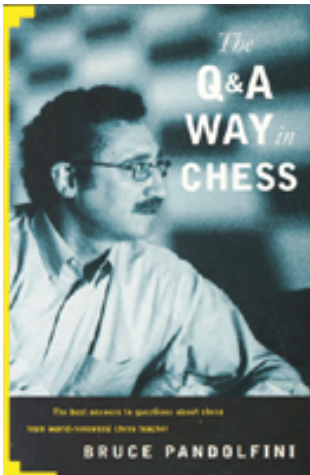




C O L U M N I S T S

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!

It's Never Too Late

Question Bruce, in your opinion, what specifically separates the USCF 1600-type players from those rated around 2000? What do Experts know or do differently than those of us who seem destined to mediocrity? I'm almost fifty years old and am returning to tournament chess after a long hiatus. I'd like to think it's not too late in my life to get stronger at chess. But I'm not sure what specifically to work on in order to improve. **Greg Delaney (USA)**

Answer There are differences across the board. Experts are significantly stronger and generally more knowledgeable in almost every aspect of chess. Perhaps the greatest impact of their superiority is exhibited in playing the endgame, making plans, evaluating positions, and appreciating transitions between phases. But even with regard to calculation, an area everyone tends to take for granted, experts are notably better, being able to see more clearly and deeply while having discernibly greater tactical awareness. An expert can also do something a 1600 player can't: having a concrete winning advantage, no matter how slight, he or she can bring it to fruition against anyone. On the other hand, there are many winning hands that 1600 players might very well misplay, particularly against resistant opposition.

If you want to improve your play to the 2000 mark it would probably help to do a few things. I recommend you begin with an earnest study of endings. You should also review plenty of first-class games. Moreover, even if you've already invested a good deal of time on tactics, it's still advisable to solve tactical puzzles, if you can, of increasing difficulty and complexity. Round off these efforts by a steady diet of competitive chess against strong players, making certain to follow-up those contests with intensive analysis.

If you need to, and relying on software doesn't work that well for you, don't be afraid to seek the assistance of a strong analyst or player to aid in penetrating the mysteries of the four hundred point difference. Can you do it, re-starting your engines at the age of fifty? Why not? Kant was "awakened" from his intellectual slumbers at fifty-seven, only to produce the *Critique of Pure Reason*. Becoming an expert by gaining four hundred points in playing strength seems a heck of a lot easier than that.

Question My question is about analyzing one's games. From what I've read, this seems to be a key step in improving one's chess. For instance, not too recently Kramnik gave an interview which stated one of the main benefits of computers was you could quickly find out your weaknesses and eliminate them. Is there any tried and true method for examining one's games? How much time should be spent on the opening, middlegame, and endgame? **Kyle Kijmorri (Canada)**

Answer Computers can tell you that certain moves are not best, but so far they are not being used to point out types of individual weaknesses. For that determination, it is sensible to have your game examined by a human critic conversant with diagnosing troubles and tendencies. Perhaps you can employ computers to unearth your own frailties. You might be able to do this by being mindful of the specific evaluations. Every time you play a move that seems inferior, you should pay attention, trying to establish why the computer gave your move a lower ranking. Categorize all those instances in which you had concern. Then see if there are any pronounced patterns and try to understand them. It might produce pertinent insights. But even if you do all that, and your efforts are ostensibly successful, it would be additionally helpful to get another observer's objective take on circumstances.

There's certainly no tried-and-true method for any of this. But here's what some players do, and they claim it works for them. First they input their moves. When they get an unfavorable evaluation, they search for alternatives, hoping to find two or three better tries. Once again they register the computer's appraisals, not that the algorithm in effect is always on the money or recognizes the value of every subtlety. Then they see which move the computer thinks to be best in the given situation. They start comparing and analyzing, and that's essentially what a good chunk of chess thinking is about.

They also rely on asking themselves questions to elicit information, as any detective or scientist would. The questions don't have to be profound. In fact, they're usually quite basic. For example, something as simple as "Is there another move I haven't considered that does even more?" can be quite useful because, as simplistic as it is, it directs us to a logical place.

