



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



Choose Your Weapons Wisely

Question I've been playing chess "seriously" for about 4 years. I've recently noticed that there is a huge difference in my playing strength between regular and irregular openings. If I can play a regular opening (of course mostly when I'm White), I get to have more say. With White I always play 1. e4 and usually reach a playable middlegame, having a calculated strength of about 1900. But when I'm drawn to some weird lines early on (which now happens quite often because people I play regularly have noticed this too), I usually am in a dire situation by the 10th move and have a much lower playing strength. Is there a way or a system that I can apply to turn unusual openings into more regular familiar lines? Can I force my games to look like I want them to by countering weird openings (1. Nf3 or 1. c4 for example) with certain moves? **Tzvika Barenhola (Israel)**

Answer If I understand you, and I'm not sure I do, your problem may be that you're encountering special difficulties when playing Black. This would be natural, in that Black is much harder to play than White – White having the first move and slightly greater control of the game's flow. Either you must opt for defenses that early on instill distinctive character and a measure of counter-control, or you'll need to play enough times to insure getting a fair share of the White pieces.

It could be that by "regular" openings you mean king-pawn openings, or even more restrictively, double king-pawn openings. Perhaps you feel more at home in symmetrical lines, though I must admit I'm only



guessing. There are plenty of asymmetrical responses, such as the Sicilian Defense, which aren't considered "irregular" at all, let alone "weird." Moves such as 1. Nf3 and 1. c4 are fairly standard in today's competitions, though inexperienced players often have trouble appreciating them, and therefore tend to go awry. If this is what you're referring to, and I'm not saying it is, you might start to familiarize yourself with these openings a little more in depth. This you can do by seeking out entire games that show the lines with which you're concerned, drawing the material from accessible magazines, books, and software.

Is there an approach to help convert the irregular to the regular? Not to my knowledge, though it probably wouldn't hurt to grasp openings and their possible transitions as well as Garry Kasparov. But even if this isn't who you are, and regardless what your opponent throws at you, it's almost always possible to direct the game to a less repellent line. It may be that you simply need to acquire a larger basket of experience so that you have more varieties of produce to sample.

Question I am an average 1600 player. I like to use the Sicilian Defense when playing Black. Sometimes I use a fianchettoed bishop in the black diagonal from g7, and when I do, I face lots of long castling. I am having problems defending against the attack on my castled king. How do I stop the pawn advances without opening direct lines of attack for my opponent? **Salvador Ramos (Puerto Rico)**

Answer It seems as if you're referring to the Dragon Sicilian and the Yugoslav Attack against it. You can try to meet White's kingside pawn storms somewhat by playing a timely h7-h5, but this doesn't stop the advances. It just attempts to neutralize them. If you're going to play the Dragon, you can't just sit back and try to defend. You're going to have to rely on counterattack to fuel your own pawn blitzes on the queenside. By mustering sufficient offense there, you might deter your opponent to the extent that White's kingside attack lacks juice and never really gets going. If this suggestion leaves you feeling uneasy, you can try something more akin to your style, either another Sicilian setup or a different first-move response altogether. Remember that in choosing opening lines it's often wiser to select moves that are more comfortable than necessarily correct. If you're not happy at the start, it's unlikely you'll be smiling in the end.

Question Do you come across junior players who try to hasten their pace of learning chess openings by studying the dynamic openings like the Sicilian when they have yet to grasp the concept of playing open games? How would you work with a student who does not put in time

to learn and yet wishes to play theoretical openings? I've seen many kids play these openings like an expert from moves 1-15, then give it all away thereafter owing to ignorance of the game plans and ideas. Many of these children do take part in tournaments and most of them against adults. Is there a practical piece of advice you can give on how they can attain decent results minus a limited opening repertoire? What would be a good repertoire for a USCF 1400-1500 player from the age of 9-12 to learn? Your comments are most appreciated. **John Wong (Singapore)**

Answer What you're implying is most definitely true: it's easier and more customary to conduct classical openings before grappling with the subtleties of hypermodern and contemporary variants. But the same type of debate takes place over what phase to study first, the opening or the endgame. Most traditionalists favor starting with the endgame, as did Lasker, Tarrasch and Capablanca, and they make very sound arguments in stating their judgment. But as other modern educators have come to realize, it doesn't matter how convincingly a position is affirmed if the student doesn't really accept it. You can't do your best if plagued by doubt.

For that reason, and because young people are usually excited by prospects of winning quickly and brilliantly, today's teachers often feed off this initial enthusiasm, delaying endgame study until a psychologically appropriate time. The same is comparably true for the study of classical openings. If students would rather immerse themselves in the celebrated games of their own time, let them do it. That's what playing chess for them is about – having fun and pretending to play like Kramnik and Kasparov. If you want to create students who can make independent decisions, you can't always tell them what to think and then expect them to do their own thinking. You can try to guide them, and the smart ones will want your help when it matters to them and when they can most benefit from it. And if they're not that smart, that's okay too. After all, this isn't math or language. It's chess, and they have the right to play it the way they want, even if it makes no sense to the rest of us.

