



*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



## It's A Material World

**Question** Hi. I like your column. I think I have a common problem that you may be able to help with. I'm rated around 1850. I seem to have stopped improving, and I've taken a hard look at my games to see what I'm doing wrong. One thing I noticed is that unless there is a forcing continuation I can see the end of, I will never sacrifice material. When I have a weak pawn, I will keep defending it until my position is totally cramped and falls apart, and later I'll find out that I could have just sacrificed it and all my pieces would be active. I don't even think about that during the game - I have to defend my pawn! Generally, I have no idea when a pawn sacrifice is worth it, when it gives good compensation and when it's just a loss of material. Let alone things like exchange sacs. And during the game, the idea usually doesn't enter my mind. Any hints on how I can work on this? **Remco Gerlich (the Netherlands)**

**Answer** By far the most overriding element in chess is material. We should never give it away lightly, because there's only a certain amount of it. A pawn is a pawn in any country in the world. For the most part, we don't want to sacrifice our things. We want to sacrifice the other guy's things. That's why most sacrifices are not really sacrifices at all. They're only expedient sacrifices, leading by force to at least a clear improvement in the position. What kind of sacrifice is it when you know ahead of time that the story has to have a happy ending?



But you raise a good point about defending weak material foolishly. It's often wiser to surrender it for non-material compensation or to create useful complications. You can become better at exploiting these situations if you get more practice with them. Why don't you try playing on the Internet, perhaps going on as a guest if you're worried about losing rating points. Once there, constantly attempt to sacrifice material meaningfully to gain relevant experience. The more you immerse yourself in sacrificial circumstances, the more at ease with them you're likely to become. You can fuel these attempts at sacrificial orgy by working with a few of the books devoted to the subject. Spielman's "The Art of Sacrifice in Chess" and several titles by Leonid Shamkovich might be helpfully conducive. I would also take a look at Gufeld's new book on risk strategy. I've been told it's quite good, and a very absorbing read at that. Other than these things, it can't hurt to stay mindful of your situation, as indeed you seem to be. It's by being aware of a problem that we can start to do something about it.

**Question** I'm having trouble with a particular aspect of my game: I find it difficult to win a won position. I (almost always) come out of the opening with a good position, and I can generally see tactics when they are lurking in the position, but I often start to "drift" and play planlessly. I've identified this inability to finish off my opponent as a weakness, but I don't know how to resolve it. Just last night I found myself 4 pawns up after a King's Gambit and lost by allowing the black king to penetrate! Do you have any hints as to how I can eradicate this weakness? **Darren Radford (United Kingdom)**

**Answer** You could try a number of things. You could, for instance, get more practice at playing out winning positions. This you could do on your own, with the aid of a study partner, or by working with a teacher or strong player. If you're doing it on your own, you'll need a source of winning positions to study. A good way to gather them is by turning to the final positions of contests in game collections. Even though almost all of these examples are decisively lost, many of them require some technique to bring home the point. You could analyze these positions by yourself, play them out against other human beings, or set them up on computer chess programs and play them out whenever the opportunities arise. The latter approach may be most efficacious, for you can use the computer at your convenience, while avoiding the let down and inconsistent quality of defense that typically accompanies the onset of the opponent's fatigue. The computer remains indefatigable and resists uniformly throughout the entire session.

You might invest some effort in endgame study. Such a task also could be pursued with the aid of computers. Just set up positions from a standard textbook, use a clock to simulate tournament conditions, and try to find the right ideas. These labors should have value even when you initially fail to win if you subsequently analyze your responses to each attempted exercise. If it doesn't work the first time, analyze it and try again, at least several times until you feel you've attained sufficient command to play such positions confidently in real games. Other than the above two remedies you could indeed seek professional chess advice, though this might be costly and certainly isn't necessary.

The other cure is time itself. If you play enough on a regular basis, try to keep mindful of your particular problems, and continually analyze and investigate the positions that give you the most trouble, you are likely to improve your facility at winning won games. There are no guarantees here, but giving the problem our total focus is the best any of us can hope to do. Logically, this categorical applies to you too.

**Question** I have just started to study chess recently. After some reading and playing, I know and can recognize some basic tactics and strategy. However, I often like to know WHY a move is the best, while the others are not. For example, using Chessmaster 8000, there is an auto-analysis function, and move advice/hint functions. However, I do not really understand the reasons for the move it suggests (e.g. it often tells me the line of moves it sees ahead, and "from this line of moves, you win a pawn.") This does not really help me understand the reasons behind a move. I am trying to find "something" that will tell me why each move in a game is the best in SIMPLEST terms. Is there a suggestion or recommendation you can give? Thanks! **Benjamin Doverin (Canada)**

**Answer** Nowadays there are plenty of books that explain the reasons behind many of the moves of the chess games they offer. I suggest that you go to a bookstore that has a large chess collection and spend some time going through the material until you find a text that works for you. But you may not be able to unearth many books that fully clarify all the moves of all their games. And even if you discovered a few such books, you'd eventually run out of them and actually have to figure out some things on your own.

