



*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



## Whose Term Is It?

**Question** I have played in some chess tournaments in the past year. I am curious about something. Why is it called a “Skittles Room?” I know it seems silly, by my engineer brain wants to know why. **Tom Filipiak (USA)**

**Answer** The term *skittles* originally had nothing to do with chess. It refers to the British game of ninepins, which is a kind of bowling. The term often appears in the expression *skittles and beer*, suggesting that the play can be more social than competitive. To play skittles could mean that you’d be willing to use the game as a vehicle to have an entertaining evening or afternoon with your friends. Some of this flavor carried over to the word’s meaning in chess, where it signifies casual play, usually without a clock, often noisy and full of kibitzing. Thus the meaning of *skittles room* now becomes clear: it’s the location at a club or tournament where you can go to play or analyze your games without having to worry about disturbing the progress of more serious games played in nearby spaces or other areas. Despite what some impish tournament directors have implied, it’s not the place where they send undesirables or people they simply don’t like. Rather, it’s where they offer a certain kind of candy.

**Question** I’m a 1620 player, especially recently. I’ve done it on the Internet, but most people sense my potential. I’m not too bad with certain openings, though I sometimes blow the endgame. I admit I have some weaknesses in some endgames, but a teacher I know has



told me I could be a quality endgame player if I studied with him every week, especially if he develops a special opening repertoire for me. He's an experienced Russian teacher who says he has a special system that he developed in the Soviet Union, not known to Americans, which is good for all the phases, so it will help my endgame. I was thinking. What do you think of the Sicilian for White and the King's Gambit for Black, when I have those two colors and get into those openings, and if I have the help of this teacher? **Ronald Rothstein (USA)**

**Answer** Your question reminds me of an anecdote concerning the Viennese born physicist Wolfgang Pauli (1900-1958), famous for his Exclusion Principle concerning electron orbits and spins. A graduate student had showed him a paper, wondering what the illustrious scientist thought of his unusual thesis. After scanning the paper with real doubt, a confused Pauli supposedly said: "This isn't right. This isn't even wrong." I feel a little the same way about your question.

It's true that specific types of endgames are more likely to arise from certain opening variations, but studying the opening is not a sure way to improve a 1620 player's endgame, even if that particular 4-digit number is achieved on the Internet, and despite the reassurances of an eminent trainer from a foreign land. Then there's the matter of the opening phase you're going through. If you plan to play king-pawn openings for White, certainly you'll need to know how to cope when Black plays the Sicilian. But I'd be careful about investing all your marbles in the Black side of the King's Gambit, which is something you can't force White into playing. If White begins with a queen-pawn opening, responding with the King's Gambit could reduce you to the status of a chagrined graduate student trying to justify the impossible to Wolfgang Pauli. My suggestion? Instead of worrying about chimerically phantasmagoric opening preparations, just look at your opponent's moves, answer them intelligently, and play chess. If that doesn't work, you can blame me. And if that doesn't work, there's always your acquaintance, the Russian trainer with the special system.

**Question** When playing people of higher strength than me, which openings give the best chance of a draw? **Phil Dixon (USA)**

**Answer** You haven't stipulated your strength. For all I know, you might be a world-class grandmaster and you'd like to understand how to maximize your chances of drawing with Garry Kasparov. If so, I really can't help you. It's also possible you're merely a beginner and you'd like to know how to draw with other beginners. There, too, I couldn't help you, mainly because I wouldn't, since I don't believe

anyone should be encouraged to seek draws as a playing strategy. Instead of trying to draw, why don't you resort to the more standard approach and play to win? It's worked in zillions of chess games, going way back, so there must be something to it.

If I were to answer your question a different way, the truth is that when most of us aim for a draw we wind up playing too passively, and that's often the surest way to lose. So if you want or need a draw, it's best to play actively for a win, but without taking unnecessary risks. However, I'm not going to advise you on which openings to play in order to increase opportunities of achieving drawing nirvana, primarily because following specified setups blindly is antithetical to the way chess should be played and the way I've been taught. But that's just the chess teacher in me.

**Question** I'm fourteen years of age and have been playing chess seriously for about a year and a half now. My rating is approximately 1400, but next week I am going to boarding school and am afraid I will not find many human opponents to practice against. Simply put, what methods would you suggest that I use when I can't find an opponent? Obviously, I can play on the Internet, but I would also appreciate hearing about any exercises I could use on my own. **Hector Maquieira (USA)**

**Answer** As you've suggested, it can't hurt to solve tactical exercises daily. These should reflect real-game situations and not be so obvious that you don't have to work a bit. Furthermore, you should always do them in your head, never moving the pieces, at least until the planet loses all its oxygen or there's peace on Earth, whichever comes first. To resist the temptation to move things about, don't even bother to set up the positions, which you can insure by not bringing your chess set with you. Just do the tactics from the book – any tactical book that appeals to you whatsoever. This should force you to learn how to analyze in your head, if your progress is to be consequential.

