

THE CANDIDA

Nepomniachtchi wins

Ding takes critical second place in a

BY GM JACOB AAGAARD



ATES:
again!
nervy finish.



w

ITH HIS DOMINATING victory at the 2022 FIDE Candidates Tournament (June 17-July 5) in Madrid, Spain, GM Ian Nepomniachtchi is

now a repeat Candidates winner. This is a feat that has only been accomplished a few times in chess history, and by some of its greatest names. GM Vassily Smyslov won twice in a row in the 1950s, as did Spassky in the 1960s and Korchnoi in the 1978 and 1981 cycles. Nepomniachtchi's victory was not due to exceptional creativity and superiority, but through his taking advantage of chances given to him, and by making draws without unnecessary risks the rest of the time.

Nepomniachtchi was seeded fourth, behind GMs Ding Liren, Alireza Firouzja, and Fabiano Caruana. But rating has not been a good method of predicting the winners in the past. The last time the highest rated player won the Candidates tournament was in 2013, when GM Magnus Carlsen won via a curious tiebreak, i.e., having the most decisive games. When Caruana won he was the fifth seed, which will probably shock people, given how he dominated the 2018 Candidates and came close to beating Carlsen in the match later the same year.

The Candidates is not like any other tournament. It is longer. It is stronger. And there is (usually) only one prize worth playing for — the ticket to the World Championship. Some participants go into the tournament not understanding how the Candidates differs from other elite events and they suffer accordingly. Many were hopeful that GM Alireza Firouzja would win the tournament, partly from infatuation with the young Iranian/French talent and partly because Carlsen had declared in the spring that he was unlikely to defend the title unless something motivated him, such as a match against the front runner of the new generation. But Firouzja was not ready for this event, and he was never a real contender.



THE FIRST HALF

Nepomniachtchi started strong with a win against Ding with Black in the first round, while Caruana defeated Nakamura.

ENGLISH OPENING (A20)

GM Ding Liren (2806)
GM Ian Nepomniachtchi (2766)
FIDE Candidates (1), Madrid, 06.17.2022

1. c4 e5 2. g3 c6 3. Nf3 e4 4. Nd4 d5 5. cxd5 Qxd5 6. Nc2 Nf6 7. Nc3 Qe5 8. Bg2 Na6 9. 0-0 Be7 10. Ne3!?

A rare move. 10. d4 exd3 *e.p.* 11. Qxd3 is the main line.

10. ... 0-0

A novelty. More rushed than preparation,

one would think. Nepomniachtchi has a tendency to play a bit fast.

Alternatives: (a) 10. ... h5 11. d4 exd3 *e.p.* 12. exd3 Qd4 with unclear play was played between Giri and Grischuk in the last Candidates tournament two years ago. (b) After 10. ... Nc5? 11. b4 Ne6 12. Bb2 0-0 (Harsha – Barp, Internet 2020) 13. Rb1! Nd4 White can choose between two promising lines. (b1) After 14. Nxe4! Nxe4 15. f4 Qh5 16. Bxd4 Rd8 17. Nc2 Black does not seem to have quite enough for the pawn. (b2) If 14. Nc2!? Nxc2 15. Qxc2 Bf5 16. Nxe4 Bxe4 17. d3 Bxd3 18. Qxd3 with two bishops and a strong initiative.

11. a3 Re8 12. b4 Ng4?!

(see diagram top of next column)

Sharp, with attitude.

13. Bb2



Left: GM Ian Nepomniachtchi, round one.
Right: A dejected GM Ding Liren after his first round loss to the tournament winner.



Ding should have taken the bait. Certainly, after 13. Bxe4! Nc7 14. Bg2 Qh5 Black will get some initiative for the pawn. But White is also a pawn up!

13. ... Qh5 14. h4?!

Still possible was 14. Nxg4! Bxg4 15. Bxe4 Nc7 16. Bg2.

14. ... Bf6

Black might have considered the unclear 14. ... f5!?:

15. Qc2 Nxe3 16. dxe3 Bf5 17. Na4?!

White's play could be justified by 17. b5! Nc5 18. bxc6 bxc6 19. Rab1 with an edge, or 17. Rfd1 Nc7 18. b5!?:

17. ... Bxb2 18. Nxb2?

The knight now goes on a journey to a5, where it achieves nothing. White's play makes a lot of sense after 18. Qxb2 Nc7 19. Rac1 Nd5 20. Rfd1, when Black cannot

play 20. ... Re6? on account of 21. Nc5 with immediate consequences.

