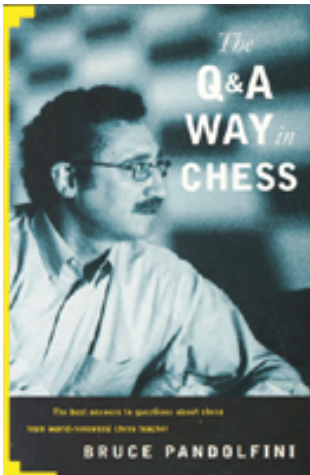




COLUMNISTS

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!

First: Find Out Who you Are

Question I've been playing chess on and off for five years. I'm rated 1928 after eleven games. I haven't played in a tournament for the past two years. The last four months I've been studying eighteen hours daily – nothing else. I notice I'm improving three hundred or more points. I beat masters and IM's daily online at ICC & Playchess.com. I feel like I'm ready to start playing in tournaments. My goal is to become a master. But I can't bring myself to play. I keep thinking I need to study more. Should I look for a chess teacher? I'm not sure what to do. I'm stuck. **Laura Neal (USA)**

Answer The first thing I'm going to recommend is that you get some sleep. Anyone who studies chess for more than eighteen hours a day can't play chess at the top of his or her game by definition. After you're well rested, let's not jump immediately to getting a steady chess teacher, though it wouldn't hurt to have your play evaluated by an impartial voice.

Do consult a teacher or strong player, not necessarily for the long haul, but rather to review what you've been doing. Aim to have him or her provide an analysis of where you really stand (it's impossible to say from the information you've given). You'll need to know how good you truly are, what your weaknesses are, some ideas on how you could offset them over time, and a possible regimen for play and study for the next three to six months.

At the next check point, three to six months down the road, you can repeat the same step to see where you are then. It's a process, and it's going to take time. If, along the way, you find it enjoyable and rewarding to meet regularly with a chess teacher, fine. It is not absolutely necessary to work with a teacher to become a chess master. But it *is* essential, if you are to achieve your desired goal, to strive for objectivity in your personal assessment. It seems to me as if you're going to need someone else to help you get that.

Question I just started playing chess a year ago, after I saw the movie *Searching for Bobby Fischer*. Since there were no regular opponents to play, I decided to buy *Chessmaster* (10th edition). My ELO rating was zero at that time, I mean it! I had plenty of time to learn, as I was hospitalized after a motorcycle accident. I went through the whole program, and I was very happy when I found a "Rating Exam" created by Bruce Pandolfini! Now, a year later, I feel I can play chess! I can beat the computer opponent rated 1700-1800, but in real life I can beat those rated 2000 and above. How far can someone like me go? At thirty-five years old, I'm too old for a chess career. But I've fallen in love with chess and I enjoy playing and learning — even if I lose. I think of you and Josh and Yasser as my coaches, because my first steps on the board came from all of you through the software! So I would like to thank you

for everything! I appreciate your advice and wish you all the best. **Zoltan Horvath (Hungary)**

Answer I don't know who to consider as your coach, but it must be Josh, Yasser, or someone or something else, since I've never taken anyone from zero to two thousand in anything, let alone chess. But whether you've been inspired by [Searching for Bobby Fischer](#) or the latest software, I wouldn't place an arbitrary upper limit on what you can ultimately achieve. Human beings can be quite amazing, and you're a human being, with evidently great energy and desire for success. How far can you go? As far as your mind and ambition can take you, right up to grandmaster and beyond. You obviously love chess, and that's an important ingredient to help you kick into second gear. Good luck on your journey.

Question I am a thirty-four year old professor of history. I recently hired a chess coach to help me improve my game. I admit that I did little research into this individual's qualifications, other than to learn that he has won awards for coaching. Yet, during our first lesson, while going over one of my games, I was nothing less than insulted, and I estimate that perhaps twenty minutes of a sixty minute lesson was spent on correcting my southern accent. I felt so discouraged, afterward, I shelved every chess book I owned and was ready to give the game up entirely. I admitted to this person that I'm a weak player, perhaps 1300 USCF, but I am determined to learn and simply love chess. Yet, he treated me quite rudely and stated, literally, that I "will never improve" if I "can't 'see' such a move." Of course my board vision is weak: I'm a weak player but I love the game, nevertheless. My question to you is, what advice would you give to someone looking for a chess instructor in general? I think the subject of how to choose a good chess instructor (not just for younger people but also for professionals, like myself, who do not have dreams of titles or such but just want to improve their game) would aid many readers. Your insight into this would be most appreciated. With sincere respect, **Tim Harris (USA)**

Answer I'm willing to bet that the misunderstandings arising from your accent pale before mine. All my life people have thought I've been saying one thing, when I've actually been telling them just the opposite, my inflective Brooklyn intonation posing as babble. Obviously, you should tell that demeaning excuse for humanity – what did you call him, a chess teacher? – where to go.

