



RUSSIAN IAN NEPOMNIACHTCHI SCORES A CONVINCING OVERALL VICTORY IN MADRID

NEPO AGAIN!

By GM John Burke

American grandmaster Hikaru Nakamura was on the verge of gaining second place with one round to go, but everything depended on his final encounter with Chinese grandmaster Ding Liren, which unfortunately he lost.

The main story of the 2022 Candidates Tournament was the fantastic play of Ian Nepomniachtchi, who never seemed to be in serious danger of losing his grip on first place throughout the entire event. His one-and-a-half point margin of victory, along with the fact that he remained undefeated, sent a clear message to Magnus and to the chess world that he was ready for a rematch with the world champion.

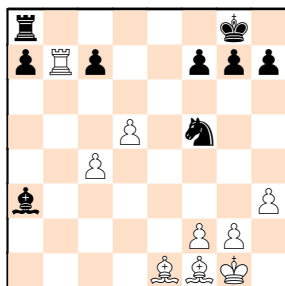
NEPO WITHSTANDS CRITICAL TESTS FROM BOTH AMERICANS

It can be said that both American grandmasters subjected the tournament winner to his most serious tests. In retrospect, Nakamura's round 5 game against Nepomniachtchi was absolutely critical. Nepo was off to a great start, with 3 points out of 4, but he got into big trouble against Hikaru. In fact, it was the closest he came to losing in the entire tournament.



▲ Hikaru Nakamura Photo by Maria Emelianova

endgame for White. 23...♖b1 The only way to survive. (The attempt to secure the bishop by 23...♗d7 does not work due to 24.d5 ♖d4 25.♙e7+-) 24.d5 ♖d4 25.♙b2 ♖a1 (25...♙e4 26.♙xe4 ♗xe4 27.♙xb7+-) 26.♖dxf5 ♖xf5 27.♙xb7 ♗xa3 28.♗d2 ♙xe1 29.♗xe1

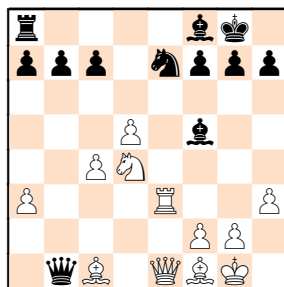


It's not entirely obvious if you're trying to evaluate this position from many moves ago, but now that we're here it's clear that White is dominating. He wins a pawn by force, and retains the bishop pair, which should be more than enough to win the game. A huge missed opportunity for Hikaru!

- A) 29...♗d6 30.♗d3 ♖d4 (30...g6 31.♗xf5 gxf5 32.♗a5) 31.♗c3 c5 32.♗xd4 cxd4 33.♙d7+-;
- B) 29...♙c8 30.♗a5 ♗d6 31.♙xa7+-.
- C) 29...a5 30.♗d3 "From very far distance it's quite hard to see that I can just go right into this line here with this endgame which is winning for White... I'm not too unhappy about not playing 23.♖h4, because this winning position is very tricky

and hard to spot," Hikaru explained in his post-game video.

23...♖b1 24.d5 ♖e7 25.♖d2? The wrong square! This gives the black queen an escape hatch, which Nepo duly spots. After 25.♖d4

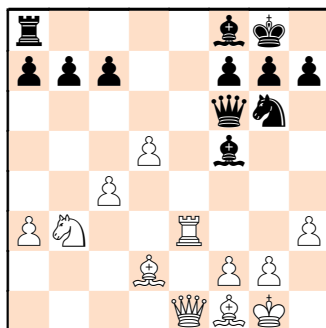


White's knight exerts a ton of influence over the board here. 25...♙b6 What else? Black has to rescue the queen somehow. (25...♗g6 26.♙b3 ♙a1 27.♖b5) 26.♙d2! White's position is a picture of perfect harmony. ♙b3 is coming, and it feels like Black is on the verge of total collapse.

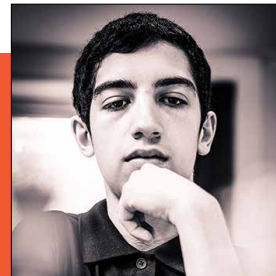
25...♙a1! Sneaky! To be honest it's an easy move to miss. You could get so caught up in expecting the queen to retreat to b6 that this move completely escapes your mind.

26.♖b3 ♙f6 Black's position is still far from spectacular, but clearly momentum is on his side. Hikaru, presumably frustrated with having spent so much time without finding a clear way forward, proceeds to lose the rest of his advantage.

27.♗d2 ♖g6

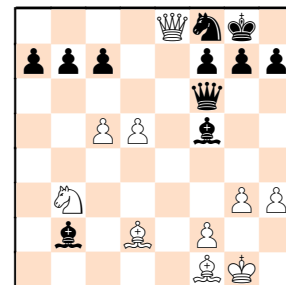


28.♖a5 Not best. A common idea to



John Burke was the 2020 US Junior Champion. The young grandmaster from New Jersey had already stunned the chess world in 2015 by breaking the record as youngest player ever to surpass 2600+ ELO. John's most notable victories include the 2018 U.S. Masters, the 2018 New York International Championship, and the 2019 Washington International Open. In 2021 he shared first at the Cherry Blossom Classic in Dulles, VA, and also in the World Open in Philadelphia, PA.

"dominate" the g6 knight by 28.g3 would work well here, and it's still not easy to recommend a move for Black. 28...♗xa3? White would have to see why this fails. 29.c5 ♗b2 30.♙e8+ ♙xe8 31.♙xe8+ ♖f8



32.c6! The only winning idea – suddenly ♗b4 is coming with decisive effect! 32...bxc6 33.♗b4+-.

28...b6 29.♖c6 ♗d7 Now ...♗xc6 is in the cards, and Hikaru wisely decides to repeat moves, rather than risk overpressing and even losing the game.

30.♗c3 ♙d6 31.♗b4 ♙f6 32.♗c3 ♙d6 33.♗b4 ♙f6 34.♗c3 Draw

In round 9, Caruana was facing the leader Nepomniachtchi where a potential



▲ Fabiano Caruana and Ian Nepomniachtchi.

PHOTO: FIDE / Stev Bonhage

win would have seen him jump into a tie for first – blowing the tournament wide open.

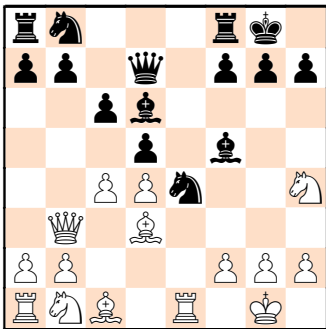
C42

Fabiano Caruana	2783
Ian Nepomniachtchi	2766

FIDE Candidates, Madrid 2022

1.e4 e5 2.♘f3 ♘f6 3.♗xe5 d6 4.♘f3 ♘xe4 5.d4 d5 6.♙d3 ♙d6 7.0-0 0-0 8.c4 c6 9.♞e1 ♞f5 10.♚b3 ♚d7 This position has been seen many times before, but Fabi comes up with a fantastic piece of practical preparation.

11.♘h4

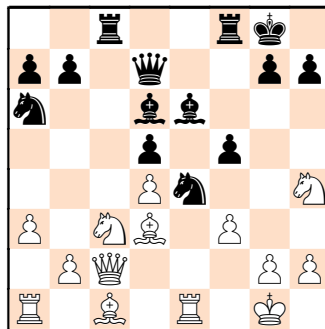


Apart from one amateur game from 2006, this may be seen as a novelty. It forces Nepo to think on his own quite early on, which makes it a fantastic choice for such an important game.

11...♙e6 12.♚c2 ♘a6 This is the usual way of developing the queenside knight in this line. With the d7 square occupied, the knight is forced to use the a6 square, but it's not so bad, considering that White has to spend a tempo preventing ...♘a6-b4.

13.a3 f5 14.cxd5 cxd5 15.♘c3 ♞ac8 Nepo has played all the most natural moves, so Caruana surely could have predicted this position in his preparation. Now he poses a critical question to his opponent.

16.f3



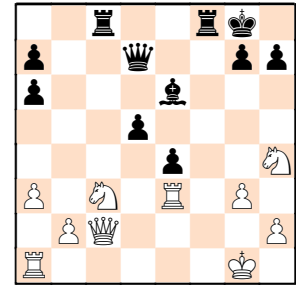
What are we going to do about that knight on e4? Retreat it, take on c3, or sacrifice it somehow?

16...♙e7! An important intermediate move, hitting the knight on h4 and forcing White into a slight weakening.

17.g3 Now the tough decision comes. Black has a lot of options, but only one equalizes.

17...♘d6 In case of 17...♘xc3 18.bxc3, this pawn structure is nice for White. He will eventually redeploy his knight to f4 and play against the weak d5 pawn.

