



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



Do It by the Books - Theirs!

Question I was recently asked to recommend a beginning book for a child I had not met. What two books (one that you have authored and one by another author) would you recommend for the first chess book of a child (age 7-12) who has caught the chess bug but knows nothing of organized chess and may not even know about en passant? **Dan Avery (USA)**

Answer There are stacks of terrific books out there, and new ones are being published all the time. I see only a small portion of them, so in suggesting particular ones I may be doing an injustice to some I haven't yet seen. Who knows how many of those are even better? Furthermore, some of the best books are hard to find or out of print, so I wouldn't want to send you on a wild chess chase. But two books you can probably go right with are the *Comprehensive Chess Course*, by Pelts and Alburt, and *Bobby Fischer Teaches Chess*, the book that some say Fischer never saw before it was published. Both are excellent, and since I never recommend my own books (it's not fair to force my detritus on animate entities), either one of those can serve to replace any of mine.

Question I recently purchased Polgar's book *Chess* and am at a loss on how to use it effectively to improve my tactical ability. Devoting 30 minutes a day, I ran through the mate-in-one problems at a clip of about 75 per session, but having reached the mate-in-two section I find myself lucky to even solve five problems over the same time frame. At



this rate, it would take me several years to finish the book. Should I continue slowly moving through the book, or is there some other way that I should be approaching this that would help me develop my tactical abilities more efficiently? **Mark Smolenski (USA)**

Answer Don't make the mistake of thinking that you have to read or work your way through an entire book to derive value from it. Chess books in particular should be viewed as tools, to be utilized whenever and however needed. There are really bad chess books that have interesting sections or good games and positions. Chessplayers keep them around as source materials, even though they have no intention or need to read them in their entirety.

The Polgar book is a treasure trove of great resource. You don't have to play through it all at once, or in any specific way for that matter. Why don't you plan, here and there, on plowing through a certain number of illustrations. That is, divide the book into much smaller subsections, where fifty or so problems are considered to be a separate book. Define your task that way, and solving four or five problems a day will be akin to tackling – and completing – an entire chapter.

From a psychological standpoint, the best books tend to be shorter ones, purely because the reader feels he or she has a real chance to get through them. Obviously, it helps to get back some reward for your efforts, though no one book is likely to make you a strong player in itself. But we do look to the completion of a literary task or plan as a sign of gain. Trying to get through a voluminous tome such as Lazlo Polgar's *Chess* would incontestably be a great achievement. Don't let failure to do so, however, become an impenetrable roadblock. For now, go on to something else, a book you can get through with purpose, so that you can go back to Polgar with excitement. You might even end up making your way through another of his meritorious manuals, if you can find any of them in the American marketplace.

Question What is the rule regarding the following: A player picks up his piece, moves it to the square he proposes, removes his opponent's piece from that square, then, without releasing either of the pieces, changes his mind and moves his piece to another square? **Charles Williamson (England)**

Answer Unless you're playing where the touch-move rule doesn't apply, the touch-move rule applies. The player must take what he's touched with what he's touched. But again, that's only applicable when players abide by the rules, not when they don't.

Question What would you recommend for a USCF 1500 rated player to read to improve his game? **Ricardo Rangel (USA)**

Answer Everything and nothing. Everything, if he's the type of player who needs to read, or nothing, if he's the type of player who hates to read. Such a person would benefit far more from regular contact with challenging opposition. But since I don't really know anything about the 1500 player you're referring to – I mean, there's probably far more to him than his rating – here's how I'd advise you to advise him.

Tell him to get a good game collection, say, that of Alekhine or Botvinnik. Suggest that he play through the games thoroughly and with care. You might also goad him into obtaining a practical book of tactics, any he feels comfortable with, and strongly encourage him to solve problems from it every day, never moving the pieces. Finally, tell him to engage in at least a couple of playing sessions each week, without fail, regardless of illness (he can always play on the Internet) or holidays (he can take a vacation, but not from chess). Nevertheless, it's not inconceivable that I might respond another way if I knew more about the individual in question or if his rating were meaningfully different from the one cited above.

Question In your opinion, where does Mir Sultan Khan rank among the most naturally talented chess players of all time? Do you think he was a grandmaster by the standards of his time? Did his contemporaries consider him a grandmaster? I read somewhere that Capablanca once called him a genius. Would you agree? **Hasnain Mujtaba (USA)**

Answer Yes, I'd have to agree. Sultan Khan (1905-66) was extremely gifted, and for a stretch was one of the world's strongest players, certainly a grandmaster by the criteria of those days. He had several outstanding tournament and match results in the early thirties, and he won the British Championship on three occasions (1929, 1932, and 1933). Besides, if Capablanca thought he was a genius – and he did – that's good enough for me.

