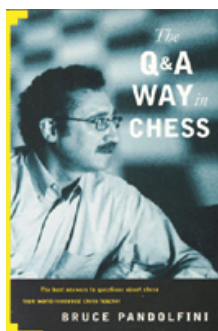




COLUMNISTS

The Q & A Way

Bruce Pandolfini



CHESSTHEATRE

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Books or Software?

Question What is the better way to improve and study: books or software? Are there major advantages or disadvantages to each? **Mark Net (USA)**

Answer I don't know that there's a better way to improve and study, other than for you as an individual. You might detest working on a computer, and therefore wouldn't get as much out of it as you would from a book, especially if you're used to proceeding from books and feel awkward or challenged at the keyboard. On the other hand, books can have their limitations. I suppose both have their advantages and disadvantages, and we could try to go through them. Besides, I don't really have anything else to do.

On paper, software has it by far over an ordinary book. Indeed, no matter how big the book is, a good piece of chess software could draw from an enormous database in comparison. Even the Polgar books, with their 5,000 plus examples, are dwarfed by what Chessbase offers. Moreover, unless the book is very small, and you already know where every example is located, it can be much easier finding a certain position or idea with software. Just do an intelligent search and you're there. Furthermore, if you'd like supplementary examples, or variations on an idea, you can get valuable reinforcement from software that no one book could provide.

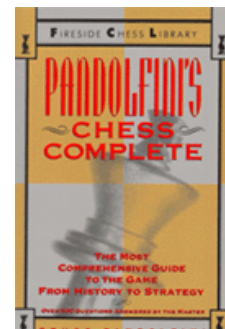
Playing through a book isn't always a picnic. You have to reset the pieces again and again, possibly losing your way, and surely expending all kinds of sapping energy. But on a computer you can jump about at will, getting back to where you started, guaranteed that everything is there and in place. With some software you even have to possibility of creating split screens and seeing positions at different points to make fine discriminations. Try doing that with a book, where similar ideas, if they're there at all, may be many pages away from each other. And there must be a dozen other pluses for software I simply haven't touched upon.

I guess you could say books cost a lot less (though not automatically these days), but then software offers so much more for the money. I know - a book can be nice to hold. Books can also have their own conveniences, such as those slim three-inch long texts, which can be placed in a coat pocket and transported with ease. I'm not saying give up on books altogether. But these days especially you might not want to rely on them as much. Yet the best way to improve possibly doesn't require reading a book or analyzing positions on a computer. It could be that more is gained from constant play, being tested again and again, in real game situations, over the course of time. Of course, computers also can do a fairly good job at providing challenging opposition. Perhaps the era of the book is nearing its glorious end. I hope not. I have so many in storage I don't know what to do with them.

Question I am looking for a sound repertoire and I have discovered a lot of books suggesting a "main line" for black or white. For example, [Chess Openings for White, Explained](#) What do you think about this? **Alexandre Smadja (France)**

Answer Whether referring to moves in the opening, or even to a string of moves in an analysis, the "main line" is just that: it's the chief, most often played, and/or simply most critical variation. If you're asking me whether other moves might be as good, or even better, the answer is sometimes yes, sometimes no. For any given situation, there might be moves or other lines that serve your purposes better. If we're talking about the opening, you might want to get away from the beaten track, playing into a variation less frequented, where you may be able to rely somewhat on more individual and

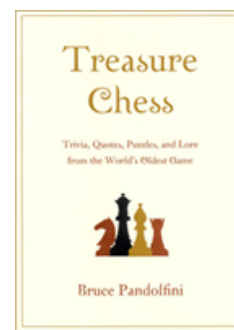
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by Bruce Pandolfini

creative effort. To be sure, even if you don't appreciate the less tried approach, there's a decent chance your opponents aren't going to be so familiar with it either, and you won't have to feel as if you're facing a line of textbook memorization. Thus veering away from the so-called main line could afford practical chances that may be worthy of use in certain circumstances. But just because your idea is different or less tried doesn't make it necessarily good or pragmatically desirable. Still, if your opponent crushes you with the less common variant, at least you'll learn something: what not to do in the future.