I wouldn't worry about the suitability of their opening repertoires. Let them choose whatever variations they consider appealing, allowing them to make their own mistakes. Permit them to grow from the game's vicissitudes gradually. Your job should primarily be to insure that for them chess remains a stimulating activity. Do your job right and they'll have a better chance do their job right. Help them enjoy chess not just to the level of their ability, but also to the degree of their

interest, and in ways they deem attractive. If things work out, your students might even let you inject a breath of classicism, and some of that may inspire them for life.

Question I have been playing competitive chess on and off for over 10 years. My rating fluctuates between 1700-1800. I have a couple of questions. My first question is, how do I find out what style of play I am best suited for? I play Nf3, d4, and e4 openings. I like tactics and I like attacking, but some of my best results have been with slower openings. My other question is, how do I prepare myself for the 5-round weekend Swiss tournaments? I tend to fare well at the local club, with one game a night, but lately my weekend tournaments have been a poor showing. Part of my results could be due to the fact I have two young children and a demanding job. I would appreciate any kind of advice you could give me. **Simon Perkins (Canada)**

Answer You're obviously a fairly strong player, with some real experience behind you, so it's likely you're not entirely in the dark. You should have some sense for when you feel chessically contented, and I surmise you also possess enough knowhow to understand which openings are most typically able to generate positions palatable to your taste. Since you like to attack, but seem to perform better in some of the slower openings – I'm going to take the liberty of presuming that you mean openings other than those beginning with a two-square advance of White's king-pawn – it sounds as if you would proceed more effectively after your position has been built-up. I'm going to go out on the limb and counsel that you narrow your choice of openings, steadily attempting to play 1. d2-d4. But this is general advice, and you're a specific person, so you might want to have your games critically analyzed by a master or strong player for confirmation or to get another opinion on the matter.

As far as what you should do to ready yourself for weekend tournaments, perhaps you shouldn't play in them at all, not if you've been much more successful in events that require playing only one game an evening. Maybe five games are just too enervating, which is comprehensible considering your tough job and consuming family demands. It's really hard to excel when you can't give an enterprise a full and total commitment. So at least for now, why not confine yourself to playing no more than one serious game a day. By ridding yourself of the Saturday-to-Sunday marathon, you'll suddenly have a surplus of time, which could be used gainfully for self-renewal and worthwhile hours enjoyed with your wife and kids. This won't improve your chess per se, but it might do a lot more for your well-being than a five-game, lost weekend ever could.

Question I have played chess since I was 8, more so since the introduction of computers etc. At present I am sitting around a rating of 1500-1600. I read books aplenty and study all my games where appropriate or just for fun. Can you recommend any books which might help me better myself this late down the learning road. I am now 43. **James Preston (New Zealand)**

Answer I can't think of any chess books particularly designed for the 43-year-old mind. It's also possible that you've read every book I could mention. But if I could go back to being 43, it would be a real pleasure to dabble through any of the outstanding game collections. To once again be moved by the greatness that is chess, I would eagerly plunge into the annotated gold of Capablanca, Nimzovich, Alekhine, Botvinnik, Keres, Fine, Euwe, Reshevsky, Smyslov, Tal, Petrosian, Geller, Polugaevsky, Larsen, Fischer, Karpov, and/or Kasparov. If you've never seriously looked at the play of these artists, now's the time to do it. And if you've already gone over the trails they've forged, it can't hurt to take those journeys one more time. Maybe it'll help you find your way back to your own right path, or even encourage you to explore woods you've never gone into before. But you never know, so you might want to take along a copy of Dante in case you get lost.

Reader Response In reply to the question from Gavin Palmer about whether one needs to play as a youngster to become good, my experience may be a little inspiring – or a cause of despair, depending on how one looks at it. I learned the moves at six with my father and played in my first tournament at the age of 21. I was 32 before I had played in three tournaments, but have been an avid player since, competing in league chess in England and in tournament chess in the U.S., Norway, Denmark, Switzerland, Spain, and Lichtenstein, as well as in England and Wales. I have a Class A, USCF rating, although I haven't played in the States since 1999, and have a FIDE rating of 2008 – down from a peak of 2147. In other words, I am a huge distance from becoming a titled player, but I am better than a lot of players who have benefited from playing chess as juniors or from receiving coaching (my father and I learned from a Teach Yourself book and I have never paid for a chess lesson, but of course I have received many free lessons in postmortems). So my bottom line is probably not too dissimilar to yours: playing young may well be a big help, but *not* playing young is no barrier to becoming a decent(ish) player – and even less of a barrier to enjoying chess. **Tim Spanton (England)**

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