



*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



Winning Coaches Get Fired Too

Question My question regards coaching. My rating is around 1850. My performance for the past several months has been in the 2100 range. My coach is about 100 points higher than me. Do you recommend I switch to a stronger coach? **Steve Johnson (USA)**

Answer I'm not sure what you're asking. If you're wondering whether you could still benefit from a teacher, coach, or trainer whose rating is barely higher than yours, the answer has to depend on several factors. The two primary ones would be how good you really are as a player and how good your coach is as a coach. Let's face it. Rating is meaningful but it isn't everything. Surely there are other considerations, too numerous to enumerate, that transcend mere numericity. Clearly ratings can be ridiculously inflated or unfairly deflated by hundreds of points. Even the simians who think that numerical index constitutes true worth as an individual -- and I'm not suggesting you fall into this category -- must admit that the very numbers themselves are dubious. Can you really be certain that you're playing like a solid 2100 player? Some teachers automatically conclude that anyone posing such a question can't possibly be a member of the class to which their question refers. Of course, I'm not drawing this inference about you, your class, or your question. I'd rather let you do that, if that's where your reasoning takes you.

As far as selecting a coach goes, if rating were the only issue to be evaluated, it would be a huge concession to



work with anyone less qualified than Kasparov or Kramnik. Contrariwise, in speaking of such lofty personages, I wonder how they feel when they have to hire trainers 200 points below them in rating. It must be terribly demeaning. What could they possibly get from such people, whom they could crush like a flea just like that? Maybe they want some of the same things you obtain, albeit at a much lower level, from a coach merely possessing a 1950 rating. Maybe they just need another objective, but sympathetic, voice. Maybe your own coach is so adept at coaching that he can actually help an 1850 player achieve a performance level of 2100 for several months when it's unclear that the results are merited. Or maybe the coach had nothing to do with it.

Certainly we all want our coaches to have a grasp of their subject matter, so that we can rely on what they're saying. Most of us also need a certain measure of encouragement, that can't be factored into a rating algorithm, to help us keep moving ahead. Some coaches are particularly good at this, and some aren't. In the end, switching coaches must come down to how you feel about your coach. If you have doubts about him relating to your actual work together, that's one thing. If you're thinking, however, of jettisoning him for a higher-priced mentor simply based on rating, you'd certainly never be accepted as a student by any coach I'd accept as an associate. But you decide, just as you must decide on your own moves, unless you can find a coach able to make them for you.

Question I play quite a bit of online chess on the Yahoo! Games site and have a rating of around 1500. I was wondering if you would have any idea how closely this rating would correspond to the "official" rating system? **Andrew Wright (Australia)**

Answer Playing online can be great fun. It can also be a terrific way to improve, where the competition can be quite exciting. But I'd be careful about swallowing the ratings as being accurate. There are serious questions about all kinds of ratings, particularly those earned on the Internet. From my experience, having analyzed many Internet games played by students whose actual strength I was very cognizant

of, I'd have to say that the Internet ratings tend to be off by as much as plus or minus 400 points, below the barrier of 2200. Beyond 2200, the ratings are also inaccurate, but it's harder to say by how much or to what degree. And as far as the services go, it seems that the ICC ratings are closer to the truth, while Yahoo's ratings are a little farther off. Nevertheless, I am not a statistician of ratings, so I'd be interested to hear what some of our more knowledgeable readers have to say on this.

Question My rating is about 2000. My question is about consistency in chess. I notice that in my own play, my games vary on what kind of day I am having or how I feel on a particular day. On good days I can "see" the board. I can calculate variations without even trying and can often predict opponent's moves. On bad days I struggle to "see" anything. My moves are based on intuition rather than strategy or calculation. On bad days I play this way because I cannot understand my opponent's plan and can't develop a good plan myself. Are there any exercises that I can do that would make my play more consistent?
Ed Harmen (USA)

Answer I suppose, if you want to instill more consistency, you can start by playing the same things practically every time you play. As you spend greater time with the same opening variations and systems you'll begin to understand them better, so you can then employ these potential weapons more effectively. But hand in hand with what you prepare should be a correspondingly suitable approach to how you prepare. That is, you'll probably benefit from establishing a routine, and then adhering to this routine as well as possible, unless some aspect of it proves detrimental and must therefore be changed. In most cases you should be trying to simulate game conditions in your practice. You should take your practice sessions seriously, and think as hard during that time as you would in actual competitive games. And when it comes to analyzing, always do so in your head, never moving the pieces, not until you get what you think to be the right idea or until death intervenes. Other than these things, I think your own words intelligently contain a suggestion that might help, whether you rely on calculation, intuition, or new lenses to "see" more. In your own words, you seem to do worse on bad days. Accordingly, I recommend that you do chess only on good days. Give it a try, follow this try rigorously, and see if trying so doesn't solve some of your problems, at least those on consistency and sight.

