

World Fischer Random Chess Championship 2022

by John Brezina

Fifty years after the Match of the Century was held in Reykjavik Iceland, another world championship match took place there. The World Fischer Random Chess Championship 2022. Aptly named for the 1972 World Champion Bobby Fischer and his popular chess variant. This was the second official FIDE Fischer Random title, the first in 2019 when Wesley So defeated Magnus Carlsen. After a two year absence and on the 50th anniversary of the Fischer Spassky match, the inaugural champion Wesley So returns to defend his title along with fellow American player Hikaru Nakamura who qualified online through Lichess.org. Three other players qualified online through Chess.com and Lichess.org: Vladimir Fedoseev, Matthias Blübaum and Nodirbek Abdusattorov. Three others were directly seeded: Top rated Magnus Carlsen, FIDE wildcard pick Ian Nepomniachtchi, and top rated Icelandic Grandmaster Hjorvar Steinn Gretarsson. It would begin with a two-stage group, then a semi-finals knockout followed by the championship final.



Gudmundur Thorarinsson making the ceremonial opening move on the board of defending champion Wesley So



Magnus Carlsen looking for the only chess title to elude him

After learning that Hikaru Nakamura qualified and the match would be held in Reykjavik Iceland at the end of October, I planned to attend the opening and first two days. Esteemed photographer and FIDE communications officer David Llada graciously granted me media access. Once the playing venue at the historic hotel Reykjavik Natura was announced, I was quick to book a room there. Originally called the Hotel Loftleidir, it is where Bobby Fischer stayed during the 1972 match and again in 2005 after being granted asylum and Icelandic citizenship. Soon after checking in I was thrilled to see the 50th anniversary exhibition of the 1972 match near the lobby and playing hall. There were many historic items relating to the match on display and you could see how this small island nation is still big on chess. I was quite humbled to be able to attend this match and stay at this historic hotel as it was the 1972 match and Bobby Fischer's story that ignited my passion for chess as it had for so many others.

The match took place October 25-30 and started with the opening ceremony the night before. Beforehand the players were interviewed by a local news channel in the hotel lobby to give their thoughts on the match. The opening ceremony took place at the hotel where attendees enjoyed food and drinks while mingling with local chess officials and all the players. Most notable was the current Icelandic Chess Federation President Gunnar Bjornsson along with the former 1972 ICF President and main organizer of the Match of the Century Gudmundur Thorarinsson. He authored the book "The Match of All Time" with inside stories from the 1972 match, a must for collectors. Also in attendance were both parents of World Champion Magnus Carlsen and his long-time second Peter Heine Nielsen. After much socializing the formalities began with an opening speech by ICF President Gunnar Bjornsson followed by FIDE Vice President Joran Aulin-Jansson. Finally the chief arbiter Omar Salama made the ceremonial drawing of lots to determine the group stages.

The next opening day many last minute preparations were happening in the playing hall. Starting with the players going over the official rules and regulations with FIDE to playing conditions including their chairs. Interestingly Magnus asked for a more comfortable roller chair while Hikaru opted for a standard chair used in the audience. I missed all of this while sightseeing around Reykjavik in the morning and when I arrived there was still much to do setting up DGT boards and the many cameras being used. Helping with all of this was photographer extraordinaire Lennart Ootes who is also a DGT expert and photographer Maria Emelianova who sub streams for Nakamura on occasion. The amount of work and detail into such a match is extraordinary.

Final touches were prepared including a check in for spectators who were scanned for devices before entering. Fifteen minutes before the start of the round the starting position was revealed to the players where they had a short time to prepare with their seconds or other players. A very appropriate special guest was discerning the playing hall and preparing to make the ceremonial opening move to kick off the match. Former Icelandic Chess Federation President Gudmundur Thorarinsson himself, who was a key figure in getting the 1972 match to even take place. Fantastic to have such a historical figure from the past match to start off this new one named in Bobby Fischer's namesake.



The President of Iceland about to be defeated at the board



Bobby Fischer's bodyguard and friend Saemi Palsson

Group A had defending champion Wesley So, Nepomniachtchi, Gretarsson, and Abdusattorov compete while group B had Carlsen, Nakamura, Fedoseev, and Blubaum. In round 1 defending champion Wesley So paired up with top Iceland Grandmaster Gretarsson while Nakamura and Blubaum faced off in group B. Classical world champion Carlsen faced Fedoseev while world champion challenger Nepomniachtchi faced world rapid champion Abdusattorov. Quite a powerhouse field indeed. Each match had the players get one game with black and white with the same starting position. A match win got two points, drawn match one, and a loss zero. Twelve rounds over three days and the top two finishers in each group would move onto the semi finals. A few opening words by current ICF President Bjornsson, then a photo shoot of the ceremonial opening move and Reykjavik begins another World Championship match half a century later.

Nakamura and Carlsen both struck first with wins in group B in round one while the young Nodirbek defeated Nepo. Gretarsson and So steered into a peaceful draw to start but in game two So struck a win with a beautiful rook sacrifice to take the two match points. Nodirbek shocked Nepo with another win in round two with the black pieces while Nakamura and Carlsen coasted to match wins with draws in their games. After a break the new position was revealed for the next mini matches. During the break some more dignitaries arrived for the second half of the day. FIDE President Arkady Dvorkovich escorted the President of Iceland Guðni Thorlacius Jóhannesson and his family into the playing hall. A true testament to the popularity and devotion Iceland has to chess. Many people wanted to meet and greet the President. There was even enough time for a young eight year old Icelandic boy to challenge the President to a quick game. The game attracted a large crowd of onlookers and cameras with FIDE President Dvorkovich looking on as the arbiter. After a tough struggle where both played chess well, youth prevailed and defeated the President. A story to tell for the rest of this young chess player's life.