18. ... Nc7 19. Nc4 Re6! 20. Rfd1 Nd5

White has played incredibly slowly. He now had to play energetically here to keep his position acceptable.

21. Rd4?

After the correct 21. b5! now 21. ... g5 can be met with active play: 22. bxc6 bxc6 23. hxg5 Qxg5 24. Na5! h5 25. Nxc6 Nxe3 26. Qc1! Rc8 27. Rd8+! Rxd8 28. Nxd8 Rd6 29. Nxf7 Kxf7 30. Qxe3 Qxe3 31. fxe3 Rd2 with a draw soon enough.

For this reason Black should play 21. ... h6! 22. bxc6 bxc6 23. Rd4 g5 24. Bxe4 Bxe4 25. Rxe4 Qg6 26. Nd2 gxh4 with slight advantage. But realistically these White moves are hard to play for humans.

21. ... h6?



Nepomniachtchi was not quite ready for 21. ... g5!, although here it really works. The key point is that White is too slow with counterplay in the center, i.e., 22. hxg5 Qxg5 23. Rad1 Qh5 with lots of attacking ideas.

22. Qd2?

I was discussing this position with Topalov and "we" came to the conclusion that it made more sense to bring in the second rook. Correct was 22. Rad1!, with the intention 22. ... g5 23. Rxd5! cxd5 24. Rxd5 with counterplay. Play continues either 24. ... gxh4 25. Nd6 or 24. ... Qg6 25. Ne5 Qg7 26. Nd7 with compensation. A key point is that after 26. ... Qg6?, White wins with 27. h5!.

22. ... Rae8 23. Kh2?! Bg4! 24. Na5?

White is already in trouble. 24. Qc2! was best, but the position remains bad: 24. ... f5 25. b5 Bxe2 26. bxc6 bxc6 27. Bh3!? Bg4 28. Bxg4 Qxg4 29. Qd1 Qg6 with a significant advantage.

24. ... Rf6!?

It is hard to understand why Black did not go for 24. ... g5! 25. Rh1 gxh4 26. Kg1 h3, which looks entirely crushing.

25. Kg1 g5 26. Nxb7?

White's last chance came with active play: after 26. b5 gxh4 27. bxc6 hxg3 28. fxg3 Qe5 29. Nc4 Qxg3 30. Qe1 Black will still have to work to win the game.

26. ... gxh4 27. Nc5 h3 28. Rxe4



If 28. Nxe4 hxg2 and wins.

28. ... hxg2!

A nice combination. But 28. ... Rxe4 29. Nxe4 hxg2 also won.

29. Rxe8+ Kg7 30. f4 Qh1+ 31. Kf2 Qxa1 32. Kxg2 Bh3+!, White resigned.

Caruana played adventurously against Nepomniachtchi in round two with Black and repeated moves in a position where it was possible to find the winning continuation.

Otherwise, the two were moving through the field like a pair of the grim reapers. Nepomniachtchi managed to win perhaps the best game of the tournament in round six against Duda.

RETI OPENING (A07)

GM Ian Nepomniachtchi (2766)

GM Jan-Krzysztof Duda (2750)

FIDE Candidates (6), Madrid,
06.23.2022

1. Nf3 d5 2. g3 Bg4 3. Bg2 e6 4. 0-0 Nd7
5. h3 Bh5 6. d4 Ngf6 7. c4 c6 8. cxd5 exd5
9. Ne5!?



Duda was entirely unprepared for this move and spent nearly 20 minutes dealing with it. More common is 9. Qb3 Qb6 10. Qe3+ Be7 11. Nh4 Bg6, which has been played in a lot of games.

9. ... Nxe5?

If you do not know what you should play, you easily end up in trouble, as seen here.

The correct way to play is probably 9. ... Ne4!?, although equality is not guaranteed: (a) 10. Bxe4!? 10. ... dxe4 11. Nc3 Be7 (11. ... f5? is very bad: 12. Qb3 Nxe5 13. dxe5 Qe7 is Malikentzos – Navara, Porto Carras 2018, and now 14. Bg5!! Qxg5 15. Qxb7 Rd8 16. Qxc6+ Kf7 17. Qc4+ Ke8 18. Nb5 and we have reached the part of the game where Black should think about resigning) 12. Bf4 (12. g4 Nxe5!? 13. dxe5 Bg6 with equality in Svane – Kollars, Magdeburg 2021) 12. ... Nxe5 13. dxe5 Bg6 14. Qb3 with an advantage in Grandelius – Keymer, Wijk aan Zee 2020. (b) 10. Nd2 is less dangerous. Play continues 10. ... Nxd2 (10. ... f5!?) 11. Bxd2 Be7 with an edge in Hakobyan – Quesada Perez, Chesterfield 2020.

