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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

There's Gold in the Golden Mean

The Q & A Way

Bruce Pandolfini



Question Are classic books better than new ones? I'm a Brazilian chess player with a FIDE rating of 2150. I have a bothersome question that nobody, including very strong players, ever explains: Should I put aside the classic books and only study modern chess writings (this is the opinion of GM John Nunn)? Or, must I first study the classical texts? I have many, many, books, classic and modern, but which group would best help me to improve? I'm working, I don't have much free time, and I am forty years old. My dream is to play in a Brazilian Championship, so I know that hard work is necessary if I'm to survive in that tournament. I don't like opening study and am not sure what would give me the best return on the study hours I put into chess. **Eduardo Maia (Brazil)**

Answer There are intelligent arguments for both sides on this question. Some authorities contend that older books lack immediate relevance and may even include outmoded concepts and refuted strategies that could lead students down an erroneous trail. Others advocate a thorough grounding in fundamental ideas, developed in more seminal works, so players can understand the rationale behind contemporary views.

Clearly, when we study traditional texts, we're scrutinizing openings and variations that are less often played and therefore seldom encountered in the competitive world of 2004. On the other hand, by excluding the classics, we may wind up being ill-prepared to react to moves we hadn't anticipated, regardless how unsound they are, whatever the year.

Recently, Garry Kasparov was in New York City and several gifted young players had the opportunity to have him analyze their play. Kasparov pointed out that some of the players were completely unschooled in the classic literature. He was surprised that their emphasis had been on current-day opening books to the exclusion of the famous texts of Alekhine, Botvinnik, Bronstein and so on.

What's more, I believe, he was appalled how little was known about chess history, including the AVRO 1938 and Zurich 1953 events. So it's easy enough to understand Nunn's reasoning, but it's not hard to grasp Kasparov's either.

A clash of outstanding intellects implies that there may not be a definitive answer to your question. Perhaps there is a categorically proper way to handle the situation, or maybe resolution is to be found in some more relative manner, by following the method that works best for the individual. Then there's Aristotle. No, he didn't play chess, even though some people mistakenly suppose that the invention of the game can be ascribed to him. But he did believe in some applicable things, like balance and striving for a golden mean. If he were a chess teacher alive today, he might suggest that you do both. That is, spend some time learning about chess history and theory through the original treatises. And then take care of present-era thinking by regular contact with printed and on-line periodicals.

To guide you from the past to the present with an essentially omniscient and latter-day standard, you might turn to Kasparov's new offering *My Great Chess Predecessors*. Using that as your home base, you can veer off and study more singular things, knowing safety can always be found by turning back to this virtuoso's superbly comprehensive overview. So for instance, if you've just read his section on Capablanca, you could then play over all the games in *My Chess Career* for example (or rifle through a bunch of Capablanca games drawn from elsewhere) to reinforce what you've been studying. Thereafter, you might turn to ChessBase or some other piece of software to see how today's players are grappling with the lines played by and against Capablanca. But it's okay to aspire to success in some utterly different fashion, too, creatively using a variety of tools in personalized ways you find satisfying. As in most pursuits of excellence, real gains can be made while actually having fun and on your own terms -- somewhat.

Question Having just read your *Every Move Must Have A Purpose* and having been a follower of this column for some years, I have come to the conclusion that you would be a good annotator. Specifically, the brief historical contexts you presented at the start of each chapter in EMMHAP coupled with your wry (Brooklyn) style hints at entertaining yet informative annotations. Do you have any published annotated game collections? Any plans for one? **John D. Marino (USA)**

Answer Thank you for your kind words about EMMHAP. It seems to this observer that EMDNHAP. Nevertheless, I shall inform all interested parties of your nice thoughts, which considering how small that number is, shouldn't take too long. Yes, I have annotated a couple of game collections, but, alas, none of the games collected were played by me. Well, not at first. As far as future plans go, I have many. Unfortunately, my plans often go off course, which is one reason I don't have enough games to annotate for a book. Well, not a real book, with something to be said and actual pages. But thanks for making me smile.

Question My question is, as a matter of fact, a curiosity I believe you can tell me. Do the GMs still play chess just for fun? Do they take the board and say "How about playing a chess game?" If they do, whom do they play against?
Marco Antonio (Brazil)

Answer Only a few of them have been caught saying such curious things to a board. But it's common knowledge that many of them say other things while playing chess for fun with various adversaries, most of whom possess anthropomorphic qualities. Sometimes they play against a woman who goes by the name Caissa while often disguising herself as different men and women; sometimes they plunge into a consuming dimensionless void known as ICC that hides the identities of countless genderless entities; and sometimes they face off against the self and the monsters within. Much of it can be fun, especially when the grandmaster wins.

