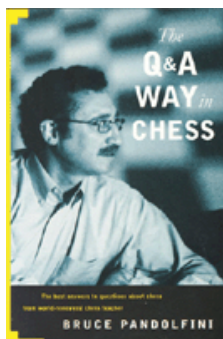




COLUMNISTS

The Q & A Way

Bruce Pandolfini



CHESSTHEATRE

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Look But You Better Not Touch

Question I am a Swedish amateur (Elo just above 2000) and I would like to hear your opinion on how blindfold play/exercises can influence your OTB play. Do you have any advice or suggestions on how to reach the goal of playing a blindfold game (without your play completely falling apart)? Here is an example of what exercises I mean:

- In your head, bring a knight from a1 to h8: what squares to move to and what color are they.
- Now do the same, but imagine a queen on e4 and you must not put the knight *en prise* or take the queen.

Do you think one can help strengthen visualization skills by such exercises? **Tomas Pettersson (Sweden)**

Answer First of all, it makes sense to distinguish between visualizing subsequent contingencies and playing without sight of the board. In typical cases, when trying to see future possibilities, you're looking at a specific position and analyzing down the line. Although it may be helpful to know how the position under consideration arose, you don't have to evoke how it became what it is to analyze it and look ahead. But it's different in blindfold play. Not only must you see ahead, you really can benefit significantly from recalling and understanding how the position materialized. Recollecting how it came about renders the position more visually concrete, which is something you don't have to worry about when looking directly at it.

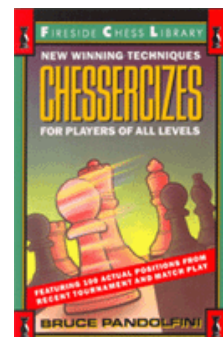
Not surprisingly, even though blindfold play defers more to memory than ordinary analysis does, the quality of your blindfold play is likely to be favorably impacted by practicing analysis without moving the pieces. As a habit, you should analyze all the time without shifting the figures around. Naturally, you can't move the pieces for confirmation while actually playing chess, and you shouldn't move them about when analyzing during study either. A good way to ensure not falling back on moving the pieces is to not even set up the positions under inspection. To get your analytic training, just work from diagrams. And if at first you have to move pieces or work from a keyboard to get to the position to be analyzed, once you get there, sit on your hands or mime a tree.

Some people contend that you can't get meaningfully better at blindfold play by merely exercising, that to begin with you must have the ability. Others argue that though obviously it helps to have superior visualization skills up front, you can still improve, whatever your native talents, by logical preparation. I don't have a precise method to guarantee getting better at blindfold play, but here's a formula, if you will, that some teachers have advocated and from which a good number of students have gained.

For working examples, start with a solid collection of classic games, primarily in the 20-30 move category. Classic games are recommended because, even if the process doesn't tangibly expand your blindfold skill, at least you'll be touching upon ideas that have pragmatic value to your overall development as a chess player.

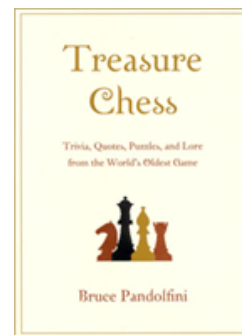
Beginning with the first move of the game, try applying the following

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four step approach to each half move in sequence, doing the same things in turn for White's move and for Black's. That is, make sure to (1) say it; (2) visualize it; (3) associate it; and (4) explain it, whether you take the steps in that particular order or not. Finally, to reinforce what you've done, you should review the entire game and process from move one to the present move.

Saying it clearly (and loudly if you can), in algebraic notation, gives you a distinct audio memory peg. Visualizing it, actually trying to imagine it being played, seeing the piece or pawn going from its starting square to its destination square, supplies a visual reminder. Associating it to important occurrences and places on the board, such as recognizing key connective squares, taking note of promising possibilities and worrisome dangers that have opened up or been made implausible or impossible, keeps you in the connective field of relations, and that provides conceptual links to make the move more indelible.

