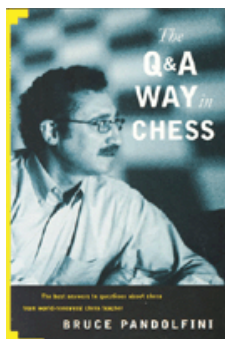




COLUMNISTS

The Q & A Way

Bruce Pandolfini



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Point for Point

Question I have been playing chess for the past year and find it a wonderful and stimulating pastime. My job has me traveling around the country throughout the year and I get to visit chess clubs from one coast to the other. In those travels I have several times gotten into arguments over how I describe the values of pieces. One recent heated disagreement came up after playing a game and talking about it afterward with an acquaintance. I said I had been ahead by three points and I was winning (I lost by checkmate on the next move). My acquaintance, a decent player, didn't know what I meant by saying that I was three points ahead, and so we reconstructed the position. He felt I hadn't been winning, even though ahead because of my opponent's attack, I had a rook and pawn (28 points overall) to his knight (25 points overall). I felt that if I had prevented the checkmate, my three extra points should win the game. Is there something wrong with my assessment? Finally, do you have any final advice? **Max Schuster (USA)**

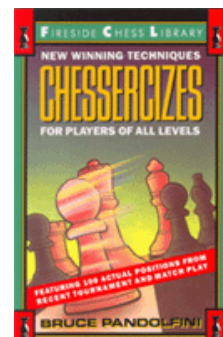
Answer I'm not going to question the part of your assessment having to do with 28 minus 25: it does equal 3. But you may be reasoning under the spell of certain misconceptions: that otherwise you were being accurate, meaningful, and efficient. What's more, you mightn't have taken into account that while you had superior force your opponent may have had his own plusses, such as the initiative and greater attacking chances, which outweighed the material. Among various considerations, it's also possible that you were winning and blundered, but let's focus on how you deciphered your material advantage and then expressed it.

Putting aside the particular position in dispute, to say you're ahead by three points doesn't convey as much useful information as you might think. Does that mean that you're ahead by three pawns? Does it signify having an extra knight or bishop? Does it imply that you have a rook and pawn for a minor piece? Or does it mean something else, that through some other of the many possible combinations of comparative force you have an advantage on your opponent of approximately three points? While every one of these across-the-board cases may equate to a difference of three, each instance might require a distinctive strategic approach to realize. And this says nothing of the particular circumstances impacting given situations. They almost always take precedence over general conditions. Hang mate and it doesn't matter who was ahead.

Then there's the idea of saying "points," a term most of chess players employ when first encountering the game and its precepts. As players become more experienced they begin to understand that the basic unit of evaluation is the pawn. From there they go on to grasp that the relative values of the pieces, obviously subject to circumstance, are expressed better in the currency of pawns, not points. It's clear, of course, what you were trying to indicate, that you had a significant material superiority. It's further evident that being ahead by "three points" typically connotes decisive advantage, even if formulated without discrimination. But so much more worthwhile information can be imparted by being specific.

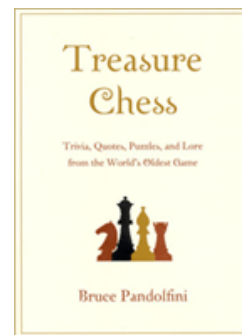
Note also that much of chess thinking has to do with comparison and contrast. This is so when trying to find alternative moves and options. It's also true when making determinations, such as which side is materially ahead, perhaps the most basic of all analytic operations. Yet adding up the total point values of all the material of both players and subtracting the

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difference is unnecessary and inefficient. It constrains one to resort to using the artificially restrictive notion of points. It also places too much emphasis on aggregation rather than on comparison and elimination. We gain more from knowing what's particularly different or special and almost nothing from sizing up the amorphous totality of everything that exists (28 to 25? Ugh).

If attempting to compute whose ahead there's no need to maintain a running total of what you and your opponent have. Rather, all you have to do is start somewhere, proceed in a purposeful direction, and keep a tab of noteworthy difference and diversity. However you do it, keep a mental log of accounts through the entire process, in the end indicating what each player has that the other doesn't (if anything). Most of these calculations are begun by starting with pawns, then moving in order to knights and bishops, rooks, and queens. Some players go in the other direction, from the most valuable to the least, queens to pawns, though this way is less common.

Whichever way players go, when it comes to counting and comparing pawns, occasionally they use a shortcut, observing how many missing pawns there are and subtracting that number from the original eight. Furthermore, because pawns are more plentiful and expected to factor into transactions more often, it's natural to reason that if there's any difference at all, chances are it's in the realm of pawns. It's also easier to lose track of pawn imbalances, whereas most players are fairly aware when they've lost a queen or rook. In those cases, there's less need to reckon what they already pretty much know, though this isn't automatic.