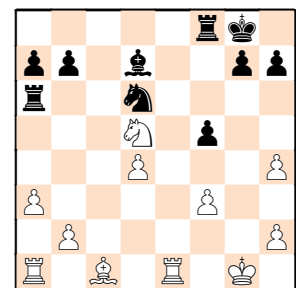
17...♙f6! This shocking sacrifice actually works out for Black, but it is so hard to play against an opponent who is clearly still in his preparation. Then, 18.fxe4 fxe4 19.♙xa6 ♙xd4+ 20.♙e3 ♙xe3+ 21.♞xe3 bxa6



22.♙d1 This reminds me of the Nakamura–Caruana game in a strange way [see page 39–Ed.], with its blockade of Black's central pawns. Black has three pawns for the piece and objectively should be okay, but for a human it looks very scary, especially if White gets a couple of moves to bring his knight on h4 back into play. I don't blame Nepo for avoiding this.

18.♚a4 One of two moves that attempt to take advantage of Black's rather clumsy bishops on the e-file. 18.♚e2 was also tempting. Then, after 18...♘c7 19.♘xd5 ♘xd5 20.♚xe6+ ♚xe6 21.♞xe6 ♞cd8, White is up a pawn, but it will be a while before his d-pawn becomes a major force. At the moment it is blockaded and will be targeted. From a practical perspective, I prefer what Caruana chose.

18...♙f6?! This could have led to big problems for Nepo. 18...♞c6 looks so shaky, but somehow Black's position holds together. 19.♙xa6 (I like the slow way 19.♘g2. The knight comes to f4 and White has some pressure.) 19...♙xh4 20.gxh4 ♞xa6 21.♚xd7 ♙xd7 22.♘xd5



22...♘b5! The key move. Black has enough play.

19.♚xd7 ♙xd7 20.♘xd5 ♙xd4+ 21.♔g2 ♞ce8



THE RUSSIAN GAME

Although most Western authors name this opening the Petroff (or Petrov's) Defense, back in the early 80's of the previous century when I started playing chess in Serbia, it was almost invariably known as the Russian Game. Rather than prompt a further debate on the name itself, I'd rather leave that to be thoroughly examined in one of the future installments of our regular column "Opening History."

Both Caruana and Nepomniachtchi certainly stand out as experts of this symmetrical opening, which brought them good results in their respective World Championship matches against Carlsen – in 2018 and 2021.

Particularly, Ian Nepomniachtchi performed well with the black pieces in the Madrid Candidates, essaying this defense as follows:

- round 5 vs. Nakamura, draw
- round 7 vs. Rapport, 0-1
- round 9 vs. Caruana, draw
- round 11 vs. Firouzja, 0-1
- round 14 vs. Duda, draw

While these results may not have been a direct result of the opening itself, it is clear that Nepo's strategy worked very well. The level of preparation he demonstrated was outstanding, so this game with Caruana, conducting the white pieces, may be seen as a clash of titans and their teams' homework. -Ed.

28.♞e4 ♜xb2 29.♙e3 ♜xa3 30.♙xa7 ♜a8 Now if anyone has chances to play for a win, it's Nepo with his outside passed pawn, but he's perfectly content with a draw, which is understandable given the tournament situation.

31.♙d4 ♙f8 32.♞e2 g6 33.♜e3 ♞d8 If a win was necessary, Nepo surely would've played 33...b5 with good chances.

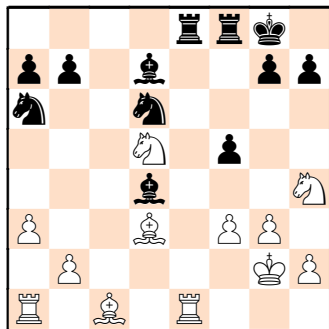
34.♙b6 ♞d6 35.♜c4 ♞c6 36.♞e4 Now White's pieces coordinate well, and the players soon find a repetition.

36...♙g7 37.f4 ♞e6 38.♜f3 ♜e1+ 39.♜e3 ♜c2+ 40.♜f3 ♜e1+ Draw
A big missed opportunity for Fabi!

ONE DECISIVE GAME

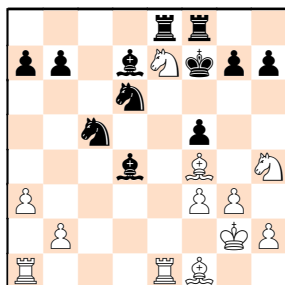
There was some additional intrigue provided by the final stretch, as second place became a much more valuable prize than normal. Magnus Carlsen had previously expressed some doubt as to whether he will play the next world championship match, and after he finally decided not to do so, then it was clear that the first and second place finishers in the Candidates would now play a match for the title.

After 12 rounds, Nepo's victory was practically assured, but the battle for second place was still raging. Nakamura beat Duda in the penultimate round to move into second place. All he had to do in order to maintain it was not lose against Ding in the last round. Unfortunately, things did not turn out in favor of the American.



Material is equal, but White has some chances based on concrete tactics. Put Black's a6 knight on c6, for example, where it would control more squares, and White would have nothing. As it is, though, Black is barely hanging on.

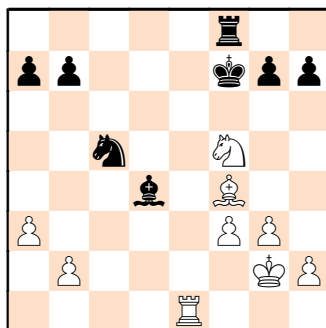
22.♙f4 ♜c5 23.♜e7+ ♜f7 24.♙xf5? Missing the chance. 24.♙f1!



It's not obvious how strong this move is,

but even without deep analysis it's clear that Black is in some difficulties. He has to do something about the d6 knight, as if it moves then White has ♙c4+. 24...♜c8 (24...♞xe7 25.♙xd6 ♞xe1 26.♞e1 ♞e8 27.♞d1! and Black runs into trouble on the d-file. If 27...♙e3 then 28.♙xc5 wins.) 25.♙c4+ ♙e6 26.♞xe6! ♜xe6 27.♜xf5 and Black is stuck in a ton of pins. He cannot take on e7 for various tactical reasons. 27...♜f6 The only way to survive. (27...♞xe7 28.♜xd4 ♞fe8 29.♞e1 and Black is toast.) 28.♜d5+! Beautiful. The f5 knight is immune, and the attack goes on. 28...♜xf5? runs into 29.♙d3 mate.

24...♜xf5 25.♜xf5 ♙xf5 26.♜xf5 ♞xe1 27.♞xe1



27...♜d3! The key idea. Nepo has managed to trade a bunch of pieces and solve his problems concretely.

D40

Ding Liren	2806
Hikaru Nakamura	2760

FIDE Candidates, Madrid 2022

1.d4 ♜f6 2.c4 e6 3.♜f3 d5 4.♜c3 c5 5.e3 The logical choice in such an important game, trying to retain tension in the position. 5.cxd5 cxd4 I'm not sure if it was Hikaru's intention, but this is a very popular line among elite players because of its solidity. White players are struggling to get an advantage here. 6.♞xd4 exd5 7.e4 dxe4 8.♞xd8+ ♜xd8



A TWIST OF FATE

What might be slightly paradoxical is that both Hikaru Nakamura and Ding Liren had entered the Candidates tournament via a side entrance. The American GM was awarded a wild card from FIDE to take part in the Grand Prix tournament series, where he was at his best and convincingly won first place, thereby deservedly earning his seat in Madrid.

On the other hand, Ding qualified for the Candidates only after FIDE banned the Russian GM Sergey Karjakin, which opened a pathway for the Chinese No.1 to gain a spot as the highest rated player in the May 2022 rating list. All that was left for him to do was to play at least 30 games from June 2021 to May 2022. Eventually, Ding was able to meet this requirement, thereby obtaining the right to play in Madrid.

With all the developments that followed, it seems that the Chinese grandmaster has now completed his quest for a world title match. -Ed.



PHOTO: FIDE / Stev Bonhage

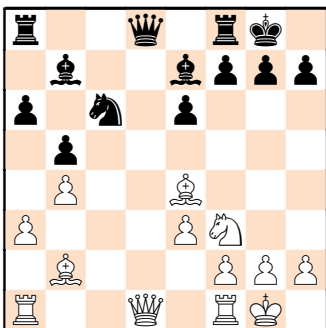
9.♠g5 ♗e6 10.♜xe6+ fxe6 is a tabiya of the line in which Black has been doing well.

5...♜c6 6.a3 dxc4 7.♙xc4 a6 Black intends to play ...b5 and ...♗b7. The position is quite symmetrical, but White argues that he can generate some pull by virtue of having made the first move.

8.♙d3 Most people castle first, but the players soon transpose back into known channels.

8...b5 9.dxc5 ♗xc5 10.b4 ♗e7 11.0-0 ♗b7 12.♗b2 0-0 The position is entirely symmetrical except for the bishops on d3 and e7. Ding now plays a typical move that attempts to break the symmetry and utilize the power of the bishops.

13.♜e4 ♜xe4 14.♙xe4



White has some slight pressure, and if Black plays lazily he could end up in trouble.

14...f5! This move does weaken the e5 square and the e6 pawn, but they are easily defended, especially as the queens will be traded next move.

15.♙b1 ♙xd1 16.♙xd1 ♜fd8 17.♙a2 ♜f7 It looks like the game should be heading toward a swift draw, but last rounds sometimes have a way of messing with your nerves. I think that is the most likely explanation for the uncharacteristic inaccuracies that Hikaru begins to make.

