



*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



## Some Highs Are New Lows

**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** Perhaps you're worrying too much about results, but you can't downplay emotions altogether. You're a human being (I have my reasons for saying this) and sensations, from dread to joy, are going to arise, so you're going to have to live with them and move on. At any rate, a high can be the next plateau's low. And just because you feel things keenly, and your passions affect your performance, doesn't mean your play can't improve. Some of the strongest players of all-time were emotional wrecks, even before they became grandmasters. They suffered if they won or lost pieces, whether they mated or got mated. Not everyone can be as dispassionate as Botvinnik, and few of us can be as immobile as he is right now.

I don't know if you typically experience similar highs and lows in other



activities, such as sports and games other than chess, but it could be that you simply don't enjoy competition. If that's so, any suggestion I'd make -- aside from advising you to give up playing chess -- would probably have little value. This is the kind of condition that can better be tackled by a psychotherapist, not a chess teacher who sometimes acts as if he is one. Why don't you e-mail the same question to Doctor Phil on his website? It can't hurt to go where millions of others have gone before. Okay, maybe it can, but I'd be curious to hear what he'd say, even if one of his aides said it for him.

**Question** I am a 30-year old who has been playing chess off and on for 20 years now. I understand the basics (I know a skewer from a pin) but I don't seem to have any sort of ability to really understand the game. From time to time I've tried reading books, playing through games, and I've memorized a few openings here and there, but I get frustrated at my almost glacial progress and I'm still a patzer at best. I would absolutely love to become a chess player rather than just pushing wood around. Is it possible to come into the game seriously after 20 years of bad habits? Or should I stick with the novice setting on my chess program? If it isn't too late, can you recommend any training programs that might lead to a better understanding of chess?  
Dean Micknal (USA)

**Answer** It's never too late to improve, especially if you love chess as much as your e-mail suggests. You might start by getting your game critiqued, to see expressly what's wrong with it and what should be overhauled. It's always best to identify problems before attempting to solve them, and too often general advice applies more to abstract concepts than individual people.

If you can, take a few sessions with a chess teacher or strong player aimed mainly at understanding how you might proceed. Between 2-4 meetings should suffice. Ask your instructor to spell out a course of study you could pursue on your own, primarily with books and software, say over the next six months or so. You can always go back when the time is fitting for follow-up.

If that's not feasible, try to obtain chess software with tests that claim to assess your strengths and weaknesses, while judging the level of your overall play. I suppose even crude evaluations are better than nothing, although this is just a supposition. Once you get some system feedback, you can supplement your efforts with literature designed to deal with the areas of your greatest apparent need. The front and back covers of chess books can help you pick out volumes that might be pertinent. Even false advertising tends to have a modicum of truth, and there's a chance something can be better than nothing.

Other than that, you could review annotated games contested by strong players, solve lots of tactical, real-game problems (making sure not to move

the pieces), and play as often as you can against strong opposition, especially those who think a lot about their own play and want you to know it. They have the potential to say wondrous things, and some of the commentary might even be instructive. Good luck, and may you enjoy the quest no matter the results, since that is the truest path to happiness and time well spent.

**Question** First off I'd like to say that I recently bought ChessMaster for my PS2. It's an excellent game, I was very surprised by the wealth of instruction (Pandolfini Chess School), the 800+ annotated games, etc. This game could certainly put people well on their way to becoming a Master! By the way, is that your voice in the narrations?

Well, my big question for you regards openings. Do you think it is necessary to study openings if you're an intermediate player? I've been playing a lot of chess over the last year or so. When I first started playing on the Internet, a friend gave me some lessons. I already knew how the pieces moved, but that was about it! He showed me the basics of openings and endgames. Really the best thing he taught me was how to think, showed me the general purposes of an opening. For example "If you move your pawn there, it will block in your bishop." So gradually, the more games I played, the more openings I learned. I type in ECO and the computer tells me what opening it is.

So just by playing a bunch of games, I've learned most all the openings and their variations. It's really been fascinating to learn these openings, because I know there is some history behind them. But do you think it is necessary to learn an opening extremely in-depth? You know how they have books out dedicated to specific openings, would those be worthwhile for me?

I'm interested in knowing more about the history of openings, the players who first played them, etc. But would it do me any good to learn 20 moves into the Najdorf Sicilian for example? Wouldn't it be pointless to learn an opening that in-depth if most of my opponents are not going to play into them anyway? I think there was a GrandMaster that once said something like "Just make thoughtful opening moves, and you're probably playing an opening system anyway." I'm rated around 1600 right now, and I'm just wondering where I should go from here in regards to openings. **Brandon Murray (USA)**

**Answer** You're obviously a good student, and you ask a lot of questions, which I will attempt to answer, though I haven't figured out the order or how yet. Let's begin at the top. No, that's not my voice in the narrations. It's not Brooklyn enough, yet the reader says my words much better than I could. Do I think intermediate players should study the openings? Yes, though the term "intermediate" doesn't really tell us how good you are or what you might already know, or anything else for that matter.

Generally, whatever your level of play, you should be studying every phase

of the game to the degree it meets your needs and to the extent you can understand it. It's not that you won't start investigating an aspect of chess until you get to a certain stage, but rather that you should study that feature of the game in a particular way until you arrive at your initial goal. Once you do reach that point, however, you'll want to modify your approach and study the same facet a little differently. With regard to opening work, that could mean many things, from changing the openings you explore to examining them in greater depth.

If you're trying to build an opening repertoire, surely you'll want to be more practical. You should, accordingly, prefer to learn lines with which you can feel comfortable. I'd also suggest that you opt for systems and variants having more likely application in your own games.

