



HIKARU NAKAMURA WINS AMERICAN CUP IN SAINT LOUIS

Naka Is The Last Man Standing!

THE
AMERICAN
CUP • 2023

Despite its unusual and, for some, complicated tournament format, the 2023 American Cup brought a lot of excitement for both players and spectators. Certainly, it required a complete set of skills in classical, rapid and blitz chess to go all the way and win this event. For Hikaru Nakamura, it also meant going through a memorable trilogy against his many-time rival Wesley So.

■ By GM John Burke



FINAL STANDINGS

1. Hikaru NAKAMURA
2. Wesley SO
3. Levon ARONIAN
4. Leinier DOMINGUEZ
- 5-6. Fabiano CARUANA,
Sam SHANKLAND
- 7-8. Ray ROBSON,
Sam SEVIAN

▲ Hikaru Nakamura Photo by Lennart Ootes

Like last year, when it was first introduced, the 2023 American Cup put eight of the best U.S. players through a double elimination format that tested their skills in classical, rapid, and blitz. The event consists of two brackets – the “Champions” Bracket, where all the players start, and the “Elimination” Bracket, where players go after they lose a match in the Champions Bracket. Then, if a player loses another match, this time in the Elimination Bracket, he is knocked out of the event and has to sit aimlessly in his hotel room until the closing ceremony. I’m kidding, of course – there’s a ton of fun things to do in Saint Louis!

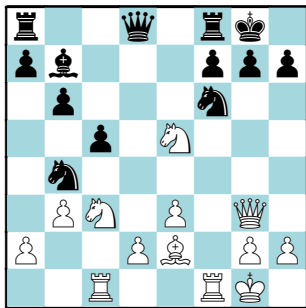
Hikaru Nakamura was definitely the deserving winner, as he was the only player to win classical games and displayed great resourcefulness in the playoff portions. However, the tournament came to an abrupt end when Wesley So, Nakamura’s opponent in the final match, crumbled and blundered!



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.

Hikaru Nakamura	2768
Wesley So	2761

St Louis 2023, Rapid Playoff



17...♖xd2?? This blunder abruptly cuts the match short. It's understandable, since the players have been playing for many days in a row and are probably exhausted. Also, it's possible to think that White's only idea here involves ♜xf6, but it turns out the rook can leave the f-file and trap the queen!

18.♞fd1 Wesley probably calculated 18.♘c4 ♜d8, and saw that he can save his knight – although even this is bad after ♘d6.

18...♞b2 19.♘c4 Black resigned since the queen has nowhere to go.

Nakamura announced himself early on, being the only player to win a classical

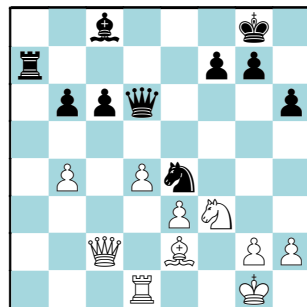
game right from the start, as he defeated Sam Sevian with the white pieces in the first game of their mini-match. What impressed me even more was how he smoothly held a draw in the second game to clinch matters.

D37

Samuel Sevian	2687
Hikaru Nakamura	2768

St Louis 2023, Champions Bracket

1.d4 ♘f6 2.c4 e6 3.♘f3 d5 4.♘c3 h6 5.♙f4 ♙d6 6.♙xd6 ♜xd6 7.e3 0-0 8.♞c1 a6 9.a3 b6 10.cxd5 exd5 11.♙e2 ♘bd7 12.0-0 ♙b7 13.b4 c6 14.♞b3 a5 15.♞fd1 axb4 16.axb4 ♞a7 17.♞a1 ♞fa8 18.♞xa7 ♞xa7 19.♘e1 ♘e4 20.♘xe4 dxe4 21.f3 ♘f6 22.fxe4 ♘xe4 23.♘f3 ♙c8 24.♞c2



Material is equal and the position should be level. Black would be pretty safe after ...♘f6, but Hikaru chooses a more concrete option that shows tremendous belief in his calculation.

24...♙f5 25.♘e5 It turns out that Black doesn't really have a good discovery with the knight. White threatens the c6 pawn and also prepares ♙d3/♞f1 ideas. Things could go wrong very quickly if Black is inaccurate.

25...♞f6! Not an obvious move, but certainly one that Nakamura saw in advance. The queen is coming to g5, creating threats against White's king.

In case of 25...♘f2? White gets two minor pieces for a rook after 26.♞xf5 ♘xd1 27.♙xd1 ♞xb4 28.♘xc6 ♞e1+ 29.♞f1 ♞xe3+ 30.♞f2. Black will have to suffer and beg for a draw here.

25...♞c7 is an example of how Black's position can collapse after a lazy move. This looks normal, defending the c6 pawn, but now White can exploit Black's loose

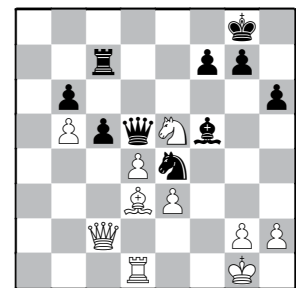
YOU MAY LOSE ONLY ONCE!