And don't worry so much about dividing up your study time in some tightly formatted manner. It doesn't make sense to stop studying one thing because you've hit the arbitrary limit, especially if you need more time to accomplish the task at hand. Just make sure you allot yourself an adequate block to have a solid learning period. A session of an hour and a half to two should normally be enough. More important than how you partition your time, however, and even what you study, may be how efficiently focused you are during the sitting. If you don't feel a little exhausted by the end, you probably haven't concentrated fully and given it everything. Be on battle alert throughout and you can collapse afterward, once the all-clear is given.

Question I have returned to playing serious chess after a thirty-year hiatus. I enjoy reading your column and your many books. Much has been written about Fred Reinfeld's *1001 Winning Chess Sacrifices and Combinations*. In my opinion, the main strength of this work is that many of the positions arise from actual OTB play. There are certainly some composed positions, but I find that compositions can be somewhat abstract and unnatural. To your knowledge has anyone published a similar work using positions from more modern games, say in the last fifty years? I have seen the Polgar book, but many of the positions in that work seem to be composed. **Dave De Angelis (USA)**

Answer True, for the most part, it's better to work with real-game positions or setups that could conceivably arise in over-the-board play. Meanwhile, many composed problems, while stressing aesthetics, may have little to do with typical chess games. (Didactic problems, created for the purposes of instruction, tend to have everyday utility, too, but they often come off as dry and not very engaging.) Even though characteristic situations have more practicality, I wouldn't dismiss composed problems altogether, for they can expand our horizons and, sometimes, if they defy standard principles and models in special ways, force us to approach our undertakings with greater openness and objectivity.

The Reinfeld 1001-books (if I'm not mistaken, there are at least of two them) are indeed classics. But since their appearances, hundreds of other worthy tactical offerings, with examples taken

from actual games, have been published to the delight of the chess community. Some of the treatises contain problems arranged thematically, others randomly. Both types are good, and there's nothing wrong with alternating their use. My advice is to go to the USCFSales.com tactics category and just feast on what's presented, sampling the excellent descriptions of the material. Even the worst book there, whatever it is, would probably still be interesting and helpful to one who loves chess puzzles (as I think you do) and tackles the examples purposely.

Question Hi Bruce, I am a 1950 player from Iran. My question is: how should I read a repertoire book, such as *Play d4!* by Palliser? Should I play through all given lines and repeat them until I memorize them? What method do you suggest? **Alireza Bahari Rad (Iran)**

Answer I wouldn't memorize anything at first, or maybe even at second. I think I would just leaf through the book and get a sense for what's there. If something strikes my fancy, and, superficially (at that point the effort can be nothing more than superficial), if I like some of the comments, I'd start playing over the lines in that section and see how I feel about them. I would keep doing this, jumping about, from chapter to chapter, until I found I liked what I was examining and wanted to learn more. I would then expand outward, from the section of interest, turning to related problems and ideas that in some way might bear on the relevant material.

If I wanted more information on those ideas, I'd then go to other books, periodicals, software, online services, or even people. (Sometimes they actually know something.) Maybe the new sources might suggest a refutation or bring to mind some crucial, previously unconsidered or unappreciated point valuable for further study, and that would only make the entire process more rewarding and fulfilling. It might even make me a better player.

What I probably wouldn't do, however, is read any opening book of variations from cover to cover. I love rote memory, and the notion of instilling that type of "thinking" into the fabric of society is very tempting, but I don't think I'd want to proceed in a manner that would reduce me to full automaton status. I suspect, neither would you. My advice is to use these opening manuals as information sources surely, but also and primarily as tools to promote proper thinking. As most teachers usually say, it's not about memory; it's about learning how to think.

Question I have tried everything I can think of, but no matter what I do I'm not getting any better. I have done puzzles, played online, done mazes but nothing seems to help. Do you have any advice on how I can get better? **Ashleigh Milam (USA)**

Answer Play strong players on a regular basis. Analyze those games thoroughly. Do lots of tactical problems. Try to analyze without moving the pieces. Familiarize yourself with basic endings and endgame techniques. Get into the habit of asking exploratory questions. Always try to proceed with a plan, and then review that plan fairly often. Make sure to concentrate when playing and thinking. Above all, approach your time over the chessboard or when reading chess material with a burning curiosity that can only be satisfied by more chess. Of course, never be satisfied.

