



*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** column...

*Yes, I have a question for Bruce!*

## COLUMNISTS

### It all Gets Back to Tactics

#### *The Q & A Way* Bruce Pandolfini



**Question** I recently read that Petrosian once said, “Some consider that when I play I am excessively cautious, but it seems to me that the question may be a different one. I try to avoid chance. Those who rely on chance should play cards or roulette. Chess is something quite different.” However, I then encountered another point of view. This said that if you are a positional player, who avoids tactical complications (chance?), then you should play through the games of tactical players to develop tactical ability. These diametrically opposed views are confusing to me. So, as a positional player who wants to improve, my question is: should I study the games of positional players or should I study the games of tactical players? **Terry Dutton (UK)**

**Answer** Good question. I wish I knew how to answer it. But, as the genie says in the *Seven Voyages of Sinbad*, and as I have said before, I shall try, I shall try. Indeed, the apparent contradiction you’ve encountered is a constant source of plague. In the end, you will probably make a decision to go with what seems to work for you because it charms you. The trick is to widen your understanding so that other paths are illuminated and also become appealing.

Naturally, if you are a more positional player than an attacking, tactical, combinative player, you will want to familiarize yourself with the games of those who play similarly. Examining the contests of Petrosian and Karpov (who used to be known as “the king-pawn Petrosian” when he was younger) makes sense. But in studying so narrowly, you are running the risk of one-dimensionally restricting your own play. To broaden it, that is, to make it more complete (which is what most students of chess ultimately want to do), you’ll need to become more conversant with the style alien to you. So that implies also studying the tactical enterprise of Alekhine, Tal, Kasparov, and others.

Some of the confusion over this gets back to the writings of Botvinnik and his

enormous influence over the Russian and Soviet Schools of chess. In several key texts (his *One Hundred Selected Games* for example), Botvinnik argued that one should submit the games of potential opponents (especially for upcoming matches) to intensive study, trying to unearth weaknesses and potential areas of exploitation. Once such weak spots are found, Botvinnik recommended going right into the teeth of those types of positions and situations, even if you then suffered like a fish out of water. His reasoning was that it was more important to make your opponent feel uncomfortable, no matter your own discomfort. Besides, as you immersed yourself in that kind of combative style, you would gradually start to feel more at ease anyway, and you would also gain stability by being cognizant of the distress you were bringing to your adversary.

By that line of logic, not only should you study the play most consistent with your own character, you should complement your efforts, filling out your portfolio, learning how to fend in circumstances atypical for you. If you're a positional player, also study tactics. If you're a tactical player, also study position play. The key thing is to be mindful of what you're doing. Perhaps you could divide your study time and efforts between periods of strengthening your grasp of like minded thinking with equal periods of understanding how the other side lives and plays.

Finally, I think it's important to realize that though great champions such as Petrosian and Karpov are characterized as "positional players," their games and long-range plans are backed up by deep tactics and counter-tactics. They are able to bring about precise maneuvers and grand strategies because they find all the little moves that facilitate matters and avoid opposing attempts to stop them. Even if Teichmann wasn't quite correct, that chess is "99 percent tactics," much of it gets back to tactics anyway. In chess, you're not likely to achieve Olympian heights without mastering one tactical plateau after the other.

Besides, if you want to be the best, you have to beat the best, which means analyzing their play, no matter how unfamiliar their styles and openings seem to be. Take a lesson from Oscar Wilde, who said: "I have the simplest tastes. I like only the best." Let that same spirit move you to study all the great chess paradigms, not just those you already know.

**Question** I began studying chess at the age of 22, and have an ELO rating of 1800, what chances do I have of becoming a grandmaster? **Keyur Gada (India)**

**Answer** I don't want to discourage you, but the odds of becoming a grandmaster after starting your studies at age 22 are not very good, even if you already are playing at the 1800 level. To be sure, I've never heard of a single person doing it by beginning that late in life. But that doesn't mean you can't get much better. Certainly, if you have any talent for chess, and dedicate yourself to practicing it, you'd have a decent chance to be an expert and possibly a master.

Still, why study and play chess just for that reason, to achieve a particular degree of expertise? If you play and explore chess because you love it, giving your full allegiance to the discipline, you'll get as good as you can get and enjoy the act of getting there. Just luxuriate in the regular experience of competition and mental massage and actual accomplishments will naturally come your way.

