



ChessCafe.com



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

Rating the Ratings

The Q & A Way

Bruce Pandolfini

Question I'm often bothered by ratings and how some players who aren't all that good get to be masters by winning lots of games against weaker players. I know this is true on the Internet where many A Players beat up on C and B players. People won't even play you unless they think they can beat you or you are "chess challenged." Doesn't a player have an opportunity to get a higher rating just by winning one hundred consecutive rated games against opposition a class beneath them? **Richard Markowitz (USA)**

Answer You're absolutely correct. Anyone who wins a hundred rated games in a row has a real opportunity to gain rating points. In an effort to avoid tautology, we could also point out that some players won't even compete unless they have a good chance to win. But many other players are not afraid to 'play up' because they realize that the competition is more challenging, they're going to learn more, and the payoff for winning is significantly greater.

You're right. A player could garner a higher rating merely by winning many games against weaker opposition (possibly thereby increasing one's rating beyond his or her actual strength). But winning game after game is not a done deal. The possibility of losing or drawing an occasional game is very real, whether the opposition is a mere class below you or "chess challenged." Anyone can blunder, and if you keep playing weaker opposition, your zest for competition is likely to decrease. Meanwhile, a single letdown can cost you a batch of points, and you don't have to be outplayed to falter. You could be crushing your opponent, get cocky, and hang something, like the king. Or you could lose on time, since some unremarkable players can move remarkably rapidly.

Actually, anybody who wins a hundred consecutive games against adversaries one class beneath them is not only very lucky, he's probably very deserving of





his higher rating. My advice to you is this: think less about the accuracy of your opponent's rating and more about the quality of your own moves. That, in correspondence, will probably improve your numbers, if not your game.

Question Recently I sought advice on how to improve my game. More specifically, a sample study program. The advice I received was to study 1 and 2 move mates and combinations along side with the more positional aspects of the game. The time specified was a couple of years! Really? 1 and 2 move mates and combinations for a couple of years?! Would this be an example of just generic advice? I don't doubt the recommender's qualifications, nor his wisdom, but if I'm to study such simple combinations for years on end, I MIGHT be a good player in 10 years! Perhaps I am just an impatient American! Please comment, console, and/or quell my impatient fears. I guess the real question is, how badly do I wish to improve? **Andrew Keifer (USA)**

Answer There is nothing inherently wrong with the advice the sample study program provided. Solving one- and two-move mates is surely not an inefficacious idea, though I wouldn't automatically equate the number of moves you must find to the level of difficulty you face. Less may be more, and often is. Moreover, if you want to develop your tactical skill, it's generally desirable to rely on actual positions rather than composed problems with circumstances not naturally applying to typical chess games.

Though finding mating tactics can be fun and is usually profitable, you may have other immediate needs that should be tackled first. Perhaps you should be concentrating your efforts on openings, principles, planning, pawn play, the endgame, or something else. Nor is there any reason that you have to work on a particular course for a specific period, such as 2 years, 2-and-a-quarter years, 1.56 years, or some other irrational figure (perhaps pi or an uplifting transcendental number) pulled from the abyss of some deviser's mind without any inherent logic for the program it's supposed to support.

Every one of these lamebrain notions has virtually no didactic value when applied to real people. But somehow it's been ingrained into us that unless the instruction is rigorously laid out, with precise steps in sequence – as if it were a scientifically determined regimen -- it can't possibly work. I'd like to inflict great mental pain on some of the espousers of these sophomorically contrived and tortuous systems, but society has its rules, too. (I was thinking maybe they could be tied to a chair in front of a computer terminal and forced to fend for their nourishment by passing their own tests for a period of no less than a year.) It's because everyone is unique that I don't like giving advice before I've had a chance to analyze who I'm giving advice to. Accordingly, you might consider turning to a strong player or teacher to evaluate your game before locking yourself into a programmer's bemused agenda for the next couple of eons.

As a rule, don't trust anyone who doesn't want to know who you are. Teachers who care about you ask questions about you. They might want to know your age, when you first learned to play, how you learned, how long you've been

playing, how often you play, which chess books you've read, which chess books you have but haven't read, who you play, the time controls you typically play under, how much time you have to study (daily and weekly), if you have a rating, how good you think you really are, how you feel about tournament play, what your occupation is, or what grade you're in, what things you turn to for fun, what non-chess books you've read recently, what your hobbies are, what you think you need to work on the most to improve your chess, how you're affected by competition, if you like playing on the Internet, if you enjoy regular assignments, what you think your strong and weak points are, whether or not you can hack being questioned and scrutinized in the first place. I don't know of any programmed chess instruction that does or assesses those kinds of things tolerably.