Now, if you've already brought your set with you, or have access to a board on screen, you might be able to pursue another project: the creation of your own chess course, relying chiefly on game collections. As an inspiration, you could begin with something similar to the program that Jack Collins used to advocate. I think he called it his "world champions course," and many of his students benefited from it. If I understood it right, Jack would have his students play over 100 games of every world champion. This would now consist of 1500 first-class games. What makes this so compelling is that in the games

of the world champions you can see all the vital conceptions of an era reified by the game's leading exponents. The outcome is likely to be that you'll experience a cornucopia of outstanding chess while getting a sense for the evolutionary flow of chess thinking. And it can be great fun.

You could start with Steinitz, though it wouldn't hurt to throw Anderssen and Morphy into the mix, to have a fuller picture. Moreover, you could settle on fewer games per player, say 20 or 25, and you could even concentrate on specific openings, as Imre Konig did in his classic *From Morphy to Botvinnik*. That is, if you're interested in the Ruy Lopez, for example, you could see how Morphy played it, how Steinitz differed or reinforced Morphy, what Lasker contributed to related lines, and so on, taking key variations right up to the present era. You might even vary your regimen further, focusing on the great players who never became world champion, such as Tarrasch, Rubinstein, Reshevsky, Keres, Stein, Larsen, Korchnoy, and all the rest. Whatever you choose to do it should serve as an adventure into the realms of chess theory and self-exploration.

If none of this sounds exciting enough, there's always the usual fare, such as playing postal chess, taking individual lessons, founding a chess club, working with software, or competing on the Internet. You might even be able to establish the basis of a chess book, regularly writing down your analysis of positions. You could even examine your own games, however they're played, whether in person, through software, or on the Internet. It's almost an argument in favor of going to boarding school, where I hope your gains in both chess and life are brought to fruition.

**Question** I've been doing research regarding adult level improvement in chess. A recent interview by GM Baburin said he only became master (in the Soviet Union) when he was 21. In a book on the late Leonid Stein, it was stated that Stein became a master at the age of 24, but progressed quickly after that to a top GM. And if I remember correctly, IM John Shaw studied the game relatively late but is still improving. From online articles and other book sources, it is considered extremely difficult for much progress to take place for those studying chess in their late teens and early twenties. While I agree that those in this category have a nearly impossible time to make the top 100, what are some other examples of the levels achieved by players who studied the game late? For instance, can an expert 20-year-old still make IM or possibly GM with the right training in this day and age? **Emeric Velasco (USA)**

**Answer** This is a sphere where very little is known. Ordinary experience tells us how hard it is for beginning adults to acquire real chess expertise, but there haven't been many scientific studies in this subject, if any important ones at all. For an unschooled man or woman to become a sophisticated player, it would really help if some of the groundwork had been laid when they were young children, rather than having to pick up the intricacies of the game de novo. But you can always find paradigmatic examples of extraordinary development after the teenage years, such as Leonid Stein, who became one of the world's greatest players, so it's clearly possible. I'm sorry I can't really help you here, but if you or any other readers would like to share further thoughts on this question, I'd consider publishing some of the more insightful responses in future columns.

**Question** I'm about a USCF Class B player. I've been at this level for a few years. I'm not expecting miracles, or for you to give me a whole course of study, like many people ask for. I'm not concerned with particular opening variations or what books to read. I know it's not about how many hours I study, because I study enough, maybe too much. I also don't think it's about time and the clock, because I've tried all kinds of time controls. I've tried many different steps and I'm beginning to think it's a matter of attitude. Maybe I'm not positive enough, or I have too many doubts. What should I do? Can you make any suggestions? **Daniel Albano (USA)**

**Answer** I can suggest many things, but let's just narrow the answer to your apparent self-doubt. In chess it's essential to have confidence. Distrust your own thinking and you're as good as lost. You can come to accept yourself somewhat if you really try to be objective, getting into the habit of basing all decisions on the position before you and a careful analysis of it. I know it's not possible to leave all your emotions at home. But somehow you have to exclude them from the equation's reckoning or your solutions will be contaminated. Furthermore, this objectivity should extend beyond the conclusion of particular games you play. If you have an unsuccessful result, don't walk away from the board crestfallen. Use the same critical powers you tried to tap during the game to afterward comprehend why you actually lost. That's the only reliable way to bring about any advancement, whether it makes you a superior player or merely enables you to better understand chess and how to get more from it. What should you do? Be positive, be determined, be objective, and most of all, enjoy being all three.

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