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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



It's Only a Movie

Question I am a great fan of the movie *Searching for Bobby Fischer*, and I always liked how the movie ends with winning a queen instead of giving checkmate, as they do in almost every movie and television program. Obviously, real life is not like that and people don't always get conveniently checkmated. I also think it's stupid when they have this habit of answering a check with checkmate, as if that ever happens in real life. I'm glad that didn't happen in the film. I didn't like all of the movie, but I liked a lot of the chess scenes, although it's different in real tournaments. My question is, could you please make available the game score of the game from the film. I realize it may be a little stupid, and I'm sure it's not what Josh really played, because it was a movie, and maybe there was no real game at all, but I'm curious.

Allen Felzer (USA)

Answer The movie *mêlée* was nothing like the game actually played between Jeff Sarwer and Josh Waitzkin. The real contest was a terrifically fierce battle, the single most exciting and competitive clash I've ever seen between two third-graders. The game in the film, however, was created solely for dramatic effect. It, too, is quite thrilling, though fortunately its logic does not have to pass scrutiny. We (myself, Josh, other experienced players, and even some of the world's leading grandmasters) nonetheless tried our utmost to do a good job, aiming to create a cinematically interesting fight, but one adhering to skillful third-grade logic, reflective of a championship struggle between 8-year-old talents. In the end, after it was all worked



out, I considered its formulation the most difficult professional task I'd ever overseen.

Why was it so hard? The chief trouble was that the game had to embed as many as 22 script points. What does this mean? It means that the director wanted to show a particular set of opening moves, with a bishop going to a certain square on move five. No problem. A definite move had to follow. Then the queen had to be won through a clever tactic. So far, okay. Then, when it looked as if resignation were in order, there had to be an equally ingenious ruse to win the queen back. This starts getting a little trickier, and some logic must be sacrificed, especially when the cinematographer spontaneously says the idea doesn't quite work on film, and he suddenly wants it done this way instead. Thereafter, pile on point after point, with more on-the-spot changes to come, and it's Alice-in-wonderland all over again. The remarkable thing is, the final combination almost succeeds (I believe we all missed one drawing line that couldn't easily be grasped on film), and the key theme about the queen is drilled home in a visually unforgettable manner, especially thanks to director Steve Zaillian's holistically aesthetic perspective. Fittingly, Steve has the only game score, all seventy-three moves of it, appropriately named "Zaillian's Gambit," and it's framed and hung on the wall of his office. That, I suspect, is where it's going to stay.

Question Having finally just watched *Searching for Bobby Fischer*, I was curious if you knew of a source to get a copy of the games from the championship match when Josh won the elementary championship. I realize the game in the movie didn't reflect the actual games, but my son and I would enjoy looking through the actual games. **Jeff Lee (USA)**

Answer Occasionally I will draw upon the play of private students for didactic purposes, but in doing so I never reveal the identities of those involved. Not only is that a violation of trust, in some cases we're talking about very young people who could be damaged by such exposure. As a caring father I'm sure you can appreciate this. Even though the games of Josh Waitzkin's primary school championship triumph could theoretically be a matter of public record, in fact they're not, and practically all copies of them – other than mine and perhaps a few others – were kept by the participants. Therefore, the only way you can see those moves is if Josh or his opponents choose to make them available. Fortunately, this is not my decision.

Question I would like to know your opinion about endings. I have read your endgame course, which I considered excellent, and I really

enjoy playing this part of the game. Understanding the endgame has helped me a lot to improve my game, but I am not sure how to continue now. To give you an idea my ELO rating is 1750, I am 33-years old and my style is more positional than tactical. Is it important to start with pawn endings, then minor pieces, then rooks and then queens? Or maybe I should study rook endings first because they are the most common? Could you also please suggest books to improve the endgame play? **Carlos Reinaldo (Argentina)**

Answer Like many things in the conceptual universe, there isn't just one way or place to start when it comes to studying the endgame phase. But however you do it, you'll need to understand something about both endgame theory and practical endgame play. Almost none of the existing endgame books are so bad – even the bad ones – that you couldn't get anything from them. Either they contain basic or theoretical positions worthy of study (true, probably borrowed from other texts, often without credit, and possibly not analyzed well in the first place), or actual endgames played out by good players. Very seldom will you get endgames played out by terrible players, because even thieves want to steal things of at least superficial value. And even if the practical endgames are presented inadequately, you'll have the examples themselves, and these must be of some use regardless how well they're analyzed or presented. To be sure, for some authorities the real pleasure in perusing inferior treatments is to deceive themselves (and any thralls who'll listen) into thinking they could have done a better job.

Now the information you provide about yourself is helpful, but I still don't really understand you well enough to offer reliable counsel, and it's doubtful you'd want to read a so-called good book just because I recommended it. You might wind up hating it, the apparently indifferent person who so advised you, and maybe the game itself. On the other hand, a particularly inept book might appeal to you in some way, so that you devote yourself to it with a passion, thereby deriving much more from it than you might from a sterile presentation of someone who the establishment designates as an expert in the field.

