



*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 Not So Much What, But How

Question I have a rating of 2048 in the FIDE list (it has steadily declined from 2095). I don't play tournaments that regularly. People tell me (and even I believe) that I play much better in practice than in tournaments. I am prone to losing my nerve in the critical moment especially in time pressure. I used to be a decent blitz player, but nowadays I have become terrible at it. In the early days (i.e., when I got a rating in 1994/95) I liked playing in a flourishing style, wanting to attack and take risks all the time. But then *My System* hit me. It had a calming influence on my style. I read the book three times and also *Die Blockade*. I became an ardent follower of the great man (Nimzo). I started to try to emulate him. There was some initial success, but later I realized to play the way he did one needs tactical and positional skills of the highest order together with a clear line of thinking. He used to bail himself out of difficult positions (if he got into one at all) through tactical skirmishes. In between a prominent player suggested to me that if one has to understand the game better one has to study its evolution from the Morphy and Steinitz's days up till date and I began a new journey. I am 28 and this is all taking a long time. I earn my living on chess coaching and half of my productive time is consumed in this activity. I am sick and tired of being at this playing level. I want to rise. I will be really grateful if you suggest me a training regimen, or whatever, that suits my condition. **Prasad Deshmukh (India)**



Answer Allow me to reassure you. A drop of 47 points, from 2095 to 2048, shouldn't be cause for anxiety. Feel free to regard the two numbers as inconsequentially different. Frankly, ratings are hardly dependable measures of actual skill. You get a number, and it tells you little about the factors and conditions conducing to it. Be careful, because the number of numbers in today's world has gotten way out of hand.

It could be that your rating has simply gone back to where it should have been. Maybe you're still overrated, or perhaps you're actually underrated. We have no way of saying anything for sure. And since you aren't playing in tournaments regularly, your rating is even more likely to be unreliable. If it's not reliable, why are you placing such emphasis on it? You wouldn't stress deleterious and erratic indicators with your students. Why do so with yourself?

You also point out that you're no longer a decent blitz player. But blitz, like ratings, shouldn't be considered a trustworthy gauge of genuine chess proficiency. Indeed, blitz tends to be superficial. Most blitz games hinge on playing threat after threat to force the opponent into time trouble. Your strategy depends on hoping that the other side blunders so you can clean up and win.

Let's not overlook the company you've been keeping. For some time you've been engrossed in Nimzovich and his awe-inspiring pronouncements. Naturally, in trying to grapple with his mind-blowing abstractions and stupefying concepts, you're more likely to get into time trouble and lose sight of ordinary things, such as your undefended b-pawn. Your adversaries will then be poised to take your b-pawn and plausibly some of its unsuspecting comrades. Suddenly, your opponents are the ones blessed with opportunities to clean up and deliver mate.

Maybe it's time to reevaluate. What are you aiming for? Do you want to become better at speed chess? Or do you wish to gain in true chess strength? Do you seek a higher rating, or do you desire a concrete improvement in real ability?

I can understand your feelings about the risk of stagnating. Once we start doubting ourselves we're as good as done for. While I'd be the first (though I'd be willing to be the last) to tell you that studying Nimzovich, or the evolutionary path leading from Paul Morphy, or any of several thousand other approaches are fine, improving isn't really about regimen. It's about developing skills, and the most important

skill to acquire and nurture is the facility to analyze in your mind, without moving the pieces. This outweighs practically everything else. How do you get better at such calculations? Simply analyzing in your head every chance you get, making sure never to move the pieces. It takes time, but it usually works.

You might also consider consulting a nearby teacher to examine your play. That's what I'd do if I wanted to improve my own chess. I'd put back some of the money I earn from the activity I love doing into the deserving hands of those who also love doing it. Good luck, to you and your students. In discovering your own right course perhaps you'll find even truer ones for them.

