



*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



## There's No One Wrong Way

**Question** I need some help! I am a beginner chess player (U-1300). I live in a very small town (Lunenburg, Nova Scotia), and have no access to a chess club or instructors. I have purchased Chessmaster 9000, and also your book *The Chess Doctor*. I also play on the Internet, usually longer games. I find the more I learn, the less I know about what I knew and sometimes my game (if I ever had one) really falls apart. There is so much information out there, but where to start? Even with Chessmaster it is hard to know how to pace oneself. Do you have any advice for setting up a basic self- training regime? Some basic formula for going from step one to perhaps getting to the point where I should start studying openings? **Shani Cochrane (Canada)**

**Answer** Chessplayers typically ponder such questions at some point or another. Most of us are used to following a stepwise regimen that begins with small and defined building blocks and moves toward more complex models. We start by learning the verb, then how it's conjugated.

But chess improvement doesn't need to follow a particular path and I don't teach as if it does. I try to take into account that every student is different – in who they are, what they already know, how they learn, and what they like to study. So to offer a definite course or procedure, without respect to the total picture, regardless of the student's human qualities, would actually defy everything I've believed, practiced, and professed in the teaching trade.



Still, I understand why you are feeling overwhelmed. Even a grand chess thinker can feel that way now and then (some explain the sentiment by comparing chess to art, or even to life itself, or to something analogous and equally humorous). Like many chess enthusiasts, you'll want to know where to start. That's easy enough: begin where there's a situation that piques your interest. It could be a particular opening, or a king-and-pawn ending you've found perplexing or intriguing. More important than what you focus on is how you focus on it – hopefully, with zeal and a desire to learn, as you patently manifest already.

It would be easy to list several books you could consult. But that wouldn't mean that other unmentioned books aren't at least as good or even better than the ones I might propose. I may not know of the other volumes, I may have forgotten them, I may not think of them while in the moving vehicle I may at that moment be occupying, or I may have misjudged them or you altogether. That's why I recommend you go to a cornucopian source and judge for yourself. Compare numerous manuals and you'll be able to tell firsthand which ones you're likely to enjoy reading. You might make a mistake, and choose a book you've over-appreciated, but such errors provide powerful hands-on experience for subsequent decision-making. The best learning is self-learning, even when selecting books you know little about.

Nevertheless, here's a practical suggestion. On a daily basis, solve a certain number of tactical chess problems – those that might apply to real games. Take them from books you've picked yourself. Don't set the problems up on a board. Do them in your head, no matter how hard. If you move the pieces, you're getting away with murder – your own. I'm not suggesting that you stay with some of the trickier problems forever, but make sure you invest enough time – time you can live with – before checking the answer. You'll want to reach a point when confirmation is unnecessary, because you'll have the confidence to know you're right. The number of problems, and how much time to invest, should be determined by you. They shouldn't be pontificated by me or any of the other teaching sachems spouting supposed enlightenment.

In addition to working on your tactics, you might want to play over game collections with annotations. Games played by any of the world champions or top players are a good place to begin, but even more important are the annotations. You should be able to scan them, and they should clearly summarize in real words the essence of what's happening. That way you have the option of skipping the note if it's

needless or not particularly helpful.

Finally, play challenging opposition on a regular basis, as fearlessly and exuberantly as you can. Chess and learning are games that prosper on bravery. You obviously have passion for the game and the aspiration to play it better. Before there were chess teachers and learning programs, the desire and will to succeed were all most of us had. I suspect they'll still work even in today's hitech chess rain forest.

