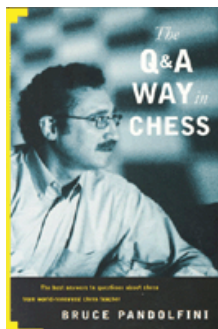




## COLUMNISTS

## The Q & A Way

Bruce Pandolfini



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## This and That

**Question** What's the point of the Ruy Lopez Exchange Variation? Every time White attacks the knight with 3.Bb5, Black always responds with a7-a6. After move eight, White loses the ability to castle: 4.Bxc6 dxc6 5.Nxe5 Qd4 6.Nf3 Qxe4+ 7.Qe2 Qxe2+ 8.Kxe2. Bobby Fischer would castle on move five, instead of taking Black's pawn on e5, but that was the whole point of 3.Bb5! Aren't you just wasting time when you don't follow through? **Sean Fakheri (USA)**

**Answer** I'm not sure what you're asking. But let's start where I think you start. First of all, Black doesn't always respond with 3...a6. People play the Berlin Defense, 3...Nf6. Some players try 3...g6, which also has many advocates. And there are other moves too. Just look in any standard encyclopedia on the openings (such as Nick DeFirmian's [Modern Chess Openings](#) for instance) and examine lines in the appropriate section. You'll see that the move 3...a6 is not an automatic play.

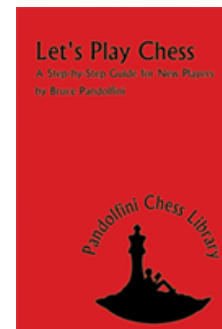
You might ask yourself why it's played, and perhaps you do. When it's played on the third move it's done so for several reasons. By putting the question to the b5-bishop it asks White if he intends to take the knight directly or retreat the bishop to a4. If White captures the c6-knight, Black can take back, away from the center, 3...dxc6, with the tactical defense of the e-pawn your variation illustrates, 4.Bxc6 dxc6 5.Nxe5 Qd4 6.Nf3 Qxe4+ 7.Qe2 Qxe2+ 8.Kxe2. While it's true that White loses the right to castle (in fact, from here, White can often castle by hand), his position isn't falling apart either. It's just that he doesn't have anything to play for, and Black has more than equalized. That's one reason Fischer and others castled (many still do) on move five instead. By playing 5.0-0 (instead of 5.Nxe5), White safeguards his position, gets ready for business, and retains the threat to Black's e-pawn. Thus, Black must find suitable ways to defend a pawn that didn't require actual protection in your variation. It didn't need protection because it was exchanged off in a transaction of king-pawn for king-pawn.

You suggest, however, that the entire point of playing 3.Bb5 was to gain the e-pawn. True, White does aim at Black's e-pawn, but White, with sufficient awareness of your variation and others, knows that the e-pawn can't be won immediately and directly. So, while White does aspire to win the e-pawn if Black drifts off, what White is really doing is pressuring the e-pawn, with the eventual hope of taking it under favorable conditions – as I say, if Black dozes off or doesn't play mindfully. If Black doesn't fall asleep, he still may be constrained to make concessions he doesn't want to make in order to keep the pawn. One such concession would be to surrender the black e-pawn for White's d-pawn in such a way that White's remaining e4-pawn opposes Black's d6-pawn; thus, giving White a spatial edge in a fixed center, what Pachman and other theorists describe as the "little center."

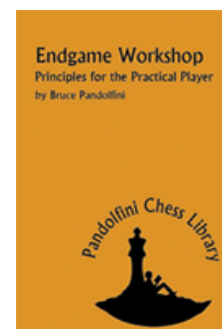
You might also ask yourself, nonetheless, if it's true that 3...a6 doesn't compel 4.Bxc6, since White has the option of withdrawing the bishop to a4, why does Black play 3...a6 in the first place. Black plays 3...a6 for a number of reasons, one of the primary ones being this: it gives Black the ability, if White does retreat the bishop to a4, to follow with the counter of 4...b7-b5, breaking the attack on the c6-knight altogether.

You could come back with a question of your own. You could ask yourself why not wait until it becomes necessary to play a7-a6, with b7-b5 to follow, instead of playing a7-a6 on move three. The answer is that if you wait until it becomes necessary, White doesn't have to retreat the bishop to a4 at all. Instead he could take on c6, especially if that idea now works for White. However, if a7-a6 has been played earlier, and the bishop has already

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retreated to a4, then b7-b5 can be played so that White no longer has the option of taking on c6.

