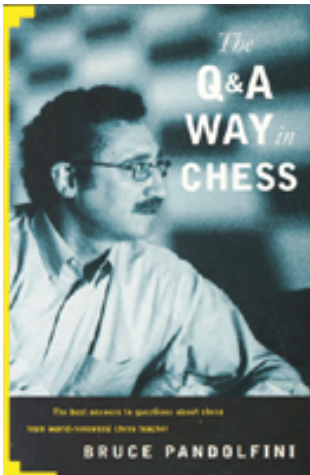




C O L U M N I S T S

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.com column...

Yes, I have a question for Bruce!

Opening Book Overload

Question In the most recent edition of *New in Chess Magazine*, GM Rowson opined that reading opening books would not help your game one iota. I know a lot of money is made on opening books, but if this is true, are most of us wasting our time going through any books let alone opening books? I myself have been through many books and find my rating just goes up and down. I am told that Kotov's method of looking over a position for an hour or so is helpful. Would you comment? **C. Batezel (USA)**

Answer The best way to improve your chess is to play strong players on a regular basis and to back it up by having your play critiqued. Still, most of us can't or are unwilling to get involved in what could be a laboriously long tour of duty, so we seek other means to sharpen or enhance our game. Solving tons of tactical problems can be quite practical. Solid endgame work is worthwhile. Intelligent study of middlegame themes, position play, pawn structure, and planning can also bear fruit.

Then there's the effort many of us put into inculcating the initial stage of a chess game. Opening books outsell all other kinds of chess books by far. Even opening books known to be garbage will slime up their share of buyers looking for tricky or trappy variations that have the barest chance to score magical points against adversarial dupes. We seek such quick fixes despite the constant warnings of strong players, teachers, writers, and the bulk of experienced observers against superficial approaches to chess study.

That doesn't mean there aren't any good opening books and you should abandon the investigation of that phase altogether. You need to have some idea what to do to get off to a good start. Moreover, understanding the opening phase and how it connects to later junctures in play can only give you a more complete grasp of chess. But concentrating merely on opening lines and variations, without regard to their underlying concepts, is not likely to help your game beyond a certain point, if at all.

Perhaps this is why your rating has vacillated. Maybe you're focusing too much on memorizing variations without rhyme or reason. But look: it could be that books and manuals on openings give you pleasure. If that is the case, if they indeed delight you so, don't concern yourself with worrying about the rise and fall of your rating. Just keep enjoying the rows and columns of sorties and stratagems and the paragraphs of surprising shots already cluttering our noise-ridden, entropic world.

On the other hand, if you really want to become a better chess player, no matter how arduous or agonizing, you might consider changing your approach. I suggest that you play challenging opposition as often as you can and follow up those encounters with rigorous analysis of where you went wrong and what you could have done better. If Kotov were still here, even if engrossed in an analytic tree for an hour, he would find the time to say pretty much the same thing.

Question I'm a club player, rated about 1800, and I want to improve my game as a whole. Recently, several good books have been published: [*Secrets of Practical Chess*](#) by John Nunn; [*How to Calculate Chess Tactics*](#) by Valeri Beim; and [*How to Choose a Chess Move*](#) by Andrew Soltis. All three books are highly recommended by the critics. Do you have a suggestion as to which one I could use to improve my overall play the most? **Vincent Jongkind (The Netherlands)**

Answer All three are good books, so it's not a matter of which book is best, not that that concept has any meaning here, but rather which one appeals to you most. If you can see and touch them in a bookstore, go through all three volumes and compare, determining which of the three calls out to you. If you can't do that, examine them [online](#). And if you still can't make a decision, why don't you purchase all three titles? You'll suddenly have many new ideas at your disposal and, just as importantly, you'll be making a valuable contribution to advancement of professional chess.

Question I am fifteen years old and rated around 2050 USCF. What do you think will help a player of my strength the most so I can reach master? I am a tactical player and I dislike positional chess. **Ilan Meerovich (USA)**

Answer You're an individual, with particular needs, so it can't hurt to have your game assessed by a sympathetic, strong player and then see what he or she advises doing as a course of action. But since it's clear you're a talented player, considering your strength and age, I think it's fair to say you can certainly gain by playing against masters and strong experts as often as you can. You need to be tested by those who can pose significantly germane problems. I'd also recommend exploring endings further, regardless what you've already done.

