



*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

## Teach the Children Well

### *The Q & A Way*

Bruce Pandolfini

**Question** I started playing chess at age 6, then played for fun until I was 12. For some reason I got tired of playing since then. However, I started playing chess again 5 years ago. Now I am 35, a husband, and a father to my one-year-old son, Josiah, I am so "addicted" to the game that I study it in earnest. I want my son to play chess also so here are my questions: When should I start teaching him? What method should be used? When should he start playing competitively? How can I *persuade* him to play chess? **Ronnie Ofalia (Philippines)**

**Answer** As a rule you should start teaching a youngster whenever he or she seems interested. If there is no interest, you should let the child be. You can, however, show your own enthusiasm for the game, thereby creating a conducive environment.

Surely, most children are capable of learning how to play chess at five or six, and some may be up to it as early as four. That's the same age that many developing minds start pondering new planes of abstract reasoning and causal relationships. If you want to induce receptivity to the game yet earlier, you could begin by treating the chess pieces as touchable toys. Accordingly, you might consider getting larger, clearly defined figures of bright color and appealing texture and substance.

I would let the child play and fantasize with these engaging objects and not worry at first about rules and their actual application. Over time you can add bits of information about how to play as it seems appropriate. As your young one gets further involved, you can increase your explanations, with the proviso that the new concepts never prove taxing or discouraging. Eventually, you'll have provided a full menu of moves and rules so that the youngster is then equipped to play an entire game of chess.



Just keep it fun, and don't be afraid to try things. For example, I've heard of one avid parent, unsure of how to teach the knight's move, who had the afflatus of putting M & Ms on every square to which the knight could go. That became a game in itself. The kid played that game within a game zealously, and now he's become a wizard at knight maneuvers and can kick his father's butt in head-to-head competition, with or without knights.

If you're looking for ways to attract a child's attention, try playing or analyzing near enough for your son to pick up on your passion for the game. You'd be surprised how often your excitement can lure the youngster into asking questions and getting involved. Furthermore, you can usually do that while disguising your intentions. He never has to know that getting him to learn and play chess was your true aim.

Once he becomes hooked on chess he'll probably want to play in tournaments. Trust me, you won't have to push him. The task will be finding tournaments challenging enough without being too daunting. But that's another issue altogether, best left for a future question. Good luck with Josiah. If you show him that playing chess is a source of stimulation and pleasure, there's a good bet he might decide to play and love it too.

**Question** Well, I learnt how to play chess 5 months ago, and I just love this game. I want to improve more and more. I did read *My System* by Nimzowitsch 3 times, and then

*Chess Praxis*. Well, there lies the problem: I got to be a positional player, so I get into the middlegame quite well, and I have almost always a plan, but when I don't have one, my plan is to direct all my attention to the center of the board, and amazingly I always achieve my goals of "taking the center." But, when I achieve the domination of the center and I have a winning position, I don't know what to do next. Maybe I need to learn how to mobilize my pieces. A friend of mine, a very strong player, told me that I don't know what to do when I get the rooks in the center and need to control them. I'm a Perfectionist, neither an Attacking nor a Defensive player. I don't have a rating yet, but I can beat a 1700 Chessmaster 9000 rated player quite easily, and I beat a 2000 yesterday. What should I do to improve my play? Should I worry about the lack of plans in the ending? (I don't study chess by obligation, I just sit in front of the PC and study even 4 hours a day. I really love it.) **Alexandre de Oliveira (Brazil)**

**Answer** It appears you've entered the building by skipping the ground floor. I know Superman can do that but I'm not sure about chessplayers. It sounds as if you've been dealing with advanced subjects (planning and other sophisticated positional themes) before you've built up a foundation on which to base your thinking and judgment.

I recommend you go back to fundamentals. Make sure you really grasp opening essentials (the principles governing development, the fight for the center, king safety, the control and use of open lines, seizing and maintaining the initiative,

and how to win a won game). Any of the classic texts will do here, such as Capablanca's *Chess Fundamentals* or Tarrasch's *The Game of Chess*.

But perhaps even more than opening principles you've got to concentrate on tactics – all kinds of tactics – including mating tactics, non-mating tactics, and all their various implementations throughout the phases. And there never can come a point when you know enough that you no longer have to keep your mind active and sharp by solving such practical problems. It goes on forever, but you shouldn't mind, for it's clear you love the game and its move-by-move challenges.