You might then ask another question. If this is a useful thing to do, to have a7-a6 already played, with the possible option of being able to follow with b7-b5, breaking the attack on the c6-knight, why doesn't Black do it immediately, thus 3...a6 4.Ba4 b5? The answer is that Black could so play that way, and Black may indeed relish such a line. But it's important to note what's essentially arrived at by so playing. After 1.e4 e5 2.Nf3 Nc6, two options (there are of course others) are the Italian Game, 3.Bc4, and the Spanish Game, 3.Bb5. If after 3.Bb5 play continues 3...a6 4.Ba4 b5 5.Bb3, Black has in essence forced White into an Italian-like setup (the light-squared white bishop in both cases controlling the a2-f7 diagonal) with two pluses for White: his light-squared bishop is slightly less attackable at b3 than c4; and Black has incurred potential weakness along the a8-d5 line because of his queenside pawn advances. True, Black gains some attacking prospects, which somewhat explains why those who play it do so, but the outcome is not unlike going into an inferior Italian Game.

Another facet to the Exchange Variation complex is how it often leads to the creation of a desirable pawn majority for White. For instance, compare just the setup of pawns in two variations (taking the pieces off the board for your consideration, but again, keeping the pawns on). Compare the pawn structure that results from (A) 1.e4 e5 2.Nf3 Nc6 3.Bb5 a6 4.Bxc6 dxc6 5.Nxe5 Qd4 6.Nf3 Qxe4+ (now mentally remove all white and black pieces) with the pawn structure that results if on move five White continues (B) 5.d4 exd4 6.Qxd4 Qxd4 7.Nxd4 (again, remove the pieces but keep the pawns on the board). In the situation offered in (A), Black's pawns are doubled on the c-file, but White can't create a passed pawn by force. In the situation depicted in (B), Black's c-pawns remain doubled, but now White has a candidate passed pawn on the e-file. With proper play, and if everything works out nicely (it may not), White can produce a passed pawn. In effect, in the situation of (B), White has won a pawn, even though both sides have the same number of pawns on the board. To be sure, Black has compensation in (B). With the pieces back on the board, Black has the two bishops and attacking chances. But at least we can see the logic of surrendering a bishop for a knight in such committing fashion, and that's to instill a favorable pawn imbalance with the possibility of producing a passed pawn.

Still one more thing you may want to focus on, and that's the situation where White first plays c2-c3 and, at a germane later time, follows with d2-d4, pressuring Black's e-pawn. In such cases a real battle often ensues. White wants Black to play e5xd4, so that after c3xd4, White has a mobile pawn center and a space edge. And Black in turn prefers White to take on e5, d4xe5, so that after d6xe5, Black has an equal share of the center. This set of circumstances doesn't always reign, but it's typically a leitmotif guiding the way players in the Ruy Lopez approach the center. Naturally, there's much more to it. And to understand it you should explore the variations in greater detail and at the wisdom of real experts on opening theory. I leave you with a few items on the Ruy Lopez Exchange Variation you might want to check out: [Ruy Lopez Exchange](#), by Krzysztof Panczyk and Jacek Ilczuk is an excellent book. In the Fritz Trainer Series, Andrew Martin's DVD, [ABC of the Ruy Lopez](#) lays down the groundwork beautifully. I would also check Andy Soltis' two books on the Exchange Lopez. They're really quite nice and will give you a grasp of the subject. But there are many books and DVDs on the Lopez, so there's much to choose from. Go have a feast.

**Question** I can't defend for peanuts. As soon as the opponent's queen or rooks get a whiff of my king, I'm checkmated. What do you advise? I've studied a few books on defending, but they didn't provide the bread-and-butter answers such as "If a black queen on h5 and black bishop on d6 are threatening mate on h2, do I move g2-g3 or h2-h3?" **John Burns (UK)**

**Answer** If you're looking for basic advice it starts by being more alert. You can start being more alert by slowing down and using your time wisely. As you probably know, once your opponent has moved, you should put all your effort into finding out what the move does. Such an investigation particularly is concerned with threats and whether your opponent's move requires

response or can be ignored. You can unearth more about your opponent's move if you ask a set of intelligently directed questions, such as, though not confined solely to, "What is the threat?" and "Can I ignore my opponent's move and go on with my own plans?" The more practice you get doing this the better.

Furthermore, once a number of things have been transacted, you should step back and get your bearings, asking a few questions to help you understand what the circumstances are and what should be done about them. Let's say you have a clearly winning game and nothing is pressing you. At times like that you should ask yourself something like: "Are there any ways I could lose this game if I'm not careful?" The mere asking of this type of question should heighten your awareness and direct you to potential problems you'll now have time to offset, such as making certain not to get back-ranked, as you allude to in your question.

As far as which pawn to move, it depends on whether moving h-pawn or g-pawn solves the problem while incurring minimal weaknesses. Much of the time it's wiser to move the h-pawn since it weakens merely one square in particular, the king-knight three square. Meanwhile, moving the g-pawn weakens two squares, the king-bishop three square and the king-rook three square. But you must also factor in if the weakness or weaknesses can be exploited by asking more questions about them. In any particular position it may not matter or moving the g-pawn might not incur exploitable weaknesses. It might even be more perspicacious not to move any pawn at all. There are many factors that could impinge on your decision, and the relevant ones should be assessed.

