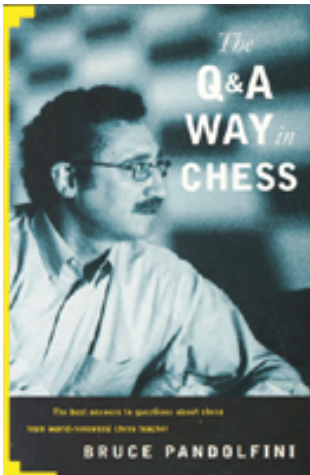




C O L U M N I S T S

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!

Raging Rating Rants

Question I have been playing chess for a few years now and my Internet rating at various sites has been around 2000. In unrated games at my club, no one can beat me, yet in tournaments I lose against the worst players ever! I bought [Fritz 10](#) which really improved my game, but I keep losing to players I really should not be losing to. Can you please help me? **Omar Hushar (USA)**

Answer The information you've provided is not really clear or definite enough to ascertain how good a player you are, or what you should be doing. Even after determining your true aptitude, one would still need more information to figure out what areas of your game may accrue benefit from greater effort.

Although ratings, when well established, can be an accurate index of your overall ability, a number alone can't specify a particular player's strengths and weaknesses. Further confusion can set in when one starts comparing ratings achieved under varying conditions, with a range of time controls, at different sites and venues, and against dissimilar playing pools composed of humans and computers.

At this point, before you go off trying this or that book, curriculum, or Internet site, it makes sense to get your game analyzed by a more sophisticated player. He or she can ask the right questions and pose eliciting problems that could fill out the picture in ways sheer competition might not be able to do. I'm not saying that you should hook up with a teacher and stay with him or her for years, as one might with a shrink. Two to four sessions should do it, with the teacher proposing a program for self study by the end of it.

You can follow up with further sessions if it seems warranted or appeals to you, but I don't think that's necessary. Just make sure you've made it patent up front that you're merely going for a diagnosis, with no intention of providing the instructor a lifelong sinecure, not that it's necessarily easy to help you or anyone, for that matter. It is work if it is done well, and in this instance the well-done work should end in an evaluation which you can fully grasp and use to create a plan for individual improvement.

If you decide not to do this, shunning the scrutiny of a trained observer, of course you can still better your game in traditional ways, playing strong opposition, especially against a field of opponents from which you can sometimes win; studying tactics, if possible, without moving the pieces, let's say from a variety of books with themes organized and random (like

real life); keeping reasonably current on openings and defenses of choice, which can be pursued in a timely fashion on the Internet; familiarizing yourself with basic endgame ideas, such as those outlined in Averbakh's [*Chess Endings: Essential Knowledge*](#) or some comparable text; and playing over game collections of strong players, especially those you admire and from whom you derive inspiration.

This approach can go nicely, and I think it can go even more nicely if you start with a confident awareness of who you are as a chess player. It can't hurt to know more about your chess skills and deficiencies, your style and preferences, and all those other aspects of competing you may think you already understand but probably don't. If you do go with your own self-constructed formula, you still might need to ask a few questions now and then to get around obstacles. A strong player or experienced teacher may know what's needed to push the process along, in half the time, in the right direction.

Question I was reading a review on a chess computer which rates the computer at 1500/1600 ELO. Is this equivalent to the USCF rating system? Thanks for your help. **Tony Wong (USA)**

Answer All chess ratings are versions of the system developed by Arpad Elo and thus are ELO ratings. When you say "ELO" rating, I think you probably mean "FIDE" rating. One can also have a USCF rating, yet the U.S. Chess Federation relies on the same kind of computation. But there are differences in the comparative results, with the ELO ratings of FIDE generally being lower than those of the USCF and especially the ICC, in some cases by an awful lot. There are a number of ICC players rated around 3300 for example, while the FIDE list usually tops off at around 2800.

