



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

The Play's the Thing

The Q & A Way

Bruce Pandolfini



Question I learned chess in high school (read Fischer's *Bobby Fischer Teaches Chess* a few times) and played friendly games through college. Once out of college, it was hard to find a chess partner until a couple of years ago. I am 47 and beginning to play on a regular basis. This last year and a half, I have increased my chess library to about 15 books. I have played through a couple of game collections - *Most Instructive Games of Chess Ever Played* by Chernev and *Understanding Chess Move by Move* by Nunn and have read two chapters of *Life and Games of Mikhail Tal*. I have gone through *Winning Chess Tactics for Juniors* by Hayes 4 times this year and have started *Combination Challenge* by Hayes, not to mention half way through *Looking for Trouble* by Heisman. I started opening study with *Winning Chess Openings* by Robertie and parts of *Standard Chess Openings* by Schiller. I have recently purchased some other opening books - *Starting out: the Sicilian*, *Starting out: the Queens Gambit*, *Starting out: Kings Indian* and *Winning with the Sicilian Dragon 2*.

I have studied all aspects of chess in *Mammoth Book of Chess* by Burgess and *Chess Training for Budding Champions* by Hall. In the last few months I have started in *Dvoretsky's Endgame Manual*, which is very interesting and challenging for a beginner. I purchased Chessmaster 8000 and went through all of the beginner and intermediate lessons and all of the games by Josh Waitzkin. I recently purchased Deep Fritz 8 and started playing online. I have loaded the few OTB games I have played over the last year and let Fritz analyze them for me and now regularly let Fritz analyze all my 15 minute and 30 minute games so I can review and see where either I or my opponent missed moves (all those little black medals look standard now). I feel like I will continue to improve by doing what I am doing. However, I might work on endgames for a week, the Dragon for a week, Queens Gambit a few days, and just play and analyze for a week. I do work on tactics at lunch three or four days a week and *Lasker's Manual of Chess* with breakfast almost every day. I say all that to ask this: Is

there a recommended pattern, percent of time, etc. that will help me optimize my time? I joined USCF in July (probably going to add *Solitaire Chess* to my training now) and would like to play in some OTB tournaments next year (I live about 2 hours from Atlanta - no local tournaments) and would like to be prepared. What guidelines would you recommend? **Steve Bennett (USA)**

Answer If there is a recommended pattern, I suspect you've already discovered it, because it seems you've tried every kind of approach there is and maybe worked your chess set (and/or keyboard) to a state of erosion. All the same, I'm not sure you should change what you're doing at all. By your own assessment you're improving and making definite progress. You also appear to be enjoying the process, otherwise it's doubtful you'd be going through it.

I'm a little unclear what your ultimate goal is. I see that you desire improvement as a player, and you've indicated you want to be prepared, but I'm not sure what for. If it's to go to Atlanta, and from time to time play in tournaments, I think you're already armed to the teeth and prepared to do battle with practically anyone. If it's to achieve something else, well what else is it?

Whatever it is, why not focus more on playing chess for plain old fun? Just try to enjoy your actual games more, certainly thinking critically during those games, using your wherewithal to comprehend and play better, but especially doing it for pleasure and mental stimulation, not to fulfill some arbitrarily determined set of tasks. As you have problems in your game, you can try to cope with them through some kind of bolstering or remedial study, if you choose. Your growth as a chessplayer is likely to follow as you encounter the game and its concepts naturally. That's what I'd do, even if I lived two hours from Atlanta.

Question I've been playing chess for two years now and I've seen a relatively steady improvement. Of course, I started playing chess at the wrong time. I also began college two years ago and I go to a very challenging university. My rating now is about 1900 and my last 4 performance ratings have all been above 2000 (some much higher) so I feel as though I'm still well on the rise. My main goal right now is to make master; I don't know what a realistic time frame for this is. My guess is somewhere between 3 and 4 years, but obviously it could take longer. My question really is, having started real chess (I knew how the pieces moved since I was about five, but I definitely had spans of whole years without playing since then and as a whole very infrequently) at such a relatively old age, should I take advantage of any benefits or take care of any disadvantages of starting at a much older age. Also I'm curious to know have there been any strong IMs or GMs that have started at such a late age (just for curiosity's sake). **Joshua Gutman (USA)**

Answer You're already a respectable player, and you're definitely young enough to still make significant advances in playing caliber, possibly even to the master level. True, it may not be easy, and you're not 6 years old. But college age is not that old either, and that's when most of us acquire the knowledge we need to succeed in our respective professions. Are we saying here, that many

professionals (doctors, lawyers, scientists, artists, businesspeople, and so on) are ill-qualified because they've learned a good deal of their expertise as adults, not as children?

