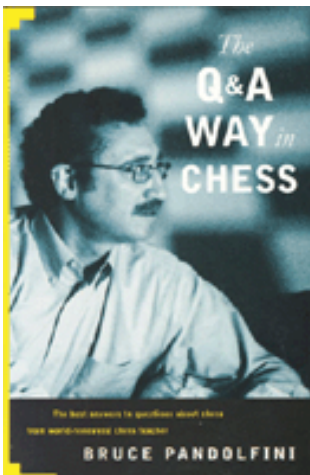




## COLUMNISTS

*The Q & A Way*

Bruce Pandolfini



CHESS THEATRE

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*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](http://ChessCafe.com) column...*

*Yes, I have a question for Bruce!*

## If You Don't Know What to Do, Don't Do It

**Question** I've been a chess addict for seven years, and have graduated from "patzer" to "adequate" via a combination of self-guided study and thousands of hours of game-play. In that time, I have learned several guiding principles that, while not meant to be followed without exception, yield sound results in most instances. My question concerns how to handle situations where one guiding principle conflicts with another. Or is it merely a matter of avoiding such situations entirely? Any guidance you may be able to offer would be much appreciated. **Scott Eckert (USA)**

**Answer** You're obviously a perceptive reader who has thought about such questions with intelligence and discrimination. You have understood the importance of principles and discerned their worth in your own play, though you appreciate their boundaries and realize they are not to be adhered to absolutely. You can't count on having it both ways. Since you admit their shortcomings, why do you override those thoughts, looking to see which principle takes precedence over the other? While I'm sure you recognize the limitations of unqualified encapsulations, I suspect the Descartes in you – in all chess players, for that matter – can't help but search for something to accept that's beyond question. In chess it's called *checkmate*, but since most of us have been moved by the same often fruitless impulses in our own lives, the problem is widespread enough to warrant further examination.

What should you do when principles conflict? Such tensions occur all the time in the analytic process. For instance, let's assume you're ahead, with a winning material advantage. The trading principle recommends exchanging pieces to emphasize your advantage and diminish counterplay – to simplify. But suppose you also have going for you a strong attack, with the likelihood of winning even more material and/or quickly finishing off your opponent. A principle pertaining to that situation advises you to avoid trades while pressing the initiative if you have real chances for greater advantage. This is just one such clash of ideas. There are other general disagreements that typically arise, and if addressed superficially are just as confusing and unsatisfying.

As we've already more or less implied and even said, the real problem stems from relying on abstract evaluations categorically. They deal best with classes of conditions, not with specific circumstances. Consider how you would tap a principle. First you might analyze the position facing you, trying to understand the pertinent threats, requirements, and plans. That assessment could take into account the calculation of some exact variations to test the merit of specified moves. But whether or not it has resolved the issue, at some point you may find yourself hesitant and in need of a shot in the arm to push thinking in the right direction.

So you might ask yourself a question, no matter if stated precisely in words or merely in some internalized non-verbal way for more experienced players (such as yourself), whether there's a principle that applies to this state of affairs. If a principle occurs to you, you might look at it more closely to see if indeed it has any juice. If it does, you'll still have to examine specific moves and lines to see where they take you. The results of that analysis may show you something entirely different. The principle you used to jumpstart your thinking might prove to be unworthy of absolute allegiance in the case at hand. You might even find that the right moves seem to contradict the general advice. But that doesn't mean the principle didn't have value. It got you looking at relevant ideas, even if your eventual determinations took you elsewhere.

Furthermore, in the course of your inner dialectic, a second principle might appear that also seems germane. It might run counter to the first general notion, and you'll have to weigh certain details to see if they support or contradict the first generalization. In the end, while you can fall back on generalities to reinforce your thinking, you're still required to find particular moves and variations that get you to some understood future place. It might even be that the moves leading you there don't fit so nicely into formulaic strategies. Adages and neat little sayings don't really win chess games. But, as I presume you already grasp, they often lead to astutely worked out moves and variations, and those are ideas that get the job done.

As I've indicated, it's likely you've already reasoned this way yourself, getting us back to your question, which has no unconditional answer, but impels me to give you one anyway. Restating the obvious, you're wondering what to do when two hypothetical campaigns suggest themselves and it can't be determined with certainty which oversimplification has primacy over the other. It's almost as if you're asking what to do when you don't know what to do. The answer is to circumvent all-purpose traps (at least a bit) by getting concrete. You can use generalities to focus your thinking, but you shouldn't rely on them to finalize it. Listen, we're all stuck in Plato's cave. No matter what we see inside, we simply can't know everything happening outside.

**Question** What advice or suggestions would you give to an aspiring player who *always* falls seriously behind on time? **Scott Eckert (USA)**

**Answer** My advice is to move faster. Beyond that, to avoid forfeiting on time, not that that aspect of time pressure has been a problem for you, play practice games where time is the most important factor. Try to play your best, but make certain not to overstep. As you do more of this, always being careful not to forfeit, you should begin feeling more comfortable with the clock and at some point may start playing better as well. During these training sessions it helps to budget your time, apportioning it in some logical way designed to ensure being poised to make the control with time left over. To get a clearer picture of how you're doing, you might want to note times during both practice and serious play.

