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The Q & A Way

Bruce Pandolfini



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!

Before the Ideal the Gods Have Placed the Real

Question Capablanca once said that "Chess should be learned starting with the endgame." I have been playing for 1½ years in tournaments and I am getting to the 1500 USCF level. In my personal training I have stayed away from studying openings. Recently, I started taking lessons with a local GM and he suggests that we should put my opening repertoire together first. Coincidentally, I was reading *How to Be a Complete Tournament Player* by Edmar Mednis and he is very adamant about spending most of the training time in the opening. As a chess instructor, what are your comments on the relative importance of opening study and repertoire design for the adult aspiring 1500 player? **Donald Dabdub (USA)**

Answer Back in the sixties, when I first began grokking the game, many authorities believed that the proper way to study chess was by starting with the endgame. There were a number of reasons for following that course, but one principal prevailed: several of the greatest chessplayers of the early twentieth century (namely Capablanca and Tarrasch) advocated it. Capablanca's *Chess Fundamentals* and Tarrasch's *The Game of Chess* were books that everyone treated as Gospel. And indeed, the views espoused and exemplified in those vaults of wisdom are convincing.

Their reasons for starting with the endgame were essentially threefold. Endgames can assert the power of the pieces in their purest form; endgame concepts and positions are often simpler to grasp; and endgame situations tend to resolve into finality, thus keeping us focused on the goal. While their reasoning is understandable, it's a little bookish. Neither Capablanca nor Tarrasch had the benefit of actually working with hundreds and even thousands of students directly, to test out their views in practice, not just in scholarly abstraction. Freed from having to deal with the reality of people, they could afford the luxury of pursuing conceptual ideality on paper.

Intellectually, the gods of chess may have been right on. Yet because they hadn't done very much heavy duty teaching, they weren't cognizant of serious practical problems that can thwart the learning process. It's a fact: even if a teacher puts forth the arguments and reasons for doing something articulately, cogently, and patiently, the attempt to persuade another individual of a position he or she isn't willing to accept is doomed to failure psychologically. Regardless how well present day teachers explain the logic of starting with the endgame first, they are constantly hit with comebacks such as: "But I never get to the endgame." I doubt that either

Capablanca or Tarrasch had to concern themselves that much with such protestations.

Naturally, teachers have answers. The more one studies anything the more likely it will begin to occur in one's own games. Learning about the endgame also helps students find out how to get to one. Still many students won't learn the endgame satisfactorily or see their play improve significantly because underneath it all they won't accept the truth of what they're hearing. Their own fears and prejudices are apt to put them in conflict with their own best interests. The result is that their passion for study may very well be sapped from the start.

That's one reason many teachers don't automatically emphasize any particular phase at all. Of course they might introduce opening principles and some useful variations. But they'll also feature the types of tactics that are likely to arise from those openings. And they may also examine with their students typical pawn structures relating to the openings under question – not just as they bear on middlegame strategy, but also on how they might conduce to certain kinds of endgames.

Instructors who take this more holistic approach, trying to study all phases and none in particular; tend to touch upon motifs as they become appropriate. For example, rather than showing how to win with an extra pawn in some manufactured framework, they'll wait until the opportunity materializes in one of the student's own games, where the student is a pawn up. Then they'll introduce the theory as they play off a specific position that means something to the student. When teachers wish to discuss planning, they'll springboard from individual positions in which the student had real-game trouble. Nor do such pragmatic practitioners necessarily teach openings they themselves especially like, unless it's truly apposite to the student's needs. Instead they develop a repertoire they think applies to that student, naturally adjusting it over time as new bits of information come in and the program must be modified.

In a way, this method of instruction fits nicely into the Mednis overview on the matter. He placed greater emphasis on opening study, despite the fact that he was a leading expert in endgame presentation. In some of his finest books, Mednis took the position that if you start your study with certain openings you could connect to many other pertinent ideas in the other two phases. Using the opening as a launching pad, you could segue into tactics, pawns structures, planning, and casebook endgames that are likely to result from those very openings. This is surely a more organic way of handling things, studying without boundaries and in context.

