



*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



## Sometimes Those Who Can Need to Be Checked by Those Who Can't

**Question** Obviously, to be a good teacher, you should be a good player, because, if you are not, you have no business teaching. But that is not my question. My question is, and very strong teachers (2500+) have confirmed this, that too much teaching can hurt your playing, which seems obvious. On the other hand, weak teachers (1600-), believe it or not, say that too much playing can hurt your teaching, which I find unbelievable and ridiculous. I am wondering if anyone, even you with your weird and self-promoting reasoning (because you would like to make people believe that you are qualified to teach chess when you are not, forgetting about all the hype), can come up with an argument, no matter how fallacious, to justify how one's teaching could suffer from too much playing, when a person tries to do both at the same time. I know you won't print this because people like you only print complementary questions that make them look good. If you do, I hope you at least address my question, if not my concern. **Robert Smith (USA)**

**Answer** I see your point. Teachers in the 1601-2499 range must be average, so at least I don't have to feel that bad as I attempt to answer your question. Although it's not essential for teachers to play regularly in order to be successful as teachers, it might invigorate their lessons if they played a little tournament chess now and then, just to stay sharp and keep fresh in their minds the types of problems students are likely

to face in over-the-board confrontation. But bear in mind that what works wonderfully for one relationship might fail miserably for another.

If you're pretty much a full-time teacher, and mainly work with beginning and inexperienced players, it's natural to generalize a bit more than you'd like. That can't help your own play, since real contests require specific and pertinent thinking. Fall back on a platitude during actual battle, and you might find yourself hanging a pawn or two, if not mate. Furthermore, as a supportive teacher, it's typical to become sympathetic with your students, as you try to provide them with necessary encouragement. That same sensitivity, so valuable to good teaching, could spell death if not checked in your own tournament struggles. If any of that empathic sentiment carried over to your own play, and your resolve were weakened, even slightly, your ability to wage winning chess war might become seriously impaired.

Conversely, if you are a dedicated tournament contestant, and suddenly find yourself trying to teach someone, it would be easy to slip into competitive mode and forget your ultimate aim, to assist the student. This problem is more likely to afflict coaches working with advanced talents, especially when the student is approaching the teacher's own playing strength and the teacher is prone to emotional insecurity. Some teachers who lack self-confidence become unwittingly defensive when they feel challenged.

The polarity is clear. When you teach, you're trying to help someone (the student), and when you play, you're trying to hurt someone (the opponent). Both of these deleterious conditions – being too sympathetic while playing and becoming too antipathetic while teaching – are exacerbated by the fact that they tend to exist on the unconscious level.

You shouldn't aspire to serve two masters, even if both of them love chess, without expecting to make concessions. But you're welcome to try, whether or not you feel my response adequately addresses your question, if not your concern, and despite my tendentious reasoning, in all its misleading fallaciousness.

**Question** What is the right way to play over annotated games? How many times should I play over a given game? Should I try to guess the winner's (and loser's) moves? How do I make use of the annotations? What do I do when I come across a move or comment I don't understand? **Tom George (USA)**

**Answer** I doubt that there's a universally right way to play over annotated games, but there's got to be a way that works best for you, and that's the one I urge you to use. You can try to guess the next moves, or merely play the game as a narrative, to see what happens in the end. You can play over a game once, an arcanelly Pythagorean number of times, or not at all, wisely opting to skip it because you harbor an enmity for one or more of the participants. And you can play over the annotations or choose to ignore them. As long as you're enjoying the experience, you should progress and your strength expand accordingly.

I do find that students tend to get into perfection mode, trying to understand every nuance before proceeding. That's human nature, which can be frustrating, time-consuming, and counterproductive. While most thoughts can be understood immediately, the beauty of other concepts can only be evaluated in context and overview. Their full impact may not be appreciated until we get to the end and see the whole picture.

For the casual player I recommend playing over most chess games at a consistent pace, only stopping to analyze when your curiosity is truly piqued. Moreover, always try to analyze without moving the pieces, whether you can visualize the imagined positions distinctly or not. You have to develop the skill of seeing ahead somehow, and if you settle for watching the present without developing the ability to envision and ultimately control the future, you're not really helping your cause. You can do this effectively by looking down the line as far as you can, and then, after going one or two mental moves beyond that (never quite settle for anything), summarizing the likely import of what you don't know you probably already do. You can always come back to troublesome points once you've gone through the entire enterprise and have some general sense of the arc of the game.