Let's say you record the time you've used every five moves. Review the results afterward, either graphing moves with times or making a chart of the two linked factors to see where you seem to be encountering the greatest problems. Suddenly you'll be able to see the path of your tribulations more tangibly. You might even spot similarities in types of positions, whereupon you can target your studies and efforts accordingly. Maybe you're running into snags right in the opening, or perhaps it occurs later on, when trying to find yourself in the middlegame. It could be that you're analyzing too much or unnecessarily, such as when your responses are forced or practically necessary. Certainly you'll want to check you're thinking in all cases, but you should do it efficiently, with minimal waste. If you have only one legal move, play it.

Another thought is that perhaps you're allowing your mind to wander too much, so that you

have to labor at recalling things that should be at your fingertips by virtue of having stayed on top of the position. This situation comes about primarily when we stop thinking on our opponent's moves, waiting for him or her to respond. Instead, we should use the time to review the circumstances and remind ourselves of things that have to be done or are attractive to pursue. No matter what you do, don't expect to get rid of your time troubles altogether. It's going to happen sometimes regardless. But at least by being aware of your personal tendencies, with some math behind it, you are armed with weapons to fight your problem and balm to assuage your suffering.

**Question** I have limited access to chess materials and am currently training myself. My only tool for improvement is the Internet. Do you know where I can get free opening lines and variations? Especially on the Anti-Caro-Kann and Anti-Scandinavian (against both 2...Qxd5 and 2...Nf6); I also need middlegame and endgame materials. Thanks a lot. **Asaph Ho (Singapore)**

**Answer** Everything you need can be found online, from free instructional materials to willing practice opponents. There's so much free stuff out there you're simply going to have to survey the electronic highway to see what you like. For opening information, search for *chess openings* and see where it takes you. You can get specific, too, doing searches on the Caro-Kann and Scandinavian Defenses, including so-called "anti" systems. For strategic information, why don't you keyboard in *chess planning* or *chess strategy* and go from there. For the endgame phase you can start with *chess endings* and *chess endgame* to unearth useful pools in which to dip. But that's only the surface of it. The fun of it is doing your own exploring, and it shouldn't cost you anything. Good luck on your investigations.

**Question** I'm 18 years old and only really started training seriously in the past six months. I'm currently rated something like 2130 FIDE, but my last performance rating was 2350. My short term goal is to break 2300 ELO by the end of the year and my longer term goal is to break 2500 in three to five years. These are the steps that I believe must be taken to achieve these goals in order of importance: 1) Do something to increase the raw number of variations that I calculate in any given position, and also improve the accuracy of these calculations; 2) Increase the number of positions that I evaluate and also improve my ability to evaluate these positions; 3) Improve my knowledge of important theoretical endgames; 4) Improve my knowledge of opening theory; 5) Think in an objective and clear manner, only being influenced by the position on the chessboard. I think I have a good idea of how to do numbers three, four and five. So my question is: what is the best way to do the first two? Thanks very much, **Kevin Wasiluk (Germany)**

**Answer** I don't know the best ways to do the first two. There are various good ways, some of which you may be familiar with, since it's clear you're already a knowledgeable competitor. Rather than offer what can be found firsthand (and better) in Kotov, I recommend that you pick up his wonderful, landmark book [\*Think Like a Grandmaster\*](#). He has so many good, agreeably expressed and illustrated ideas that it seems prudent to start your efforts by reading it. I think you'll find it to be a real joy.

But I want to caution you on one thing. In your question you emphasize the importance of increasing the number of variations you analyze. Actually, the trick is just the opposite. You want to develop an intuitive feel for positions (as best as possible) so that you can reduce the number of variations you have to consider. That's the art of it. Once you've improved your ability to evaluate positions, then (if not concurrently) you'll want to upgrade your analytic and calculating skills to augment your judgment. You want to be able to think logically, not exhaustively. I suspect you're aware of that and momentarily lost sight of it while framing your nicely put together question. Hope you like the Kotov.

**Question** I am a Class A player who likes to attack, but I prefer to do it in sound strategic

positions. Currently I am playing 1.e4 with White and entering the main line Ruy Lopez, 3. Nxe5 in the Petroff, Classical against the Pirc, 3.Nc3 against the French and the Caro-Kann, etc. Against the Sicilian, I play the open lines, and Be2 against the Najdorf. I play the Sicilian Accelerated Dragon with Black against 1.e4. However, I have problems with 1.d4. I found myself frequently smothered to death in the King's Indian, so I currently play the Grünfeld, and even though it fits my style better, it sometimes seems like my opponents are getting too much play. Do you have any recommendations against 1.d4 that would fit with the rest of my repertoire? Thank you in advance. **Sebastian Fernandez (USA)**

**Answer** For students of the game who already play the Dragon against king-pawn openings, it is customary for teachers to recommend that they also flank against queen-pawn openings. This strategy may be adhered to by playing the King's Indian or Grünfeld Defenses. But such a course of action is not written in stone, nor should it be. Besides, you're too adept a player to follow cursory recommendations. Before obligating yourself to a plan of study, why don't you set a trial period, say three months, where you assay different replies to 1.d4 in your practice games and study time. That interlude should suffice, providing enough time and instances to see which systems and variations are more conducive to your style of play. Once the information starts coming in, then you can make a greater commitment to particular defenses.

