess, virtual or face-to-face (I play the 5-minute games where you are automatically paired . . . making it much like tournament conditions in terms of pairings . . . i.e., I have no control over who I play) is a good/excellent use of one's chess time? My own thoughts are that it is, if used properly. I have used it to work on my openings, to try to observe some of my thinking processes to see where I may improve, to create a compendium of critical positions to do further work, and also

to try to put a clamp on my “emotions.” As many of the masters have said, chess is art, science, and a battle (Lasker). The battle component tends to bring out some other, non-thinking characteristics in our games, e.g., emotions, will to win, sense of superiority, etc. Chess and emotions are incompatible, however, in both OTB and speed. It is amazing how I/we can let ourselves “go” (fail to pay proper attention to the “logical” side of the game), so to speak. Thus, I have found speed to be a good way to develop a sense of mental discipline. What do you think? **Chris Hansen (USA)**

**Answer** I think we are in rat’s alley, where the dead men have lost their bones (T.S. Eliot). I think many other things, too, but let’s just talk about speed chess and it’s possible value. Indeed, I think it can have value. It gives you a chance to experience a lot of ideas over a short time. It may sharpen your tactics and technique. It could boost your confidence. It enables openings and pet lines to be practiced. And it can provide enormous pleasure. You can get more out of speed chess if you also stay mindful of its downside. It doesn’t lend itself to reflection or thorough analysis. In fact it promotes superficiality. It could shake your confidence, or give you a false sense of security. It could have a carry-over affect to your tournament play, causing you to be impulsive and prone to blunder. You especially should steer clear of speed chess just prior to serious competitions. But if you remain aware of the potential pitfalls of speed chess, while enjoying its possible benefits, I see nothing wrong with continuing to engage in it for timely fun and profit.

**Question** I read that you are a philosophy buff and I am curious as to your reactions and hopefully some comments on an open letter written by Ayn Rand to Boris Spassky in 1972. The letter appears in her book, *Philosophy: Who Needs It*, chapter six, page 63. Of particular interest is her comment that the reason many Russians “fled into the world of chess,” was an escape from their totalitarian culture. Also, her comment, “Chess removes the motor of intellectual effort – the question “What for?” – and leaves a somewhat frightening phenomenon: “intellectual effort devoid of purpose.” Thanks for your time. I really appreciate the many books of yours that I own and study. **Don Schumacher (USA)**

**Answer** I read that I am a philosophy buff, too, though I never saw Ayn Rand’s letter to Boris Spassky. I did read her “Fountainhead,” however, all seven hundred pages of it. It did nothing for my chess, but left me terribly sympathetic to Boris Spassky. Actually, I agree with her contention. Chess does provide an escape, so it’s easy to see the game’s appeal in a totalitarian culture. Yet I suggest there are other

reasons the Russians have done so well at chess, not least of all being they love it. Maybe this explains their success more than anything else.

**Reader Response** Finally, a letter from one of our thoughtful readers:

This is not a question but a comment based on my own experience. This came in to my mind from your latest column, where you say: “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.” I’m a 1600-1700 national ELO (Finnish) player attending WE tournaments every now and then. I practice by playing against a computer and studying from books, which is normal procedure I think. I have a friend, approximately of the same playing strength as me, and we have time to play about 2-3 times per month. The time limit we use for our games is one hour per side, without increments. This way the whole session takes about 3 hours, as almost every time we both use all of our time, and we usually go through the game afterwards.

I think there are some good points in our system. One hour is enough for serious thinking. It should lead to improvement. The quality of play is better than, e.g., blitz. Analysis after the game is both fun and beneficial. (Actually it is not proper analysis. Mostly we just share our ideas and compare our candidate moves. Too seldom do we find major improvements to the game text and confirm it by rigorous analysis.) But the best part is this: Practicing with 1 hour time limits has helped me to avoid time trouble in tournament games which are usually played with the limit 1.5h/40 + 0.5h for the rest of the game. I’m familiar with the “slow” speed, and in a difficult position I know I can spend a few extra minutes compared to our practice games. I don’t say that I never get into time trouble, but the cases are very rare nowadays. It doesn’t matter if it should be called casual or something else, but for us it is great fun. **Risto Vallenius (Finland)**

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