**Question** I have been reading that calculation comes only after clearly assessing

the position and ruling out certainly obviously flawed moves. Nevertheless, one eventually needs to calculate. Can you recommend books that specifically focus on training calculation? Also, I have been using Fritz8 to go through my own games and those that have been annotated. With respect to annotated games, Fritz 8 does allow one to open up another window to play through analysis variations. Some of those analyses are quite deep. Do you recommend that one should nevertheless play through each and every variation? And if not, how does one follow those variations in one's head? **David Kaplan (USA)**

**Answer** Plain old puzzle books will provide you the material for calculating lines of play. I've given this advice to other readers, but it bears repeating: try to solve the problems without moving the pieces. Don't even bother setting up the positions. Merely work with the diagrams. Allot yourself a certain amount of time, whatever you're comfortable with, and tackle a set number of problems each day, whatever the situation allows. Practically any tactical book will suffice. Even if it's a bad book how bad could it be? Who cares what the "writer" says about the positions? It's the positions that matter, as long as they come from, or could have come from, real games. Just make sure the diagrams are clear.

To be sure, if you're looking for the right book, you're already going wrong. It's not only text that matters; it's also process. You'll want to develop the wherewithal to stay with a position, even when the course gets tough. It's easy to give up as we start losing our way, but that's where proper practice comes in. And that means analyzing in your head, without moving the pieces.

But let me add this: There's no need to calculate extensively all the time. In most situations the real knack is to determine what to look at.

By assessing what's generally important, you may be able to find the right path without too much calculation at all. So don't waste your time playing out every variation in detail. That's where computers fail us. They give us the moves, but not the verbal summary of what's happening. The second is often more important than the first.

Much of chess has to do with developing your intuitive sense, and that's not going to be enhanced by raw computation exercises. To improve intuition, it would almost be better to play over the games of people like Capablanca, not that there are thousands of players like him. If you insist on a mechanical approach, play through Capa's games, or the games of a surrogate, hardly stopping to consider the comments, unless a move has surprised you. This should heighten your awareness of when to calculate in the first place, and that's probably the best starting point when it comes to the art of analysis, of which calculation is only a part.

**Question** I am a casual player and don't know what my rating is. (Using an average of about 100 minutes per game, I can beat Pocket Fritz about 50% of the time at the 1 second per move level, running at 300 mhz, whatever that indicates). Is there a method for calculating that you recommend? I have tried several different approaches to try to minimize the number of blunders I make.

Currently, in most positions, I consciously look at three things after the opponent has moved: 1.What new squares or pieces are attacked by the piece that moved? 2.Which opponent's pieces are given protection by the move, either where they are or on another possible square? 3.Have any significant lines or squares been cleared or blocked by the move?

Next I usually consider every legal move I have, even if only for a split second, picking a few contestant moves. Then I try to analyze each contestant move one at a time without any redundant thinking (which I am not completely convinced is ideal, since calculating a variation a second time sometimes gives me a fresh perspective). After I have selected my final move, I ask three questions before I move the piece: 1. What are the different ways the piece can be attacked? 2. Are there any pieces or significant squares that my move takes protection away from? 3. Are there any significant lines or squares that are cleared or blocked by my move?

This method has worked fairly well in reducing the number of blunders I make, although at times it seems unnecessarily time

consuming. This is especially true when I feel that I can just "see" that the opponent has no serious threats or that a particular move of mine is best, and that making these conscious checks is unnecessary. Once in awhile though, the opponent will have a surprise-winning move in a position that I was convinced was safe. Much of the time, the opponent's threats will jump out at me without any conscious effort to find them. This of course would be ideal if it worked all the time. What are your thoughts on sticking to a strict regimen for calculating as opposed to letting one's intuition guide the analysis? **Ian Olsen (Japan)**

**Answer** Your approach is certainly well informed, but you may be giving yourself too many tasks. In trying to scale a mountain it's easy to fall into a crevice. You don't want to try to do so much that you miss the obvious. Let's approach this as if you're playing against someone in a real game. You can apply similar procedures for solving problems and for using software.

It's your turn. The first thing you should do is to look at your opponent's move. If you're being threatened, make a mental note of it. Whatever move you choose must deal with your opponent's threat or threats. If you're not being threatened, you're free to proceed to your next step.

