Interview with GM Peter Wells

Questions by Mark Rivlin

A prolific chess author, GM Peter Wells has written nine books, including the recently published *Chess Improvement – It's All In The Mindset* (co-authored with Barry Hymer, an expert in psychology and education) which has received excellent reviews. Peter has an impressive portfolio of training success with the England Open and Women's squads and with England's top young players through the Chess Trust's Accelerator Programme. We are delighted that he is providing a monthly column for *Chess Moves*.

Tell us about your playing career, the highs and lows.

I was lucky to be part of a very strong generation of players in the UK: Nigel Short is just a couple of months younger than me and Julian Hodgson, Danny King, Jo Gallagher, Stuart Conquest, John Emms, Willy Watson, and James Howell (amongst others – apologies to anyone I have missed out!) were all just a couple of years either side. I think this provided a very healthily competitive environment growing up.

My career overall has had more than its share of frustrations – as happens to players who never quite solve the time management issue. I guess the two lowest points that spring to mind are the failure to even minimally control my nerves in the first round of the 1997 World Championship knockout (my only appearance at this level) and the very simple win I missed (35…Nf2!) – again with the help of that deadly combination of nerves and time-trouble – against Julian Hodgson in the final round of the British Championship in Scarborough 2001. To be fair, some of the high points occurred in Scarborough too, including two of my three runner-up spots at the British Championships. Various tournament victories as well as my qualification from the 1995 zonal in Linares have meant a lot too, but as I get older, it is probably my reasonable number of attractive games which I appreciate most, as well as the fact that I have had a decent strike-rate against very strong players over the years.

You have been a prolific chess author with several titles to your name. Tell us more about *Chess Improvement, it's all in the mindset* which has received critical acclaim and includes an excellent foreword from Henrik Carlsen, father of Magnus.

I was fortunate to be introduced to my co-author Barry Hymer by our mutual friend Tim Kett (who was subsequently heavily involved in the project as well) at the British Championship in Bournemouth in 2016. The timing was excellent. Barry was looking to make a return to chess after a decades-long break and I was (belatedly) getting interested in the psychological causes of the kind of career ups and downs which I described above. This had already led me to the work of Carol Dweck which had made quite an impression on me, and Barry has been one of the leading UK advocates of her 'mindset theory' for many years. I was delighted when he followed up our excellent dinner with the suggestion that there could be an interesting book to write about the role of mindset in chess improvement. This appealed to another feeling I had at the time – that I was tiring of writing somewhat 'transient' theoretical opening books and keen to embark on a writing project which might better stand the test of time.

So we explored a number of themes under the broad umbrella of mindset: the importance of being motivated by a genuine love for the game, the benefits of embracing different types of feedback and of developing resilience, as well as considering how best to work on the game and how we do all of this within the social context of the chess world.

Since we believe that hard work is a more fundamental component of success than anything that might be captured by the notion of 'natural talent', we suspected that the methods which have worked for those at the top of the game, should also offer valuable insights for those at an earlier stage of their chess journeys. Consequently we were delighted and very grateful that so many of the top English players gave very extensive interviews which we used to help enrich each of these topics. Probably my very favourite section was on metacognition – the interviews led us gradually to the tentative conclusion that serious reflection on our chess experience and a tailoring of our training regimen in line with the self-awareness which should flow from this, is perhaps *the* single most important factor in chess improvement.

The writing of the book was a major collaborative undertaking. I was keen to immerse myself in the theory as well as its application which I think improved my contribution, but also undoubtedly lengthened the process. However, it has been great to be involved in a project where I am even more convinced of the validity of our basic argument than I was at the beginning and we have been delighted with much of the reception too.

We were also thrilled that such a fast-growing and respected publisher as Crown House was sufficiently convinced of the educational value of the book to take their first venture into the chess world – we have been delighted with their contribution. It was also great, of course, that Henrik Carlsen agreed to write the foreword and hugely flattering that his genuine enthusiasm for the work was so evident in what he wrote. His expression of regret that such a book had not been around when Magnus was a child did make me smile a bit – somehow, I felt that they had muddled through rather well without it! Nonetheless we were very gratified that someone whose own priority as the parent of a high-achieving child could be summed up in the words 'do no harm', felt that our approach was flexible enough that he could strongly embrace it.

You worked with Michael Adams and Luke McShane in their rise to prominence. Tell us about their approaches and the reasons behind their success.

