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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

You Already Have a Coach - You

The Q & A Way

Bruce Pandolfini



Question I am a beginner at chess and my experience of the game comes from online e-mail chess and games against my chess computer. Although I know all about development and basic tactics like the pin, fork and skewer, I seem to lose more games than I win. I think I concentrate too much on attacking and not enough on defense. My openings are okay but I get lost in the middlegame. Can you tell me how I can improve my middlegame without a coach? Most middlegame books seem to complex. **Malcolm Fletcher (United Kingdom)**

Answer You improve with practice in any art form, and there's no way to get around that ugly fact, to paraphrase William James. So it's a matter of time: time spent playing strong players, solving tactics, analyzing positions, and in this case reading books and essays on middlegame situations. It's clear that you already know some things about pins, forks, skewers and the like, but it sounds as if you're having trouble spotting them in your own games, or sensing in advance how and when to set them up and ward them off. Let's focus on fundamental tactics and put aside strategic issues, because we need to start somewhere, and in this compass we can only say so much.

You can bolster your underlying tactical skill by playing game after game against challenging opposition – learning on the job and over real time. But you should also work with books (or software) examining such tactics in both instructive and random formats. It truly doesn't matter which books you start with – any of hundreds will do. Basic positions are basic positions. I mean, how many ways can you talk about the forced mate in the Paris Opera Game?

Don't let self-absorbed chess people fool you into thinking that how they present a forced two-move mate is superior to the way other, less-skilled people do it, or that their arrangements are more logical, or that they make sure there are fewer misprints. In fact, the test you must eventually pass to enter the realm



of tactical understanding requires that you realize for yourself that an error has occurred, even a potentially misleading typo, and that you are able to make the decision to correct it or pass over it on your own. Furthermore, the most important logic a problem offers is often what you give to it. That's logic that sticks: what you've figured out for yourself becomes a tool for active future use, with more power than many abstract and lifeless truths (not that it's not nice to know about them, too). This comment, naturally, does not necessarily apply to more subtle positions, that may become clearer under the guidance of a more sophisticated hand.

More pertinent at this building-block stage is that you actually attempt to solve the puzzles yourself, especially without moving the pieces. You should approach such tasks as if they're positions from your own games. A little pretense never hurt any chess student, and it can elevate your practice to a meaningful personal level. Since you're at home over the keyboard, rely on software tactics. To be sure, you can work with them more expeditiously, and you can try to envision future positions with less hassle. That is, if you lose your way, you can usually just click back to the original position without any loss of certainty and with diminished time-wasting toil. Finally, it's okay, even desirable, to look at the same problems periodically, and to keep track of how you do. If initially you solved a problem in five minutes, aim to find the solution in a minute or two the next time around. You'll want to invest even less time with review efforts after that. Your goal is to be able to look at a diagram and know the answer, just like that, almost as if recognition is sufficient for comprehension. You won't need a coach, and that's when the real thinking can begin.

Question Any opinions on Jeff Sonas of Chessbase and his reevaluation of the ELO rating scale, that would put Capablanca statistically the best player ever (beating even Kasparov)? And could you also comment on Dr. John Nunn's assessment, that present masters are better than old masters, and make fewer mistakes (echoed by Professor A. Elo in his book on chess). **Ray Lopez (USA)**

Answer I haven't seen that analysis by Jeff Sonas, so I can't really say very much about it. Perhaps statistics do support it, though I'd really like to see what his parameters were.

Question I work in a school and run a chess club. As a club player I figure I should be able to answer any chess question that may arise. However, one that got me stumped regards touch move/promotion. The question is: With the pawn on the seventh rank and a queen is placed on the queening square, when does the point of no return precisely happen? E.g. can the queen be let go then subsequently be replaced by a knight before removing the pawn? Can you place the piece on the eighth rank, touch the pawn, change your mind about the promoted piece and finally remove the pawn? I feel sorry for some of your questioners if they don't understand your sense of humor. Go easy on me with your answer as I don't want to feel sorry for myself. **Lindsay Ridland (Scotland)**

Answer If you touch the pawn, you must move it to the promotion square. If you touch an enemy piece on the 8th rank, you must take it with the pawn. Touching a new piece on the side of the board, even lifting it, does not constitute the completion of the move in itself, and has no required consequences. As Glenn Petersen informs us, according to the 5th edition of the rule book (page 22, rule 10-h), there is no penalty for touching pieces on the side and the move is not completed until the new piece is released on the promotion square. So, if I understand you rightly, and I understand very little these days, whether it's promoting pawns or myself, you still have options until you let go of the new piece (the thing-in-itself) on the last rank's square. I'm not absolutely certain that I know what I just said, and I feel rather sorry about it, for all concerned.