Still, I'm not sure how to give you a simple answer, and it is not possible to correlate all the rating differences up and down the entire range. FIDE ratings and their corresponding titles are often important in deciding high caliber tournament invitations. So, for purposes of illustration, organizers may take pains to invite a certain number of 2600 players to an event. But very few international organizers will bother inviting players rated 1500 FIDE. For some reason they're not as attractive, and accordingly those lower rated FIDE players don't get many chances to improve their FIDE rating at all.

Anyhow, when the reviewer referred to an ELO rating of 1500/1600, it wouldn't be perverse to assume he or she really meant to say USCF. It's unlikely the designation was meant to be FIDE, but in this case, even if that were the intent, I don't think at that particular rating (1500/1600) the differences are especially meaningful. My advice is to interpret it as being a USCF equivalent and go from there.

Question Morphy was the greatest chess genius of all time. His rating, at its best, was 2690. Kasparov is supposed to be the best player ever. His best rating ever was 2851. I must say it is very surprising to see such a difference. Do you really think that Kasparov is 161 rating points better than Morphy? I know all about Darwinian evolution, but I have thought this question out very carefully. I am curious what you think about it. **Wexler Mann (USA)**

Answer My watch says it's two in the morning here, so I'm getting tired and a little cranky, though I promise not take it out on you or your carefully thought out question. There is no incontestable way to compare Morphy and Kasparov, and that's that. But since you have, I must answer you in the affirmative. I don't know who would be the greater genius, but Kasparov is certainly the stronger player. I'm not certain that he's 161 points better than Morphy. The difference might be ten points less, or even ten points more. It's quite beyond my ken. But Mr. K is that good, and the game of chess has evolved significantly since Morphy and Darwin, both of whom converged in the late 1850s. It's too bad they never met.

Question How accurate is the rating scale in your *Chess Life* "Solitaire Chess" column? Is it

close? **Paul Bettis (USA)**

Answer Close? If you're alluding to the USCF rating system, it's close, but not too close. Still, the accuracy of the correlation would depend on your actual strength and the quality of the column for the given month. Since I'm uncertain about any of the months, or the excellence of anything I've done, and knowing even less about you, I can't corroborate anything numerical. Hopefully, it doesn't matter, and you get a kick out of guessing moves and playing over master games regardless.

Question Do you teach or encourage your students to engage in gamesmanship? Chess has many examples, including Petrosian's table-shaking, Tal's intimidating stare, and the coded yoghurt during the 1978 Karpov-Korchnoi World Championship Match. Is this okay or is it considered unsporting behavior? Many thanks and best regards, **Adrian Adorna (Philippines)**

Answer I'm not sure everything you've mentioned or implied has to do with *gamesmanship*, which is a word first given vogue years ago by writer Stephen Potter. If he were alive, I think he'd concur that the coded yogurt incident you've referred to was actual cheating, if indeed it did occur the way some observers have recounted it. Furthermore, shaking the board, if there seemed to be proof it was done intentionally, would probably also be considered a transgression of the rules by that same delightful British satirist (he died in 1969). Potter differentiated between gamesmanship (actions within the rules) and outright violations of the rules in his droll 1947 book *The Theory and Practice of Gamesmanship: Or the Art of Winning Games Without Actually Cheating*.

There are myriad ways to get psychological edges in competition, such as slowing things down, maintaining a poker face, trying an unexpected move, essaying your opponent's favorite lines, playing for a draw when you need a win, and all sorts of other ploys that might work under timely or opportune circumstances. But those ruses have to do with elements of strategy and practical decision-making, not rascality and mischievousness.

Teachers naturally encourage students to choose moves that cause maximum difficulties for the opponent while producing optimal chances for success. Those choices tend to be based on an objective analysis of the player's situation over the board in particular events and circumstances. But most chess teachers don't usually advocate staring, arriving ridiculously late, moving the pieces with antagonism, expressing emotions with exaggerated facial movements or body language, all of which are within the rules, though not far removed from the odor of poor sportsmanship. Beyond loutishness, teachers also realize that if those annoyance schemes become too excessive or pronounced, such dealings might even be judged illegal by the officials.

