



*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

## In General Be Specific

### *The Q & A Way*

Bruce Pandolfini



**Question** It seems odd to me that with all the information that is available to the chess enthusiast today through books, video, DVD, websites, software and computers, we are still asking the same questions. How can I play chess well? How can I improve significantly? A quick look at the USCF website indicates a rating history of my fellow tournament players that hasn't changed much in 10 years! It appears to me that most players improve initially somewhat, and then plateau at a level that won't improve much, despite their efforts in studying the game with the vast material available. This may explain why many low rated players think there must be some 'secrets' that only grandmasters know. All this brings me to question whether having private lessons from an instructor is one of these 'secrets' for significant improvement. The other possibility is that chess is something where most people just 'don't get it'. You either have what it takes, or you don't. You can only improve on something that is already there. If you don't agree Bruce (and I figure you won't), then how do you explain the situation? **Joe Hawks (USA)**

**Answer** I think it could be helpful to pin down what you mean by playing chess "well" and improving "significantly." Some of us, for instance, might conclude that we're getting nowhere unless we're verging on mastery. Others may be happy merely with winning an under-1300 tournament. Some of us seek at least a gain of a couple of rating classes as a sign of improvement. Others may be content with a surge of a paltry 50 points.

Let's say you define a significant improvement as the latter, a gain of 50 points. Even then you have to make distinctions. Advancing from 762 to 812 is not the same thing as going from 2162 to 2212. Were gains achieved in almost no time or over a period of years? What about the age of the subject and the type of opposition he or she normally faces? There's a big difference between gaining those points as a child of eight or as a 25-year-old adult. Acquiring 50 rating



points in classroom play against unschooled novices is incredibly easier than doing it in weekend contests at the Marshall Chess Club against veteran tournament competitors. And let's remember – we're all individuals. A suitable answer should also take into account a student's persona and peculiar needs.

So if your concerns are to be addressed satisfactorily, it makes sense to define our premises more precisely. Most of us simply are not going to eat an apple in the same way we'd consume an orange.

You make a good point when you suggest that most players eventually tend to hit a plateau. No matter how innately endowed one might be, obstacles of some sort are apt to slow down development or bring it to a sudden halt. Knowledge and experience should begin to play an increasingly pivotal role, and at that point, a player's mindset and personality help determine whether further progress is to be made. Suddenly, it's not just about talent, unless of course one defines talent only by some ultimate success, quite apart from how it's achieved.

It's often possible to get beyond transitory impasses to advance toward higher levels of performance, and there may be a variety of ways to do it. Some of us need the aid of teachers and strong players. Others do it on our own. Some of us do it by purposeful reading and use of software. Some of us make our gains by playing more challenging opposition as often as we can. Others don't play at all, at least for awhile, until interest has once again piqued. Then we seem to improve just like that, without apparently doing anything definite whatsoever. Who knows why some of us who do virtually nothing manage to get to the same or better place as those who do practically everything? The point is that there aren't any formulas to nail down our goals. If there were, we all would achieve our ends applying them purely by rote.

If chess teaches us anything it's that situations are as different as they are similar. Each one of us is unique, and not just in trivial ways. Despite our common humanity, we still function differently enough to require tailored solutions.

There are no secrets to success. To be sure, having a great teacher or state-of-the-art tools might help. And some of us just seem to "have it" while some of us don't. But why is it that many of those with apparently everything on their side falter and those who enter the Valley of Death unarmed conquer? How come some of the most talented bomb out spectacularly and some of the supposedly least talented seem to fly straight to the top?

I can only ask those questions. I can't answer them. But I can say this. Nothing, not even a carefully protected grandmaster secret, can replace good health, an objective frame of mind, an upbeat disposition to adversity tempered by a degree of equanimity, a reasonably based practicality and philosophic attitude, a resolutely incorporated tough-mindedness, a holistically integrated approach, a true passion for the enterprise, and the ability and wherewithal to think for oneself – the latter, more than anything. If you can offer another set of

generalities to bring about success, it wouldn't surprise me and they might work just as well.

