



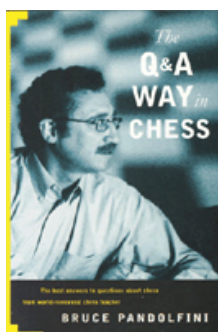
COLUMNISTS

The Q & A Way

Bruce Pandolfini

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Losing Appetite

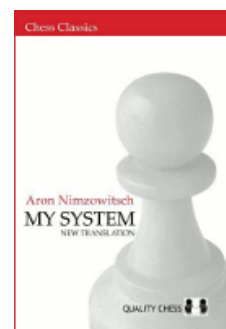
Question I'm around a "C" Tournament Class player and I've been out of chess for more than eight years. I've recently returned to chess on a weekly basis and one thing I've found is that it's hard to get back that unconditional love I once had for chess. When I first joined a chess club I was passionate about chess and everything that had to do with chess, to the point of being consumed by it. I loved to play and study, even do the homework I structured for myself. But then life happens; career, marriage, kids ... Life! I lost that true obsession I once had and I'm afraid that I may never get it back. So my question to you is: Have you ever lost the true passion or all consuming love for chess to the point where it is just a game? And, if so, how did you get back to the way it was when you were truly transfixed on chess and it was your life! **Joseph Propati (USA)**

Answer This is an excellent question. I'm afraid I may not be able to give it the time and effort it deserves. The answer would probably benefit from the greater experience of a more worldly-wise observer, maybe even someone outside the chess pantheon. But I'll do what I can. Indeed, the feelings of lost enthusiasm you've encountered are not uncommon. I, too, have gone through the same kind of emotional channels. Many of my students also have, so I think I might have a sense for the situation you've described, and, accordingly, have empathy for you.

As I've said, in chess it's certainly not an unusual scenario. It happens at various ages and through all playing levels. It happens to young juniors. They are constantly facing older and better players. No matter their initial success, they're bound to go through a period of losing lots of games. The result often is that their passion for playing the game evaporates and they give it up altogether. It happens to adolescents. To be sure, they have so many interests, capriciously changing passions from week to week, that their love of chess can hardly be expected to survive such internal turmoil. It happens to young adults, who leave school, start a new job, get married, and become engulfed in life's ups and downs. They can have gads of trouble keeping up their zeal for chess. It happens to people going through mid-life crises, who wonder where they've been, what they're doing, and where they're going. Chess may suddenly not be the only thing on their minds. And it happens to older adults, who begin to lose some of their focus and prized skills. As their games lack freshness and sharpness, their hunt for challenge and purpose begin to wane. In short, it happens to all of us.

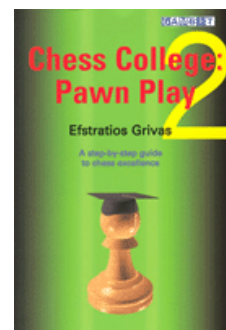
We don't have to search the world of chess to find examples. The outside environs are replete with them. Sometimes the trigger is disappointment or criticism. When Sergei Rachmaninoff's First Symphony was performed in 1897, it received devastating reviews, and the composer went into a funk, unable to compose again for three years. With the help of an analyst, his creative afflatus continued, and he was able to get back to musical heights, including his Second Symphony and his Second and Third Piano Concerti. Sometimes we're simply worn out and can't bear to think any more in a disciplined way. When the great mathematician, philosopher, and social activist Bertrand Russell finally finished his monumental work *Principia Mathematica* (with Alfred North Whitehead) – an enervating effort that took from 1910-1913 to complete – he was exhausted and his taste for rigorous logic and mathematical reasoning had disappeared. It would be years again before he could get back to doing theoretical math. That didn't stop him from winning the Nobel Prize for literature and writing many important books. Or sometimes we're simply bored and need to get back to another love, perhaps one of an earlier time. After the 1993-94 NBA season, when basketball icon Michael Jordan lost all taste for the game he had mastered, he retired from it to pursue an undistinguished sojourn in baseball. Once he had enough of that,

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by Daniel King

however, which took a year or so off his basketball career, it was back to the courts and championship hoops again, with much the same will to win – and to achieve – as he had before.

