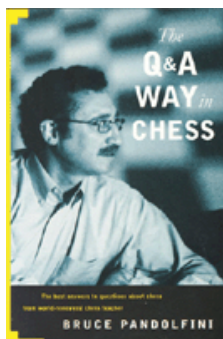




COLUMNISTS

The Q & A Way

Bruce Pandolfini



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Sitting in on Lessons

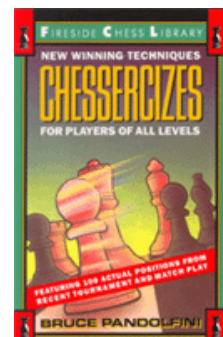
Question I have been playing chess for fun ever since I was a child. In the beginning I played, I think, mainly because my father played and he loved the game. It was a way for us to spend time together. He passed away a few years ago but the memories of those early times always stay with me. Perhaps that is one reason, though not the only reason, I love playing chess. My son is now starting to play, and in order to expedite his improvement, my wife and I have hired a chess teacher, who comes once a week to give him a lesson. For the first few lessons I was allowed to sit in and watch. Of course I did not say much. It was understood that I would just watch and not be disruptive. While the teacher allowed this, I could see that he was uncomfortable, and after awhile I stopped sitting in on the lessons. When I was attending the lessons my son and I had a great time and we really enjoyed the sessions. Now that I have stopped taking silent part in the activity, my son appears to be losing interest. I have thought about raising this issue with the teacher, but I sense he's not too sympathetic to the idea, being an old-world type instructor. Do you have any thoughts about this, namely, is it all right to sit in on your son's chess lessons without being too pushy or selfish? Or does such participation smack of the kind of problems portrayed in *Searching for Bobby Fischer*? Thanks for considering my question. **Richard Samuelson (USA)**

Answer The issue has pros and cons. On the con side, some teachers may not be comfortable with your direct presence. Instead of teaching they may feel it necessary to perform. Unconsciously a teacher might start to speak to the parent, addressing parental needs over those of the child. Discipline and control also tend to wane, and students might listen less attentively, there being a superior authority in the room who commands final say. And while a parent may be respectful and listen at first, as lessons go by he or she could inevitably reveal a proclivity to restate everything the teacher says in words thought more suitable. They're usually not, and this tendency saps teaching power. It could also become terribly confusing, since parents typically misunderstand or don't grasp at all what the teacher is getting at. True, sensitive parents can be helpful, smoothly sprinkling clarity and mild restatement when it's really useful. But it's too easy to turn a wand into a club, "correcting" the teacher at will, and every subtle idea is beaten down. Without doubt, teachers often commit intentional mistakes to play off those "slip-ups" for effect, when parental intrusion undermines the effort completely.

There is a halfway approach. You can fulfill a desire to take part by staying in the background, ostensibly doing other things, yet close enough to be involved and participate indirectly. This also allows you to monitor your child's safety and state of mind. Surely such removal, however, nearby as it may be, is not as much fun as being at the side of the board, immediate witness to your son's development and triumph. And I also agree that sitting in on lessons is a way to get closer to your child as you share in pleasant experience.

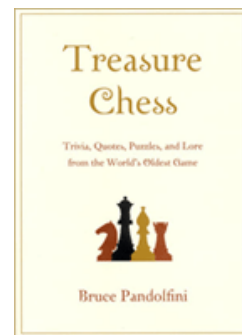
Indeed, for a child to succeed at chess competition, parents must be involved. Encouragement and balm are always needed, and there are so many tasks requiring parental dedication and commitment. Somebody has to take him to the bathroom. That same person routinely has to carry the right books and equipment, while making sure the charge gets fed. In the end it comes down to intelligence and cooperation. The intelligence of the parent, the teacher, the child, and the collective group as it ties the

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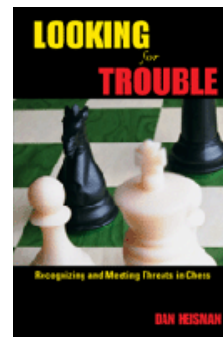
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willingness of the three parties to work together as a team for a common goal: to help the child mature into a strong individual, with healthy will and mind, fused with respect and compassion for other people and their ways of thinking.

Question My question concerns how to finish off my opponents once I get a winning game. In many of my tournament and offhand games I get a dominant position, but I don't seem to be able to win. I cannot tell you how many times I have let opponents escape or find myself suddenly losing when once I thought I was winning easily. One way I go wrong is that I cannot find the right plan and lose my way. It seems to me after analyzing my own play that my tactics are much weaker than they should be. I miss a lot of counterplay and throw games away because of it. I figure I can improve my tactical play by working on tactical problems from several nice books of tactical problems. I have *Leonard Barden's Chess Puzzle Book* and *The Art of Combination* by M.V. Blokh. I also plan to study planning by playing over collections of positional players and great strategists, including Rubinstein, Capablanca, and Karpov. But how can I improve my ability at defense and spotting counterplay? Do you have any suggestions for improving defense and the ability to see threats? **Richard Menking (Australia)**

Answer This kind of question comes in quite frequently, so I understand your concern. But I think I've also used up any originality, however little it might be, in trying to address such queries previously. At the risk of being terribly repetitive, which I already was when I answered similar questions before, here are a few suggestions.

