



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

We All Need Goals -

The Q & A Way

Bruce Pandolfini

Reasonable Ones

Question I play chess because I love the game. I don't mind losing if I learn something from it, however. I recently realized that I was losing too often to better rated players because I expected too. I set about playing less blitz, playing the board more than the rating, doing some visualization training and tactics. In 6 weeks my ICC rating has gone 1350 to 1500. My question is about setting myself some goals linked to rating points. Is 1800 by Dec 2005 reasonable? Has anybody done any comparisons of ratings to school exams such as 1400=GCSE, 1800=A level, 2000=First year Uni- if not could you hazard a guess or is it too arbitrary. My main goal will always be to continue to enjoy the game but I do feel that with a deeper understanding that will hopefully also be accompanied by increased enjoyment. (I am 33 and generally spend at least an hour per day studying chess.) **Michael Tanner (UK)**

Answer I can't say how well ICC ratings correlate to English school exams. Generally, ICC ratings are subject to a range of factors. That is, they're achieved under unreliable conditions: with different time controls, at various times of day, often at pressured moments, such as when one has only a few minutes at work, and sometimes after adjourning, when positions could be analyzed and outside sources consulted. Since many of the games are contested under such wildly undefined circumstances, direct comparisons are hard to make. We just don't know for sure that we're comparing the same things.

It's sensible to set yourself goals, as long as they're reasonable and attainable. But I think it would be imprudent to attempt to do too much too quickly. That's a formula for failure.



Three hundred points is a lot to gain. Even though you're allowing yourself two years to complete the task, that's quite a period of time to wait for positive reinforcement. It's easy to lose heart before reaching your goal. Accordingly, we can see why many teachers assign problem books of 100-200 examples, rather than immense tomes that can take forever to complete.

Try to establish smaller goals over shorter durations rather than bigger goals over longer stretches. We all need signs of progress. It's easy to become stuck on a learning plateau, where, in the face of uncertainty, apparent lack of improvement can sap our willingness to continue.

You would be better served, I think, by setting yourself shorter-term goals, say something on the order of three months. Instead of trying to move ahead by a certain number of rating points, be content with any gain whatsoever. If you take away the unnecessary pressure of having to reap anything numerical at all, and just approach the project for fun and stimulation, you're apt to be rewarded for your efforts anyway and wind up feeling better in the bargain. Most progress requires push, and surely we can push faster if unfettered by unnecessary and illogical constraints.

You've already shown an informed approach to study. You're willing to lose if it results in learning. You're not afraid to play up, against higher rated players. You've stopped playing so much fast chess in order to improve your analytic skills. You understand the importance of visualization and the value of solving tactical exercises. And generally you're open to suggestions and evidently willing to work. My advice is to continue in the same enlightened way and now take the next step. Worry a little less about ratings and regimented progression and simply let yourself experience the pleasure and challenge of pure play. I'm not saying that you shouldn't study and practice chess. Of course you should. It can be joyful and most satisfying. But do so divorced from required gains and adherence to timed curricula and you're bound to acquire far more than you sacrifice. With your obvious passion for chess you're going to improve no matter what. Think how much more enriching your chess time will be if you spend it with peace of mind.

Question With the proliferation of Chess CD's -- some of which are prior books -
- I read somewhere that content from the CD is retained up to 80% better than from the same book. I am now thinking that maybe I will purchase the CD rather than the book -- same content -- to further my retention of the material. I realize the drawbacks -- a book being more portable -- but it may be worth a try. What do you think of CD vs. the book? **John Henry (Canada)**

Answer Chess is a visual game. It doesn't require words as much as it does clear and distinct pictures. (Coming from me, that may sound strange, for I have done several instructional books consisting mainly of words. I was deluded, it was often very late at night, I was reading too much Arthur Schopenhauer, and frankly he had very few illustrations in his books.)

On screen the images can jump out at you, and there are all kinds of things you can do with them, aside from the illegal or immoral. You can enlarge them, highlight them, draw on them, and even write on them. Within the program, you can find them quickly, going back and forth between them at will and caprice. You can print them out for transport and affixation to a page, or for transported rapture and unadulterated fixation. You have the added benefit of not having to work with a board. That means you can save scads of time you would have wasted setting and resetting the positions. By having the ability to light-speed ahead or backward, you can hone your art of analysis to unexpected levels of insight, without ever having to fear loss of position or just getting lost. A simple stimulus from the mouse will get you back to where you were, if that's the place you suddenly want to be.

Since you can click your way from example to example, you can do so much more in the course of a keyboard session than you could in the checkered confines of light-and-dark squares. Boards and pieces have dimension, but, in the domain of conception, that's flatland. I'm not even sure books will be more portable in the future. We can already carry around devices that offer hundreds of tomes in the same compass. So there's really no comparison. Software is most definitely the better way to go. That doesn't mean you shouldn't buy any paper books. You don't have to use them, just buy them, even if they cost too much and are produced by people who injudiciously leave out diagrams. You'd be surprised what your allegiance would mean to them and their friends the trees.