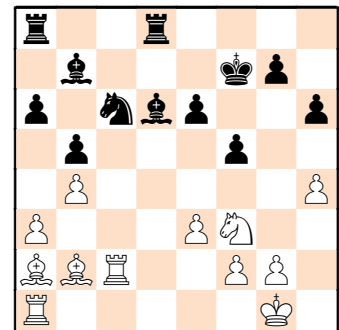
18.h4 h6 I believe Hikaru expressed regret after the game for not trading the rooks off while he had the chance, saying that this would have greatly simplified his task. I'm inclined to agree with him. 18...♙xd1+ 19.♙xd1 ♜d8 20.♙xd8 ♙xd8=.

19.♙dc1 ♙d6 This is a slight concession in my view. The way I see it, White's b2 bishop has now "won" the battle for the long diagonal, as Black's dark-squared bishop has declined to oppose it. It's just a little thing for the moment, but sometimes these little things pile up over time.

19...♙f6 You have to calculate a bit, but this works out just fine for Black.

20.♜d4 ♜xd4 21.♙c7+ ♔g6 22.♙xd4 (22.♙xb7?? ♜e2+ wins.) 22...♙xd4 23.exd4 ♙d5 24.♙xd5 ♙xd5 25.♙e1 ♙e8 seems the most straightforward to me. (25...♙d6 26.d5! exd5 27.♙ee7 Black is completely fine, but no one likes the opponent's rooks terrorizing them like this!) 26.♙c6 ♜f6 27.♙xa6 ♙xd4 28.♙b6 ♙d3 29.♙xb5 ♙xa3=.

20.♙c2



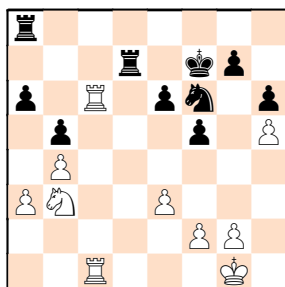
20...♜e7 Not a mistake by any means, but I sense that Hikaru wants to draw the game without going for any forcing variations. 20...a5! Again, this requires calculation, but it's a small price to pay for achieving equality. 21.♙ac1 axb4 22.♙xc6 ♙xc6 23.♙xc6 bxa3 24.♙e5 ♙xe5 25.♜xe5+ ♔g8 26.♙xe6+ ♜h7 27.♙xf5+ ♔g8 and White has nothing better than a draw.



21. d4 d5 22. xd5 xd5 23. ac1
 Now Ding has a slight but tangible edge. He has control of the c-file and can potentially work with the weak dark squares.

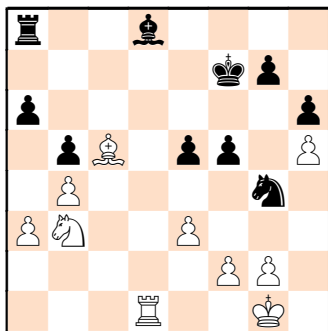
23... d7 24. b3 e7 25. h5! ? This pawn ends up becoming a weakness. Upon 25.g3 Black would face an unpleasant defense.

25... f6 26. d4 26... xf6 xf6 27. c6



I would be very tempted to try this, with c5 coming: 27... ad8! Activity is the key. (27... hx5 is too complacent. 28. c5 e7 29. xa6) 28. xa6 d1+ 29. xd1 xd1+ 30. h2 f4! An amazing idea. White can't take the pawn, and otherwise Black gets good counterplay. 31. exf4? d3 32. c5 g4+ 33. g1 d1 mate.

26... e5 27. c5 d8 28. d2 f6 29. xd7+ xd7 30. d1 f6 31. d6 g4 32. c5



32... h4! Hikaru has been playing very well the last few moves, and he has avoided all the pitfalls.

33. d7+ g8 34. g3 g5 34... d8! was the way. It looks scary because of the weakness of the a6 pawn, but objectively Black holds. 35. xd8+ xd8



▲ Ding Liren

PHOTO: FIDE / Stev Bonhage

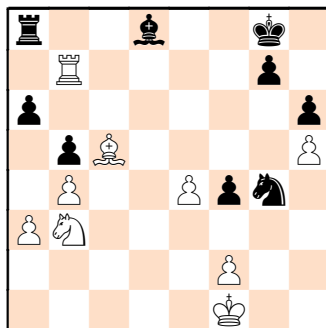
36. d6 f7 37. c5 e7! 38. xe7 xe7 39. xa6 d6= Stopping c7 . Black will play ... f6 and ... hx5 , restoring material equality.

35. f1 d8? Resorting to passivity is almost tantamount to resignation. 35... d8! It's the same story as before, but if you didn't play it last move, you probably won't play it now.

36. b7 Now Black is just stuck, while White can calmly play d6 and c5 .

36... f4 Desperation, but there was nothing else to do. 36... f6 37. d6 hx5 38. xe5 Material is equal, but the difference in the quality of pieces is apparent. c5 is coming, with complete domination.

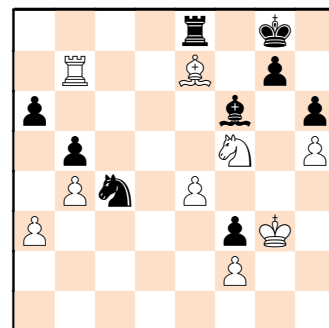
37. gxf4 exf4 38. e4



38... f6 38... f3! was the actual last chance, fixing the pawn structure and artificially isolating White's e4 pawn. It's still an uphill struggle, but Black should survive with correct play. 39. d4 e5 40. d6 This just kicks the e5 knight away, right? 40... c8! Wrong. Here's another point of the move f3 – mate ideas! 41. g1 f6 Black has a ton of play.

39. d4 e8 40. g2 e5 40... xe4 41. f3+ .

41. f5 Now it's really over. The combination of Black's weak g7 and a6 pawns is just too much to handle. 41... f3+ 42. g3 c4 43. e7



43... b2 43... xe7 44. xe7+ f8 45. g6+ g8 46. xf3 xa3 47. f4 c2 (47... c4 48. e5 Threatening



e6 next, and the pawn can't be taken because of ♖b8+ followed by mate.) 48.♖e7+ ♗f8 49.♖c6+-.

44.♗xf3 ♕xa3 45.♗g3 ♖e5 46.♕c5 ♖f7 47.f3 ♕c1 48.♖a7 ♕d2 49.♖xa6 ♕e1+ 50.♗g2 ♕c3 51.♖a7 ♖g5 52.♖e7+ ♗h8 53.♖g6+ ♗g8 54.♖e7+ ♗h8 55.♖d5 ♕b2 56.♖a2 ♕c1 57.♖c2 ♕a3 58.♕e3 **Black resigned**

Not a perfect game, but chess is sometimes more about nerves than anything else, and Ding kept his composure, leading to a deserved victory.

After an exciting race, the Chinese No.1 managed to grab the important second place. However, all the players were certainly approaching the event with the mindset that only first place is good enough. I doubt that Ding harbored too many hopes upon the conclusion of the tournament – but Magnus did subsequently end up officially pulling out of the next world title match after all! Ding will now have his chance to play Nepomniachtchi for the championship – a just reward for his resilience throughout the tournament.

SECOND WIND FOR HIKARU – BUT NOT FOR FABI!

From the American side of things, Hikaru Nakamura and Fabiano Caruana had two wildly different tournament experiences. They played each other in round one where the latter emerged victorious, which propelled him to a fantastic first half of the tournament in which he remained neck-and-neck with Nepomniachtchi. Shockingly, Fabi collapsed in the second half, losing four games and finishing with a minus one score, whereas Naka benefited from a second wind, even propelling himself into second place before the final round. Even with a painful loss to Ding Liren at the end, Hikaru can be proud of his plus one score, showing that he is still one of the best players in classical chess, and not “just” a streamer.

The all-American clash that opened the tournament was a fascinating illustration of how one inaccuracy can be costly at this level.

C65

Fabiano Caruana	2783
Hikaru Nakamura	2760

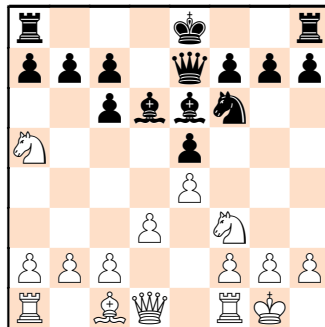
FIDE Candidates, Madrid 2022

1.e4 e5 2.♖f3 ♖c6 3.♕b5 ♖f6 No surprise from Hikaru. Starting the tournament with the black pieces, he sticks to his main repertoire.

4.d3 ♕c5 5.♕xc6 dxc6 6.♖bd2 This is a pretty flexible move order from White. He retains the option of castling queenside and going for an attack. In fact, Caruana defeated Nakamura in the 2016 Candidates in this very manner.

6...♕e6 7.0-0 ♕d6 Normally, upon 7...♖d7 White tries to neutralize Black's bishop pair with 8.♖b3 ♕b6 9.♖g5 ♕xb3 10.axb3.