The matches in the Champions Bracket consisted of two classical games – 90 minutes per player for the whole game, with a 30-second increment starting from move one. If the players are tied after that, they play two rapid games of 10+5. If they are still tied, they play two blitz games of 3+2, and if still tied, they finally play an Armageddon game. The matches in the Elimination Bracket followed the same format, except the original games were 25+10, not classical.

At the end of all the madness, the winner of the Champions Bracket and the winner of the Elimination Bracket play a match under Champions Bracket conditions. If the Champions Bracket winner wins this match, he wins the event, since he would not have lost any matches at that point, and the opponent would have lost two. However, if the Elimination Bracket winner wins, then both players would have lost a match throughout the course of the event, so the two would play one final match under Elimination Bracket conditions to decide the title.

It may sound confusing, but the important thing to keep in mind is that you are only eliminated once you lose two matches.

knight on e4. 26.♙d3 ♞d5 27.b5 c5



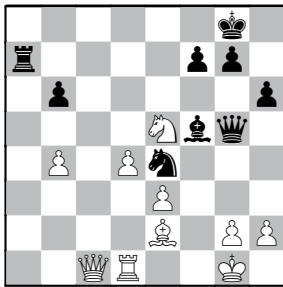
28.♘xf7 Not the only good move, but certainly good enough to discard this line for Black. 28...♞xf7 29.♙c4 ♘g5 30.♙xd5 ♙xc2 31.♙xf7+ ♜xf7 32.♞c1 ♙e4 33.dxc5 bxc5 34.♞xc5+-.

After 25...♘g3 26.♙d3 ♙xd3 27.♞xd3 ♘h5, Black is still fine here, but White retains some pressure in a couple of ways. For example, 28.♞c1 ♞c7 29.♞a1.

26.♙d3 26.♞xc6?? backfires after



26...♖g5, when White can't defend the e3 pawn conveniently. 27.♖c1



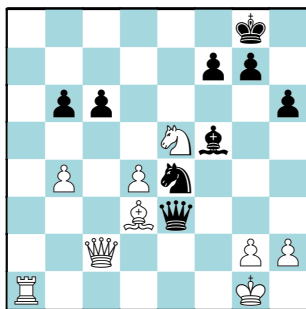
27...♞a1!-+ A classic deflection idea – we'll see this theme again later! 28.h4 ♞xc1 29.hxg5 ♖c3-+.

26...♖g5 Here's the tactical justification for Black's play – he defends against the threat to his knight indirectly. 26...♞d6 27.e4 was not the plan of course, as White gets his way in the center and has a large advantage.

27.♞e1 27.♙xe4 runs into 27...♖xe3+.

27...♞a1! Again, we see this deflection idea.

28.♞xa1 ♖xe3+ White's king can run to f1 now, so he will actually end up amassing three pieces for the queen.



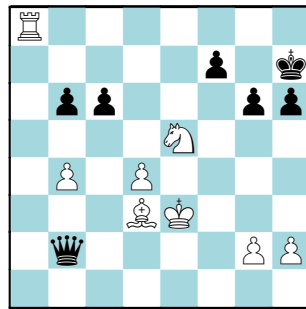
29.♔f1 29.♔h1?? ♖f2+ 30.♖xf2 ♖xf2 The f5 bishop is defended here, so Black wins. 31.♞f1 ♖xd4 32.♞xf5 f6 33.♙c4+ ♔h7 34.♙d3 fxe5-+.

29...♞d2+ 30.♖xd2 ♖xd2 31.♞a8+ Not 31.♙xf5?? because of 31...♖f4+ winning.

31...♔h7 32.♙xf5+ g6 33.♙d3 After a forced line, we get a dynamically balanced position. Normally two minor pieces and a rook would dominate a queen, but here they don't coordinate so well. More importantly, White's king is

very exposed, and avoiding a perpetual will be impossible. Consider that this was the position Hikaru had to see and assess when he decided on 24...♙f5. Pretty impressive!

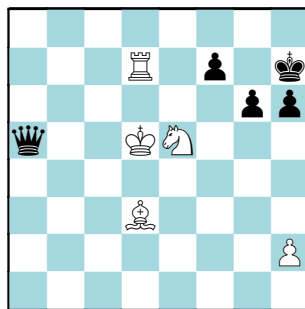
33...♖c1+34.♔e2 ♖b2+35.♔e3



35...c5 Forcing matters in the center, and breaking down the defense of the e5 knight.

36.bxc5 bxc5 37.♞d8 cxd4+ 38.♞xd4 ♖xg2 39.♞d7 Now, if White had a free move, he would take on f7 and think about mating Black, but that's not how chess works.

39...♖g1+ 40.♔e4 ♖e1+ 41.♔d5 ♖a5+



42.♔e4 42.♔d6 ♖b4+ 43.♔c6 ♖c3+ This wouldn't change a thing – there's just nowhere for the king to hide.

42...♖e1+43.♔d5 ♖a5+44.♔e4 ♖e1+ Draw.

The second round featured the matches Nakamura - Dominguez and Caruana - So. Caruana and So drew their two classical games before So won the rapid playoff.

However, for the second time in a row, Nakamura finished things off in the classical portion, winning with Black



▲ Samuel Sevian

Photo by Lennart Ootes

against one of the most solid and best prepared players in the world – in what was yet another classical masterpiece!

