



*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

## Tactics Is A Good Strategy

### *The Q & A Way*

Bruce Pandolfini



**Question** Hello Bruce! I started playing chess seriously about 3 or 4 months ago. I learned the rules of the game when I was 8 (I'm 15 years old now), but I never gave the game the attention it needed, until some months ago when I became fascinated with the game. But the problem I have is that I don't see my game improving at all. I mean, I read some books over the last months, but apart from learning the basics of openings and some ending patterns, I couldn't find any book or any method to help me improving my tactics and strategy, which, I think, are my biggest problems, because sometimes I even get some advantage after the openings and I just throw it all away in the middlegame. I never seem to find any kinds of combinations, or just good moves at some parts of the game, and so I'm stuck at 1100-1200 rating. So I would like to know if you could give me some tips on how to improve my strategic/tactical vision or any other way to improve my game. Thanks a lot. **Gutenberg Neto (Brazil)**

**Answer** Tactics and strategy are very different. Most developing students find it easier to acquire tactical knowledge. You can work your way through book and software collections of tactical examples, and there are hundreds of such treatises available. Far less has been produced on planning and position play. Ironically, assimilating good strategic thinking usually takes longer, and requires going through years of experience and solid mental investment.

To improve your tactical grasp, pick up a good puzzle book of practical examples and work your way through it as efficiently as you can. When you finish that, get another book and do the same thing. When you finish that, get still another book and proceed through that third book (and so on). Just keep trying to solve situational puzzles – always without moving the pieces. I'd be terribly surprised if your tactical awareness didn't sharpen. There are other things you can do as well, but there's no need to be exhaustive or original. Repeatedly solving tactical problems has helped chessplayers around the world.

It should help you too.

To acquire a better understanding of strategy, and significantly improve your overall chess skills, I suggest you turn to Botvinnik. Buy, borrow, or take out of the library any of his annotated game collections (or find a character from Bradbury's *Fahrenheit 451* who knows Botvinnik by heart). A player of your apparent strength (1100-1200) should be able to learn a great deal about strategic thinking if you follow his analysis with effort and care. After you finish with Botvinnik, you might then move on to Petrosian or Karpov. What they have to say about middlegame reasoning and judgment can be similarly helpful. *Petrosian's Legacy*, for instance, is an excellent book, with wonderful insights that virtually all players can appreciate. *My Best Games* by Karpov is also worth spending time with, as is *How Karpov Wins* by Edmar Mednis. And if you want something that treats planning in particular, give *Chess Middlegame Thinking* by Peter Romanovsky a try. It's also a glorious book.

But if you truly want to get better, why don't you play a couple of thousand games against really good players. That odyssey should improve all aspects of your game in ways I couldn't even begin to describe, which is just one of the reasons I'm ending this answer right here.

**Question** Hi, I'm from Atlanta, Georgia and I'm rated about 1722. Basically, I have two questions. I have accumulated several opening books to complete my repertoire as White and Black. For White, I have a good book on playing d4, by Richard Palliser. As Black against e4, I play the Sicilian Sveshnikov and have the book *The Complete Sveshnikov* by Yakovich. Against an anti-Sicilian, I have the book *Beating The Anti-Sicilians* by Gallagher. Against d4, I play Nf6, and will play either the Nimzo or Benoni and I have great books on those openings. Now, I have my opening repertoire setup with White and Black. Is this a good approach? I know what I want to play. Now, I'm hoping that in time, I'll really do well in future tourneys. Also, is it a good idea to play in the open sections of tourneys, with the intent to gain experience playing those who are 300+ rating points higher than me? **Dominick DiMantova (USA)**

**Answer** It seems as if you're working with some first-rate texts. Judicious use of those books should place you in good stead to play at your current level and beyond. But I wouldn't stop there. I'd search out reinforcements for the particular lines you've chosen. You should be looking at current journals and tapping software, such as Chessbase. The Internet could also prove accommodating – for example, Chessgames.com. You might additionally find it worthwhile to work with a study partner. He or she could test the lines you're interested in against you (as well as analyze with you), and you could correspondingly assist your study partner. By setting up a joint schedule, you indicate your willingness to take the entire proceeding more seriously. You're far less likely to talk yourself out of a session if there's someone else with whom to share the experience and the responsibility.