If you find that most endgame work is dry and not stimulating, why not delve into endgame tactics? They can be very practical while increasing your practical knowledge of endgame theory. To that end, two books I propose you peruse are Jenő Ban's *The Tactics of End-Games* and Van Perlo's [*Endgame Tactics*](#). Both works are great fun and excellent for a player at your developing level. Good luck on your journey to mastery and beyond.

Question What kind of physical exercises do you recommend to your students to keep them in good physical condition to endure the rigors of tournament play and to improve their ability to play chess? **Adrian Adorna (Philippines)**

Answer That's a good question, which I don't believe I've ever been asked in this forum. To be sure, I often make suggestions on physical exercise to my students. For one, I like them to be comfortable at the board. If they're experiencing physical discomfort, sitting for hours over a tournament game, the quality of their play may suffer. So while I don't advise wandering all over the building, I think it's a good idea to occasionally get up from the board and walk about to stretch the muscles, out of sight of the opponent but not very far away.

That's during a game. Physical preparation for serious contests is another matter. Yoga is wonderful for staying in shape for chess, but cardiovascular exercises can also be quite helpful. If players don't have time for jogging, or simply are repelled by it for personal

reasons, I think they should do plenty of fast-walking. Many top players daily walk miles and miles. Furthermore, instead of taking elevators, if you must go no higher than the fifth floor, I encourage students to take the stairs. Such options are godsend at large chess tournaments, where the elevators at the start of rounds can be incredibly slow and nerve-wracking.

As for young students, let's say ten and under, I recommend kicking around a soccer ball or playing throw-and-catch. Both activities are great for coordination and maintaining focus. While I wouldn't say that engaging in such corporeal efforts necessarily improves their chess performance, keeping their bodies fit and able means their minds aren't as fettered and they are more able to survive the ordeal of tension filled brain work. And if they lose, they can always go outside, kicking and throwing their way back to equilibrium.

Question We were hoping you could offer some tips on how to select and work with a chess teacher for our four year old son. We have "interviewed" with two local folks and both are very interested. According to them our son has very strong potential to be a young force to reckon with. While both are very good chess players, their style seems to be different, and so are their ages. They both seemed focused on getting him into tournament play immediately, and my son has taken to both of them equally. Is tournament play the best place for a young player? Is there a special skill set to look for in a teacher of such a young child? How can we partner with his teacher to design his lessons to maximize his potential? What other teaching methods do you recommend that we can supplement with his formal lessons? We bought [*Weapons of Chess*](#) today. My son loved [*Fritz and Chester*](#) and went through versions 1-3 quite quickly. Any suggestions you can provide would be much appreciated. **Anna Miller (USA)**

Answer You ask important questions and I'm afraid I'm not going to be able to do them justice. Clearly, you've tried to go about finding a prospective teacher for your four-year old in a prudent manner and now you're unable to decide between two desirable possibilities. Why not try a novel line of attack? If you can't make a decision in favor of one, maybe you could work with both. In life even the very young don't rely on just one teacher. There are parents, sometimes grandparents and other concerned relatives, friends, nannies and baby sitters, and various professionals, from pre-school on up, all of them advising and teaching in their own ways.

I suggest you try the following. Separately ask the two teachers how each would feel sharing the teaching load and working as a team with the other chess teacher. Based on those answers you'll have more information. Possibly you'll then be able to winnow your choices down so that only one of the two seems attractive. If you find that both are willing to work together, sacrificing their own feelings for the good of the child's development, it might make sense to hire both of them. Have each teacher come every other week, making certain to stay in close contact with the other teacher. Such a team has the built-in advantage that, if one of them can't make it for some reason, your youngster doesn't have to miss his scheduled lesson.

At some point you can step back and review what's happened, say after a couple of months. If it's all moving along smoothly and satisfactorily, continue on course. If it's not going as hoped, you can change course and go with one of the teachers or seek a third teacher who in your measured estimate is more appropriate. Sometimes the best thing to do is simply to stay the course and see what happens, remaining vigilant to information and feedback as it comes in.

