



A Few Thoughts on Learning and Competing

By Bruce Pandolfini

1. Just Begin

Start where you are, with what you already know. Don't look for the right place to begin. Don't worry about learning the wrong way. Don't think about finding the right book, teacher, or method. However you go, your opponents will light the path by beating you. We learn best by doing, which is a good way to learn anything. So in the beginning we're urged to play before we know how. Not everyone can do it, but those who try are ahead of those who don't. They know some of the obstacles, and that's a step on the road to conquering them.

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2. Make a commitment

Our game is demanding. It requires effort and dedication. If we let our minds wander, or play with ambivalence, or lack energy, we lose. We can't show up and expect to get by. We're playing people. They play for real. They don't care about our troubles. They'd exploit any weakness without quarter. So the course is clear. In order to succeed we must fight to the end. That attitude doesn't always win. But it commands respect, and on a long journey, we need it to point the way.

3. Expect best response

Adversaries are predictable. They never cooperate unless it's to their advantage or they have no choice. If they see we have an answer, they play differently. We gamble, but not really. Nor do we look for trouble. We're opportunists, ready to exploit what comes our way. Yet we never expect the opponents to play along. We can't suppose they're going to blunder, or fail to see the threat. Even a novice can make a good decision by accident. So we play the odds, expecting the best response, armed for combat against master or lucky beginner.

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4. Beware of self-deception

The player is always striving to know the truth, which can be many things and therefore misleading. For example, truth can be big or small. It can be objective or subjective. Objective truth is true for everyone or no one. Subjective truth works only for a particular player, opponent, observer, or commentator. But it works, as does factual truth, relative truth, practical truth, and truth for truth's sake. With all that truth, it's easy to fall back on our own truth, the most deceptive of all. Fortunately, the game can't be won by a lie.

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5. Take control

Players clash for the initiative. If we don't fight for it, our opponent might seize the reins and become us. Whoever wrests control has greater freedom and new choices, which fuels the attack. Feeding off that surge, the aggressor hopes to impose restraints and extract concessions, leading to more rewards and fresh options for the mounting onslaught. From options to control, the process is unstoppable, and each play builds on the one before it.

6. Appreciate small differences

Some games are played the same way over and over. That helps us learn how to win, doing the same things every chance we get. But even the same moves can be played differently. We can play them at different speeds or on different days. We can try them at different times against different opponents. Nor do we ever have to wear the same clothes or feel the same way. And there are many other elements that play a role, if we factor them in. It's in those illusory differences that surprising creativity can be found.

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7. Make something out of nothing

We start even and what follows is small change. We create tiny differences and turn them to our advantage. We convert the immaterial to the material and the intangible to the tangible. We make the temporary permanent and the fleeting lasting. We gather nuances and favorable transitions into an overall advantage. If we do it right our superiority becomes overpowering. We can't be stopped and win the game by force. But victory can come so suddenly it's easy to miss how we got there: by gradually making something out of nothing.

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8. Think like they think

The bedrock of defense is mindset. Players are cautious, always wary of potential problems. So we look in the mirror, entering the defender from the mind of the attacker. We imagine being where the opponent is, conspiring against us. Suddenly, defense is attack, and attack defense. We become the other side, seeing the idea first to sap it of value. That neutralizes the opponent, who doesn't know we have until it's too late.

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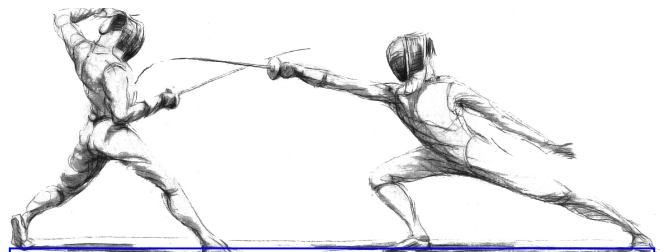
9. Avoid bad habits

We keep our minds active, but don't burden ourselves needlessly. So we assign some tasks to involuntary procedure. That way, certain things get done. Indeed, true ability is implied by the number of operations we can perform without having to think about them; the more, the better. Reactions are important in timed competition, when excessive thinking can hasten defeat. But we must always resist thinking too superficially. It could lead to bad habits, such as undue thinking, or not thinking at all.

10. Look for patterns

The game is fraught with everyday parallels. It's not that its situations have direct bearing on daily living. They may or may not. But many of the methods and strategies used to solve problems of play, with creative input, may be applied to the real world. Beyond that, we can often use the solution of one quandary as a template for another, even in different universes. It's surprising how far we can go on a good analogy.

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Bruce has been teaching chess at the Fencers Club Summer Day Camp for three years. He has written this for our athletes and originally titled it, *A Few Thoughts on Competition: Chess, Fencing and Otherwise*.