10. dxe5 Ne4 11. Nd2! Nxd2

White also looks good after 11. ... f5 12. Nxe4 fxe4 13. Be3 Be7 14. f4 exf3 15. exf3 0-0 16. Qb3 with a solid advantage.

12. Bxd2 Bc5 13. Rc1

The weaker 13. Qb3? was played in Rakshitta – Cabrilo, Arandjelovac 2021. After 13. ... Bxe2 14. Qxb7 Bb5! White would have to find 15. Ba5! (or 15. Bg5) 15. ... Rb8 16. Qxb5! to avoid being worse.

13. ... Qe7 14. Kh2?!

14. Kh1! is more accurate, as the e-pawn will never be taken with check, when White later goes f2-f4-f5. But Nepomniachtchi seems to remember a game where his good friend GM Sergey Karjakin played Black in a similar position.

14. ... 0-0 15. g4 Bg6 16. f4 h6!

A new move, but not home preparation. Actually, I suspect that this is the opposite of preparation, but rather an indication of the difficulties of Black's position. After 16. ... f5? 17. Qb3 Rad8 White's advantage was overwhelming in Svidler – Karjakin, Wijk aan Zee 2018. (a) Stockfish 15 proposes 18. a3! with the threat 19. Qc2 Bb6 20. Bb4. (b) And after 18. ... Rf7 19. g5!? Black is paralyzed and White slowly advances on the queenside. White also has ideas of Bg2-f3 and h3-h4-h5.

Note that there is an interesting trick associated with White's last move in line (b) above. If 19. ... Bh5, White wins with 20. e6!! Rff8 (the f6-square is no longer available) 21. Rxc5 Qxc5 22. Bb4 Qb6 23. e7 a5. This looks like it wins back the piece, but then comes 24. Bxd5+! cxd5 25. Qxd5+ Bf7 26. Qxa5 27. Bxa5 and White gets the material back with interest.

17. Qe1

The engine prefers 17. Qa4!? Rad8 18. f5 Bh7 19. Bf4 with an advantage.

17. ... Rfe8 18. Qg3 Bh7 19. h4



Having somehow survived the opening with a decent position, Duda now spends six minutes in thought, and then four more, on two of the worst moves on the board.

19. ... Rad8??

It is really difficult to explain this move. What is the point? Did Duda not anticipate the idea behind Nepomniachtchi's last three moves? Or did he not expect it to be dangerous?

There were many better ways to play. For example: 19. ... Bd4! 20. Bc3 (20. b3?!

f6 only helps Black) 20. ... Bxc3 21. Rxc3 f6 with rough equality.

20. g5! hxg5?

It is hard to understand what Duda was thinking, opening up his kingside like this. Every line I have looked at looks horrible for Black, no matter the depth. The open h-file is a huge improvement for White. So what he should have done instead?

First, (a) 20. ... h5? 21. f5 is overwhelming for White, i.e., 21. ... Bd4 22. e6. But (b) 20. ... Kh8! would have solved a lot of problems for Black. After 21. f5? Bd4! 22. e6 fxe6 23. g6 Black turns the tables with 23. ... Bg8.

21. hxg5 Bb4

The alternative 21. ... Bf5 22. Bh3 would further weaken the black king.

22. Bxb4 Qxb4 23. f5! Qxb2



24. e6?

The position is still lost after this very reasonable looking move. But 24. Rc3! was stronger — White includes the last piece in the attack. However, the details are by no means elementary and Nepomniachtchi most likely saw something he did not like in them. Here are some sample lines:

(a) After 24. ... d4 25. e6!! is not an easy move at all. Play continues 25. ... fxe6 (25. ... Qxc3 26. exf7+ Kxf7 27. Qc7+ Kg8 28. f6 is quite similar) 26. f6!! Rd7!? (if 26. ... Qxc3 27. Qc7!) 27. g6 (27. Rcf3 Bf5 28. Qe5! also wins, but is unnatural; 28. ... Red8 29. e4!! is the key point) 27. ... gxf6 (27. ... Bxg6 28. Qxg6 Rf8 29. fxf7 quickly leads to mate, i.e., 29. ... Rxf1 30. Qe8+ Kxg7 31. Rg3+) 28. gxh7+ Kh8 29. Qg6! Rf8 (29. ... Rxf7+ 30. Rh3 Rxf7 31. Bxh3 Qxe2+ 32. Kh1 with mate approaching) 30. Rxf6 Rxh7+ 31. Rh3 Rxh3+ 32. Kxh3 Rxf6 33. Qxf6+ Kg8 34. Qxe6+ Kf8 35. Bf3 and White wins.