The teacher should also test-and-check you a bit (okay, computer chess programs do attempt to do that, but usually without satisfying resolution), to see how you analyze, cope with certain situations, and frankly what things you know and don't know. Only after all this analysis and questioning and testing, and possibly much more, should a teacher begin to make suggestions to help you. Then and only then are you being treated as an individual with personalized requirements. Of course, as a student, you don't have to seek and even demand such an effort from the teacher or program. You could just accept "generic" advice and see where that gets you. It will probably get you to the place most people get to, but I suspect you'd rather be somewhere else. It's possible to pass go and get there right now.

Question Is a high lightning rating more than just an indication of a player's ability to memorize opening moves? Sometimes I wonder. **Karl Meyer (USA)**

Answer Knowing opening variations is certainly a key ingredient in successful blitz play, but hardly the only one. Your speed play is definitely enhanced by factors such as aggressiveness, tactical facility, confidence, resourcefulness, mental toughness, concentration, alertness, awareness of the clock, coolness under fire, and even pure reflexes. I'm sure I'm leaving some things out, so you may want to be careful not to deceive yourself into thinking it's solely a matter of opening knowledge. It's best to save deceptions for the chessboard and unsuspecting opponents.

Question I have been playing chess regularly for a little over a year now. I mainly play computer opponents (various chess engines and Chessmaster 9000 personalities) as there is no local club (though I'm working on changing that) and for various reasons I have a disdain for playing on the Internet. While I have no real rating, I currently seem to have about an even record with Chessmaster personalities that are put at about 1400-1500.

My question concerns the computer analysis I put most of my games through in Chessmaster. How useful is this and can I get more benefit out of it than I currently am? Specifically, when the program gives the main line of a move it didn't like with the recommended move, it compares the material exchanged in

each circumstance. I have always had the impression that I was getting a tactical analysis with little or no weight given to positional considerations. Though I realize the importance of studying tactics at my level, when I play I'm not always playing for material. This was underscored with a game I just had analyzed. I had just promoted a pawn and aside from the new Queen and the Kings, there were only a couple of pawns for each side on the far end of the board that had no chance to promote before the axe fell. As my King moved in for the standard K and Q vs K mate, not only did the computer not note the inevitable until three moves from the end, but it was still considering pawns gained or lost with this move as opposed to that move even over the fat lady's familiar refrain. Deck chairs on the Titanic and all, and this from a program that never fails to note the forced mate in ten that I missed.

So how should I take this analysis? How do the benefits of going over the game on my own or with a stronger human player compare? To be sure, it finds a great many errors, explaining why my game fell apart several moves later and the like. Can I expect much more? **Joe Iannandrea (Canada)**

Answer For most chess software, move evaluations are based almost exclusively on concrete elements, with overwhelming emphasis placed on material and forcing variations. Intangible factors, such as positional pluses and minuses, are very hard to quantify meaningfully. As good as they've become, algorithmic move-generators like ChessMaster 9000 simply don't appreciate fine points and immaterial considerations adequately. Of course, chessplaying programs usually don't have to. Even with their simplistic methods of assessment, computers typically play in the 2,500 realm or better. That's good enough to flatten most of us who think we play this game at a decent level.

I applaud the efforts of code writers busily trying to create diagnostics to help you understand your play, but they have a long way to go. You can usually get a much more pertinent and nuanced investigation of your game from a qualified teacher or coach. Nonetheless, computers do have great value, and routinely perform certain operations with greater reliance than humans.

For that reason you might try employing both methods. Use the computer at the outset. It will spell out obvious things and calculations probably better than most human observers. It's also apt to weigh certain moves and possibly criteria, which could be important, that the human mind might dismiss. But then follow up with a second analysis from a recognized expert. He or she will probably point out things the computer didn't appreciate in turn. By using both tools – the computer and the human expert – you'll wind up getting a fuller slice of reality. That's the way I think I'd go, shooting for the big picture with every possible weapon in the arsenal.