B32

Leinier Dominguez	2743
Hikaru Nakamura	2768

St Louis 2023, Champions Bracket

1.e4 c5 Already a sign of aggressive intentions! Hikaru usually plays the Berlin, but here goes for something more offbeat.

2.♖f3 ♖c6 3.d4 cxd4 4.♖xd4 e5 The Kalashnikov is a rare guest at the top level, compared to the Sveshnikov, but it's still a perfectly fine opening.

5.♖b5 d6 6.♖1c3 a6 7.♖a3 ♙e6 This is the modern way to play this opening – to not even attempt to prevent White's a3 knight from returning to the game. 7...b5 8.♖d5 ♖f6 9.c4 is one of the differences from the Sveshnikov – White doesn't necessarily have to transpose back with ♙g5, but can try this independent option.

8.♖c4 ♞b8 A slightly mysterious looking move, but the point is that b6 is covered after Black pushes ...b7-b5 in some lines.

9.♖d5 After 9.♙e3, now 9...b5 illustrates the point of 8...♞b8.

9...♙xd5 10.exd5 ♖ce7 11.g3 11.g4 is the shocking top engine line, which is impossible to play if you don't know it.

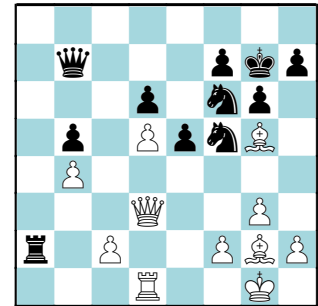


▲ Leinier Dominguez

Photo by Lennart Ootes

White may have the bishop pair, but the position isn't super-open, and the only pawn weakness is the one on b5. White's pawns may become weak soon, and Black's knight can jump into c4 when the time is right. The position seems balanced, but easier to play for Black.

26. ♖d3 ♜a2 27. ♝d1 ♜f6 28. ♗g5 ♜g7

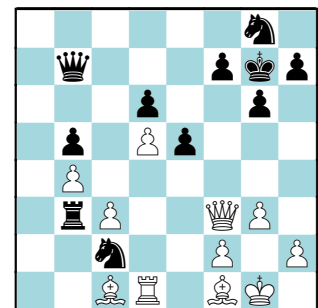


29. ♗h3! White has to create some threats, and at the moment the f5 knight is the only vulnerable piece in Black's position.

29... ♗d4 Natural was 29... ♗e7, attacking the d5 pawn, but it turns out to be risky after 30. ♗xf6+! ♜xf6 31. f4. With the f-file opening next, Black could be in trouble if he is not careful.

30. c3 ♜c2 31. ♖f3 I think now was the time to force a draw with 31. ♝d2, before Black is able to bring his knight to c4 and coordinate his pieces. 31... ♜a1+ 32. ♝d1 ♜a2 leads to a repetition, as trading off the active rook with 32... ♝xd1+ would be a huge concession for Black, when after 33. ♖xd1 ♜a3 34. ♖c1! ♜c4 35. ♗h6+ ♜g8 36. ♖g5, suddenly White is on the offensive.

31... ♜g8 32. ♗f1 ♜a3 33. ♗c1 ♜b3

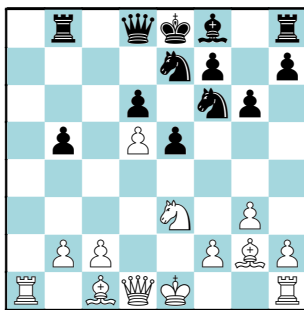


34. ♖e4? Down to his last seconds, Dominguez fails to find a good way to

It looks very unnatural to weaken the f4 and h4 squares, but the idea is that it interferes with Black's development. If he plays ... ♜f6, he always has to worry about g4-g5. 11... ♗g6.

11...b5 12. ♗e3 g6 We have a sharply unbalanced position here. White will try to play on the queenside and use the undermining moves such as a2-a4 or b2-b4, while Black will go for kingside play with a potential ...f7-f5 pawn push at some stage.

13. a4 ♜f6 14. axb5 axb5 15. ♗g2

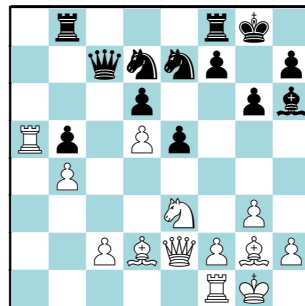


15... ♗h6! Normally, when we play ...g7-g6 or g2-g3, we automatically put our bishop on g7 or g2, but here Black has an additional option where the bishop can exert more influence.

16. 0-0 0-0 17. ♖d3 ♜d7 The knight isn't doing much on f6, so it makes sense to redeploy it to c5, especially if it comes there with a gain of tempo.

18. ♗d2 ♜c5 19. ♖e2 ♜c7 Black had to make a tough choice as to whether he wanted to play 19...b4 instead. On the one hand, he prevents White from playing b4 himself and fixing the b5 pawn as a weakness. On the other hand, he concedes the c4 square to White.