(b) The alternative 24. ... Qxe2 25. Re3 Qc2 is another reasonable try, although the path forward here is wider, i.e., 26. g6! fxf6 27. f6! Rf8 (27. ... gxf6 28. exf6 Rxe3 29. Qc7! is an important point.) 28. f7+! Rxf7 29.



This page: Scenes from the critical sixth round matchup between GMs Ian Nepomniachtchi and Jan-Krzysztof Duda.

Rxf7 Kxf7 30. e6+ Kg8 31. Qc7 and White wins: 31. ... Rf8 32. e7 Re8 33. Qd7 Kf7 34. Qe6 mate.

24. ... fxe6 25. g6?

This actually throws the win away. Better was 25. Rb1! Qxe2 26. g6 exf5 27. gxh7+ Kxh7 28. Rxb7 Qg4 (28. ... Qe5) 29. Rxf5 Qxg3+ 30. Kxg3 with a significant advantage.

25. ... exf5 26. gxh7+

26. Rb1 Qe5 27. gxh7+ Kxh7 would transpose to the next note.



26. ... Kh8??

A horrible mistake. After 26. ... Kxh7! 27. Rb1 Qe5 28. Rxb7 Qxg3+ 29. Kxg3 Rxe2 the less-than-obvious 30. Bh3 is the only way for



White to get an advantage. Now 30. ... Rxa2 should objectively be a draw. The worst-case scenario is that Black will have to hold a rook and bishop against rook endgame.

27. Rb1

Now White is back on the winning track.

27. ... Qf6

After 27. ... Qe5 28. Rxb7 Qxg3+ 29. Kxg3 Rxe2 30. Rxf5 Rxa2 31. Rg5 White is winning. The line is long. It would need to be played move-by-move and not worked out

in advance. But the initial moves are so easy for White it would not be a problem to get this far.

28. Rxb7 Rxe2 29. Rxf5 Qh6+ 30. Kg1 Rxa2
If 30. ... Rde8 31. Rff7.

31. Rbf7! Ra1+

Or 31. ... Re2 32. Rg5.

32. Bf1 d4 33. Rg5 Qd6 34. Qf2 Qa3 35. Rg3, Black resigned.



CARUANA FALLS APART

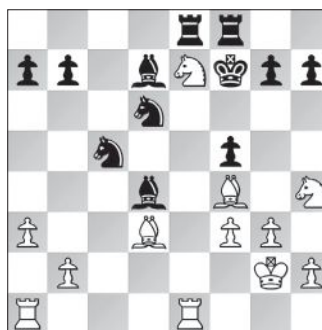
By halftime Nepomniachtchi was leading with 5½/7, a half-point ahead of Caruana. Then Nakamura won a long game against Caruana in round eight, which gave Nepomniachtchi a chance to repeat his successful 2021 strategy of making draws on command. All it required of him was to survive the round nine encounter with Caruana. Again, Caruana managed to build up a winning position, but failed to display accuracy at the critical moment.

PETROFF DEFENSE (C42)

GM Fabiano Caruana (2783)
GM Ian Nepomniachtchi (2766)
FIDE Candidates (9), Madrid,
06.27.2022

1. e4 e5 2. Nf3 Nf6 3. Nxe5 d6 4. Nf3 Nxe4
5. d4 d5 6. Bd3 Bd6 7. 0-0 0-0 8. c4 c6 9.
Re1 Bf5 10. Qb3 Qd7 11. Nh4 Be6 12. Qc2
Na6 13. a3 f5 14. cxd5 cxd5 15. Nc3 Rac8
16. f3 Be7 17. g3 Nd6 18. Qa4 Bf6 19.
Qxd7 Bxd7 20. Nxd5 Bxd4+ 21. Kg2 Rce8
22. Bf4 Nc5 23. Ne7+ Kf7

We have arrived at the moment where Caruana's biggest weakness is exposed. He is very well prepared in the opening, and his positional skills are the most impressive in this event. But I doubt he does regular solving of difficult positions, and for this reason he has a tendency to make mistakes in critical moments. It is why he is not world champion, and why he perhaps never will be.



This page: scenes from the round nine encounter between GMs Fabiano Caruana and Ian Nepomniachtchi.