What you don't want to do is get mechanical about this, playing moves as if they always work without regard to individual circumstances. It's when we start presuming things instead of really looking and examining and questioning that we wind up blundering and throwing away games. To be sure, really looking at anything gets us back to taking more time and slowing down, which remains the best way to become a better defender and avoider of trouble.

There are various training procedures you could attempt to employ that might help. You could set up difficult positions and try to play them out against software or a training partner. You could actively get into the habit of changing perspective at the board, so that on your move you pretend you're the opponent trying to get you. You'd be surprised how this difference in viewpoint increases general awareness of potential difficulties. And you could read up more on the subject. I believe it's in *The Art of the Middlegame*, a small but weighty volume by Kotov and Keres, that you'll find their wonderful essay: "How to defend difficult positions." Who could ever forget the Estonian grandmaster's incredible defense against Fridrik Olafsson in the first Piatigorsky tournament of 1963. There's also Andy Soltis's magnificent *The Art of Defense in Chess*. Get it and start winning more games. It's also a pretty darn good read.

**Question** Has the increase in prize money since Bobby Fischer's time had a detrimental effect on the world of chess? I am thinking especially of the cheating incentive. **Alan Westcott (USA)**

**Answer** Who can say? I see your point, that now there are greater incentives to cheat. But perhaps more than the money it's our hi-tech world that increases the opportunities to get away with something. Naturally, technology also augments the ability to fight such transgressions as well. I don't think people are different very much. Most of us would never consider cheating, for any number of reasons. Then there are those who would. They would have done so before the advent of Fischer and high prizes. They would have done so during Fischer's time. And they would do so now that Fischer has left us. Such villains were here long before Caissa had a twinkling of a war game in mind, and I imagine will be here long into the future, when, hopefully, attempts at abolishing real war forever will finally succeed. For now, it's back to war games, best played with our eyes open.

**Question** I keep hearing the saying practice, practice, practice. But I don't

know how to practice. What is the best way to practice for tournaments and competitions? What is the best way to solve problems? Do you have any suggestions? Is it simply about working harder, putting more time in?

**Wendell Maray (Canada)**

**Answer** I have many suggestions, but I will confine myself to your question and only in its most limited sense; that is, readying yourself for tournament play and how to approach problem-solving. The best way to practice is to simulate game conditions. Play practice games with the same time controls, and when solving problems, do them in your head, never moving the pieces. Yes, working longer and harder might help. But still better is to work smarter, getting more out of your efforts. That's my staccato advice for now. Catch me on another day and I'll spell more of it out.

**Question** Back in the crazy days of the Fischer boom, you apparently gave lessons at absurd times of day and night, both very early and very late. I've seen your comments on this, but I don't know where and can't seem to find them now. Were these regular lessons or just occasional lessons? What kinds of students took lessons very early in the morning and what kinds took them very late at night? What did you do in these lessons? I'm curious to know what those lessons would be like. **Bo Daniels (USA)**

**Answer** I don't think I've published much about those times, and I don't know exactly what you're referring to. I did give many bizarre lessons in the period from 1972-75, but I can't remember a particular instance of writing about it. As best as I can recall, the earliest starting times in a day I would teach was 6:00 a.m. I did have a few students take lessons that early. Some of those lessons were given in person, others by phone. They were just people who started early in the day and so did I.

The latest regular lessons I ever gave began at 2:00 a.m., and they were given to two different students. One student was a writer who apparently was always working on the Great American Novel. To my knowledge he's still working on it. The other 2:00 a.m. student was a rock star. The only thing I recall about the rock star's lessons was how I'd fall asleep during them. We'd be thinking over a position and my head would collapse. I'd snap it back in place and keep thinking. My student never seemed to notice. He was always too stoned to notice much of anything. Come to think of it, I really enjoyed those sessions.

### **Question of the Month**

The best answers will be published in the next column.

*What is the most intriguing of all chess concepts?*

### **Reader's Responses from Last Month**

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

*Are today's top players really better than the top ones of the past?*

Among the many interesting replies were the following:

**Marshall Benjamin (Australia)** writes: Absolutely. Too much is written about past stars. The game is so much harder now and the players have so much more going for them, it would be no contest. As much as I admire Capablanca, he'd be crushed by today's super grandmasters, with super databases in their corners.

**William Schwartz (USA)** writes: The proof is in the ratings. The best players of today are many points ahead of the best players from fifty years ago. Even Fischer might have trouble, we know so much more than he did.

(BP- Yeah.)

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**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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