To improve your defensive play you can tap the very tactical works you've already listed, or any comparable ones you can get your hands on. After trying to find each winning shot, change sides and make it be the other player's move. Then try to frustrate or stop the winning line. As you do this through the course of an entire book, first solving a given problem, then turning it around and trying to thwart it, you will find yourself naturally becoming more focused and better able to defend against potential threats. You can apply some of this inverted discipline to your own games, either afterward in relaxed analysis or during actual play, making use of the other player's time to change perspective and see how your opponent might spoil or prevent your intentions.

You should of course cultivate the habit of never just defending, if you can help it, but of combining defense with counterattack. By always trying to do both you should broaden your overall play and begin instilling the groundwork for a fuller approach, where the possibility of missing a counterthreat is likely to be reduced. But probably you also need to be more careful. To that end you should close all your premeditated thought with questions about your analysis, whether there's anything you might have missed or not considered which could overturn your considerations. You might be surprised how the mere raising of these concerns helps you avoid obvious and even more subtle mistakes and snares. Naturally, no technique or application is going to turn you or anyone else into Tigran Petrosian, but it's a start.

Question I have been playing chess for many years. I learned as a teenager and played in high school, and particularly remember Milton Hanauer and his wonderful scholastic tournaments. Much of the excitement of playing chess has gone away since those days. Now the computer age is here and the players appear to know much more than they used to. It appears that the basic B and C players are much stronger than they used to be. Do you think this is true? Or am I just getting to be a bit of an old-timer? I wonder how today's players would do in Dr. Hanauer's events. Maybe I have become too duly impressed by a lot of thought about nothing. Sometimes I think so. **John Ferguson (USA)**

Answer You sound about my age, so if you're an old-timer, I am too. For all I know we may have played each other in Dr. Hanauer's competitions,

though I must say your name doesn't ring the bell of recollection. But it was a long time ago. Getting back to your question, it's hard to make a comparison, and there are many factors to evaluate. It's true that there's much more information available. Yet while players are assailed in data, and even though they may be able to process more these days, the tendency is to learn less thoroughly and well. I can't tell you how often I've seen "old-timers" play an out-of-date variation and score because their opponents knew the line only in adumbration, having never bothered to study it closely. On the other hand, it's at least equally true that even the most mundane new lines, however superficially employed, could confuse someone whose opening knowledge has deep roots in hoary times of yore. I suspect it's true therefore, whatever the rating and class specialists say about it, that today's player is more equipped than those of the past. How could it be otherwise? But, I concur with you, that doesn't mean he or she would so well in Dr. Hanauer's scholastic events. Nor like you would he be duly impressed by a lot of thought about nothing.

Question I am a chess devotee and relative introductory player. I have thought about a certain question rather a lot and wanted to get it cleared up. Before I get into it, I wonder what goes on in a player's mind when he is playing. To put it another way, I am curious about how chess players ratiocinate when playing a game of chess. Of course, I have read all about analyzing a position and so on, but still I wonder if it is a move by move game. Because when you have a plan and go about trying to implement it, your opponent could play a move that disrupts it and makes your plan go down the drain, without any tangible gain. To the untrained eye it might even look like you are constantly making a new plan after every move, discarding the old plan from move to move, and then coming up with a new plan, in a life and death cycle. This is the way it is if your opponent understands what you have been planning, in my opinion. You can see this if your opponent defends against your plan and stops you from playing it. Now I am coming to the question. I am particularly interested in getting off to a good start in most games, so I am focusing on the opening. Here, the opening moves are critical, as they have to be in all openings. Are there any opening moves you can play that can be played without too much thought about what your opponent can do to stop them? Can you play the same five first moves no matter what? What about the King's Indian Attack (Nf3, g3, Bg2, d3, 0-0)? This way your opening plans will not be stopped, at least for five moves. A small but definite advantage is all I am looking for. **Marty Edison (USA)**

Answer You and about a couple of hundred million chess players worldwide. What the heck are you talking about? Try not even thinking that way; looking for an array of opening moves that can be played without regard to what your opponent does. Oh, you can play the same five moves from game to game, but don't count on getting an edge if you ignore the other player (not that you're looking for a conversation or anything). A few setups seem to be fairly definite, and you mention the King's Indian Attack. But Black has ways to counter that actually require White to think before responding, like real chess. I hope that answers your question, at least the one I thought you posed near the end of your disquisition.

