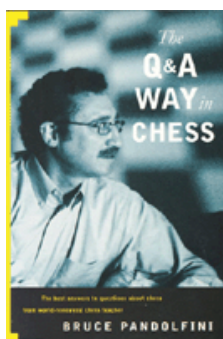




COLUMNISTS

The Q & A Way

Bruce Pandolfini



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Beware of Regimens

Question After five to ten years of practice, chess players usually reach a plateau. This supposes the chess player has over this long period of time: participated in a number of chess tournaments, played in over 100 classical games (40 moves in 2 hours, 20 moves per hour, etc); gone through classic books on openings, tactics, middlegames, and endings; analyzed his own games, as well as having gone through classic games (World Chess Champions, current top GM games, etc.); and played many blitz games in a chess club or on the Internet. Let's assume, for sake of argument, that all this brings the player to a level of a seasoned club player, corresponding to a USCF 2150 player (FIDE 2100). How do you suggest improving your own level of play (obviously not as strong as the FM/IM level), without repeating the basic stuff? How do you separate what you already know (rook endings, typical tactics, such as pins, skewers, and double attacks) from what you should learn to make progress? What should you pay attention to when you replay grandmasters games? **Frank Fortune (USA)**

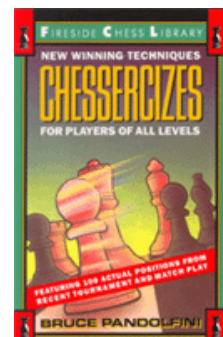
Answer Chess players don't have to wait five or ten years before reaching a plateau. It can happen much sooner than that, and typically does. Nor need there be just one plateau. Periods of stasis occur all the time. They can last a few weeks or go on for years. All along the way are potential obstacles halting improvement, putting our playing ability in a virtual freeze. Regressions are even possible, where our method of addressing troublesome stages can retard progress, if not detract from overall skill. Clearly, how we cope with such troubling circumstances plays a role in shortening those episodes. It also is a key determinant in how far we can ultimately go.

Moreover, there's no single path that guarantees advance. Some players achieve success naturally, absorbing ideas in the context of regular play, with aptitude developing over time, without specific effort. Others do it by dint of hard work, studying this and that, until all major areas are reviewed systematically and everything seems to fall into place. Still others, taking definite steps or not, never get beyond a point. Either they accept who they are or give up altogether.

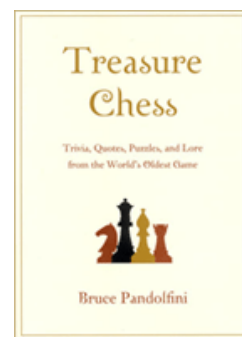
I'm going to take slight issue with another one of your implications, which is that it's wasteful to study things you've already gone over. Indeed, constant review of the same or similar techniques and concepts, viewed for a variety of situations, reinforces what you know. And it gives you a range of conditions under which you can adapt that knowledge to efficient use. This modus operandi is a chief weapon in the chess player's arsenal. That is, players are always looking for analogies. You can't employ analogous reasoning so effectively, however, if you haven't a proficient grasp of what you've already experienced. The way you acquire such facility is by constant reconsideration and repeated immersion. To that end, the argument that learning some things well, rather than lots of things on the surface, may have greater impact here. I'm not suggesting that tangential treatment of many different notions doesn't have value, too. But if you don't constantly review your past experiences, you're bound to make the same mistakes, fall into the same snares, miss the same shots, and form the wrong plans, again and again.

So, even though you've laid out your question hypothetically, I'm going to take exception with the nature of your basic premise anyway. It implies

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that one has to do certain things in order to succeed (play at least one hundred serious tournament and match games, study particular tactics and strategies, examine the games of great players, and so on). Yet, there's no accepted evidence whatsoever that one has to follow a definite regimen of any kind before attaining specific playing levels. To be sure, such an approach is antithetical to the idea that each of us is an individual. Put simply, an activity is more rewarding if we're able to pursue it along a unique pathway, to the Thoreau inspired beat of our own drummer.