24. Bxf5?

24. Bf1! was the winning move. After 24. ... Nc8 (a variation that is not in dispute, but is important to calculate goes: 24. ... Rxe7 25. Bxd6 Rxe1 26. Rxe1 Re8 27. Rd1! Ne6 28. Nxf5 Bxb2 29. Rb1 and White wins) 25. Bc4+ Be6



POSITION AFTER 25. ... Be6

We encounter the moment of resistance. White has to sacrifice an Exchange after which the position becomes tricky to navigate: 26. Rxe6!! (26. Nxf5 Bxb2 is OK for Black) 26. ... Nxe6 27. Nxf5 Kf6 28. Nd5+!! (the key move) 28. ... Kg6! (28. ... Kxf5 29. Bd3 mate is unfortunate) 29. Nxd4 Nxd4 30. Rd1 and White has a big initiative. Together with the two bishops and pawn against knight and rook, White is objectively winning, but a lot of play is ahead. Caruana would not have reached this position in his calculations and rejected it, so something clearly went wrong in his calculative process.

24. ... Nxf5 25. Nxf5 Bxf5 26. Nxf5 Rxe1
27. Rxe1 Nd3!

Black has escaped.

28. Re4 Bxb2 29. Be3 Bxa3 30. Bxa7 Ra8
31. Bd4 Bf8 32. Re2 g6 33. Ne3 Rd8 34. Bb6
Rd6 35. Nc4 Rc6 36. Re4 Bg7 37. f4 Re6 38.
Kf3 Ne1+ 39. Ke3 Nc2+ 40. Kf3 Ne1+, draw.

Meanwhile, Nakamura tried to win at all cost against Radjabov in round nine, and lost in a way befitting a much lesser master. After the tournament, he said that he believed Carlsen was "talking baloney" and would defend the title, which required a scorched earth approach to taking first place. Looking at the match strategy of others, most notably Caruana, it appears that this was not an uncommon belief.

GM Teimour Radjabov's ambitions looked much more modest; it was evident from the outset that he had played for a draw with both colors. By halftime he was in last place

with two losses and five draws, looking like a serious candidate for the worst performance in the history of the Candidates. Then he won three games in the second half — the horrible game with Nakamura, a shaky last round game against Rapport, and a crucial round 12 game against Ding Liren with Black.

NIMZO-INDIAN DEFENSE (E48)

GM Ding Liren (2806)

GM Teimour Radjabov (2753)

FIDE Candidates (12), Madrid,

07.01.2022

1. d4 Nf6 2. c4 e6 3. Nc3 Bb4 4. e3 0-0 5.

Bd3 d5 6. cxd5 exd5 7. a3 Bd6 8. Qc2 Na6

This move order is new but transposes soon enough.

9. Nge2 c5 10. Bxa6

Previously seen was 10. dxc5 Nxc5 11. b4 Nxd3+ 12. Qxd3 in Johner – Bogoljubow(!), Bern 1932. Black could take the initiative with 12. ... Ng4!!, when there are no good moves, i.e., 13. Bb2 Qh4 14. g3 Qh3 is dreadful.

10. ... bxa6

Playing 10. ... cxd4!? is also possible.

11. dxc5 Bxc5 12. b4?!

Very poor. The pawn becomes a hook and White suddenly should think twice about castling. Instead simply 12. 0-0! is safest. I actually prefer White a little bit optically, but I would not call it an advantage.

12. ... Bd6 13. Bb2 a5 14. b5 a6

Also pleasant for Black was 14. ... Bb7 15. 0-0 Rc8. Essentially the position is equal.

In the above analysis, the keen tactical eye (if I do say so myself...) will note that an improved version of the Greek Gift sacrifice is possible. Black can try 15. ... d4!? and now:



POSITION AFTER 15. ... d4

(a) 16. exd4 Bxh2+ 17. Kxh2 Qd6+ 18. f4 Ng4+ 19. Kg3 f5! and the attack would be deadly. The white king is in too much danger. For example: 20. Ng1 Rae8 21. Nf3 Bxf3 22.

gxf3 Ne3 23. Qb3+ Kh8 and having the move and an extra piece does not in the slightest help White, i.e., 24. Rg1 Qg6+ 25. Kf2 Qh6 26. Rh1 Qxf4 with a decisive attack.

(b) Therefore White has to play 16. Nxd4! Bxh2+ 17. Kxh2 Ng4+ 18. Kg3 Qd6+ 19. Kxg4! f5+ 20. Nxf5 Qg6+ 21. Kf4 Qd6+ with a curious perpetual.

15. h3

Worse is 15. 0-0?! Qc7! and the queen is undefended on c2.

15. ... Bd7 16. bxa6?

The inability to keep the tension has been a theme of this Candidates tournament. Why would White think it is a good idea to allow the black rook to the third rank? People usually give one or two pawns to be allowed to activate the rooks laterally in this way.

