

Tata Steel 2023: "The Wimbledon of Chess"

By John Brezina

The year 2023 starts with the 85th edition of the "Wimbledon of Chess": Tata Steel Chess in the quaint little village of Wijk Aan Zee held January 13-29. After a two-year absence, spectators were allowed back and anxious to see the best players in the world once again. In addition the amateur sections returned and filled the Dorpshuis de Moriaan building to its rightful chess glory. It's always an adventure getting to this seaside village which is a short drive or train ride from Amsterdam. This year my brother and nephew joined me which made for an extra special tournament. As my second time attending this event, I can attest the chess atmosphere here is second to none.



The seaside village Wijk Aan Zee

We stayed in the heart of Wijk Aan Zee near the playing hall where everything is easy to walk about and reach. Signs everywhere remind you that the Tata Steel tournament is taking place with side events for kids and adults. At the main playing hall there is a restaurant and bar attached to unwind during and after the tournament. It was always a full house with chess boards strewn about with fans of all ages analyzing the top games or playing their own with a pint or two always nearby. A favorite time of mine meeting people from all over coming together for our beloved game of chess. It was here we met the "Chess Buccaneer" Manuel Bosboom. A Dutch IM who created many brilliant creative games including a blitz win over Garry Kasparov. This and many more stories in his recently released book by New in Chess, *The Chess Buccaneer*. I picked up my copy next door where chess books were being sold during the tournament.

Now for the main event. The two top fields were the Masters and Challengers where each had fourteen players which accounted for thirteen rounds of play. Players in the Masters group included three American players: Fabiano Caruana, Wesley So, and Levon Aronian. All of which have previously won Tata Steel. But the main contender is World Champion Magnus Carlsen who has won Tata an

impressive eight times. In the Challengers section the lone American player was the extremely talented Grandmaster Abhimanyu Mishra at only 13 years old. The Amateur section completed the field throughout the hall which provided an immense number of games to watch.



Entrance to the tournament hall

Fans came out in droves as lines were long to get into the playing hall. Reservations online were required to attend and helped with the vast amount of chess fans. Very well organized though and once inside, a nice reception desk awaited with friendly attendants to answer questions or sell items related to Tata Steel. Inside the playing hall was a nice area in the back with food and refreshments and also a separate bar and restaurant to enjoy the day-long festivities. Cameras and phones were limited to only seven minutes of use once the round started throughout the playing hall at 2:00pm sharp. Doors opened at 1:30pm for fans and the early birds were lucky enough to get up front near the top boards for the start of the round to get photos of their favorite players. An elevated platform allowed fans a better view but came to capacity quickly in hopes of catching a glimpse of World Champion Magnus Carlsen or number two player in the world Ding Liren. A small upper level provided a bird's eye view of the hall where some of the amateur players competed. The organizers did a fantastic job creating an experience players and fans alike will certainly remember. 85 years of experience running this tournament and it definitely shows in the professionalism displayed throughout.



The magnificent main playing hall



13 year old GM Abhimanyu Mishra

While we were only able to attend rounds seven and eight in person, I followed the entire tournament online where the young Nodirbek Abdusattorov came out of the gate in round one with a win and maintained the lead throughout. Ding Liren shared the lead until round four where he tripped up against the young Praggnanandhaa. Dutch number one Anish Giri shocked the world champion Magnus Carlsen with a win to continue sharing the lead with Nodirbek. Round five saw a change of venue and the unthinkable. Magnus Carlsen lost his second game in a row of classical chess to sole tournament leader, Nodirbek Abdusattorov, who never looked back. Round six and Wesley So and Fabiano Caruana were the only two with victories to keep them close to the leader.



Old rivals Magnus Carlsen & Fabiano Caruana

The halfway point of round seven saw four decisive games by tournament leader Nodirbek, So, Carlsen, and Praggnanandhaa. But the game to watch was the marathon battle between Fabiano Caruana and Parham Maghsoodloo. The Iranian GM was a late addition to the tournament replacing Jan-Krzysztof Duda and he showed great defensive skills in this seven hour battle with the top American player. While all other games in the entire hall had finished, Fabiano pressed his one pawn advantage late into the evening. A few hard core fans stayed until the end, including myself, to see a stalemate play out on the board. Then the handshake after

nearly seven hours and fifteen minutes of play. With the privilege of media access, I was able to capture a moment in the back room afterwards where the exhausted players made a quick analysis together over the computer.



