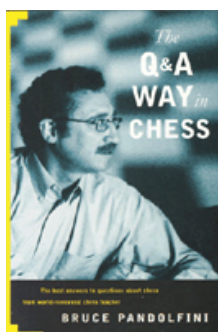




COLUMNISTS

The Q & A
Way

Bruce Pandolfini

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The Laws of Chess

Question My background is in science. I am always attempting to understand everything and to find the laws that govern it. There are many laws in chess. One of the most often cited ones is "knights before bishops," as many chess teachers say. Is this an important law in your system of teaching? What are the other important laws in your system of teaching? Which are the ones that every chess teacher acknowledges? **Peter Grimes (USA)**

Answer If you mean laws, and not principles, I doubt that "knights before bishops" even qualifies, regardless what some chess teachers say. It's not a law. It's not even a principle. It's a maxim, a jejune phrase that some teachers throw out with authority, as if it came from the lips of Isaac Newton. But if you did mean laws, I'm going to offer two very important ones: the first and second laws of thermodynamics. The second law seems especially true in chess. I can't tell you how many games I've analyzed that have headed toward maximum disorder.

Let's assume you mean principles, not laws. I don't know which chess principles are the most important, but I do know I've tried to answer this type of question before, when there was greater potential energy to answer questions like it in the system. Rather than stressing certain principles and one-liners, many chess teachers tend to bring out a few ideas right away, no matter how they illustrate or encapsulate those ideas.

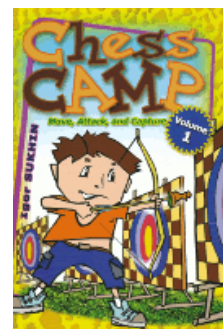
Most of us talk about the center, the importance of activating the forces quickly and relevantly, and the need to deal with king safety, with a preparation for the possibility of early castling. Cardinal in this discussion is the fight for the initiative and the significance of producing meaningful threats while making sure to respond to opposing threats in turn. Seizing and controlling open lines, avoiding weaknesses and trying to inflict them, gaining time and eschewing its waste, and a bunch of other germane notions, such as taking time to consider desirable alternatives, are also brought out in these initial sessions. But again, it's key to make the student realize that moves are not played in a vacuum, that chess is a two-way game. Not only must one affect his or her own plans, he or she must do so while countering and minimizing the opponent's plans. If there's an overriding approach to advocate, that's it – to base your moves on an analysis of what's really happening – whether it's phrased elegantly or not.

Question What should I teach young children first? When my grandchildren come to the house they are very interested in playing with the chessboard in the living room, but I am so busy talking to my daughter-in-law that I never have time to show them much. **Henri Arsenault (Canada)**

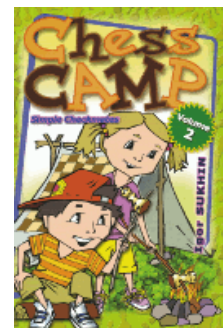
Answer There's no one thing you have to show them first. You don't even have to be strictly correct or legal in your presentation. That is, you can leave out some specific information, knowing that you can fill in gaps later, introducing what you didn't originally explain because it wasn't necessary to get going. For instance, as many chess teachers know (and not to be ridiculously obvious about this), but early on there's no compelling reason to talk about *en passant*. You'll come around to it in time. You can also tap into chess variants, as long as you make certain not to impart them too indelibly. Anything goes, as long as it works, and anything can work in the hands of a master teacher.

The key thing, rather than what you show, is how you show it. The aim is to engage your grandchildren so that they'll want to continue playing and learning more about the game you love. That's surely one message you'll want to get across, that you, their grandfather, love the game of chess. You may

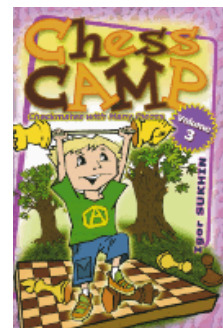
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also want to talk a little less to your daughter-in-law and a little more with your grand-kids. Or, I have another idea. Why don't you make her part of a group lesson? Then you can talk to her and them for the same money. Still, hold back on dwelling too much on *en passant*.

Question I am about a 1450 player and I have been playing for many years. I do not know if you have had a question like mine before, but I was wondering about analysis. When I play over a game, I look at every note and try to analyze thoroughly. This is hard work and I do not see many examples. But I have been told this is the right way to go about it, if I am going to get anywhere in chess. So no matter what the game is, no matter who played the game, if it is in print and in an opening I am playing myself, I play over it very, very well. What do you think about what I just said? Do you think it is wise to play over everything like a grandmaster does (they play over everything deeply)? Or should I be more selective? Thanking you in advance.
Pryor Marshall (USA)

Answer Grandmasters don't waste their time looking at everything, and neither should you. You don't have to play through every game thoroughly. If you did, much of it would be counterproductive. Do you really want to analyze every chess game you see in the greatest detail? What about all the uninspiring, ridiculously abstract, drawing pretenses that some strong competitors offer us? And how about all those, downright pedestrian, or illogically blunder laden games and examples of amateurs and unskilled children, many of which make their way into huge, uncritical databases? Wouldn't your life be a whole lot happier if you didn't have to expend time and effort on much of that morass of ambiguous and essentially inscrutable logic?

