

# **FM Paul Whitehead**

## **Hans Niemann: Chess at the Top**

“Money Changes Everything” – The Brains

By now we are all familiar with the scandal engulfing the chess world, boiled down to this: lame-duck World Champion Magnus Carlsen loses a game in the Sinquefeld Cup to 19-year-old American up-start GM Hans Niemann. He then withdraws from the tournament, at the same time making a vague insinuation that Niemann has cheated. A couple of weeks later in the online Julius Baer Generation Cup, Carlsen loses yet another game to Hans, resigning before playing his 2<sup>nd</sup> move. Shortly afterwards he makes a statement on social media, asserting that Hans had cheated during their encounter at the Sinquefeld Cup – and offers not a single shred of evidence.

I want to offer my own opinion, based on long experience in the chess world plus my own interactions with Hans when he was an up-and-coming player at the Mechanics’ Institute.

It is not an easy path to the top of the chess world. It takes great fighting spirit and single-minded determination. Magnus Carlsen, like every other World Champion before him, has demonstrated those qualities. Other top players I have observed, like GM Walter Browne (one of Hans’ early coaches), manifest that desire to win in an almost visceral and physical way.

I have no doubt whatsoever that the will to win (and not to lose!) can cloud a chess player’s moral compass. Ashamedly, I remember engaging in fisticuffs with my own brother over a disputed game.

With that said, I’m curious what the reader might think of the following example. Captured on video, Carlsen attempts to take a move back against GM Alexandra Kosteniuk in the 2009 World Blitz Championship, and then leaves the table without a word or a handshake: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WeyXKTVYenA&t=161s>

If this was not an attempted cheat, then I don’t know what is.

Perhaps even more damning is the following video, Carlsen’s own live-stream of the Lichess Titled Arena in December 2021. The World Champion clearly takes the advice of GM David Howell to trap GM Daniel Naroditsky’s queen. I understand the tournament had a 1<sup>st</sup> place of \$500. The critical moment is at the 1:44:00 mark: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CRdrf1Ny3x8>

I am not trying to throw just Magnus Carlsen under the bus here. Both of these videos show very typical displays of fighting spirit. Sadly, they also display not particularly rare examples of un-sportsmanlike behavior.

For the World Champion to accuse Niemann of what he himself is clearly guilty of is, in my opinion, just flat out wrong. If Niemann has cheated, then so has Carlsen. And many, many others.

Thirty years ago (and more) it was a common sight to see chess masters and grandmasters walking the hallways together, whispering in each other's ears. I don't believe the majority of players were outright cheating perse, but innocent questions or statements such as: "What do you think of my position?" or "Maybe it's time to go home!" accompanied by frowns, raised eyebrows, coughing, laughing, et cetera, were quite common. Of course, this is different information than one can get nowadays. After all, a grandmaster is only human, and their suggestions and advice will only take you so far.

But Stockfish is a God.

Nowadays the top players are electronically frisked, and their trips to the bathroom are monitored - all under the smoky pall of large prize funds, large appearance fees, and generous corporate sponsorship.

While the top players and streamers, and the private interests that sponsor them (purporting to speak for the regular player), wring their hands worrying over the "integrity of the game" and the "existential threat" posed by cheaters, they are living in a chess world unimaginable only 30-40 years ago.

Back then, top players might have lived out of their cars or crashed on a friend's couch, all the while waiting for a few paltry bucks from their chess federation or a miserable cash prize to pay their expenses. Chess lacked the glitz that corporate sponsorship and lots of money can buy: the glamorous world of *The Queen's Gambit*, trash-talking streamers angling for a date with one of the Botez sisters, or better yet: the chance to be rich and/or the subject of world-wide attention.

Chess at the top looks, sounds, and tastes very different now than it did not so long ago. The players are younger, have nice haircuts, and pay respect (if not outright homage) to their master, World Champion Magnus Carlsen. It looks quite cozy from the outside: for almost ten years now, the same 15-20 players have competed against each other over and over again in countless tournaments, over the board and online. Rarely are outsiders permitted into this precious circle, which helps to keep their ratings inflated just enough to keep the invites and appearance fees coming and the sponsorships rolling in.

