



## INTERVIEW: AMERICA'S CHESS TEACHER

By Pete Tamburro

A 50-YEAR  
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# 25 Questions for... **Bruce Pandolfini**



Whether Bruce Pandolfini was guest starring on the Shelby Lyman hosted PBS live coverage of the Fischer–Spassky match or almost 50 years later conjuring up the games Beth Harmon would be playing in *The Queen’s Gambit*, he found he had a knack for communication with the general public in order to invite them into the mysterious world of chess.

In between, he has been a monthly columnist since 1979 in *Chess Life* with his work directed at educating the average player. Bruce has had over 30 books published. In private lessons, he has had an all-star cast of student alumni. His role, along with other fine chess teachers, in developing chess in schools in the New York area has been ongoing for 50 years.

And, by the way, he could really play chess back in the day. At the Atlantic Open in 1969, GM Pal Benko had to go  $7\frac{1}{2}-1\frac{1}{2}$  to finish a half point ahead of Bruce and Orest Popovych at 7-1.

At the 1970 National Open, GMs Larry Evans and Arthur Bisguier were tied at 7-1, with Walter Browne and Ariel Mengarini at  $6\frac{1}{2}-1\frac{1}{2}$  and Bruce, Ken Smith, Louis Levy, Walter Cunningham and Eric Bone all tied at 6-1. Bruce had outplayed Evans in the last round for 32 moves, with an inaccuracy on move 33 allowing Evans to escape with a draw (interested parties: *Chess Life 1970 p. 389*). His peak rating was 2300.

However, we are here to celebrate a 50-year chess teaching career that took over from his playing and allowed thousands of people to benefit from that decision. Bruce shares some very honest feelings about how it all came about and what it has meant to him.

The Lakewood, NJ, born Bruce grew up in Brooklyn. He now resides in Manhattan with his wife of 40 years, Roselyn, and he has an adult daughter, Sarah, of whom he is immensely proud.

**■ You are celebrating your 50<sup>th</sup> year of chess teaching. As it was concurrent with the Fischer explosion, you are inextricably associated with that era. So our first question is how did you learn chess and how did the way you learned impact on your chess teaching?**

I learned some of the moves and rules at the age of nine from my mother. But I didn’t really get into chess until I was almost fourteen. I was walking through the Brooklyn Public Library, the Grand Army Plaza Branch, not far from where Bobby Fischer lived, and came upon the chess section. As I sampled this volume and that, I became fascinated. I don’t know what it was about chess. Maybe the diagrams, notations, personalities, or possibly the look of the pieces. Whatever the reasons, I was totally captivated. There were more than thirty books in the section. You were allowed to take out six at a time, and I couldn’t decide which ones to choose. So, I made my first chess decision. I went back six times that day and cleaned out the entire section. I didn’t go to school for a month.

Thereafter, I played in Washington Square Park every chance I got. I learned a lot from players like master Alex Dunne. I admired his cool demeanor at the board and tried to emulate it. I also joined the Marshall Chess Club, practicing every Sunday with master Harry Fajans. We’d play

offhand for ninety minutes or so, Harry spicing it with witty, down-to-earth commentary. I’ve never forgotten his pithy one-liners and still use them on my own students. At the Marshall, I digested experience playing within a savvy group of seven or eight juniors led by Andy Soltis. Andy was incredibly talented, and practically all those juniors became masters. Finally, I also benefited from analyzing Russian and German chess journals with Raymond Weinstein. In various ways, all that experience informed my teaching.

**■ What made you decide to teach chess instead of playing it?**

I played competitive chess for a bit, but never that much, somewhere between 250–300 rated games in my life. There were fewer opportunities to play back then. My highest published rating was 2300 on the head, though at my best I was probably playing somewhat higher. I was a decent speed player, winning the rapids at both the Marshall and Manhattan chess clubs several times. I had really given up playing serious chess in my early twenties.

While working at the Strand Bookstore, I was offered a chance to be an analyst for PBS assisting Shelby Lyman covering the Fischer–Spassky Match. As the match forged on, front page news every day, I was inundated with students and lessons. I often worked from 6am to 2am and was a sleepless zombie. You’d be surprised how many people take lessons after midnight... actors, rock stars, musicians, artists, ladies of the evening, graveyard shift workers, and, of course, chess players. Once I started teaching chess, I couldn’t stop. It was a juggernaut. Without grand design, I de facto became a chess teacher. Besides, I enjoyed teaching perhaps more than I did playing.