I think the best course of action for you right now would be to have your games assessed by a strong and objective player, in your case, preferably of 2400 strength or better, who also has some experience at performing such analyses. It makes sense to get your play diagnosed before committing to any definite course of action. Otherwise, you might be striking out in the wrong direction and creating obstacles that interfere with eventual progress.

I'm reluctant to advise a player of your status without knowing a lot more about you, and you're not going to get anywhere with glib generalizations. Such things can work for beginners, inasmuch as most players can often profit much more from general concepts than particular ones when they're just starting out. But once you become fairly adept, you tend to need more pertinent solutions, applying particularly to who you are, instead of what you are. So it seems more prudent to first get your play evaluated by a considerate and skilled advisor before you establish a long-term course of study and practice.

Have there been strong players who reached the master level or better in later life, who might serve as inspiring beacons? Of course there have been. Many of the game's strongest players learned in their teens. Akiba Rubinstein didn't learn how to play chess until he was sixteen. I think he did okay. Reuben Fine, for whom I worked as an assistant for two years, told me he learned the moves at eight yet didn't get really involved till his middle adolescence. And there are definitely others who became accomplished much later in their chess lives.

But I wouldn't look to them. I'd look to you, and based on your present level of rapid improvement, and who you appear to be, I'd say you have an excellent opportunity to become a master in 2-3 years, playing and studying the game 20-30 hours a week or so. That doesn't mean you're categorically going to get there after following such a regimen. But you strike me as one determined and possibly talented enough to have more than a bettor's chance. Good luck. You seem to know where you're going, and you're probably not going to stop there.

Question I have been playing chess, OTB and other, for many years, usually at the 2000 level, though I have beaten my share of masters. Nowadays I prefer ICC chess and do real well. I have many chess books (they fill up a couple of bookcases), but I prefer demonstrating my skills online. I think I can say I know something about the game, after all these years. Though I hesitate to ask you, because I don't think you're really going to answer me, and I'm not sure you know more than I do (I think I could write your column easy). Anyway, is there a best way to study chess? **Howard Samuelson (USA)**

Answer I don't know. Is there?

Question How should a chess player study a chess opening? I want to be a

professional chess player but I am suffering in the opening. I develop my pieces to the center against Shredder 5.32. I have a chess engine, Shredder 5.32. I also want to know the best system to study in ECO, and what level to study, because sometimes I think I won't study the opening, the middlegame endgame, etc. I shall play 50 serious games with a classical time control against Shredder 5.32 and after every finished game analyze each game thoroughly. After that, I study opening theory and other theory, based on my 50 games. Please suggest to me about my thinking, and forgive me for my mistakes, if I don't speak English properly. **Khondakar Nazre Mowla (Bangladesh)**

Answer There are many ways to study the opening, and all of them work or fail depending on the circumstances and the givens. Why don't you try the following: Once you've found an opening you'd like to examine, collect 50-100 games that branch from that opening. Preferably, the games should be annotated by strong players, though this is hardly necessary when being introduced to these lines. The commentary of experts becomes more valuable later on, when you need experienced and insightful interpretations, instead of ersatz wisdom.

Once you've amassed the original block of 50-100 games, play through them casually at first, lightly reading the notes, unless particular positions are confusing or intrigue you. Rather than trying to comprehend everything initially, merely try to get a feel for the material, to see if you could play those lines comfortably, once you've learned more about them. This is a judgment call, and it means you might misjudge the situation, but you have to start somewhere. You can always change your course of action if you don't seem to be making any gains.

If you wind up not being happy with the lines you've been looking at, you can pick different openings and games and try playing through them. If, however, the procedure does work, and you like the results and resulting positions, you're ready to explore those openings in greater depth. That's when you can make a commitment to intensified follow-up with encyclopedias and books on specific variations.

I'm not going to get into what systems are objectively best for two reasons: I don't know what they are, and even if I did, I don't know that they would work for you. But having said the above, I must also say this. I think you're doing superbly. Playing 50 serious games against Shredder, and then subjecting those games to fuller analysis, is a great way to generate relevant and useful information about your play.

