



*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



The Grandmaster as Gipper

Question I recently had a conversation with a veteran Grandmaster from Russia who asserted that no player who is less than a Grandmaster should attempt to train talented young players. He argued that while not all grandmasters are good teachers, a player who is not a grandmaster lacks the necessary feel for how the pieces move to train a player to reach his full potential. He stated that Yusupov and Dolmatov, two of Mark Dvoretsky's most famous students, could have achieved even more than they did if their play had not been "sterilized" by an International Master, and that Josh Waitzkin did not reach his potential either.

He compared teaching chess to teaching music. He said that an expert (but not great) musician may teach a student to play in a local bar, but that student would never be able to play in Carnegie Hall. Such a student would have to unlearn everything in order to learn the proper feel for the notes. To what extent do you agree with him? Should chess teachers who have truly gifted students recommend they start with Grandmasters or should coaches work with young gifted players until they have taught them as much as they can, and do you refer your very most gifted students to Grandmasters for further training? **Dan Avery (USA)**

Answer To answer the last part of your question first, I try never to stay with a student beyond my ability to help. Once a student seems ready to move on, which might be determined fairly early in our



relationship, I do what I can to find other teachers who can do a more appropriate job, including grandmasters. As far as the rest of your question goes, it's unlikely I can do it justice. I will try to address a few of the points raised, but I suspect your thoughtful concerns are going to remain unresolved by my response.

What the grandmaster implies is probably correct, but there's no way of knowing for sure. How do we do tests on particular human beings? Get them to go back in time and live their lives twice, the second time studying with a grandmaster? If we could have two teachers who were virtual clones of each other, except for their chess ability, then we could make more definite statements. For this analysis, if both teachers had an equally bright disposition, comparable knowledge about the art of teaching, pretty much the same degree of development in the personal intelligences, practically the same dedication to the student and the enterprise, similar time to invest, and so on, then the playing skill of the teacher would mean everything. In such a case, the stronger player should undoubtedly be the better teacher.

The real world, however, is not so ideal. I've never met a non-grandmaster who was a leading player, nor are there many grandmasters who seem to have a facility for teaching. If we want the teacher to impart factual knowledge about chess, then it's clearly better to have a grandmaster. But if we deem it wiser to empower the student to reach full potential on his or her own, then it makes more sense to stress teaching skill over playing strength. The grandmaster can't make your moves for you. The good teacher can inspire you to find the right ideas for yourself.

It's curious that so much emphasis is placed on the term grandmaster. What about those who are practically grandmasters? Are they likely to mislead their students with notions that would ultimately prevent them from reaching their full potential? Then there's all those ordinary grandmasters. In Voltaire's perfect world, how could they possibly teach as well as the super-grandmasters? Even super-grandmasters might pale before Garry Kasparov. I'm not a very good player or teacher, but I've seen enough of the world to know that what your grandmaster associate says about Mark Dvoretsky is patently unfair, for it's an opinion that can't be verified or disproved. It's also not true, for Dvoretsky has probably done more to advance the science of chess training than anyone on the planet. I'd be willing, of course, to argue this with the grandmaster in question, though preferably over a few beers.

Maybe something is being missed here. What's the purpose of

teaching? For teachers to show and tell students everything they know? Or to help students develop so they can function without teachers? If we are to determine who should and shouldn't teach the young and talented, it seems we should answer this question before tackling anything else.

Question I live in Canada and I've always dreamed of making a living with chess. Is it possible to do that in North America? More specifically, I imply making a living by teaching chess (a chess coach/trainer). I think I've got the skills to do that because I taught someone to play about four years ago and now he is playing around 1800. I live in a small place where there is virtually no market for that but I wonder if that would be possible with the help of the Internet. Are there resources out there to find potential customers or to become a better trainer? And while we are at it, what are the qualities required to be considered a good chess trainer/teacher? I know this is a lot of questions but I appreciate your time and your feedback. **Michael Smith (Canada)**

Answer In the past it would have depended on what you actually meant by "making a living," but nowadays things are more promising. There are school programs all over the place, and industrious people with an interest in teaching chess in classes and privately have a good chance to find possibilities and clientele. But since your area seems to offer dismal prospects, you might consider moving to a major city, such as Vancouver or Toronto – the latter, by the way, is where most of the filming for *Searching for Bobby Fischer* took place. You probably could find out more about chess teaching from the Canadian and U.S. chess federations, but you'd be surprised how much stuff could be downloaded off the Internet, and most of it is free. There are curricula, collections of principles and advice, annotated games, suggestions on literature, and much, much more. Just do a search using the word "chess" and see where it takes you. Wherever it takes you, I'm sure you'll also find lists of supposed qualifications. Whatever cyberspace provides, it's likely to offer at least something that works for you.