**■ What made you decide to teach chess as a career?**

I majored in chemistry, but never worked a day as a chemist. Then I wanted to be a poet. That didn’t work out either. I didn’t consciously choose to become a chess teacher. But I found that I had opportunities and loved what I was doing. In no time, chess teaching became my profession and way of life.



### ■ Did you ever think you would be teaching 50 years later?

I never knew what I'd be doing next week, let alone what I'd be doing fifty years hence.

### ■ What were the circumstances of your very first lesson?

My teaching career began with Shelby Lyman. At that time, Shelby was considered by many to be America's foremost chess teacher. Even before appearing on Channel 13, he held regular classes at various Village emporia and the Marshall Chess Club. Moreover, he had a steady private practice of about a dozen students. He was able to make a living doing it, and wasn't aware of anyone else who did.

Shelby invited me to observe a lesson with a new student. I could then get a sense for what chess teaching was like. The lesson began with the student sitting on the White side waiting for the moves and rules to be taught. Without explanation, Shelby suggested they play a game. A quizzical look came over the student's face. He said he didn't know how to move the pieces. That didn't faze Shelby who intoned: "Move them the way you think they move." What a remarkable thing to say. Naturally, the surprised student couldn't move the pieces correctly. But emboldened by Shelby's imaginative challenge, he was focused and poised to pick up the basics more quickly once they were explained. That was the day I decided chess teaching was for me.

### ■ You have been heavily involved with teaching chess in the schools. What were your early experiences in getting that set up? How did you convince schools to participate? What kinds of challenges arose?

I've had some history with teaching chess in schools at the scholastic and college levels. Along with friends George Kane and Frank Thornally, I shared the first college courses for credit at the New School for Social Research starting in 1973. The four different courses we offered were attached to the philosophy department. Each course was worth one credit. Thereafter, we created various school programs in private and public schools across the New York metropolitan area.

Here and there, major players in the investment world either gave us advice or actual assistance. Saul Steinberg, Arthur Carter, Steve Friedman, Bruce Wasserstein, Stanley Druckenmiller – all helped us at different points. When I taught Frank Samford, whether during lessons or on the golf course in Alabama or Georgia, we talked about supporting young talents on the road to becoming grandmasters. To me, that was the genesis of the Samford Scholarship a bit later.

The actual chess-in-the-schools program was started in late 1985 by me and Faneuil Adams, the retired president of Mobil Oil South. I still recall Fan's opening line as he approached me at the Manhattan Chess Club at Carnegie



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Hall, where I was the executive director. "I think you're the guy I want to talk to." It soon became clear that Fan hoped to improve tournaments at the Manhattan Chess Club, even throughout New York City. The conversation moved from chess professionalism to scholastic education. I always believed chess professionals needed a large base of support for success. To build that support, I reasoned we had to introduce chess into school systems. My goal was to see the day arise when everyone in the country knew the moves and rules of chess. The chess professional would then be assured a fan base appreciative of the game and its leading proponents.

It didn't take long before Fan and I became a two-player team presenting chess to the New York City public school higher-ups. We gave sundry demonstrations to Board of Ed teachers, administrators, critical thinking experts, and observers. It didn't go well at first. There was considerable opposition to

chess becoming part of the curriculum. But I just kept hammering away, emphasizing that playing chess tended to make students better thinkers. In session after session, I illustrated how techniques used to solve certain types of chess problems could be adapted to stimulate problem-solving skills in math, logic, and science.

In today's world, it's not always necessary to validate the worth of the game or show its impact on other skillsets. But we had no choice. I modified an initial syllabus from earlier days, one I had put together for the New School and later adapted for the Hunter College Elementary School. With help from Bruce Alberston, who was indefatigable, we started giving experimental classes to licensed Board of Ed teachers. What was then called the Manhattan Chess Club School Program would soon morph into Chess-in-the-Schools.

### ■ We know you taught with different people. Who comes to mind? How did that come about and how did it work out?

I have had opportunities to work with some of the best chess teachers in the United States. For a while I was Shelby's assistant and learned quite a bit from him. In 1972 I formed a company (U.S. Chess Masters, Inc.) with George Kane and Frank Thornally, two of the finest chess teachers I've ever known. Joining us at the Shelby Lyman Chess Institute were Julio Kaplan and Sal Matera, two other outstanding chess teachers. All of us would discuss what we had been doing and the right ways to teach chess. I learned an awful lot from those five pros. Every chance I got, I tried to observe experienced teachers in action so I could retool my own lessons.

