



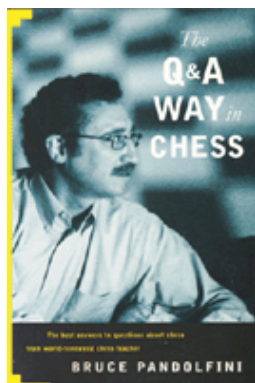
The Q & A Way is based in large part on readers' questions. Do you have a question about preparation, strategy or tactics? Submit your questions (with you full name and country of residence please) and perhaps Bruce will reply in his next ChessCafe.com column...

Yes, I have a question for Bruce!

COLUMNISTS

The Q & A Way

Bruce Pandolfini



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All and Everything

Question How much influence does good visualization of the chessboard have on our analyses during the game? Grandmasters have always emphasized the need to familiarize ourselves with every square, line and diagonal, to the point we subconsciously know them like the back of our hands, always knowing what color a square is, almost without thinking, etc. Thanks. **Izhar Junian (Malaysia)**

Answer If you can't look ahead, you can't analyze at all. And if you can't analyze, you might as well play randomly and blindly, which is what some do anyway, since the rules don't allow testing variations on the board before playing them. True, you don't necessarily have to analyze everything. In reality, many moves are speculated intuitively, and others are played because there is no other possible or practical alternative.

But usually you don't have to look a mile ahead to be able to play decent chess. Most tolerable players get by being able to see three half-moves down the line. That means they can visualize the move they intend to play, how they expect the opponent to respond, and what their follow up to the opponent's anticipated reply is going to be. Naturally, if they can see further ahead, and if the position calls for it to determine the worth of an idea, they'd like to have the capability to do so. To be sure, a truly adept player should be able to perceive the essentials of any line to its conclusion, perhaps even the most difficult variations, regardless of length and complexity, if it's necessary. How do you improve your ability to see ahead? You can develop calculating and visualizing skills by analyzing as often as you can without moving the pieces. It's the old maxim at work, *practice makes perfect*.

Question I'm a 25-year-old who has been playing seriously and studying the game for about a year, rated about 1600, and my goal is to make expert within seven years. I study about two hours a day (mostly playing over master games in my opening systems, doing Stoyko exercises, and solving tactical puzzles) and play about one 5-round classical time control tournament a month. Is my goal reasonable? More generally, what is a typical yearly rating progression for the average player putting in six hours a week in study time? I'm sure it's different for kids and adults, but I'd be curious to know what that difference is. **Tom Rampley (USA)**

Answer For the most part, the exercises you're doing, and the amount of time you're applying to doing them, seem more than adequate to making real improvements. Barring unforeseen obstacles, you have a definite chance to make the expert class with the chosen regimen, especially if you're enjoying it and you've already made real progress. Beyond doubt, the seven-year period you've opted for seems long enough to execute your scheme adequately. I must admit, though, I have no idea how you've settled on the particular number of "seven." I applaud your patience, but even the Soviets, who never seemed to have enough time, usually went with plans of only five years. In our faster world, I'm betting on you to do it before you're thirty.

As you've suggested, there are simply too many open-ended variables to answer your question satisfactory. To my knowledge, there are no typical rating gains to be expected given the stated ambitions. Many results are possible within your stipulated parameters, from abysmal failure to total success, from gaining lots of points to losing an embarrassing number of them. All the same, I don't think you should stay with a program like the one you've adumbrated if it doesn't net for you at least 100 points for each of the first couple of years, and at least 50 points or so for the next several years after that. To be sure, I'd think you'd want to change a bit just so that you're doing something new and different. If you always do the same things and you risk falling into a rut. But these decisions are best made in context,

as you progress along, assessing incoming results, and how you feel about the way it's all going.