If you need an all-purpose book of examples, I suggest you obtain a copy of Laszlo Polgar's *Chess*. Its 5,000 plus illustrations should keep you busy awhile. You probably also need to play a lot more, and since you're not averse to using your PC, you can take care of both needs (play and study) online or by using software. So that's my strategic advice: get back to tactics. And don't forget to play, everyday.

**Question** Hi, I am Michael from the Philippines. I play in the ICC and am rated 1800+ there. We have this so-called Lechess club wherein higher rated players teach players rated below 1300. I am one of the mentors who volunteered to teach because I personally want to contribute in the success of someone else. My question is, can you suggest a good lesson plan which I can follow, and which would be very effective to the students' part? I may have the proper rating but I am not sure about how I will proceed in teaching. How should I approach the student? What concepts should I teach them and in what way? What topics should I concentrate on? One person suggested to let them solve mate-in-one puzzles and basic endgames. However, I still have some doubts because when I was rated below 1300, mate-in-one puzzles and simple endgames were already mastered by me. But I have seen some 1200+ players who still have difficulty in the very basic rook + king vs. king endgames. Some also say their main weakness is poor analysis. Anyway, I would still prefer to know the opinion of the greatest trainer in North America. **Michael Lucagbo (Philippines)**

**Answer** You've sent your e-mail to the wrong person. But since I can't determine which of the several thousand trainers better able to answer your question you meant to send it to, I will do my best. I will, however, pass your compliment on to my mother, who undoubtedly will agree with you.

As you become more experienced at teaching you'll naturally cultivate your own approach and hopefully adapt it to each student's individual requirements. Until then, it makes sense to start somewhere until you know where to go. Get a basic book and work with that. In addition to the classic manuals of Reinfeld, Capablanca, Tarrasch, Reti, and so on, any of many others would also suffice. The *Complete Chess Course* by Alburt and Pelts is excellent, as is *Learn Chess* by Alexander and Beach. It's really hard to go astray here. Most regimented texts demonstrate the correct movement of the pieces and offer illustrative practice examples. Just find one that appeals to your eye so that you can satisfy

the demands of your students.

Have your students play assiduously, and make sure to analyze those games with some care later. To that end it's not undesirable to play them yourself, since those direct encounters may offer insights that escape the review of games played previously or at some remove. Your students might additionally benefit from analysis sessions, with you guiding their efforts.

In all such situations, underscore working out move sequences in the head. Never allow the student to move the pieces, for that will only encourage damaging habits and flawed play. Anyhow, this is not a bad way to launch your teaching career, and you are to be commended for offering your time and expertise to further Caissa's ambitions.

**Question** I was just reading through your Q and A column. I have never heard anyone say that there was a gainful way to play speed chess. My children love speed chess (By speed chess I am referring to anything G/10 and under). But as a father/coach I am in the practice of putting a halt to any speed chess two-three weeks before a tournament--not to mention the negative comments I make about speed chess only creating bad habits. It would be helpful if you could tell me how to get some real milk out of the speed chess cow. **Don Brooks (USA)**

**Answer** We have to be careful about following maxims, principles and general assertions and stipulations blindly. Such oversimplifications usually fail to factor into account limitations, exceptions, subtle differences and, for that matter, anything like a specific condition.

Take for example the principle "knights before bishops." Obviously, if players followed such a guideline exclusively the chessboard would be populated mainly by openings that resembled the Four Knight's Game, regardless of how they began. That would be a version of chess Hades, and none of us need experience it to know we don't want to be there. Furthermore, that particular advice (knights before bishops) is clearly unreliable, sometimes downright wrong.

Some of the same kinds of objections can be made against the injunction not to play speed chess. Truly, too much speed chess just prior to serious competition can be deleterious, especially for young people, when the carry-over effect incites them to conduct what should be two hours of play in a meager ten minutes. It's likely your apprehension has been stoked by analogously disheartening experience.

So I join you in recognizing the potential ill consequences of too much, untimely, or imprudently conducted speed chess. I wonder, though, if not allowing them to play for 2-3 weeks before a tournament might be an overreaction. Of course, most coaches want their students to be prepared to win. But many of the most successful ones emphasize playing chess for fun, reasoning that children perform better (don't we all?) when the enterprise is

joyful. As a coach/parent you naturally have a critically directed eye, and you certainly know your children best. But I'd be careful about denying them moments that, if properly reined, could increase their zest for play.