**Question** I started playing chess a few months ago and I loved it. I'm 13 so apparently I took chess up quite old. I made good progress and progressed onto the 1400 level in only a few weeks by reading books and doing exercises etc. I thought that I would like to really improve so I asked my dad if we could hire a chess tutor and he thought it was a great idea. But when I went to find one they all refused to teach me because my rating was too low. What do I do from here? Can I utilize the internet to improve to becoming a master? Does playing through master games (e.g. Garry Kasparov's games) really go to improving my chess? **Nat Clark (United Kingdom)**

**Answer** I too didn't take up chess until I was 13, so I know what you're talking about. And I must admit, I felt quite old at the time. Forget about now.

Your initial success and decent starting rating are to be applauded. I find it astonishing, though, that there aren't any local chess teachers who'd want to help a player of your ability and obvious love for the game. It makes me wonder if the teachers you've encountered are really teachers.

I have a feeling, nonetheless, that you possess the independence to get by without any teacher at all. You're obviously very bright, and it's clear you truly love chess. As a result, you have so many options that it might not be sensible to recommend any of them over the rest. The important thing is to keep playing and studying chess, however you do it.

If you had to work with any block of information, why don't you start with your own games? You could catalogue them, which is best done with software, such as ChessBase. Then you should subject those games to thorough analysis. Start by running searches to see which lines seem to achieve greater results, and find out which top players play the variations of special interest. As a rule, to develop an opening repertoire, it's not a bad inspiration to adopt a leading player's lines. They will provide you with a sound and consistent springboard to launch your opening study. That's because most good players tend to sport a group of openings and defenses that are in harmony with a definite approach. So once you've found a player whose style you seem to admire, it's desirable to let that player do the preliminary work for you. Over time you can always modify your play to suit your own needs and tastes.

To help you with the analysis of your play, you should input your openings into a program such as Fritz and see how it responds. Furthermore, you can use its appraising function to test out your mental meanderings. You're still able to ask Fritz questions, as you would be able to with a teacher. It's just that Fritz (or any program like it) answers you more cogently – not in words, but in moves, the language that matters most on a chessboard. Naturally, using the tandem team of ChessBase and Fritz, your explorations needn't be restricted merely to the opening. There's no reason you can't also bolster your middlegame and

endgame play by virtue of the same search and trial method.

So there you have it. All you need is a computer, the proper software, and a database of your own games, all propelled by your patent intellect and enthusiasm for chess. Once you realize you don't require a teacher – that you are totally self-reliant and can indeed be your own best teacher -- you're well on the way toward winning chess. And who knows? Someday you may have the opportunity to show those so-called chess teachers what they weren't capable of seeing in the first place.

**Question** I've been playing chess for about a year and a half now, since I was 19. My current rating is around 1600 on the internet. My question is about defenses or established "lines", such as the Sicilian, Caro-Kann etc. I've read about these in different articles but have been too lazy to delve into extensive analysis with any of them. I realize that at some point I need to learn the basic rudiments of these established lines. Is there any book or web-page that gives overviews of the most common defenses, or is it simply impossible to learn them all at once? **Ian Swanson, USA**

**Answer** You probably shouldn't attempt to study them all at once. It's too easy to get lost in the chess forest. Instead I recommend you break down your investigation in some manner, perhaps by pawn structures or other typical classifications. Certainly a textbook such as MCO can help you do that, though many of the others are more than adequate to provide a curriculum skeleton while laying out the indispensable basics. Of course you can also obtain what you need online, and there are numerous and inviting places to visit. Type in the opening you'd like to consider and see where it leads. A worthy site to explore is Chessgames.com. It has a huge database and is very easy to use. There are also other features, including an effective search engine and forums where you can ask questions about openings and get assistance from very advanced players. What's more, as I understand it, it's entirely free. Why don't you give it a try?

**Question** Hi. I certainly benefit from your column. My question is about a young student who plays too fast-non-speed games. We are trying to slow him down to play slower chess and think out his moves. Fast play leads to blunders and poor games. Can you give us some ideas to make this student play more slowly and more thoughtfully. Thank you. **John J. Henry (Canada)**

**Answer** Teachers and parents try everything here. They make kids sit on their hands, write their moves down beforehand, internalize certain procedures on each turn, and follow all sorts of mechanical routines to retard their impetuosity. Some of that may work, but nothing can beat constant practice at analyzing properly.