20. b4 ♜d7 21. ♜a5



21... ♗xe3! Absolutely necessary. Passive defense with 21... ♖b7 would fall flat, as after 22. ♜fa1 White has total control of the a-file and Black has no counterplay.

22. ♗xe3 ♜f5 23. ♜a7 It's definitely better to keep the bishop pair, rather than grabbing pawns. After 23. ♜xb5 Black would have many good paths forward. For example, 23... ♗xe3, when White has to take with the pawn, which weakens his king significantly. 24. fxex3 ♜c3 and Black has more than enough compensation for the pawn.

23... ♖b7 24. ♜xb7 ♖xb7 25. ♗d2 ♜a8



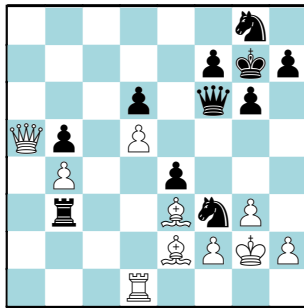
deal with the threat of ... xb4 and hangs a pawn.

Instead 34. d3 ! Surprisingly, the best way to deal with the threat is to ignore it! 34... xb4 35. d2 a6 36. c2 The rook is caught behind enemy lines. 36... c5 37. e3 b4 (In case of 37... a3 38. xc5 dxc5 , White has 39. e2 , with a nice double attack on the b5 and e5 pawns.) 38. cxb4 xb4 39. xc5 dxc5 40. xc5 b6 =.

34... xc3 35. b2 f6 36. h4 b3 Now White's position is in a shambles, but the game is not over, as there are still chances for an attack on the dark squares.

37. c1 g8 A nice retreating move, covering h6.

38. d8 e7 39. a5 d4 40. e3 f3+ 41. g2 f6 42. e2 e4



43. xb5 43. a1 was White's best chance, but it's understandable that Dominguez avoided it, as he is already a pawn down and will potentially lose another one. 43... xa1 Not the only move, but I like its simplicity. 44. xa1 f6+ It's hard to believe that White can survive with his weak b4 and d5 pawns.

43... b2 Nakamura misses a surprising win. 43... xe3 ! 44. fxe3 h6 The knight is coming to g4 or f5, and White can't keep his kingside together. 45. f1 g4 46. xf3 exf3+ 47. xf3 b2+ 48. h3 hxh2+ 49. xg4 h5+ 50. f4 f5 mate.

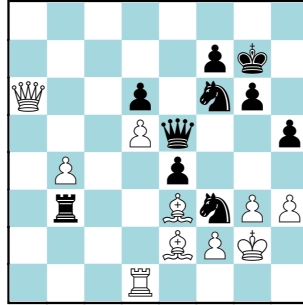
44. a6 44. f4 ! Finding this exchange sacrifice is a lot to ask, but it looks like it would've given serious saving chances. 44... d4 45. xd4 xd4 46. xd6 .

44... f6 45. h3 h5 ! White is stuck, unable to coordinate his pieces. Black is clearly threatening ... h5-h4 and White can never take on f3.

46. f1 46. xf3 is met by the devastating 46... xe3+ .

46... e5 With h3 undefended, this is the right moment to transfer the queen.

47. g2 47. f4 f5 48. g2 b2+ .



47... xe3 ! A nice finish.

48. fxe3 h4 49. gxh4 49. xf3 xg3+ 50. f1 exf3+ .

49... h2+ White resigned

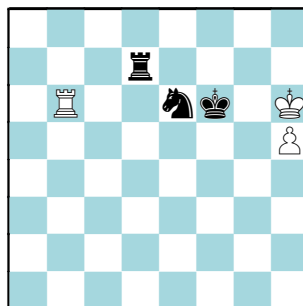
This result meant that Nakamura and So went head to head to see who would emerge as Champion of the Champions Bracket. Spoiler alert: this was not the last time they would play in this event...

THE BEGINNING OF A TRILOGY

After drawing the two classical games without intrigue, the first rapid playoff game was absolutely insane, with both players spoiling winning advantages before So eventually panicked and cracked in a drawn position.

Wesley So	2761
Hikaru Nakamura	2768

St Louis 2023, rapid playoff



The position is a theoretical draw, even without the h-pawn, but with seconds left Wesley panics and tries to force matters.

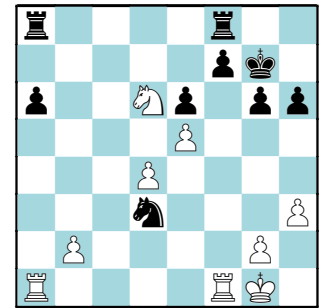
100. xe6+?? xe6 101. g6 Unfortunately for White, he is just too slow here.

101... d1 102. h6 g1+ 103. h7 f7 White resigned before waiting for what would have been the finish: 104. h8 g6 105. h7 a1 106. g8 a8 mate.

Hikaru Nakamura	2768
Wesley So	2761

St Louis 2023, blitz playoff

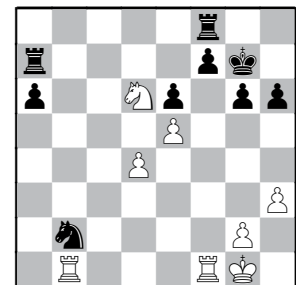
To his credit, Wesley bounced back and won the second rapid game to force matters to the blitz section. But then, Nakamura was absolutely clinical, winning both games. Here's the cute finish to the second game, involving some nice geometry.