Question I am 22-years old and have been studying and playing all the time now, and I'm not really sure why I'm bothering to write to you at all. My rating is almost 1400, and I'm about to make a jump, as my

teacher has demonstrated to me. I study all of the important books, such as *My System* by Nimzovich and *My 60 Memorable Games* by Fischer. I keep learning a lot from both, and my teacher thinks that I should do tactics, especially the classic bishop sacrifice, which I've gotten quite good at. I play in a weekly tournament every other week, and I can actually feel myself gaining in strength tremendously. The other day I destroyed a 1600 player. It was a pretty nice game and now I'm ready for more. But I want your opinion, though I'm not sure why. My teacher thinks you won't even bother to answer me out of rudeness. I'm really curious what you think anyway. I bet you are not going to answer this, but do you think, from the sound of what I have been saying, if I really work hard, that I'm ready to become a strong player? **Larry Hirsch (USA)**

Answer Not yet.

Question I have been studying as much as possible. I am very serious about chess. I find myself studying everyday. I have only been truly playing for 3 or so months now and I can see a huge improvement in my play. I have gone through the entire curriculum included in *Chessmaster 8000* numerous times and it has helped me a lot by introducing me to advanced techniques early in my chess development. I cannot afford a chess coach but I was wondering if there are any suggestions you might have that I could use as an alternative so that I can improve my play even more? **David Rude (USA)**

Answer It seems as if you've already done some excellent things, particularly working your way through the entire *Chessmaster 8000* study program. I would suggest following through on similar projects, and if you can't find them, there are plenty of instructional books from which to choose. Just click on the **Chesssafe.com** catalog and see for yourself. Beyond this simply study chess as often as you can, and when you're studying and practicing it, give it your all, or efforts comparable to those you'd make in actual competition. In your studies, you might especially work on tactics and learning how to calculate without moving the pieces. If you can't afford a coach, you might consider working with a training partner at a club or elsewhere, who'd be willing to focus on some of the same areas, just so that you'd have another critical mind to help you evaluate moves and ideas. But the best thing you can do is practically the same thing everyone should do: to play against challenging opposition, in tournaments, clubs, or on the Internet, on a steady basis and to analyze your play afterward. These games, combined with all your other serious efforts, should provide the necessary impetus to keep you advancing up the chess ladder.

Question Do you think correspondence chess has pedagogical value for a beginning/intermediate player? I find it enjoyable because there's time to think through the moves and even research the positions (say, in the opening). I don't know if one would want to play correspondence chess exclusively until the player has a fair amount of experience with a clock (quick-thinking does seem to be an important part of the game and the learning process), but it seems correspondence chess is useful because it allows one to think through the position more deeply. **Michael Hirota (USA)**

Answer Obviously, any form of chess that affords time to think is preferable to most kinds of fast chess games, though speed chess has its place and value too, especially by presenting many ideas over the course of a session and forcing you to stay focused. Let your mind wander in speed chess and you're lost. Either you'll hang something or lose on time. The nice thing about correspondence chess is that it provides so much extra time between moves that you can really sink your teeth into variations and positions. You can look up lines in different books to compare evaluations, and you can spend your own time weighing the alternatives and analyzing. Furthermore, you can test out certain ideas against computer chess programs for further back up and reinforcement. With your opponent's knowledge and approval, you can even use the games chiefly for training, showing the positions to strong players to get their feedback, if this can be done without an unfair advantage over your opponent.

But I wouldn't spend all my time on correspondence chess either. For most players, it's not real chess, in that you lose the immediacy and impact of sitting across from a live opponent. That interaction can be very appealing, and it's certainly one of the reasons we play chess, for face-to-face, stimulating, intellectual contact with other people. Of course, you can find social attractions in correspondence chess (and online), and some of the comments exchanged between players can be quite invigorating. You might want to read Woody Allen's short piece, *The Gossage-Varabedian Papers*, in his *Getting Even*. It captures much of the flavor of what we're talking about, and it's very funny. Still, unless you simply have no choice, try to spend most of your available chess time at an actual chessboard, sitting directly across from the opposition you're hoping to outwit and throttle. As a way to improve, it simply can't be beat.

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