Decelerate things simply: stop them from moving pieces in analysis and training sessions without telling you their intentions. It might be difficult at first, but if you're consistent, and always encourage them to explain their thoughts instead

of demonstrating them, you should naturally slow the kids down in a way that's bound to produce better play.

When some teachers analyze with students, they may even penalize them for giving the right answer by playing the actual move. You might try saying something like: "If you touch it, you're wrong, even if you play the right move. But if you tell me your thinking, even when you don't have the right scheme, you can still save yourself by changing your mind and finding a better move, without any penalty. In fact, you'll get extra credit." In other words, initially reward the procedure more than the right result. You can always balance things out later, making sure that those who get the correct answers, but who break form, receive credit as well – though not immediately, not until they've learned a lesson.

Much of real chess thinking has to do with discovering options and alternatives. Too often a young player will get a notion and play it without further thought, especially if it seems strong on the surface. But in essence they're just playing the very first move that comes into their head. Somehow you must insure that they learn to mull over other options until they can settle on the one they think is best.

Let's say they have to respond to a particular threat from their opponent. And let's further say that they come up with a move that doesn't quite do it or even flops. If you talk things out with them, and they suggest an inferior move, you should then ask them if there's another move that meets the criteria of the situation and also "works." If they don't find another credible move, you must keep prodding them until they do. Once they do, and the move is still inadequate, you must keep the interaction going until they unearth another possibility. If they finally determine a better move, ask them to compare the moves they've come up with to see which one they like most. If you do this consistently and often enough, you will be instilling in them a very practicable technique that should certainly hold back their rashness and predispose them to use their time better in the search for logical moves and pertinent options.

But these problems are typical and apparently eternal, and they bring to mind Lasker's insightful cogency: "If you see a good move, look for a better one." You see, they were making the same mistakes even then.

**Question** I am about a 1500 USCF player, though this is not exact. Sometimes I go a little over and sometimes a little under, but I'm usually around 1500. Is there a best way for a player like me to prepare for tournaments? I have tried everything, including studying openings, tactics, endgames and puzzles (which I like), though is there a correct thing to do first, or in a particular order? I have read everything – magazines, books, the internet, and ChessMaster. I admire the books of Silman, and how could you not be impressed with Kramnik? But is there a proper way to get more out of my time? I realized I asked a few questions, and I know you don't always answer all the questions readers ask, even throwing their questions back at them. I'm curious, though I suspect you



won't be able to help me, but is there a best way for a player with my resume to improve at chess? **John Mardone (USA)**

**Answer** I don't know. Is there? It might help if I could actually see your resume. But short of that, and if you're not sure, which seems to be the case, and I know I'm not, which I know to be the case, I suggest you do only those things that increase your pleasure, no matter the reservations expressed by pundits. There's a lot to be said for hedonism in chess. Just saying it can make some players smile.

**Question** Recently, my twelve-year-old son played in a two-day tournament. The

tournament included three divisions: Under-1400, Under-1800, and an Open section. My son chose to play in the Open. His playing strength is around 1400 or so, and a few of the Expert and Master players there suggested that he should not have played in the Open. While playing "up" is generally regarded as a good idea, I was told that he should only play up by just one section. In other words, he should have played in the Under-1800. Is there any general rule of thumb for making these decisions? He played plenty of hard games, and though he lost pretty consistently, he also said he learned a lot playing very strong players. What does Mr. Pandolfini have to say about this? **Naomi Singer (USA)**

**Answer** Usually I advise my students to play in their own section, whatever it is. On occasion, it's perfectly proper to play a section ahead to test the waters, but two sections ahead is another matter. If he or she wishes to play up so temerarily, and I deduce that's an improvident plan for the youngster in question, I'll say so and explain my thinking. But I will also indicate that the decision is theirs and their parent's (gulp), and that everyone is the captain of his or her own ship. Since your son made the decision, the prudent thing would be to review the situation and assess its overall effect. Was it a valuable experience? Did he learn something important from it? Or did it tinge his chess with an unsuitable color? Only by discussing this with him and analyzing everything relevant can you decide if that's the kind of thing he should be doing. And if you can't evaluate it all conclusively, then maybe it's wise to let him learn how to seek his own future – in chess, and everything else.

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