Better was 16. a4 with an equal position.

16. ... Rxa6

Now Black is better and White already has to consider how to stay in the game. He does not manage to do so, which is why it is important to put the majority of the blame on two bad decisions: 12. b4 and 16. bxa6. In both cases there we see a total lack of dynamic sensibility, akin to what we saw in the first round, when Ding played a long knight sortie only to get mated on the kingside.

17. Rd1

After 17. 0-0 Qc8! White already has to consider letting the pawn go when Black sacrifices on h3.

17. ... Rb6 18. Rd2?

Stockfish says that 18. Ba1! Bxa3 19. 0-0 is only a fraction worse for White. But who would want to make such a glaring admission of incompetency on move 18, giving up a clean pawn to stay in the game?

18. ... Qc8! 19. f3?

Preventing ... Nf6-e4 ideas, but creating lots of weaknesses in the white position and only making things much worse.

Here 19. Ba1 Re8 20. 0-0 is worse than just one move before. After 20. ... Bxa3! (20. ... Bxh3 21. Qd1 d4 22. Rxd4 Be5 23. Rd2 Bg4 also looks as something you would need to be made of silicon to survive) 21. Nxd5 Nxd5 22. Qxc8 Rxc8 23. Rxd5 Bb5 24. Rb1 Bb4 the endgame looks more lost than difficult, but even the engine can not come up with anything better.

19. ... Re8

Bringing out the last piece.

20. Kf2

One of a few unpleasant moves that were possible.

20. ... Qb8! 21. Qc1

The alternative 21. Rb1 also gives Black a winning attack after 21. ... Rxe3! 22. Kxe3 Bc5+ 23. Rd4 Qe5+.



21. ... Rxe3!

A nice shot, but there were plenty of other winning moves already.

22. Nd1

No lines are needed after 22. Kxe3 Bc5+. It's just over.

22. ... Re8 23. Ne3 Rb3

Radjabov plays the human continuation.

24. Ng4

There's no salvation after 24. Bxf6 Rbxe3 25. Bd4 Rxe2+ 26. Rxe2 Bg3+ 27. Kf1 Bb5 and Black wins. And after 24. Bd4 Bf4 25. Nxf4 Qxf4 Black wins with the dual threat of ... Rb3xe3 and ... Nf6-e4+.

24. ... Bxg4 25. hxg4 Rc8 26. Qa1 Bf4, White resigned.

As the rounds ground on, Caruana fell apart, losing a nearly winning position against Ding in round 11 and withering further away with a loss in the final round against Firouzja. Nakamura ruined his recovery with a stupid loss to Radjabov, to whom Ding also lost. Nepomniachtchi was therefore able to put things on cruise control, enjoying a two-point lead before the last two rounds, and winning the tournament with a round to spare.

Ding was the only contender that never had a chance to catch up to the leader; he was therefore able to focus on second place, and a potential "reserve spot" in the World Championship match. In an instance of true sporting drama, the race for second place came down to a one-on-one matchup in the final round, where Nakamura had to hold with Black against Ding to take second.



"THIS RESULT LEFT DING IN SECOND PLACE AT EVENT'S END, A RESULT WHOSE IMPORTANCE WAS AT THE TIME UNCLEAR. BUT SOON ENOUGH ITS IMPORTANCE BECAME APPARENT."



Top: GMs Ding and Rapport on the move. Left: Ding ponders. Right, top: GM Magnus Carlsen, visiting Madrid. Right, bottom: Ding with fans.

QUEEN'S GAMBIT DECLINED, TARRASCH DEFENSE (D40)

GM Ding Liren (2806)
GM Hikaru Nakamura (2760)
FIDE Candidates (14), Madrid,
07.04.2022

1. d4 Nf6 2. c4 e6 3. Nf3 d5 4. Nc3 c5 5. e3 Nc6 6. a3 dxc4 7. Bxc4 a6 8. Bd3 b5 9. dxc5 Bxc5 10. b4 Be7 11. 0-0 Bb7 12.

Bb2 0-0 13. Ne4 Nxe4 14. Bxe4 f5 15. Bb1 Qxd1 16. Rxd1 Rfd8 17. Ba2 Kf7 18. h4 h6 19. Rdc1 Bd6 20. Rc2 Ne7 21. Nd4 Bd5 22. Bxd5 Nxd5 23. Rac1 Rd7 24. Nb3 Be7 25. h5 Bf6 26. Bd4 e5 27. Bc5 Bd8 28. Rd2 Nf6 29. Rxd7+ Nxd7 30. Rd1 Nf6 31. Bd6 Ng4 32. Bc5 Bh4 33. Rd7+ Kg8 34. g3 Bg5 35. Kf1

Black has played a lot of weird moves, while White has steadily improved his position. We have arrived at what GM Boris Gelfand

referred to as the zone of one mistake. The computer still shows 0.00, but only with one move to keep it. If Black makes another mistake, he will be lost.