37... xb2 Taking this pawn is risky business, but given that Wesley is in a must-win situation, the decision makes some sense.

38. ac1 a7? Objectively a mistake, but allowing c7 certainly would not have improved Wesley's winning chances.

39. f3 39. b1 ! This sudden switchback wins, because Black has lost the connection between his rooks.



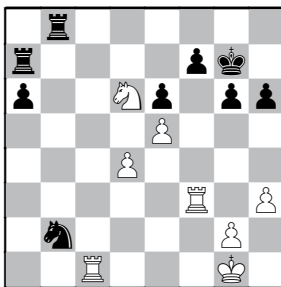


▲ Hikaru Nakamura vs. Wesley So

Photo by Lennart Ootes

- A) 39...♖d3 40.♜f3 traps the knight.
- B) 39...♖a4 40.♜fc1 with ♜c4 to follow leads to the same outcome.
- C) 39...♜b8 40.♜f2+- If the a7 rook was still on a8, Black could move the knight up, but as it is – he loses a piece.

39...♖a4 39...♜b8! was the last chance. It looks a bit risky to self-pin, but the knight is actually safe.



40.♜b1 ♜b4! Maybe So missed this move, intending to meet ♜f2 with ...♖d3!.

40.♜b3! Now the knight is snared and ♜c4 is unstoppable.

40...♜d7 41.♜c4 **Black resigned**

And while Nakamura was relaxing and waiting to get an opponent for his next match, the rest of the players battled it out through the Elimination Bracket in order to reach the final stage of the event. Wesley

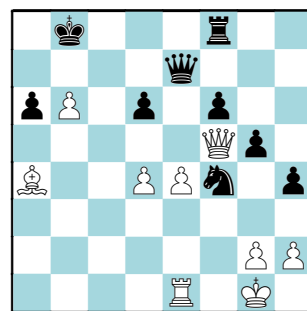
So was able to get through this phase and schedule a re-match with Hikaru.

2/3 – A RE-MATCH

The first two classical games were drawn, though not without major adventures in the first. Then Wesley displayed fine form by winning both rapid playoff games. I was particularly impressed with the way he won the first one.

Wesley So	2761
Hikaru Nakamura	2768

St Louis 2023, rapid playoff

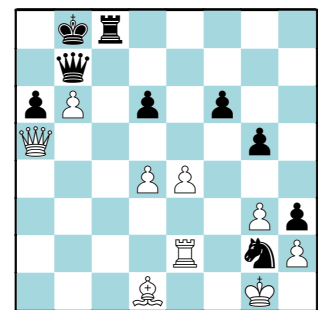


43.♞a5 ♞b7 44.♞d1! This was the one miss for Wesley in an otherwise impressive game. 44.d5! would cement the bishop on c6 with disastrous effects for Black's king safety.

44...h3? Looks natural, aiming to fight against White's idea to bring the bishop to f3 by undermining its protection. Unfortunately, the operation ends up stranding Black's knight. After 44...f5! everything would be up in the air here, since ♜f3 can be met with ...g5-g4.

45.g3 ♖g2 After 45...♖e6 46.♞b4!, White maintains complete control and can play the calm ♜g4 and ♜xh3 next.

46.♜e2 ♜c8 It looks like Black is creating counterplay with ...♜c1 to follow.



However, the important thing to realize is that the g2 knight is not necessarily dangerous just because it's in close proximity to White's king. It's just sitting there, and it can't create any real threats.

47.♞b3! With ♞d5 coming next, there's one trick Wesley had to see.

47...♜c1+ With 47...♜c6 Black wins the pawn back, but opening the b-file offers White a nice tactical opportunity. 48.♞d5 ♞xb6 49.♞a1+- Defending the d4 pawn and preparing ♜b2.

48.♞f2 ♜b1 49.♞d5! Displaying very nice awareness that the transition into the endgame is completely winning for White.

49...♞xb6 50.♞xb6+ ♜xb6 51.♞e6 This is the big point – White will collect the h3 pawn, leaving Black's knight trapped. The rest was easy for Wesley. **White won** on move 66.

Since this was the first match loss for Hikaru in the event, the same two warriors settled their differences in one final match.

After three drawn games, Wesley made a costly blunder in the fourth (as we've seen), which resulted in Nakamura becoming the American Cup champion!



How Did Caruana and Other Top Players Fare?

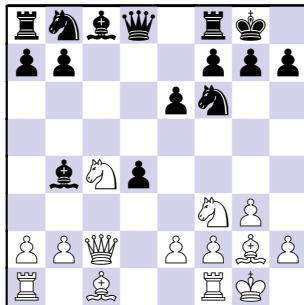
Not much separated the other players in their classical segments, as all the games were evenly balanced. In Round 1, Dominguez eventually triumphed over Aronian in the rapid playoff, as did Caruana over Robson, thanks to some nice play following some opening preparation in the Catalan.

