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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

Sometimes You Just Have to Try

The Q & A Way

Bruce Pandolfini



Question Thank you for your excellent column at the Chesscafe! I always look forward to reading your updates. I have a question for you concerning chess classes. I am currently rated in the 1500's, and everything that I have learned has come from books and my computer. I have been considering going to a chess coach, but I come from a town that doesn't have a very large chess community. I know that there is one person who offers lessons, and he is rated around 2000. I realize that he can probably destroy me in every game, but do you feel that someone of his rating would have a good enough grasp on the game to be able to teach well? I am mostly interested in positional and strategic ideas, as I can practice tactics easily on my computer at home. Thanks very much for any advice that you would have about this! **Kirk Sloan (USA)**

Answer There are strong players who can't teach and capable teachers who can't play. It doesn't automatically follow that if you can do one you can do the other, or that if you can't do one you can't do the other.

Generally, the first category of recognized "good player" is the A class. That is, an A player knows enough and has sufficient tools to be able to win a won game. The same really can't be said for players below 1800, though some 1799 players may want to mount a counterargument. There are simply too many ways to go wrong, and most of us, whether considering tactical or strategic questions, will find them. Accordingly, though not necessarily, most of us can derive value if our teacher possesses an established rating of 1800 or better, though some 1799 players may want to mount a counterargument.

On the other hand, it might be more important that one's mentor be a good teacher than a good player. Unfortunately, it's harder to quantify teaching ability. As a rule, an effective teacher should know his or her subject well enough to explain the fundamentals clearly and correctly. Beyond that good teachers care about the quality of their work and what happens to their students (okay, there are exceptions). But these qualities don't lend themselves to numerical evaluation, so it may be tough to recognize them before we've spent some time in a person's presence.

Certainly, anyone who knows more than you do may be able to help you. But if we must talk numbers, as a rule, it makes sense that the person trying to improve your play be at least two rungs of experience above you. Since USCF rating classes roughly correspond to levels of real understanding, veteran observers tend to recommend that one seek a teacher rated at least 400 rating points higher.

Nevertheless, I wouldn't follow this suggestion absolutely. People comparable to you in strength can still help because their experience is greater than yours or they are really skilled at the teaching craft. Moreover, there are specialists who can help even though clearly weaker than the person they're trying to assist, as is evident from the fact that Kasparov profits from trainers he could crush 6-0 in a match. But these situations are rare and not to be counted on.

Actually, I'd like to suggest another approach. Instead of focusing on ratings or how much stronger a teacher needs to be, why don't you take a lesson from this prospective teacher and see how you think about it afterward? If you feel it works, it probably has, and you've found yourself a coach. If it doesn't work, you should still have gotten something from it. Even a bad teacher has some gold to offer. Usually a few nuggets come out in that first session, when the teacher is trying to make a favorable impression.

If nothing else, that trial lesson should enable you to appreciate a good teacher when he or she eventually comes along, whether it's by direct contact or over a distance, say through the Internet. Ratings may express playing strengths, but that information can't replace your own judgment, which seems quite good and nicely articulated.

Question I was wondering what you'd recommend to avoid or get over the discouragement that you feel when you plateau, not that YOU ever do, but most of us are mere mortals. You mentioned at some point that chess learning is often a quantum process, with little improvement for periods of time followed by sudden jumps. Undeniably, though, the periods of stagnation suck. I follow a regimented training schedule involving lots of tactical exercises with some theory thrown in. Do you have any suggestions how I can get through periods in which I feel I'm going nowhere? **Alan Ward (Canada)**

Answer The truth is I haven't been on a plateau. I've been on a desert, and I've been here so long I'm starting to see mirages of winning moves that hang mate.