8.♖b3 ♖e7 9.♖a5



9...♖b8 9...0-0-0 was also possible, and was tested by Leinier Dominguez against Ray Robson at the 2019 U.S. Championship. It has the potential to lead to an attacking race that perhaps Nakamura was not quite in the mood for. After 10.♕d2 ♕g4 11.♖b1 ♖d7 12.♖c4 ♖f6 13.b4 ♖f8 14.h3 ♕xf3 15.♖xf3 ♖xf3 16.gxf3 Black was more than fine and later won in R.Robson 2667 – L. Dominguez 2739, Saint Louis 2019.

10.♕g5 h6 11.♕h4 g5 There's nothing particularly egregious about 11...0-0, but it makes sense for Nakamura to break the annoying pin before castling, so as not to expose his king.

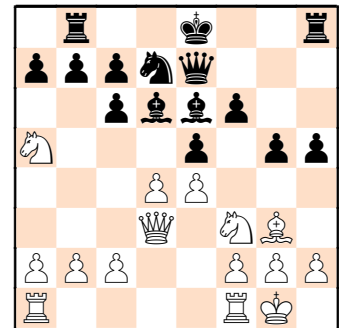
12.♕g3 ♖d7 13.d4 This pawn break is screaming to be played, attempting to

open up the center to White's advantage.

13...f6 13...h5 is a pretty shocking possibility. Black basically claims that he is free to proceed with his plan without even bothering to defend his pawn! 14.♕xe5 ♖xe5 15.♖xe5 (15.dxe5 ♕b4 16.♖b3 ♕c4 and out of nowhere, White's rook is trapped!) 15...♕xe5 16.dxe5 ♖c5 17.♖d2 ♖xe5 I would still take White here because of Black's weak kingside pawns, but it should be close to equal.

14.♖d3 Maybe 14.c3 is an important subtlety, preparing to meet Black's ...h6-h5 with the move h2-h4.

14...h5

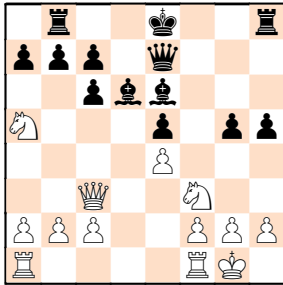


15.dxe5 15.h4 would be the ideal response, retaining the tension in the center, but White's pieces get kicked around a bit now. 15...g4 16.♖d2 exd4 17.♖xd4 ♕c5 18.♖d3 ♖e5 19.♖e2 0-0 It's a difficult position to evaluate. Black's king is actually quite safe here, as it's not easy for White to play f2-f3 or f2-f4 under favorable conditions. He can try to bring his bishop into the game, say by ♕f4-e3, but that leaves the h4 pawn vulnerable and would run into ...♖g6 ideas by Black. White's knights also seem to be competing for the same squares (b3 and c4). All in all, I'd be quite content as Black here.

15...♖xe5 16.♕xe5 Visually, White definitely wants to trade off his nearly trapped bishop, rather than his knight. 16.♖xe5 fxe5 17.♖c3 0-0! and White is not in time to take the pawn, since 18.♕xe5?? runs into 18...♕b4+-.

16...fxe5 17.♖c4 Going after the e5

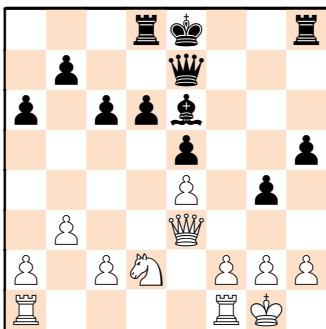
pawn with 17.♖c3 doesn't lead to much.



Ignoring a pretty easy trick of 17...♗f6?? 18.♟xb7!, Black has two satisfactory responses.

- A) 17...g4 18.♟xe5 ♟b4 Note that Black cannot win a piece here after 19.♗e3 ♟c5 There's still a ton of play with the two bishops. (19...♟xa5?? fails for 20.♗xa7.) 20.♗e2 ♗g5 21.♟d3 ♟b6 22.♟b3 g3;
- B) 17...0-0 18.♟xe5 ♗g7 19.♟f3 ♗xc3 20.bxc3 g4 Black's bishop pair and White's busted structure should be enough to keep the game balanced, despite the pawn deficit.

17...♟d8 18.♟xd6+ cxd6 19.♗e3 g4 20.♟d2 a6 21.b3



Now comes the critical moment, and the move that could probably be blamed for Naka's defeat. It's always difficult to decide which side of the board to send your king to, or even to leave it leisurely in the center. Here Hikaru makes the wrong call.

21...0-0? Sometimes it's okay to put your king on the side of the board where you've advanced your pawns far up the board, but the problem is that Caruana has a very simple break to open the f-file.

21...♟d7 was also fine. Perhaps, in view of Fabi's last move b2-b3, he wanted to play



▲ Ian Nepomniachtchi

PHOTO: FIDE / Stev Bonhage

♟c4 in response to this, which is somewhat scary, but with accurate play Black has nothing to fear. 22.♟c4 ♟c7 23.♗a7 h4 24.♟a5 ♟c8 and Black is just too solid.

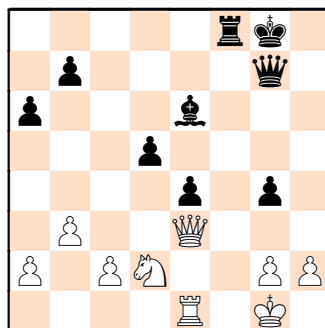
Something like 21...h4 was probably best, just keeping the position flexible for the moment.

22.f3! Now the position is very unpleasant for Black.

22...♗g7 23.fxg4 hxg4 24.♟ad1 The main problem for Black is that the d6 pawn will always be loose, and if he opts for a ...d5 break (as in the game), then e5 will come under fire.

24...d5 Staying put with 24...♟d7 is a psychologically difficult choice to make. 25.♟xf8+ ♗xf8 26.♟f1± White's play is very easy, and Black will have to sit and defend for a long time.

25.exd5 cxd5 26.♟de1 e4 27.♟xf8+ ♟xf8



28.c4! Breaking down the central pawns

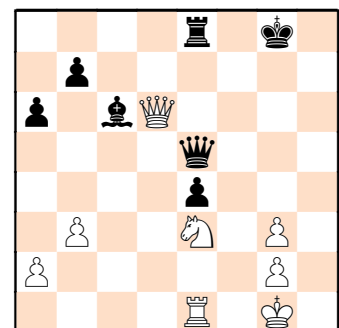
is definitely the way to go. An approach like 28.b4 ♗e5 29.♟b3 ♟d7 30.♟d4 might appear tempting, as White has a nice blockade. However, to win a chess game, you can't just play in a way that's visually appealing. You have to actually have a plan to break through! White doesn't really have a way forward here.

28...♟e8 29.cxd5 ♟xd5 30.♟f1 Black's e-pawn is going nowhere fast, and once the white knight arrives in the game it will be a headache to keep White's pieces from swarming the king.

30...♗e5 31.♗h6 ♗g7 32.♗d6 ♟c6 33.♟e3 g3 This pawn is likely to fall at some point anyway, so Nakamura tries to pitch it away on his terms.

34.hxg3 34.♟f1 was actually even stronger. Then after 34...gxh2+ 35.♟h1 White's knight jump to f5 is going to be devastating.

34...♗e5 35.♗g6+ ♗g7 36.♗d6 ♗e5

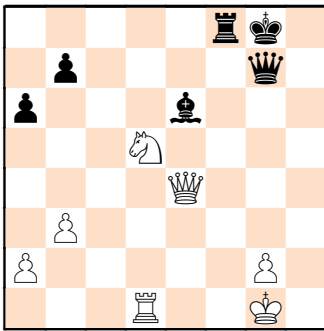




37. ♖h6! It's best to keep queens on the board, since upon 37. ♜xe5 ♝xe5, now that White has doubled his pawns, this endgame is not an easy win, although he should score the point in the long run.

37... ♜xg3 38. ♝f1 ♖g7 39. ♖h4 ♖h7 40. ♖g3+ ♖g7 41. ♖h4 ♙d7 42. ♝d1 ♙e6 42... ♝e7! was the last chance, although it's doubtful that Black could survive long-term. Eventually White will find the way to get at the king. 43. ♗d5 ♝f7 44. ♖xe4 ♖g5±.

43. ♗d5 ♝f8 44. ♖xe4



Now there is no way to organize Black's pieces.

44... ♖h6 44... ♙d7 is met by 45. ♗e7+ winning.

45. ♝e1 ♝d8 46. ♗e7+ A nice final touch.

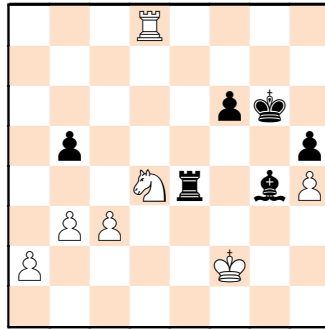
46... ♗f7 47. ♗f5 There's not much more to fight for. Black's king is getting slaughtered.