EO1

Fabiano Caruana	2766
Ray Robson	2702

St Louis 2023, rapid playoff

1.d4 ♖f6 2.c4 e6 3.g3 d5 4.♗g2 ♗b4+
5.♘d2 0-0 6.♖gf3 dxc4 7.♙c2 c5
8.0-0 cxd4 9.♘xc4



We have here a typical Catalan position. Black is temporarily up a pawn but lags behind in development. Often these positions come down to the c8 bishop. If Black manages to get it into the game comfortably, he is usually fine.

9...♘c6 Surprisingly, even though this is far and away the most natural choice, it's an inaccuracy.

Black should give the pawn back immediately by 9...d3! to close the d-file. 10.exd3 ♘c6 11.a3 ♗e7 12.b4 b5! A surprising move given that White's g2 bishop stands ominously on the long diagonal, but it works. It reminds me a bit of Nepo's 11...b5 in Game 6 of his World Championship match against Magnus Carlsen. Then after 13.♘ce5 ♘xe5 14.♘xe5 ♘d5 Black will play ...♗b7 next with a fine position.

10.♙d1 Black now has extreme difficulty finishing his development.

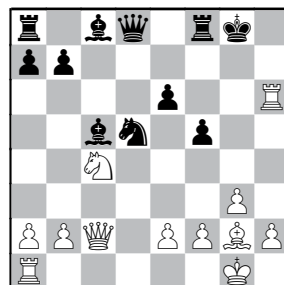


▲ Fabiano Caruana

Photo by Lennart Ootes

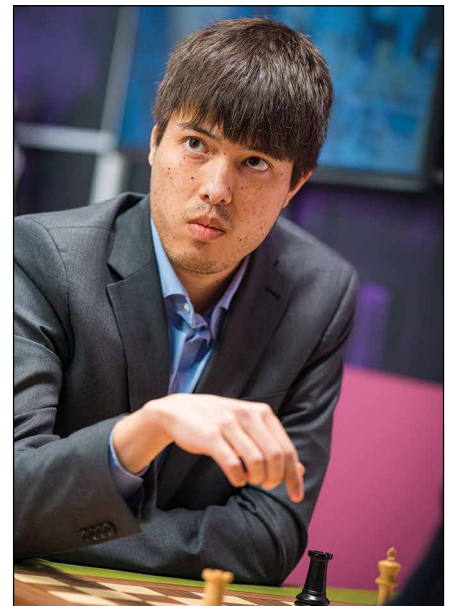
10...♙e7 This isn't great, but it's hard to say what the best choice was. Giving back the pawn by means of 10...♘d7 11.♘xd4 ♘xd4 12.♙xd4± doesn't relieve the pressure. Black is still dealing with the monster g2 bishop and will probably lose the b7 pawn.

10...♘d5 is another try, blocking the long diagonal, but now Black's king comes to lack defenders. 11.♘xd4 ♘xd4 12.♙xd4 ♗c5 13.♙h4! h6 (13...f5 is best, but ugly, and weakens a bunch of squares.) 14.♗xh6! gxh6 15.♙xh6 f5



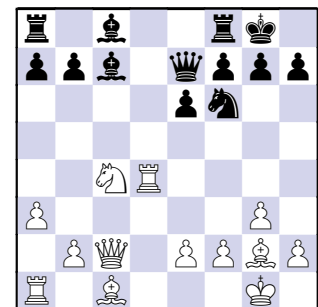
16.♙d2! It's not obvious that this is so good from afar, but it turns out that Black can't prevent White's queen from breaking in. 16...♙g7 17.♗xd5 exd5 (Or 17...♙xd5 18.♙g5+ ♖f7 19.♘e3! ♙d4 20.♙d1 ♙g7 21.♙h5+ winning material and the game.) 18.♘e5 and with ♙g6+ coming, it looks scary for Black.

11.a3 ♗d6 12.♘xd4 ♘xd4 13.♙xd4 ♗c7



▲ Ray Robson

Photo by Lennart Ootes



14.♙d1 14...♗d2! was actually winning immediately, based on an easy-to-miss



▲ Sam Shankland

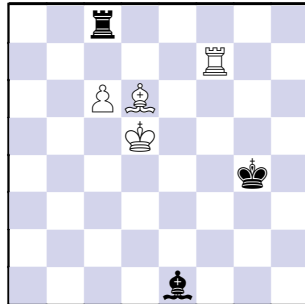
Photo by Lennart Ootes

Play it again, Sam!

Wesley So also moved past Shankland in the rapid segment, despite a huge scare in the first rapid game.

Sam Shankland	2710
Wesley So	2761

St Louis 2023, rapid playoff



After a topsy-turvy rapid game in which both players seemed to be doing well at some point, we come to this endgame in which Shankland seems to be on the brink of victory.

93. ♖e7 Shankland traded rooks a couple of moves later, but under less favorable circumstances than those, as we will see in the following analysis. Eventually, Wesley managed to hold the **draw**.