But cracks are starting to appear.

Almost all of the top players lost rating points at the recent Olympiad in Chennai, where they had to compete with lower rated players.

A younger generation is muscling in, in the shape of players like Hans Niemann, India's Dommaraju Gukesh, and Nodirbek Abdusattorov from Uzbekistan. The latter became the World Rapid Champion earlier this year, defeating not only Carlsen, but Carlsen's two most recent World Champion challengers, Fabiano Caruana and Ian Nepomniachtchi.

The young may also seem to lack the "proper respect," which leads us back to what I see as the whole crux of this sorry Carlsen/Niemann affair.

Right now, with the lack of any evidence that Niemann cheated in that over-the-board game against Carlsen, I think the only conclusion we can reach is the one staring us all in the face: Hans Niemann beat Magnus Carlsen fair and square at the Sinquefeld Cup.

I believe Hans has gotten under Magnus' skin big-time, and, as is well documented here and elsewhere, Magnus hates losing. And to what extent, we are just now finding out. With Carlsen also abdicating the World Championship, I am reminded somewhat of an angry child that destroys his own sandcastle when told that it's time to leave the beach.

Hans Niemann played a lot at the Mechanics' Institute as a youngster (11-12 years old in 2013 and 2014), and his progress was meteoric. As I outlined in our last [newsletter](#), his rating jumping from 1200 to 2200 in just under two years.

I myself played Hans a bunch of times, and his father recently sent me a video of Hans and I battling it out in a blitz game at the Mechanics' Institute. I am totally winning for ages and ages, and his only hope is that I will lose on time. Hans hangs in there though, crying "Flag, flag, flag!" over and over. Both of us are enjoying the contest immensely... and I lose on time before I can mate him. His joy at winning is a sight to see.

Not everyone appreciated Hans' brash and cheeky demeanor. It was either IM John Donaldson or I who (affectionately) started calling him "Niemann the Demon," but there were (and are still) players at the club who, perhaps, have forgotten what it was like to have been young once.

When I see Hans in those post-game interviews at the Sinquefeld Cup, I feel I am watching exactly the same person that I knew back then: a person with a great love for chess, supremely confident in his abilities, and with respect for no one.

A stone-cold chess killer.

Hans acts in a rough and tumble manner that surprises us nowadays, and harkens back to earlier times - perhaps strongly influenced by older coaches like GMs Walter Browne, Max Dlugy, and IM John Grefe. These are no-nonsense and worldly fellows, and Hans' development was tempered in steel.

I think the time has passed, if it ever really existed, when chess could lay claim to completely fair-play. Ruy Lopez de Segura (c.1530 - c.1580) a founding father of modern chess and a Catholic priest, advised his students to "place the board such that the light shines in your opponent's eyes."

Behind the brouhaha surrounding Carlsen and Niemann, there are other factors and interests playing out. As we follow chess celebrities, minor and major (because that is what they are now) we should also follow the money. Is it a coincidence that Niemann was banned anew from chess.com whilst the Play Magnus Group was acquired by that selfsame chess.com? I find it fascinating to see who is lining up to defend Carlsen's accusations, and why.

There will always be attempts to cheat at over-the-board chess - some have been caught, others not. With the money pouring in, attempts to cheat will not stop, ever. Chess has entered the world of all other sports and games where these problems exist, whether it's baseball or poker.

The online world thrived like nobody's business during the pandemic: perhaps the real "existential threat" to wealthy streamers and online platforms is not cheaters - it's the return to over-the-board play.

The chess world at the top has waited a long time for this moment – they’ve made it. They have world-wide attention, and they are rolling in the dough. In a sense they have gotten what they wished for, yet in another sense they are paying the price for those wishes coming true.

But back here, for the rest of us in the clubs, in our homes and schools, I believe chess will thrive and continue to be enjoyed for the skillful, interesting, and fascinating game that it is - untainted by money and enjoyed for its own sake.

The same way Hans and I enjoyed playing together, not so very long ago.



Hans Niemann playing blitz with GM James Tarjan at the Memorial for IM John Grefe at the MI in 2014.

Photo by Elliott Winslow.