It's not imprudent to play in open sections, potentially facing players rated 300

points or so higher than you. I wouldn't necessarily suggest that tack for players much weaker than you (around 1000), but an established 1722 player is a decent chess warrior, generally inclined to learn from instructive losses and capable of occasionally beating expert players.

One last suggestion: if you can, I recommend you try to add the element of chess software to your regimen, if you haven't already done so. Surely, it's not indispensable, but I feel there's much to be gained by utilizing the new technology, before it utilizes you.

**Question** I've heard that studying the games of masters can help one improve his or her play. And I've have recently heard that a certain grandmaster stated that a player should "annotate his own games" in order to improve. Therefore, I ask, "In your opinion, which is a better way for a player to improve?"-- studying the games of the masters or their own games (maybe they are equally as beneficial). Also, exactly how should one "annotate" his or her own games -- please explain the best way to do this to me in order to get the most out of it.  
**Erik Dawkins (USA)**

**Answer** Perusing the games of grandmasters and masters might very well improve one's play. Maybe. If you're a total newcomer, you might gain much more from working with basic texts than with books of esoteric moves and complex analyses well beyond your experience and present level of understanding. If you labor too often over unreadable material you might become so discouraged that you wind up abandoning ship. I'm also willing to bet that the grandmaster you're paraphrasing was referring to players of "A" strength (the first class of good player) or better. The suggestion might help players of lesser stature, but it wouldn't be as effective or meaningful.

Actually, the best games for you to study are those not between grandmasters, not between masters, and not between players of your own strength. By far the best games to study, if you can get your hands on them, would be games between players of your own strength and very strong players. The players of your strength would likely make the errors typical of your class, and the very strong players would undoubtedly take advantage of those mistakes. That's powerful instruction. You probably wouldn't learn as much if only sophisticated errors were made, which you didn't comprehend even if they were taken advantage of, or if downright blunders were played that went unseen and unexploited.

Without knowing much about you, I'm going to suggest that you place greater emphasis on the analysis of your own games, preferably with the aid of a strong and sympathetic player. But I don't think you have to annotate your games so much as simply figure out what went wrong and what you could have done better. If possible, you might consider taking some instruction aimed at analyzing your games. You can improve with greater speed if you understand what you've been doing wrong and you're shown how to do it right -- on a regular basis. You can use software, friends, and your mind to get the job done,

but having a knowledgeable and considerate advisor in your corner couldn't hurt.

It can be desirable to learn how to write down your thoughts on a chess game. But even more to the point is learning how to analyze chess positions in the first place, whether you write down your ideas or not. If you want some sense of what the analytic process is like, and thereby better your calculations and evaluations, you might want to check out several of the works of Alexander Kotov, including his *Think Like a Grandmaster* and *Play Like a Grandmaster*. Both books have many practical ideas on the art of analysis, and they're both quite entertaining. So was Kotov, but that may not be as relevant as his admirers thought.

**Question** Hi Bruce! I hope this question reaches you. I am a player rated about 1700-1800 strength. I have recently stepped into the Class A bracket. However, as an ambitious player, I desire for a higher rating. I want to seriously work on my game, especially the opening. I have many books about the opening, written by players such as GMs Eduard Gufeld, Lev Psakhis and Joe Gallagher. My problem is that when I flip a page of the opening book, all I see are lines and variations, which make me feel lazy to study. It is very much time-consuming to go through all the variations, and sub-variations, often resetting the position to the main line. Aside from being time-consuming, it would require a great deal of mental energy, because you will have to analyze each move. I do understand the lines presented, but only after a few minutes of study. Well, I would be willing to spend that much time and energy if only I could memorize (I believe mastering the opening still involves the element of memorization aside from understanding) them, but often times I tend to forget. Yes, I do memorize a few, but I rarely apply them, because my opponents would tend to deviate from the lines I study, and then I find myself out of the book and all alone. This leads me to two questions which, I hope, you could answer: Can you suggest me a proper way to study an opening book full of variations and contains less verbal explanation (e.g. Informator style)? and What should I do if my opponent plays a move not found in the opening book? Thanks. **Michael Lucagbo (Philippines)**