47... ♖f6 48. ♝f1 ♙d5 49. ♗h6+ ♗g7 50. ♖g4+ Black resigned in view of 50... ♖g6 51. ♗f5+ ♗h7 52. ♖h4+.

An excellent start for Caruana, setting the tone for the first half of the event. On the other hand, Nakamura, resilient as ever, bounced back in the very next round.

Hikaru Nakamura	2760
Teimour Radjabov	2753

FIDE Candidates, Madrid 2022

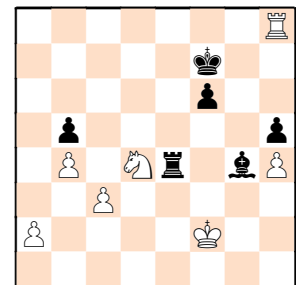


The players have just reached the time control, and Nakamura is a pawn up with excellent winning chances. At first glance, it should be a pretty

straightforward affair, with the b5 pawn seemingly doomed to fall, which would give White three passed pawns ready to march up the board. However, as we will see, it is not so easy for White to win this pawn without giving up one of his in return.

42. ♝d5 42.b4! is actually a clean win, but it's not immediately obvious why. The answer is that Black is in a strange sort of zugzwang! His pieces are in their ideal defensive spots at the moment, and any move he makes has a drawback. The move b4 is not obvious because White loses flexibility with his pawns, and apparently doesn't threaten anything. If you could imagine Black's bishop landing on c4 in this position, it would be obvious that White has gone wrong. However, there is just no way for Black to achieve that. All that being said, the move White has to play after this one is practically undetectable. 42... ♗f7 (42... ♝e5 43. ♝g8+! ♗f7 44. ♝b8 ♙d7 If Black's rook was on e4 here, then the h4 pawn would be under fire. Here, though, White wins easily by preventing the rook from returning. 45. ♝b7 ♗e8 46. ♗f3+-)

- A) 43.a4 This brilliant breakthrough would win, if not for one detail... 43... bxa4 44.b5 ♝e8! The rook comes back to save the day.
- B) 43. ♝d5 is tempting and probably good enough to win, but it's hard to be 100% certain over the board. 43... f5! 44. ♝xb5 f4 The pawn is fast! ♝e3 is coming next, and from a distance it looks like Black is about to be very active. 45. ♝b7+! Very important, gaining a tempo to get behind the f-pawn. 45... ♗g6 46. ♝b8 ♝e3 (46... ♗f7 47.b5+- Now the b-pawn is just too fast.) 47. ♝f8 ♝xc3 48. ♝xf4 ♝a3 49. ♗c6! ♝xa2+ 50. ♗e3 White should win, but it's not a sure thing.
- C) 43. ♝h8!!



▲ Teimour Radjabov

PHOTO: FIDE / Stev Bonhage

Okay, this move is absolutely absurd. I'm only showing it for the sake of objective truth, which I tend to strive for in annotations. But don't be deceived – this move makes no sense at all and no human would ever play it. It attacks a pawn that's very firmly defended. I felt obliged to share this line, because I've never seen anything quite like it before. Somehow, Black is again in a weird zugzwang. The main point of the move is that Black can no longer play ...♙d7, defending the b5 pawn and attacking the h4 pawn. I'll try to show why a few of Black's natural moves fail.

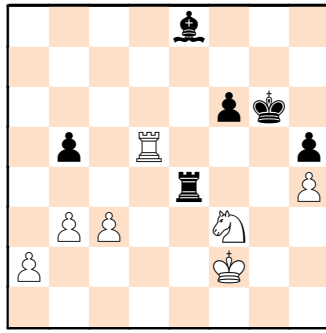
- C1)** 43...♙g6 44.a4! Now it works! 44...bxa4 45.b5+- There's no longer the ...♞e8 resource!;
- C2)** 43...♞e5 We've previously seen that Black would prefer the rook on e4, in order to potentially attack the h4 pawn. 44.♞h7+ ♙e8 45.♞b7 ♙d7 46.♙f3+-;
- C3)** 43...♙g7 44.♞b8 f5 45.♞xb5 f4 With the black king on f7, this position was not so easy, but what a difference one square makes... 46.♞c5 ♞e3 47.♙f5+! winning.
- C4)** 43...♙d1 Best try. 44.♙xb5 ♞xh4 45.♙d4 ♞h2+ 46.♙e3 ♞xa2 47.b5 The story is not over even here, but with best play White's two pawns should win the race fairly comfortably.

42...♙c8 Now we see some of White's struggles – the h4 pawn is a constant hassle to defend.

43.♞c5 ♙d7 44.♞c7 ♙e8 45.♙f3 The knight comes back to defend the pawn, but this can be seen as somewhat of a victory for Black. The b5 pawn suddenly feels a lot safer.

45...♞e6 46.♞a7 Hikaru now embarks on an admirable strategy, in my opinion. He plays some "shuffling" moves, which outwardly represent no cohesive plan, but they definitely have a clear aim. He has all the time in the world to decide when to strike concretely, so he aims to induce an error from Teimour, by exhausting him both physically and on the clock.

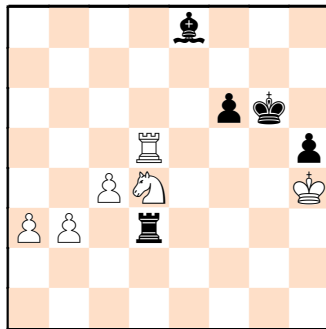
46...♞e4 47.♞a8 ♙f7 48.♞d8 ♞e7 49.♞d2 ♞e4 50.♞d5 ♙g6



51.a3 Now is the time for some progress. The point of this move is that in a future check along the second rank, this pawn won't be hit.

51...♞e7 52.♙d4 ♞e4 53.♙xb5 ♞xh4 54.♙d4 Finally, a major transformation has taken place. It's basically a race now, and White not only has an extra pawn, but they're all connected, whereas Black's are split. Nevertheless, we must remember that bishops are generally superior to knights in such races, as they are long-range pieces.

54...♞h2+ 55.♙g3 ♞d2 56.c4 ♞d3+ 57.♙h4

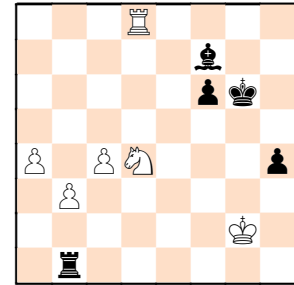


57...♙f7 57...♞c3! saves the game, as it effectively freezes White's pawns. 58.a4 (58.c5 ♙f7) 58...♙xa4! 59.bxa4 ♞xc4 60.a5 ♞a4 61.♙g3 ♞a3+ Black will check the king until the moment is right to start pushing the h-pawn. 62.♙f4 h4 White will have to divert his attention to stopping the pawn, which will prevent him from pushing his own passer.

58.♞d8 ♞d1 59.a4 Now Black is not in time to restrain White's pawns.

59...♞h1+ 60.♙g3 h4+ 61.♙g2 ♞c1? Finally, the decisive mistake.

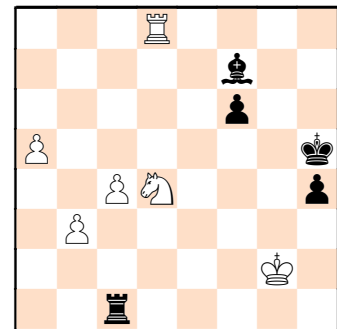
61...♞b1!!



Remarkably, this move, putting the rook behind NEITHER of White's further advanced pawns, draws the game. It prevents c4-c5 due to ...♙xb3, while if a4-a5, there will be some counterplay with a timely ♞b2+. 62.a5 ♙g5! 63.c5 ♙g4 64.c6 h3+ 65.♙h2 ♞b2+ 66.♙h1 ♞b1+=.

62.a5 The difference is that the c2 square is covered, meaning that Black cannot land a check along the second rank.

62...♙h5



63.♙f2!! Amazing! Remember the crazy move ♞h8 I was showing earlier? I feel almost the same about this move. It's so difficult to find, but it's the best, and kudos to Hikaru for calculating accurately. It's strange to spend a tempo like this in a race situation, but now ...♙g4 and ...h3+ do not come with tempo.

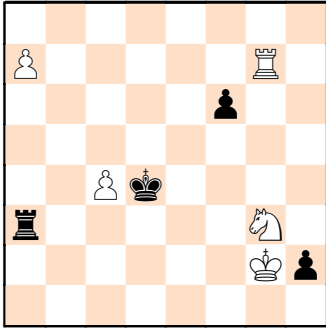
63...♙g4 64.♞f8 h3 A last try, but Hikaru has already seen that it doesn't work. 64...♙g6 65.♞g8 ♙h5 66.a6 ♞a1 67.c5 ♞xa6 68.c6 ♞a7 69.b4+- The pawns are just too fast.

65.♞xf7 h2 66.♞g7+ ♙f4 67.♙e2+



♙e5 68.♘g3 White still has all of his pawns, so the rest is easy.