As far as tournament competition goes, you don't have to push it yet. After all, he's only four-years old. Capablanca played at four, but it wasn't under the pressure of tournament conditions. It was against his father, in their living room. But you can, if you wish, enter your son in children's tournaments to get his feet wet, especially if you don't stress winning and losing. He'll have plenty of time to realize it's a dog-eat-dog planet without expediting the

process.

Other things you can do are play with chess software and solve elementary checkmates and tactical problems. You might also consider taking lessons yourself, in front of your son. As he sees your enthusiasm for chess, he may become more interested in learning about the game without you having to provide any special encouragement. Overall, keep it fun and let nature take its own course, with or without professional chess instruction.

Question Is there an opening repertoire (as White and Black) that you would recommend for an older player with limited time for study, and whose tactical skills appear to be decreasing with age? I am asking because I am sixty years old and my ability to analyze complicated tactical situations appears to be decreasing as I age. (I am currently rated at 2131 in USCF correspondence chess.) Nevertheless, I would like to continue enjoying chess in my later years. **Bob Beavan (USA)**

Answer I don't like recommending specific openings without knowing much more about an individual. And when it comes to studying an opening, I'd prefer that a student learn it in context, by playing over games that illustrate how the opening is played. You can get a better sense for the themes and typical plans emanating from opening variations by seeing how they evolve in the course of actual games, especially those played by good players and explained for didactic purposes.

So rather than memorizing a bunch of lines, none of which will probably show you how to fend for yourself, pick up one or two of the volumes in the Euwe and Meiden series. Either the *Road to Chess Mastery* or *Chess Master vs. Chess Amateur*. Two other books you might enjoy are Fred Reinfeld's *Chess Mastery by Question and Answer* and Irving Chernev's *Logical Chess Move by Move*. Any of these four books will give you an excellent foundation in opening ideas without proving to be too taxing. And they're all great reads.

Question of the Month

The best answers will be published in the next column.

How would you explain to a child why players resign?

Reader's Responses from Last Month

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

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

Among the many interesting replies were the following:

Julian Wan (USA) writes: In response to your call for jokes, I can think of only two chess-centric jokes. The first is reputedly Russian in origin: A man goes to visit his uncle. He finds his uncle enthralled at the chess board. To the man's surprise his uncle's opponent is a dog. He watches as the dog maneuvers the pieces and studies the board. The man exclaims that this dog is amazing. His uncle replies, "He isn't that amazing. I beat him twice already." Second joke: Two members of a chess club meet and agree to play a game. Neither usually plays the other. The first man plays pawn to e4 and then carefully takes out his pipe, fills it with tobacco, tamps the pipe down and lights it. He then pours himself a glass of wine, swirls it about and takes a sip. Returning to the pipe he takes several puffs and loosens his tie and settles in his chair. His opponent plays pawn to e5. The first man then says "I didn't know you were in a hurry and looking for a blitz game."

Michael Schwind (USA) writes: Two chessplayers were checking in at their hotel following

the first day of the tournament. Both were bragging about their victories when the hotel manager asked them to leave, saying: "I cannot tolerate chess nuts boasting in an open foyer."

Edward Minor (USA) writes: Bobby Fischer dies and goes up to heaven where St. Peter meets him at the gate. Peter tells Bobby "Chess players aren't allowed in heaven."

Bobby glances around and notices Bruce Pandolfini and says to Peter "Well how come Bruce Pandolfini is up here?" And Peter replies. "Bruce just thought he was a chess player."

(BP – I think I liked the original better, though this version may get Bogoljubow off Alekhine's hook. Also, are you sure Fischer's going to heaven?)

© 2007 Bruce Pandolfini. All Rights Reserved.

[Yes, I have a question for Bruce!](#)

 [TOP OF PAGE](#)

 [HOME](#)

 [COLUMNS](#)

 [LINKS](#)

 [ARCHIVES](#)

 [ABOUT THE
CHESS CAFE](#)

[\[ChessCafe Home Page\]](#) [\[Book Review\]](#) [\[Columnists\]](#)

[\[Endgame Study\]](#)[\[Skittles Room\]](#) [\[Archives\]](#)

[\[Links\]](#) [\[Online Bookstore\]](#) [\[About ChessCafe\]](#) [\[Contact Us\]](#)

Copyright 2007 CyberCafes, LLC. All Rights Reserved.
"ChessCafe.com®" is a registered trademark of Russell Enterprises, Inc.