Question The first part of my question concerns the movie *Searching for Bobby Fischer*, I know the movie was released quite a while ago but I only saw it recently. I understand if you are unwilling to go over old ground, as it were. I have quite a few of your instructional books and thoroughly enjoy them, particularly the style of writing. Were you happy with the characterization and were you consulted at all during production? Do you feel the movie was factually and dramatically

correct? If you could have changed some aspect of the movie what would it have been? (I hope you take the time to answer these questions. It's a bit like getting to ask Yoda what he thought of the *Star Wars* series of movies.) Secondly, I believe I have a reasonable grasp of opening principles. I have only just started studying openings, do you recommend any particular technique when studying openings? Is there a particular order I should start looking at the openings? I tend to enjoy attacking play more than quiet play, what openings would most suit that type of player? **Mark McCallum (Australia)**

Answer The movie *Searching for Bobby Fischer* was adapted from Fred Waitzkin's book of the same name. The book gives the true story, and the film uses the book as a vehicle for dramatic truth. The movie takes some liberties with the actual facts, but does capture much of the essence of the father-son relationship between Fred and Josh. Obviously, what works on the printed page doesn't necessarily translate well to screen, but I think the filmmakers – namely director/screenwriter Steve Zaillian, producer Scott Rudin, and cinematographer Conrad Hall – did a brilliant job bringing the world of scholastic chess to the public. In fact, the above three artists are among the brightest people in Hollywood, and I know they earnestly tried their best to depict a subject they considered very important.

The cast was also outstanding. None of them played chess beforehand, except Joe Mantegna, who was probably about a 1200 USCF player. But since he portrayed Fred Waitzkin, who doesn't play chess, he didn't have to display his abilities. Ben Kingsley worked hard on his playing scene, and I think he was fairly convincing. He gave me a slight Irish brogue because he saw me as a character out of Beckett, which frankly I preferred to the Brooklyn accent life gave me before the film. Larry Fishburne was truly remarkable. Before the film, he didn't know how the pieces moved, yet he did his homework so well – method acting and preparation – that he truly came off as being a park hustler. But undoubtedly the key was Max Pomeranc. He did so much chess in getting down his scenes, that he became good enough to finish sixth in the real third grade nationals the same year he acted in the role of Josh Waitzkin. In a sense, he got to play the same role twice!

I'm not sure what I would have changed, but as with any artistic expression, it's easy to find things that could have been done differently. One pleasant surprise was the character of Bonnie Waitzkin, who in real life doesn't always get the credit she deserves as the linchpin of the Waitzkin family. As much as Josh needed Fred, he also needed Bonnie's rock solid qualities and support. I was very happy with the way Joan Allen evinced her quiet strength.

You also ask about openings. There are many things you could do, but probably I'd recommend that you start playing over game collections to see which openings interest you. After you determine the most appealing lines, then you can turn to some of the encyclopedias to check out the main ideas. And if you get really excited about certain variations and whole systems, you can purchase specific openings books. Most of these can be found in the Chessscafe catalog, or in some of the other easy-to-find online catalogs, if you feel so inclined. Finally, you might consider taking a few lessons from a nearby teacher, just to get your play assessed and to receive some objective feedback.

Question Over the past couple of months, I've been doing simple endings over and over, at first because it annoyed me not to be able to do even simple things well. (I mean checkmate the bare king with any mating material, and win with queen against any other piece, first at all and then without wasting a lot of moves.) Later I just did it because the endings are so pretty. (And I want to "get the complete set" with two knights versus pawn soon, but it's still too tough for me.) I stopped it a couple of weeks ago, because it was making queen moves look funny - spiky and curly, if I can put it poetically. It was like "the wrong pair of glasses", and it was off-putting.

In the past week, I've just started playing chess on the Internet; my real first chess in years. I keep seeing queen simultaneous attacks and pins and checks and captures and zugswangs and bad things that can happen to the queen. The zugswangs aren't real (in the middlegame, and my games aren't going to endings), but a lot of the other stuff is. Again, it's disorienting: things that used to look unsafe look safe, because of what the queen can do, and vice versa.

It's not the fact of it being safe or unsafe in the abstract that throws me, but it looking different. I've slogged through thousands and thousands of tactical studies over the decades, and played through hundreds of model games, but it never affected how things on the board look at all, let alone like this. Have any of your pupils started seeing moves "look spiky" when they were learning? Did you? Is it a temporary thing, or is it permanent but you get used to it, like glasses? I hope this doesn't sound like a joke or that I'm acting nutty. I've been playing chess on and off for about thirty years, and I "know the drill", and this isn't it, and I'm genuinely a little disoriented. **David Blue (Australia)**

Answer I'm not sure if I'm going to have more trouble answering

your question or convincing people that I didn't make it up. If any of my students saw anything that appeared "spiky," particularly "when they were learning," I would surely take appropriate actions. Right now I'm not sure what they would be. I hope this helps you, and any of those facing a similar situation.

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