



*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

## Numb in Number

### *The Q & A Way*

Bruce Pandolfini



**Question** In general, I am now thinking about the overall popularity of chess world-wide rather than the individuals who make up the final tally. However, I have been unable to get a handle on a source that could be considered reliable. For instance, I am sure that the Fide membership is but a small representation of the actual number of world citizens who play chess periodically and enjoy the experience of playing the great game of chess. Also, due to the amazing increase in "net" citizens, to what extent has this affected the playership of chess and are there more people learning to play or fewer? **Christopher Castle Haight (Canada)**

**Answer** There are no reliable statistics on how many people play chess (or know the moves and rules). I recall, however, that Paramount had its advertising and PR firms try to come up with a ballpark calculation around the release time of *Searching for Bobby Fischer* (1993). They determined that as many as 250 million people worldwide play at least one game of chess every year. But some of us thought that estimate was a bit suspect, inflated like everything else in the field of dreaming sales. If we factor in the obvious increase in scholastic, software, and online involvement, the mass of people playing chess has, in all likelihood, grown somewhat. But who can say with any degree of assurance? I'm just glad that more people are enjoying the world's most intriguing game, even if a few of them seem to come from the realm of the imaginary number.

**Question** I am an amateur Greek chessplayer and my rating is 1700. I am 32 years old and I do not play in tournaments with the exception of 5-6 games a year (national team championship -- local group). In fact I have not played many official games in my whole life (100 or so) and that's because I live in a distant and "chess isolated" county. I love the game very much and I daily watch the international news and games through the internet. I am the strongest player of my village and some kind of "coach" for young people. I have a lot of books,

programs and other chess stuff but my problem is that I do not have any opponents to practice, I mean in the flesh. I know my potential and I have realized that I won't probably become a better chessplayer under these circumstances. I play some blitz games in the internet and there are periods of time that I try to set a training program (tactical exercises, positional aspects, openings, endgame) but I soon find myself tired because I know that I won't play a real game soon. Last year I played in an international open and I did it quite well (4.5 in a Swiss of 9) though I hadn't played an official game for six years. The problem was that I had to travel for about 500kms to get to the city of the tournament and to stay there for seven days away from my family (I am married). Can you please suggest to me any alternatives in order to play normal time chess on the internet? Most of the sites I know refer to speed chess. Can you imagine a theoretical simulation of internet and tournament play? Do you think that I'll be able to train normally in order to be ready for an internet chess game? My goal is to play for a rating of 2000 even though it won't be in the official lists. Thank you for your time and attention. **Stefanos Kadoglou (Greece)**

**Answer** You don't have to travel to play chess. You can ride the Internet, and you needn't reconcile yourself to playing games at ridiculously speedy rates. In many Internet chess encounters you have the ability to change the standard parameters. On the ICC for instance, you can choose longer time controls with greater increments instead of accepting the default offering of 2 minutes per side plus 12 second add-ons for every move played. And while most players seem to prefer rapid games, there are plenty of people willing to play at 30 or even 60 minutes per side, thereby affording you the longer time controls usually associated with serious tournament chess.

You may have to wait a bit, but the combatants will inexorably come out of hiding. You might even find some of your opponents dependably showing up at particular times of day. You can plan to go on at those very times or communicate with them directly and set up scheduled two-game matches, where you play one game with White and one with Black. Produce printouts of those games and use them as source material for further study. It's well known that analyzing your own games is one of the best ways to improve your overall play.

In the same way, rather than trekking to some distant point to play in an international Swiss (incidentally, your fifty percent score sounds pretty good), you can stay at home and enter competitions on the Internet, making sure to opt for those with longer time allotments. There are also all kinds of free instructional bits and pieces offered on the net, much of which might prove of interest and value. The trouble is not that there's not enough. It's that there's so much it's hard to decide which of it works best for you. Can you make a rating of 2,000? With your current rating of 1,700, and your obvious intelligence and zest for intellectual challenge, I believe you have a stellar chance – without having to neglect your family even for a single day.