Here's my advice for those who are decent players but seem to have been stymied in their recent attempts at progress. Begin by playing a bunch of serious games at respectable time controls. Take those games and have them assessed by a competent observer. Have the analyst spell out what he or she thinks you need to work on in order to move ahead. It probably won't be right on the money – it almost never is – but it's a place to start. Acquire, borrow, or tap into the recommended materials. Start using them on a regular basis, and in accordance with the laid out program. Play lots of serious games, all of which should then be analyzed by you first, then by a strong player who cares that you exist. The strong player could be named Fritz, even though Fritz is likely to be indifferent. Modify your original program as it reflects your recent experience. Over time this constant testing of challenging opposition, intense review, from within and without, should direct you to relevant areas worthy of attention. It's typically the best way to break the stalemate in your progress and move you along. It's tough to say what may be the best thing to study to push improvement along. But probably it should be pertinent to your needs, rather than satisfying some abstract ideal. If you want to get more out of you, study you.

Question I am planning to join a tournament with time controls of two hours per side for the entire game. I was wondering what you would advise for time allocation per move and other aspects like nutrition. What food to eat before, during and after so that alertness is maintained throughout the game and one can perform to his best? If this question has been asked before, could you direct me to the column where I can find the answer? Thanks for answering my question! **Desmond Faze (USA)**

Answer This is a difficult question to answer satisfactorily since I don't know enough about how you respond to time pressure circumstances. It would help to know if you play much rapid chess. It would also be useful to know if you've played much serious chess. Also to be factored would be your knowledge of openings, and various other issues that might impinge your efficiency when pressed to make moves. Without knowing any of these criteria, and others, here's what I'd advise.

Try to spend no more than 15-20 minutes on the first dozen moves or so, until you get out of the initial opening stage. Bear in mind, of course, that some openings may not be as familiar and might require more time and effort to find your way. But let me inject an admonition. Never waste time dawdling. Whether or not you know the opening at hand, don't treat it lightly. Even in familiar settings it's possible to make a terrible mistake. You could casually play moves out of order. You might misread your opponent's unusual move for one not worthy of concern. You could play too mechanically, not realizing something is amiss or very different from usual. So really concentrate right from the start, beginning with move one, deeply reviewing, even the obvious. That's a good way to avoid errors and consequent trouble before they arise. Many players throw out the first bunch of moves without much thought, thinking they're conversant with the line, only to find that suddenly they've been caught out of their friendly confines. That's when many of them start to think, when already it may be too late. So, again, don't treat the opening blithely.

For the period of transition to the middlegame, as well as for the middlegame itself, say, for the next twenty moves or so, try not to use more than half an hour. But use it, if you must. Just make sure to monitor your time, making certain to keep an eye on the clock, as well as on any

pre-established boundary lines you've indicated on your score sheet. Still, you don't want to get too contrived in this effort. And if you need more time, you have to take it. That's why you can't waste time. Of course, you can economize time better if you stay alert, always on top things.

To that end, organized players prudently break their endeavors into two mindsets: their moves, on the one hand, and their opponent's moves, on the other. On their moves, they try to remain completely attentive. They waste no time and effort to get the job done. They try to get the maximum out of their ticking time, keeping attuned throughout. But they use their opponent's time very differently. That's when they ask exploratory questions, review problem areas, figure out possible plans and alternatives that might come up, and generally supervise their time concerns. Most of us squander these important breaks in intensity. And even though it does have value to relax a little, it still makes sense to use the opponent's time more intelligently, rather than going into a total sleep. Thus, we can be timely in two ways: by watching the clock, and by dividing up tasks.

One other word and it concerns actual time pressure. If your opponent is short of time, don't necessarily rush your own moves. If you do, you're likely to play the very moves your opponent has been thinking of. Find the strongest moves you can, within your own allotted time, and go with them. If you can, playing an unexpected but strong optional move increases the chance that your opponent will overstep. Even if he or she doesn't exceed the time limit, your opponent might become so agitated about the surprise that bad moves ensue, and you wind up winning more easily, whether the flag goes down or not.

So that's my biggest recommendation. Rather than focusing merely on time, also piece out duties by whose turn it is. That improvement in functioning almost always saves time on the clock as well. And don't fall asleep in the opening, waking up when it's already too late. Finally, give the enterprise your full effort and concentration. Stay focused pretty much throughout. If you don't feel tired by the end, something may be wrong. You can always collapse afterward, once the game is in the bag. Good luck.

