



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

Botvinnik Smartvinnik

The Q & A Way

Bruce Pandolfini

Question My playing strength is between 2000-2100 ELO. I think I could increase my level a lot, if only I could do something about my one big weakness: I play very bad in time trouble! Do you have any tips or training ideas, so I can improve my play in time trouble (other than not getting into such troubles in the first place)? **Arno Beljaars (Netherlands)**

Answer The great Mikhail Botvinnik believed in solving a problem by going straight into the teeth of it at every opportunity. That's one approach -- not the only one -- but a tried and true one. So, if you don't feel comfortable when you're short of time, you should, following Botvinnik's logic, immerse yourself in time pressure situations whenever you train. If you're playing on the Internet, for example, select shorter time controls (within reason) and learn to live and survive with them. And if you're grappling against a computer chess program, opt for tighter time restraints until your responses become more intuitive.

That could suggest one aspect of the predicament: maybe you're analyzing too much. This advice might seem perverse, since most serious players encourage analyzing very carefully, and many of us don't analyze enough. To be sure, you must be open to considering anything that might be relevant until you get the hang of a variation and its contingencies. But you need to be efficient, eliminating waste and needless repetition in reviewing the moves you've previously investigated. At some point you have to stop questioning the obvious and its counterpart, the unknowable, and forge onward.

When your analysis doesn't appear to be heading anywhere definite, yet you've sincerely attempted to get to the root of your opponent's moves, you must be willing to trust your judgment and go with your gut. If you can't, perhaps you're suffering from self-doubt, and that could easily translate into time trouble and poor results.



We shouldn't obtusely and automatically think we're right or going to win, however, and play overconfidently, without a discriminating eye (I'm not saying that this unavoidably relates to you). But if we've really tried to comprehend what's happening, and if we've played according to good and sound principles, we should be able to cast our fate to the ultimate fight for the initiative and the advantage, accepting the consequences. Otherwise, it's hard to get through time difficulties and win games. That's all there is to it.

When analyzing in preparatory sessions, accordingly, place as much emphasis on completing tasks within particular time frames as you would on the accuracy of your thoughts. If you exceed the time allotment, even when you were on the right track, view your effort as unsuccessful and insist to yourself that if it had been a real game you would have lost. It's mainly by replicating game conditions that we can convert practice into experience with impact.

Question I was hoping you might be able to help me out with a problem I am having as of late. I am 37 years old, have been playing chess for about four years now, and only seem to be regressing. I put in about 2 hours a day (mostly just playing against Fritz, et al). I also do some puzzles, go through grandmaster games, analyze my own games (somewhat), and play in local tournaments. My problem is that I do not yet know my true strength! In my tournament games here in Montreal, while still provisional, I played and drew against the 3-time Quebec champion, Serge Lecroix (ELO 2200), in a small open tournament. (We played 5 rounds, 1 round per week.) Then, the following week, I will lose to some 10-year-old girl, who can barely see over the table and has an ELO of 1200 or so! Similar situations have also occurred when I play against someone with an ELO of 1800 and win, only to return the following week to have my ego handed to me by someone with a rating of 1300. I attributed this to nerves as I cannot eat before a game and sometimes get headaches during (I know it's just a game). Though, when I play at home, I can beat Fritz and Crafty, with their ELOs set at 1900 and 1800. But I also get pummeled when their ELOs are set at 1350. Out goes my theory of it being nerves. My teacher (whom I can only afford to see twice a year, and lets face it, I am never going to be Kasparov, Pandolfini or Fischer), says that there seems to be a huge chunk of knowledge missing from my practice and can't quite nail it down from our lack of time together. Yes, I know I am asking you to pull a rabbit out of your hat, but you are Bruce Pandolfini. PLEASE, Sir, what might I do to rectify this situation? Am I doomed to live in Patzerville? Also, please settle a long-time bet. Is that you in the movie "Searching for Bobby Fischer," saying "young Fischer" to Ben Kingsley (who plays you)? If it is, it must have been bizarre talking to yourself.