But if you're not concerned with practical matters, and you inhabit the enlightened state of the thinker or the ethereal realm of the aficionado, you can do whatever pleases you. You can just enjoy the game for the gratification it imparts, letting the flux of ideas take you wherever your mind is willing to travel. In such cases, you can root out the history of specific variations, commit lengthy definite ones to memory, or do something equally valid not mentioned here. In your immediate and "intermediate" situation, there seem to be no limiting parameters.

**Question** An individual at a club I attend has asked a number of people the same question but as of yet no one has been able to answer it. When we write chess notation we use 0-0 or 0-0-0 to record castling king or queenside. Where or when and why was it decided to use these notations to indicate castling? **Richard Martin (USA)**

**Answer** These changes took place sometime late in the nineteenth century. Before then the words were written out. If there were only one way to castle, the indication might be "castling." If both types of castling were possible, one might see either "castling kingside" or "castling queenside," whichever applied. Obviously, as chess literature proliferated, writers and readers required more economical ways to communicate moves and information. That's how more abbreviated notational forms arose.

**Question** I'm 25 years old. Last year I 'rediscovered' the game of chess, having not played more than half a dozen games in the last 10 years. I bought a load of books and chess software and really started studying chess seriously for the first time. While I'm not completely dissatisfied with my progress I came across two big problems.

1. I am happy when my opponent plays attacking chess and I am defending and counterattacking. But when I play a player similar to myself (e.g., a counter-attacker) I'm rarely able to win. My skills in planning and executing an attack on the opponent's position seem to be underdeveloped. Are there

any books on the subject you could recommend?

2. I regularly use Fritz to analyze my games and I am shocked at how many forced sequences, leading to gain of material and even quite a lot of forced mating sequences, I've missed. Searching for a forced sequence and not being able to find it is one thing. But most of the time I don't even notice there was any possibility of a forced mate. Thus I sometimes find myself reasonably satisfied after a game which I've drawn, and then it turns out I could have won by force. This is really starting to become frustrating. Are there specific ways of finding forced sequences? Any advice would be helpful. Thanks. **Lennert Beurskens (The Netherlands)**

**Answer** Rather than suggesting a particular book on the subject, it might make more sense to study game collections of great players known for their counterattacking skills. This, I think, is preferable to reading a specific title. It takes into account all the different styles that a counter-attacker might have to face, and therefore is naturally more complete. If you examine hundreds and maybe even thousands of such examples, you should start to assimilate an increased sensitivity and awareness for the critically small points on which such positions hinge. You can best do this with software, though literature can do the job, albeit more slowly and with greater labor on your part. For this enterprise, two counter-attackers come to mind, and each is radically different from the other. They are Korchnoi and Karpov. Certainly, there are other players who would serve your needs nicely and adequately, but in the games of these two giants there is a full range of challenging circumstances that can enable you to sharpen your own play on the cutting edge of developing chess theory.

Your second question also comes down a matter of working with many and more examples. The more you do, the better you'll become. So you should try to solve as many tactical chess problems as you can, preferably without moving the pieces, until you begin to acquire a heightened sense for both obvious and imbedded tactics. One should never stop analyzing tactical situations, no matter how good one gets. Besides, it's fun. If it's not, then chess is not one's game, for nine tenths of chess is below tactical water.

It might help your cause if you get into the habit of asking questions that help attune you to prospective tactical circumstances. The best way to do that is by dividing your thinking according to your move and your opponent's move. On your move, get down to business, chiefly analyzing concrete lines and moves that deal with impending threats and the furthering of your own aims. You have no time to explore, since your clock is ticking away. It's on your opponent's turn, however, that you can fall back on various cues to elicit information from the position. That's when you can reconnoiter the terrain for golden opportunities, when your mind is somewhat freed from the responsibility of having to reply to the relentless tyranny of time's arrow. Still, it's not going to be easy, but then most things worth our efforts seldom



are.

**Question** I have used what I considered a unique method (that I'm sure would be of special interest to you), to improve my chess intuition. Many years ago I watched two masters play speed chess. While watching I would try to guess, "feel", the best move, or rather the move that each master would make. Somehow I'm sure that this method improved my chess intuition. There being little time to consider the position logically I would consider the "feel" of the moves made. Incidentally, the names of the two players were Ionel Ronn and Bruce Pandolfini. Not much is written in chess literature about improving chess intuition other than that intuition is really developed from reading, watching and playing lots of games over the years. In a sense that it is really subconscious knowledge acquire. **Jerry Yellen (USA)**

**Answer** Speed chess tends to be more intuitive, in that we have to make decisions without being able to analyze as exhaustively as we'd like, as we could with more time at our disposal. Indeed, after slight consideration in most fast chess games, we often have to go with what feels right, if we don't want to risk overstepping. But there's an upside to speed chess, which is that it compels us to be more intense. We can't afford to let our minds wander, and that forces us to work harder and to experience a peculiar kind of learning -- though only if we take the enterprise seriously. If we're just fooling around, the intensity won't be there, but the superficial analysis will be.

I remember the Rumanian-Israeli-French chess master Ionel Ronn very well and with great affection. He was a true intellectual, who cared about ideas as if they were precious jewels. I also recall those speed sessions at his Greenwich Village Chess Shop vividly, and some of the games indelibly burned their moves into my resource bank. They were truly intense encounters, especially because I was afraid he was going to beat my brains in, with some of my loyal charges nearby. And sometimes he did, whereupon he'd lecture me on deconstruction and postmodern interpretation, and though defeated, I'd sit there and love every moment of it. Thanks for bringing back all those wonderful memories.

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