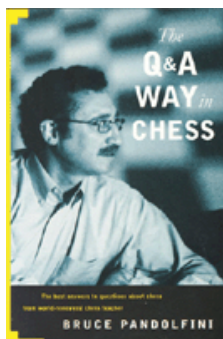




COLUMNISTS

The Q & A Way

Bruce Pandolfini



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Go with the Flow

Question I am a 2000-rated FIDE player and I study all phases of the game (the opening, the middlegame (tactics and strategy), and the endgame) up to three to five hours per day. For example, one or two hours on opening study, one hour on the endgame, and one or two hours on strategy, with some tactical problem-solving. Is this an effective plan of study, or are there better ways to study chess for a player like me? Thank you for your great columns and books. **Alireza Bahari Rad (Iran)**

Answer As with so many questions like this, I'm afraid I have to give you a qualified answer. The information you've provided, while stated clearly and with sincerity, doesn't tell me enough about you. And even if more information were offered, I'd still be reluctant to answer with formulaic guidelines and prescriptions.

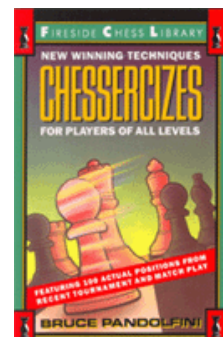
What kinds of things would I like to know? I'd like to know how old you are, how many years you've been playing chess seriously, how often you play in tournaments, the typical strength of your opposition, and the history behind your rating evaluation, including how long you've been at your present level, how quickly you've gotten there, and what problems seem to be preventing you from moving forward, if indeed there are any. And I'd want to test you, too, to see how well you absorb your present regimen. Some of this can be perceived directly enough, and some of it can't. After all, you're an individual, a complex of nuance and subtlety that can't be encapsulated without loss of something essential. I wouldn't want to treat a real flesh-and-bones person as I would an artificially sketched stick figure. On the other hand, it wouldn't be fair to expect an e-mailer to list all the things relevant to a deeper assessment. Nor would it be fair to the readership, many of whom make a further sacrifice by reading my answers.

So I'm going to suggest something radical, that you follow through on a kind of self-analysis, aided by software, though not determined exclusively by specific numbers and data, but based on something rather intangible: how you feel. If you like the way things are going, why change? Keep doing what you're doing, enjoying the process for what it is, time well-spent with your good friend, the all-encompassing, totally fulfilling game of chess. If what you're doing makes you unhappy, however, if it doesn't seem gratifying, if each session leaves you with lingering doubt and gnawing dissatisfaction, start doing things differently. Maybe you're putting too much time into study, maybe not. Perhaps you should be playing more and studying less, or maybe you should take some time off now and then, so you can renew your efforts with inspiring vigor.

Or maybe your study time should correlate more to the specific problems generated by your actual play. Chess is an art, but it's also a pragmatic challenge, where good training very definitely leads to better results. Begin each day in abstraction, engrossed in generalities, and you might not zero in on the area of greatest need. But springboard from your own examples and everything you do becomes more immediate and practical. I recommend, to reiterate, that you play as much as you can, and when it comes to study, spend more time on analyzing your own games and less on worrying about whether you're doing the right thing.

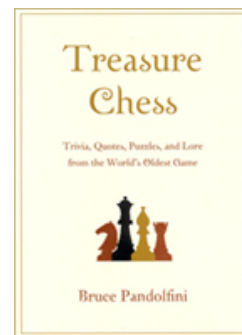
Question I usually enjoy playing the French Defense, but am sometimes frustrated by the Exchange Variation (3.e4xd5). It seems to lead to

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boring, symmetrical games without the imbalances and tension I enjoy in other lines. And I don't like to play for draws! Do you have any suggestions for creating an interesting game from black's perspective in this variation? **Bal Abanis (USA)**

Answer If you're going to play the French, it's very hard to avoid the Exchange Variation, not that it's so bad for Black, compared to some of the more aggressive lines White has at his disposal. Still, it's a way for White to get a small but definite edge. When I was a kid I recall how, in the last round of the New York City Junior Championship, Andy Soltis with white played the Exchange Variation of the French and wound up beating Walter Browne to become champion. Many of us were surprised how much play Soltis got from a system then deemed to be drawish. (I then tried it against an expert and got crushed, but that's only because I didn't know what I was doing.)

If you're going to play the French, and I know some people who still do, though they play online and don't have to admit it, you may have to take some chances. If you want to infuse life into your game, after you've been hit with the Exchange Variation, you could play for an early c7-c5. That will undoubtedly lead to the isolation of your d-pawn, but if you handle development around the isolani sufficiently assertively, you might get enough activity to compensate for the potential problem. Control useful territory, or push the pawn in a timely way, and you might turn a weakness into a strength.

Question If I am a beginner, who knows the basic concepts and only has one to two hours per week for chess, and want to improve, what is the best approach? Books, online play, ChessMaster 10th Edition, join a chess club? Should I concentrate on openings and the middlegame first? When is the right time to enter a tournament? **Richard Pilon (Canada)**

Answer The best thing you can do is to play regularly against the most challenging opposition you can find, trying to glean one or two points from each game you lose. Usually, we learn little from the games we win, since our minds tend to shut down somewhere along the road to victory. We see the win, not that it may have been unmerited.