### **Question of the Month**

The best answers will be published in the next column.

*After beating Spassky in 1972, could Fischer have been saved?*

### **Reader's Responses from Last Month**

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

*If you could study the play of only one chess great, who would it be?*

Among the many interesting replies were the following:

**Paul Linshits (Germany)** writes: I would pick Alekhine: a) he showed how brilliant attacks should be conducted. b) Alekhine-Nimzovitch, San Remo 1930 is one of the best examples of zugzwang (squeezes) I know. c) He understood the game of chess very well, as can be seen in his brilliant annotations in "My Best Games."

**Adrian Adorna (Philippines)** writes: Hands down it's Garry Kasparov simply because he can do it all. Generally, he is an aggressive and explosive player: his games are filled with dynamic ideas, fearless attacks, and brilliant combinations. Also, his positional play is superb – something he learned from his five title matches against his fiercest rival, Anatoly Karpov. His training and preparation in all the phases and aspects of chess is worthy of emulation. Anyone, from the new world champion to the chess enthusiast next door can gain plenty of insight and inspiration from his vibrant play.

**Risto Vallenius (Finland)** writes: Capablanca – His play is a solid foundation for everyone, regardless of personal style, abilities or preference. The starting point from where you can then build your own play.

**Brenan Nierman (USA)** writes: I would study the games of Tigran Petrosian. It is his games that I find myself repeatedly replaying, looking at the various nuances of his play. Part of the reason for this is my own repertoire and stylistic preferences, but most of all it is the sheer delight I derive from various aspects of his play. The bonus of studying Petrosian is one also absorbs the lessons of Nimzovitch, who was Petrosian's own chess hero. What is not

commonly appreciated about Petrosian is the degree to which tactics could figure in his play. The man was a great blitz player; and some of his greatest games, such as the 10th game in his 1966 match with Spassky, end with a tactical masterpiece. “Iron Tigran” was known for his exchange sacrifices too; and games such as his 11th game against Spassky in 1969 show that Petrosian, far from being the stodgy player that the Western press made him out to be, was actually a chess genius with a finely-tuned sense of the dynamics of chess positions. Finally, the books on Petrosian seem to be of a quality that one wishes to find with other chess greats. There is no equivalent to Shekhtman’s two-volume games collection on Petrosian for any other player other than Alekhine. If you want to study the play of a chess great, the first thing you have to have are the games!

**Joshua Franzj (USA)** writes: Victor Korchnoi – He has played more high level games against the greatest players from more generations than anyone. He plays everything and plays it well. He plays all phases of the game soundly. He has more games in Informant than any other player for a reason. The sheer volume of high quality games against top competition makes Korchnoi the best selection if you can only choose one player to study.

**Terrance Jones (USA)** writes: I suspect my answer will be poorly received by most readers, since neither was ever world champion. The GM’s I’m thinking of are Victor Korchnoi and Paul Keres. Both players had a playing career of great length, and basically played “everybody who was anybody” over a long period of time. By studying them you would be studying all the greats. Forced to make a choice, I would choose Korchnoi. He had an active career spanning over fifty years, and has a three-year peak rating of 2798, and a twenty-year peak of 2766, no slouch indeed! Korchnoi also gets my vote since I have been following his games for over forty years. Of course, there are others to choose from based on these criteria – Karpov, Spassky, Petrosian, Tal, Alekhine, et al, but I’d go with Korchnoi. Nice question.

**Dan Avery (USA)** writes: I have studied the collected games of several great players from Morphy to Kasparov. I considered several players, including Taimanov, Petrosian, Fischer, Karpov, Kasparov and Nunn. If I had to choose, I would study Mikhail Tal’s complete games because almost every game published (by Chess Stars or in various databases) is educational. Of course Tal’s games include his brilliant victories and his evolving style as he got older, but his losses were often even more important. Tal’s losses to Botvinnik, Korchnoi, and even Kasparov are among the most important games ever played. The third reason I choose Tal is for the wonderful analysis that is available on his games. Tal’s own writing was fantastic and there has been so much additional work done on his games by so many talented players that the depth and beauty of his games are well-documented. His games still feel fresh today. His handling of the Catalan alone presages some of the very most recent chess theory. The last reason is that he played in various tournaments and battled through many physical hardships (some of which were self-inflicted). He is one of the few world champions to play in open Swiss tournaments. His games in these tournaments are textbook examples of how to maximize the possibility for a win against all classes of players. This sort of range just doesn’t exist in the games of today’s great players or of any other player that I can think of.

(Wow, and these are only some of the wonderful replies that came in – BP).

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

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