Question How can I make endgame study more fun? In answer to this question I have done the following: I find examples of grandmaster games in which one of the players has inexplicably (to us *patzers*) resigned. Then I pick one, put the final position in my computer, and play the winning side! If the computer beats you, reset the position and try again. **Jack Scheible (USA)**

Answer It sounds as if you've been reading my column. Wait, maybe I've been reading yours. Anyhow, among the myriad paths you could pursue, why don't you take one that leads

to writing your own book? It's very simple. Make diagrams of every intriguing or useful endgame paradigm you come upon. Tape the diagrams to index cards. Put useful comments and variations on the back of the cards and start collecting.

As the cards accumulate, organize them by apparent theme. Opt for themes that seem to help you recall and grasp the information better, even if they are unique to you. To be sure, especially if they are unique to you, because then you'll remember them better and wind up having greater command over them.

In the course of time, these themes may coagulate into larger, more pliable patterns. In fact, throughout your work, you might have to constantly arrange and rearrange your examples; if you can, at least into groups of four, so that one example flows into the next, as one group flows into the next.

Throughout, imagine you are conducting a chess class and have to explain the ideas to a roomful of people. Eventually you'll impose some kind of narrative on the collection and, even if there are holes in the story, you're still going to understand a tremendous more than you did at first. Furthermore, that narrative now becomes the binding lifeblood of a book – your book, one that shows how far you've come and everything you've accomplished. But hey, I like the other idea, too.

Question of the Month

The best answers will be published in the next column.

Which chess book of the last decade do you consider the most important?

Reader's Responses from Last Month

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

What do you envision as the ultimate tool for studying chess?

Among the many interesting replies were the following:

Todd Wither (USA) writes: In the future we will have miniature electronic books. We will have information at the tips of our fingers, even in our palms. But then there is the question of cheating.

R. Surf (England) writes: I recently started up chess as a way to fill some time while I was doing a sabbatical traveling around the world, which turned into a never going back to the International Banking World in New York/London. I write now, but not nearly well enough to pay the bills like my previous job. In 2002, IM Malcolm Pein gave me the book: *Tactics for Advanced Players*, by Averbakh, with the not too subtle caveat, "You know everything about nothing. *Learn tactics!*"

As a very well paid London banker I did not take this personally, because, heck, he was a *just* a chess player depending on the patronage of terrible players with large checkbooks like me. But in 2005, I decided to play chess again after a fifteen year hiatus. Oh, and I actually read the Averbakh book cover to cover, I set up almost *every* position in the book and repeated this process several times. I then put his exercises into a database that I call Tactical Destruction. I added further exercises from Edward Lasker's *Modern Chess Strategy* and Vukovic's [Art of Attack](#), and along the way I added all my terrible blunders and occasional successes from online games. Together with exercises from various other sources, I now have over 535 cards that I *know*.

But this has been a chess journey of over two years. In those years I can only give the following to justify my work: the FMs in a chess club that I occasionally visit (one of whom said to me in annoyance “You play like Morphy!”) are no longer willing to play for money at even odds and try to avoid playing me. But the best part of this experience, the other players say, with the hope I will share the secret, “They are scared of you.” Everyone thinks that I was faking my 1900+ rating. I take it with a smile and realize that I know nothing, except 535 positions better than anyone else in this club. As Malcolm said, “You know everything about nothing. *Learn tactics!*”

I know Malcolm Pein does not even know who I am and probably will never remember this incident, but if you happen to have contact with him at the higher levels of chess Nirvana, then please tell him “thank you” from a once well-to-do banker and now a poor but happy writer. In the meantime, I will continue building and refining my database, because I realize that until you can see the basics, all those books, from *My System* to Dvoretsky, are simply meaningless if you cannot see the tactics that are beneath the surface.

Regarding Blitz, it is unlikely unless you are some child prodigy or an adult who has played chess his entire life that you will ever be any good at it. I sincerely believe that it is the worst thing in the world for chess. But in fairness, I have no clue how to play this game. Still, I will venture the following thought to my detractors, that no other sport in the world turns their game from a contest of one hour to eighty-five minutes into a five minute debacle of who can move pieces faster than the other player. To paraphrase former World Champion Dr. Lasker, from his [*Manual of Chess*](#), “Speed Chess will be the *death* of Chess.”

(BP – I couldn’t have said it any better.)

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

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