**Question** Unorthodox openings are great for surprise value and taking your rival

out of book. Some work -- like b4, Nc3 etc. -- and some can beat a higher rated player who may not know a good defense. I like them and might even challenge Kasparov with my a3!!!! What are your opinions on unorthodox openings? Your favorites? **John J. Henry (Canada)**

**Answer** I agree that unorthodox openings can be a plausible ploy to get your opponents out of stereotypical lines. But they may not achieve your goal, to distract experienced opponents from responding with established book lines. Chessplayers analyze everything, and many of the most adept analysts, thinking just like you, have explored the strangest moves n-ply. Consequently, some strong players may not be fooled by 1. a2-a3. They may even relish playing against it. So in addition to trying something a little different, sizing up your opponent, and adjusting for the attendant circumstances, you better come in prepared to play your fanciful lines with real knowledge. You might want to bone up on your chosen surprises with a good text (try Joel Benjamin's excellent book, for example) or an extensive database (try Chessgames.com) before challenging sleeping giants. If you're fantasizing about beating Kasparov, I suspect most "surprise" moves, rather than catching him napping, are likely to wake him up.

**Question** If you are playing someone in chess, is there a touch move rule, meaning, if I touch a piece, I must move it? Thank You! **Rasheim T. Freeman (USA)**

**Answer** Only if you play according to the rules.

**Question** I've read your excellent book, the *ABCs of Chess*. It was my first chess book and it was incredibly fun to read. I enjoyed the way you eased through the game, separating different concepts and ideas of play, and yet still maintaining the idea of chess as a whole. I've played chess on and off for about 10 years, but every now and again the passion for the game flares up and I get really involved in it. My question is probably stupid, but I'll make it anyway: When I analyze my games I often see moves that I could have made, better ones than those I actually played, and I enter these better moves in my comments of the game. My problem is that I can see my new moves, but I'm never sure of the moves my opponent would play in response. Is there any method I should follow in trying to determine his moves? **Jorge Azedo (Brazil)**

**Answer** The world is an uncertain place. We can seldom be sure of anything, which is why we often resort to strategies, probabilities, rules of thumb, and plain old intuition. You might get a better feel for the opposition's thinking if you practice trying to put yourself on the other player's side of the board, envisioning the game from your opponent's vantage point. That is, actually pretend you're sitting across from yourself, preparing to attack your own forces. That should give you a contrasting take on things, while unveiling some of your adversary's potential aims and hoped for tricks.

In your training sessions you can facilitate such perspectival extrapolations by

physically turning the board around, but in your real games you simply have to apply some spatial conceptualizing, making believe you're the other player.

That kind of imagining can help improve your defense as well. For example, instead of just trying to figure out the best move from your own active point of view, you should also attempt to assume the mindset and stationing of your opponent so that you can determine your adversary's best move – what he or she is trying to do to you. Armed with such global awareness, you have a much better opportunity to find moves that thwart your opponent schemes while fostering your own intentions. That in itself doesn't guarantee you'll always be able to devise your opponent's likely moves. But it should make you at least a tad more receptive to discovering his or her prospects, which must mean something in a game where anticipation and the accumulation of small advantages combine to make all the difference.

**Question** I am from India and I am 20-years old. I have been playing chess since quite a long time. You can consider me a rank beginner. What I want to ask you is if I can become a grandmaster if I am serious from now onwards. If you think yes, then how many hours a day should I dedicate to chess and give me a perfect method to start off from the beginning level to reach the grandmaster level? I think I can do what you think. **Keyur Gada (India)**

**Answer** You have an uphill battle in front of you. It's not easy to become a grandmaster, and I don't believe any of the other extant GMs have started on that arduous path so late in life. Perhaps you should lower your sights somewhat to the IM level. That's still pretty high, and from there you can gather your energy and necessary resolve for the final climb to the top. I don't know if you can "do what I think," though you have a glorious spirit, and if somehow you can lengthen the day to include much more than 24 hours (or make time stand still), I give you a fighting chance. It's always safer to set reasonable goals, but maybe your goals are reasonable for you. If so, more power to you, and I hope you succeed.

**Question** I heard in a movie (*Searching for Bobby Fischer*), that Bobby Fischer played chess against himself, that he played both sides of the board, careful to be fair. My question is, can you elaborate on this? Also, is this kind of chess effective? Can it really improve your play? Or can it actually hurt your chess skills? Thank you for your answer and your time. **Elba Torres (USA)**

**Answer** There's nothing to elaborate. It's not really possible to play against yourself, for various reasons. Against real opponents there's always a degree of uncertainty that you can't experience when the other side's thinking is entirely known and understood. What you can do instead is explore reasonable possibilities and judge their worth objectively for both sides. Learning how to analyze for yourself has obvious value. Playing against "yourself" is both a misconception and the surest way to get nowhere. I doubt that Fischer ever did that, and if he did, it would explain everything.

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**TOP OF PAGE**



**HOME**



**COLUMNS**



**LINKS**



**ARCHIVES**



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