Mel Griffin (Canada)

Answer It's evident you've really made an effort to get better and that you've had a levelheaded approach to chess improvement. You're obviously a seasoned and knowledgeable player, yet the problems vexing you are not uncommon. Many veteran tournament competitors have to live through paradoxical results, beating players on the rating scale above them and faltering to those beneath them. It's also typical to lose to players we've already beaten many times

before, and not just because of a tendency to assume victory instead of earning it. Disparities in outcomes and swings in supposed playing strength can be explained by a multiplicity of factors, and sometimes can't be explained at all. Performance dynamics could be affected by nerves (which on the surface applies to your case), time controls, time of day, focus, health, situation, personality, knowledge, experience, all kinds of other conditional parameters, and yes, even ability.

We might lose to lower rated players because we take them for granted, or beat higher rated players because they take us for granted. That we draw with a master strength player doesn't mean we've played like a master (not that we haven't). Maybe he or she didn't play that well. That we lose to youngsters rated 1200 doesn't mean that we didn't perform at our natural level (not that we did). Maybe our young opponent found some nice notions, maybe we played one or two bad ones. Conceivably, we were spaced out that day and lost our concentration. It could be that dozens of determinants impinged on the proceedings, and the winning effort can only be appreciated holistically, or not at all. There are no obvious explanations, and simple answers are often part of the problem.

I'm not trying to minimize results and ratings. Clearly, they're important. We all need to know we're doing okay, and if we're not doing okay, then we'd like to know what we can do about it. But winning games and gaining rating points aren't everything (actually, let me check on that). If we're going to be comprehensive, even the most favorable occurrences should be judged sensibly and in context.

That's where objectivity comes in. To grasp the import of what happened, and how we're doing, we should analyze our own play. This can be done on our own, with the aid of a mentoring advocate, or by employing a piece of evaluative software. So even though you can't see your chess instructor as often as you'd like, you can turn to computers. I can't say that if you do *this* you'll achieve *that*. But if you earnestly try to explore your weaknesses, strengths, style, and propensities, you have a decent chance to understand, make progress, and enjoy the pastime to which you've been investing so much time and labor.

Having argued against merely emphasizing results and ratings, permit me to make an apparent turnaround and respond to the difficulty you had ascertaining your true level. Taking all issues into account, the best way to verify your actual playing strength (perhaps regretfully) is to compete in rated tournaments regularly, under a range of conditions. Thirty games will give you statistical meaning, but it will take at least a couple of hundred games to establish a number with real-world meaning. At that point you should have some reliable sense of your approximate ability. Your rating won't tell you what must be done to improve, of course. To figure those things out, as I've already indicated, you should analyze your play or have it analyzed. But there are no grounds for not recognizing that number as the true state of affairs.

Two other things: I appreciate your alluding to me in the same sentence as Kasparov and Fischer, but I suspect they might have a different reaction. Also, you're quite right. In the movie *Searching for Bobby Fischer*, it is indeed me standing next to Ben Kingsley in Washington Square Park. It was director Steve Zaillian's little joke, and I laughed all the way to the deposit machine.

Question In a chess site reading a GM game analysis, sometimes by move 17 or 20, for example, they say that player "X" made a different move against player "Y" in tournament "Z" five years ago. Does it mean that from move 1 to move 20 of that GM game there was no novelty and both sides knew already the move sequence they had been playing? If your answer is "yes," then, for the players, a GM game seems a little boring in the beginning, don't you think so? **Marco Antonio (Brazil)**

Answer It doesn't mean quite that. Surely, the same setup could have arisen by transposition. A novelty could have been played earlier to take an unexpected branching formation to the one at hand. In fact, surprise opening moves, and different sequences of the same moves that hoodwink an opponent out of the book line, or back into it, form a large portion of the art of innovative opening play. So just because one knows the so-called book very well, as if by rote, doesn't indicate that he or she can't be inventive. In fact, to be really creative under such doings, one might have to be ingenious.