### ■ You have had more than a few great talents under your tutelage. Please review some of the earlier ones as well as the most recent ones.

I have had many wonderful students right from the beginning, whether in classes, seminars, and/or private lessons. I recall fondly early sessions in the seventies with Robert LeDonne, Andy Lerner, and Bob Gavrich. The latter two became masters. Thereafter



came various lessons with Joel Benjamin, Max Dlugy, Rachel Crotto, Josh Waitzkin, David Arnett, Morgan Pehme, Adam Maltese, Fabiano Caruana, Robert Hess, Christopher Yoo and a brace of others. Some students, like Irina Krush and Laura Ross Smith, I gave only one or two lessons to, yet I remember their luminous intellects vividly. All these, and others not here listed, had the acumen to excel and shine. But you never know who will do what.

Years ago, I had a student (let's call him Joseph Smith), who liked chess but had a particular learning problem. He stammered terribly. In teaching him chess, I also tried to allay and remedy



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his stuttering, much of the lesson time focusing on that problem. After a couple of years, when he was in the 4<sup>th</sup> grade I believe, his family moved away. We lost contact. Maybe seven or eight years later a message was left on my answering service. "Mr. Pandolfini, this is Joseph Smith. I wanted to tell you I've just won the high school nationals. Thank you for all you did for me." Those words were spoken in perfect, confident English. Here and there, you find yourself sitting across the table from some of the most gifted people on the planet, and it may take years before you realize it.

#### ■ How frequently do you stay in touch with former students?

Occasionally, I have lunch or dinner with former students, and at times with their parents. Fred Waitzkin and I see

each other every couple of weeks. In a way, it's all one big family that keeps growing and growing.

#### ■ Which of your students in turn became chess teachers?

Whether they started as youngsters or adults, took private lessons or classes, a number became chess teachers. Some became quite distinguished, such as David MacEnulty, Joel Benjamin, Max Dlugy, Robert Hess, and Evan Rabin. Some became eminent teachers in other disciplines, even university professors. Then there's Josh Waitzkin. He's so gifted, he could teach almost anything.

#### ■ With respect to your students, what things hit you in determining whether a student has a special talent?

There are a few things. But here's one tipoff. Chess is a game of spatial relations. Every idea over the chessboard, especially in young children, is reflected in their eye movement. You can tell what a child is thinking by looking where their eyes go. They're not yet sophisticated enough to disguise this. If they have a good deal of focused eye movement, they likely have chess talent. (I can still recall aspects of my conversation with Joel Benjamin's parents. The spotlight was on Joel's intelligent eyes and face.)

David Feldman, then professor at Tufts, agreed with my interpretation about eye movement when he studied several of my students back in the 1970s. Often students think I'm reading their minds when I'm merely following what their eyes are telling me. Even beyond such indications is a student's passion for the game. This I think is the most important factor. If students love chess, it usually loves them back.

#### ■ How do you approach parents when you have a student like that, and what do you recommend to them?

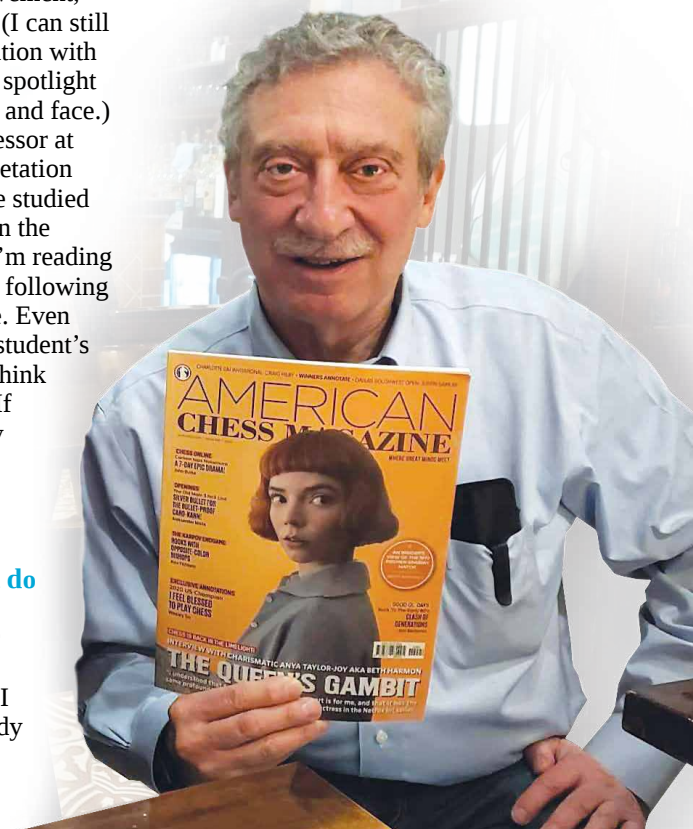
If a child displays a talent for chess, I let the parents know, saying why I think this is so. I will also lay out a plan of study for further development. My recommendations vary from student to student. More