35. ... Bd8?

The correct 35. ... Rd8! held. The difficulty seems to occur after 36. Rxd8+ Bxd8 37. Bd6, when the a-pawn is in danger. But it is an illusion — after 37. ... e4!?, for example, Black holds: 38. Nc5 Kf7 39. Nxa6 Ke6 40. Bf8 Kf7 41. Bc5 Ne5! 42. Nb8 Nc4 and the a3-pawn falls.

36. Rb7 f4 37. gxf4 exf4 38. e4?

Much stronger was 38. exf4!. After 38. ... Nf6

PHOTOS: COURTESY FIDE / STEV BONHAGE (TOP), FIDE / NIKI RIGA (LEFT)



CARLSEN VACATES THE WORLD CHAMPIONSHIP

On July 20th Magnus Carlsen announced that he would not defend his title. Those of us who had found it inappropriate that he had said this before the tournament were equally unimpressed that he used this announcement as a platform to promote a new podcast for his sponsor Unibet, a gambling website. Certainly, he could have broken the news in Croatia the next day, where he was playing chess at the Rapid and Blitz in Zagreb as part of the Grand Chess Tour.

[An aside: the podcast, aptly named “The Magnus Effect,” shows just why Carlsen is as beloved as he is. One would think that two Norwegians chatting about losing their hotel keys and who will be the top scorer in the Premier League (England’s top soccer competition) could not possibly be entertaining, but the banter between Carlsen and his “hype-man” Magnus Barsted is oddly riveting.]

So what happens now that Carlsen has withdrawn from the FIDE World Championship cycle? Ding “inherits” Carlsen’s spot in the world championship match per FIDE regulations, but what is the broader effect of Carlsen’s abdication?

I think it is important to note that this is not the first time the top-rated player in the world has chosen not to be a part of the cycle. Most will obviously think of Fischer and Kasparov; we can also look back to Morphy for those with a longer memory. But more recently Carlsen himself twice withdrew from the 2010-2012 cycle, also while being rated number one in the world.

Carlsen’s first withdrawal was due to concerns over the qualifying system, after which FIDE tried to reinsert him into the cycle without his consent, leading to the second withdrawal. The world championship trudged on, but as a consequence, the 2011 Candidates match tournament was scrapped, and the current system was introduced.

It is quite possible that the withdrawal of Carlsen now will similarly lead to new thinking. FIDE will not have the same moral debt to the next world championship, and perhaps there would not be any obligation to seed him into the final. At the same time, all agree that finishing with a match is a part of our history we are not ready to let go of just yet. FIDE’s challenge will be to respect that history, while avoiding matches that are all (or nearly all) draws, and more than a few decent proposals for that task have been offered.

39. Nd4 Nxh5 40. f5 Bf6 41. Ne6 Black is dead lost. The knight on e6 is overpowering, and White dominates the board, threatening Kf1-e2-f3-g4 as a start. This is not easy for Black to defend against.

38. ... Bf6?

Nakamura misses the chance to fix the f2-pawn and keep the white king out of the game temporarily with 38. ... f3!, which just holds. Black will play ... Bd8-f6, ... Ng4-e5, and ... Ra8-e8 in a few possible move orders. A fun line goes 39. Kg1 Bf6 40. Nd4 Bxd4 41. Bxd4 g5! 42. hxg6 *e.p.* Rd8 and White has no advantage.

39. Nd4!

Back on track.

39. ... Re8 40. Kg2 Ne5

Of course 40. ... Rxe4 41. Kf3 would win a piece.

41. Nf5 f3+ 42. Kg3 Nc4 43. Be7!

White dominates. The a6- and g7-pawns are too weak.

43. ... Bb2 44. Kxf3 Bxa3 45. Kg3 Ne5 46. Bc5 Nf7 47. f3 Bc1 48. Ra7 Bd2 49. Rxa6 Be1+ 50. Kg2 Bc3 51. Ra7 Ng5 52. Ne7+ Kh8 53. Ng6+ Kg8 54. Ne7+ Kh8 55. Nd5 Bb2 56. Ra2 Bc1 57. Rc2 Ba3 58. Be3, Black resigned.

