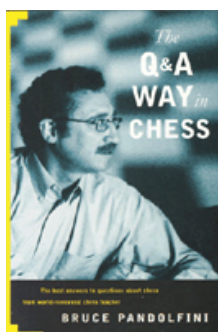




COLUMNISTS

The Q & A Way

Bruce Pandolfini

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Placement Possibilities

Question I have been teaching chess for a few years, teaching mainly adolescents, perhaps with a Socratic, interactive style. On occasion I also teach older people. I don't suppose you recommend teaching the same openings to students of all levels and ages. I am thinking about starting to teach younger children as a good business. What openings, if any, do you teach very young children (let us say, around four to six years old)? I realize that they should be playing open games, with plenty of attacking possibilities. Maybe, in my Socratic methodology (treating them like equals), I get a little carried away, and I think I should have them learn the same sharp lines I play, including gambits and such. Do you think it's OK to teach them that way, to play sacrificial lines so early on? Are you also my kind of Socratic teacher? I have a feeling you may be. Thank you. I enjoy your columns. **Robert Pressmire (USA)**

Answer I don't know if I am your kind of Socratic teacher. I'm not even sure what your "kind of Socratic teacher" means. Anyway, I don't spend a lot of time on teaching openings to very young children. I'm happy to get them playing chess at all. Sure, I try to show them king-pawn play and principles especially relevant to open games. But I'm more likely to work on appreciating simple tactics and endgames. I'm more concerned with getting them to make captures, to see when forces are threatened, and to understand the concepts of check and checkmate. Forks, back row mates, support mates and the like, are emphasized in my sessions over specific lines and gambits. To be sure, I'd be happy if I inspired them to look at their opponent's moves a bit more, if at all, with or without discernment. At least it's a start. Let me also say that I like Socrates as much as the next human, but I'm not confident I could append his name to what I do. I think if he were still with us he might not approve. Actually, as I think about it further, it's possible he wouldn't care or necessarily object. So maybe I won't either.

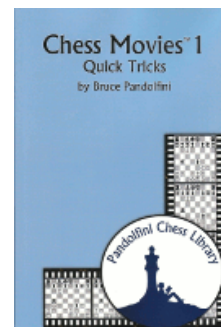
Question I am Sandeep Kumar. I am twenty-two-years old now and want to start chess again, which I left eight years ago. I loved it, and I was good at it, but due to some financial problems, I left it. Now I want to restart my game. I want to make it my profession. I want to play for my country. Can I start now at the age of twenty-two? Can I reach my dream of becoming a GM? I would be very thankful to you if you take the time and reply to me. Thank you so much. **Sandeep Kumar (India)**

Answer I'm happy to respond to your questions, but one or two of your ultimate goals are a tad ambitious. Surely, it's reasonable at the age of twenty-two to renew your interest in chess with the aim of becoming a strong player. You don't even need any past experience to become skilled from there, assuming you have time to invest in the project and some aptitude for the game. Naturally, you and life will have to decide that.

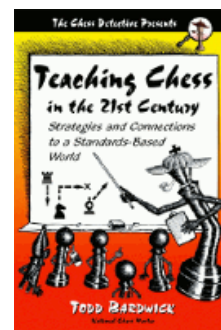
Yet some of your other quests are not just a matter of time and having a modicum of native ability. You will need real talent and probably plenty of luck to become a grandmaster. And even if practically everything went your way, and it may, you still might not achieve such lofty status. Nor is making the Indian national team a walk in the park either, since that team (which you may be aware of), boasts some very strong players. Allow me to remind you that the present world chess champion, Vishy Anand, comes from India, and that, among other factors, he has sparked and primed many of your country's able gladiators to pursue serious involvement in chess competition.

But the lesser goals of becoming a very capable player and pursuing chess as a profession (especially if you're willing to teach), are not ridiculous aims at all. To be sure, I wish you luck and much success in fulfilling your hopes and

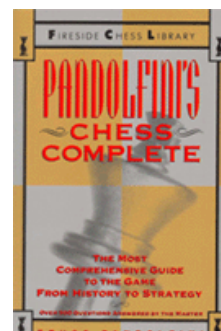
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dreams. But I have another suggestion. Why not play chess simply because you love it, and not worry so much about the worldly success to which it could possibly lead. Approach the game that way, because it's your passion, and whatever eventual skill level you master, regardless of your accomplishments over the chessboard, you'll never be disappointed.