Question My rating on the FIDE list is about 2050, though people say I play at a strength of 2200. I know I play pretty well, but I do find myself bogged down when playing with players of 2300+, and after sometime I play absolute trash and recklessly (probably wanting to mate them faster) and many a time I have lost some good position either due to my stupidity, blindness, or whatever you might call it. I do feel the psychological heat also when playing against heavyweights

(2300+) as compared to players of my equal strength. Could you tell me how to improve myself while playing against these heavyweight players, so that I can win against them on consistent basis? **Dinesh Bhandarkar (India)**

Answer It seems as if you're asking me how an expert can improve his play by several levels. It would be hard to do a satisfactory book on the subject, although that would still be easier than answering your question in the context and compass of this format. Generally, to gain that much at your present rank is going to require real effort, and there are no guarantees. You surely must improve your analytic skills. Your positional understanding and grasp of endgame theory must likewise advance.

You can start on the arduous and uncertain road of beating 2300 players by playing against them under serious conditions. Then, scrutinize those games, diligently analyzing every last nut and bolt of the play. One idea is to arrange 4-game matches against target players. All the games should then be examined with the aid of your opponent. Try to pick his or her mind in the process. To gain their cooperation, don't rule out paying them. If money is out of the question, try to compensate them with the full coin of a discipline for which you already are at the 2300 echelon, so that it's a fair trade. There are other suggestions I could make, but rather than starting to write the first chapter of a very long book, I'm going to move onto the next question. However you decide to proceed, it can't hurt to find suitable opposition, set up training matches, and get to work playing and analyzing.

Question I'm a long-time reader, first-time writer. Your column has been like a beacon shining in the wilderness for me. I live in what has charitably been described as the middle of nowhere, where chess fanaticism is somewhat scarce. I own all of your books that I have been able to find (don't worry, I own books by other chess luminaries as well), but I have found that reading your columns, answering specific and random (the writers' fault, not yours) chess questions has added immeasurably to my chess education.

Do you plan to do a book in this format? If not, would reader response encourage you to do so? I think there is something about this format, knowing that other people have questions similar to mine and are learning right along with me at different levels that makes the material more approachable. And of course your answers are always informative and chessically invaluable (and often quite funny). Wally Dow (USA)

Answer Thank you for your kind words, but no, I do not plan to do a book in this format. I doubt that you would either, not if you got some of the responses I get now and then. But overall it's been fun, and I suspect I've learned as much or more than I've dispensed. For the most part the readers have been really great, even those who hate my guts. Besides, maybe they know something. Perhaps they should do the book.

Question I have loads of chess books (like a good chess fan should) and one thing which really bothers me is the annotation “?!” (dubious). Why isn't “?!” equal to “?” ? It seems to me that “?!” always works out badly for the person who played the move, so is “?!” actually bad and therefore equal to “?”? What do you think and what is your interpretation of “?!”? **Tony Wong (USA)**

Answer You can be winning, but that doesn't mean you're going to win. You can blunder and not lose the game. It may be your experience that almost every time you've seen this symbol the player it pertains to has eventually lost, but there are plenty of published cases where this is not so, where the player playing the questionable move has won. The symbol “?!” means the move is probably bad but can't be analyzed for sure. The opposite symbol is “!?”. It means the move is probably good but can't be analyzed for sure. Neither symbol refers to a definite mistake, as does the symbol “?”.

But let's not get carried away here. These are just symbols. They never mean quite the same thing, even when employed by the same analyst under similar circumstances, because they are not precise synonyms for the ideas they represent – the moves of a chess game. It's like translating and interpreting, and all translations and interpretations tend to lose something in the process. I have to laugh at all the times I've seen a writer give a particular move two exclamation points in one publication and only one exclamation point in another. But it's good to have standards, especially when we know what they are.

Question My question concerns teachers of chess. How do you define a good chess teacher? Rating of the teacher? Rating of the students? How long the students keep playing chess? How much the students enjoy chess (hard to measure)? Friends ask me to recommend a chess teacher for their children, and I don't know how to answer. There are several in the area (some of whom are not friends) and I don't know how to objectively decide who is a good teacher and not so good. **Ed Barr (USA)**

Answer My bet is that Socrates would have made a great chess teacher. I'd propose looking for someone who can apply his sort of interactive and provocative question-and-answer approach.

Watch different teachers in action: do they tell the students answers instead of posing a problem or a question and letting the students work out replies on their own? Do they lecture and demonstrate instead of asking kids to interact, debate, and explore ideas? The best teacher I ever knew was a master at doing just that. George Kane had the patience to let his students do the hard work of learning on their own. He was their guide, not their master. Tell students what you know, and they may not remember what you've said. Let them discover what you know, and they'll own it for life.

Ratings may determine something about how well someone plays the game. Maybe. But they can't apprise you on how well someone teaches. So simply ask yourself a few questions. Is he or she the type of individual one could learn from, and actively? And, would I want anyone I care about sitting across a chessboard from such a person on a recurring basis? This approach might not get you the best teacher possible. But it should at least place you in the right school, if not the right classroom.

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