To be honest, by the time I formally worked with Michael – first in 1999 at Linares – he was already pretty prominent – I can't take any credit for his rise! As I said in the book, the thing which impressed me most was his filter – vitally important when dealing with vast quantities of information. He seemed to sense very quickly which ideas/pieces of analysis could be useful to him and to dismiss the rest with admirable efficiency. I'm not sure he was always very industrious growing up, but in this period – and even more when we worked together again in about 2005-6 – he was very methodical and disciplined in his work, as well as fiercely objective. At this time this helped to steer the work towards a heavy concentration on demanding analysis of main lines and lines which were likely to prove of enduring value even against the world's best. Part of the key, I think, is that he replicates this discipline and focus at the board as well. That sounds simple, but plenty of players struggle to achieve that.

I did work with Luke at the end of his junior career – seconding him when he won the silver medal in the World Junior 2002 in Goa and also some very enjoyable tournaments in Switzerland. We then teamed up again around 10 years ago for work which culminated in the Tal Memorial in Moscow in 2012. Luke was kind enough to say in our interview that I have been around for many of his best results and certainly I have the sense that this has been a successful collaboration. He is not a natural theoretician in two senses. He has clearly dabbled in various sideline openings over the years and his fiercest weapon probably lies in his practical skills – not least his acute sense of what will create problems for an opponent. We did produce serious opening work in a fairly systematic way in the later years,

but I especially valued the moments when we permitted ourselves to think a little outside the box. Every now and again in our analysis, Luke would pause the process and take a step back. The outcome was, almost invariably, some pretty profound and often actionable reflections.

Latterly you have been coaching and mentoring some of England's best juniors and in a recent *Perpetual Chess* podcast you said there are reasons to be optimistic about the future. Please expand on this.

I think a few years ago things seemed a bit bleak for professional players here and I was concerned that over time, this will necessarily impact negatively on the ambitions of the very top juniors. Now I am rather more optimistic about both of these groups, at least in the UK.

I think we have two slightly dangerous habits with regard to our top juniors. We tend to look to very strong generations such as my own or the decade or so which produced Luke McShane, Gawain Jones and David Howell and assume that these are 'the norm', when actually such players are produced relatively rarely. We also tend to lavish public attention on 'young talents' at a very early age, after which – more often than not – this weight of expectation and all that goes with it, does not work in their favour.

Right now it seems to me that we have some very promising young players. Moreover, a number of them exhibit a truly impressive work ethic, which I believe (as I suggested above) is often the decisive ingredient in the mix. On the Accelerator it is no exaggeration to say that one of my chief tasks with maybe 3-4 of the players (I won't mention names – I think they know who they are!) was not to 'get them to work', but rather to try to stop them working excessively in ways which were not optimally productive. Especially in opening study, it is possible to be *too* systematic and to make too few judgements about which bits of theory are really 'essential knowledge'. This is an important issue to solve, but a luxurious one – it means that a high level of commitment and ambition are clearly in place already. This is why I am quite optimistic and, incidentally, the gender balance amongst those willing to go the extra mile is noticeably healthy too.

There has been a phenomenal rise in people taking up chess during the pandemic. How can the game adapt to include those who have been drawn to it, especially as a result of *The Queen's Gambit.*

I think this is a great opportunity, but one which needs to be carefully handled. I sense on social media some tension between those speaking for the new enthusiasts who are concerned that chess should simply be fun and the traditionalists whom they perceive as somehow stuffy and elitist. I think we should do everything possible to prevent this rather artificial division from becoming a 'thing'. At the same time, I do think that the long and rich history and literature of chess are a big part of what makes it special. We should be very wary of downgrading these elements for the sake of those whose enthusiasm may not prove so enduring.

One big test will surely be the return to over-the-board chess. I guess the focus of some of those recently drawn to chess will remain firmly online. However, for those who wish to play in a social setting, I suspect much could be done to make things more inviting and welcoming. Conversations which focus on the positive experience of playing and enjoying chess rather than fixating on the results, ratings and rankings which accompany it might be a positive start.