High caliber analysis in the backroom

Round eight and four more decisive games. Richard Rapport, Dommaraju Gukesh, and Jorden Van Foreest all scored their first victories. But the main game to watch was between 2018 World Championship match players, Magnus Carlsen and Fabiano Caruana. Magnus scored a fairly quick victory in thirty three moves, perhaps due to an exhausted Fabiano from the previous night's marathon. This would be Fabiano's only loss and by drawing his next five games, he would not catch the leader. Parham also lost his round eight game after the previous night's marathon game. With a victory in round nine, Anish Giri trailed leader Nodirbek by just half a point. In round twelve, Magnus with the white pieces, had a chance to still catch the lead with a win. But the young Indian prodigy Praggnanandhaa held the world champion to a draw with a perpetual check in the end. Anish Giri was held to a draw by his Dutch colleague and former 2021 Tata Steel winner Jorden Van Foreest.



Interviewing Nodirbek Abdusattorov

The final round and the tournament was still up for grabs. Nodirbek still led with 8 points, followed by Anish Giri with 7.5, and close behind was Wesley So and Magnus with 7.0 points each. A last round loss or draw by Nodirbek and the tournament

was open for the other three players. Wesley So was held to a draw by Praggnanandhaa with just the Kings remaining on the board. With this draw Wesley was one of only two players to finish without a loss. Next up was Anish Giri with the white pieces against Richard Rapport. After 34 moves it looked as though a draw could be held, but then Rapport blundered by moving his King out of check to g6. A stunned Giri looked on in disbelief and carefully took his time to find the killer tactic he suspected was there. Giri found the winning move Rd6! and a few short moves later with a forced exchange of queens leading to mate, Richard resigned and put Anish in the lead with 8.5 points. While this put Magnus out of a chance for first, he fought a double bishop and queen ending against Arjun Erigaisi where he came out on top and tied currently for second depending on the last game. The pressure mounted on Nodirbek to at least draw in order to secure a playoff. But Jorden already had the advantage in the game with the black pieces and looked to become the tournament spoiler for the young Uzbekistani player. With an unstoppable three pawn advantage in the endgame, Van Foreest handed Abdusattorov his only heartbreak



First time Tata Steel winner Anish Giri

loss of the tournament. With this an exuberant Anish Giri won his first Tata Steel without a loss. What a finish!

On the Challengers side, another incredible tournament in its own right. Many more decisive games in this field including the last round where all games finished with a victory. Of special note was Praggnanandhaa's older sister in the field, Rameshbabu Vaishali. The only time I can remember siblings competing in the top two fields. Four Dutch players in the field included veteran Erwin L'Ami who finished at fifty percent with 6.5 points. Erwin was the only player to hand tournament winner Alexander Donchenko a loss. Turkish player Mustafa Yilmaz came closest to catching Alexander in the end. Going into the last round, Yilmaz had 8

points while Donchenko led with 9 points. Only a win by Mustafa and a loss by Alexander would harbor a playoff. But while



Challengers winner Alexander Donchenko

the Turkish Grandmaster won his game, the red hot leader continued his streak and won his last four games in a row and therefore winning the tournament. A phenomenal performance with a total of eight wins.



*Dutch colleagues
Erwin L'Ami and Thomas Beerdsen*

Chess fans would do well by attending Tata Steel once to experience all the best chess has to offer. Cafe De Zon next door was a great pub to watch commentary, albeit in Dutch mostly, in addition to enjoying some late night chess and great company. And with the North Sea beach a short walk away, a wonderful way to relax and enjoy some great scenery. The people and hospitality of the Netherlands make this a favorite place of mine to visit. Tot ziens! Until next time....



Commentator Fiona Steil-Antoni