To be sure, we all want to win, and there's nothing wrong with opting for move and planning choices that are tinged with psychological and emotional content. But I think you'll agree that boorish behavior, drenching our chess encounters with philistine tactics, designed merely to unsettle our opponents, though having little to do with chess itself, is not why most of us play the game. It seems to me that the real pleasure chess has to offer derives from mastering the intuitive art of finding simple yet powerful solutions to the complex problems posed by the shifting forces at clash in the time-and-space universe of the chessboard. You seem to be an intelligent person, so here's my advice. If you plan to do any teaching yourself, counsel your students to keep their efforts focused on the immediate position before them. If they must stare at something, tell them to stare at that.

Question I am a great fan of the movie [Searching for Fischer](#), and I admire what you have done as a chess teacher, although some of the side shows in the film nag at me. It is incomprehensible that you or the actor who played you said to the kid that he is "no

Fischer” (while the mother was there) and you in actuality knocked the pieces off the board like they were toys. You must also know that smoking is not allowed at kids’ tournaments, so how could that happen in the movie with all those chess players involved? Thank you for all your work teaching the game of chess, but I wanted to hear your thoughts on those concerns in your own words. Did those things truthfully happen? **Thomas Deschler (USA)**

Answer I believe I understand your comments, and though I appreciate the thought behind them, I think it might be construed as a tad unreasonable to expect me to recall the daily doings of fifteen and twenty years ago. But here’s what I remember. None of the kids smoke in the film. In 1985, Kasparov was just becoming Kasparov, so naturally Fischer had the chess world’s attention and the bulk of popular characterizations. And knocking the pieces off the board? If I didn’t do it, perhaps I should have; and if I did, I sense it was unintentional.

Question Why should one read chess books if one is to demonstrate inner creativity and brilliance? **Krsna Reneau (India)**

Answer Your question is a little profound for this column at this time of night. It’s two in the morning here, and it might have helped if I had seen your query a couple of hours ago. Actually, I did, but my watch had stopped. Nonetheless, I will say this. One doesn’t have to read chess books if he or she is to demonstrate inner creativity and brilliance. But if you do read chess books, there’s no need to demonstrate it. You can read them in private, being inwardly creative and brilliant, and nobody has to know about it.

Question of the Month

The best answers will be published in the next column.

What is the ideal time control for tournament play?

Reader’s Responses from Last Month

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

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

Among the many interesting replies was the following:

Srinath Kay (India) writes: The talent to be able to love chess irrespective of the number of losses incurred.

Julian Wan (USA) writes: I would nominate the skill or ability not to blunder. Chess, when played competitively is ultimately a practical game – a sacrifice may be proven unsound in one long difficult variation but over the board, with the clock ticking, it may be good enough. I’m not suggesting that reckless play is good but that ultimately games are not so much won as they are lost. It seems that the strong players in the world rarely make an obvious mistake. While the very best may not win more than a third of their games, they are typically very hard to beat – sometimes going 60-70 games without a loss. The question I have follows from this suggestion. If “not blundering” is important – than how does one train for that? Tactical acuity can be developed by doing exercises. How does one train not to blunder? Thanks again for a nice column.

Dan MacNeill (Canada) writes: I think the most essential talent a chess player must have is a strong will. In a tournament game, a game of chess between two players is a battle of wills. Tournament games can be fairly serious to the players. I think most players would agree that the object in tournament games is to win or draw, as every point or half point is crucial for a

good placement on the score board. When you impose your will in the game, you develop a fighting frame of mind, and I find this gives the following advantages in a game:

- You focus more and analyze positions more precisely, which helps avoid mistakes.
 - You set problems for the opponent to solve, and wait for him/her to make a mistake.
 - You force yourself to see more tactical opportunities, and consequently be more creative in your moves.
 - You are not afraid to play anyone, which develops your confidence, which in turn improves your game.
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