



Chess Educator Of The Year: Bruce Pandolfini

An award that Ben Kingsley has not won.

By Dr. Alexey Root, WIM

EIGHTY PEOPLE ATTENDED the free lecture by Bruce Pandolfini on February 23, 2012. His presentation was part of the 11th Annual ChessFest at The University of Texas at Dallas. ChessFest is a celebration of chess organized by University of Texas (UT) Dallas' Eugene McDermott Library and the UT Dallas Chess Program. ChessFest also featured UT Dallas chess team member GM Julio Sadorra's blindfold chess exhibition, at Chess Plaza near the center of the UT Dallas campus.

Pandolfini's topic was "How I Became A Professional Chess Teacher." A national chess master, Pandolfini has written dozens of instruction books and is a highly sought after chess teacher. Pandolfini's legacy spans back to his role as an analyst for PBS' coverage of the 1972 world championship match between Bobby Fischer and Boris Spassky. To the general public he is most recognizable for the 1993 film *Searching for Bobby Fischer* that was based on the book of the same title by Fred Waitzkin. In the movie, Oscar-winning actor Ben Kingsley plays Pandolfini as chess prodigy Josh Waitzkin's teacher.

Pandolfini was not always a chess teacher. He said, "Let me say at the outset that I was never trained as a chess teacher. Back in 1972, when I first started teaching, I was a chess master, but an undistinguished one, and certainly I knew nothing about the art and science of teaching the game of chess. I had a degree in chemistry, and I had done some graduate work in physical chemistry, but I never worked a day as a chemist. I had dropped out of graduate school to pursue a playing career in chess, but it didn't pan out." Pandolfini worked odd jobs such as salesperson at the now out-of-business Gimbel's department store. He amused himself by sometimes asking customers, "May I hinder you?"

An amateur poet, he took a job at the Strand bookstore. While working there, he was offered the PBS commentator position. It paid expenses only. But its Fischer-Spassky coverage was the second most popular PBS show of the 1970s (after the Watergate hearings). The PBS chess shows ignited interest in chess lessons among adults. Soon Pandolfini was working 75-80 hours a week as a chess teacher, sometimes teaching chess to rock stars at 1:00 a.m.

From 1972-2012, Pandolfini's main source of income has been teaching private chess lessons. Early on, he mostly taught adults. For one private lesson with a businessman, Pandolfini ended up as an unintentional chess analyst. The businessman asked him for a best move in a non-descript position. The next day, the businessman invited Pandolfini back to analyze what would be the best move in

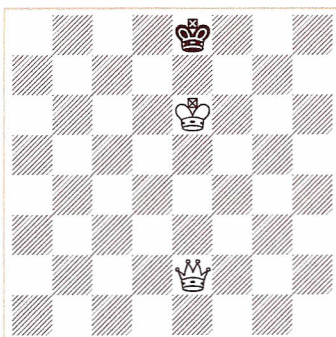
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the same position one move further advanced. After a few more moves, Pandolfini had helped the businessman win two pieces. Then a second businessman asked for a private lesson. At that lesson, the second businessman displayed a very familiar chess position in which the second businessman was two pieces behind!

One of my Chess Online students, Rachel Perales, shared her summary of that story, "Each man had hired Pandolfini to help him win the game, unaware that the other had done the same thing. Although Pandolfini ended up letting the two men know what was going on, by inviting them both to lunch, he joked that he could have become a rich man by letting the game go on indefinitely."

To supplement his chess teaching income, Pandolfini has written about chess, given chess exhibitions (such as blindfold games or simultaneous exhibitions), and been a chess consultant (as for the *Searching for Bobby Fischer* film). He added, "Another bolster to my income has come from administering and running businesses, such as managing the Manhattan Chess Club when it was in Carnegie Hall, or by co-founding and developing the Chess-In-The-Schools program in New York City. Neither enterprise was lucrative, but both left memories."

