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Champions Showdown: Chess 9LX 2022

By John Brezina



Arbiter Chris Bird watching the games

The annual Fischer Random tournament of champions returned to St. Louis Sept.13-16 with special guest player Garry Kasparov. The field included five American players of which four are in the top ten on the world's rating list. Current World Fischer Random Champion Wesley So was a favorite along with former champion Hikaru Nakamura. All eyes were on the young Alireza Firouzja fresh off his victories in the Rapid & Blitz and Sinquefield Cup. Could he pull off the triple crown in St. Louis? I returned to a beautiful day in St. Louis for day one of the 9LX to capture some photographs of these great players. Nine rounds of chess over three days at G20+5. The positions were randomly selected by a computer and given to the players 15 minutes before the start of the game. This gave them a short time to study the position and prepare alone or with other players. Very entertaining to watch the players collaborate over the board. Before each game Garry Kasparov and Peter Svidler would study opening lines together and what a treat to watch the former World Champion work in over the board.

Round one and three decisive games. A tough start for Hikaru Nakamura as he lost his game to Shakhriyar Mamedyarov. Both Peter Svidler and Garry Kasparov also lost their first games, back to the drawing board. Fabiano Caruana and Alireza Firouzja started the tournament with their game drawn but they would both see each other again in an incredible playoff match. Day one ended with a perfect score for Ian Nepomniachtchi and Fabiano on his heels with 2.5 points. A scoreless day for both Peter & Garry despite their collaborations before each round. Day two and round four started off with victories for Ian, Hikaru, Alireza and Shakhriyar. Nepomniachtchi undefeated and in the clear lead, then faltered with a huge defeat by Alireza Firouzja which put them at a tie. Then Shakhriyar delivered another blow to Ian in round six with his third victory of the day. By the end of day two, Firouzja and Mamedyarov were leaders tied for first with 4.5 points. Alireza the only player to still be undefeated while the opposite for Garry Kasparov, still scoreless after six rounds.



13th World Champion Garry Kasparov



Tournament winner Fabiano Caruana

The final day brought some exciting games and a toss-up struggle for first place. Wesley So delivered Hikaru his third loss and Shak delivered Leinier Dominguez his fourth loss putting Shak in the clear lead. Peter Svidler held Firouzja to a draw while Caruana and Nepomniachtchi won their games, both still in contention for first. Then the penultimate round eight and pole position changed hands again. Firouzja with yet another win and still undefeated, regained first place with 6.0 points going into the final round. Shakhriyar was finally slowed down by Peter Svidler with a loss after four wins in a row. Ian was held to a draw by Wesley So and Caruana won his game. This made for a three-way tie for second with 5.5 points for Shak, Ian, and Fabiano.

Round nine was intense as first place was still up for grabs by four players. On the other end was a still scoreless Kasparov, something I have never witnessed before. He ended the tournament finally with half a point after drawing with Svidler. Levon Aronian held Nepomniachtchi to a draw and Dominguez did the same with Mamedyarov. But Fabiano Caruana pressed Wesley So and won the game, pressuring Firouzja to win in order to secure the title. So after seeing the other games end, he agreed to a draw in his tough game with Nakamura, setting up a playoff between Caruana and Firouzja. What an accomplishment for Firoujza after his previous two tournament wins.



Analyzing the new starting position

The first two games would be the same random position setup for each player with both colors at G10+2. Caruana, playing black in game one, pressured Firouzja and handed him his first loss in the tournament. Then in game two, a must win with the black pieces, Firouzja repaid the loss to Caruana setting up an incredibly difficult armageddon game. Fabiano chose white getting five minutes while Alireza had four minutes but draw odds, reasoning that he feared flagging against the very quick Alireza. Another random position was chosen and not much time to calculate over the board. Fabiano steered into the endgame a pawn up and nursed his pawn to the seventh rank and zugzwanged Alireza, winning the 9LX tournament with just seconds on both players' clocks. Congratulations to Fabiano Caruana and Alireza Firoujza after both competing in all three exhausting tournaments.

Enjoy pictures from the event in the links below.

https://photos.app.goo.gl/hGd85cLWyyXBj69r9

https://parkerchessclub.godaddysites.com/f/2022-champions-showdown-chess-9lx