



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 All in the Cards

Question Recently I've been surfing the cable channels and have stumbled upon a show that has quickly become one of my favorite TV shows. That show is, surprisingly, the WCP Tour or The World Championship Poker Tour. Surprisingly because before starting to watch this show I really knew little about the game of poker. Now, not only do I know how to play Texas Hold'em but I know how to bet, who the players and personalities are, and much about the locations of where the tournaments are held. Also I was surprised at the amount of suspense and excitement that comes from each hand of poker played. Now the chess question, why can't this be done for chess? I've seen the 1998 Kasparov vs Anand championship on ESPN and it just wasn't as interesting as the poker. Daniel King's over exaggerated commentary was just too phony. On the other hand the coverage of the 1972 Fischer vs Spassky World Championship on PBS with Shelby Lyman was fantastic. It would seem to me that there is some kind of similar relationship between the games of chess and poker. Chess and poker players, aren't they of a similar kind of mentality? Wasn't that noted American chess master, Ken Smith, also a noted world-class poker player? So why not chess and TV? I can see nothing that can promote the game of chess more, if done right. Any thoughts on the subject would be appreciated. **Tony Wong (USA)**

Answer Chess should be on television, and that kind of slick programming could help promote and popularize the game. Many chess fans, nonetheless, don't need the seamless transitions and state-of-the-art pyrotechnics today's typical viewer requires. For them, the ongoing process of trying to guess the next move is usually sufficient to keep their interest. But for the uninitiated, coverage must hold sway over content. So it's natural for those who analyze chess positions on the tube to emulate those who announce sports, adopting and adapting the broadcasting tricks and techniques of baseball, football, basketball, hockey, soccer, and whatever else relies on scoring and winning, such as cheerleading and poker.

To be sure, chess can be seen on the telly now and then, and expert commentators such as Daniel King, Yasser Seirawan, and Maurice Ashley have done a splendid job trying to make Kasparov kingside attacks sound like Laker fast-breaks. Though this doesn't necessarily appeal to everyone, it generally has broadened the spectator base to include many non-core chess people who otherwise might confuse chess with checkers, both of them being war games. In fact, such members of the lost generations often make the same mistake even after following the televised analysis. Too bad chess programming has not tempted the

corporate world to invest the power money that big-time sporting events have. Maybe we should ask Walter Browne about that (actually, you ask him).

True, television reporting of the 1972 Fischer-Spassky Match was special, even though there was virtually no financial backing available. But it was the first of its kind, so it was compellingly novel. Moreover, Americans (including, supposedly, Henry Kissinger) thoroughly enjoyed the spectacle of Bobby Fischer challenging Russian hegemony when it really meant something. Spice in Shelby Lyman's utterly charming and diverting on-air stewardship, and you had a winning formula for all future coverage of chess competition, with or without sponsorship. If only all of those conditions could be fulfilled with every small screen presentation, then the game could really give poker a run for the play money.

Question I'm an enthusiastic 15-year-old chess player and I've recently begun studying chess very hard in order to improve my game. I'm about to compete in my first tournament. I play chess quite frequently on Yahoo and my rating there is about 1650-1700, and I also play in my local chess club. I seem to have come to a point where it is tough to improve any further without the guidance of an experienced chess coach, yet the problem is lessons with a chess coach are just too expensive! I live in Abu Dhabi in the United Arab Emirates and I don't think there are any chess coaches available here. I know many coaches offer lessons through the Internet in the ICC but they are at rates like \$50 per lesson, which would probably seem very unreasonable for my parents. I think that I really need a chess coach in order to help achieve my ambitions of becoming a professional chess player, so my question is this, who would you recommend as a suitable coach who does not ask for such high rates? Also, what would be your advice to improve my game without the help of a chess coach. **Emre Turken (United Arab Emirates)**

Answer It shouldn't impair your health to solve vast numbers of tactical problems, especially without moving the pieces unless absolutely necessary, and it never is. Reviewing annotated games contested by strong players should also help, as well as studying good books on particular areas of chess, such as clear texts on the middlegame and endgame, especially if they holistically integrate moves and explanation. And you don't need a coach to prosper from any of that, a truism most of us took for granted before coaches existed (according to some of them, in the Dark Ages, before the 1972 Enlightenment).