Question I am a retired sea captain, who has played chess for many years but hasn't played in too many tournaments. In fact, I haven't studied the game formally since I was a young man. I am now approaching my eightieth birthday. In trying to get back into the game more seriously, now that I have time on my hands, I have turned to books, computers, and even the Internet; the latter being unexpectedly helpful. In general, it always seems that when writers and experts start talking about chess talent they refer solely to children. I can understand this but there are increasing numbers of older people who also require attention and helpful ways to learn. They also want to know how good they are and how good they can be. A recent study has it that a 120 IQ of today would be equal to a 130 IQ from previous generations. People are apparently getting smarter. I've seen some of your answers regarding children, and you mention eye movement and keeping attention as being important when it

comes to detecting talent. What about older adults? How can you determine, if at all, an older person's ability to learn chess and how far they can go, and can you narrow your answer to something like a single talent? I am sorry to pose what may be a difficult and paradoxical question, in that you teach so many youngsters and now must address a subject that may not come up too often. But any answer you can give me will be appreciated. **Captain Daniel Highet (United Kingdom)**

Answer I think it was Claude Levi-Strauss who said, more or less, that every paradoxical question is driven by an obsessive need to answer a paradoxical question that cannot be answered. Yet as the genie says in *The Seven Voyages of Sinbad*, which I've said before and may be dear to seafaring temperaments, "I shall try, master, I shall try." I think I know the study you're referring to, and it does suggest that average IQ's have changed to reflect the advantages children now have. If I remember, the study doesn't claim that youngsters are necessarily smarter but that they are able to learn more effectively and systematically later on because they are being taught earlier and better. This very plausible theory of course is subject to further exploration and testing.

Clearly, as one gets older, the ability to focus and stay alert for longer periods shrinks. But this is counteracted somewhat by the average child's shorter attention span. Impressions, however, can be more indelible with the young. When they encounter a new idea they quickly find a place for it in their emerging cognitive scheme. Older people, in contrast, are more likely to force-feed a new idea into remotely distant and even obsolescent context, when it may not exactly belong there. But that's the irony, since the chief skill that distinguishes an older mind may be the ability to compensate for inadequacy and diminishing capability by drawing upon experience and acquired knowhow to solve problems with correlation and analogy. Young people haven't necessarily seen as much to make such meaningful comparisons. So that's what I look for in older people more than anything else, how naturally they remember appropriate or nearly suitable instances to cope with sudden problems. Those are the individuals, inspired and creative, who tend to remain vibrant. They can be a pleasure to sit across from at the board, and they are the ones more able to enjoy a complex game like chess.

Question of the Month

The best answers will be published in the next column.

Which style of play do you prefer, Anand's or Kramnik's?

Reader's Responses from Last Month

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

How can chess players make a living from the game?

Among the many interesting replies were the following:

Wendell Hurst (USA) writes: By playing poker and backgammon on the side.

Dan Avery (USA) writes: There are really three answers. The first answer is for the extraordinarily gifted and hardworking soul who is good enough to play professional chess as a career. This is not a life I would wish on anyone. These players travel from large tournament to large tournament in the hopes of winning some small portion of the Open prize fund. Meanwhile, some rank amateur walks away with thousands of dollars for beating up on other amateurs. It's enough to drive a player to drink. In fact, I have seen several of the top board players at the bars of the hotels where many of these tournaments are played, drinking their drinks and trying to impress the one or two women in the bar with them. Someone will come in, and one of the players will leave. The players seem to be playing tag-team bar hustling.

The second way to make a living from chess is to write books and columns. However, to do this, you have to be able to fill a certain niche and be able to write at least as well as the first group plays chess. This combination of writing talent and chess skill used to be extremely rare, but now that anyone can own a world class German-made chess player, all it seems to take is writing skills. Having said that, writing skills are still in short supply!

The third way to make a living from chess is a much less stressful, much more personal method. That is, become a reasonably good player and use your skill to teach chess. I chose this last method as a way to make enough money to take my wife out to dinner (away from hotels holding chess tournaments), and to interact with inquisitive students outside of a school setting. I love the game of chess and I find it most enjoyable when my students use what they've learned in a new setting.

I'm a professional teacher, and I get to use both of my talents as a chess teacher! I always start my first lesson with a set of questions, including, "why do you play chess"? Just about 100% of all my students have said "because it's fun." I encourage every one of my students to play chess for fun, not for money. I also give all my students the same homework every week: Have Fun! (I sometimes give them other work as well.) If the student isn't having fun playing chess, then play something else! Luckily for me, my students seem to have fun playing and learning chess, otherwise I'd have to find another hobby to pay for my dinner dates!

(BP – The first answer is amusing, and Dan's response is really quite fine. Mr. Avery is obviously a terrific teacher.)

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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