important than taking lessons, however, is to play chess against challenging opposition on a regular basis. I tell this emphatically to all parents.

#### ■ What great masters' games do you have your private students go through first?

I don't have an ordered set of games I automatically show every student. It depends on various matters. Unless students are complete beginners, I tend to start by playing them at least a few moves. While playing, I pose investigative questions. It usually takes no more than a few moves to intuit who they are. Introductory students might get to see four or five Morphy games. A bunch of opening traps illuminating do's and don't's may follow.

Whenever I show games with more complex themes, I will likely offer examples from the world champions and top players. Capablanca, Alekhine, and Botvinnik, Tal, Fischer, and Spassky, Petrosian and Karpov, Kasparov and now Carlsen. Tarrasch, Rubinstein, Nimzowitsch, Keres, Bronstein, et al. I rely solely on games I know by heart. I don't like to read from





notes, especially with newer students. I'd rather keep my focus on their faces, remaining alert to subtle reactions.

I don't just show instructive games. When I do present a game, it's always an interactive process, posing questions and allowing think time between moves. George Kane had enormous courage. He would pose a problem and keep his mouth shut for at least a few minutes, enabling students to explore for themselves. Very few of us can do that. But George could and did. He helped me appreciate the value of patience and silence.

**■ Do you give homework on endings and middle game and then have the kids bring their efforts and questions back to you or do you prefer to present the material face to face right away?**

I do both. While I like to play off in-person reactions, I also give students homework once I've gotten a take on what they need. Pertinent homework can reinforce what students have learned. Homework is usually tactical – across all three phases, opening, middlegame and endgame. When I offer strategic positions, I frequently accompany them with lead-in directions



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and questions. While I often give some homework, I really don't like giving lots of it.

**■ Many people believe immersing students in tactics is the best way to speed development. What's your opinion of that?**

I think that's a reasonable approach. Much of chess has to do with finding shots. There's more to chess, of course. At the beginning of my teaching career, I agreed with Tarrasch, Lasker, and Capablanca, all of whom emphasized



the endgame. But clearly much of chess has to do with tactics. Accordingly, I do present tactical problems, especially endgame stratagems. I like to do it thematically, showing related examples in blocks of four, from simple or defining illustrations to harder ones. No matter what I'm trying to exemplify, I do it with zeal, hoping my love for the game can ignite theirs.

**■ How should chess teachers that end up with after-school classes filled in part by students whose parents use them as a baby-sitting service deal with the situation?**

If parents truly use the class for "baby-sitting," the teacher should just teach normally. But this is not a common problem. The bigger problem is when parents try to control what and how the teacher teaches. Stories about that could fill a very big book.

**■ One of the big problems historically in U.S. chess has been retention. Kids play in great numbers at the elementary level, and then, when high school hits, they are attracted to typical teenage activities and interests, like the opposite sex and sports, and participation drops off. How do you think we should deal with that?**

I'm not sure we have to deal with it.

It's merely the way things are. We should expect developing youngsters to get interested in other pursuits. Again, I'd continue teaching the same way I always teach, showing the wonders of chess. While trying to reach all students, it's expected our efforts will not be appreciated by everyone equally. Some are apt to be excited more than others, and those are the ones likely to stay with chess.

