



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



Stopped by One of Three

Question While surfing the net the other day for a full explanation of the Ruy Lopez, I came upon "THE BEGINNER'S GAME", "THE CENTER GAME", and "THE DEFENSE GAME" by Pafu. These books claimed that their openings were the cure-all for all those who find openings a real nightmare. Would you have any information pertaining to these books and their credibility? I would really appreciate your comments. **Arthur Holler (Canada)**

Answer When I originally saw this question I thought that someone was pulling my leg, but then I realized nothing animate was even remotely close. Apparently these books do exist, and once again I've lost out on three potentially brilliant ideas, or at least next month's rent. I'm not convinced *The Beginner's Game* (1. . . e6, 2. . . d6, 3. . . Ne7, 4. . . Nd7, 5. . . Ng6, 6. . . Nb6, 7. . . Be7, 8. . . Bd7), as inventive and intriguing as it is, could cope with everything (I'm thinking mainly of invasion at gunpoint), but it might help those who find openings a nightmare. Actually, after I learned the moves last night and went to sleep, the chess monster of my dreams still managed to take my b-pawn and get away with it. Even so, if Pafu's other two volumes are anything like his first, their judicious use may go a long way toward reducing overnight trauma.

Question Hi. I am 1576-USCF. I started studying tactics hard and have

picked up 91 points my last 12 games. I now believe I can become a class A player. However, I am driving myself nuts trying to figure out which openings I want to play. I have heard that for a class player it really does not matter. So play any and all? I have also heard of class players playing lines unsuitable for their level of development. Should we just pick the simpler ones and stick with them? **Randy Ryner (USA)**

Answer When what you've been doing has considerably increased your rating (a numerical notation believed to possess magical powers that signifies your temporary position on a bell shaped curve), why would you want to change your approach? Whether or not there's logic to your opening play, your system has apparently worked over a twelve-game run, so you needn't bother to fix it.

Theoretically, though not automatically, you'd probably get more out of those openings most conducive to your style. But you're not going to determine your style, or what ails you chessically, without a thorough analysis of your actual games and moves. That means you'll undoubtedly require the help of a more experienced hand. Just make sure he or she isn't an accommodating yes-man.

Forget what you may have heard or suffered over in thought. Play whatever appeals to you, in spite of what anyone else says about it. If that doesn't accomplish everything you've hoped for, you can always adjust your plan over the course of time, based on actual battle conditions, not the platitudes and mindless assertions of pontificating automatons unable to pass the Turing Test. You'll live longer and enjoy the game a whole lot more.

Question I am a 1500 out of TN. I played a lot of competitive chess in high school, but since college started, I haven't had the time to develop or practice. My goal in my chess life is to make it to 2150. Do you think this is possible if I don't start getting real serious until I'm 23, as I am 21 now and won't graduate for 2 more years? If it is possible, what is the best way to do it? Are these steps I should take? **Andrew Crigger (USA)**

Answer Obviously, school can be demanding, so I understand why you're considering putting serious chess out of the way until you get your degree. But unless you're committing the *Critique of Pure Reason* to memory (they didn't even try that in *Fahrenheit 451*), I see no reason you can't follow an academic regimen while continuing to improve your game. Life doesn't necessarily become any easier. When you get out of school, you're still going to have to work. I've been told that's a fairly fulltime activity too, so it's doubtful you're suddenly going to possess several unencumbered years for chess study.

Can a 1500 player put aside the game for a couple of years and pick it up at age 23, eventually to achieve a rating of 2150, whatever all these numbers purport to mean? The answer is, of course, yes. You're clearly intelligent and motivated. Moreover, you won't be over the hill at 23 (don't, however, let it go to 24), and 2150 is surely not Mount Everest.

What's the best way to get to 2150 once you get to 23? If I knew that I'd tell you. But since I don't, I'll have to offer the same advice I'd give myself, even though I wouldn't be any more likely to listen to me either. Simply play regularly and often against the strongest opposition you can encounter, pursuing this stimulating task with the same passion – maybe even more – than you invest in your college career. Allow those games (not general guidelines and old-chessplayer's tales) tell you what you need to study, and go from there. If you open your heart to Caissa, she's honor bound to pay back your commitment in a universal currency of knowledge, skill, and lifelong pleasure. Well, that's what they told me in college.