I am reminded of an instance many years ago, when I came upon two friends, both of whom were very strong players (2300+), analyzing a ridiculous position, where one of the players was down a queen with absolutely no compensation. As he deliberately, seriously, and silently extended the analysis of this hopeless game, with the other player just as engrossed, it occurred to me that both of them were quite drunk. After five minutes or so of letting the folly go on without commenting, I couldn't help but point out to the losing side (let's call him Sam), the futility of the situation. "Sam, why are you playing out this position? You're a queen down." Apparently surprised by this revelation, in complete astonishment he replied, "Oh, am I?"

The truth is the type of calculation we've been talking about here applies more to coming upon a position for the first time, as when you're trying to solve a puzzle. In the inebriated case above, I had to make such a calculation since I knew nothing about the position and had to start somewhere. Then I was able to consider more subtle matters and see what I thought the overall situation was. They were drunk. Otherwise, the two strong players above, already involved in their game, should have known where they stood on such a basic and essential issue, if not for the effects of too much alcohol. So here's my final advice. While playing, stay very focused on your own game. That means you should already "know the score," so to speak, because it's such a fundamental part of strategy. You can't know where to go if you don't know where you stand.

Question I have read that the most important principle in endings of queen vs. queen is the center. I think it was in a book by Averbakh, [*Chess Endings: Essential Knowledge*](#) that I came upon the idea, though I have seen it elsewhere too. I understand the center is always important, so you can take the initiative and develop faster. However, could you tell me why the center is so important in queen endings? The endgame is not like the opening. Development and occupation of the center do not seem to be as important. To my way of thinking, those principles should not be that critical once you arrive at an endgame. Should I follow principles and play for the center in queen endings? And how much should I use principles to play these endgames? **Joseph D'amico (USA)**

Answer First of all, be careful about relying excessively on principles,

especially in queen endings, which are fraught with tactical pitfalls. Let your guard down and superior positions can quickly fall victim to perpetual check. Worse, push too hard, and don't be surprised if you stumble into a sudden mate. But having issued those admonitions, I don't mean to imply that guiding precepts have no value, even in treacherous queen endings. Rules of thumb and general advice can be very useful. They can get you moving in the right direction and help you get off to a good start. Nevertheless, you're still going to have to be concrete and analyze what's really going on.

The center should never be neglected, opening, middlegame, or endgame. Even in the endgame one should endeavor to centralize the pieces, including the king. By creating this centralized base you ready your forces to attack and defend in all directions. In queen endings, it's not so much that you should be playing for the center. Rather it's that once you've securely stationed your queen on a central or near-central square you tend to reduce the capabilities of the opposing queen. In this less risky atmosphere, your king and pawns are harder to threaten and therefore safer.

As indicated, a central queen placement also augments attacking opportunities. Indeed, from the center, the queen can simultaneously assail both wings. This enables the queen to more adequately support the advance of dangerous passed pawns. And with a winning simplification in view, a centered queen is poised to give a useful threat or check, achieving a desired setup without loss of time. Thus, from the center, it's relatively painless to reposition and gain control of an aspiring promotion square. It's also easier to put an end to opposing threats to your king, blocking a check with a crosscheck and thereby trading off the enemy queen. In queen endings, the center might not be chess heaven, but it must be somewhere in the neighborhood.

Question I became involved with chess when my son, then in first grade, took up the game. As he heads back to college, I'm left with a puzzle on what it takes to sustain a scholastic club. Our club had its ups, when we had over forty kids coming weekly, but now it's mainly downs. We have no shortage of kids below ten who join, but very few stay through high school. We've had state champions who felt their time commitment to maintain their standing was too high, and quit the game altogether. We've had cases when one of the older kids quits, and a couple of old timers stop attending too for lack of company; similarly for girls, especially when they cross middle school. We've had in-club tournaments, tournaments open to the public, bus trips to tournaments, parties and annual dinners and award nights, but we're always fighting a battle against the more mainstream sports and scholastic commitments, or simply chess malaise. What are your suggestions for sustaining a healthy scholastic club with sufficient players at all levels? **E.G. Seshadri (USA)**

Answer Your sincere and well-composed concerns are very understandable. Scholastic clubs and programs have always had to deal with declining attendance over time. Participation through the early years of school can be really good, right up to the sixth grade, but thereafter turnout can fall off greatly. Various factors explain this downfall in involvement. Parents don't seem to push older kids as much. Suddenly there are new diversions to lure young people away. Popular members or social magnets drop out, or do other things, and they pull friends and tagalongs with them. School gets harder, too. More effort must be invested in homework and study, and that siphons time from chess-play and related activities.

Then there's chess itself. Up to a point one can get by without focused endeavor and with less exertion. Natural talent and aggressiveness can take you so far. But there comes a time, perhaps in the later middle school years or around then, that to make any real progress one has to work with ever-increasing diligence. Most youngsters don't want to go from the free-for-all frolicking and freedom of the speed and bughouse lunchroom

tables to the emotionally deadly and serious arena of gladiatorial chess competition. Funny thing is, the ones who are willing to commit to greater involvement aren't necessarily working at all. They stay with chess because they love it and all those attributes about challenge and competition that some find discouraging.