Question I was going to change the subject line to: "A Correction for Bruce Pandolfini", but I was afraid the e-mail filter wouldn't send it to you. I was just reading through the [Chesscafe Archives](#), and found a particular instance in which you gave Ian Hobbs, from England, a very poor answer. He asked about spiral-bound chess books, to make for easier study. I'm sure you remember what you told him, so I won't reiterate it. Ian should know that he can simply take his chess books to Kinko's, or the British equivalent, and have his regular-bound books made into spiral-bound books. Oh, what joy this answer will be to Ian in England's ears! He can read the best stuff out there, just how he likes it.
Nathan Jones (USA)

Answer I think we are in Rat's Alley, where the dead men have lost their bones. Imagine what T.S. Eliot could have done if only he'd have had access to a Kinko's. There's no telling how many allusions to chess he could have put into a highly edited, repeatedly photocopied, and beautifully spiralized Wasteland. But you're right. My answer was a very poor one and your point is a very good one. I shall do what I can to convey your sensible suggestion toward Ian's Merry Old England.

Question Hi Bruce. Quick question first. What is the appropriate way to address oneself to a Chess Master / IM / GM in the context of chess? Should I have written instead 'Hello Master Pandolfini'? :-) More to the point, every bit of chess strategy I have read so far often refers to the concept of 'control' over this or that square, this or that file or rank or some other set of squares. Fine. But what is control, really? At some shallow level, I have no problem with this concept. If my rook sits on an open file, say, it 'controls' that file. But what if another piece, perhaps several other pieces, also control the set of squares in question. Say, there is an enemy rook sitting on the other end of that file. Who controls the file now? One could say that whoever can control the square(s) when all pieces are exchanged controls it. But, first, the game is constantly in flux, so that I may control that file 3 moves down the line, but maybe not 4 moves down. Also, control, sure, but at what cost? If after exchanges, I am in control of a file, but also down a queen, what kind of control is that?

To put it another way, for all practical purposes, is there an unequivocal way of defining control? Foremost, I would like to read how you think a low 1900's correspondence chess player can usefully fit the concept of control into his play? Finally thank you for your very useful answer to Ronnie Ofalia. I have a 2 year-old girl and your suggestions will come handy in fostering in her a healthy dose of interest in the game. **Jean-Philippe Stijns (USA)**

Answer Frankly, I don't even know how to control my response to your question, let alone define the meaning of control in chess. But I shall strive to endeavor an attempt at trying. When you control a square or line in chess it means not only that you guard it but that you can use it to your advantage. Furthermore, by having control you at least temporarily prevent your opponent from use or access. And even if your opponent can neutralize your control by comparably opposing you, you'd still have control if you could exploit the situation thereafter. But, to be sure, control can come to an end just like that, which apparently is the way I'm choosing to close this answer. Love your question.

Question I have just returned to chess after a twelve-year hiatus. I'm now 36. Before "retiring," I estimated my strength in the 1700's (based on friendly competition, but lacking enough rated tournament games). After returning three months ago, I believe my strength was about 1400 (albeit with less evidence) and after *much* effort is probably now around 1500. Upon returning to chess, I made a decision to start over with the basics.

My current study program consists mainly of solving tactical problems, analyzing my own games, and visualization exercises. Last month, I also switched openings from the forcing Bird's and St. George's (cough, cough!) to 1 e4 as White and Petroff as Black (keeping the Dutch against 1 d4) for more tactical games. I do a small amount of opening study.

In *Comprehensive Chess Course Volume I*, Lev Alburt and Roman Pelts advocate visualization: "All beginning chess players should start by studying and memorizing the chessboard. Knowing the board by heart has great importance because of the vital relationship between playing strength and the facility of being able to visualize the chessboard and chessmen...Three to ten hours are typically devoted to learning the board...Knowledge of the board should be perfect in the sense that visualizing the board becomes automatic."

I discovered an interesting thesis paper by a Harvard graduate student, Christopher Chabris. In this study, the author studied blindfold chess versus conventional chess, using the results of the yearly Monaco tournament where GMs play round-robin style, one of each game type per opponent. The conclusion of this paper was that "grandmasters play about equally well, even in rapid games, whether or not they have actual site of the changing board positions." They go on to state that "numerous verbal reports of very strong blindfold players reveal that the changing positions on the board are rarely visualized in a very realistic or concrete way, like a photograph or a mirror. For

example, reported representations typically do not contain pieces that actually resemble a horse or a tower, or squares that are black or white. The representations are much more abstract, and are often described in terms of the functions of the pieces, like "lines of force;" a rook is a horizontal-vertical cross, a bishop an oblique power or trajectory...The stronger the blindfold player, the more abstract (and unverbalized) the reported representations become. There is little or no evidence suggesting a master can visualize the entire board at once."