I'm not an expert in any field, but I'll meet you half-way and tender this advice: go to a bookstore or online catalog and take a closer examination at what's available (useful new items are coming out all the time). Carefully look at each offering and compare to the rest. When you encounter a book you like (or possibly even some software), just go with it and have fun. If, once you've gotten a bit into a particular book (or program) and determine it's not working, stop

using that course and simply turn to another. If your initial choice is favorable, however, and you find yourself craving even more on the final phase, you can proceed with the same investigative process until you discover another inviting tool. Eventually you should learn something, possibly even about the endgame, and you'll have done it your way, which according to Frank Sinatra is why we do anything. And if none of this really helps, just go out and buy any large reference work on the endgame. At least you'll be able to look things up.

So armed, you can try to derive benefit from your own endgames, merging the practical and the theoretical in an individualized way. Whenever you've had trouble with an ending from your own play, try to analyze it afterward. Don't be afraid to ask nearby chessplayers what they think, because sometimes they actually do. Follow-up further by using your large reference manual, or any other related texts or databases in your library. See if you can find pertinent material that can aid you in your quest for understanding and endgame truth. A nice by-product of this quest is that you should steadily get better at classifying positions, inasmuch as you'll need to make your searches as specific and relevant as possible. When you become more adept at this – when you become more mindful of the material and what you're doing with it – you'll naturally start to become stronger at the endgame and a superior player overall.

Question How the heck can I solve my problem of impatience? Besides buying a new brain somewhere, I have no clue how. I am crushing my opponents in the opening, killing them in the middlegame, and then I blitz out my endings. Two years ago I had a shot at the World Open title in the under 1400 section and botched it when I became impatient. Aside from “sitting on my hands,” are there any secrets? (I know this is probably a hopeless question.) **Rob Billingham (USA)**

Answer Other than your two suggestions for solving the problem (your ideas about the brain and hands), you're simply going have to learn how to manage your time better. You'll probably need to stay on red alert, for the most part keeping the problem and the process ever in mind. Approach-wise, get into the habit of asking yourself internalized questions that tend to counter your impulsiveness. Whenever you're about to strike without too much forethought, stop yourself and ask questions such as: Is there something I haven't considered here that might be relevant? Am I overlooking something? Is there something I had to do I've forgotten about? Am I responding adequately to the circumstances posed by my opponent's last move? And so on. Not all

players proceed so, and even when they do, they don't necessarily articulate the questions in these ways or, for that matter, in words at all. But you don't really have a choice because you're trying to remedy a condition which requires watchful application if it's to be dealt with productively. If none of this works, I suppose in the future, when you're crushing your opponents in the opening and killing them in the middlegame, you can actually leave them for dead right there, avoiding endgames altogether. This way you'll no longer blitz out in the endgame, and think of all the big titles you might win

Question I am rated at around 1500, give or take a few points. I'm playing and studying both the Najdorf and Accelerated Dragon defenses. Presently I seem to be winning against higher rated players, but losing to players I should be beating. Can you please help?

Richard St. John (USA)

Answer No, I probably can't. But from the sound of things, you don't need any help at all. Just continue to play higher rated players and eschew those you should be beating. You'll always succeed while being challenged at the same time. It's a win-win situation.

Question I am an intermediate player who has been playing chess avidly for the past couple of years and am now at the age of 24. From my personal observation it seems that all top-level grandmasters are those who become ardent players at a very young age. Many seem to have even earned the GM title by their early twenties or before. Pulling from your own experience as a chessplayer and from your general knowledge in the realm of chess – do you think it is possible for a player starting in his twenties to reach the upper echelons of GM chess and compete at the highest levels? Or do you think that the rapidity of learning which takes place during one's child-teen years is necessary to truly master the game? In addition, which percent of chess mastery would you contribute to natural talent? Do you believe it is possible for one to master the game with zero talent, relying on pure ambition and dedication alone? Finally, are you aware of any chess masters who play the game for cathartic purposes only, and not primarily for competition, as I tend to do from time to time? **Gavin Palmer (USA)**

Answer I don't want to dampen your spirits, or place restrictions on what human beings can do, yet it's extremely unlikely that one could become a top grandmaster starting de novo in his or her twenties. And yes, training is important, though to be truly great in chess one must be incredibly talented. There's no getting around it. However, you may be

going about this all wrong. Successful students of anything are generally those who compete against themselves, who typically strive to reach greater levels of personal performance. We should always aim high, and it can be inspiring to imagine ourselves at the top. Nevertheless, we should shun creating impossibly lofty goals as preconditions, because by establishing such aims we're setting ourselves up for disappointment. But if you love the game, luxuriate in its beauty, and constantly aim to better yourself while truly enjoying the experience, there's no way you can fail.

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