A good basic book of lessons might do, such as Capablanca's *Chess Fundamentals* or Lasker's *Common Sense in Chess*, but I would also try to solve a few tactical problems every day from a book with diagramed puzzles. It's better not to set the positions up on a board, which offsets the tendency to move the pieces around while analyzing. To play chess well, you'll want to learn how to do more in your mind, which is not likely to happen without proper training. As far as how you partition your efforts, go with your impulses at the time, playing, reading a few pages here and there from a basic book, or solving puzzles. Whatever you do, however, make sure to give it your all while doing it. If you've worked really hard, you can collapse afterward, once the hour or two is exhausted, knowing you've gotten your money's worth.

Question I am more or less a beginner. I have bought a record number of chess books that I cannot really read, hundreds of them. They collect dust on my shelf. In fact, I do not think I have read any of them all the way through. One argument I always see is that it is better to study the endgame first because it is simpler and more basic to do so. If you understand the endgame you understand the goal of a chess game. Yet I think most chess games are about checkmate. Endgame books are mainly about moving lots of pawns. I thought most checkmates have to do with tactical exercises, and pawns are not always the most important pieces in those exercises. From what I have picked up it seems that tactics are more important in the opening and middlegame, not so much in the endgame. My question is, which I debated sending, since many endgame books begin with the basic mates, what is a basic mate? And do you have any advice on buying books? **Van Plasse (USA)**

Answer Practically every book that offers a section on the basic mates probably explains what they are (I'm just guessing). You might even discover this for yourself if you deign to read one of your shelved books. Nonetheless, since you have opted to email your query, the basic mates are those that illustrate the powers of the pieces, in their purest form, against a lone enemy king.

There are only four true basic mates. They are

- king and queen vs. king
- king and rook vs. king
- king and two bishops vs. king
- king, bishop and knight vs. king.

All four of these mates can be brought about by force, which is why most experienced defenders resign upon encountering them in their own games. I'm not suggesting that do that, giving up without a fight. You shouldn't resign anything at first until you find out how to win from the same situations. You can start with learning how to play the basic mates, especially those for the king and queen and the king and rook, since without that knowledge you may not be able to win many games at all, even if they go far enough. Instead you'll find yourself stalemating or checking endlessly, as many people these days endlessly check their email to see who's trying to sell them something.

Finally, my advice on buying books is to stop buying them. It sounds as if you have enough books and you're not going to break the record anyway – trust me.

Question I was sorry to hear of the demise of the Manhattan Chess Club a few years back. Now there are only a few great chess clubs left, such as the Marshall Chess Club in New York and the Mechanics Institute in San Francisco. I can remember when I was a kid being taken to the Manhattan by my father (we were visiting from Texas) and seeing the likes of Al Horowitz and other luminaries sitting around in a very conducive atmosphere for chess. Over the years, chess clubs have become fewer and fewer. What do you think are the reasons for that? Is it the big open tournaments, the rents, the Internet, etc. Thank you for your answer and for all your wonderful columns. **Thomas Gruening (USA)**

Answer You've already said it: it's all of the above and more. At one time play in chess clubs dominated the American scene. When I was first coming up there must have been twenty or more real functioning chess clubs in the greater metropolitan New York area. The Metropolitan League was a thriving vehicle, and people looked forward to defending their club in head-to-head matches every year. Fischer won a famous game against Saidy in one glorious Marshall-Manhattan confrontation. I recall another year where twenty-five players for each club squared off to contest top spots in different sections, such as the best junior, best senior, and so on. Now it's down to the Marshall Chess Club, and I don't think there's another New York club remaining of any substance. The Marshall is a truly great club, as is the Mechanics Institute, and we're fortunate to still have them. I'm not sure what keeps the Mechanics floating, but the Marshall gets by, not on its dues, which sadly don't cover minimum expenses, but because the club was endowed with its own brownstone building. Yet even with owning the building the club can barely meet upkeep. The Internet is a fantastic place, and it's become the present and future of chess. As good as it is, though, it may never quite satisfy the hopes of chess players to see the likes of Capablanca, Reshevsky and Fischer up close and in person. We can't have everything.

Question of the Month

The best answers will be published in the next column.

When will Magnus Carlsen become world chess champion?

Reader's Responses from Last Month

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

How would you go about teaching the endgame to beginners?

Among the many interesting replies were the following:

Joseph Bloch (USA) writes: I wouldn't bother teaching the endgame to beginners. Everyone recommends studying the endgame, but I think the endgame can be learned by playing and through experience. I think beginners should learn how to get off to a good start, and they can do that by beginning with opening principles and memorizing useful (not stupid) beginner's traps.

John Henry (Canada) writes: I teach the endgame to beginners by using the elementary mates: queen vs. king; rook vs. king; two rooks vs. king; and two bishops vs. king. They love it. I then graduate slowly to king and pawn vs. king taking in opposition if they're ready. Then I find they are ready for endgame studies. The endgame being often neglected, I spend more time on this than the various intricacies of the openings. It works. Many of my students have won Gold! Again, thank you for your books – they are a great help, especially your [endgame book](#), which I teach from.

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!](#)

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