Question I'd like your opinion of my recent idea for chess training, head-to-head against the computer. I refer to it as "20 - 20 chess." My premise is based upon the belief that a "class" player is going to be busted by move 40 against a Fritz 7 or 8; but if he has played a creditable game, he will still be in the fight at, say move 20, with probably a slight positional disadvantage - or at worst, close to a pawn down in the evaluation (whether he realizes it or not, since all hints and evaluation windows would be turned off). My newest notion is that at move 20, the class player switches sides and plays out the balance of the game, striving to win or hold what should be a slightly better position by then. In this way you're "rewarded" twice for having played well. (The satisfaction of holding Fritz to a low +/- evaluation in the first half; and then getting in some practical experience at trying to win a superior position, and therefore not being "sent to the showers early".) **James C. Jackson (USA)**

Answer On paper, I like your suggestion, though it may not always work out so well practically. Most players, even truly good ones, would be busted far earlier than at or around move forty against today's chess software, particularly Fritz. Nonetheless, assuming you haven't been mated by move twenty, your idea seems to have considerable value as a training technique, especially for garnering experience in winning won games. Actually, I've known players to experiment in similar ways, attempting to play out dominant positions achieved from the computer's side, only to see their advantage slip away after a move or two. But then they usually switch sides once more, or as often as necessary, until they can savor the thrill of making the decisive move. Regardless, win or lose, they don't usually take a shower. That's just not their way.

Question Assuming that one is an absolute beginner, in what order should your chess books be studied? **Victor B. McBee (USA)**

Answer This is tough. Although I had something to do with them, I never had to study them. Initially inspired by James Joyce's *Finnegan's Wake*, I'd hoped to write each one so that you could open to any page and read

from there, as if that were page one, but it didn't really work out. Then I tried to apply this approach to the oeuvre as a whole, so that you could read any book as if it were the first in the series, but that ambitious plan didn't fare any better. After all, it wasn't a series, it wasn't *Finnegan's Wake*, and the public hit me with some unanticipated responses that necessitated a modification of my plan.

Notwithstanding, it's only fair that I extend some kind of answer to your sincere question. Accordingly, I recommend that you read them in reverse order, as if working backward from the goal. That technique should ring a bell with most chessplayers, whether trained by eminent Pavlovians or not.

Question I'm coming to chess late in life. I'm 37, and I have no illusions that I will ever be a force on the state scene here in Nebraska, much less on a national or international scene, but I do see myself playing often through middle age and beyond and my goal is to always become as good as I can at what I'm doing. I hope to someday flirt with a 2000 rating, but I would be happy with 1800. However, how to improve is not my question. You have answered that countless times. My question is this: Do you think the Internet has been a blessing or a curse to local chess clubs? It has been, I believe, a blessing to chess overall, as witnessed by the number of people in Yahoo's chess room at any one time, and the ability to always have an opponent just a couple of clicks away. As nice as that is, I guess, I wonder if many chess clubs around the nation have not 'folded' as a result? I went to the listed location of the Omaha Chess Club this past week and discovered that they were no longer meeting there. I then had a trip planned to Alexandria, VA and when I did a search for the chess club there, I found an e-mail address which ended up no longer being valid. Although this doesn't mean that they no longer exist, I wonder if you have noticed small chess clubs around the nation folding as would be members find it easier to get a game on any number of various web pages? **Brad Young (USA)**

Answer Not only have small chess clubs suffered recently, the large and famous ones have also been hit hard. It broke my heart last year when the Manhattan Chess Club was forced to close its doors. Surely, the Internet had something to do with this, but other factors have been playing a role for quite awhile. The lure of colossal weekend tournaments, offering much larger prize funds and the opportunity to play against top players, definitely contributed, as did the increase in rent and the consequent rise in dues. Our lifestyles have also changed. Some of us prefer to master satellite TV, interactive media, and other modern-day wonders, many of which can take us across the globe in a nanosecond. A certain percentage of us don't inevitably want to feel trapped

inside the confines of a chess club, especially for what seems to be an infinite number of nanoseconds, where you can't even hang out in your underwear. For all these reasons, and particularly the latter, I believe the Internet has mainly been a boon to civilization, even with its attendant collateral damage. But, indeed, I commiserate with all those who miss sitting at the very tables where Fischer and Capablanca once sat.