**■ What role can local chess clubs play in the development of young talent? What's the tally up to this point?**

Opportunities to play are critical. Chess is highly cerebral and some of its principles can be assimilated without necessarily playing. But it's still a game, like soccer and baseball, and much is gained by playing consistently and often. A club can bring youngsters together for common purpose and to share experience. To be sure, there's strength in numbers. The larger the group, the more likely the best will emerge from it. But close personal ties are also important. In the same way that excelling college students are challenged and nurtured by being together at top universities, peers in chess clubs can fuel rivalry and competition, learning from each other and inspiring movement up the



### ■ What have been your favorite moments with teaching chess?

I don't think I've had one favorite instance. I've had many. I can remember exalting moments of victory, as students won national championships or other major events. Such success never grows old. When Fabiano Caruana had that spectacular result in the 2014 Sinquefeld Cup, and when he later earned the right to play Magnus Carlsen a World Championship Match, I was overjoyed. I was thrilled when then 8-year-old Max Pomeranc, star of *Searching for Bobby Fischer*, finished 6<sup>th</sup> in the actual Primary Nationals. But I'm also excited when students are shown what they did wrong in a game and then exploit that knowledge in a subsequent game. Or when you prepare a student for a championship game and the preparation is right on the money. The practical application of advice can be exhilarating.



ladder. Although considerable progress has been made in America over the fifty years since the Fischer-Spassky Match, we're not quite there yet. We still need more clubs and more youngsters playing on a steady basis. One new twist that's proved helpful are online chess clubs. But there's a tradeoff. These very large entities tend to be more distant and impersonal. Nonetheless, Chess.com and similar worldwide services are finding ways to cope with those problems, so the future is hopeful.

### ■ When did you and why did you decide to write about chess?

I had always tried to write. Not about chess at first, but poetry and short fiction. By my early twenties, I had produced a small collection of about 50 poems. Thinking back, it was fancifully adolescent. Then the Fischer-Spassky Match came along. I was hired to write three books for a well-known chess personality. A big break came when Simon and Schuster hired me to replace titles written by Fred Reinfeld, Irving Chernev, and Al Horowitz with new books. Those giants were irreplaceable, but I forged ahead and created the Fireside Chess Library. I also was helped by Burt Hochberg, the editor of *Chess Life* and my mentor. His advice was of inestimable value.

### ■ Which books are your favorites? Are they the same as the ones that sold best?

Of my published works, my favorite is *Bobby Fischer's Outrageous Chess Moves*. It gave me pleasure playing through all those Fischer games. After the book came out, Bobby said he didn't like the word "outrageous," claiming it had negative overtones. It sold okay, despite Fischer's objections.

I'm reminded I once needed a snappy title for a new book. I was in a bar, sitting around with other chess teachers. We were talking about a tournament round we had just witnessed. One teacher said so and so had played "a nice trap." Another one quickly responded: "Yeah, he really zapped him." At that point a bell went off in my head. I began saying to myself, "traps and zaps" ... "traps and zaps" ... "traps and zaps." Suddenly, I had my title. *Traps and Zaps*. That book would go on to sell a ton of copies. Maybe I should go to bars more often.

### ■ What kind of things came out of teaching chess that you never expected?

I never expected that playing chess tends to make one a better reader. Why? Because you wind up reading a lot of chess material. Another

observation concerns teaching and playing. I came to realize that these two different ways of thinking could at times be counterproductive. The reasoning goes like this. When you're teaching, you're trying to help someone. When you're playing, you're trying to hurt someone. Do a lot of either and unconsciously it may impact your performance when doing the other. You wouldn't want the softness of teaching to impair your play. Nor would you want the hardness of play to make you unintentionally more competitive when teaching. The solution is to be mindful of these predispositions, whether you're teaching or playing. If you're cognizant of the problem, you can cope with it effectively. You should be able to do both, playing competitively and still teaching compassionately. One more unexpected thing I learned is that possibly I preferred teaching to playing. Even so, I still play chess every morning online. That's how I start my day.

### ■ What other aspects of chess have you been involved with these last 50 years?

I have always had an interest in promoting chess. I have done work in advertising, public relations, publishing, film, television, and other media. But it's hard not to mention *Searching for Bobby Fischer* and *The Queen's Gambit*.

### ■ Looking back, what might you have done differently?

Are you kidding? Just about everything.

### ■ What are your future plans or goals that you still would like to accomplish?

Beyond getting another crack at life, I'd like to enjoy these last few years. There are places I haven't seen and things I haven't done. There are books I haven't read and music I haven't heard. There's also much to reread and rehear. I'd like to write one last book before it's all over, if ever I can find the time and energy. If there's a special debt I'd like to pay back, it's to the game of chess itself for all the joy it's given me. I must admit, I could never pay it back in full. ■