Can speed chess have prospective value? We all know the possible drawbacks, which include promoting superficiality and emphasizing the clock over the actual play of the game. But just as obvious are some of its positive features. It can offer more opportunities to play tactically and aggressively. It can force us to play more relevantly, because we can't afford to lose our focus with the time ticking away. It's not that fast games encourage us to abandon analysis. It's that fast games constrain us to analyze more efficiently. So we lose something (thoroughness), and we gain something (intensity). In fact, some productive kinds of ratiocination are not based on how much time you put in but on the application of focused concentration. Unless a certain threshold is reached you might never find the answer. Speed chess can give us training at being so attentive.

Furthermore, even the best trained young players will find themselves unexpectedly running out of time here and there. If they haven't had sufficient experience at moving quickly in practice sessions, where they can acquire helpful routines with careful monitoring, how can they be expected to navigate the treacherous waters of time pressure when they need to in meaningful games? I can't tell you how many strong players I've seen undone by weaker ones because they were unable to cope with a shortage of time in grossly winning positions.

Speed chess can also help us test-drive several ideas in a single session. Those ideas can then be examined later. If a player has had trouble with a particular variation during a bunch of rapid games, the answers can be sought in times of contemplative reflection. Moreover, if you work with a partner such as a coach/father, you can tap speed chess to generate information. Say, for instance, that opening theory takes you only so far on a definite line. You can then play 50-100 fast games (or some suitable number) from the last known or evaluated position and thereby produce at least some moves worthy of further investigation. Those notions can then be analyzed dispassionately in your mental laboratory to assess their true worth. And such scrutiny doesn't have to be confined to the opening. One can employ the same technique for exploring the nuances of any curious position.

So you're right to be concerned. Uncontrolled, unsupervised speed chess can have disastrous results on one's serious play. But I wouldn't dismiss quick chess altogether. Chess, thank goodness, isn't the army, even when preparing for battle conditions. All we are saying is let's give fun a chance.

**Question** On several occasions you've written favorably about speed chess, but in the film *Searching for Bobby Fischer* you attacked speed chess. Better players played slow chess while showmen played fast park chess, and you were opposed to that. Was Ben Kingsley correct? Or did you change your thinking since the



film? **Peter Popovych (Canada)**

**Answer** I hope my thinking has changed since then (1992). I trust I've learned some things and emended some of my foibles. But don't be misled by what you've seen and heard. Ben Kingsley was playing a character in a film -- a Hollywood film, and a great actor with a wonderful script. Everyday I play a character in life -- a Brooklyn life, and an ordinary person following a pedestrian script. Nonetheless, in both reel life and real life, speed chess serves its purpose. Then and now it passes my screen test.

**Question** Hi, I'm a chess amateur from Hong Kong, China. Let me first describe how dull the chess atmosphere is here in Hong Kong. Chess is not popular. Here Hong Kong people play xiangqi, the Chinese version of chess. The Hong Kong Chess Federation organizes very few tournaments for juniors each year, and they charge very expensively. The chess books in the public library are not really enough. The worst thing is, not even one chess club is here except the Hong Kong Chess Club run by the HKCF, which is very inconvenient for people who live very far away like me.

My question is, how can I improve my chess in such a city? I have thought correspondense chess, but I cannot find a suitable opponent. I have tried playing with computers but those silicons cannot explain anything except tactics. Playing endgame studies or tactical puzzles are useless unless you can employ them in a real battle. I hope to find more resources from the internet, do you have any suggestion? If possible, I hope you can offer something like a "training program" for me. I am about 1800, and may spare an hour to study chess everyday. **Victor Chan, Hong Kong (China)**

**Answer** I think the Internet offers the perfect solution for you. The amount of available information out there seems inexhaustible and much of it is free. In addition to chesscafe.com, you might check out what chessville.com, pgnmentor.com, chesscorner.com, chessopolis.com, and uschess.org/scholastic/sc-research.html have to say about instructional chess software. Those addresses should provide some useful information, though it's easy enough to do your own searches and discover all kinds of interesting sites.

The other tack you can pursue is to play chess online. You should be playing regularly and following up by examining the critical parts of those games. If you don't have access to a strong player, for whatever reason, you may want to make a onetime purchase of a program such as Fritz. Whenever you're not sure how to judge a position, simply input it in the Fritz analysis engine and see how it evaluates the situation and what it recommends. You don't need verbal language. The moves are your words and they tell you what to do better than Shakespeare ever could.

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