But I also recommend something else. While you don't need to be made fun of by somebody you've hired to help you, I sense your own attitude may serve as a huge obstacle to get around. Perhaps unintentionally, you describe yourself in very disparaging ways, such as an overuse of the word "weak." That's such a negative term, which can't help but cast a pall over the entire enterprise.

As a professor of history, despite H.L. Mencken's view to the contrary, you should know the importance of couching ideas in propitious expressions, if you are to promote and bolster the process. So why don't you start fresh, opting to characterize yourself in accurate but less debilitating language? You can just say you think you're a 1300 player (presumably, you don't know for certain, even if that is your present rating), without emphasizing you're a "weak" 1300 player.

Surely, you don't need a criticizing, unsympathetic teacher. Nor do you want a "yes man," who will say whatever makes you feel good. A good teacher is one who knows how to point out where you go wrong, but can do so constructively, suggesting with emboldening specificity how to correct the problem. And when it comes to giving praise, he or she should also be explicit, saying exactly what you did right and why, so that you can see the reasoning behind it.

So look for a teacher who is both hopeful and helpful, but also, always truthful, objective,

and concrete. How do you do that? You explore possibilities, keep your eyes open, ask questions, weigh the answers, and make informed decisions. If you screw up, you can always try again, until you get it right.

Question My question is about a move you do to protect the king. I haven't played in years and I can't remember how it's done or what it is called. Thanks! **Christina Alexander (USA)**

Answer I haven't played in years either, but I suspect you're referring to the move of *castling*. This idea enables the player to shift both the king and a rook in one turn, something it seems many students have trouble doing in real games. In addition to the rule, there are conditions and restrictions on it, and you have to learn them, too.

Practically every beginner's chess book explains it, so you don't need a recommendation for a particular one. You can also find it clarified on the Internet at many, many sites. Rather than putting it solely into words, which is the best we can do here, it makes more sense for you to check it out in fuller context, with illuminating diagrams supporting the explanations. Meanwhile, have fun, and, in your own games, get into the habit of preparing to castle early. That doesn't mean that you automatically should castle as soon as you can, but I won't yell at you if you do.

Question I have a question about training methods. I'm quite good at chess (2000 ELO), but of course I want to get a master's title. I try to spend about ninety minutes every day on training and I'm ready to do some serious work. Yet my progress seems very slow. Kotov says that one needs to master three things to be good at chess: tactics, calculating variations and positional understanding. I thought that this could all be achieved by analyzing master's games and studying tactics, so for some time I completely neglected the study of my own games. Now, having begun analyzing my own games, I have a bad feeling about my chess intuition. I think that my positional play has suffered. I'm a little confused and I'm wondering how to best apportion my time between studying my own games and the games of masters. **A. Bazik (Poland)**

Answer There's no one way to do this, and there's no best way. My advice? Get your play evaluated first. See where you are. After that, you can focus on the areas of study ostensibly most timely and relevant to you. As a rule, regularly analyze your games, preferably with the help of a player at least two to three classes above you. When it comes to what you "have to study," not that you have to study anything in particular, let the course of your own play decide that.

But see here: if you want to study this or that, and Kotov didn't bring it up, wouldn't that be okay? True, Kotov's [*Think Like A Grandmaster*](#) is a famous book, and Kotov said some wonderful things in it and elsewhere, but you can succeed, practically violating almost everything he recommended. Although a carefully laid out program of actions, procedures, methods, techniques, and memorized opening lines can be vital to good chess play, very few of us have gotten anywhere by just following such pigeon-holing prescriptions.

