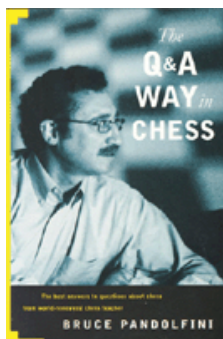




COLUMNISTS

The Q & A Way

Bruce Pandolfini



CHESSTHEATRE

Play through and download the games from [ChessCafe.com](#) in the [DGT Game Viewer](#).

[The Complete DGT Product Line](#)

Understand What You're Playing

Question I am a 1970 USCF rated player and lately I have successfully been playing many uncommon chess variations (Trompowsky, Scandinavian, Tango etc). I had a few insights regarding the pros and cons of playing such variations and wanted to get your opinion. There are several good things:

- There is less need for book-study time, as not much is covered in the books.
- They save time for other chess (middlegame/endgame study) and non-chess activities.
- Your opponents will not be as familiar with the variation and will spend more time in the opening getting into time pressure.
- There is little chance your opponent will read many books and out-memorize you (as with the KID or Sicilian).
- If you have time, you can analyze these positions at home with a computer and can really come up with strong moves, which is a great cultivation of your chess thinking process.
- These positions force you to think rather than memorize, so your general chess skills will improve.
- Openings such as the Trompowsky offer a wide variety of positions and your general chess understanding will be broader.
- Opponents sometimes play second-best moves in trying to take you out of "book," making your life easier.
- Finally, you will develop a much better "feel" for these positions and will be able to outplay your opponents even in equal or slightly worse positions, as many times he may be clueless on how to play these odd positions.

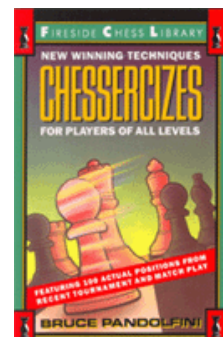
There are also a number of bad things:

- If you are a serious professional, you may lack existing book theories. For example, if you can afford to spend a lot of time and money in memorizing variations, the Sicilian will offer a lot more pre-cooked meals than say 1...e6 or 1...b6.
- Against an equally well prepared player, chances of getting an "opening advantage" may not be high.
- No matter how much you prepare at home, you will still wind up in new positions very early in the opening.
- It demands much more time in the opening and may be stressful in long tournaments. Finally, a great way to learn is to follow great players and go through their analysis, but number of annotated games in these variations is far fewer than in the main lines.

What do you think of my analysis? **Souvik Chaudhuri (USA)**

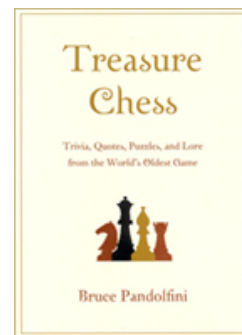
Answer If you spend as much time studying offbeat variations as you did composing your thoughts in this question, it's obvious you'd be an imposing opponent. Your analysis is very perceptive and well-thought out indeed. I would add a cautionary comment. Less trodden paths have their own obstacles to overcome. Even though they are not as likely to be familiar to your opponents, you still must understand them to play them correctly. Following your reasoning, which I essentially agree with, your opponents, once confronted with these lines, are apt to go astray perhaps more quickly than in main lines. To exploit those inaccuracies you'll want to draw upon real knowledge. If you've merely memorized the moves

Check out these bestselling titles from [USCFSales.com](#):



[Chessercizes](#)

by Bruce Pandolfini



[Treasure Chess](#)

by Bruce Pandolfini



[Pandolfini's Chess Challenges](#)

by Bruce Pandolfini

without understanding them you'll not be able to capitalize on your opponent's imprecision with confidence. Your comments indicate that you're already aware of this. It's simply a matter of putting ideas into practice. From how thoroughly you've presented your thinking, I suspect you're just as careful with implementation.

Question Is there such a thing as being over-chessed? I have been trying to solve tactical positions throughout the whole day, even during meal-times (!). However, I found that doing this actually diminished my sense of tactics, as can be measured by blunders during games. Sometimes, when I take a rest from chess, when I return to playing it, I actually find that I can see tactics better! On another note, what is a recommended time per day to spend on chess? **Gary Wu (USA)**

Answer Too much of a good thing is a bad thing, as proverbs and folk tales tell us. One can be over-chessed or over anything. I'm still trying to get over my first day at school, and that was awhile back. Generally, there is a select period of time to do whatever, and no matter how much fun obsessed devotees think it should be (don't listen to them), beyond a certain point the returns are marginal at best. The activity, if overdone, can even become counterproductive, dulling the senses and reducing the capacity for logic and joy. But I can't tell you what the optimal time for chess study should be. It's an individual issue, which must be determined by trial and personal taste. Try studying the game at different times and for various durations, keeping a record of your efforts and seeing how well ensuing performance corresponds to the amount, kind, and setting of preparation. For a shot in the arm, you'll find a little music, a bit of nature, or a moment of quiet peace is just what most chess doctors would order. I say most.