Question I like to read books where chess games are annotated and explained move by move. I have read Chernev's *Logical Chess, Move by Move* and Weeramantry's *Best Lessons of a Chess Coach*. Recently, I also completed your excellent book *Russian Chess*. Could you recommend some other books in this vein? **Joe Bacso (USA)**

Answer I can, but I'd like to caution you against relying too thoroughly on this method of instruction. Every move doesn't have to be explained for readers to derive benefit, and following any approach too rigidly may dull the mind and sap didactic value. Chess writers who manufacture a page of largely unnecessary or irrelevant information on why the move e2-e4 is an excellent way for White to start a game, or who bloat a paragraph to clarify why the opponent responded with the only legal move, could be wasting your time. These people, myself included, are also partly responsible for the rising cost of chess books.

Of course, Irving Chernev used the format artfully and with great value to the reader, despite its attendant abuses. To chew on a similar morsel, you could savor John Nunn's *Understanding Chess Move by Move*. It's done in the same vein, though Nunn assumes the reader understands more of the basics before opening his book. But he does rely on contemporary material, as opposed to Chernev's prehistoric sources, which may give the text greater luster for today's active tournament competitors.

But no matter the approach, a superior instructional book should stimulate us to think. It shouldn't rely on formula to convince us we've learned something when we haven't. Adhering to any contrivance runs counter to what chess is really about. It's about learning to think for ourselves. It's about making decisions. It's about accepting the

consequences of our actions. Measure each book by this standard, and you can't go wrong (not that you would, but if you do, at least you'll have a good read).

Question I am an intermediate player (~1400) and I am looking for a book or two of master games to analyze with the goal of improving my calculation skills. Do you have any players whose games would be good for this purpose, and if so any particular books? Thanks. **Gordon Moseley (USA)**

Answer I'm not certain that any particular game collection is designed for that purpose, but there are plenty that provide superb notes. Some of these explore variations and concepts in a proper balance. If you can get your hands on a copy of Paul Schmidt's *How Chessmasters Think*, I suspect you might be doing yourself a service. If you like questions and answers, Fred Reinfeld's *Chess Mastery by Question and Answer* should prove most inviting. The book is a real gem. If you prefer short games, and you'd like to get inside a strong player's head (be careful here), why don't you give Julian Hodgson's *Attack With Julian Hodgson* a try. He has a nice manner and certainly knows what he's talking about. If you like scoring points, Daniel King's *How Good Is Your Chess* should compute well. He's very clear communicator and easy to learn from.

But as I've said, there are many other appropriate titles. Just go to any bookstore or library with a large enough sampling and invest some time in reviewing the material. Rather than going with someone else's advice, see what appeals to you. You'd be surprised the extent to which we know our own needs.

Question I'm a learning/inquisitive USCF club level tournament director with the following scenario and question. In a recent tournament my opponent would hide his notation from view until after his move was made. In one or two instances he would erase and change the hidden notation before making the move. In lieu of the prohibited use of notation to assist memory, is the above an accepted practice? **Donnie Cox (USA)**

Answer There are sound reasons to write your moves down before you play them. Noting your moves before you make them helps safeguard against blunders. If you see an appalling move written on the score sheet, it may trigger a reaction that tells you it's not right before playing it. That reaction is your chance to save yourself.

Teachers also enjoin their students to write their moves down before playing them to ensure they don't forget to write them down at all. Scholastic players often forget to notate altogether, particularly if their opponents are responding quickly. Understandably, they focus on the action and forget to maintain the record. Then, after the game, there's nothing to analyze but fragments. This is particularly troubling for the teacher, whose utility diminishes accordingly.

Not all coaches bend every effort toward improving their student's play or making themselves more useful during postmortem analysis. Some, particularly those who like to tally up wins that translate to trophies for the school display case, encourage their students to wear out their pencils and erasers purely for psychological reasons. They assume that opposing players will feel unnerved (as you might have) by the sight of their adversaries intently scribbling, then erasing, then scribbling again. If you or your students do feel irritated by this practice, you can fight fire with fire. Merely write down unflattering synonyms for your opponent's cranial matter at the spot you'd note your next move. Related words will do. Just make sure you're equipped with a suitable eraser, and bring your smile.