Question How does someone keep his repertoire up to date? How much time do you think is required in doing this? **Cliff Batezel (USA)**

Answer Tough question. Surely it depends on your present strength and experience. If one is a novice, talking about opening repertoire has little significance. If one is an "A player" or better, however, then it becomes more and more meaningful the stronger you are, with the strongest players having their own demanding regimen the rest of us are not likely to follow or benefit from. Let's confine our discussion to the "1400 player." Which is about the level of the average rated competitor, give or take a hundred points.

Such a player needs to have at least one way to start a game for white, keeping in mind that it's good to have an acceptable alternative for particular situations (you've played the opponent before or circumstances in the event require taking chances or avoiding them). The same prepared player should have lines of response ready for whatever Black could reasonably answer with. Plus, there should be an awareness of all the noteworthy transpositions and key positions to achieve or avoid. When playing black you'll have to draw upon the same approach, but do so while experiencing greater demands, since White goes first and can hit you with almost anything.

Once you've gotten your repertoire in hand, then you must cope with the question of keeping it up to date. A good way to begin this process is to review all the key games from recent events, seeing which, if any, pertain to your own repertoire. You can get access to this material in current magazines and online services. When you discover something worth further exploration, see what supportive information you can find in Chessbase and comparable offerings (Playchess.com, for instance), examining that material for opportunity as well as prevention. Critical lines could also be analyzed with Fritz or a similar tool, such as Rybka, if you're in need of confirmation or further worthwhile sequences. You could do many other things, too, but at least this approach will keep you involved and aware of important developments. How often should you explore this new material to keep your repertoire *au courant*? For a 1400 player, I'd say at least an hour every week, and that's just to stay a 1400 player.

Question I have read somewhere that Ruy Lopez is credited with the advice that to win your games you should place the board so that the sun is in your opponent's eyes. You can't do that if you are playing at night indoors. What's your answer to that? Do you really think that following his flippant advice has any value? I wanted to hear what you have to say. **Maurice Welles (Singapore)**

Answer Fortunately, I don't think you can hear what I have to say. But in print here's how I'll answer your two questions. First, don't play at night indoors. Second, why not follow his advice? It's worked for me.

Question How does one overcome the fear of losing? I will sometimes avoid tournaments and playing particular persons for fear of losing. **Ralph Hennings (USA)**

Answer Dealing with the fear of losing is probably better addressed by a therapist than a chess teacher. I know I don't have any magic at my fingertips. But I have thought about the problem and tried to guide students through it. Sometimes it helps to eviscerate this problem by examining it beforehand and recasting it as a non-problem. In the case of playing chess, if we're playing for the fun of it, for the effort made in merely pursuing a challenging pastime, we should realize that the worthiness of the activity is not based merely on winning. To be sure, if we view such an enterprise as nothing more than a set

of intriguing puzzles to solve, we take the sting out of the act of losing. That is, by losing, we simply didn't solve all the puzzles. It doesn't have to feel any worse than failing to solve *The Times* crossword. Indeed, for years my inadequacy in completing these puzzles has been a delightful source of good cheer.

Once you can convince yourself losing is not the end of the world, and thereby free yourself from the stultifying nature of such fears, which include, by the way, the fear of having such fears, you will be surprised at the relief it can bring. By reducing your contests to problems to solve, you become greatly unfettered and wind up playing better in the process. It might also assuage things a bit if you view the situation another way. Be reasonable about this and you'll perceive that most of your opponents are also afraid of losing, perhaps the very players you've been avoiding.

It might also help to try the following. Tackle as many incredibly strong players as you can, always playing up, no matter the event. You're likely to lose many of these games, but no matter how many you lose, you can't possibly feel as badly losing to players several ranks above you than to those of your own level. And you won't be wasting your time because games against such strong players will naturally provide many lessons of their own. Over time those constant trials will give you the experience you need to contend much better with this debilitating fear, so that the dread of losing won't be as great when confronting those closer to you in playing strength.

Sometimes, though, we have to fall back on platitudes, which have their own logic. In the end, if you are to overcome these strangling forces, you must look the issue in the face and accept the truth that, win or lose, it's only a game. Losing to someone doesn't necessarily mean the other player is smarter, better, or more deserving. It may mean that, but it doesn't have to, not if you don't let it.

Question of the Month

The best answers will be published in the next column.