Question I, like many adult chess players, have a limited amount of time to study chess on a regular basis. This hard truth made me start to consider the optimum study strategy for the adult player. I concluded that it is to follow the most often repeated methods but in specific time allocation manner: 50% tactical study; 25% solitaire play; 15% endgame theory study and practice against computers; 10% playing over master games. This seems to be the best usage of study time for those individuals U2200 and seems to get the most results. It focuses one on *active* participation in the learning process and minimizes emphasis on less optimum time utilization. It is also hard work! I am convinced that this is why many adult chess players don't advance very far: they focus more on passive reading of manuscripts rather than active decision making while playing. On a related note, it occurred to me that the best way to read a chess book, to maximize the learning process, is to practice solitaire chess whenever you come across a diagram in a book or an example game. This forces you to become *active* during the reading. The only "drawback" is that reading a chess book will take more time than usual, which is a small price to pay in my view. Incidentally, this is how I am studying opening texts. It has made the process more interesting and less arduous. What do you think about these ideas? Does this seem consistent with your experiences? **Jonathan Allen (USA)**

Answer The regimen you've set up for yourself, with the accompanying breakdowns and methods of study, is excellent. As long as you revel in the course, hard work and all, and assuming subsequent evidence supports the program, you should continue doing what you're doing. But I would caution you against becoming too formulaic, relying on a process and plan that, if followed to the letter, could stifle independence of thought and the free thinking needed to develop naturally. Bear in mind that many players wind up succeeding in their efforts, breaking all the rules and following no definite plan whatsoever. They just play chess against all comers, putting their hearts and souls into it. Furthermore, when it comes to study, they might only look at material concerning games and positions they've recently played or examined and to which they want reinforcement.

Frankly, and this is not to disparage your thinking on the matter, which seems entirely reasonable, I've always felt uneasy with teachers and programs presenting a line of attack to study independent of particular student needs. True, you're trying to apply this program to a class of students (adults under 2200, though that is undeniably a wide and variegated group), but there's a sizeable minority for certain who will not thrive adhering to any organized approach or definite system at all.

I also tend to agree with your assessment on the worth of trying to figure out the next moves before seeing them, approaching the situation as if you're involved in a real contest. Unquestionably, it's wise to practice any competitive activity as if you're actually doing it, simulating game conditions. By approaching your training this way, you'll get more genuine time playing real chess, so to speak. As can be deduced from what you've said, this is likely to take more time, extending the actual length of the study period and, concomitantly, demands on the student.

But once again I must offer a complementing view, pointing out that there are virtues to spending less time with a particular game, using the study period to see more games and positions. That is, by playing through them slightly faster, not necessarily trying to determine the next moves in detail and with precise specificity, but just trying to absorb their impact, we get to see many more possibilities and meantime still derive value from our efforts, without being as taxed.

And it doesn't have to be as superficial as it sounds. If we really apply ourselves while proceeding more rapidly, we may actually extract more from each example, in that the speed could force us to focus more intently if we are to get anything out of it at all, kind of like high-level speed chess. That doesn't mean we don't lose anything. We definitely do. But we also gain by living through more situations. Moreover, certain things in the study universe are not automatically factored by time. That is, unless you attain a degree of intensity that scales a noteworthy level, you may not reach the promise land at all. For those cases, where the amount of time is less a determinant, sheer concentration over shorter spans may prove of much greater merit.

Then there's another issue. Recent efforts in diverse disciplines have shown that, at a variety of instances, sheer quantity can translate into quality. I'm not saying or advocating by this that one shouldn't study some chess positions deeply and exhaustively, and that those efforts wouldn't have enormous value. But I am suggesting that we shouldn't routinely dismiss so-called "superficial" processes either. In context and abundantly they can have great significance and often are unappreciated or not even considered as being worthy of application.

Overall I applaud your efforts, and your intelligently outlined program, but I would recommend not following it religiously. Good luck on eventually becoming a chess master. Whoever helps you along the way, once you get there, you're on your own.

Question Many teachers recommend studying annotated master games as one of the better ways to improve. I typically get bogged down following the lines in the annotations – perhaps losing the thread of the main game – and then it ends up taking a long time to actually get through the game. On a typical 35-40 move game, how long should one spend studying it? And is there a method of going through the games that you recommend? **Rob Bernard (USA)**

Answer You should spend as much time on playing over an annotated game as you're comfortable with. I know that some pundits advise students to look at every note of every game to instill thoroughness, develop analytic skills, and take in the full worth of the commentary. But not every note is vital or to be viewed as Gospel.