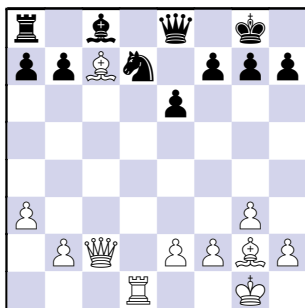
I'm sure Shankland calculated the direct ♜f8, forcing the rooks off, but couldn't reach a conclusion in time and played a different move. Tragically, ♜f8 here would have been winning.

trick. For example, if 14...a5, to stop White's ...♗b4, then 15. ♖xa5! ♗xa5 (15... ♜xa5 16. ♗b4+-) 16. ♖a4 The pin will win the piece back while retaining the extra pawn and an overwhelming positional advantage. 16... ♗d8 (16... ♗xd2 17. ♖xa8 ♗h6 18. ♖xc8+-) 17. b4+-.

14... ♖b8? The last mistake, missing White's idea. The b7 pawn has to be tossed, thus 14... ♗d7 was necessary. Desperate times require desperate measures. 15. ♗d2 a5 16. ♗xb7 ♖ab8 17. ♗g2 It's a pawn down for Black, but at least he can fight on. In rapid chess, miracles can happen.

15. ♗d2 Now there's just no stopping ♗b4, with a complete disaster for Black.

15... ♖d8 16. ♗b4 ♖e8 17. ♗d6 ♗xd6 18. ♗xd6 ♖a8 19. ♗c7 ♖d7 20. ♖xd7 ♗xd7 21. ♖d1



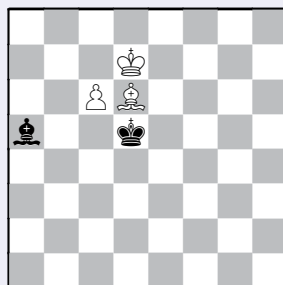
Black is almost comically stuck here. Robson played on, but the result was never in doubt. **White won.**

Analysis

93. ♜f8! This works because Black's king is too far away, and he has to spend a crucial tempo bringing his bishop back.

93... ♜xf8 94. ♗xf8 ♗a5 95. ♗b4! This is the key idea – we force the bishop to choose a square. In each case, White will be able to gain a tempo against it with his king.

The unsophisticated 95. ♗e6? allows Black to set up the defensive construction. 95... ♗f3 96. ♗d7 ♗e4 97. ♗d6 ♗d5

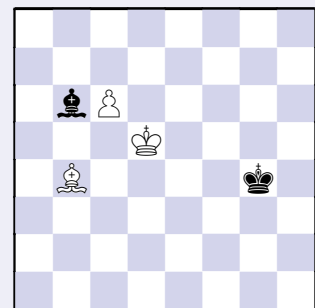


This is an important position to remember in such endings – the defending king approaches the pawn from behind. 98. ♗c7 ♗d2 99. ♗b6 ♗f4=.

95... ♗b6 95... ♗d8 96. ♗d6 ♗f5 97. ♗d7 Similar to the main line, Black has to

waste a move with his bishop, so his king will not reach d5 in time.

After 95... ♗c7 96. ♗e6, again, ♗d7 will gain that tempo.



96. ♗c4! Here's the big point – we choose this path to gain a tempo on the bishop when we play ♗b5.

96... ♗f5 97. ♗b5 ♗c7 98. ♗a5 ♗f4 Or 98... ♗d6 99. ♗b6 ♗e6 100. ♗b7 ♗d5 101. ♗c7 ♗b4 102. ♗g3 ♗a5 103. ♗f2+- transposing to the main line.

99. ♗b6 ♗e4 100. ♗b7 ♗d5 101. ♗c7 ♗d2 102. ♗g3 ♗a5 103. ♗f2 with an unstoppable ♗b6 coming next and winning. Note that Black is one crucial tempo short. If his king was already on c4 for example, he could play ... ♗b5 setting up the drawing construction.



ELIMINATION BRACKET

But what was happening in the Elimination bracket while Nakamura was clearing his path to overall victory?

In the first round, Aronian sent Sevian home in two games, while Shankland did the same to Robson in six. Caruana and Aronian then contested an absolutely epic match consisting of all decisive games and the only Armageddon of the whole event, with Aronian prevailing in the end.

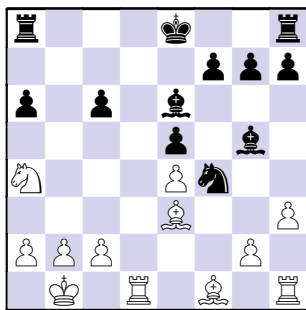
Dominguez was much more efficient against Shankland, taking advantage of a blunder in the first game to end things quickly.

B90

Leinier Dominguez	2743
Sam Shankland	2710

St Louis 2023, Elimination Bracket

1.e4 c5 2.♘f3 d6 3.d4 cxd4 4.♗xd4
 ♗f6 5.♗c3 a6 6.♙e3 ♗g4 7.♙c1 ♗c6
 8.h3 ♗f6 9.♙e3 e5 10.♗xc6 bxc6 11.f4
 ♙e7 12.fxex5 dxe5 13.♙xd8+ ♙xd8
 14.0-0-0 ♙e6 15.♙d3 ♗h5 16.♗a4
 ♗f4 17.♙f1 ♙g5 18.♙b1



Black should definitely take care to prevent White's threat of g2-g3, winning a piece. For example by playing ...♙e7. Except... maybe it's not a threat after all?