Lastly, courtesy of *The Queen's Gambit*, a large proportion of the newcomers are likely to be women. This is a very welcome development, and a great chance to break out of the vicious circle by which the low number of women in chess has then deterred others with potential interest in the game. However, whilst at present we can boast high female representation amongst the streamers and commentators, at some point there will be questions about the lack of female players at the pinnacle of the game. This was precisely the positive message of *The Queen's Gambit* – that a female player could take on the very best in the world and win – and I think, frankly, that at some point people will become a bit sceptical of all these articles in which various players ranked in the many 000s are hailed as the 'real Beth Harmon'. First of all we need to accept that there is an issue – that this problem is *partly* explained by the low numbers of female players, but by no means entirely – and then set about helping girls with the determination and skill to be champions, without taking short cuts. With regards to how to do this, I think my view is close to that of Judit Polgar – who has herself done so much to show what is possible. The greatest impediment to girls achieving the heights in chess has probably been a limiting of ambition. By all means use women's events and titles as great resources, as stepping stones on the road to success, but the end goal should be the achievement of a level of mastery which is, essentially, blind to gender.

What advice can you give a 1600-1700 club player who is finding it difficult to break into the 1800-plus cohort?

I think at any level it is possible to identify some ‘typical’ areas needing improvement, but there are usually individual quirks which make it difficult to generalise. This is why – again at most levels of the game – the kind of self-awareness I talked about above is so important. It is very useful – ideally together with a coach or mentor – to identify where your strengths and weaknesses lie. Work is essential on *both* of these, but there is a difference in how to go about addressing weaknesses or leveraging strengths respectively. At all costs, do not try to deal with your weaknesses by essentially avoiding the positions in which they arise. This will surely come back to haunt you at some stage!

For players around 1600-1700 I think it is vital to be crystal clear about the role tactics are playing in your games. If your games are still being frequently decided by blunders/tactical tricks then this should be the area to focus on. I think it is true in general that there is a complex relationship between knowledge and skills in chess. I have come across many players who are working hard acquiring knowledge, but still struggling to put this into practice. This is probably not a question of deficient ‘talent’. It is far more likely an issue of too much passive learning rather than actively practising to develop skills. As I said in the book, this issue is magnified with relation to tactics. Tactical exercises set up an artificial situation which alerts you to the presence of a tactic (frequently, even to the specific type of tactic). They still have their uses for sure, but part of your tactical training should be about developing tactical alertness – spotting the warning signs that tactics are present and thereby reacting with heightened vigilance.

What are your interests outside of chess?

I have two wonderful daughters aged 10 and 4 and – as any parent will know – this determines how a fair portion of my non-work time is spent. As a family I am delighted that we do a lot of outdoor stuff – country walks, camping etc. I haven’t been in the greatest health over the last couple of years, but these things certainly help. My elder daughter Emily has got very enthusiastic about football lately and I am very pleased to still be playing a (surprisingly active!) role in fostering this interest. In my own time I read a lot of non-fiction. I

used to select my academic subjects largely according to what interested me and my passion for these: politics, philosophy and history is undiminished. My collaboration with Barry has further fostered my interest in psychology, education and learning as well. Perhaps playing the piano remains my best route to pure relaxation, though. As Tartakower said, 'every chess player should have a hobby.'

Your game against Jonathan Speelman in 2006 is certainly one to watch with excellent analysis from Simon Terrington [(103) Peter Wells v John Speelman 2006 Modern Defence - YouTube] Tell us more about this game.

I really enjoyed Simon's videos and was rather touched that he devoted three of them to my games. This is my favourite of the three, in part since it owed the least to theory. It was really a case of creativity borne of desperation. The tournament had started very badly and I guess I was in the mood to take risks to try and snap out of this. However, the truth is that by the time I played 14 Bxc4!!? I already didn't like my position very much after routine moves. It sounds odd, when playing Jonathan Speelman, to look for randomness to try and take him out of his comfort zone – he is in many ways uniquely qualified to handle it. Still, I think he prefers to be the one with the initiative, the one calling the shots. In fact, he didn't handle the shock of this very well.

At the point I played 14 Bxc4 – sacrificing two pieces, even though Jonathan only took one of them – Ray Keene walked past and after the game told me that he thought I had gone completely crazy. I guess that is kind of flattering. Certainly I saw quite a lot at this point – all the key Rxb7 ideas which are essential to its soundness of the thing. However, as always with these sacrifices, a fair bit was left to intuition. I remember being a bit concerned about some 15…g5 idea to try and enable Black's king to wriggle out to the king-side, but my engine now tells me that 16 Nxg5+! just wins. Bonkers – I certainly didn't have that covered. Still, the whole thing was a lot of fun and I was very chuffed to win the brilliancy prize in a field of that calibre.