A much better course at first might be to play over games at a reasonable pace, stopping only when your mind says so, not just because there's a note in front of you. After you've played through a game and gotten some sense for its flow, terrain, nature, and so on, then you can go back and play through it again with guiding overview, knowing what's there and what may have greater meaning to you as a student. And even when you come upon a point that seems obscure, and for which you don't immediately understand, it might make sense anyway to play through the game first before resolving the situation by seeking certainty. In doing so, the course of the game might provide the answer you missed earlier, without you having to expend additional time or effort. Furthermore, if the game's course doesn't offer eventual clarity, you can still go back and try to understand what happened after having played through the game on the initial go round. In doing that, you're making the very kind of fully recommended effort at any rate, and the second or third time around you're armed with the weapon of hindsight.

I think we have to be careful here. It is easy for most of us to see grandmasters and experienced chess teachers as gurus, Glass Bead Masters, in essence, whose pronouncements seem to come down from up high. Let's not forget that these mental giants are still human, with the same weaknesses and frailties we have, camouflaged behind titles, rating points, and years of experience. Sure they know more, and their advice is to be respected and heeded. But if we are to become like them, we also have to learn to think for ourselves, to break their rules, and to make a few of our own.

Question I very often hear or read GM's saying that they have spent time studying games of other masters. I was wondering what this "studying" actually consists of. I enjoy playing through the games of various GM's but I don't feel that this in itself particularly helps my over-the-board results. Assuming that simply playing through the games of a chosen player is not enough, what more should I be doing when it comes to studying a player's games? **James Rothwell (England)**

Answer Strong players certainly have a need to study the games of their competitors and rivals to get a sense of what they may be facing in the future. They may also play through top level contemporary games as a way to stay sharp, especially reviewing critical positions in openings they intend to play. No matter how good they are, they can't get around the techniques and methods that moved them ahead if they wish to stay there. I think they also do it because looking at good chess games can be pleasurable, even if little is to be learned. Good players, like the rest of us, also need to have fun.

As far as your own chess labor goes, you might study the games of particular grandmasters for some of the same reasons. Maybe particular grandmasters play roughly the same openings you do. Perhaps they get into the types of positions from which you like to springboard, or, contrariwise, comparable positions to the kinds of circumstances on which you need to work. Maybe they're especially adept at certain phases, such as the endgame; or they stand out strategically, and you need to improve your planning; or tactically, and you want to better your attacking skills. Or maybe they're incredibly good at prophylactic chess, and you sense you'd benefit from learning how better to gut your opponent's possibilities before they get off the ground. Or, just like the grandmasters, it could be that certain chess artists play so beautifully and powerfully that you enjoy going over their games.

Nor do you have to do anything special to derive benefit from these match-ups. You can just play through them trying to understand or get a feel for them. When you see something you like, maybe study it a little more, try it out in practice, and eventually aim to employ it in your own serious games. If it winds up scoring points for you, that's wonderful. If not, maybe you can go back to the source and compare, trying to understand what was different

about your efforts and thereby gain more specific, useful information, translating your diligence into competitive points at a later date.

Nevertheless, for most of us, if we're going to rely on playing over games as a means of instruction, those played between grandmasters are not automatically the best ones to examine. Those efforts are typically too deep for us to appreciate, and all kinds of fine points are simply not grasped, even after lengthy study. This, of course, doesn't mean that we should be examining games between amateurs. Not enough is going on in those skirmishes to teach us very much, and too many things are overlooked or missed that should be grasped but never seem to come out.

No, the best games to look at are those between competitors of your own class and strong players. The players of your own class will tend to make the same kinds of mistakes you might as they attempt to cope with analogous obstacles. Meanwhile, the strong players will show how to exploit those mistakes to win games and overcome those impediments. That's powerful instruction. The problem is that there aren't many games played between strong players and players of amateurish classes that subsequently appear in print. Perhaps, we'll see more of them in the Internet age, but there still aren't enough examples of this kind available for worthwhile study. If you'd like to obtain a book or two on these cross-class battles, several instructional texts by Euwe and Meiden are excellent.