Question I am a National Master strength player who will be graduating this Spring from the University of Chicago. I have been teaching after school classes and private lessons here for the last couple of years and would like to make chess teaching a significant part of my life after college. Do you know which organizations are major employers of chess teachers in the U.S.? Who do you think would be useful for me to talk to about making this a significant part of a future career? **Jeremy Kane (USA)**

Answer These days there are many organizations desiring chess teachers. A search on the Internet will provide you with numerous opportunities to pursue. Practically every state in the union has placement possibilities. However you envision the process of your own investigation, you can follow-up or start with the USCF. I'm sure it, as the vibrant entity it strives to be, will be happy to make suggestions. But wherever you eventually look, it can't hurt to prepare yourself as best you can. To that end, become as a strong player as you can be; get some practice teaching people now, even if it means volunteering; regularly read books and articles on teaching chess; explore sites on the Internet that offer material, ideas, and plans for teaching; and make contacts, as many as you can. Hey, if you're ever in New York, look me up and I'll see what you can do. We're always on the lookout for good teachers who love teaching chess.

Question I was simply wondering about your opinion on the matter of video lectures as a learning tool. Are they worse or better than books? **Ian Cameron (USA)**

Answer They're different from each other, but when they're done well, they both can be effective and enjoyable. Just as some books are written poorly, videos can be presented badly. Some speakers are delightful. Others are unpleasant, ineffective, and at times soporific. Videos often have nice features, such as special graphics and ways to jump between sections advantageously. But a well-constructed book, with excellent divisions and organization, can provide its own sense of convenience. Consider it more as a matter of your own preference, rather than reducing the decision to a situation requiring the choice of one method over the other.

But there's no reason you have to be so exclusively cut and dry about it. Why not use both media forms, where and when you please? A good video can reinforce the essentials of a good book, or be used happily to introduce those essentials if consulted first. Therefore, instead of emphasizing one over the other, make sure you employ both and show nicety in your selections, visiting bookstores and libraries, while consulting online catalogs galore for reviews and descriptions. And don't address it all with trepidation, afraid to make a mistake by choosing an offering that others have deemed unsatisfactory. Indeed, be guided by one overriding idea: if you like a book or video (or any product, or anything whatsoever), it doesn't matter what others think about it. If it gratifies you, and it doesn't hurt anyone else, I'd be very surprised if it didn't result in some kind of overall benefit.

Question You are a noted teacher, who has been teaching chess for many years. What makes you such a good teacher? Is there some particular quality you have? Is it because you are a master player? Do you understand the game very deeply? Do you have a degree in education? I am interested in learning how one gets such an esteemed reputation (which I admire) to make a profession out of it. If I may ask, how did you get to be where you are? Do you have any teaching asides or stories to share that could be generally helpful? Do you have any thoughts on other teachers? Can you think of something you've learned from another teacher? **Maurice Klein (USA)**

Answer It sounds as if you'd like to see my resume. Unfortunately, I don't have one. But let me try to explain it anyway. I was never a great player, at best, an ordinary national master, nothing more, and at times, I wonder if even

that. Nor do I understand the game at some profound level. I mean, I could pretend that I do, but I pretend enough as it is. I don't have a degree in education. I have a B.S., with a major in chemistry, but I chose chemistry as a major solely because it was the only subject in which I received an "A" in my first semester at college. I'm pleased that you feel my reputation is admirable, but you might want to speak to some of my students after they've been messed up by me. I might not seem so worthy of your reverence after you hear what those charges have to say. Finally, let's be frank, I have no special talent for teaching. If I do anything to bring on success, besides being lucky, I guess it's not unreasonable to say that I work hard, try to observe with care, and listen to what my students are saying.

I have so many stories about teaching and teachers that I might as well have none, being unable to settle on one appropriate enough for this response. I do remember, however (who knows why), my first attempts at giving lessons back at the Marshall Chess Club in the early 1970s. The back room often had several teachers yapping away, and I was struck by how one in particular seemed to talk his way through the entire lesson, never giving his student a chance to breathe, let alone think for himself. Good lessons should offer lots of quiet time, where the student can endeavor to reason his or her way through the puzzles and problems of real chess play. But this teacher would always hold court, speaking in as loud a voice as he could, as often as he could, with the notion of displaying his "learning," so that the teacher's self promotion and purpose predominated over the student's own needs, not that that teacher ever bothered to determine what any student's needs might be. He was too busy flaunting what he thought to be his magnificence. But I did learn something from him, and that is, never to teach the way he did.

Question of the Month

The best answers will be published below.

After the moves and rules of chess, what should you teach a young child first?

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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...

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