Question I have a question I have been thinking about. I am a beginner with a rating of about 1200. So far I have not been able to play any masters (or experts), some of whom I see at my local club. I have offered to play skittles and speed chess against them and none of them have so far accepted my challenges. My question concerns resignation. Out of respect for them, I am wondering what to do if I lose a pawn, once I do get to play them. Should I resign? I am afraid that if I do not resign that they will not play me anymore. Then I will never have an opportunity to play and learn from much better players. Should I resign after losing a pawn (or sometimes two)? I enjoy reading your answers. **Scott Salisbury (USA)**

Answer You're obviously a considerate person, and I hope the strong players you've been around appreciate your respect. But you're not going to get anywhere if you treat them like gods, unless you're applying for a position much lower on the chess pantheon, and one of them needs an admirer. As an inexperienced player, no matter who you're playing, you should avoid resigning without a fight. How else are you going to gain technique unless you see how it's done? We tend to learn from experience, and some of the best learning experiences are those in which we are beaten. If you resign game after game, whether it's out of respect or nausea, without seeing how they do it, it's going to be much harder to learn how to do it for yourself. Besides, it's as Yogi would have said if he played chess, and if he ever used the word resigning: nobody ever won by resigning.

Question There's a common theme in many openings, where a bishop pins a knight to its king or queen, for example, in the Nimzo-Indian Defense. I've heard it said that it is considered more favorable in contemporary opening theory if the bishop takes the knight if the rook's

pawn comes up and threatens said bishop. For instance, in the Nimzo-Indian, 1 d4 Nf6 2 c4 e6 3 Nc3 Bb4 4 a3 Bxc3. I'm aware of other responses, like 4...Ba5 5 b4 etc., so really my question is, why is taking the knight considered more favorable? **Justin Lett (USA)**

Answer Sometimes, even when we're trying to be general, we tap into the specific and wind up going wrong, very wrong. While I think I understand the point you're raising, you may have gotten too casual in its presentation. The suggestion you offer as an alternative, 4...Ba4, actually runs into trouble after 5 b4 Bb6 6 c5, which is a version of the Noah's Ark Trap. So in the line you've offered, taking the knight is better than retreating the bishop, since the retreat loses a piece. But it's clear what you're after, some kind of general truth. And I'm going to give it to you, though I doubt it's the answer you've been seeking.

Let me first take the liberty of rephrasing your question, since I think you're really asking something else. I think what you're really asking is, in comparable situations where the bishop can safely retreat to queen-rook-four (let's keep it on the queenside for our discussion, since kingside transactions bring other considerations with them), why would players fancy to take the knight instead of opting to withdraw the bishop to rook-four?

Well, in some cases, they might not prefer to take the knight. They might find it desirable instead to keep the pressure on the knight and lure the opponent into making a potentially weakening pawn move (let's say b2-b4, in some comparable situations, where the bishop is not lost by retreating it). In other instances, a player might prefer to keep the tempo, taking the knight, knowing that a move must be expended to take the knight back. So that kind of action may revolve around keeping or fighting for the initiative. And why is it better to take the knight after the bishop has been attacked by a rook-pawn (as opposed to taking the knight before the bishop has been so menaced)? If it's better, it might be so because the side with a similarly positioned bishop probably wants to encourage such a pawn move (say, a2-a3). Such a pawn move wastes time, weakens queen-knight-three (b3), and places the pawn on a square that then denies the other side's queen bishop access (a3). Whereas, if the bishop takes the knight first (say Bb4xc3), before it's attacked (say a2-a3), the rook-three square remains open. If the b-pawn has taken back on c3 (b2xc3), the queen-bishop would then have the option of deploying to queen-rook-three (a3 in the skeleton you're concerned with). But this is not how chess should be played. I'm not sure how chess should be played, but I know this isn't it. It's good to be aware of such general things, but, in the play of an actual game, it's best to really understand what's happening in the very specific position before you, I think. Okay, I know.

Question of the Month

The best answers will be published in the next column.

How can chess players make a living from the game?

Reader's Responses from Last Month

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

What is the most common mistake the average player makes?

Among the many interesting replies were the following:

Mark Donlan (USA) writes: Thinking the next chess book they buy will be the one that makes them a better player.

Josh Newsham (USA) writes: At every level, the most common mistake is the tactical oversight. However, as one who has risen through the ranks of class players, I would say that the average player's most common mistake is the tendency to be consumed with a specific plan or assessment. Average players see a plan and then try to force it through,

come Hell or high water. If they are determined to attack a weak pawn or get a Knight to a certain square, all other considerations may vanish. A pawn up endgame looms, and they happily swap pieces automatically only to find the game now drawn. Similarly, an average player who feels threatened often curls into a defensive ball, warding off every threat – real or imagined – with little thought of taking positive action.

Thomas Petroczi (Austria) writes: Playing the right move with the wrong idea (tactical skilled) or playing the wrong move with the right idea (strategic skilled). The average player is very seldom completely right or wrong about a position.

(BP – Nice answers, which may lead to other questions)

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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