There are no quick fixes for solving your problem. You're just going to have to ride it out and survive. Sometimes, in order to do that, we have to take a break. That's why vacations were invented. Possibly, if you can find some other activities to engage your interest, or even if you simply do nothing other than rest, you might whet your appetite for further involvement and come back with just enough renewed vigor to lift you to the next echelon. Besides, even when we stop thinking about a situation consciously our minds still pursue things unconsciously. Taking a desirable hiatus may sacrifice nothing at all. So why not apply a little enforced relaxation to the problem? See some movies or videos you've wanted to see, or read some books you've wanted to read. And none of them have to be about chess or anything remotely like it.

Question I have some books on chess. *Think Like a Grandmaster*, games from Botvinnik, Petrosian, and Capablanca. I also have Chessbase, and I would like to know what is a good plan of study to improve my game? I have some doubts: Should I study the endgame or should I study openings or should I study tactics? How can I plan the middlegame? **Marcel Valasquez (Brazil)**

Answer There are many good approaches, though you can't count on any of them to succeed per force. Yet you probably know this from Ecclesiastes. For now, until you feel experienced enough to make independent decisions on your own study habits, be sure to play plenty of chess.

But don't stop there. Record your games and then analyze them afterward. Since you have Chessbase, rely on it to supply examples that correspond to your own play.

Find the right ways to play the openings you've chosen. Come up with short games that end on characteristic tactics for those openings. Do searches on related pawn structures and see what maneuvers and plans typically ensue. If you get to an endgame, review the ways similar positions are handled by strong players.

It's likely that you're going to be inundated with illustrations, so it might be wise to consider corroborative games played by players of 2500 strength or stronger. It's not that players of lesser numbers don't ever do critically important things. Without doubt, many of them do. Rather it's that you should strive for economy with your time, and competitors of 2500 or better are more likely to have a proper overview.

Finally, if your search hasn't produced what you've wanted, you can always turn to the feature on Chessbase that allows you to check the position against Fritz. See what it comes up with. Test your ideas further by playing them out a number of times against this enormously powerful engine, taking particular note of the way it eats your pawns (and ideas) and turns them against you.

So that's how I'd proceed. I'd play, and then analyze my play, principally by using software implements. And if you're bent on working from books, you might want to pick up two recent efforts that directly relate to use of the new electronic methods. Both *How to Use Computers to Improve Your Chess* by Christian Kongsted (Gambit Publications) and *Chess Software User's Guide* by Byron Jacobs, Jacob Aargaard, and John Emms (Everyman Chess) are excellent texts with lots of well-presented, useful ideas illustrating the implementation of the new tools. If you're going to study chess at the keyboard, I'd make the investment in acquiring these two worthwhile volumes.

Question What benefits are to be gained by forcing yourself into unfamiliar circumstances and/or far-ranging discussions with diverse populations of people?
Sandra J. Diva (USA)

Answer None.

Question Most chessplayers and some casual observers know that Bobby Fischer beat Boris Spassky (12½ to 8½) for the World Championship. However the streak of 20 wins in a row prior to the Spassky match seems to be a more unbelievable feat. Somewhere I read that White wins about 40%, Black wins about 30%, and the other 30% are draws. Assuming that each game is an independent event, i.e., the probabilities remain constant, we can calculate the probability of Fischer's string of 20 as $(.4)^{20}$ times $(.3)^{20} = 6.1 \times 10^{-10}$ or .0000000006.1 assuming that Fischer played White 10 times and Black 10 times. Did anyone else in the history of chess ever run a string of 20 or more consecutive wins (no draws) that is comparable to what Fischer did? **Dennis Newhart (USA)**

Answer Not really, especially when you factor in Fischer's two shutouts (6-0) of top grandmasters (Larsen and Taimanov). There have been other long winning streaks, but not against that kind of impressive competition. On the other hand, Kasparov has also done some amazing things. He's been in the forefront for twenty years, and he's taken on one serious challenge after the other. I can't think of anyone who has performed comparably to him either. Beyond that, I don't feel good about leaving out the unnamed world champions, as well as fifty other unbelievable chessplayers that could come to mind. I kind of remember they did fairly amazing things too.