Question This question has nothing to do with chess instruction, but it continues to bother me. In a game God vs. God (or, if you will, Perfect Computer vs. Perfect Computer), would the result be a draw, or White wins? **John Leonard (USA)**

Answer Finally, a question I know something about. I have it on good authority (this guy I used to know from Washington Square Park), that the position is drawn and they wouldn't even play the game, whether god, perfect computer, or Wilhelm Steinitz. Actually, the thought is that, if Steinitz were alive, he'd play a few moves anyway, to give the opponent a chance to go wrong.

Question My question is about the tactical aspects of defense. I know some books about tactics (*Chess* by Polgar; [The Complete Chess Workout](#), Richard Palliser; [Perfect Your Chess](#), by Andrei Volokitin; *The Tactics of Endgames*, by Jeno Ban), but I would like to ask for some suggestions for tactical training from the defensive point of view. If there are no titles available, what kind of activities can I develop to improve my defensive tactics? I'm thinking it's kind of difficult to change your mind during a slow game of chess when you defend strategically most of the time and, because you're mentally tired, blunder into a tactic. But I think that, if someone is trained, he will be able to see the defense in the same way we see an attacking line, even hours after the game, because we train to attack much more. Another point is that sometimes we should switch to defense but can't help continuing the attack. Thank you for your attention and time. **Natan Estivallet (Brazil)**

Answer The books you refer to are excellent, and there are plenty of defensive tactics offered in their pages. You're right to realize that much of this has to do with mindset. That is, once we're embroiled in a particular point of view, such as trying to attack, it's not so easy to sense that the time has come for another approach. That's why during games you have to constantly analyze the position as if you're seeing it for the first time. Not on every move, naturally, but perhaps every five moves or so, certainly once material transactions have occurred and other significant features may have changed. At those moments you should step

back and see once again whether you still must continue with your earlier plans or change course. You're more likely to be able to do this adequately, to analyze the position anew, at different stages, if you stay mindful and focused on the process. A good time to ponder general questions of evaluation is often while your opponent is thinking, when such issues can be tackled more freely and the pressure of having to make a move, with your clock not running, is not as great. It's clear, however, you're aware of the problem, and that means you're well on the way to addressing it.

Question I stopped playing about twenty-five years ago, and I'm going to be seventy this June. Is it too late for me to start playing chess again with any proficiency? Can I get much better, considering my age? What about openings? I'm afraid to play the openings of my younger days, especially with computers, but those are the only lines I really understand. Should I still play the same things or make some changes? **Thomas Lasser (USA)**

Answer It's never too late to start playing chess, even at an older age. Recent studies have shown that, for instance, when an older person learns a new language and is forced to find new ways to solve problems, he or she can perform as if much younger. In effect, their brains function with much greater vitality. (I was recently tipped off to this, and thereby was led to changing my own thinking on the matter, by Josh Waitzkin, who turned me on to the book *The Brain That Changes Itself*, by Norman Doidge.) To that end, I reason that studying and playing new opening lines and variations equates nicely with the concept of learning a new language. It will help you to think with a brand new perspective and enable you to perform with much greater strength. I'm not saying that you should throw out all you've learned. But don't be afraid to add new wrinkles to get rid of some of the old ones.

Question In your book *Chess Thinking* you give a term called "reductive instruction," explaining that it is about editing down harder problems to make them simpler for students to understand. I couldn't find this term anywhere other than in your book. Is this your term or did you get it from another author? To your knowledge, does anyone else use it? Thank you for your books and columns, which are often entertaining and stimulating. **Michael Lewis (USA)**

Answer To my knowledge I was the first to use that term, which I offered in a series of lectures at the New School for Social Research in New York in 1974, not that it's particularly profound. I think a few of my colleagues then followed suit and also used it, though possibly somewhat drolly. It seemed at the time to be a colorful way to describe some forms of retrograde analysis. I simply liked the alliterative quality of it, thinking the idea would be more descriptive for students and therefore more memorable. I should add that all the students attending my New School classes were adults. I don't think I would have necessarily put it that way for younger students, though it was so long ago, and I was always a bit incorrigible, so who knows? In recent years I think some educators may have adopted it. To my knowledge, none of them had attended those 1974 classes, but I've used the term here and there for my own form of entertainment and stimulation, and I guess it caught on and spread, somewhat.

Question of the Month

The best answers will be published in the next column.

No other game could replace chess, but which comes closest?

Reader's Responses from Last Month

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

Is there a playing strength that most average adult beginners could achieve?

Among the many interesting replies were the following:

Martin Chang (Canada) writes: Your *Principles of the New Chess* was one of the first chess books I ever owned, and you and I have even very briefly stood in the same room together during the shoot of the final tournament scenes for [*Searching for Bobby Fischer*](#). (I was a student of Trinity College, Toronto.)

When I saw your question of the month, I felt a need to respond, since it is the type of question that has fascinated me my entire life. I am a medical doctor, and former researcher in the medical sciences, and count classical piano and chess (Canadian Rating: 1827) among my favorite hobbies. I have taught piano, to “average adult beginners” and have found that the plateau for progress varies significantly with motivation, demands of the day job, and other life factors. But on average, most adults discover a diminishing return on effort, and are happy with a middle ground that gives them the ability to produce an aesthetically pleasing result without exacting too much repetitive strain and technique training.