68...♞c2+ 69.♙f3 ♞c3+ 70.♙g2 ♞xb3 71.a6 ♞a3 72.a7 ♙d4



73.♙f5+ ♙xc4 74.♞b7 ♙c5 75.♙e7 **Black resigned** as ♘c8 followed by ♞b8 is unavoidable. A very difficult endgame to navigate, but Hikaru managed to bring the point home.

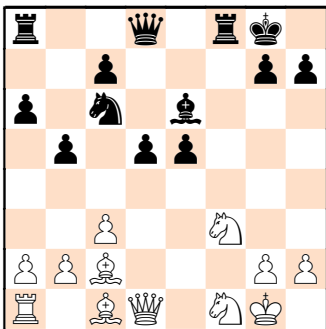
The second half of the tournament brought a complete reversal of fortunes for the two Americans. Nakamura won their second individual clash in a topical Dilworth variation of the Open Ruy Lopez.

C82

Hikaru Nakamura	2760
Fabiano Caruana	2783

FIDE Candidates, Madrid 2022

1.e4 e5 2.♘f3 ♘c6 3.♙b5 a6 4.♙a4 ♘f6 5.0-0 ♘xe4 6.d4 b5 7.♙b3 d5 8.dxe5 ♙e6 9.c3 ♙c5 10.♘bd2 0-0 11.♙c2 ♘xf2 12.♞xf2 ♙xf2+ 13.♙xf2 f6 14.♘f1 fxe5 15.♙g1



It's an extremely difficult position to assess and play for both sides. Black has a rook and two pawns for two minor



▲ The Masked Man in Madrid!

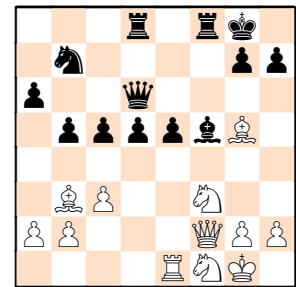
PHOTO: FIDE / Stev Bonhage

pieces, and normally the result of the game depends on how he manages to mobilize his center pawns. If he can march them forward unimpeded, good things are in store, but if White manages to blockade them, the minor pieces will begin to take over.

15...♞d6 16.♙e3 ♙f5 17.♙b3 In general, White wants to keep his bishop pair. The more minor pieces that are traded off, the less Black has to worry about them coordinating and creating problems.

17...♞ad8 18.♞e1 ♘a5 The idea here is to bring the knight to b7. The c5 square is a big problem for Black since he lacks his dark-squared bishop, so this knight maneuver is a nice way to solve that issue.

19.♞f2 ♘b7 20.♞e1 c5 21.♘g3 21.♙g5 would lead to a forcing sequence that I'm sure both players had in their preparation.



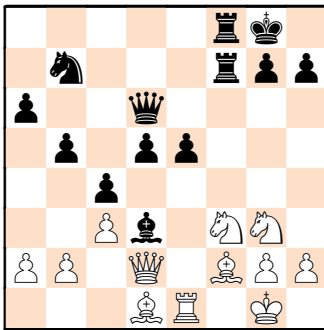
- A) 21...♞de8? 22.♞xe5! is the tactical point, when after 22...♞xe5 23.♙f4 ♞fe8 24.♘xe5 ♞xe5 25.♞g3 White wins material and the game.
- B) 21...c4! 22.♙xd8 cxb3 23.♙h4 bxa2 24.♞a1 ♙b1 What a strange position! Black has three pawns for the piece, including one on a2. I'll exercise my annotator privileges by assessing this position as "unclear."

21...♙d3 22.♞d2 c4? It turns out that there's a big difference between Black's two natural pawn pushes, ...c5-c4 and ...e5-e4.

22...e4 23.♖h4 ♖e5 The thing is that here Black will never be compelled to touch his c5 pawn. His knight on b7 can stay there guarding it for all eternity if he wants. Compare this to the game continuation, in which Caruana's pawns were blockaded by force.

23.♙d1 ♗d7 24.♙f2 Nakamura simply piles up on the e5 pawn. If he ever forces it to move, he acquires a wonderful dark-square blockade.

24...♗df7



25.♗h1! Showing fantastic understanding of the position. The bishop on f2 is protected, so ♗xe5 now becomes a threat.

25...e4 Black can't maintain the pawn on e5. If 25...♗f5 then follows 26.♖e3 when ...e5-e4 is going to be forced sooner rather than later, since the alternatives are even worse. 26...♙e4? 27.♙g3 ♗e8 28.♗g5 ♙d3 29.♙g4 ♗ff8 30.♗f2 White is just way too active.

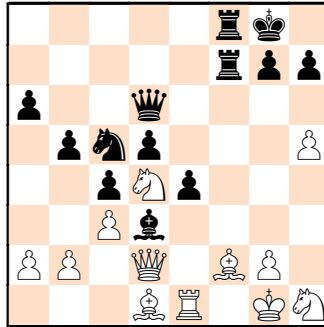
26.♗d4 From a practical perspective, the position is a complete nightmare for Black. He might be okay with accurate play, but any human would take White here. There are various plans to play on the kingside with the minor pieces, while Black's rooks are just stuck, and all he can do is wait and react to White's moves.

26...♖g6 This seems to walk into Hikaru's next move. Maybe 26...♗c5 was relatively best, trying to bring the knight into play.

27.h4! ♗c5? Too late. Only now is the position objectively lost for Black. 27...h5 is extremely difficult to play,

but desperate times require desperate measures. After 28.♖g5 ♖xg5 29.hxg5 g6 30.♗c6 it's a great endgame for White, but Black can still cling to life.

28.h5 ♖d6



29.♙g4! This is the big deal, and the whole point of Hikaru's preceding play. The bishop arrives on this diagonal at the perfect time, completely cutting Black's c5 knight out. The conversion wasn't perfect from here on out, but Hikaru never lost control of the game and **White won** in the end.

This was undoubtedly a painful loss for Caruana, but he had to rebound quickly for the next round, as he had his all-important white game against Nepomniachtchi, which we saw earlier in this article. Fabi, though, had previously won consecutive games in round 6 and 7 to keep pace with Nepo. Here's his nice win against the young talent, Alireza Firouzja.

E06

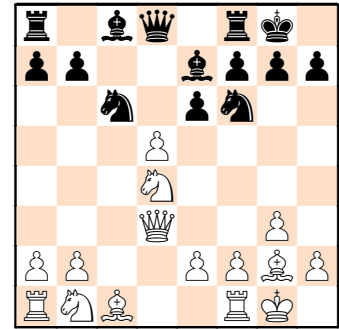
Alireza Firouzja	2793
Fabiano Caruana	2783

FIDE Candidates, Madrid 2022

1.d4 ♗f6 2.c4 e6 3.g3 d5 4.♙g2 ♙e7 5.♗f3 0-0 6.♖d3 An extremely rare move, only played 16 times, compared to over 30,000 games in the main line! White simply defends the pawn, making ...dxc4 less desirable for Black. Lately, White players have been struggling to get much of anything against 6.0-0 dxc4.

6...c5 Logical enough. White has already spent a tempo with the queen, so why not play directly in the center?

7.0-0 cxd4 8.♗xd4 ♗c6 9.cxd5



9...♗xd4 9...exd5 is how the previous game that reached this position went, but I don't like it so much. Why accept the isolated pawn voluntarily? After 10.♗c3 it's a pleasant Tarrasch position for White.

Certainly worth considering is 9...♗b4, when after 10.♖b3 e5, we've actually reached a few other games by transposition. I suspect if this 6.♖d3 line picks up popularity, this is one of the positions we'll see tested quite a bit.

10.♖xd4 ♗xd5 As usual in the Catalan, White has some slight pressure based on his strong light-squared bishop, but Black is extremely solid. If he can complete the development of his pieces, he will have nothing to fear.

11.♗d1 I think 11.♗c3 poses greater challenges to Black. 11...♙f6 12.♖c4 The point is that Black has to make a concession now, whichever way he captures on c3. If he takes with the knight, then the b7 pawn becomes soft, and it's hard to complete his development. Or he can take with the bishop and surrender the bishop pair. 12...♙xc3 13.bxc3 ♙d7 14.♙xd5 exd5 15.♖xd5 Black should still be fine here, but White is up a pawn and eventually won in A.Grischuk 2752 - I.Lysyj 2668, Sochi 2016.

11...♙f6 12.♖g4 ♙d7 Now Black can claim full equality. He'll connect his rooks next move.

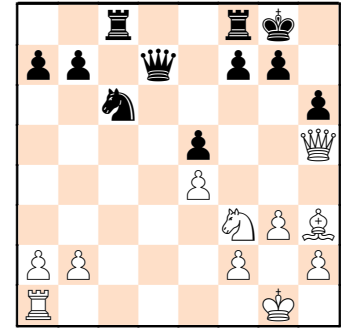
13.♗d2 ♖e7 14.♗f3 14.♗e4 fails to snag the f6 bishop. 14...♙e5.

14...♗ac8 15.e4 It's a risky proposition to block in your prized Catalan bishop like this. Of course, Caruana has seen that this



▲ Alireza Firouzja and Fabiano Caruana.

