



*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



A Draw Is Not So Terribly English

Question My son age 8 has started playing chess. His coach has taught him openings starting with e4, but is reluctant to teach him the English Opening, saying that it is very drawish. Is it true that games played with the English Opening are very drawish? **Raja Swaminathan (India)**

Answer It depends. Sometimes the English is drawish and sometimes not. But that has nothing to do with why most coaches strenuously avoid showing their beginning 8-year-old students 1. c2-c4. In order to play the English well it helps to have a sound grasp of rudiments, which are typically introduced by examining classical variations. In fact, classical play itself relied on 1. e2-e4, so naturally there's a cornucopia of examples stemming from king-pawn openings. Moreover, newcomers are easily confused by the English, which seems to transgress traditional principles. That's because it's characterized by the counterintuitive delay of central occupation and the apparent paradox of flank development. For these and other reasons, which I could detail but won't, teachers have tended to dissuade their students from playing it in the first place. But if your son really wants to learn the English, and the impulse definitely comes from him, not from you (who is irrelevant to the entire proceeding), that's okay too. Enthusiasm is the best motive for doing anything.

Question I enjoy reading your answers to chess questions, particularly those about books. Can you tell me which two books have most



influenced your thinking, how old you were when you read them, and if they explain the motivation behind the fashioning of your column?
Sam Rosenfeld (USA)

Answer Your question is provocative and practically impossible to answer, so I'm going to try. At sixteen I read Bertrand Russell's *Religion and Science*, and his clarity and logic inspired me. The other work that comes to mind is Freud's *A General Introduction to Psychoanalysis*, which I read at seventeen. I especially loved his manner of presentation. The chess in both books helped to shape this column.

Question I have been playing chess for several years, mostly playing on the Internet. In the past two months I became interested in getting better and studying. Just a few weeks ago I joined USCF and now play weekly rated games and have had good success, mostly playing players rated between 800 and 1000. I played several games with a more experienced player, about 1800, who said he would guess my rating at about 1100 or so. I have recently borrowed a book from a local library called *Chess World Championships, All Games*, with diagrams from 1834 –1998. I find it fun to play through the games, and the index is split up by opening, so I have used it to help me learn openings like the Sicilian. I have learned the basic opening moves as well as certain common positions that come into play often. There are only two problems with this collection of games, however. I find that there are many "grandmaster draws" or games, which are mutually agreed to be drawn after only 15 moves, and there are no annotations. I have found it hard to find a good collection of games with good annotations. Could you please recommend some good collections of games, which are well annotated and offer a learning value by playing through them? **Jonathan French (USA)**

Answer If you want to learn how to play better chess, make sure you examine sources you can understand. Games played in world championship matches are fraught with assumptions well beyond the level of the ordinary competitor (even with comments), and grandmasters seldom make the kinds of mistakes the rest of us do. Some of theirs are worse.

But I wouldn't advise studying encounters between casual players either. Ideally, you should be playing over games between stronger players and weaker ones. The weaker ones make the same mistakes you might, and the stronger ones exploit the mistakes in ways that stand out.

It goes without saying that if you really want to maximize your efforts you need more than mere game scores. You require notes and explanations. Several writers have put out books with both, relying on games played between disparate opponents. Reinfeld published a related volume thirteen years after his death, *Chess for Amateurs*. Euwe and Meiden published two such works before their death, *The Road to Chess Mastery* and *Chess Amateur vs. Chess Master*. These titles may not have an epiphanous effect “upon all the living and the dead,” but there’s a chance you may be able to benefit from them in a way James Joyce can’t.

Question Supposedly, you have written 25 books. I am a collector, but I don’t have that many of them. Where can I see the list? Besides, I like your style. **John Fleming (Bermuda)**

Answer I think the only one with a complete list is my mother. Maybe she can be induced to copy it out, especially since she also seems to like my style.

Question In your November 26 column, you mentioned a beginning player should play through the ABC's of Chess--the game collections of Alekhine, Botvinnik, and Capablanca. Which of these players should I begin with first? **Douglas A. Puthoff (USA)**

Answer You seem to be implying that you’re a beginner. As I remember, the player who originally asked that question was not a beginner, but a 1300 player with a history. No matter. You’ve got options. You could do it chronologically, starting with the world champion from Cuba. Or you could do it in terms of simplicity, starting with Capablanca. Or you could do it by the caprice of reverse alphabetical order, starting with the letter “c.” All three of these approaches should work. But even better would be to circumvent the problem by commencing with Morphy, whether you’re a 1300 player or not yet conversant with every last move and rule, as all the past greats undoubtedly were.