In playing those games, and in reviewing them afterward, you should make sure to check out Shredder's evaluative function, to see which moves it recommends that you didn't play. You might then try those alternatives against Shredder and see where they guide you. Gradually, if you keep applying yourself in that way -- playing, analyzing, re-trying, re-analyzing, and so on -- you're bound to gain in both understanding and, inevitably, real strength. Keep it up. I think you're going about things intelligently, and people tell me that's the point of being

human.

Question I'm wondering if you can recommend a good book on how to defend. The books I've seen so far - like Colin Crouch's work - show how leading grandmasters defend in inferior positions, or when a pawn down. What I'd like is something more basic - what do you do when your opponent has opened the h-file and is letting you have it with both barrels, or your king is on the wrong end of a pawn storm. Should your knight be on f3 or f1, should your king be on g1 or h1... that sort of stuff. (I'm an average club player, ELO 1800.) Thanks! **John Burns (United Kingdom)**

Answer I'm not sure it will meet your needs, but an excellent treatise on the subject is the *Art of Defense in Chess* by Andy Soltis. I think it's put out by McKay/Random House and I believe it's still in print. It's a terrific work, and many observers deem Andy Soltis to be the best chess writer in the English language. If his book doesn't quite fit the bill, I think you'll still find it an enjoyable read and well worth your time.

Question Hi Bruce! It's been about 25 years since I dusted off my chessboard. About a month ago, I decided to study chess seriously and really learn the game. I went out and purchased Chessmaster 9000 and bought a few books on openings. In one of the books, Jeremy Silman recommends learning one opening system for White and two defenses for Black (one against a d4-opening and the other against an e4-opening). Silman goes on to recommend using these openings for a year. Besides getting my butt beat on a regular basis by the Chessmaster 9000, I have been studying games by grandmasters, too. My goal is to have enough knowledge to be dangerous in three months and then join the local chess club. After four weeks, I am learning a lot, but still haven't decided on what openings to study for the first year. Do you agree with Silman's advice? Would you recommend something different for an 'elder' novice to do the first year? Also, how does one improve their memory with chess? I had read that Fischer could recite the moves from the majority of his matches and that most really good chessplayers have strong recall. Your advice would be most helpful in my development. Thanks! P.S. I checked out one of your books from the local library - *The Winning Way* - and am about to start reading it. **Tom Merrill (USA)**

Answer Jeremy Silman's suggestions are very reasonable. They're hardly the only way to go about it, but they're good ones, nonetheless. You also must take into account that his advice applies to classes of players, and not to anyone as an individual. But a well-structured, soundly formulated, all-purpose program, such as Jeremy's, can be an outstanding platform from which to springboard.

The idea is that, whether you receive personal help, or go through a period of trial and error, you start off exploring some ideas, parsing out bad habits from good strategies, and eventually settle upon procedures and tasks that suit you and your requirements. You should give them some time to see if they're working. But even when highly successful, few of us stay with anything forever.

And let's not forget, you're not an amorphous group. You're a defined person and have personal characteristics and needs.

Just keep an open mind. Regularly assess your status and ask lot's of openly posed (as well as internalized) questions that help you get a larger perspective on your efforts and apparent results. Variety and change are integral to a rich experience and a fulfilling life. Chess is no different, and the same surely can be said for chess study.

I wouldn't claim that chess improves your memory. That's like saying chess makes one smart, which, of course, it doesn't per se. In fact, it might even hinder the subsequent use of your memory with an overload of extraneous information, and that mishmash might impede clear thinking. A more levelheaded assertion would be to say that the techniques you learn while processing chess data and attempting to solve chess problems could be helpful in scrutinizing all kinds of other facts and ideas.

Upgrading your memory is another matter. I'm not sure you can actually improve your memory so much as get more out of it. Experience things more intensely, and they'll tend to stay with you more vividly and cohesively, while being more accessible when you need to call upon them. No doubt, you can remember more indelibly by focusing with greater concentration. It also helps to be proactive while thinking, readily seeking associations, finding analogies and correlations, so that you have more buttons to push in order to trigger a particular recollection. You should also be dealing from strength, which means being in good health, feeling well-rested and properly fed, and having an untroubled mind, free of enervating stresses. As a rule, it's much harder to do something if you're doing anything else – not exclusively, but usually. Accordingly, if you want to remember better, be properly prepared, pay attention, and give your all. Other than taking some kind of wonder drug, that's the best most of us can reasonably do.

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