**Question** How long does a typical GM caliber player study openings? Until they feel comfortable with them or until they know all variations? Do you ever stop studying a particular opening, and when do you finally start a new one? Thank you so much for great insight. **Bryan Bentley (USA)**

**Answer** I don't think there is a typical GM caliber player, and I'm sure most of them study openings (and defenses) with a degree of individuality. Generally, good players try to keep on top of things. They look at current games of interest, which might include openings they already play, openings they'd like to play, openings their future opponents are likely to play, and other lines that seem to have currency. They're also concerned with what the game's leading exponents are playing, even if they themselves don't necessarily get into those variations. They're interested in potential difficulties they might have to face and promising solutions to already existing problems. They're looking for new wrinkles in old lines as well as surprise moves and unexpected transpositions into favorable setups in their own systems.

They get much of this material online, and they use [Chessbase](#), [Fritz](#) and other evaluative tools modern technology provides. They try to follow the latest tournaments and matches, and they keep databases of relevant information, games, and positions. They also spend a good deal of time on the middlegames and endgames normally occurring in their openings, trying to find the right plans and more efficient ways to implement them. And there are many other things they do, depending on who they are and how they function. Of course, they study openings to the extent they feel comfortable, but that may entail learning all the critical and alternative lines, however varied and demanding.

I don't think they ever stop studying any aspect of chess, unless they're as lazy as Capablanca, whose talent ran into a wall in the commitment and hard work of Alekhine. But even top players are moved by whims and personal motivations. They also play and study the game of chess to derive pleasure. It turns out, that's an excellent reason for doing almost anything.

**Question** Kasparov expressed the view that Karpov would have defeated Fischer had they played in 1975. But I recall reading earlier statements from Kasparov hailing Fischer's unprecedented margin of superiority over his peers. What do you think, and what do other top experts think, about what might have been the outcome of that match? Can any reasonable extrapolation be made based on past performances? Is there any kind of consensus or "plurality of opinion" about this age-old hypothetical question? **Keith Wald (USA)**

**Answer** If Kasparov gave two different assessments, I think we should cut him some slack. He's allowed to change his thinking over time, as more information comes in and historical perspective takes hold. But, to be sure, opinion is greatly divided on this question. Many strong players from the present may favor Karpov over Fischer, especially the developed Karpov. I'm not so sure everyone agrees, however, that Karpov would have dispensed with Fischer in 1975 (or even later).

I also understand that some pundits argue that Kasparov's apparent subsequent statement (though we shouldn't take it out of context) only makes Kasparov seem greater, in that, since he triumphed over Karpov, it implies that Kasparov would have beaten Bobby even more easily. On the other hand, Kasparov once had the highest rating of all-time, and, by several sets of standards, he's also the most successful player ever, with many experts contending that Karpov is right behind him.

But such questions are easy to debate and hard to resolve. If you want to explore them further, you can do so very nicely on the Internet. I recommend that you check out Jeff Sonas's [Chessmetrics](#), a delightful site in which to wander, as well as the Wikipedia [analysis](#). In both places you'll encounter plenty of material to stimulate your thinking and fuel the argument.

**Question** I am tutoring beginners and I am having a hard time creating a manual using Fritz and Pagemaker. Do you have a suggestion? What software application do you use in making manuals? **Steve Matutino (Philippines)**

**Answer** I'm afraid what I could offer here would not be too helpful, since, on such matters (and many others), I am an idiot. Generally, I use Microsoft Word for the text, and paste diagrams and analysis from Chessbase directly into the manuscript. The quality of your printer is important, too. But there are various software tools available on the Internet, and some of them are freely made available to the public. For instance, you can create free [diagrams](#) in PNG format and use free web-based [word processing](#). Good luck.

### **Question of the Month**

The best answers will be published in the next column.

*Which tournament or match book is your favorite?*

### **Reader's Responses from Last Month**

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

*Which question would you like to see posed?*

Among the many interesting replies were the following:

**James Neo (Philippines)** writes:

- How can we make chess the best sport ever?
- How can we use chess to stop all wars in the world?
- Who would be the best chess ambassador to the world?

**Robert Branson (USA)** writes: What chess game is the best one ever played?

**Mary Calloway (USA)** writes: How good do you have to be to become a chess teacher?

**Tony Sanchez (USA)** writes: I am going to make it easy on you. What is the most often asked question?

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