



*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

## Test the Best

### *The Q & A Way*

Bruce Pandolfini

**Question** I am a 12-year-old kid and I enter a lot of scholastic tournaments. My question is about openings. Which ones should I study? What ones are good at the scholastic level? Should I play 1. e4 or 1. d4 or 1. c4 or what? Maybe I should play a flank opening. What do you think I should do? I have tried just about everything and I often get confused. **Johnny Bishop (USA)**

**Answer** Most teachers counsel young players to practice king-pawn openings first, before they begin to branch out. They argue that the themes stemming from that initial e-pawn move are clearer and more direct. Many of the same teachers also believe there's an abundance of supportive literature on openings that originate with 1. e2-e4, more so than for any other starting moves. But these are old ideas, and they're open to dispute, despite Fischer's claim that 1. e2-e4 is "best by test." Still, look what it's done for him.

Let's say you start with king-pawn openings. Find a contemporary player who often begins 1.e2-e4 and whose play you admire. Then adopt his or her opening repertoire. You may have to look at numerous games from current journals and magazines, or simply see what you can extract from the Internet. There's such a wealth of material available, and so many outstanding sites, that one could easily go astray amid the informational abyss. If you'd like to narrow your search to a specific site, I suggest you go to Chessgames.com. It has a large database, is very current, and should prove inviting. Naturally, as you become more seasoned, you may want to modify your own repertoire to suit your individual needs and tastes.

Starting with the style of particular player is an excellent vantage point. At the very least you'll acquaint yourself with a set of harmonious concepts that can be used to springboard toward more specific study, once you figure out who you are and where you're going.



**Question** You and Yasser Seirawan have one thing in common, that is, you don't reply. My question is (just in case you get this), I have plenty of chess books, so, which is the best one to start? **Dino Lar (Philippines)**

**Answer** It's an honor to be compared to Yasser in any regard. Nonetheless, it would be nice to know what chess books you have. It would also be helpful to know more about you as a player. Without real knowledge on either of those two subjects, the best I can do is to steer you toward a generic or all-purpose chess book. But I can't think of any that works for all levels of chess skill and that some readers wouldn't find repellent. Even so, if you're interested in quality and substance, I suggest you take a gander at the series of texts produced by Yasser himself. They're quite good. You might also consider, once again, reaching out to him directly. He may have more time to write e-mails these days, and his replies, when he does reply, are always on the money. It's a start, just like pawn to king four.

**Question** I am from Rome and I am 38 years old. I am also an admirer of yours, since the time you appeared in the movie *Searching for Bobby Fischer*. What do you think of the rare book of I.M. Santasiere on the Santasiere Attack of the Wing Gambit of the Sicilian? I am not sure of the title. Did you ever meet him? **Fabrizio Nomagnoli (Italy)**

**Answer** Santasiere wrote lots of articles and various monographs on openings and different aspects of chess, but I don't recall one in particular on the Wing Gambit of the Sicilian, not that he didn't play it (or write about it). He loved to play b2-b4, whenever he could, which is why another name for the Orangutan or Sokolsky's Opening is Santasiere's Folly. He was a very creative man. I met him only on one occasion, at the Marshall Chess Club, when Carrie Marshall introduced him to a table of people I was sitting with. I was just an obnoxious kid, so I don't remember much about it. What I do recall is that Mrs. Marshall was all aglow as she guided him around by the arm. Those were the days.

**Question** With all the "man vs. machine" matches of the past ten years, I have really enjoyed the comments on both sides. For example, take a few of the comments by Vladimir Kramnik and Frederic Friedel. They said some things to arouse my curiosity. I found them to be rather interesting and also mysterious. Vladimir Kramnik said: "I have to change my way of playing from normal chess. What matters is to develop the most unusual tactics possible. I have to keep the computer from using its calculating skills. And I will do this while provoking moves that it doesn't understand. The machine has to feel uncomfortable, so to speak." I don't know what Kramnik meant exactly by the term "unusual tactics." And I understand that computers are superior to humans at tactical play, so why doesn't Fritz "understand" these unusual tactics? And how do you "provoke moves that it doesn't understand?" Does he mean he will make the machine do things it has no idea of?" Why would the machine make moves it does not understand? Strange! Then there is Frederic Friedel: "But I confidently predict that within five years Fritz will be able to beat any human in any type of match. His speed and sophistication are going to continue increasing

exponentially.” I am astonished that Humans will become such useless players so quickly! In five years only! I understand the speed aspect, but I wonder whether the speed of calculation will help it only in the tactics department. As for sophistication, is it not the HUMANS who teach the machine that, hence humans will always know more in that department? **Tehul Mohil (Kenya)**

**Answer** I expect it’s likely that Russian world champion Vladimir Kramnik and German computer genius Frederic Friedel were trying to engage interest in the match Kramnik and Fritz played a couple of years ago. We might want to keep in mind that these two intellectual giants had to reduce complex ideas to a level that could be understood by various journalists and their readerships, many of whom may not have been familiar with the most elementary of chess concepts.

Since Kramnik and Friedel are two of the smartest and most gifted people on Earth, I’m not certain I should pretend that I understand exactly what they were trying to convey. But since you’ve asked me to, I’d say Kramnik intended to play the match with a different mindset, one emphasizing unusual aspects of positional struggle to which computers might have trouble assigning verifiable numerical values. His programmed opponent might attribute weight to irrelevant matters or miss certain intangible subtleties that the experienced human mind would be able to judge better, however intuitively. By invoking the term “tactics” it appears he was not using it as is often done, to mean short-range immediacies to advance a strategy. It seems he was really employing the word in a more strategic sense, to indicate a methodical line of attack or overall approach.