There are plenty of things you can do on your own, starting and finishing with playing lots of challenging chess games, against the strongest opposition you can find. Review those games and try to figure out how you could have done better – how you could have avoided problems, saved losing games, and made sure to win those winning ones you let get away. If you can't come up with a coach to fuel this process, you can use software, such as Fritz or ChessMaster. Simply input your moves and take note of the evaluations, hoping to make your plays either more positive or less negative. Eventually you should acquire greater understanding of your own games. Your play is likely to gain accordingly, with or without a coach. In fact, if you want to become a professional chessplayer, there's only one coach you should ever rely on anyway, and that's you. It's never too late to become self-sufficient, and it will probably cost you less than fifty bucks an hour.

Question I am already 44 years old, work as a doctor, and I have all my life played chess. My ELO is about 1850. I have always played the French and Semi-Slav. Now I want to improve, let us say, to get to ELO 2000 (that way you become an expert in Venezuela). What should I do? Change my opening? Tactics? Am I too old to improve? **Carlos Guaimare (Venezuela)**

Answer Getting to an ELO rating of 2000 is the surest way officially to become an expert in any country. That includes Venezuela. Actually getting to 2000 can be an even more accurate index than someone telling you he plays at the expert level. Now if you feel you've been in a rut, making any kind of change is probably not a bad idea. In truth, the French can be very problematical to play if we're talking about surviving the opening phase. I know, Botvinnik won some famous games with it, but that was awhile back. These days he says nothing whatsoever about the French. Switching to an appropriate Sicilian (either the variation will come to you or you'll come to it) might be just the thing the doctor ordered.

The good thing about taking a different approach, such as playing new lines, is that it forces you to work harder at the board, and that has to upgrade the quality of your entire game. Moreover, it can never hurt to jumpstart our lives by going back to school, to freshen up and clear out the cobwebs. Perhaps you know some doctoring associates in America who might benefit from this advice. I'm mainly referring to the ones who depend on therapeutic techniques they picked up at the graduate level twenty years ago. Are you too old to improve your chess? Not if those colleagues are still young enough to improve their medical practice.

Question I was just reading the interview with Gary Kasparov about his new book and in the second interview he implies Bobby was afraid of Karpov. Kasparov also implies that Karpov would have beaten Bobby convincingly. I heard, although I'm unsure, that Fischer was voted chess player of the century, and I'm assuming that this vote was by a great deal of chess professionals. So, do you think Kasparov may be a little biased? What do you think? By the way, I always thought Spassky was the strongest Russian chess player until he faded away shortly after Fischer defeated him for the world championship... **David A. Slocum (USA)**

Answer How could Fischer not have been afraid of Karpov? The 12th world champion was an overwhelming force, who had an uncanny knack of luring the world's best players into voids of chessic abyss. Kasparov himself found this out in head-to-head confrontation something like several hundred times. Might Karpov have actually beaten Fischer in 1975? That was a very real possibility, but not a certainty. Fischer's genius and will to win might well have found a way to triumph. But the same arguments could be made for Karpov and Kasparov. They too, both of them, have genius and a will to win. So it may be a truly unanswerable question.

You mention Boris Spassky. He also was an ingeniously formidable over-the-board opponent, especially during the mid 1960s. But Fischer did beat him straight up, and Spassky didn't fare that well against either Karpov or Kasparov in their respective conflicts. Though to be fair to Boris, the match against Bobby was a circus, and he didn't confront either of the two K's at his best, but such fantasy matches simply aren't in the pawns.

Okay, Bobby Fischer may have been voted the chessplayer of the century, but isn't it likely that this had a lot to do with what he did for the stature of the game in the eyes of the public, in addition to his actual ability? (Meanwhile, he's done other things for the stature of the game, but someone will discuss that another time.)

Now I suppose that Kasparov has attained the highest rating in history. But is it conceivable

that if Fischer had realized his top rating would one day be surpassed, that he might have piled on the rating points while he still could have done something about it? This doesn't mean that Kasparov isn't the greatest chessplayer ever. The opinion of most authorities says that he is. Nevertheless, there's just no way to verify which champion is the greatest unless all of them had confronted each other at the top of their games, and up to now that's never been possible.

I think Kasparov is to be applauded for trying to be objective when objectivity is so difficult to achieve. After all, can you imagine any reigning king in any endeavor whatsoever speaking of another as being greater? It goes against the conceptual grain of being best. So it's to be expected that people think him biased and his opinions tendentious. But if he had come out the other way, in effect claiming that Fischer were stronger, would that have been believed either? Or would we slyly reason, as chessplayers are wont to do, that by appearing to take the higher road he was really trying to mislead us into thinking he was safe in his own superiority and merely being magnanimous? That's a no-win situation, where any statement puts Kasparov in the passenger's seat.