What is the most important of all chess skills?

Readers' Responses from Last Month

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

What is your definition of a good chess player?

Among the many interesting replies were the following:

Gilbert Chan (USA) It depends on level. Just learned the moves: plays game with all legal moves. After ten games (beginner): knows what all the pieces do. Recognizes when pieces are attacked and moves or defends them. After twenty games (advanced beginner): knows basic endgame wins, doesn't stalemate opponents with overwhelming force. Recognizes forks for gaining material rather than just eating free pieces. After fifty games (novice): can recognize good positions and not just count material, knows basic tactics like discovery, pin. After 100 games (maybe intermediate); can come up with a plan for his or his opponent's side; starts deciding when it is better to look for a draw. I would defer to experts and masters for higher levels. Nowhere up to the intermediate level does "knowledge of opening systems" become a significant part of the definition of "what is a good chess player."

Joe Iannandrea (Canada) When we say someone is "good," there is some implicit purpose we're saying they're good for. It's a value statement about someone's suitability for a purpose. What makes someone a good chess player depends a good deal what they are attempting to achieve by playing chess. The careers of professional chess players matter a good deal to others and we could probably spend a good deal of time listing the qualities that make them good, but they are a vanishingly small portion of the chess playing population. For the rest of us, which is very nearly everyone, the purpose to be served by playing chess is entirely our own, and whether we are "good" depends on how well we achieve those purposes. If a player takes up chess with the goal of thoroughly the game and they do so, that's a good chess player even if they

never break out of Class E.

Dani Guillermo (USA) A good chess player: Says, "Please" and "Thank you"; holds the door for those behind them; is kind to animals; lets you have the last slice of pizza. Or did you mean at playing chess?

(BP - I don't know what I meant, but I like the way you responded to it.)

Readers' Responses from Prior Months

On a previous question concerning the most intriguing concept:

Bruce Johnson (USA) The most intriguing concept in chess for me is the fundamental that both players have to agree to reach the position on the board, or else you'd arrive at a different position. No other game/sport is built on that. So it's a game of opinion and understanding, not a game of getting ahead on the scoreboard. No other game/sport debates between the players what score to have after five innings, or middle of the fourth quarter, or what yard line to start the play on like chess does in the middle of a game between players that haven't missed a major oversight.

On another previous question:

Serge Champetier (Canada) In response to Leon Domskey, who contributed a question in the [February 2010](#) column, I would humbly suggest [Jon Speelman's Best Games](#), for its very pleasant written style (and interesting games too!). Another book is from his fellow countryman, the late GM Tony Miles (actually a collection of articles from different sources), with which you are in for awesome games, and a lot of laughs.

Gellusboy (USA) Thank you so much for your column, you gave not just sound advice but a plethora of information concerning the Ruy Lopez Exchange Variation. I found your article inspiring.

Leon Shernoff (USA) This is sort of a belated response to last month's question - I thought you might be interested in a thoughtful GM's response to the question about relative strengths of chess players. I remember reading Bent Larsen saying somewhere that players of the past were just as strong as today's players "in positions that they understood." He gave the example that Lasker used to play what we now call the Sveshnikov every once in awhile, and he would always win because no one back then knew how to handle it. But in turn, if Larsen was facing Lasker, he could just play a Hedgehog and win because Lasker wouldn't know what to do (though this seems a bit optimistic). So I think it does historical players a big disservice to simply write them off because we now know that there are better ways of playing certain positions. If, for example, the Poison Pawn variation is one day shown to be a forced win for one side or the other, does that mean that everyone who ever played it who didn't find this win is a fool? And yet we constantly make these judgments about historical players because they made decisions that we now know to be incorrect in positions that are now well-analyzed. Another improper way that folks get compared is by mentioning today's databases and attributing them only to the contemporary players. Well, many players of the past had phenomenal memories. If Pillsbury was playing today, clearly the use of databases would make him a much, much more effective player than he was during his lifetime, and of course he was one of the top five in the world. Alekhine, too, was an extremely hard worker with a fantastic memory and a genius for positions that seem messy to lesser minds. Give these sorts of players access to our technology and the constant top-flight competition that's available today, and they might easily be 2700 or 2800, utterly competitive with the top talent of contemporary chess.

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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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