Isn't such an approach antithetical to what chess is supposed to be about? Free yourself from such trappings. Study what you want and what gives you pleasure. If you're going to get good at all, and enjoy the magical mystery tour on the road to mastery, you can do it without anyone telling you how to think for yourself. I encourage you to diet on a menu of very strong players, afterward analyzing those games in great detail. That's the best way to learn how to think like a strong player: to get crushed by them on a regular basis, to analyze those losses, until eventually you're the one doing the crushing.

Question My current goal is to defeat *Chessmaster 9000* and *Chessmagnetschool.com*'s toolbox in the king and queen vs. king and rook ending. It seems like this is the toughest

ending. I remember reading in Yasser Seirawain's [Winning Chess Endings](#) that even he does not know all its nuances. I am also reading *Pawnless Chess Endings* by John Nunn, which shows many examples of top level grandmasters making suboptimal moves. So, I do not feel bad that I have not mastered this particular ending. What I am doing now is inputting the positions from *Pawnless Chess Endings* in *CM 9000*. I am also going to input the moves from *Basic Chess Endings*. Are there any pointers that you can provide to win this ending against *CM 9000*? Some people say that my time could be better spent elsewhere. But I have become obsessed with trying to win it. I feel that if I learn to win this ending consistently, I could learn anything in chess. Therefore, I figure it would be a confidence builder. Thank you. **Parag Shah (USA)**

Answer I'm going to go out on the limb, agreeing with some people you've heard or overheard, and say you're wasting your time. Instead of putting so much time and effort into studying the king-and-queen vs. king-and-rook ending, testing your knowledge and the techniques you're studying against software, why don't you simplify your life a bit.

Try this: find strong players, wherever they are; play them, if you can, under favorable conditions; analyze those games afterward; and build a study program around those encounters. With your propensity for exacting detail – for which I'm duly impressed – I have no doubt that you will gain immeasurably and measurably. I'd rather give you that advice, which I know has value, than to think a microsecond more over what I view as an inspired but misguided email. May you have nothing but success, whether or not you follow my guidance.

Question of the Month

The best answers will be published in the next column.

What is the most essential talent a strong chess player must have?

Reader's Responses from Last Month

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

How would you explain to a child why players resign?

Among the many interesting replies was the following:

Ernest Schlich (USA) writes: First, when teaching young people chess, I take the opportunity to include vocabulary lessons. This often results in my discussions being sometime more adult than one might normally use with children. Second, while looking up S. Tartakover's history, I found the following computer translated page at Wikipedia with some interesting terminology. You might enjoy reading it. My favorite was "When I arrived in France, I decided to become a professional player of failures." Also good was "It is still better to sacrifice the pieces of one's adversary."

There are several reasons why accomplished chess players resign rather than playing the game to checkmate. The primary reason is they see that they will be mated in several moves. A second reason is that they are down material and can see how the opponent will win the game. It is often at this point that they don't want to finish the game, as they can't see any good moves and are discouraged. The least important reasons are they feel that the opponent will not respect them if it appears that they don't realize that they are lost or will become mad at them for not resigning.

It is true that there comes a point when one's position is so bad that it would take such an elementary blunder by your opponent for you to have a chance to draw or win that it makes

no sense to continue. If you are both good players, say with ratings above 1200, it is then a good idea to congratulate your opponent and resign. However, you should only resign if you are sure that you have no resources and could easily win if you had the opponent's position. Knowing that your opponent can easily win means that you have examined the position and know *exactly* how you would play the game to get checkmating material if you had your opponent's position. If you are not certain you see both the plan and the moves, play on so you learn.

As a starting player it is very important you play as much chess as possible. By resigning too early, you miss the opportunity to exercise your mind and build your playing and analysis skills. Another important reason to continue is to improve your ability to fight when your position is bad and you are discouraged. The ability to continue to work hard to find a resource when your position is bad is one mark of top players. And remember, you may not have evaluated the position correctly or missed a resource. Therefore, if you are going to err, err on the side of resigning too late or not at all.

Even grandmasters can make the mistake of resigning too early. In Henry Hunvald's book *Chess Quotations from the Masters* there are a couple of good quotes to keep in mind when thinking about resigning. GM Klaus Darga said "My God, I have a winning position" a moment after resigning. Savielly Tartakover said, "Nobody ever won by resigning." Finally, keep in mind that we are a community of people who enjoy our game and want to see others play and enjoy chess. As a beginner, more experienced players will teach you and not be critical when you don't play well or don't resign. Keep this in mind as you become better and show the same patience for your beginning opponents.

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