Question In one sense, when I look at games played by 1600 players and 1800 players, there doesn't seem to be much of a difference. Isn't the distinction a little bit arbitrary? Aren't the two classes (A & B) practically alike? **Johnny Mason (USA)**

Answer Try telling that to B-players who continually lose to A-players and see what they say. But actually, you have a point. Aside from the A-Player's undeniable superiority in opening knowledge, tactical awareness, endgame understanding, positional insight, analytic ability, and essentially more challenging experiences, the two classes are virtually indistinguishable.

Question What is the rating difference between FIDE and the US. I ask this because when I go to look at the ratings of my top favorite players like Kasparov, Kramnik, Ivanchuk etc, who are in the top twenty or less, I notice that like always, with there enormously high ratings, they are in there usual spots for their world rankings. But on the other hand, when I look up the ratings of the US players, I notice that there are quite a few at about 2650 and up (I think about twenty or so), and this would be great if I could convince myself that they are really there. The reason for this is that when I am looking up world rankings and such I see (excuse the butchered names) names such as Gregory Kaidanov (2742), Alexander Onischuk (2736), Boris Gulko (2705), Alexander Shabalov (2700) which are all 4! of the 2700 or above players that we have in the US. But they are nowhere in sight for world rankings. Gregory Kaidanov (2742) is FIDE 2624 (ranked 70th in the world), Alexander Onischuk (2736) is FIDE 2661 (ranked 36th in the world), Boris Gulko (2705) is not even in the FIDE top 100, from what I saw. Anyway maybe it's because there are only a few top rated players in the US, so our best players win most of the time, or maybe they use a different rating formula than us? Anyway thanks for your insights. **Jeremy Williams (USA)**

Answer With slight deviations, both the USCF and FIDE depend on the basic method for calculating ratings developed by Arpad Elo in the late 1950s and early 1960s. These variations have somewhat changed over time, ever since Professor Elo formulated his first statistical approach. But a key reason for many of the discrepancies you might find lies in the fact that neither FIDE nor the USCF rates all the other's events. FIDE, for instance, only rates FIDE-sanctioned tournaments.

For the most part, USCF ratings tend to be somewhat higher than their FIDE counterparts, though not by necessity. It also works the other way. Some players with FIDE ratings are indeed several classes weaker than their rating implies. Still, at the top and bottom echelons, the numbers are fairly indicative of the individual's place on the list.

Question First of all, I must admit that I'm unfamiliar with how chess computers are programmed, but I was curious. Often one is presented a situation in which a choice of two moves seems to be entirely equal, and it isn't until later in the game that you realize that you could have saved a tempo or gained a positional advantage by choosing one move over the other. Are computers capable of such in depth analysis now, or will they play flawlessly in the future? **Gene Pegg (USA)**

Answer Chess is a very complex game. As good as computers are at calculating

forced variations, they're programmed to compute only so far in unclear conditions. They'll go as far as their "horizon" will take them. People only look so far as well, especially when they can't find their way. In those instances the human mind is more likely to rely on a sophisticated generalization, which may indeed receive the largest part of its vigor from intuition. Regardless of who is playing the moves, or analyzing them, whether the impulses are electronic or anthropomorphic, it's not atypical for certain determinants to become evident later on, far beyond the analytic stopping point. That feature of the game adds to its peculiar charm. Suddenly we can be hit with something unexpectedly startling that reveals an underlying truth. Computers are not omniscient or omnipotent. They can't see everything, and they certainly can't do everything. Not yet.

Copyright 2004 Bruce Pandolfini. All Rights Reserved.

[Yes, I have a question for Bruce!](#)



[TOP OF PAGE](#)



[HOME](#)



[COLUMNS](#)



[LINKS](#)



[ARCHIVES](#)



[ABOUT THE
CHESS CAFE](#)

[\[ChessCafe Home Page\]](#) [\[Book Review\]](#) [\[Bulletin Board\]](#) [\[Columnists\]](#)
[\[Endgame Study\]](#) [\[Skittles Room\]](#) [\[Archives\]](#)
[\[Links\]](#) [\[Online Bookstore\]](#) [\[About ChessCafe\]](#) [\[Contact Us\]](#)

Copyright 2004 CyberCafes, LLC. All Rights Reserved.

"**The Chess Cafe®**" is a registered trademark of Russell Enterprises, Inc.