In the classical piano repertoire, representative pieces include *Für Elise* at the low end, and some of Chopin’s *Nocturnes* at the higher end. So let me try to address the Question of the Month: Is there a playing strength that most average adult beginners could achieve? Which I interpret as meaning: What is the minimum approximate ELO rating that could someone achieve, given that they are: an adult who has never learned chess beyond the basic moves, did not have any special talents for chess or related abstract problem-solving disciplines, were to devote a reasonable amount of time to learning the game with a reasonable amount of tutelage/resources. In other words, I interpret this question as asking for a “lower limit” of skills that an average person should be able to acquire within their lifetime. My gut instinct, based on tournament and club experience is Class C (1400-1599). In fact, I would go so far as to state the opinion that the later in life one starts, it becomes more and more difficult to achieve 1600 ELO, but should be possible to achieve the 1400 ELO.

How would I justify this answer? I think a truly deep answer would account for the differences in learning and development between the adult and child, and an examination of what kinds of cognitive reasoning are strongest in the average adult. But I’m not really qualified to do this; my answer is more of a feeling. To keep things brief, in chess, what types of things characterize a Class C playing strength? recognizing obvious threats, and most of the time, not hanging a full piece; having the technique to win when up a full rook; understanding classical or “static” positional strengths and weaknesses (open files for rooks, good vs. bad bishops, knight outposts, pawn structure weaknesses); being able to calculate forced moves when conducting mating attacks and material-winning combinations, including classic sacrifices (e.g. the Bxh7 “Greek gift”) – to name a few.

These are skills that can be obtained through systematic, mechanical evaluation, and do not require holding a lot of variations in the mind. These are skills that emphasize material, static, and forced considerations, as opposed to dynamic and sharp/complicating factors. This really begs the more difficult question: what is it that holds the average adult back from breaking the Class C barrier? How can one make progress in chess beyond static, mechanical, and materialistic skills? That there are more and more chess books published every year means I can’t possibly answer this in my e-mail. That adult beginners have become experts and masters I have no doubt; that they were average in any way, I am less certain. A recent *Scientific American* article (August 2006) suggested that five years of full-time work is enough to become “expert” at anything. Not many average adults can spare this much time. As with amateur musicians, the typical learner will often be very happy with an aesthetically pleasing result, without exacting repetitive strain and technical training!

Terry Jones (USA) writes: This particular question hits a little too close to home! There are many variables to consider, perhaps too many. I'm sure a person in your position has seen what can be achieved by the average adult player, so my thoughts are probably irrelevant. I would be most interested in seeing your thoughts on this in your next (or some future) column. Based on adults I have helped learn the game (and I don't consider myself an instructor by any stretch), I should think a rating of 1600 could be achieved.

At this point they are no longer beginners, they are now chess players. Somewhere between 1400 and 1600 they reached a point where "blunders" are largely avoided, and many of the basic tactical motifs have been learned. They know a few openings for white and black and are starting to look towards the endgame. I would also like to think that by this time they are more concerned with their play rather than their rating, but this appears to be a tough nut to crack. For average adults who have an above average amount of time (10-15 hr/week) to devote to the game, I should think 1800 would be a reasonable goal. It might take several more years, but at this point they are students of chess. I'd like to think they look at their course of study as a fulfilling endeavor rather than "work." At this stage they are probably amenable to 5-10 games a week on a chess server, and are following some organized hierarchy of studies. If they have access to a chess club and can play OTB, so much the better. For this group of adults access to an instructor could very well get them beyond 1800. Only one of the adults I have taught the game to has gone on to do this. The rest remain patzers like myself.

Dan Avery (USA) writes: I first thought this was a banal question, but I decided to emulate you. I will try to answer the question that was asked and then try to answer the question I wish had been asked! The obvious answer to the question of a playing strength for the average adult beginner is to find out the average tournament strength, which is about 1600 USCF. (I know, the actual average is under 1500 USCF.) So, let's say that the average adult beginner has above average desire to achieve the very best rating possible. I have coached several motivated adults (not true beginners), and while they are certainly not average, they were able to break 1800. Probably the highest rating any adult beginner could hope to achieve is about 2100 USCF.

I used to believe that Lasker was correct and that anyone could become a master. I no longer believe this because the competition is just too brutal. In order for an adult beginner to become a chess expert, that player would have to be able to devote significant time and energy to the game. This could only happen with an adult who has a means of supporting himself or herself that allows for significant time away from work. If a player is strongly motivated and has the time and ability to analyze, then I could see a true beginner making expert after about 7-10 years of hard work. Does anyone have evidence of a true adult beginner (over 21) ever breaking 2000 USCF/FIDE?

(BP – Wow! Those are three very nice answers.)

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!



[TOP OF PAGE](#)



[HOME](#)



[COLUMNS](#)



[LINKS](#)



[ARCHIVES](#)



[ABOUT THE
CHESS CAFE](#)

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

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

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

© 2008 CyberCafes, LLC. All Rights Reserved.

"**ChessCafe.com**®" is a registered trademark of Russell Enterprises, Inc.