But it's clear what you mean: so much of contemporary opening activity seems to be based on having greater book knowledge, and that may take some of the magic and mystery out of playing chess, at least for the observer. For the player, it can be quite another matter. Regardless how much preparation, or one's relative strength, it's still possible one's adversary has found a move not in the book – or in a different book. No player can therefore afford to rest on his or her knowledge, rating, title, or experience against an opponent out for deception. Every player, however ready, lives on the edge of insecurity. Such circumstances are not likely to be boring. But then, I don't think you necessarily mean "boring." I think you mean instead something more like "hard to do," because it entails a lot of detailed work. Naturally, work can be boring – or invigorating, if you love it.

Question It seems that in most books at the beginner to intermediate level, authors tend to emphasize the beautiful games. That is, games which are won with a swashbuckling, sacrificing attack. While players at this level are encouraged to play open games which are likely to feature a lot of tactics, could it be that some disservice is being done to readers who may be left with the impression that this is a more valid approach to the game? Certainly for a hack such as myself, doomed to eternal class level play, this may be the case. My name and the word "master" will never be used in the same sentence, so I might as well have some fun. For a younger developing player who has a shot at reaching a more serious level of play, however, shouldn't things be presented in a more balanced way? **Joe Iannandrea (Canada)**

Answer Your question is very thoughtful and perceptive. Ideas should be presented in a more balanced or complete manner, because, for most issues, there are at least two perspectives, if not more. So, after showing students that doubled pawns are often weak, teachers should also demonstrate how they can have lively features that impart positive character. After encouraging students to capture toward the center, teachers should point out when students might find it desirable to capture away from the center. After cautioning students not to bring out their queen too early, it should be made clear to students that there are many instances in which bringing the queen out quickly is the road to success. After promoting early castling, teachers should make it clear that sometimes it's wiser to delay castling or to keep the king in the center altogether. And after recommending that students should develop their knights before bishops, someone should tell that teacher to take up another profession.

I don't want to sound too iconoclastic, or relativistic. Without doubt, students need to begin with understanding principles before they can deal properly with shadings and ostensible contradictions. But we still need teachers and writers to underline context more, rather than all purpose generalities, which can be misleading and unmindful of significant exceptions and limitations. Nevertheless, it's easier to think one-dimensionally, in pure good and bad concepts, which explains why it's so easy to write and teach that way too.

Question Hi! I first want to say how much I love reading your column. Now my question: How high do you rate the study of annotated classical games (such as Alekhine's book, or 100 selected games by Botvinnik, or Tal's book)? **Matthew Haas (USA)**

Answer The books you've alluded to should be rated very highly. They abound in invaluable reflections and give tangible reality to the most subtle abstractions. We have few opportunities to get inside the minds of the game's leading proponents. Other than spending personal time with them, and not too many of us can do that, perhaps nothing can convey their thinking better than a book to which they've given their heart and intellect. Should one study annotated classical games? My response is yes, though it would be tempered somewhat by who played the games and who's doing the annotating. If we're talking about the collections of Alekhine, Botvinnik, and Tal, annotated by those players or chess thinkers nearing their ilk, few rational observers would demur.

Question Hello Mr. Pandolfini. My question is, are there any rules that can tell when a counterattack is effective and when it is a mistake? I know from my little experience that counterattacks might be very dangerous if you don't take care of all the possibilities that might arouse from your opponent's reply to your counterattack. I have managed to find some basic "counterattack rules," such as: Don't counterattack if your opponent can move his attacked piece and check you (unless you can capture the checking piece). I have come to some more rules, but I found that there are too many complications to set up clear, useful rules. Can you help me to state those rules clearly? Is that possible at all? **Yair Spiegel (Israel)**

Answer You have to be careful about such general rules. You can consult them but you shouldn't rely on them. All your decisions should be based on what's really taking place over the board, not on some wide-ranging encapsulation that's supposed to explain everything (we're not talking about a unified field theory here). For that reason I am hesitant to restate your counterattack principles. However well they could be put, I doubt that my reformulations would prove enlightening or very beneficial.