**Answer** The opening books you have are fine. I do understand your dilemma, however. It can be really enervating to set up again and again, as you work your way through variations upon variations. I think you can try either of two things. If you're determined to go through every single line (which certainly has the virtue of being thorough, and, in the end, may even be satisfying), you can do so far more productively by using a software analytic tool, such as Chessbase. You will be faster, find it much less taxing, and accomplish a vast amount more. You may discover all sorts of new relations. And whatever you enter can be saved, so that you have full access to your work in the future, without having to go through the same drudgery a second time. Chess is a visual game, and a visceral one. You'll derive much more from your pains if you see the patterns and connections, and if you eventually begin to feel the lines as vector forces. Working on a screen may be two dimensional, but it translates into multi-dimensional reality (the mind is a fantastic thing).

That's one way to go: inputting the variations with the aid of chess software. But if the above doesn't appeal to you, you might choose a different course altogether. You could concentrate on the main lines, and skip over the explanatory notes, only stopping when it's essential, or when you feel so moved. You can learn the various side lines – not by studying them – but by playing them against other people and seeing what they do. Over the course of time, you won't get beat up so often and you'll start to absorb key ideas. Things will just begin to fall into place as you keep seeing the same situations. If you want to expedite the process, you can again seek the aid of computers. The better programs will respond with book moves and you can pick up most of the things offered by the book, without having to toil as much. You can lose and learn with tireless pleasure. To be sure, you're not going to be put off by losing to a machine, are you? Finally, what should you do if your opponent varies from the book? Why not try thinking for yourself? I'm told that it can actually help, and it's supposed to be the real fun of it, as perverted as the notion sounds. I suspect you're even very good at it.

**Question** I am interested in the names of openings, and have three questions: 1) Which is the origin of the following names: Halloween Gambit, Elephant Gambit and English Defence? 2) Is it true that Ruy Lopez de Sigura did not trust the opening which uses his name? 3) Is it true that ECO system has the same mistakes that the former Informator classification had? Thank you in advance.  
**Viktor Freund (Germany)**

**Answer** You're asking the wrong person, but that's never stopped me before. I think the Halloween Gambit arises from the Four Knights Game. It is announced by 1. e4 e5 2. Nf3 Nc6 3. Nc3 Nc6 4. Nxe5, which even now sends shivers down my spine. But what's in a name? The Elephant Gambit, I believe, is a variation stemming from the Queen's Pawn Counter Gambit (1. e4 e5 2. Nf3 d5). I don't know who's responsible, or if it should be judged a crime, but after 3. exd5, the zoo-like response 3. ... Bd6 seems to signify the Elephant Gambit. And the English Opening (1. c4) goes back to fact that it was played and analyzed by Howard Staunton in the 1840s, though it was first put into print by Lucena in 1497. I can't say if Ruy Lopez trusted the opening named after him, but I don't think his play was good enough to trust him, or anything he played, for that matter. Just make sure the sun is shining in your opponent's eyes. As far as ECO mistakes being incorporated from the old Yugoslav Informator system, I'm not sure what mistakes you're referring to. Perhaps some of the classification is slightly inexact or maybe inelegant, but for the most part, the work of Braslav Rabar and his cronies has accounted for much of the improvement in the theory and practice of chess openings. I say we give the man a break.

**Question** I don't understand why there are separate sections for men and women in chess tournaments. Do you think that men are superior? (I don't!) Thank you. **Marco Antonio (Brazil)**

**Answer** Most serious chessplayers, male and female, believe people shouldn't be judged by that kind of distinction, plain and simple. The main thing that should concern us is how well someone plays, regardless of their gender. Certainly, there are more men than women inhabiting top ranks, but I don't feel it has to be that way. Societal influences play a huge role, but that's never stopped Judith Polgar from kicking a great deal of male butt (just an observation from another perspective).

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