Question Please help me - all of us - on this one. Thanks. Does Blitz chess hurt the beginner or developing player? Like the Bishop vs. the Knight, there are many opinions on the value of Blitz chess. What is your opinion? **John Henry (Canada)**

Answer Blitz chess is Janus faced. It can smile on you by providing a lot of chess over a short span of time, by forcing you to practice staying focused, and by encouraging tactics and attack to equip you with a more aggressive playing style. It can also afford you opportunities for learning, particularly when used as a training method. For example, if you needed to generate ideas from a specific position, say out of some opening variation, play 10 or 20 (even better, 50 or 100) speed games from that position with a willing partner. You'll definitely understand much more about where you might go, and probably come up with a few new wrinkles in the process.

But Blitz can frown on you if you play too much of it just before serious chess. You wouldn't want to get into the habit of making superficially quick decisions when you have far more time at your disposal. Moreover, you should avoid playing speed chess too quickly. If you're interested in higher quality fast chess, a time control of 5 minutes is much better than one of 3 minutes. Forget about the bullet chess version (one minute per side) that has become so popular on the Internet. In real life that's been known to reduce even bystanders to blithering idiot status.

Overall, I recommend blitz chess, as long as it's suitable to the situation and done for profit or fun, which I believe are excellent criteria for doing most things, chess not excluded.

Question I love your column. I have a question for you! As White, I love to open with d4, particularly with 1.d4 and 2.c4. Now I know that a good way to practice is to look over games played by grandmasters or champions. Is there a collection of games from a person who is most notorious for opening with d4 and c4 as their style of play as white and black? If so, I think this person's collection of games would be right up my alley! **Vinn Piskorski (USA)**

Answer Making a recommendation here is not as easy as you might think. That's because beginning with 1. d4 can lead to dramatically different developments, depending on how you or someone else follows up. You could play it slowly, trying to nurse home positional advantages, as in the Exchange Variation of the Queen's Gambit. Or you could play it directly and aggressively, using it to open the center and promote immediate attacks, as in the Colle.

Furthermore, those who typically started with d2-d4 back in the 1920s didn't meet with the quality and variety of responses thrown at d-pawn players these days. I don't know enough about you to answer specifically, but for the purposes of this answer, let's assume you might still need to absorb some of the key ideas in the openings you usually employ.

To get an old-time feel for those positions I'd look at the games of Rubinstein and Capablanca. To get a take on today's ideas, and principally the most current ones, I'd look at well-annotated games in journals, magazines, and newspapers. It would also be worthwhile to acquire some computer study tools, with their often limitless source of information. You'll be much more able to find suitable examples there, to support whatever style you want to pursue. Come to think of it, you'll find more of Capablanca and Rubinstein in some electronic storehouses than in any book using paper. And when you factor in supportive material, games and analyses from other players and thinkers on the same openings in the accompanying databases, software may be a far better bargain and way to begin, even if you stumble at first or around first ChessBase. What's in a name?

Question I have been playing chess since I was 8 (I am now 32), but have only taken it "seriously" for the past few years, playing in one or two tournaments a year as my schedule allows. One way I have been able to play more often is through various Internet chess servers. My question concerns the large gap between my OTB rating (around 1030) and my on-line rating (around 1430 for quick games and over 1500 for standard games on USChessLive). What causes this kind of difference in performance? What can I do to improve my OTB game so that it matches my "on-line" game? **Evan Shelton (USA)**

Answer I'm not sure it's possible to match the two, since the conditions under which the ratings are achieved are radically dissimilar. Playing with a mouse or keyboard could never be the same as seizing and moving an actual chess piece. Competing directly against a live opponent, with his or her attendant expressions and body language movements directly impinging on us, could never quite equate to facing a two-dimensional screen in our pajamas.

Furthermore, when the playing pools aren't comparable, as is likely the case, beating a 1200 player online doesn't necessarily mean you'd beat a 1200 player over the board. One set of 1200 players is different from the other. They're similar terms (each type of 1200 player), related words if you will, but not exact synonyms.

And there are still other factors. An online rating is likely to have been achieved at faster speeds, with its concomitant hazards. Faster games are usually (though not always) played more carelessly. It doesn't have to be that way, but that's often the way it goes. What's more, since we can afford to lose online without exposing our identity, many of us are willing to take risks we mightn't take when sitting across the board from a person who hasn't showered all weekend. Factor in the fact that some people (not only among the great unwashed) are particularly good at speed play. If they naturally move more quickly, they tend to turn speed play itself into a winning strategy by keeping the game going as long as possible. For them, the real fun is being down the king's army but winning purely because they can survive a few seconds longer. There are even differences between speed ratings realized online and speed ratings earned, often to one's discredit, over the board.

So many things can account for numerical disparities. I'm not even sure we should bother trying to make the two ratings more parallel. Just accept the truth that they can be (and often are) different, like apples and oranges, rinsed or unrinsed.

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