If only Fischer had been the one to analyze the situation publicly. Perhaps then we'd wind up concluding that Kasparov at his best was the stronger player, regardless of what Bobby thinks (whatever he thinks that can be printed in algebraic notation). Now, if we could only get Bobby to come out with his own book on the world champions, including the ones that came after him – you know, those he still doesn't recognize.

Question I have been playing the game for about a year. I have been trying to improve by reading chess books. My question is, what is the best way to read a chess book? Do most people read with a board next to them? I figure the only way to not do this is by visualizing the position in your head. Are there ways you can develop skills that will allow you to visualize the position in your head? It would make my education more efficient if I could just sit down and read a book without constantly checking my position on a board. **Ben Kim (USA)**

Answer I believe it was Mortimer Adler who once wrote a book on how to read a book, but I doubt that he had a section on perusing chess literature. Maybe there's no best way to read a chess book. Responding Adlerians might say that some chess books are to be read all the way through, from page one on. Others are to be read here and there, turning to what on earth we're interested in at the moment. And some are not to be read at all, their main function being to hold up the more readable books on the shelf.

Without doubt, it's all right to play the moves on a board as we're reading them, if just for convenience and particularly if we're looking at entire games rather than puzzles and positions. Indeed, whenever we can follow the action without resorting to a chessboard and pieces, the better. That's how you can eventually develop the skill at seeing ahead, by trying to do it every chance you get. It's that simple, which can make it ridiculously hard. But still, to answer your question of what is the best way to read a book, I'd settle for saying whatever method worked best for you. That means, whichever way to read you liked the most. I'd make a suggestion here on your reading likes and dislikes, but something tells me you'd be the better judge at deciding the color of your own parachute.

Question What kind of preparation plan do you recommend to a national team that doesn't have a coach and no grandmaster in the country? They have a continental

tournament coming up soon and each player is given 30 minutes to finish the game. They also have a blitz tournament. In the squad we have a player who is a FIDE Master and four

of them have 2200 ELO ratings from two consecutive Olympiad appearances. They have two months before the tournament. **Dr. Yohannes Damtew (Ethiopia)**

Answer Without regard to how much time you have before the upcoming event, I recommend the following. Play regular round robin tournaments, preferably every week. Then have the team analyze the games in seminar sessions, where everyone tries to help everyone. Since you don't have a grandmaster coach, the group will have to coach itself. While no one could replace Mark Dvoretsky, you'd be surprised how much could be realized by an assemblage of 4-6 really motivated people, all working in harmony for common purpose. Moreover, fostering that all-for-one spirit beforehand naturally makes it easier to draw on it for the actual competition. It will already be there, which means all your squad has to do is play good moves as individuals.

Question I apologize in advance for troubling you with a question that is not strictly related chess to play. However, from interviews I have read, you seem to be quite well read, so I thought I would ask your help with an interesting conundrum. I read *Moby Dick* in a somewhat cursory fashion when I was in high school, and did not get much out of it. I was recently encouraged to reread it, though, and I was shocked at how much better it had gotten over the years! The question: I thought that I had read somewhere that Melville has a few chess scenes in the tome. Since I had read it in such a lackadaisical manner way back when, I wasn't surprised that I didn't remember them from the first read. But I also did not run across them in my second, more diligent reading. Have you heard about chess scenes (or references?) in *Moby Dick*? Must I read it a third time, looking only for chess? Do I somehow have the wrong edition of the book, or the wrong book altogether? Is there another whale of a book I have it confused with? **Frances Stephens (France)**

Answer Finally, a question having to do with chess. There's no evidence that Herman Melville played chess. Nor, to my knowledge, did he write about the game with any real insight. The only allusion to chess in *Moby Dick* that I know of occurs when he refers to the harpooner Daggoo as looking "like a chessman," but he doesn't say which chessman. Nor does Melville show any special appreciation for chess in any of his other works – he actually writes with greater admiration for checkers – though he does attempt to use chess here and there metaphorically.

Besides reducing Daggoo to a kind of pawn in *Moby Dick*, references to chess can also be found in *Omoo*, *Redburn*, *White Jacket*, *Pierre*, and *Billy Budd*, with the latter novella providing: "Life is not a game with the sailor, demanding the long head; no intricate game of chess where few moves are made in straightforwardness, and ends are attained by indirection; an oblique, tedious, barren game hardly worth that poor candle burnt out in playing it." I love Melville's work. He was a true literary artist. But I think there was a lacuna in his artistry when it came to chess.

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