For his first two years with the Chess-In-The-Schools program, Pandolfini earned nothing. The main task then was to convince the New York Board of Education to allow the program into schools. Pandolfini shared some of the chess examples he presented to the New York Board of Education. The first example he showed was:

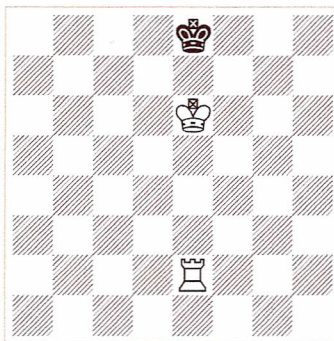


White to mate in two

The second example he showed was:

(see diagram top of next column)

(See solutions at end of this feature.) I recalled a video where Pandolfini explained these problems (Chess Now - episode 41, about 19 minutes into the episode, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DjmZrg6k4aQ>). Pandolfini gave a similar explanation to that shown in the video to the ChessFest audience. He added that the New York Board of Education was most impressed by how solving



White to mate in three

these chess examples taught critical thinking.

In year three with Chess-In-The-Schools, Pandolfini earned \$3,000. For the fourth year he earned \$4,000. He did not work for the money; he worked to help chess. As the program grew, he had to find more chess teachers. Pandolfini mentioned that he first turned to chess players. Yet those chess-player teachers could not be alone in classrooms, since each classroom had to have a certified teacher present. Therefore, Pandolfini conducted chess training sessions for certified teachers.

After the initial Fischer-Spassky wave of adult students, Pandolfini has mostly taught children. Children tend to be very emotional about losses. If a chess student loses, the chess teacher should be empathetic. The teacher might share a story about when he or she lost a game or simply state "I know how you feel." When a chess student wins, Pandolfini said, "I really zing them." That is, he critically analyzes that win. Wins show chess weaknesses just as much as losses do. A student is usually more willing to show a win than a loss. Finally, a student is also more open to hearing criticisms of poor moves after winning than after losing.

Pandolfini said that his students learn not to move the pieces during analysis. Chess involves visualizing. Visualizing must be practiced. About one year into chess teaching, he began telling his students, "If you move the pieces when analyzing, even if you get it right, you are wrong. But if you tell me what your planned moves are, without moving the chessmen, I will give you another chance if your moves are wrong."

When I interviewed Pandolfini over lunch (see sidebar), he highlighted aspects of Bobby Fischer's life that chess students should emulate. Pandolfini said, "One time Bobby Fischer sat with two 1500-rated players as they analyzed a game that they had just played. Of course, Fischer was much above their level. But that didn't matter. Fischer talked to them as equals. He was interested in the chess game. That's what I tell students too. Students shouldn't think so much about the ratings of players but should instead

consider chess positions."

One time, Pandolfini saw Fischer disagreeing with almost everything that Bernard Zuckerman said about a particular chess game. In Pandolfini's opinion, "Zuckerman could describe a chess idea in English better than anyone else." What impressed Pandolfini was that Fischer and Zuckerman could argue about chess yet remain friends.

Dr. Abby Kratz presented Pandolfini with the UT Dallas Chess Educator of the Year Award for 2012. Past recipients are Susan Polgar, 2004; Sunil Weeramantry, 2005; Erik Anderson, 2006; David MacEnulty, 2007; Beatriz Marinello, 2008; Dr. Stephen Lipschultz, 2009; Dr. Jonathan Rowson, 2010; and Elizabeth Shaughnessy, 2011.

Abby Kratz is the associate provost of UT Dallas. Jim Stallings, UT Dallas' chess program director, also spoke at the Chess Educator of the Year ceremony. Stallings was "pleased to welcome an honoree with such a legendary reputation as Bruce Pandolfini to UT Dallas. His approach is to teach students how to think. In Pandolfini's own words, he teaches how 'to read other people and to understand oneself.'" The full text of Pandolfini's acceptance speech, as well as more information about ChessFest, is at the Chess Program website www.utdallas.edu/chess/.

See "Pandolfini answers fans' questions" on next page.

SOLUTIONS:

First example: 1. Qe5 (1. Qb2 Kd8 [1. ... Kf8 2. Qh8 mate] 2. Qb8 mate) 1. ... Kd8 (1. ... Kf8 2. Qh8 mate) 2. Qb8 mate.

Second example: 1. Rd2 (1. Rf2 Kd8 2. Rc2 Ke8 3. Rc8 mate) 1. ... Kf8 2. Rg2 Ke8 3. Rg8 mate.



Bruce Pandolfini being presented with his Chess Educator of the Year plaque by Abby Kratz, Associate Provost at University of Texas at Dallas.