PHOTO: FIDE / Stev Bonhage



21...f5! It's very easy to miss moves in a position where your opponent has plausible alternatives. Firouzja likely expected that he was simply orchestrating a fancy trade of pieces, when in reality he will have to play an exchange down. It's also a bit of an unusual tactic, shedding a pawn just to open up a diagonal to make contact with the queen on h5. After 21...♙d6 22.♙xc8 ♜xc8, I honestly still like Black since White's queen is a bit offside, but he should of course manage to draw.

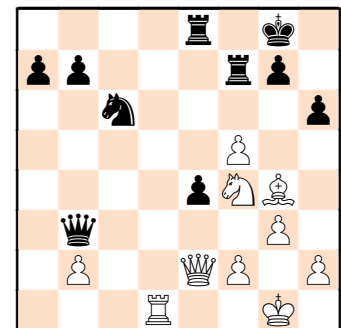
22.exf5 Upon 22.♙xf5 the point is 22...♙e8, when Black retains his extra material.

22...♞ce8 White has some compensation on the light squares, but this h3 bishop is still not living up to the hype. Put it on e4, and we'd have something to talk about, but that's clearly not happening.

23.♞h4 The knight is heading to g6, where it will at least try to intimidate, if not exactly threaten, the black king.

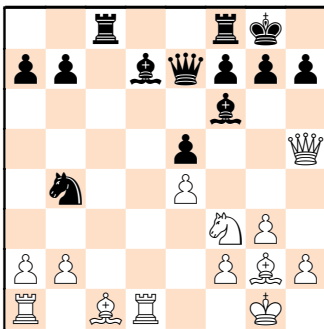
23...e4 24.♞d1 ♙f7 25.♙e2 ♙xa2 Why not take a pawn? Now the material situation is desperate for White, meaning an all-or-nothing attack is the only option.

26.♞g6 ♞f7 27.♞f4 ♙b3 28.♙g4



move does not win material by trapping the bishop next move with e4-e5.

15...e5 16.♙h5 ♞b4

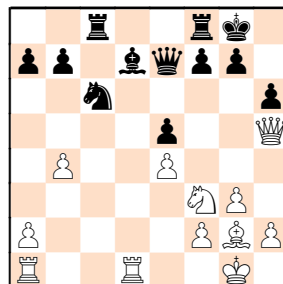


I already get the sense that the game is going a bit wrong for Firouzja. Of course, he hasn't made any terrible mistakes, and you'll hardly be much worse early on with the white pieces unless you make a major error. But Black's pieces are more harmonious - his knight is a lot closer to reaching the d4 square than White's knight is to reaching the d5 one.

17.♙g5 It might already be a good time to force the trade of the light-squared bishops. 17.♙h3 ♙xh3 18.♙xh3 ♞c2 19.♞b1 ♞d4 20.♙g4 I'd still take Black, but it should be close to equal here. White will play ♙d2 or ♙e3 next.

17...♙g5 18.♞xg5 h6 19.♞f3 ♞c6 Firouzja's next move is a tactical blunder, but I believe it came out of his desire to do something about his g2 bishop. My first two candidate moves here would be ♙h3 or ♙f1, trying to do something about that piece, but they are both unsatisfactory.

20.♞xd7? After 20.♙h3? ♙xh3 21.♙xh3 ♙b4 Black is clearly better as both the b2 and e4 pawns are hit. If 20.♙f1, then 20...♙e6, and the f1 bishop never quite reaches the c4 square, when Black is doing very well. Perhaps 20.b4 was the best.



Then, after 20...♞xb4 21.♙xe5 ♙xe5 22.♞xe5 ♙a4 Black's queenside majority is certainly worth a lot here, meaning he should have a pleasant endgame.

20...♙xd7 21.♙h3



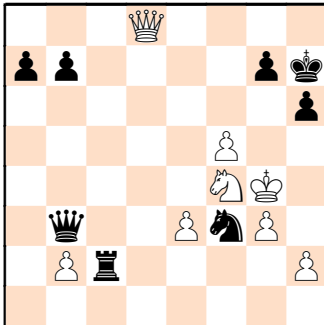
28...e3! Absolutely fantastic play by Fabi. Going ...♖d8 on the previous move was not ideal for Black, because it would hang the e4 pawn, so the text move solves that problem while also reminding White that his king isn't completely safe.

29.♔g2 29.♕h5 doesn't work. 29...exf2+ 30.♖xf2 ♖xf5 31.♕xe8 ♖xd1+ winning.

29...♖d8 30.♖xd8+ ♔xd8 31.fxe3 Caruana has managed to trade off a pair of rooks, leaving him with the only rook on the board, which is normally a good idea in these exchange-up positions. We'll soon see why.

31...♖c7 White's second rank is dreadfully weak, and he has to run his king out just to not lose immediately.

32.♔h3 ♔f7 33.♕f3 ♖c2 34.♖d1 ♔g5+ 35.♔g4 ♔xf3 36.♖d8+ ♔h7

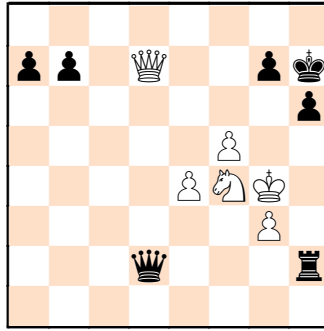


37.♔xf3 37.♔e6 is a bit trickier perhaps, but it would not save the game. Then, after 37...♖c4+ (37...♔xh2+?? Don't do this! After 38.♔h3 Black is suddenly out of checks and is dead lost!) 38.♔xf3 ♖e2+ 39.♔e4 ♖c4+ White won't be able to maintain his knight on e6, meaning that his threats come to a grinding halt. 40.♔d5 (40.♔d4 ♖xh2+-) 40...♖d3+ 41.♔d4 ♖a4+-.

37...♖xb2 The queen and rook create deadly threats, and White never has time to get his knight within striking distance of Black's king.

38.♖e8 38.♔g6 ♖f2+ 39.♔g4 ♖e2+ is winning.

38...♖f6 39.e4 ♖xh2 40.♖d7 ♖c3+ 41.♔g4 ♖d2

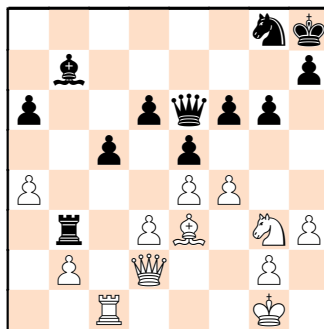


42.♖a4 White resigned rather than see 42...h5+ 43.♔g5 (43.♔xh5 ♖e2+) 43...♖d8+. A strange game by Firouzja, who seemed to be drifting even before his blunder. Conversely, Caruana did an excellent job of punishing his opponent's mistakes.

Perhaps spurred on by the desire to go all-out to catch the leader, Caruana played extremely riskily as Black against Duda in round 10 and lost badly. His next game against Ding would either salvage his tournament, or bury it.

Fabiano Caruana	2783
Ding Liren	2806

FIDE Candidates, Madrid 2022



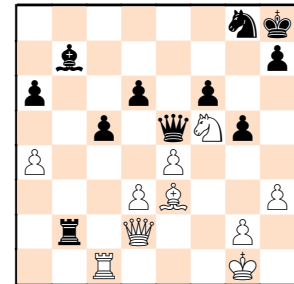
We pick up the action in this position. The presence of opposite-colored bishops gives White some long-term attacking potential if he can manage to rip open the kingside. However, if Ding just stays put and keeps the pawn structure as it is, he will be perfectly fine. Finally, he spots a tactical trick and assumes that Caruana has missed it. Little does he know that he himself is getting tricked!

30...exf4?! There's no reason to play

this move, except for the fact that Ding has a concrete follow-up in mind.

31.♕xf4 g5? 32.♕e3 ♖e5 This was the whole point. It looks like a simple double attack – how can White save the b2 pawn?

33.♔f5! ♔e7 Given that the b2 pawn is poisoned, Ding has to go into survival mode and trade off this knight as quickly as possible. 33...♖xb2

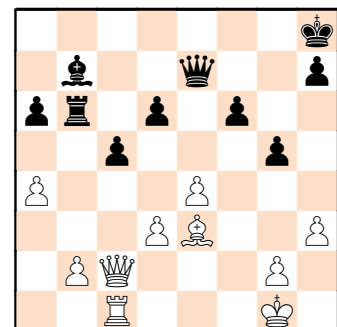


34.♔xd6! A beautiful tactic which I'm sure Caruana saw many moves in advance. White regains the pawn and comes out completely winning. 34...♖xd2 35.♔f7+ ♔g7 36.♔xe5 ♖a2 37.♔d7+-.

34.♔xe7 ♖xe7 Now White has a clear target – the f6 pawn, along with the potential pawn break of d3-d4 at the right moment. It's still not easy to see how White will crash through, but it's clear that he can press with no risk for a long time.

35.♖c2 Clearing the way for the bishop to make its way to c3 is the obvious choice.

35...♖b6





▲ As usual Nepo and Naka are on the prowl!