Question I have started playing chess on the Internet and am enjoying it immensely. As I've not played for a long time, I've referred to my two chess books: "Kasparov Teaches Chess" (Gary Kasparov, Batsford) and "Chess Fundamentals" (Jose Capablanca, Cadogan Chess) by way of preparation. Both are small paperbacks and are pitched at my level, but they are annoying because they won't stay open at the current page. Do you know of any books at a similar standard with a spiral binding or similar that will open flat and stay open at the page? **Ian Hobbs (England)**

Answer Very few books have been done this way. Years ago Reinfeld did two or three though their names elude me. Horowitz also published at least one. I can't remember what it was called either. Some scholastic organizations, such as Chess-in-the-Schools, may have produced workbooks to this effect. But nothing like a current title really comes to mind. On the other hand, many worthwhile texts are now available over the Internet, which you've recently taken to. And efficacious software chess books are starting to proliferate. You might check out some of those possibilities.

There are also all kinds of mechanical things you can do on your own. You can photocopy a book and then spread the pages out. You can scan a book and then work with it on screen. You can even cut up a book and deal with it in separate page form. It is, by the way, perfectly okay to brutalize a book if you put it to meaningful use (and if you own it). That is, you can "destroy" the actual thing in

reality if it allows you to “save” an ideality, to paraphrase certain military people. Other than hiring someone to hold down the book for you, you might simply employ a clasp. They still make very big ones, and the biggest can place even Kasparov and Capablanca in proper perspective, if not on the same page.

Question In all answers you give when you are referring to solving problems you insist on solving the problem without moving the pieces. I even saw a movie some time ago with Ben Kingsley as the instructor and a miracle boy (sorry, I forgot the title). Kingsley set up the pieces for the boy to look at. Then he threw them on the floor. Is this just a Hollywood trick? Can you please explain: what is the gain when you solve a problem without moving the pieces?
Ilias Traganidas (Greece)

Answer In chess we try to look ahead to see the consequences of our actions. In order to improve that skill we have to train by analyzing and calculating moves in our minds. To practice visualizing, you have to rely on your synapses, neurons, and self-discipline.

If you don't move the pieces, you force yourself to foresee what might happen. Practicing using your imaging abilities leads to immediate chessic gain: you get, with rigorous application, the ability to predetermine and hopefully control the future (of the game). Let's face it. During play, nobody is going to let you check out a variation on the board to fathom if it allows you to beat them. So you're going to have to see your way to the truth. If you don't prepare for such envisioning ahead of time, how will you ever be secure enough to do this in direct competition? By magic? Those kinds of tricks should be left for editing rooms and Hollywood's special effects. That's where they seem to work best.

Question What is the best way for me to study my own games? **Miguel Chavez (El Salvador)**

Answer There is no one best way to study your own games. You are an individual, your games are individual to you, and your methods must therefore be, individual. To quote Monty Python: we are all individuals. If there is a best way, it's merely the way that works best for you. Nonetheless, I will suggest a few things just as a platform from which to springboard. You can modify what I outline here as you ascertain what appears to be more appropriate to your personal needs.

Record your games somewhere, either in a notebook or, since you obviously have access to a computer, in an electronic file. A tool like ChessBase would be ideal because of its ease of use, visual impact, and enormous databases. But that item is relatively expensive and not necessarily immediately available.

After recording a particular game somewhere, play over it and write out your analysis. I would play through it at least twice, once from your side and once from your opponent's vantage point. You'd be amazed what can be discerned from another perspective. Constantly looking at games from the adversarial

outlook particularly develops your defensive skills, which are often neglected.

Wherever you have doubts, make notes. Perhaps you know strong players and maybe you can ask them questions about situations that stumped you. You can also send questions into various Internet services, such as the ChessCafe and, for instance, Gary Lane's excellent column on the openings. If it's feasible for you, you might consider taking a lesson here and there from a chess teacher or strong player in which you specifically get those annoying questions answered. It should be sufficient to take one of those sessions every month or so as material accumulates.

However you proceed, especially try to understand key moments on which certain games seemed to turn. Figure out, if you can, how you could have avoided unpleasant consequences by playing alternative moves that would have thwarted the looming threats. This way you'll tie your play and study together so that you're tackling relevant problems. Generally, the more diagrams and visual aids you can exploit the better. Fortunately, with many kinds of chess software, you can print out diagrams, so there's no need to draw them by hand. I would cut these out (the printed ones) and affix them to books, index cards, loose-leaf pages, even walls and surfaces that come under constant view.

Once able to determine a definite problem that pesters you, try to find illustrative paradigms from good players that cope with the same difficulties. How does Kasparov deal with that opening? How did Kramnik survive that assault? How had Anand played that ending? You can't cover everything. But if you try to find reasonable answers and make useful associations, over time you'll add to your knowledge and gradually improve your play. So, there are many ways to go. Just stay alert and approach chess and its interplay with focus and inquiring mind. Those two qualities can never hurt you.

Question For White I play fine against the Sicilian Defense. My favorite system is Rossolimo's variation, with 3. Bb5. With White when I play 1. d4 I like it when my opponent goes into a King's Indian but not a Gruenfeld. I'm also having trouble sometimes with the Benoni and I don't like to play against the Benko. That's why I'm going to stick with 1. e4 and try to get either a Rossolimo or maybe a wing gambit, which I've had success with. I'm not sure what I should be doing, although I currently owe a word of thanks to Eric Schiller's books on Unorthodox Openings and Standard Openings. Schiller gives facts, and I like that. My question is I notice that you often give long answers to short questions. Do you ever do it the opposing way, getting right to the point? **J. J. Tripoli (USA)**

Answer Occasionally.

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