It's doubtful that there's one and only one way to study chess. And regardless what Tarrasch had to say about starting with the endgame ("the simplest part of the game"), wasn't it also Tarrasch who offered the *bon mot* that before the endgame the gods have placed the middlegame? Maybe he was onto something – both times. As long as the grandmaster you've contracted cares what happens to you, I think you should trust his advice. Look where his kind of thinking has gotten him.

Question I am a big fan of both Charousek and Leonid Stein. Is there anyway you could include more games from them in your Solitaire Chess column in Chess Life? I love Stein because I am learning the KIA and I love Charousek because I am learning the open game to improve my tactics, and no one played tactics better than Charousek. Thanks. **Jeff Hall (USA)**

Answer Like you, I admire Stein, though I suggest the reason you offer – that you are learning the KIA – to be a bit off the mark. If we put our heads together I'm sure we could find better reasons for revering him. I also appreciate the tactics of Charousek when he played at his best, though I admit I find it a tad curious to

suggest that his was the highest level of tactical play ever achieved. I think Capablanca, Alekhine, Keres, Tal, Spassky, Fischer, Alekhine, and Kasparov would have kicked his aggressive butt. But I will do what I can. It's what I do best and it's the least I can do.

Question I am preparing a Birthday Wish List for a March 18th deadline. One of the works on the list is one of yours. As I was impressed sometime ago by your *Weapons of Chess*, I have been searching for more of your works locally. The book *Traps and Zaps* looks to be a grand enhancement over earlier works that exclude much desired analyses. But I am new enough to chess to be led astray by omissions and errors that I wouldn't notice on my own. A couple of folks are critical of such weaknesses in *Traps and Zaps*. May I ask if there are plans to revise this one? I could bide my time with reading over David LeMoir's recent *Essential Chess Sacrifices* while I await an update to what surely appears another noteworthy work of yours. **Mike Smalley (USA)**

Answer I'm afraid I've missed your birthday, so there's not much I can do this year. You'll have to wait until next year to see what can be done about all the typos, shallow concepts, incorrect analysis, busted problems, messed up diagrams, uselessly impractical examples, inelegant expressions, and wretched writing I've been prone to, let alone attempting to introduce all the other higher qualities found wanting in my work. It pains me no end, for I have no one to blame but myself. Perhaps my publisher will allow me to clean up my act in time for my own birthday, assuming I may still have one. If so, I'll let you know and you can take the new edition out of the library. Until then, I suggest you stay with Mr. LeMoir's excellent book. I too think it's worth your time and effort.

Question Our state, Colorado, recently held its annual open scholastic championship tournament and I noticed that the Elementary School section (K-3 and 4-6 grade) games featured the same openings. Almost every top game began 1.e4 e5. The Middle School (7-9 grade) and High School (10-12) sections, showed much more opening variety, but most of the top players' openings reflected their coaches' tastes, with several players repeating sometimes obscure lines as White and Black. At what age/ability level do you focus on specialized openings? Also, do you teach a specific opening repertoire to your students, or do you try to give the students more freedom of choice, even at the possible expense, in the short run, of less practical success? **Dan Avery (USA)**

Answer Generally, I don't focus on any particular opening variations. I tend to commence with discussions of opening principles. From the beginning I'd probably emphasize the center, development, the initiative, king safety, mobility, and several other important dos and don'ts. If I needed some opening lines to illustrate those concepts, I'd rely on king-pawn games, especially double king-pawn ones, simply because they're easier to understand and there are many more examples of a shorter nature from which to choose; long variations are liable to eviscerate didactic value. Later on I'd likely move to asymmetrical king-pawn games before illustrating queen-pawn ones, inasmuch as queen-pawn beginnings tend to be harder for newcomers to assimilate with all their nuances.

But there are no hard and fast rules here. If a coach truly believes in something else, that's okay if he or she can pull it off. Whatever works, works. Nonetheless, I do think a coach's task is less demanding in the straightforward double king-pawn lines, at least at first. Of course, there are always students who want to go their own way, trying everything new and unusual under the sun. I would advise them against such undertakings, and I'd give the reasons for my objections. Teachers should be willing to explain their rationales just to show that their thinking is not arbitrary.