Friedel’s remarks also seem perfectly plausible. Programs are becoming so sophisticated they indeed should be playing better than the world’s most adept players within a couple of years. But nowhere does Friedel say or imply that humans will thereby become useless. They are the programmers – at least for now. I’m sure they’re resourceful enough to find some way to keep people on top, even if that means merely having a better seat from where to observe the proceedings.

**Question** I have a deep desire to improve my game although I am slightly better than Josh (that is, when Josh was 8). Most of the books I’ve read over the years and the little instruction I’ve received emphasize tactical perception. A tactical threat or opportunity can require some searching but once you’ve found it the course of action is concrete. I believe to improve my game I need to be able to recognize more subtle threats and opportunities. Your book “Weapons of Chess” is helping. Also, I’m reading with excitement, “The Amateur’s Mind” (Silman) which I’m confident will dramatically improve my positional perception and enable me to one day beat Josh (actually a computer simulation of Josh at age 9). While drills abound for improving tactical play, exercises for improving strategic play seem scarce. What advice do you give in learning to recognize and leverage subtle positional imbalances? **Lawrence Kilmer (USA)**

**Answer** Improving strategic play is very much a factor of experience. You

simply have to see many situations requiring a strategic handling played out over and over to get a sense how to proceed in similar circumstances. In recent years countless books have appeared dealing with all kinds of strategic problems and long-term decision-making. Some of these are quite excellent, and surely Jeremy Silman's *The Amateur's Mind* is among the best. But rather than limiting yourself to any one book I'd recommend that you go across the board, ferreting out games played by top grandmasters that are fully annotated, wherever they come from (books, magazines, software, or the Internet). The comments should contain both variations and explanations, as in Bronstein's masterwork on the Zurich 1953 Interzonal (of which there are two excellent editions obtainable, one by Burt Hochberg and one by Jimmy Adams). Living through and breathing in strategic ideas laid out in competitive games played by great players is an efficacious way to learn something about planning and the positional themes commonly associated with higher strategy. And if not that, you're just going to have to face Josh at a later age. He was good at eight, but he got really good at ten.

**Question** I started playing chess seriously for 2 months now and I am thoroughly dedicated to it. On my free time I study all aspects of chess. My question is, do you think that a player with my love and dedication for chess can ever become a grandmaster or at least a master? **E. Torres (USA)**

**Answer** You haven't given me enough information about yourself to say anything specifically, so it's hard to make a definitive statement on it, particularly concerning your desire to become a grandmaster. But I can say this. I didn't know anything about myself when I became a master, and I didn't have very much talent for it, so it wouldn't surprise me if you were to do significantly better. Perhaps one day you could even answer questions from onliners such as yourself, who love the game as you do. You never know.

**Question** According to many observers, you are an experienced chess educator with more students than you can ever possibly do a good job on. (Maybe you could send some of them to me.)

I often read your column at the **ChessCafe**, advising people to take lessons from masters, not to be too frugal about the price of the lessons, and to not expect that the lessons will make them instant grandmasters or a world champion. Now here's my problem. I am a very strong player (I should be about 2400), and I'm also heavily involved in club, state, and USCF affairs. I also want to get a hold of more chess students, and my lessons, while not overpriced, are not inexpensive either. So what is my problem? Well, I get new students several times during the year, and for the price I ask for, even though I'm not cheap.

The problem is that they always take just a few lessons from me before leaving me regardless of the price. Is it that I'm too honest with them when I tell them that I can't help their game as much as I'd like to? Or that I tell them that if they buy a recommended list of chess books from me (usually at a discount), reading them through religiously, and play a weekly tournament (or several weekly

tournaments), analyzing the game(s) carefully with their opponent's or strong players sitting around, that they will (or could), improve their game a great deal from this as well, and without weekly paying me my required fee, whatever I charge. Goodness gracious! Maybe I should just pretend that I really can be the complete answer to all their chess problems (I suspect this is what you must do, not that you do it that well). Then I will retain their need for lessons from me for a lot longer!

How do you keep your most "consistent students," or do you simply tell them that they are good when they are not? Also, I expect you sell a lot of your books to your students. I would not be surprised if those are the only books you recommend (your own), which many people tell me is pretty clear from reading your column. Or is it that you are famous, so you are always in big demand with people who don't know any better, and that is how you get them to buy your books? Finally, do you know of any chess agents or publishers (I don't need a big advance) who could help me with my own book ideas (this is where I think you could really help and it is what I most need)? I'm a pretty good writer (no, an extremely good writer), and if I had students and connections I think I could succeed (I would not be surprised that I would do as well as or better than you). Can you help me? Especially, though, how can I succeed as a chess teacher?

**Brandon Wagner (USA)**

**Answer** The most reliable way to keep your students is not to pretend they're something they're not, or that you're something you're not. You should always make clear who the two of you are and do the best you can for them. You should always tell them the truth. If they've done well, you should show them why and how. Every student is from Missouri and they have to be shown – not just told. If they've done poorly, you have to demonstrate what they did wrong. Even if it lowers the boom, you need to provide the most useful and pertinent advice you can give, making sure not to promise ridiculous panaceas. That doesn't mean you have to be hurtful – just truthful. Furthermore, if you endorse books or items for your students, it should be those you think can really help them as feasibly and economically as possible. And you should never recommend your own products, no matter how wonderful they are. That way they'll come to trust you, which is essential to the relationship between student and teacher. But that quality, at the foundation of character, must be earned, not bought or sold. How can you get to be a successful chess teacher? By making a commitment: to your student, to your profession, to the game of chess, and to the honest truth. Do all of that and watch your status go up, not just at the club, tournament, and USCF levels, but at the human level, where all good teaching begins.

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