This result left Ding in second place at event’s end, a result whose importance was at the time unclear. But soon enough its import became apparent.





KRAMNIK, STATISTICS, AND OTHER LIES

Statistics shows that the 2022 Candidates Tournament had fewer mistakes than most prior events, while that 2013 and 2018 had the most. But bloodless draws from Radjabov (from fear) and Nepomniachtchi (from circumstance) skew the statistics. GM Vladimir Kramnik said that this was the worst of the Candidates tournaments, and he was right.

I did daily coverage of the Candidates for *Chess Life Online*, so I spent no small amount of time looking at the games as they were played. The level of play was shockingly poor in some cases, and there were no big masterpieces to be found. The worst example came in round 11, when a demoralised Firouzja played hyper-bullet through the night against GM Daniel Naroditsky and stuck to that playing style against Nepomniachtchi.

PETROFF DEFENSE (C42)

GM Alireza Firouzja (2793)
GM Ian Nepomniachtchi (2766)
FIDE Candidates (11), Madrid,
06.30.2022

1. e4 e5 2. Nf3 Nf6 3. Nxe5 d6 4. Nf3 Nxe4
5. c4 Nc6 6. d3 Nf6 7. d4 Be7 8. d5 Ne5 9.
Nd4 0-0 10. Nc3 Bg4 11. f3! Bf7 12. Be2
c6 13. 0-0 cxd5 14. cxd5 Qb6 15. Kh1 Rac8

We have reached the end of Firouzja's preparation, and as with Nakamura and Caruana in rounds nine and 10 respectively, he decides (with his pieces on the first rank!) that it is now time for a brutal attack on the kingside. It is a simple violation of the basic laws of chess, and unsurprisingly, it does not work.

16. g4? h6 17. h4? Rfe8 18. g5? hxg5 19.
hxg5 Nh5 20. Kg2 Ng6! 21. f4

(see diagram top of next column)

21. ... Nhxg4+!

With all the pieces in the game, it is not surprising this works for Black.



22. Bxf4 Qxb2 23. Ne4 Rc4!?

There was a beautiful complicated win with 23. ... Bd8! 24. Nxd6 Rxe2+ 25. Qxe2 Qxd4 26. Nxc8 Qxf4!! and Black will end up with extra material in all lines. But Nepomniachtchi's move was better from a practical perspective. The advantage is not reliant on long variations.

24. Be3

The white minor pieces are set up for a combination.

Final Standings

2022 FIDE CANDIDATES

			1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	
1	Ian Nepomniachtchi	2766	**	1½	½½	½½	½½	11	1½	1½	9½/14
2	Ding Liren	2806	0½	**	½0	½1	½1	½½	½1	½1	8/14
3	Teimour Radjabov	2753	½½	½1	**	01	0½	½½	½½	½1	7½/14
4	Hikaru Nakamura	2760	½½	½0	10	**	01	½1	½1	½½	7½/14
5	Fabiano Caruana	2783	½½	½0	1½	10	**	10	½0	½½	6½/14
6	Alireza Firouzja	2793	00	½½	½½	½0	01	**	½½	½1	6/14
7	Jan-Krzysztof Duda	2750	0½	½0	½½	½0	½1	½½	**	½0	5½/14
8	Richard Rapport	2764	0½	½0	½0	½½	½½	½0	½1	**	5½/14



Left: GM Alireza Firouzja had a disappointing Candidates. Top: You could track GM Hikaru Nakamura's event progression by his beard!

24. ... Bxg5! 25. Rb1 Qxa2 26. Ra1 Rxd4!
Clear and simple, although not the only move that wins.

27. Rxa2 Rxd1 28. Bxd1 Bxe3 29. Nxd6 Re7 30. Bb3?!
Another bad move, but at this point it hardly matters anymore. The stronger 30. Re2 f6 would also leave Black with a winning position, but postpone things for a bit.

30. ... Bc5 31. Nxb7 Bb6 32. Bc4 Re3 33. Kh1 Bh3 34. Rc1 Bf5 35. Bf1 Be4+, White resigned.

Here in the West we may have exited the time of COVID-19 lockdowns, but we are still suffering from the aftershocks of the pandemic. The same is true for chess, which for a while was demoted to being little more than a computer game. Hopefully our recovery will continue with an exciting World Championship match between Nepomniachtchi and Ding in the spring of 2023.

For complete, round-by-round analysis of the 2022 Candidates, including more analysis by GM Jacob Aagaard, visit our extensive online coverage at **Chess Life Online**: [new.uschess.org/2022-fide-candidates-tournament](https://www.uschess.org/2022-fide-candidates-tournament).

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