However, it is the fourth step that creates the connective tissue to trigger the flow of the game in proper sequence. True, since it's not likely you'll be certain of all the reasons strong players essay a specific move, you'll have to fall back on your own thinking to draw out elucidation. You thereby may wind up explaining some moves unsatisfactorily or incorrectly. But that's okay, since the personal touch will simply render it more memorable, no matter its rightness. Besides, as the game goes on, and more detail is revealed, you can correct earlier impressions to refine the narrative and strengthen the game's overall retention.

In effect, you are creating a storyline that links all the moves of the game. That narrative ties it all together, and employing those first four steps as a methodical approach affords a reliable way to help you remember the position at hand, and, consequently, to play blindfold chess. The fifth step, reviewing the entire game from move to move, puts the caper on the whole thing. It is to be likened to a measure taken before entering upon a lengthy but tricky line you've analyzed during a real game. Before playing such a move, and beginning a tricky sequence, entailing a good deal of uncertainty, you should ask yourself: Is there any thing I may have missed, such as a check, capture, or threat, that would compel me to abandon my expected sequence and undermines my idea?

You should indeed feel one can strengthen his or her visual skills, as well as ability to play blindfolded. Some strong players would like the rest of the world to think that they just do it by sheer, innate skill. They want you to assume that they don't have to fall back on artificial techniques to see ahead and to play without sight of the board. You don't have to believe them. Oh, the techniques they utilize may be far more advanced than those described here. In real life they might go unarticulated. Perhaps they've become ingrained over time intuitively. Maybe they're now implemented subconsciously. But they're there. Otherwise, what the elitists say would be true. It's not, is it?

Question I have often seen it claimed that 1.e4 is easier to understand than 1.d4. Personally, I prefer moving the d-pawn first, as I feel I understand those openings much better. I also find that 1.e4 leads to duller positions. Do you think that king-pawn openings are easier to understand? Considering that I've read very few chess books, other than the most basic ones, is it all right for me to continue playing 1.d4? For me, it feels right. **Josie Weingarten (Australia)**

Answer King-pawn openings are often portrayed as being easier to grasp. This is terribly superficial, and at the level of serious chess-play, downright wrong. New players typically feel that king-pawn games are less difficult and they get to see them far more often in their own contests. Teachers encourage this usage, pointing out how such beginnings stress development, the center, and castling, while underscoring clear and basic principles.

But what are they really talking about here? Usually, when they say king-pawn openings, they mean double king-pawn openings. Frankly, I don't know that it really is any easier or better for newcomers to play so that the four knights are developed indiscriminately, misunderstood Italian Games redound, the term "Fried Liver Attack" is bandied about without any real meaning, and the Ruy Lopez routinely hangs either side's king-pawn. Perhaps teachers factor into the mix that, in analyzing their student's play, they prefer not to look at a barrage of games beginning 1.d4 d5 2.Nc3 Nc6, without any rational follow-up in the offing.

I suggest that this is not a reliable basis to judge the respective fine points, and degree of difficulty, between king-pawn and queen-pawn openings. Yet all of it is understandable. One has to start somewhere, and the traditional examples illustrating intelligent play in simple double king-pawn openings assumes less on the student's part than does playing queen-pawn openings with any kind of compelling logic. After issuing the proper warnings, some teachers prefer allowing their students to enter upon lines that are more demanding but can be understood with insightful explanation, derived from that great instructional textbook in the sky. In some instances, this puts the teacher and student nearly on the same page. So there's nothing wrong if you read ahead and go with what feels right – at first.

Question What is the real difference between a C-player, an A-player, a master, and a grandmaster? What can the average player do to jump to the next level or even two levels? **Cliff Batezel (USA)**

Answer You have to be careful when using these terms. A USCF C-player is one with a USCF rating somewhere between 1400 and 1599. A USCF A-player is one with a USCF rating between 1800-1999. Objectively, these classifications can't necessarily be relied on. Is the rating based on a few games or many games? Are you comparing a C-player rated exactly 1400 with an A-player rated 1999, or a C-player rated 1599 with an A-player rated 1800?