Sometimes we can gain by emphasizing the Gestalt of chess more than its atoms and electron orbits. But this doesn't mean you shouldn't analyze, and with great care and effort. In fact, you won't get anywhere if you don't. It does mean, however, that you shouldn't let little things get in the way of the true path, whatever that is, wherever it leads.

**Question** About 6 months ago I started learning chess when I found a local chess club. I learned the basics in the 7th grade (only 7 years ago) but never pursued the game after I passed the necessary test to get a good grade. In fact, I was usually the first one to laugh at the "chess geeks" in high school who obsessed over chess problems that I perceived as meaningless. But, to make a short story a little longer, I have "seen the light" and have spent every Monday getting my butt kicked by the fiercest chess players I have ever met. We've got a couple of people rated in the 1800's, a 1750, and even a 3 time winner of the biggest tournament in Maine, whose rating used to be 2332 before he gave up chess for a decade which lasted until about a month ago. Being one of the only newbies in the chess club, I have yet to win a serious game. And early on, I adopted the attitude of "I don't expect to win, I expect to learn." So I don't mind losing, so long as I learn something. However, despite all my losses, studying book after book after book by Polgar, Truong, Silman, and yes, Pandolfini, I have yet to come close to presenting the slightest amount of opposition to any of the serious players. My question is, how long do most newbies take to become competent enough to play serious players and at least make them not fall asleep?

**Bob Grant (USA)**

**Answer** I applaud your courage, tenacity, attitude, and patent love of the game, but it's hard to offer you any definite advice because I still don't know enough about you. Some terms and expressions you use need to be spelled out a bit more. You call yourself a "newbie," but that doesn't really tell me your current playing strength. It might be under a thousand or about 1200. You could be a 1500 player or even better. "Newbie" simply doesn't correspond to a USCF rating category or typical playing strength classification, nor does it

help me suggest a particular regimen from which you could profit.

You also say you haven't won any serious games or beaten any serious players, but I'm not sure what you mean by these expressions either. Does a serious game refer to the time, circumstances, or quality of opposition? Is a serious player one of an exact strength or a competitor who's had a certain degree of experience? And I have other questions, but they're more of the same.

I think this suggests the next hurdle you must get over to really start making advances, and that is to stop being so general. You're simply going to have to get more specific. In that way, and primarily in that way, will you begin to be conscious of the tiny differences that signify certain growth. Otherwise, in a game that offers a whole universe of data and possible interpretations, where the smallest factors are meaningful and can determine your fate, how can you expect to get anywhere if you don't know where you stand?

Give yourself a break. You've taken the game intently for just six months. You can bet that there are students who have played and studied chess for years to get where you are now. It's clear you're a positive person, so why don't you put all that affirmative energy to good use by starting to be more precise? While numbers aren't everything, they do mean something, even when they add up to nothing, and that's the point.

**Question** I have been playing chess for over twenty years (gosh, where has the time gone?). I reached a rating of 1820 (Welsh chess union - I guess this is about 1920 USCF) but now I am slowly going downhill. I am about 25 points lower every year. Being semi-retired I now spend about 15 hours a week studying chess. I identified my two biggest weaknesses, opening play and tactics, and I concentrate on these. I play against my computer at home, other people in the chess club once a week and play in four tournaments a year. I play about 100 rated games a year.

The problem is this. When I sit down to play a game I have no "fear factor". There is no "kick", no thrill anymore. It is just not exciting. I usually play opponents in the range 2000 to 1500, and I can win against a 2000 and lose against a 1500. I can play brilliantly one game and terribly the next, I have lost all reliability. I find it almost impossible to concentrate on the game. I find that the result of a game is not the most important thing anymore. If I play well then I am happy (even if I lose), but if I play badly then I really am ashamed about the way I played (even if I win). After a bad game I say to myself "I KNOW that I am better than this, so why do I play such rubbish!" Even during a game that I am playing badly I will talk to myself and try to raise my game, but I just cannot "lift" myself back to a level that I know I am capable of! It has become so bad that I am thinking about giving up the game. Have I overdosed on chess? Have you any suggestions? A friend has suggested that I try to play opponents a class higher. What do you think? **Stephen P Sienczyk (USA)**

**Answer** The last thing you want to do is play opponents who could kick your butt even worse, unless you'd find some personal pleasure in being crushed more efficiently. No, it does seem as if you need a hiatus. I propose that you take a vacation from chess for a while, notwithstanding its tempting appeal. Then stand firm. Don't reenter the combat zone until further resistance is impossible, and you simply must play chess.

