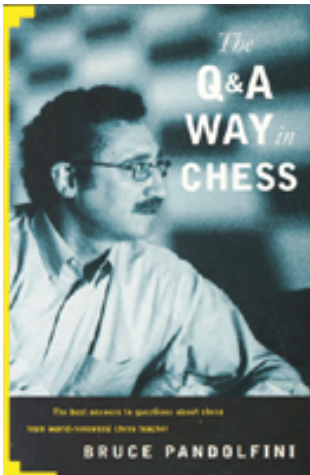




C O L U M N I S T S

The Q & A Way

Bruce Pandolfini



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!

That Special Book

Question There are so many chess books on the market now, and many of the best books are out of print. I was wondering which two or three titles made the biggest improvement in your game. **Nick Kinney (USA)**

Answer I am amazed at how many books are out there these days. It can be fantastic fun going to a large bookstore or checking out an extensive online catalog and looking at the titles. What's inside the books can be good too.

But you're correct, some of the finest productions are now out of print. Let's see, when I was younger, which was so long ago I can't remember how long ago it was, I reveled in all kinds of chess books, even the bad ones. They were still worth looking at because they had chess positions, and that's all I apparently needed to become ecstatic. (My girlfriends soon realized I was a cheap date.)

I suppose I learned a lot from many different chess volumes, though some critics might claim I absorbed nothing of relevance. As I think back, a few revealing books do stand out in my mind. I particularly took pleasure in playing through first-rate game collections, especially Botvinnik's *One Hundred Selected Games* and Alekhine's *My Best Games of Chess* (two volumes). Both Botvinnik and Alekhine were invigorating and transcendental, full of majestic ideas and fiercely contested battles.

Yet if I had to pick one book above the rest, it would be Botvinnik's *Absolute Championship of the Soviet Union* (1941), for which I had a pre-Dover copy. What an incredible event, and what a great book. Furthermore, since there weren't that many games in it (I think sixty), I played over all of them and their variations in my mind, never checking analysis by moving pieces at the board. If I had trouble with a specific game or situation, I just kept trying to "see" and "sense" the moves until I felt I understood what was going on.

Did it work? I think it did. True, I didn't become a formidable player, but over that summer of experimentation I gained more than 300 rating points, not that that means anything in the grand scheme of things. Nevertheless, there you have it: those are the books from which I believe I profited most, if you want to call what I do profitable.

Question I was an avid chess player (average) many years ago. I have returned to the game at age 38. Do you think it's possible to advance my game to the point of playing in

tournaments without embarrassment? **J. L. (USA)**

Answer Don't make it seem that thirty-eight is terminal. You're still a young man, with many opportunities ahead of you for excelling at chess. And stop worrying about being embarrassed. Are you kidding? Have you seen some of the chess being played these days?

Anyhow, you could start with a regimen of tactics, maybe solving five or ten real-game puzzles every day. Why don't you play with [303 Tricky Checkmates](#) by Wilson and Alberston. It's a nice collection, and I don't think you'll be disappointed.

It couldn't hurt to beef up your endgame. You might want to acquire a good basic text to review the fundamentals and get your mind once again thinking about winning won positions and saving lost ones. I recommend Jeremy Silman's outstanding new book, *Silman's Complete Endgame Course: From Beginner To Master*, as a worthwhile addition to your library. If that doesn't help you improve, you can write me another email.

For opening preparation, you could play over a bunch of games from recent tournaments to lay down groundwork and see what's been happening lately. Much of that material can be found online, and surfing for recent games can actually be quite rewarding. You never know what superb lines and new ideas you'll find.

More than anything else, however, should be the act of play. Playing chess two or three times a week, against challenging and stimulating opposition, should expedite getting in shape faster than anything else. Besides, playing the game is what it's all about. That's where the real fun is, so get to it.

Question I am twelve years old, my rating is 1848, and I love chess! I hope to become a great player when I grow up. Can you please give me advice on which books I should use? I have already read many, but I want to read more and get better and better! I have a national championship in April 2007, and, of course, I would like to be first! So, if you have some advice to help me improve by then, I really would be thankful for it. **Barbara Dizdarevic (Serbia)**

Answer Here's a project for you, an approach that can be traced back to Richard Réti. The practice eventually became a valued teaching weapon in the arsenal of Jack Collins, who was a mentor to Bobby Fischer. Jack would have his students play over one hundred games of each world champion. The logic was that the essential ideas of every aspect of chess, as the game evolved over time, were exemplified in the play of the game's leading exponents. They gave the chief opening, middlegame, and endgame themes life, and naturally those concepts caught on as the rest of the world tried to emulate them. We all want to be the best and, naturally, it's from the top that most of us draw our inspiration.

By now, of course, we're talking about at least 1,400 games, if Kramnik is to be viewed as the fourteenth world champion. Throw in all the other types of stellar chess performers (FIDE champions such as Topalov, unofficial champions such as Morphy, and all the other worthy aspirants who never quite made it such as Keres) and you'd have a mountain of games to play through).

But there's another way to go about this, which might prove just as constructive and far easier. Just get your hands on the first book in the [My Great Predecessors](#) series by Kasparov. (You can move on to the other volumes in the series as you finish them in sequence.) What better way to experience and enjoy the course of intellectual chess development than to see it given a logical flow in the discourse of the greatest chess player of all time? It's a thought.