Question I was just wondering what you think of the so-called Silman Thinking Technique. **Matthew Hass (USA)**

Answer I think very highly of Jeremy Silman's work. His *Reassess Your Chess* is

one of the finest chess books published in the last twenty years. His “Silman Thinking Technique” is explained in that book. There he argues persuasively in favor of seeking imbalance (“any difference in the two respective positions”), which other authors have described slightly differently as striving for “asymmetry,” though I suspect they mean pretty much the same thing. Essentially Silman shows what these imbalances consist of, how to play for them, and how to utilize them to one’s advantage. He does this admirably, and surely other teachers and students can gain from Jeremy’s outstanding presentation. Employed appropriately, the Silman Thinking Technique is a wonderful way to go about improving your chess.

Question How do you coach your students who have chronic time trouble? I grew up in the late 50's and early 60's playing the classic time limits 40/2. I even remember adjournments in weekend Swisses! I never had time trouble and certainly never lost a tournament game by time forfeit. Slowly but surely, I made progress and my last published USCF rating was 1783. I hadn't played a serious game since 1982 when I formed a team where I worked and starting playing in the Bankers Athletic League ("BAL"), an adult after-work league in New York City, in Autumn 2002. The BAL plays G75. I can't seem to adjust. My rating has plummeted from 1783 to 1627 and falling because I have lost game after game on time, either outright time forfeits or blunders in the mad scramble at the end. What's most galling is I was winning, either materially or positionally, on the board in all those games! And this has occurred against a complete spectrum of opponents, including several much-lower-rated ones. (My record the last two seasons is 5-9-3, the first time in my life I've had a losing record.) I can't seem to find a pattern. Even my wins and draws had time pressure. I'm no GM or IM, but I thought I used to know how to play chess, at least a little, but I'm starting to wonder. I have desperately searched the Web and bookstores for information about time trouble, but can't find a thing. Surely being a good player is more than the board, but hardly anyone writes about it. Please point me in the right direction to defeat the time demon and get back on the winning track. I can't be the only guy who's ever suffered from time trouble. What have we all learned about the problem and why can't I find anything on it to learn from the accumulated wisdom of other chess players? **Michael J. Miciak (USA)**

Answer There is no known antidote for your problem, but there are methods you can apply in hopes of a remedy. You must start by playing many games in which meeting the time control is the chief condition. That doesn't mean you should neglect the quality of your play, but initially time fulfillment should be paramount. Once you get a handle on the situation, and start increasing your confidence in your ability to satisfy time requirements, you should naturally begin to play better as well. That's the theory as espoused by authorities such as Russian icons Botvinnik, Bronstein, and Kotov, and the methodology adopted by many chess teachers. They expect that students will ameliorate the obstacle of the clock by encouraging their students to be mindful of it.

Essentially, we get into time trouble because of uncertainty, because we can't analyze quickly enough and/or with resolution. So improving your analytic skills to the point of efficiency is surely one way to counter the problem, and controlling the amount of analysis we perform is another. Most of us analyze too much. We calculate with great waste and beyond the point of utility.

Obviously, speed chess can be helpful here. In order to avoid forfeiting we have to play more instinctually. In rapid play we are forced to rely more on our intuition and what looks good. Surprisingly, when we analyze less and become more sensitive to structure and pattern, we also become more adept at positional concerns – just the opposite reason for which many of us turn to quick chess for gainful training. We think it sharpens our tactical skills, and it may. But the nature of the play also redounds back on our strategic acumen. Eventually we come to sense what's

logically sound, almost by appearance. It's uncanny how those immediate judgments are frequently on the money. Think how often good players say things like "that doesn't look right" -- and it isn't -- without any analysis at all.

You're obviously a very thoughtful person and a fine writer, which probably won't help you here. I believe with diligent application you can make headway and solve your problem, but you might need some assistance. Fortunately, there's the Internet. It enables you to play untold practice games, under controlled conditions, at times of convenience and purpose. I suggest you exercise your obvious intelligence and put the medium to good use starting now.

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