We can't expect everything to be spoon-fed to us. We may have to fend for ourselves, to rely on our own abilities, for no book – nor any consultant or computer -- can supply us with all the explanations and answers we might need to succeed during over-the-board play. The best way to become more capable of finding good moves on our own

in real games is to find good moves on our own in practice. Surely, we all need a helping hand from time to time, especially to get over certain learning roadblocks and hindrances. But you shouldn't want to be told everything, not if you imagine yourself a real chessplayer or a sentient being. If we are to grow and improve the right way, some things must be left to the natural process of learning over time. There are no quick chess fixes that are worth anything. You simply must put greater effort into considering chess positions: asking probing questions, analyzing reasonable possibilities, and considering alternatives to see which seem to be more effective. Sometimes you may have to play positions all the way through before achieving understanding, and even then you may have to work further, moving backward from final positions to starting points before things naturally sink in. This is work, but it often *does* work, and nothing else works any better.

**Question** I'm an intermediate player, but whenever I'm calculating variations or candidate moves, I keep forgetting about them and I'll have to think all over again. What should I do to fix this problem? **Lim Shueh Hann (Malaysia)**

**Answer** You could fix it by giving up chess. You could fix it by becoming a character in "Star Trek" and aligning yourself with the Borg. Or you could try to fix it by structuring your approach. Let's focus on the last of these three. Maybe you're already doing this, but if you're not, you should concentrate at first on your form. As you're exploring a position for candidate moves, you should make sure to construct a short list of worthy possibilities before analyzing any of them in depth. This is critical, for the mere act of creating a list gives you something definite to refer back to, in case you forget, and it also makes it possible to compare the ideas better so that you could establish a proper peck order to the candidate moves. By grouping and arranging them together you'll sense which ones should be looked at first and which can be eliminated altogether. To be sure, one of the main analytic tasks chessplayers perform is to compare choices. Regardless how we fashion it, we're constantly seeing how several different moves deal with a specific problem to see which moves we prefer.

Making sure you have proper form is one thing that might help, and really keeping your focus while analyzing is another. If you're letting your attention wander, if you don't fix your thoughts in place to begin with, and if your ideas lack defining concreteness, it's very unlikely you'll remember much at all. Of course I don't know you, and there

might be something personal that should be factored into the equation. But if I had to offer general advice, I'd suggest that you get back to basics and reconsider your starting approach. Get that right, and other helpful things may follow.

**Question** I have read that you have worked on a few movie sets as a chess consultant. What does a chess consultant for a movie do? Do you set up the chess positions and make sure the games played are emotionally true to the scenes at hand, or has the screenwriter usually done that? (I think Nabokov at least would have enjoyed that part of writing a script for *The Defense*.) Do you teach the actors to play chess? If so, does it depend on the actors' and/or directors' interest level in chess or in the authenticity of their performance (i.e.-you could imagine a Method Actor needing to delve deeper into the mechanics of the game). Did the actors' actual ability to play chess affect their performance, in your opinion, or did it depend on the authority with which they handled the pieces regardless of whether they were making convincing moves? Was it your job to coach the actors on the psychological meaning of the moves they were making or did the moves usually have little to do with the look on the actors' faces?

Also, what did you think of *The Luzhin Defense*, both as a film on its own terms and in comparison to the book, including the changed ending? In general are there any movies that are "truer" to the chess world and to the world of chess than others?

Don't worry, I'm not looking for a job as a movie chess consultant--I am just nosy about intersections of the chess and movie worlds. **Lina McLaidlaw (USA)**

**Answer** The chess consultant's chief function is not to screw up the possibility of working as a chess consultant in the future. This I've done by not getting in the way of anyone important while filming and by putting the chess pieces where the director says they should be even though I advise otherwise. I don't really teach the actors how to play chess, and they don't really teach me how to act. In preparing a scene in which the actors have to make a series of moves, I provide them with visual patterns rather than chess sequences, in that many of them see a lot more than they think. As far as coaching the actors psychologically, I've always told them how I thought scenes should go, and some of them have told me where they thought I should go. And they've never really needed method acting to convey the message that in the world of film the chessplayer is very much only a pawn in the game. But don't get me wrong. I've loved every minute of it.

Moving to *Luzhin's Defense*, I liked its exquisite cinematography, and the performances of John Turturro and Emily Watson were truly luminous. But the second half of the film played a little too much on the queenside. I can only imagine how Nabokov would have reacted if he had still been alive. Surely he would have wanted to write the screenplay, and he might have insisted on being the film's chess consultant. But I don't think he would have planned on doing a cameo, appearing in the last scene and winning the big game. It would have ruined the plot.

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