I am also a little unsure of what you mean exactly by "counterattack." It could be you're suggesting that a counterattack is a pure attack that takes no notice of your opponent's move. If you do mean that, you may be misunderstanding the nature of most counterattacks.

In all instances, you should look at your opponent's last move and figure out what it does. If it threatens you (undoubtedly one of the possibilities), you should make sure that you respond to it if it's a real threat. Ideally, with your next move, you should do at least two things. You should cope with your opponent's threat, intention, or plan (unless your opponent's move is ridiculous or irrelevant). And also you should try to foster your own ends. A good counterattack doesn't integrally have to be stronger than your opponent's move, or come first (though those are valuable attributes). Whatever good things stem from your counterattack, nonetheless, you should make certain it nullifies your opponent's threats – if there are any. I suppose one rule might be that you can play a counterattack if it succeeds regardless what your opponent played on the last move, and no matter what he plays on the next moves. But what kind of rule is that? The rule is, you don't need a rule to give pedigree to a counterattack. You need concrete analysis to determine if your counterattack actually works. If the counterattack works, the rule works – for that occasion.

The best time to resort to general advice is when specific analysis doesn't seem to be getting anywhere. This may be particularly helpful when you're losing. For example, if it seems that you're under heavy attack and are likely to lose if you do nothing; and if you can't seem to find moves that contend with your opponent's impending threats and aggressive possibilities – that is, if you have nothing to lose – then you might think of trying to divert your opponent, hoping to get him focused more on your imaginary or empty threats than on his own aims. By deflecting him, you may sap his resolve and attendant assault, and that could give you opportunities to come back. But that is more a piece of advice, and less a rule or principle. And even in the situation where you might consider following such counsel, you're still going to calculate and judge in explicit moves as much as reasonably useful, and not in broad generalizations. Think too generally, or not at all, and you're bound to hang something or get mated. What fun is that?

Question Thank you for everything that you do for chess. I have a medium sized library of chess books that I am looking to extend. In particular, I enjoy tournament collections. What I am looking for now is books that go beyond games and analysis. I want tournament books that cover the relationships

between the players, political situations, etc. I have *Zurich 1953* by Bronstein and it is very good. However, I much preferred Gligoric's 1972 Fischer-Spassky book (or *No Regrets* by Seirawan), due to the comprehensive coverage of many facets of the match. Can you recommend good tournament books (on good tournaments) that cover aspects of the events other than just the games? **Tony Rich (USA)**

Answer In addition to the ones you've mentioned, you might pick up Alekhine's books on the tournaments of New York 1924 and Nottingham 1936. Botvinnik's monograph on the 1941 USSR championship is also excellent. Tal's work on his 1960 match with Botvinnik, is indisputably among the best. Those four books provide great games, first-rate examinations, and topical commentary. And in the contemporary chess world, you can't really do better than the coverage provided by Yasser Seirawan in his books on the Karpov-Kasparov world championship matches. They are truly outstanding and are fast becoming classics, revered for their analysis and reportage. Keep up the good reading.

Question Who is the oldest person to gain the title of Grandmaster and at what age (or to phrase my question differently, so you surely understand what I am asking), at what age did someone become the oldest person to become a grandmaster?) **Erik Dawkins (USA)**

Answer I don't really know, but it could be Arthur Dake (1910-2000), who was an active grandmaster until his death at 90. He was awarded the grandmaster title at the age of 76, based on years of stellar play earlier. I think the oldest player ever to become a master was Oscar Shapiro, who earned the title at age 74. It's funny how so much interest is shown for young players who accomplish great things, but much less attention is accorded those who attain great things in later life. For most of us, their achievements should be much more encouraging.

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