At that point you should go back to the board and start chessing,

without the slightest regard for anything other than pure enjoyment. If playing still isn't any fun, why bother to persist? How many lives do you have to waste? Find something else to amuse yourself and be happy that the game has provided you a valuable life lesson, that you're not a pawn and chess isn't the only way to advance to happiness. All right, maybe it is, but the last time I said that I got letters.

**Question** My question concerns the psychology of the game. I have played tournament chess for four years at a local club in Allentown, Pa. Upon reflection of my games, I notice that there is a tremendous chess roller coaster effect on the emotions during the game. High points occur as you win a piece or imagine a mating net being built; and low points happen after you did not correctly analyze the position and your opponent springs a "surprise" move on the board. These high and low points detract from clear reasoning about the true game position. I am trying to keep the internal highs from becoming too high before the end of the game; and I am trying to keep the internal lows from becoming too low during the game so that I do not mentally concede the game to early. What recommendations do you have for smoothing out the roller coaster effects so that I can play my best chess or improve the quality of my play? **Dennis Newhart (USA)**

**Answer** It's not so easy, I know, but strive to think less about results and more about the intellectual challenges the game offers. Try treating each position as a problem-solving venture or scientific investigation, where winning is secondary to unearthing the truth. This should help you become more dispassionate in your analysis and selection of moves.

Much of this objectivity can be preconditioned by how you treat losing positions in your own play. Instead of letting your emotions run rampant, merely recognize that you have a losing game, making sure to understand why. Remember that recognition doesn't imply acceptance. Instead it announces your intention to get on top of the situation so that your mind can devote all of its energy to finding resources and ways to make your opponent's aims difficult.

After impartially analyzing and assessing, your internal monologue might go something like this: I have a losing game. How can I proceed to create counter-chances and make my opponent's job as hard as possible? A question like this heralds your determination to defy a la Botvinnik, while putting you in just the proper mindset to fight back and possibly turn things around.

By the same token, when you have winning tries and other promising moves, get into the habit of not playing them right away. Instead, ask questions about your plans. That approach tends to remove you from the emotional realm while placing you more in an investigative framework. Such demeanor is needed to judge the true worth of your ideas.

It all gets back to what Lasker said (I think it was Lasker): "If you see a good move, look for a better one." In other words, take your time, and realize that your first thoughts may not quite be on the money. By asking questions and slowing down, you may find other answers that work better. So that's my advice. Take the reins, pace yourself, ask questions, and try as best you can to be more objective. Over time, the constant implementation of this method may become part of your procedure, and naturally you'll discover that your emotions interfere far less with the logic that sound chess play requires.

**Question** Great question last month about Moby Dick . . . if I ever read any Herman

Melville! This is more my speed: at the end of X-Men, Professor Charles Xavier (Patrick Stewart) plays a game of chess with Magneto (Ian McKellen). I doubt you've seen this movie, but if you have, is it a real chess game? Also, my dad says I should ask you about the chess game that Hal plays in 2001. **Robert Granger (USA)**

**Answer** In point of fact, I did see Ian McKellen in *X-Men*, though I preferred him in Richard III, where he didn't have to draw upon his skill at chess. I'm not sure the position against Patrick Stewart evolved out of a real chess game, but that's never stopped Hollywood before. Perhaps Paramount found the basic setup in an outtake from the old Star Trek. The final position seemed Spock-like, although I wasn't as focused on the chess as I was on my watch, which glows in the dark. You can tell your dad, however, that I am familiar with the chess situation in *2001*. Indeed, Hal does give a winning 3-move combination, when actually there's a mate in two. Either that's the first sign that Hal has a screw loose or it's his use of descriptive notation. Please give my best to your dad.

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