But we don't have to veer far from the chessboard to find analogous situations. When Paul Morphy, frustrated by various pretexts and excuses, couldn't realize the ambition of obtaining a title match with Howard Staunton, he lost his zest for competitive chess. In his case, he never really got back on the main road. Disenchanted, his aspirations gone for good, Morphy even belittled the occupation to which he had contributed so much. In the ambit of my own experience is Reuben Fine. When I was younger, I served as an assistant to Dr. Fine for several years. At maybe the zenith of his game, he put aside the mission of further chess accomplishment for the day-by-day work of psychoanalysis. He claimed he had no choice; that the need to make a living had to come first. Undoubtedly, that assertion had some truth behind it. But it seemed to me, from various asides and troubled looks he manifested at certain times, that he felt he couldn't go any further. Either that or he thought striving for further chess attainment wouldn't be worth the effort and eventual reward. No matter, whether for those reasons or others, he never played meaningful chess again.

A positive example, perhaps, is the stellar Sammy Reshevsky. His chess development was put on hold by the imposition of forced religious studies. Although what he achieved afterward is a testament to his extraordinary ability, winning the U.S. Championship numerous times and emerging as a world-class challenger, we have to wonder if the five years of lost time didn't in the end prevent him from becoming world chess champion.

In my own case, after I took a hiatus from the game, I found a more satisfying manner to be involved. Although I was never a quality player, I, like you, loved the game, too. I stopped playing for real in my early twenties. I got back to the game by accident, by having opportunities to teach, and I'm very happy I chose that road. If I try to think about the path I didn't take, the best I can do is to meander down the imagined lane evoked in Robert Frost's poem of epiphany, *The Road Not Taken*.

The truth is, we all need to take a break, now and then. It can even be a good thing, and once our appetites are revitalized, we can get back to our preferred pursuit with renewed passion and vigor. It helps if, once we do start playing again, to focus less on winning and more on enjoying the game. That should be our outlook. Naturally, we all like to win. But it wouldn't be much fun if we could win all the time without real opposition, without having to overcome obstacles and tests requiring determination and resourcefulness. So the best things we can do, once we get back to the game, are to give it our all and to revel in the experience totally, regardless of outcome. That mindset doesn't always work, and there still will be frustration and letdown. But if we stay the course, there also will be success. Some of that success, once we've wended our way through Dante's dark wood and emerged stronger for it, will be just as passionate and fulfilling as anything we experienced at the beginning of our journey. If there's a better road to take, I'm not aware of it.

Question I do not know how you got to be such a famous teacher. It is obvious you are. I presume you were once a strong player. If you were once a strong player, why do you not play anymore? I never see your name listed at tournaments. Did you find it too hard? Did you not have the time to play as often as you would like? Did you lose interest? Is there another reason? Is there an incident or happening you can mention that clarifies the matter? Did you lose your passion for chess? Maybe you are not as good a player as you think you are. Where is your source for passion and will power? I could also question how good a teacher you are, but that is not what I am asking. **John Saballa (USA)**

Answer Thank heaven for that small favor. I don't have the energy or wherewithal to defend myself on all fronts. Nonetheless, I will address one of your concerns. I was never a really strong player or ever claimed to be. I've made that clear on any number of occasions. So I don't know what I might have written in the past to make you think I had a great opinion of my own play. As far as passion for chess goes, true, I have lost it at times. But I always

seem to get it back. I do love the game, and that's why I teach chess, because I love the game. It once saved my life. Beyond that, it's been the source of unbelievable highs (and lows, may I add). It's also been a revealing diagnostic tool, helping me to understand more about people, myself, and possibly even you.

I was twenty-one-years old and playing speed chess with a good friend, another chess master, at 3:00 a.m. on the Berkeley campus. I didn't want to play at all. He insisted (I think he had lost a tough speed series earlier to another master and wanted to get even), so I went along with it. We played two speed games. I played terribly. He completely outplayed me. But somehow he was victimized by a few coffee house-shots, and I won both games reluctantly. Finally, in the third game, the same scenario took place. Once again I swindled him. I could see him getting furious. Fortunately, I lost on time, and felt incredibly relieved. Maybe he could win the next game as well. But a strange thing then happened. He looked me straight in the face, saying with utmost gravity, and much more rage than I could withstand at such an early hour, "Justice triumphs."