Question I have been playing for about a year now. I mostly play because I enjoy the game, but I do like to win occasionally too. I don't spend a lot of time studying books, or opening variations. I learned the basics principles of opening play, and rather than playing a move by reflex I like to play based on those principles. Sometimes I fall victim to various traps and tricks, but I find after I fall for a trap a couple of times, I tend to recognize it in the future. I realize that if you want to achieve master level, then eventually you will need to engage in

endless study, but for the casual (semi-serious) player, isn't there definitely something to be said for just learning good fundamentals, and simply playing? **Chuck Schroeder (USA)**

Answer There's always something to be said for learning the ground rules and applying them. Even masters do that. There's something to be said for "simply playing." Masters do that, too. Chess survives because it's a game that zillions of mortals play for fun. If it had been left only to those who spend their every waking hour studying its intricacies – the so-called chess gods -- it would have vied with the dodo bird for extinction. We don't need wings to sense the supremacy of flight.

Question Must a pawn be captured "en passant" after its move from its home square or can it be captured anywhere else along its path?
Charles Sands (USA)

Answer I can't seem to find my rule book, but I'm not sure the answer I seek can be found there. Since I was never good at drawing arrows, I shall have to rely on the fallibility of my own Brooklyn logic. It tells me that no move in chess is compulsory unless it's the only legal one. It also says that no en passant capture can take place unless the pawn to be captured has just made a 2-square move to its 4th rank.

Question Recently, I have begun a self-study program involving collecting a number of Morphy's games and annotating them. By performing this exercise a few times a week, I'm hoping to gradually improve my calculation and visualization skills. However, I've noticed that, when I'm annotating the games, I frequently consider poor candidate moves and variations that result in serious blunders. Much of my thinking time is spent pondering poor or irrelevant moves and variations, a practice that strikes me as being a serious liability in a real tournament game. In your experience, is this typical for an average player, or does one usually learn how to weed out poor variations more quickly as time goes on? **Franklin Ng (USA)**

Answer You are to be commended. Regularly annotating quality chess games is a stellar way to improve your play. Obviously, no tack is likely to be effective right away. Efficiency at any endeavor is a result of layered expertise. Expertise develops from practice. Keep at it, and you'll inevitably sharpen your diagnostic tools so that you can eventually focus on relevant moves and possibilities conveniently from the start of any analysis. You shouldn't be astonished if you soon manifest solid progress, and other than those you surpass, who

wouldn't be pleased by that kind of surprise?

Question I apologize in advance for not using the correct terms, but I'm somewhat confused. I have no idea what my rating is, but as a guideline, I win about half my games on Yahoo.com against players of about 1200 (I know this doesn't tell you much but it's all I have). I have found dozens of books that describe the basics, and piles of them that discuss openings etc., but even the texts that claim to be "intermediate" seem to assume that I know what a Sicilian opening is, (or is that a defense). My chess game is much like my golf game, in that, I go out and hack away without really going to the driving range to learn the stroke (if you get my meaning). I read a book that describes a game that was previously played by a Master, and annotates the "why" behind his/her moves, but after they give me a list of 3-4 moves I can't visualize the board in my head any longer. I do have ChessMaster software, and that has a large number of games in it, but somehow I'm not even sure how to analyze them. Again, I'm sorry for being so basic, but I seem to have hit a block on how to become a better player. Watching out for potential skewers, forks etc. is fairly straightforward (not that I catch them all the time by any means) and I can formulate an attack without leaving myself too exposed, but beyond that I get a little lost. I see mention of how d4 vs. e4 can lead to an open or closed board, and I can't even see that. I'm not opposed to doing some studying or reading, but I feel it should be of some value or I'd rather just sit and enjoy a game. I think I'm on the verge of taking my game to the next level of understanding, but need some guidance. **Michael Derksen (USA)**

Answer The secret is not to obsess about what you're doing, but to enjoy it. The more you enjoy, the better you'll become, and that's true even for chess. Don't try to do too much too soon. Genuine growth takes time. Always try to keep the big picture in mind by centering on the small. Be willing to settle for tiny but certain advances, and stay context based. If you blow a particular endgame, try to find out why. If you mishandle an opening, try to learn how you could have managed it better. Be specific, with no immediate urgency to solve a larger problem. Just keep taking things in stride and eventually real gains will be made. By sheer accumulation of experience, parts will begin to fit into place naturally, without you having to put them anywhere. A much greater power, more potent than our own mindfulness, insures that each cog turns the wheel the way it works best. I suspect wisdom has already informed you of this. As the sage says: "Everyone is given the key to the gates of heaven. The same key opens the gates of hell."

Question Several months ago I sent you an e-mail about chess books

about the opening, endgame, and middlegames. I wanted to know which of them you recommend to get better with, for the average level of play. You never answered it. I wonder if you got it. So I must ask, about your getting it, is it true or false? **Dietmar Diehl (Germany)**

Answer True.

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