The same kinds of thinking can be applied to the master and grandmaster classes, if we think in terms of numerical ratings. If we're trying to compare abstract classes based on conceptualized differences, however, that's something else altogether. First of all, such class definitions don't exist, so it becomes a matter of opinion what's implied by being a member of a particular class. Such a discussion could easily fill a book, and various writers have undeniably attempted to analyze apparent differences. The Euwe and Meiden books from the past come to mind. Authors such as Heisman and De La Maza and others have gotten into related matters, and they've done nice jobs of it. Still, it's hard to say for certain what a so-called C-player (or players from any of the other classes) should know or be able to do for sure. If we could, it would make teaching less fun but much smoother.

Question Why are draws scored ½-½ and not 0-0? **Bill Bolin (USA)**

Answer In seeing your suggestion I wasn't sure if you were recommending a new scoring system or merely thought that those who draw should castle kingside. Whichever you meant, one full point is awarded for each chess game. That is how it's usually done. What the winners and losers get, taken together, must add up to one point. It doesn't have to be that way, but that's the way it is by convention. Other contests award scores differently, not just based on winning but on how well or by how much one wins. Those games are not zero sum games. Chess is treated as a zero sum game, where the winner's take balances the loser's loss. When one wins, he or she gets a point and the loser gets nothing. If a point is to be awarded for a draw, each player must get half a point. Add up the two halves and you have a full point. Taking your suggestion, the drawing players, both of whom have done "better," so to speak, than one who's lost, would get nothing. That doesn't seem quite fair. On the other hand, what's fair?

Question I love speed chess, but there are many kinds of speed chess. I often play 1, 2 and 3 minute chess without increments. I like 1 minute chess the best. Other players like 5 minute chess, or 7 minute chess, or even 15 minute chess. What do you think is the best form of speed chess?
Larry Gargano (USA)

Answer What do you mean the best form of speed chess? Are you interested in producing a reasonable game? Are you thinking about increasing the chance of having a seizure? One and two minute games tend to be ridiculous, unless you're trying to steal someone's money. Fifteen minute games are more like offhand games. I would hardly call them speed games, and just talking about them puts me to sleep. Even seven minute games are not quite speed games in the traditional sense. It seems to me that most good players prefer three minute and five minute games, based on the choices you've offered in your question. Anyway, what are we fussing about? People typically play speed chess not for practical reasons but for fun. So if you enjoy one minute chess, don't let me stop you. But tell me who you're playing and maybe I can stop them.

Question of the Month

The best answers will be published in the next column.

How would you go about teaching the endgame to beginners?

Reader's Responses from Last Month

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

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

Among the many interesting replies were the following:

John Henry (Canada) writes: Since I coach and teach chess, I find backgammon closely resembles chess. Lots of tactics and strategy in backgammon, too. Although the roll of dice brings some chance, overall it is how you play the numbers that you have learned through mathematical thinking just like in chess using logical thought that makes you better. Backgammon is older than chess, played everywhere and a great compliment to chess; in fact, good chess players can play backgammon well.

Bert Mayo (USA) writes: Some days I feel like chess is the greatest game in the world, but some days I prefer Go. Here are some comparisons: Chess is massed armies on a battlefield – Go is guerilla warfare all around the country. Chess is aristocracy – Go is democracy. Chess is fruitcake – Go is flan. Chess is like programming in C – Go is like programming in Lisp. Chess is like going to law school – Go is like grad school in mathematics. Chess is algebra – Go is topology. Chess is talkative children – Go is sedate elders. Chess is Winter and a warm fire – Go is Springtime and cherry blossoms. Both teach pattern recognition. Both parse fairly nicely into opening, middlegame and endgame.

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 your full name and country of residence please) and perhaps Bruce will reply in his next [ChessCafe.com](#) column...

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