Question Are you currently writing any chess books; if so, on what topics? **Joseph Daudish (USA)**

Answer I don't have any immediate book ideas. Rather, I seem to be writing the answer to a **ChessCafe.com** question. Perhaps I will use it for an upcoming book, or disguise it in some way that makes it seem I'm doing something original, when I'm merely copying what I'd done before. Wow, this gives me an idea for a book.

Question Having worked, informally, with a succession of adult players who've come to our club knowing the rules and little else, I've come to the conclusion that an important step in their development is to learn "abstract vision." I'm sure other chess teachers have called this skill by different names and explained it in different ways.

You and I can tell at a glance whether a piece on a square is safe. When a beginner wants to do the same, he or she must first identify by name, in turn, all the other bits of wood surrounding it, then recall how those pieces move: "this is a bishop, so it moves... diagonally," then mentally draw a bunch of arrows on the board, trying not to lose track of the arrows already there. This is a horribly tedious process. (I know because I have to do the same when playing shogi or xiangqi, or even chess with silly novelty sets!) I'm sure if I could somehow show people that chess really isn't like that, many more of them would stick around.

I encourage my protégés to play lots of games of chess and see what happens, but is there any quicker way of developing their abstract vision – or even giving them a glimpse of what it is and how wonderful chess is when you have it? **Chris Wardle (Scotland)**

Answer If there is a quicker way, Chris, I'm not sure what it is. I seem to be doing the same kinds of things with my students you've been doing with yours. I agree with you that being able to see moves and positions in your mind is absolutely essential to good chess, but it's hard to acquire the ability to visualize and abstract without trying to develop these skills in numerous situations encountered in real play or germane analysis sessions. Unfortunately, once newcomers realize how much work is required to become truly adept at chess they are dissuaded and may indeed abandon their chess studies.

I try to do a few things. Like Freud, I state the problems up front, indicating the unlikelihood of success. But then I do my best to show students how wonderful the game of chess is, stressing the beauty of its ideas and the charm and greatness of its leading exponents. Where I can, I try to take chess techniques and relate them to other aspects of thinking I judge students might find practicable to their own activities away from the chessboard. I also relate, where I can, chess concepts to intellectual history and their place in general culture. Finally, I hope to take real interest in the student, attempting to find particular ways that might make chess more exciting and easier for them to learn as individuals. But, sadly, as you and other chess teachers surely know, there's nothing magical about it, and despite our best and most creative efforts, the odds on us succeeding are still not terrifically high. In the end, and I suspect for reasons not unlike your own, I've stayed with teaching chess because I love the game and enjoy experiencing those moments, however many there've been, when others come to love it too.

Question of the Month

The best answers will be published in the next column.

What character traits are typically most important for success in chess?

Reader's Responses from Last Month

We received many responses to the [October](#) question of the month:

Style-wise, how would you characterize new world champion Vishy Anand?

Among the many interesting replies were the following:

Juliann Wan (USA) writes: In terms of style, Anand is clearly an attacker, a tactical wizard and an artist. From the little that I know it seems that given the choice, he'll prefer the most beautiful and also tactical/aggressive choice. He is accurate usually and pragmatic like all modern super GMs, so he'll play a more mundane, less aesthetically pleasing move if it means mate in one. But given the option, between two equally swift lines, he'll usually pick the one that is a bit more elegant. This explains why, in addition to his overall good reputation as a decent person at and away from the chessboard, he is so popular.

Adrian Adorna (Philippines) writes: I believe that Vishy Anand has a universal style. I agree with what your former student, IM Josh Waitzkin said about Anand – his style is like Aikido on the chessboard. Whether he is attacking or defending, all his pieces are moving in harmony. The way he would repulse one attack after another with ease is exceptional – clearly a sign of great natural talent. He is no slouch either when it comes to tactics, as he can go toe-to-toe with the best in the world. His positional play is also excellent, which reminds me of Anatoly Karpov in his prime. He plays lightning fast, which is always a double-edged sword – some opponents get rattled by his quickness – but most of Anand's losses came from his failure to double-check tactics. Case in point: his game against GM Alonso Zapata of Columbia where he resigned after only six moves!

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