Psychology is part of any competition, and chess is no exception. Your opponents may not mind resorting to mind games, and neither should you. It may not hurt to observe what they're doing off the board, so long as you end up focusing on what's really happening over the board. Ultimately, that's the only place that has a right to command your attention.

Question I am a long time reader/follower of yours from Toronto. I have many of your books. I teach /coach/train students in chess. My belief is that Internet Chess is not good for young kids under 13. I recommend Chessmaster for these kids. Experience tells me Internet Chess for these young kids gets them into bad habits, incomplete games, nasty language, etc. Am I correct? Please help me. Thanks.
John Henry (Ontario)

Answer Let's not throw out the baby with bath water (I haven't used this cliché recently). Internet chess is bad when it's bad for us, though it's good when it's good for us. Internet chess is bad for us when we play it too quickly, without regard for a single interesting thought. I don't count the inane, often quite vulgar messages players exchange as even remotely approaching the notion of interesting. Empty-headed speed play and mindless communiqués do nothing for us. Actually, it all detracts from the quality of our lives. It may even carry over to our more significant chess encounters – if we have any – causing us to

play on the surface and without reflection.

Internet chess can be good for us if we allow enough time to play and think, as we would in any serious game of chess. It offers us a much wider range of opponents, and we therefore experience many more ideas than what we might reasonably expect from playing within a smaller chess pool. In fact, it's so wide that the question of throwing out the bath water need never come up. But I understand your reservations. Internet chess can lead to vacuity, to poor sportsmanship, to players thinking they can escape accountability by running away, to hiding behind an interface to hide our very identities. No doubt, some of us should. But in the end you have to know your kids. If you think that they, as Jack Nicholson indelibly intoned, can't handle it, then indeed it may be the prudent course to dissuade them from playing over the Net completely. As Steve Zaillian's script reminds us in *Searching for Bobby Fischer*, in the end, they are who they are. Even if they aren't who they are, they're somebody else, and there's always Chessmaster 9000.

Question Good morning, sir. I have been playing in a chess club for 5 years. I would like to find a chess book (with commentary) about famous Soviet chess players. Their names are Zaitsev, Kholmov, Issac Boleslavsky, Georgy Illivitsky. Do you know this book? Thank you early. **Samir Azzoug (Belgium)**

Answer The last time I answered a question like this I created a small imbroglia, so I'm going to refrain from inflicting my perverse sense of humor on innocent readers and stick to the facts. You can probably find more on Isaac Boleslavsky, one of the most innovative players of the twentieth-century, than on the others. I think Jimmy Adams did a book on Boleslavsky; it may have included 10-20 pages of biographical material. If you mean Alexander Zaitsev, there's at least one collection of his games in Russian. I don't recall the author, and whether or not it's been translated. The same is true for Ratmir Kholmov. There's a Russian book on his play (I think the early 70s seems right), and I don't recall seeing a translation of it either. Offhand, nothing comes to mind dealing with Georgy Ilivitsky. I recommend that you do an Internet search and see if you can find anything. If you purely want to read about Soviet chess in general, there's a book by Richards on its development and history. Botvinnik also has a marvelous section on Soviet chess in the introduction to his *One Hundred Selected Games*. But by far the best-known book on the subject is *The Soviet School of Chess* by Kotov and Yudovich. It's a classic, which every chessplayer (Zaitsev, Kholmov, Boleslavsky,

though possibly not Ilivitsky) should have on the shelf.

Question I enjoy your books very much. I have heard it said that a person should study openings with a particular eye towards the type of middlegame and endgame positions that arise. Is this correct? If so, is there a resource you could recommend or should one play over annotated games of grandmasters and make note of the positions that occur? Thank you for your help. **Jimmy Sweet (USA)**

Answer Playing over quality annotations can hardly hurt. If something is explained well, it should encourage you and provide a direction for further investigation. That's a really good way to learn: to be pushed gently and favorably toward learning more. If you want books that specifically take you from the opening toward desirable middlegames and endgames, especially showing how later positions are likely outcomes from earlier ones, I propose you look at the works of Edmar Mednis. He produced several treatises taking that very approach, and Edmar never did a bad book.

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