PHOTO: FIDE / Stev Bonhage

36.♟f1 36.b4!! was a pretty shocking opportunity. White gives up a full pawn just to gain a tempo to bring his bishop to its ideal square. **36...♞xb4 37.♔d2 ♖b6 38.a5 ♖b5** Not the obvious square for the rook, but it's important to control the b2 square. (**38...♞c6 39.♞b2** White threatens ♔xg5, and ♟f1 will come soon.)

A) On **39.♔c3?** Black is just in time with **39...d5**. The idea is **...d5-d4**, to close the bishop. **40.exd5 ♞e3+ 41.♔h1 ♔xd5** Black is threatening **...♞xh3+**, so White is not in time.

B) **39.♞e1!** It's pretty unhuman-like to play like this. Black's counterplay with **...d6-d5** is prevented, and White will continue with **♔c3**, with a great position.

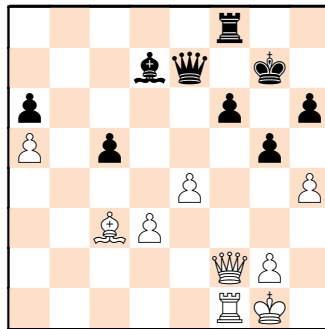
36...♔g7 37.a5 37.♔d2? d5 Again, White should be wary of allowing this.

37...♞c6 38.♔d2 ♞c8 39.♔c3 ♟f8 Ding has scrambled back with his rook to defend the f6 pawn, which means he's safe for the time being. Still, all he can do is sit tight and hope his opponent fails to break through.

40.♞f2 h6 41.h4 ♔c8 42.b4 Opening a second front is a typical way to

make progress in such positions. One weakness for your opponent is normally not enough to win, so you have to try to stretch his defenses thin.

42...♔d7 43.bxc5 dxc5



44.♞b1 The most obvious, but a bit more subtlety was required. **44.♞f3!!** is a strange move that leaves Black almost in zugzwang. I'm serious! Here are some natural moves by Black that would give up key squares.

A) **44...♞d6** is strongly met by **45.e5+-**.
B) After **44...♔c8 45.hxg5 hxg5 46.♞b1** now Black doesn't have **...♔b5** to prevent the rook invasion.

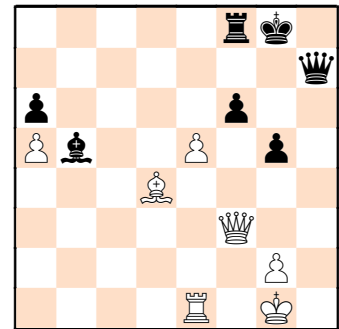
C) **44...♟f7** allows a very unpleasant **45.♞h5+-**.

D) **44...♔b5 45.hxg5 hxg5 46.♞f5+-**.
E) **44...♞e6 45.hxg5 hxg5 46.♞e3+-** Black can't defend both the c5 and g5 pawns.

44...♔b5 45.hxg5 hxg5 46.♞f5 Now there's only one satisfactory defense to **♞xg5+**, but it's enough!

46...♔g8 It's clear that White's best opportunities have passed. Black's bishop on b5 is fantastic, harassing White's d3 pawn.

47.d4 ♔d3 48.♞e1 cxd4 49.♔xd4 ♞h7 50.♞f3 ♔b5 51.e5



Finally, we have a break, but Ding is well-equipped to meet it.

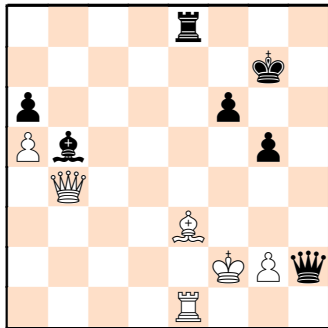
51...♞d7! 52.♔c5 ♞c8 53.♞b3+ ♞f7 54.e6 This is the only way to play for a win, but as we shall see, it has its risks as well. White's pawn is very far up the board, but it's not queening anytime soon. Black's king will soon be the safer one for the first time in the game.

54...♞c7 55.e7+ ♔g7 56.♔d4 ♞f4 57.♔e3? Fatigue finally sets in, not only from this game but probably from the whole tournament, and Caruana suffers a blind spot. Bailing out with **57.♞e3** was probably called for.

57...♞g3! I'm not sure what hallucination Caruana had, but his position is desperate now. He has to deal with his loose pieces as well as **...♞h8** and **...♔c6** ideas.

58.♞b4 ♞h8 59.e8♞ The only way to survive temporarily is to give up the pawn to break Black's perfect coordination.

59...♞h2+ 60.♔f2 ♞xe8

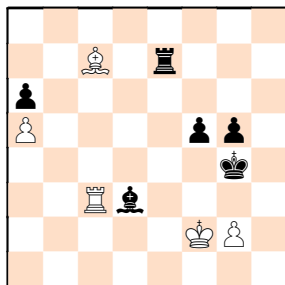


61. ♖g4? Missing what I would consider the last practical chance. It's true that White should still objectively draw with best play after this, but the position is so difficult for a human.

61. ♗xg5 Even if this is impossible to properly assess at the board, I think it should be tried. Of course it's easier to say this now, in hindsight, than when you're in the midst of things trying to steady the ship as the game slips away from you. 61... ♗xe1 62. ♗xe1 fxc5 63. ♗e7+ ♔g8 64. ♗xc5+ ♔f7 It's not a perpetual, but Black can never trade queens because he has the wrong-colored bishop, so I think this is a draw. 65. ♗f5+ ♔e7 66. ♗e4+ ♔d6 67. ♗d4+ ♔c6 68. ♗c3+ ♔d5 69. ♗f3+ ♔c4 70. ♗e4+ ♔b3 71. ♗d5+ ♔b4 72. ♗d2+ Black can run all over the board, but the queen on h2 is just about as badly placed as it can be. It's always at risk of being traded off, and it doesn't cover enough key squares to prevent White from executing a million checks.

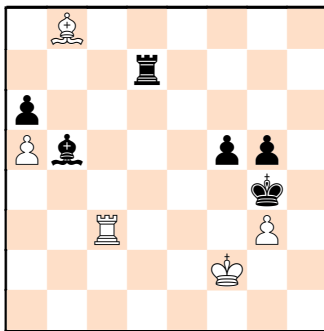
61... ♗e5 Now Black has an extra pawn and an ongoing attack. Even if the queens are traded, the endgame is miserable for White.

62. ♗d4 ♗f5+ 63. ♔g1 ♔g6 64. ♗d2 ♗c6 65. ♗f2 ♗g4 66. ♗d3+ ♗e4 67. ♗g3 ♗xc3 68. ♗xc3 f5 69. ♗c7 ♔h5 70. ♔f2 ♔g4 71. ♗c1 ♗e7 72. ♗c3 ♗d7 72... ♗d3!



I understand Ding's desire not to rush things, but this would end matters quicker. 73. ♗xd3 (73. ♗d6 ♗e2+ 74. ♔f1 ♗e3+ 75. ♔f2 f4-+ The rook gets to e2 next). 73... ♗xc7 74. ♗g3+ ♔f4 75. ♗f3+ ♔e4 76. ♗e3+ ♔d5-+.

73.g3 ♗d3 74. ♗b8 ♗b5



75. ♗c7?? Finally, the decisive blunder. Upon 75. ♔e1, the point being that White doesn't really need his king near the g3 pawn since it's perfectly well-defended as it is, 75... ♗e7+ 76. ♔d1 it'll be a lengthy torture, although I would still

expect Black to win the majority of the time, even if objectively it's a draw.

75... ♗e7 Now the rook gets to e2, boxing in the white king after which it will succumb to a hailstorm of mating threats. The bishop on c7 is on the worst square, since White cannot play ♗e3 here.

76. ♗d8 76. ♗c2 ♗d3-+.

76... ♗e2+ 77. ♔g1 ♗d2 78. ♗e7 ♗d3
White resigned

As I stated previously, despite ending the tournament on a sour note, I'm sure Hikaru will view this tournament as a huge success, as he's finally put to bed the ridiculous rumors that he's washed up in classical chess. As for Fabi, it's rough to see him fade after such a promising start. Losing four games in the second half of the tournament is shocking. However, I give him credit for the uncompromising play he showed. He was trying to win the tournament at all costs, and sometimes that can backfire, but at least he put it all on the table. ■

CREATIVITY IS NOT DEAD

What about the other players? Much like the last Candidates Tournament, Ding had a poor first half and an excellent second half. The "old lion" Radjabov showed that he is still one of the elite, finishing tied with Nakamura on a plus one score. Firouzja, despite being one of the highest rated players, still seems to lack experience to compete for the top spot, and he ended up in clear sixth place. Nevertheless, he's still so young, and the next time he qualifies for the Candidates, I guarantee that he'll have a much better outing.

Rapport and Duda tied for last, which is somewhat depressing for me personally, since they were probably the two most creative players in the field. Does this mean that creativity is dead at the elite level? No, I wouldn't read too much into it. They just did not play their best chess, and I'm sure they won't abandon their trademark styles on the basis of one result.

Let's hope the World Championship match proves as exciting as this tournament.



▲ Richard Rapport



▲ Jan-Krzysztof Duda

PHOTO: FIDE / Stev Bonhage