18...0-0?? Shankland thought he was setting a trap, but in fact he was trapping himself.

19.g3 ♗xh3 This is what Sam was counting on. I think I remember Dan Heisman calling this motif a "phantom pin." Apparently everything is okay for Black, since the g5 bishop is defended, and ♗xh3 is met with ...♙xe3.

20.♙b6! You always have to consider

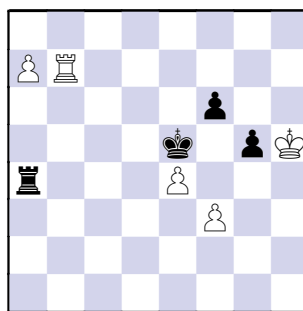


non-captures! Black's knight remains trapped and he will just end up a piece down. Dominguez went on to win.

Aronian then knocked out Dominguez and went on to face So for a chance to get a crack at Nakamura. The first game brought heartbreak for Wesley and showed that rook endgames are so tricky, even for the world's best.

Wesley So	2761
Levon Aronian	2745

St Louis 2023, Elimination Bracket



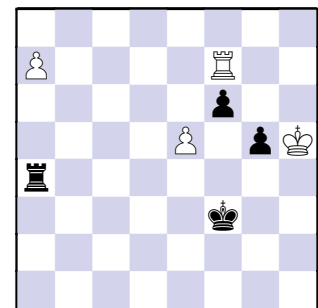
White should be easily winning with his far advanced passer, but he has to take care not to give Black too much counterplay. With limited pawns remaining, the margin of error is often surprisingly

small, despite how overwhelming one's advantage might seem.

62.♙e7+? This permits Black's king to come storming in. Wesley had anticipated this of course, but miscalculated.

I think 62.♗g6 would have been the easiest win, preparing to give up the a-pawn in return for both of Black's remaining pawns. 62...♙a6 (Or 62...♗f4 63.♗xf6 ♗xf3 64.e5+-) 63.♙e7+ ♗f4 64.♙e6 ♙xa7 65.♙xf6+ ♗e5 66.♙f5+ ♗e6 67.♗xg5+-.

62...♗f4 63.♙f7 ♗xf3 64.e5 This was Wesley's whole point – he takes advantage of the pin to create a second passed pawn. Now he'll have two passed pawns and Black won't be able to stop both. Except...



64...♗e4! 65.exf6 65.e6 ♗f5 is the same



▲ The playing arena. Photo by Lennart Ootes

theme as in the game. 66.♔h6 ♕xe6.

65...♕f5 Suddenly there's a threat of mate! White's king is caught in an awkward spot, and Black will begin using his own pawn.

66.♔h6 g4 White's rook is caught in an awkward situation as well – it can't move without surrendering one of the pawns.

67.♕g7 g3 68.♖b7 g2 69.♖b1 ♖xa7+ 70.f7 ♕f4 71.♕g8 ♖a8+ 72.f8♖+ ♖xf8+ 73.♕xf8 ♕g3 74.♖a1 ♕h2 75.♖a2 ♕h1 76.♖xg2 ♕xg2 **Draw.**

Despite a huge miss, Wesley overcame this setback to win the match in the playoff section, setting up a re-match with Hikaru, which we previously presented.

All-in-all, it was nice to see a double elimination format, which is a very rare guest in chess. You are given a chance to redeem yourself after a match loss, so one bad moment doesn't cost you everything. I'd like to see more experimenting with tournament formats like this – it could make for an entertaining viewing experience for sure. ■

2023 Women's American Cup SECOND STRAIGHT TITLE FOR IRINA KRUSH

In what was a replay of the 2022 Women's American Cup, this year's final match was another clash of experience and youth, as the eight-time U.S. Champion GM Irina Krush faced the quickly improving 13-year-old FM Alice Lee. Krush won the first classical game, but the youngster bounced back in the second classical game, to force the match towards a rapid playoff.

Again, experience prevailed over youth as Irina won the first rapid playoff game, before the second hard-fought battle ended in draw, which meant a second straight Women's American Cup title for Irina Krush.



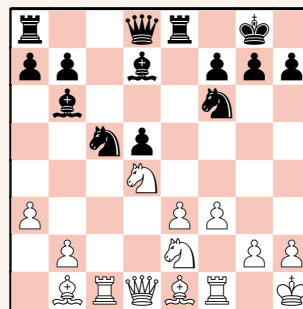
Photo by Lennart Ootes

▲ Irina Krush

E48

Irina Krush	2432
Tatev Abrahamyan	2294

Saint Louis 2023



18...♖xe3 19.♗h4 ♖e5 20.♖g3 ♗c6 21.f4 ♖e8 22.♖h5 ♖cd7 23.♖f5 g6 24.♖h6+ ♕f8 25.♖xf6 ♖xf6 26.♖g4 ♖xg4 27.♗xd8 ♖e3 28.♗xb6 **Black resigned**



FINAL STANDINGS

1. Irina KRUSH
2. Alice LEE
3. Nazi PAIKIDZE
4. Gulrukhbegim TOKHIRJONOVA
- 5-6. Atousa PUORKASHIYAN, Tatev ABRAHAMYAN
- 7-8. Anna ZATONSKIY, Katerina NEMCOVA