Here it is: After you've ascertained whether or not you're being threatened, decide whether your opponent's move responds to your last move. That gets you back to your own play, and keeps you focused on the game and the process of playing logically. Good chess isn't conducted as if it's a collection of independent moves with no relation to each other. It can come to that, especially the way some of us play, but that's not the ideal approach. It's much better to play with a plan. Moreover, you shouldn't veer from that plan without definite reason – say, for example, because your opponent's move rebuffs or challenges your presuppositions, or simply because you've missed something you hadn't considered. If your opponent did fail to reply to your move, make another mental note to come back to that circumstance. That way, you can either follow through on what your opponent failed to counter or exploit your opponent's breakdown in logic.

Now for your third step: If you don't have to answer any threats or capitalize on your opponent's letdowns, look for moves that foster your aims, based on your previous planning. If you didn't have a plan earlier, now would be a good time to develop one, though you should have had one earlier, from move one on. You might be better able to



explore these questions on your opponent's time, when your mind is freer to wander and you're not pressed by the exigencies of the clock.

Whatever you're doing, whether it's answering threats, taking advantage of unresponsive opposing moves, or furthering your own general ends, the trick is to come up with intelligent alternatives. You don't want to consider everything, just everything that matters. That's where the so-called list of candidate moves comes in. Let's say that you've gone through your initial period of asking internalized questions, however you ask or phrase them and regardless of the order you've followed. Let's also say that you've found a move that seems to satisfy your needs. Try to find another move that does virtually the same things. If you find such a move, you suddenly have two moves to evaluate and compare. Which one do you like better?

A third or fourth possibility may recommend itself. At that point, I suggest that you hit your mental brakes. If you don't, the whole thing is likely to become unwieldy, and your entire analytic edifice may start to collapse. Try to work with no more than four possibilities, and winnow your list down to the point where you find the move you like best.

Obviously, it doesn't have to be done this precise way. But if you're looking for procedure, this is manageable and efficient. A good chunk of chess thinking has to do with comparing reasonable options. To do this effectively you'll want to reduce what you have to look at, not increase it to overwhelming proportions, with more steps entailed than the human mind can process in efficacy and power. Clearly, you're a dedicated student, and that means a great deal. Step back, now, and look at the big picture. It's time to rid yourself of all the unnecessary toil and to start enjoying the game for what it really is: not work, but play, pure and simple.

**Question** I'm 35 years old and I have played for more than 10 years. I have a national Elo of 2040. I'd like to improve but I don't know how to do it. I have read a lot of books: by Silman, Howell, Dorfman, Euwe and 50 others. I analyzed of my games with two masters that taught me a lot of things, but now I don't know how it is possible to improve on my own (I live in a quasi-deserted place with no strong players within 300 kilometers). Should I read books (which ones?) or analyse games (how?). I can work hard to realize my dream (to be a 2200 Elo). How can I do it? **Baas Laurent (France)**

**Answer** Books are fine. Sounds as if it wouldn't hurt to create a small

library, not to read all at once but to tap into whenever needed. Maybe get a few massive tactical books, such as the Polgar tome (though that one treatise, with its 5,000 plus examples, could keep you busy for a short lifetime). Get one or two opening encyclopedias as source material and a full-size book on endgame theory. I'd also obtain some game collections. Grandmasters should do, though you can go elsewhere, as long as the explanations are clear. And possibly it couldn't hurt to add a few titles that deal with strategy and explicate themes. I think what you've already done, going through the works of Silman and Euwe, and possibly some of the 50 other elucidators you've read, is admirable, and you should continue on the same silk road.