It seems you're well aware how vital it is to instill passion and respect for chess. It's clear you also appreciate how to fashion an appealing club. Encouraging tournament play, arranging dinners, parties, and other social functions, and providing a supportively receptive environment are at the hub of a successful scholastic program. Any suggestions I could make you've probably already pondered. But at the risk of saying what you've possibly already thought, here are a few ideas adopted by other chess organizers.

Where feasible, try to integrate more of the latest technology. Providing exciting chess software is worth considering, and so is furnishing convenient access to Internet chess sites. You could promote top students into teaching assistants. Keeping pivotal students active could act as an antidote against the dropout rate. Establishing sub-clubs in libraries, churches, synagogues, local cafes, and various emporia could prove of value. You might even persuade strong adult players to take part. Perhaps they could contribute lectures, analyze games, give exhibitions, and offer special attention to smaller groups of more motivated or deserving club members. And surely, there are many other nuggets of lure you might be able to furnish. But I must admit, even with an aware coordinator such as you seem to be, there are no panaceas. Good luck. If any of our readers send in useful suggestions, I will make certain to pass them on.

Question I am a 1500 player, who has been rated as high as 1600. In trying to analyze during a game, I find I can't look as far ahead as I probably should. Sometimes I practically fall asleep while analyzing. This has held me back. When I try to find answers to how far ahead I should look, from people who should know more than I do, I get unclear answers. I think it was Fine or Capablanca who said he looks ahead just one move, "the best one." This is stupefying and also puts me to sleep. I realize that Fine or Capablanca were joking, as I am a little bit, but since some positions are easy to calculate, and others are much harder, I wonder if there is some truth to it. Are there a minimum number of moves, in most positions, not all of course, that one should try to look ahead into the future? Thank you for your column and for answering questions like this one. I'm only looking for a simple answer. **Marshall Compton (USA)**

Answer No, if you're looking for a simple answer. However, staying on the same simple track, as a rule of thumb you should attempt to see at least three half moves ahead. After coming up with the move you'd like to play, you should fathom how you expect your opponent will respond, and then how you'd like to follow up in reply to that. To repeat: your move, your opponent's move, and your move again. Applying this formula will not ensure getting you to 1600. But it satisfies the need for a simple answer, so I'm going to leave it at that. More could be said, even by me, but I'm getting tired, it's almost time for dinner, there's still one more question to answer, and miles to go before I sleep.

Question Chess players are always talking and writing about what they think are the best chess books. Whenever they do this they almost always mention important instructional works. Nimzovitch's *My System*, Alekhine's *Best Games of Chess*, and the wonderful beginner's book *Chess Fundamentals* by Capablanca come to mind. They almost never refer to those books that are purely a pleasure to read, without reference to their educational value. I just recently read Capablanca's *Last Lectures* and thought it was wonderful. Do you have a favorite book you enjoyed reading, and not so much because of its instructional value? Thanks for your response, and here's to great chess literature: Kasparov, Chernev, Dvoretsky, etc. **Dr. David Heinrich (Hong Kong)**

Answer As with most chess enthusiasts, there are myriad chess books I've thoroughly enjoyed. Much depends on when a book is read. It could appear greater than it is, or less so, if your mind is disposed or indifferent. Knowledge and circumstances also play parts. You may know too much or too little to take in what a book has to offer at the time you read it. You're not the right audience if you read it at the wrong time.

So if I had to choose a favorite, I couldn't. But one that might have been my favorite, if such a thing existed, is Fred Reinfeld's *The Human Side of Chess*, which I believe has since been published under another title (or two). It's not an instructional book. It's more of a chronicle of the great players up to the 1950s. What makes the book so special is the language of Reinfeld's driving account. He imbues his cast of characters, and their tales, with vibrant and compelling immediacy. The reader is transported to places and moments that are turning points in the mythology of chess. In the experience, following the surge and sweep of chess storyline, you are brought into the fold, penetrating the game's veil of mystery and joining with your fellow players in their spirited quest. Chess receives its proper due, and so do you. I wish I could read *The Human Side of Chess* for the first time again, as I did many years ago. For some of us, it may not be too late.

Question of the Month

The best answers will be published in the next column.

Which chess book was the most enjoyable you ever read?

Reader's Responses from Last Month

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

When will Magnus Carlsen become world chess champion?

Among the many interesting replies were the following:

Mike Chatterley (Canada) writes: Never.

Dani Guillermo (USA) writes: If FIDE has anything to do with it, I'm sure the World Championship Cycle will be screwed up again and it will be twenty years before Magnus Carlsen has a chance at a title. By that time he will have become frustrated with chess and be challenging Josh for the world championships of Tai Chi Chuan.

Garth Williams (Australia) writes: I don't agree with this question. It implies that Magnus Carlsen is an obvious choice to be the next world champion, and it leaves out all the other obvious choices. The question shows you have a bias on this issue. One might almost think you were trying to be clever or cute.

(BP – One might.)

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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