So naturally it makes more sense to play through games first merely to get a sense for their worth, at least to you. After you obtain an overview on a particular game, then you can better decide if you want to explore its intricacies further. By being so selective, making certain only to invest in illustrations you've already found intriguing, you are likely to get more out of your study and analysis sessions. In this regard you should be a little like Oscar Wilde, who I've quoted before: "I have the simplest tastes; I like only the best."

Question You have written more than a few books, and some of them get reviewed. The reviews are sometimes real good, but some of them are very critical of you. Reviews by John Watson and Edward Winter stand out. How do you feel about it when you are criticized by other chess writers? Do you feel the criticisms are fair? Have those reviews led you to change your writing style? Would you change any of your writings, if you could? By the way, I enjoy your books, but I wanted to know how you feel about what they say.
Paul Aggioti (USA)

Answer I would change practically all of my writings, if I could. I would even change this answer, and I still have time to do something about it. I've seen a few of the reviews you mention, and frankly I thought they were good reads. They were also funny, and while painful on the one hand, they made me laugh. Worse, I practically agreed with every word they said while I was laughing. Have those negative reviews changed my writing in some way? Who knows? I have no pretensions about my writing or my books. I am not a natural writer. It may not seem so, but I work very hard at trying to say what I mean and to say it well. But this is not so easy to do and I often do a bad job. What's more, just about all the time, I think I should have analyzed more carefully. I also wish I had avoided many of the categorical statements I've made through the years. I'm also not too crazy about many of my jokes. But look, there's not much I can do about what I've already done. Do I feel the criticisms are fair? Short of addressing each critical observation, which I have no intention of doing, I'd have to say yes. If I can't stand it, then I shouldn't be doing this. Hey, maybe I should try something else.

Question Larry Evans just passed away. He was Bobby Fischer's second in Iceland and he also won the U.S. Chess Championship a few times. He was known for the quality of his books. He received a nice obituary in the *New York Times* by Dylan Loeb McClain. Did you know Evans? Did you ever play

him? Was he a friend? What did you think of him? Do you have any odd remembrances about him to share? **Stephen Manstein (USA)**

Answer McClain's obituary was quite nice, but then Dylan always does a really good job. I did indeed know Larry Evans personally, but we weren't close friends. He was an incredibly talented individual, a grandmaster, a very fine writer, an excellent teacher, and a top professional. Without doubt, for about twenty years, Larry Evans was America's leading chess pro.

The first time I met him was at a chess exhibition he gave at the Marshall Chess Club (I think in 1963). I was a wise guy adolescent, and I thought I could catch him in a Sicilian line I had prepared. He quickly refuted my play, gained a pawn, and efficiently simplified to a winning endgame, which I managed to play out so that it was the last game left. Since there was still some fight in the position, he pulled up a chair and sat down across from me for about fifteen moves or so. He was gracious when I resigned, said some comforting words, and signed my score sheet. (I believe I've recounted this event before.) Fischer was there, waiting to go out with Evans afterward, and he saw the final moves. (Imagine trying to play intelligent chess with Bobby Fischer standing over you.) Somehow, as everyone was leaving, Mrs. Marshall got Bobby to sign the score sheet, too.

Years later I drew with Larry in the National Open (1970), and that's the only other time I played him. It was an exciting game, one in which I blew a winning attack and managed to cling to a draw by a surprising perpetual. Through the years I spoke to him now and then. Sometimes he'd call me up to ask if I knew how to reach so-and-so, especially a rich and powerful mogul who could make things happen. After the filming of *Searching for Bobby Fischer*, we had a number of exchanges on the final position of the movie, which one of his readers had shown should have been drawn. We joked about it, how, after all, this was a supposed game played by third-graders, and not an endgame study. Larry went on to write a column about the game.

On two other occasions he asked me about finding him publishing contacts for some of his older books, which were chess classics but had recently become neglected by the chess public. If you'd like an odd remembrance, I must say I also knew his mother, who I had met in Washington Square Park when I was a kid. On separate occasions, she wound up giving me at least three autographed copies of his books, including *New Ideas in Chess* (twice). As I say, he wasn't a close friend, but I admired and liked him very much. It's a great loss for American chess. He surely will be missed.

Question of the Month

The best answers will be published below.

What is Larry Evans's legacy to the chess world?

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