But clearly your situation cries out for Internet activity. Since it appears that you're not in mainland France, the super-informational highway seems to be the place to go. Just about everything you'd need and want could be so acquired and used to great advantage. Without doubt, you should be playing regularly, and at suitable time controls. You might want to probe various online services out there as well, such as lessons, problem competitions, general and critical reviews, and published analysis. Besides the Chesscafe, which I think it's safe to say you've already found, you might try the ICC. In fact, there's so much out there that it's really hard to suggest anything in particular. Yet that's partly the fun of it, doing it your way and for yourself, not that I envy your situation. Sand always makes me cough.

**Question** I am a club player with an ELO 1850 (on the Internet, 2160). For a long time, I collected and worked on chess books, and studied articles by grand masters in magazines. But as a result of my job, it is not possible to play in tournaments often. To be an international master which method or books would you recommend? **Ali Murat Uygun (Turkey)**

**Answer** I don't necessarily prefer this method, but the only one that really works is to beat up on other good players in tournaments and practice sessions. I wish there were some easy way, such as reading a certain book or books or even performing a thought experiment, where the desired result is imagined and that's as good as actually doing it. There's no collection of books that can make you an International Master. You can't get away from real competition against formidable opposition, and even playing against stronger players might not work, since most of us don't have the talent to get that good. I don't say that about you, of course, but there's no quick fix around either.

Now you say you can't play in tournaments because of your job. Does

that mean your job doesn't afford you the time to play in tournaments? Or does it mean that your work times conflict with the usual times tournaments are held? If it's the former, there's nothing to be done, and it makes no sense to suggest anything because you don't have the physical time. If it's the latter, there's hope. It's called the Internet, which you already play on, as your 2160 rating indicates. Instead of just playing on the Internet, however, why don't you play with purpose and enter Internet tournaments? But even if you decide otherwise, you can still set parameters that bring you into contact with stronger opposition. After losing a set of such games, you can then go to your source materials (you may want to get some if you don't already have any, especially stuff on the openings). This process of playing and reviewing your own games may not make you an International Master, but it should make you a stronger player, and for most of us that's good enough.

**Question** I'm hoping you can offer me some advice. My ten-year-old daughter wants to compete in a big tournament coming up. This is notable because she has not competed in a tournament for about three years. At that time we left a tournament early because she got too upset after a loss. Since then her interest in chess has continued unabated; she plays online frequently and has a lesson every week. We had dropped the issue of tournaments completely, feeling it was more important to preserve her love of the game than to force her to confront its competitive aspect face-to-face.

Here is the question: should we convince her to compete in tournaments before the big one? Her teacher thinks it might be poor planning to let her attend a stressful tournament without first building up her immunity to the pressures through practice at smaller tournaments. We don't want to be irresponsible, but we don't want her to burn out on the smaller tournaments. Nor do we want to send her to the big tournament ill-prepared. Nor do we want to force her into the grind of frequent tournaments (which she has not expressed interest in) just so she can do well in the big tournament (which she has expressed interest in). We haven't talked to her about it at length because we don't want to create present anxiety by talking about past anxiety; we also think it might be possible that she her added maturity will carry her through the competition with grace. Where do you come down on this issue? **Sean Muir (England)**

**Answer** Why don't you give one of the lesser events a try, just to see how things go. If that experience turns out nicely, you can enter her in another tournament, making sure to get her approval on it first. If



there's any lingering doubt, talk it out with her to see what her fears and reasons may be. If she agrees to play, enter her with the same proviso, prepared to stop further entries if it turns out deleteriously. If she's still adamantly against playing, I would accept that as the way things are. You shouldn't impose your will on hers when to do so might inflict real damage. And over what, a chess tournament?

Nonetheless, I recognize your concerns. It's extremely difficult for a child to succeed in a competitive world without intelligent parental involvement and gentle pushing. There's always going to be some resistance to the threat of discomfit, even if the overall benefits might outweigh the slight difficulties. Still, you don't want to go too far and cause an emotional scar. But you sound like a sensitive and loving parent, so I don't imagine that will happen. You have already set priorities where they should be: maintaining her love of the game is paramount; embracing its competitive trappings is not.

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