Another special guest and historical figure from the 1972 match was in attendance and an absolute delight to talk with, Saemi Rock Palsson. He was best known as Bobby Fischer's bodyguard during the 1972 match. Saemi is now 87 years old and a very respected former police officer. He kindly made his way around introducing himself and telling stories about his time with Bobby. What a delight to listen to him tell his stories and he told me he speaks eight different languages. Saemi was instrumental in getting Bobby Fischer asylum and citizenship in Iceland after Bobby called him from a Japanese jail after his detainment in 2005. A great documentary on this extraordinary friendship was released a year after Bobby's death by Icelandic Films, titled *Me & Bobby Fischer*. Here is the link: <https://www.icelandicfilms.info/films/nr/1611> \

Back to round three and the main board was Magnus Carlsen vs. Hikaru Nakamura. The President of Iceland approached and shook both players hands and then made the opening move for Hikaru, b3. Both players smiled and laughed perhaps because it was the move Hikaru stuck with on the board after possibly analyzing this move. Magnus responded with g5! setting up a queen trap with a capture of his bishop in the opposite corner with Hikaru's queen on move one. These opening scenarios are what makes Fischer random so fascinating. After 39 moves they agreed to a draw.



*Clash of the Titans:
Magnus Carlsen & Hikaru Nakamura*



Iceland's top GM Hjorvar Steinn Gretarsson

Nepo came back with a vengeance after two losses and won his two games against Gretarsson. Nodirbek shocked the defending champion Wesley So by winning their second game and taking the two points. Fedoseev won his first game against Blubaum and drew the second to get his first points. Game two between Nakamura and Carlsen was the shocker to watch and to end the day with. After a long think, Magnus made the move 31.a6? which blundered a rook with a simple fork. After realizing his mistake, Magnus was clearly mad at himself for messing up his move order and played on a few more moves before resigning. This left Hikaru and Nodirbek on top with four points each on the first day.

Day two the players would stay with their pairings for both mini matches all four rounds. Nakamura and Fedoseev drew all four games in very tough struggles, splitting the points. Wesley So won his first game against Nepo but struggled the rest of the day. In their second game, Wesley made an illegal move trying to castle out of check which prompted a visit by the arbiters. After clarification about the castling rule and realizing he would be lost anyways, So resigned and went on to lose his next two games as well. Nodirbek dominated the Icelandic Grandmaster and won all four of their games. Magnus easily dispatched Blubaum with three wins and a draw which left the German Grandmaster scoreless after two days along with his Icelandic counterpart.

Unfortunately I had to leave the next day but continued to follow the remaining games. Wesley So could not recover on day three and failed to make the semi finals as Nepo edged him out by a point. Nodirbek easily took first in group A while Nakamura and Carlsen tied in group B moving them all to the semi finals after a rest day. The players took a group photo at the Perlan museum landmark nearby on the rest day and some traveled to Bobby Fischer's gravesite to pay their respects. The semi-final matches were the best of four games and paired Nakamura against the young Nodirbek. All expected a tough match but Hikaru was in great form and won three games in a row and a seat in the finals. On the other side a World Championship rematch between Carlsen & Ian Nepomniachtchi. Magnus struck first with a win but Nepo composed himself and took the next two games. This forced Magnus to win game four and after overpressing in a must win situation, he lost the game and his chance to capture the only World Championship title yet to elude him.



Ian Nepomniachtchi settled for second place after an epic finale



The new World Fischer Random Champion Hikaru Nakamura

The last day was an epic finale between Hikaru Nakamura and Ian Nepomniachtchi. Hikaru continued his great form and won game one with the black pieces. Game two with the same starting position steered into a calm draw. But game three and with a new starting position, Nepo struck back with a win to tie the match. The players came to a draw in a bloodless calm game four setting up an armageddon game. Nepo won the bid as black with 13 minutes to Hikaru's bid of 14. So Nepo just had to draw the game with 13 minutes to Hikaru's 15 with no increment. The game stayed rather equal until move 25 where Nepo weakened his position and lost a rook exchange soon after. This gave Hikaru a chance and he was relentless, forcing Nepo's King up the board and setting up a mating net with his two rooks. After move 48 Nepo threw in the towel and resigned. Another American World Champion in Reykjavik 50 years after the first one, a fitting end to a great tournament.

After the other playoff games Magnus ended in third place despite his lower standard of play. Defending champion Wesley So ended in a disappointing sixth place but rebounded a week later by winning the first ever Chess.com Global Championships in Toronto. Abdusattorov finished a respectable fourth followed by Fedoseev. Rounding out the bottom was Blubaum and the host nation's own Hjorvar Steinn Gretarsson. A fantastic tournament in a great host nation at a historic hotel with an American champion. Can't ask for more. I have attached a large photo album below from the tournament as well as my YouTube link that has some video clips from the games. Enjoy....

Tournament photos: <https://photos.app.goo.gl/qFadyPPN9aBRNYgWA>

Videos: <https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCQ85GefQ-cz41MKBsJm2xdw>