Nevertheless, I suspect however you go about trying to better your chess, you'll succeed as many have done before, feeding off a combination of hard work and love for the game, the latter of which you've already demonstrated. Good luck and good chess.

Question I am a relatively weak player (1450-1500). I practice and improve mainly by tactical exercises and solving endgame problems. Also, I look through my favorite openings, but I know that opening preparation isn't so important at my level. I play mainly blitz, but I feel this isn't really helping me improve. Do you think I should play more games at longer time controls? What time limit should I play? What level of opponent should I aim to play? And what added benefits would I gain? Any advice would be great, thanks. **Jesse Jordan (UK)**

Answer It's so hard to say what time control would work best for you. I don't know enough about you, other than that you're an excellent writer who expresses himself very well. But that's not going to suggest your ideal time limit. Perhaps you should resort to trial and error.

For blitz chess, why don't you assay controls that enable you to complete between 2-4 games per hour. For slower contests, try playing with the luxury of sixty minutes per side. If that seems to work well, stay with that time limit. If it doesn't, and you need more time, test out playing with 15-minute increments until you find what appears to afford you temporal adequacy. From move to move, if you're not able to analyze three alternative ideas sufficiently, then you need more time.

As far as selecting suitable opponents, not that they're so easy to find, try to play people no less than one level below you and no higher than one level above you. That's an acceptable range. Playing opponents below the low parameter promotes superficial play, and playing opponents above the high parameter can be terribly discouraging.

But there's something that outweighs everything, and that's the pleasure the activity provides. You can do anything if you enjoy it. That's when you'll gain the most from it. Make your play too much like work, and that's all it will ever be – work. But you're obviously an intelligent and thoughtful human being. I'm sure you'll be able to find the right blend of challenge and comfort to optimize your chess time while benefiting from those with whom you spend it.

Question It's a sad state of affairs when the issue of cheating and chess players is the hot topic of the day for the royal game. What's the point of playing if you are going to cheat? Are people so hard up for money and/or prestige that they have to cheat at chess? And what do you think of the tactic of cheating by accusing your opponent of cheating? Baseball, football and now chess: who would have *thunk* it. **Tony Wong (USA)**

Answer I agree with you. It's a sorry state of affairs to which some competitive chess has come. Who knows what it's about, whether it's economics, reputation, or lunacy. Maybe the notions did start with big-time sports. If so, does it mean that some chess players may be taking steroids? As I think back on some of the rage I've witnessed over chess results, it might explain a lot.

Question In [*Searching for Bobby Fischer*](#) (the book), Fred Waitzkin talks about listening spellbound to your stories about analyzing with Bobby Fischer. Now, please don't belittle your qualities as a storyteller, because I am sure that that is one reason you are regarded as such a great teacher! My question is, could you write about this? Larry Evans isn't in *Chess Life* anymore, and people still want to know about Bobby, even though he has placed himself beyond the pale in more ways than one. But he was (is?) still Fischer, the champion against whom even Kasparov must measure himself with some degree of trepidation. That makes

virtually everything connected with his chess career an item of intense interest. Bobby may hate America, but I suspect that many Americans, and indeed chess players around the world, still feel some affection for him because of the innate compassion that human beings have for someone who is suffering from some delusion or another – and that really encompasses most of us. After all, he caused so many of us – myself included – to first become exposed to chess; and so for the countless hours of pleasure that that has afforded us, he deserves our gratitude. So, what was it like to actually sit with the man and talk about chess? **Brenan Nierman (USA)**

Answer I don't have much of value to say about Fischer and what it's like to sit at the board with him. I didn't know him well enough (I hardly knew him at all) to be a chessboard companion. In each of the fifteen or twenty times I was in his presence, I was so excited to be near him, that all the little things that happened became blurred and I wound up remembering almost nothing.

I recall analyzing with Fischer and Ray Weinstein at one juncture, but I was a punk kid on cloud nine, while they were giants back on earth. In another instance, I analyzed chess with Fischer and Bernie Zuckerman for about three hours at the Marshall Club one night. (Analyzing? Actually, I just listened. What chess idea could I have suggested to Bobby Fischer back then that I would have had enough courage to utter?) Anyhow, I was so starry-eyed, I can't remember any specifics or anything Bobby said on that twilight occasion, and he said a great deal. For insight into his character, you'd have to reach out to those who really were his acquaintances and friends, if he had any.

It brings to mind a small gathering I was at many years ago in which I met John Lennon, whom everyone in the room viewed as a god. In the course of the evening Lennon heard I was a chess player and proceeded to tell a joke about Bobby Fischer. I was so enthralled to be sitting next to John Lennon that afterward I couldn't remember anything about the joke or, for that matter, anything Lennon said. To this day all I recall is that I laughed my head off and can't say why.

Question of the Month

The best answers will be published in the next column.

What is the funniest chess joke you've ever heard?

Reader's Responses from Last Month

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

When do you think Kramnik will be dethroned as world champion?

Among the many interesting replies were the following:

Randy Ryner (USA) writes: After a couple more drawn world championship matches, they will switch to rapids for the whole match instead of as a tiebreaker. Although after the next drawn match it may be tough for Kramnik to repeat a win on rapid or blitz.

Dani Guillermo (USA) writes: Kramnik will lose his title in Mexico and then regain it in 2008.

Barry Miken (USA) writes: Kramnik will never be dethroned. The point is, not immediately.

(BP – I see your point.)

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