If students remain resistant, however, I'd let them follow their personal choices.

They will eventually learn the right or better way over the course of time, mostly by getting their chess heads beaten in repeatedly. Few of us are going to continue traveling along a losing path that goes nowhere if we find evidence of a better path that goes somewhere. Besides, there are always some young people who will take a bad or wrong idea and as adults somehow show why it's good or right. Those are the people who change our world to enrich all of us. I don't think we should stop them.

Question I have ChessMaster 9000 which I think is fabulous. However I do have a complaint: have you checked the grammar in the annotated games? It's absolutely

Unbelievable, there are so many mistakes that it spoils what is otherwise a superb product. I would be more than happy to proof-read the next version. Is there a CM 10000 planned? **Martin Mills (USA)**

Answer I don't have a ChessMaster 9000, but I suspect the product is indeed fabulous, even with if what you say about the troublesome grammar in the annotated games is correct. I will pass on your comments to the company, along with your e-mail address. In the event that there's a ChessMaster 10000 on the horizon, perhaps they will consider your help in proofreading the content. You never know.

Question I have only recently tried to improve my chess skills to become a better player. I have been looking at *Bookup*, a software program to work on your chess. Do you know anything about the program? Is it worth my while to use the program?
Jerry Bengtson (USA)

Answer Since I don't know anything about you, or sadly much about the product in recent times, I'd be hard pressed to say how much it might be able to help you. But I will say this. The firm has a good reputation and Mike Leahy, its creator, is respected for the quality of his work. If I remember correctly, years ago I had an electronic collection of Alekhine's games created by Bookup that I liked very much. I think there's a version of one of their products you can get for free as a test. If so, why don't you try it and see if it works for you. That's the only way you can tell for sure.

Question I've been playing non-blitz computer chess over the Internet for a number of years, to the point of not even seeing how high the dust had accumulated on my wooden board and pieces. Now I have joined a chess club, am playing people over the board in rated tournaments, and have found that my Internet exploits have in many ways been more of a hindrance than a help. I do not see the whole board as I would if looking at a chess diagram on a computer screen. So oftentimes I miss obvious opportunities or just make dumb mistakes. I have to force myself to write down my moves, something which the computer automatically did for me. I have to remember to start my opponent's clock after I make my move; I have on more than one occasion lost a game due to time trouble just because I forgot until it was too late to start the other guy's clock. And I have to deal with staring onlookers -- albeit, mostly quiet ones -- and the idiosyncrasies of different players; one fellow continuously cracks his knuckles when it's not his turn, another moans, groans, and contorts his face like he is in pain when he is thinking, and the list goes on. I am sure that I am not the only one who has experienced these things and, in time, they should not be as problematic as they are now. Nonetheless, I have not read of the dangers of playing one-hundred percent of the time over the Internet, even in USCF rated real-time Internet games. Do you have any thoughts on the subject? **Michael Hyman (USA)**

Answer Almost all the grumblings I hear are about the dangers of speed chess as practiced on the Internet. For many people it's played at too fast a clip for their satisfaction and benefit. I can't say, however, I've received comments that detail

what playing on the Internet can do to spoil your enjoyment of over-the-board play in chess clubs all that often. It seems quite obvious that you have a right to feel more comfortable with Internet play.

Maybe you shouldn't go to the club as much. Perhaps they could even refund a portion of your fee, before it's too late. There must be some excuse that could move them. Otherwise, you might be able to persuade the management to get some computer terminals for the club premises. That way you could combine the best of both worlds, playing at the club but with an interface that keeps score and time. Still, I must admit that particular solution wouldn't eliminate the idiosyncratic behavior of your fellow club members. Their peculiarities tend to be beyond the control of reasonable people, nor are Caissa's eccentric children known for their spirit of compromise. So it's hard to say how to proceed. Where's Bobby Fischer when you really need him?

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