Question I recently watched an old episode of *Star Trek the Next Generation*. I believe the episode was called "Peek Performance." The subplot of the story involves Data, the android, who loses his confidence after losing a high tech strategy game to a high ranking Star Fleet official, who happens to be an alien. Anyways, Data believed that his programming was flawed because he lost the game. Jumping to the end of the show, Data has a rematch with the alien and is able to frustrate his opponent's every move by not playing to win but rather for a draw. The alien walks away in frustration and, in a sense, even though there was no winner, the victory was Data's. The reason I bring this up is because of the way that computers have been beating on the human grandmasters lately (somewhat depressing). Maybe the way to win against the machine is to not let the machine win at all. Finally, the question, if a grandmaster wanted to, can he or she force the machine to a draw at will and not give up a victory to the old nuts and bolts opponent?
Tony Wong (USA)

Answer When we play for a draw from the get-go, we often increase our chances of losing. We tend to compete too passively and our opponents sense they can attack us without fear of reprisal. A better way to play is to push for the advantage, trying to get a winning game without incurring unnecessary risk. With active play of our own, we can hope either to win or cow our opponent into accepting a draw. Adversaries will stubbornly resist agreeing to anything if they think they have a draw in hand, with carte blanche to attempt all kinds of active

things without retaliative consequence.

I must inject a word of caution, however. If you want to draw against a machine, play to win, but make sure you don't sac any pawns. Otherwise, the artificially gifted one will munch on your stuff and laugh all the way to the computer bank, perhaps gloating with a programmed joke or two. Can a grandmaster force a draw against a machine at will? Some of them might have trouble forcing a draw against mere anthropoids, let alone software wonders such as the impudent Fritz. But they surely know what they have to do to obtain the best chance for a draw. And that's to play for the edge – without going over it.

Question It seems like a while since someone has asked you an innocuous, non-instructional (but still diverting) chess question, so I thought I'd try to fill the gap. I recently saw the *Seventh Seal*, Ingmar Bergman's great film, famous for Max von Sydow's portrayal of a medieval knight playing a game of chess against Death. It didn't occur to me until the film was well over that it would have been interesting to look closely at their chess positions (I was distracted by the themes about the meaning of life, the existence of God, and the possibility of personal annihilation at death). Have you seen the film lately? Have you ever noticed any specifics of their game? Does it comport with their descriptions of it? In your opinion, is Death a "skillful tactician," as the knight says? Can you tell if the knight was planning on breaking his flank with a combination of bishop and knight? Also, as a matter of curiosity, what would happen if a real chess player tricked his opponent in order to learn his strategy (as Death did)? It's certainly unethical, but is it considered cheating as well? Thanks Bruce-yours is my favorite chess column! **Kristofer Nilsson (Scotland)**

Answer The movie is great, one of the masterpieces of world cinema, but the chess positions make no sense. Worse: except for one scene, they always put the corner light squares on each player's left, and the positions themselves are afflicted with plague. Generally, whether it's film or advertising, it often seems that the board has been set up incorrectly, with a dark square on the right, when actually what they did was flip the negative because someone thought it made for a more interesting shot. But that's not what Bergman or the cinematographer did here.

Still, you have to like the dialogue. Who wouldn't want to break the enemy's flank with a knight and bishop combination? I'm not sure, however, that Death cheated the knight by deceiving him. It's long been accepted that hornswoggling your opponent is standard operating procedure at most chess events, whether dressed to kill or not, on light squares or in the Dark Ages.

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