For a second or two I was transfixed on the picture of Karl Marx on the wall behind. Getting back to my friend, it struck me that he didn't think it was so much a game. It seemed he fully thought that he was the just and I was the unjust. That blew my mind, but then it got worse when I had a further insight. I thought to myself: maybe I think the very same way and never realized it. Maybe I think I'm the just and the rest of the world the unjust. (I realize now that I truly am the unjust, but that's a discussion for another time.) Anyhow, from the moment of that realization, I never took the competitive side of chess so seriously again, and though I played in a few events after that, I gave up trying to play tournament chess pretty much forever. But almost every month I still have to answer questions like this, and I find that a great source for passion and will power.

Question Can you recommend a chess book that shows each common pawn structure (double pawns, isolated pawn, backward pawn, etc) and briefly explain how to firstly attack it and secondly defend them. I am not looking necessarily for complete game examples but a brief description of how to attack and defend each structure. **Bruce Fox (USA)**

Answer While the following books may not need your needs precisely, they are well worth investigating. You might want to start with Aron Nimzowitsch's [*My System*](#), which many feel is the greatest chess book ever written. Several of Nimzo's other works should surely be of value as well, including [*Chess Praxis*](#) and *The Blockade*. You could also pick up a copy of Hans Kmoch's classic *Pawn Power in Chess*. It's a landmark effort, but you have to prepare yourself for Kmoch's terminology and diverting neologisms. The truth is, you have to be prepared for a bit of the same kind of thing in Nimzowitsch. I would also explore Andrew Soltis' very fine book, *Pawn Structure Chess*, which in turn has also become a classic. Probably the best American chess writer of the past half century (the gods Reinfeld and Chernev were born way before Andy), Soltis has many wonderful texts out there, including this one about pawn structure. I would also like to add the following works as being possibly helpful: Ludek Pachman's *Modern Chess Strategy*; Drazen Marovic's [*Understanding Pawn Play in Chess*](#); and Israel Gelfer's *Positional Chess Handbook*. All of these contain excellent material for perusal. Naturally, if you merely want to learn a few basic facts, you can do all right on the Internet, without having to buy anything. But the material presented above can only fill out your understanding of pawn structure and its integral part in strategy.

Question I am something like a 1400 player. I have been playing chess since I was a boy in elementary school. I am now fifty-three-years old. I have one question. I know chess is a tough game. I do not expect ever to become a grandmaster. But you have been through it. You know what it takes. When and how did you become a grandmaster? **Jason Pressing (USA)**

Answer I don't know much about it, but I know I am not *it* – that is, I am not a grandmaster, so I can't tell you the year I first became one. If you read the rest of this column, you will surely realize that. About the only thing I've been

through today is the wringer. Even so, I wish you well. Take solace that I'm in a similar boat to yours. Only thing, mine is sinking and I can't swim as well as I used to. Worse, I never learned how to swim at all.

Question I recently saw a question on a message board that I could identify with and would like your input on. As we are all getting older, I and others have noticed that even though we believe we know more about chess, and have many more resources, it seems very difficult or close to impossible to regain our old rating. This seems to be true even if we put more time, effort and tactical efforts in. I know it is probably related to our age, but is this a universal? Is it a given? Is there a way around it? Do you know why this happens or how to change it? **Cliff Batezel (USA)**

Answer It gets harder as we get older. It gets harder to concentrate. It gets harder to learn things. It gets harder to sit down and stay in place for long periods of time. I'm certain it gets harder in other ways, too, but it's getting harder for me to recall all those ways and mention them now. Wow, I suddenly forgot the question and had to look back. That part of it, looking back, was easy. I don't know if the problem is universal, but it certainly seems to be. It happens here, it happens there, it happens at star's end. Of course, you still have to concentrate to play good chess, but maybe you can select time controls at which you feel more comfortable and that allow focusing without becoming drained. Perhaps you can learn some new things without as much effort by using software to avoid the toil of moving pieces over a chessboard. You might also consider getting up now and then, even when playing at home on the Internet, walking about for thirty seconds or so just to get the blood circulating again. You don't even have to sit. You can stand, if you can stand it. Make sure, however, if you've walked away from the board, or if the change in altitude has made you light-headed, that you regain your focus before playing your next move. I've been told by those in the know that focusing on the next move can be a very good thing. Happy New Year!

Question of the Month

The best answers will be published below.

What chess resolution is likely to be the first one you break this year?

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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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