In my past chess experience, I have never attempted to visualize the board independently from the physical board. That is, when doing my calculations, I have always referred to the actual position on the physical game board, moving the pieces on the board in my mind. This seems to be a different thought process than that employed by masters, who create their own versions of chessboards in their minds. Based upon the scant information I have available to me, it seems that my current thought process towards the game is all wrong. The way I visualize my analysis seems very limiting. Specifically, I don't believe that my thought process will eventually "magically" convert to the more abstract visualization mentioned above.

Can you provide some additional insight on how grandmasters visualize the chessboard and positions, and how their thought processes may have changed through various stages of skill development? What exercises can I do to develop this ability? **John Mogusar (USA)**

Answer I won't feign knowing what a grandmaster thinks, nor can I speak with any confidence about the mysterious wanderings of the blindfolded GM mind. For all I know, they may go on wondrously mental (tormental?) divagations. Before addressing your concerns, however, I'd like to distinguish between visualization and blindfold chess. Too many of us use the terms interchangeably, as if they mean the same thing. But as you probably know, they don't.

Visualization is about conceiving ahead from a definite position. Playing blindfolded, whether actually blindfolded or sitting so that we can't see the playing area, also relies on trying to analyze future possibilities. But there's a difference. Playing blindfold forces us to recall the entire position before being free to look ahead. All of us should develop our abilities to analyze without moving the pieces. Few of us need to play an entire game while expending such effort on lines already played or on remembering so much done-deal detail before deciding on our next move.

Now let's return to your main question. It's true that grandmasters and other strong players think about chess very differently from the rest of us. Some of their thought is specific and concrete, of course, and some of it is indeed general and abstract. Yet their abstractions usually have motive power where our specificity may accomplish much less if anything. We can try to do a lot and waste a lot. While we attempt to take in everything, they aim to perceive everything relevant and no more. Strong players typically economize and achieve the maximum with a minimum. They won't even consider moves that

many of us invest a ridiculous amount of time contemplating. What we try to come up with they already have in the bank, ready to be ATM-ed out. Various concepts that ordinary players need to put into words, strong players act upon without ever expressing. Rather than having to figure out where what is, they seem to know where everything is before they begin to think. What we want to see they already feel and sense and know. And it goes on and on. Their abstractions can overwhelm our concretizations.

Did grandmasters and other proficient players become so adept at establishing more useful and inclusive constructs merely because they had the right talents to begin with? The answer is a little yes and possibly a lot no. They probably were inclined to develop such capabilities, but it's also likely that in the beginning they had to go about the learning, improving, and encoding process virtually the same way the rest of us do. They doubtless resorted to trial and error, played and analyzed considerably, and even depended on the same kinds of formulaic principles and guidelines most chess competitors draw on.

But obviously they didn't stop there. In fact, they eventually had to leave their rudimentary preconceptions behind. As time went on, they came to realize some of their original notions weren't quite right and needed to be modified or even discarded. And the more they absorbed and better understood, the more they began to lose some of their initial dependency on primitive formularizations. Their generalizations are both more embracing and sophisticated. That's one reason their Gestaltings can't be articulated or broken down precisely. From the artificial prescriptions of step-by-step linear thinking they somehow wove numerous discrete monads into more holistically integrated blocks and relations, where many of the elements never need to be expressed or thought about at all. They're just there: sensed and felt, seen without actually being seen, fully understood, and ultimately primed and poised for efficacy.

How can you get to be like that, so that you don't have to think about everything you do so procedurally and unconnectedly? Surely, you have already closely studied games you found really attractive – even to the point of memorizing the moves. Now put a new twist on that process, and after inputting those games, let them unfold on your computer screen at high speeds. If you know the games intimately, you should begin “seeing” the moves in more nonrepresentational ways, as encompassing totalities with interdependence and trajectories with “lines of force.”

But this is just one of several possible methods for moving your chess thinking toward more abstract and advanced levels, and the most tried and true rely simply on playing, and playing a lot. You're certainly right to assume that nothing happens magically. But you're wrong to conclude that what you've been doing is off base. Maybe no specified regimen can ever get you to the point of thinking as naturally as a grandmaster. But if you keep giving it your all, rigorously making sure to analyze without moving the pieces, and consistently endeavoring to appreciate and fathom what's really happening, you should evolve into a stronger player. Otherwise, there's no justice in the world. There is

justice, right?

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