



TAKE IT SLOW



THE 2023
TATA STEEL AND
WR MASTERS
TOURNAMENTS
SHOW THE
CONTINUING
**VALUE OF
"CLASSICAL
CHESS."**



BY **VJEKOSLAV NEMEC**
ADDITIONAL ANNOTATIONS BY
**GMs NODIRBEK
ABDUSATTOROV
AND PETER HEINE
NIELSEN**

With so much excitement surrounding the Tata Steel and WR Masters, is it fair to say that classical chess is declining? Read on.



W HILE THE FINAL few months of 2022 saw a notable absence of classical chess tournaments at the super-GM level, they certainly made a triumphant return at the beginning of 2023.

The venerable Tata Steel Chess Festival, held in Wijk aan Zee, Netherlands, rang in the new year with a thrilling event, while February saw the first-ever edition of a new, elite tournament in Düsseldorf, Germany — the WR Masters.

With both events featuring well-balanced lineups, with some of the world's best meeting some of the best of the coming generation, there was a lot of excitement about both of these tournaments. With game after game of fighting chess, spectators (both online and in-person) were rewarded with two fantastic events in Wijk and Düsseldorf, making early winter much more bearable for fans of longer time controls!

In what follows, we will go over some of the most important moments and games from both events!



TATA STEEL

While first place has long stayed just out of reach on his home soil, Dutch number one GM Anish Giri can usually be counted on to perform well at Tata Steel. The year 2023 was no exception; from the very start of the event, his play announced that it might finally be his year. First, he beat GM Gukesh Dommaraju in fantastic style in round two. And then, in round four, he accomplished an even greater feat by defeating GM Magnus Carlsen for the first time in 12 years!

HISTORY!

GM Anish Giri (2764)
GM Magnus Carlsen (2859)
Tata Steel Masters (4), 01.17.2023

(see diagram top of next column)

From a combative Queen's Indian, a very complex position arose where White has some pull and Black has to be careful.

22. ... Nd4

The wrong move, allowing the b2-b4 push.



BLACK TO MOVE

Instead 22. ... Ne5 was necessary, keeping the knight on c2 for the moment and attacking the d7-pawn.

23. b4 Rxd7?

Mistakes come in pairs. After this, there is no chance to hold the game.

Retreating the knight with 23. ... Ne5 and intending to capture on d7 was the only way. Then after 24. bxc5 bxc5 25. Ba3 Nxd7 White has an advantage, but Black is still in the game.

24. Bd5 Nd6

Now 24. ... Ne5 doesn't help as after 25. bxc5 bxc5 26. Ba3 the knight can't go to d7 — the rook is there!

25. bxc5 bxc5 26. Ba3

And White went on to win quite easily as all of his pieces are dominant and coordinated!

26. ... Ke7 27. Bxc5 Ne6 28. Bb4 a5 29.

Bxa5 Rc8 30. Na4 Nc4 31. Rbc1 Be5 32.

Bb4+ Kf6 33. Nc5 Nxc5 34. Rxc4 Rdc7 35.

Ba5, Black resigned.

But as well as Giri began the tournament, one player started better.

In his first appearance in a classical event of this caliber, GM Nodirbek Abdusattorov's play demonstrated that his gold-medal-winning performance at the 2022 Olympiad was no fluke.

The young Uzbek got off on the right foot by defeating GM Richard Rapport in round one, and GM Parham Maghsoodloo in round four. The victory over Rapport was particularly pleasing, as Abdusattorov himself explains in these notes exclusive to *Chess Life*.

VIENNA GAME (C29)

GM Richard Rapport (2740)
GM Nodirbek Abdusattorov (2713)
Tata Steel Masters (1), 01.14.2023
Annotations by Abdusattorov

I was eager to play my first classical super tournament (discounting the Olympiad) at Wijk aan Zee. With most of the strong players from my own generation competing, I wanted to see where I fit into the pecking order. My first-round opponent was the highly original player Rapport, who recently moved from Hungary to Romania. I was certain we would get a tough fight.

1. e4 e5 2. Nc3 Nf6 3. f4 d5 4. fxe5 Nxe4 5. Qf3

I was quite unfamiliar with this variation.

5. ... f5

Here 5. ... Nc6!? is another decent idea.

6. d3 Nxc3 7. bxc3 d4

This was as much as I could remember.

8. Be2 Nc6 9. Qg3 Be6 10. c4 Bb4+?!

It is almost impossible not to give this check, but it turns out that the black bishop is more misplaced on b4 than the white king on d1. Better was 10. ... Qd7 followed by long castle when we would have had a sharp battle.

11. Kd1! Qd7 12. Rb1 0-0-0 13. Bf3 Be7

Technically the first new move of the game, as there was some random internet game played previously.

14. Nh3?!

Black is under a bit of pressure, but is close to being fully developed. It is clear that my counterplay had to come on the kingside, but after 14. h4 it was not easy to see how this could be organized.

14. ... b6 15. Nf4?!

This looks natural, but 15. Ng5! with an unclear game was better.

15. ... g5

Without deserving it, I have counterplay.

16. Nxe6 Qxe6 17. Rb5

I was hoping for, but not expecting, 17. Bd5?! Rxd5 with big compensation.

17. ... Nb8!?

I was really proud of this idea. The knight becomes useful and I fight for the light squares.

(see diagram top of next column)

18. Rd5!?

There is no way back.

The computer gives the highly entertaining variation 18. h4 gxh4 19. Qf4 c6 20. g4 hxg4 e.p. 21. Rh6 with counterplay, ending in the



traditional 0.00. But of course no one would play like this.

18. ... c6! 19. Rxd8+ Rxd8

I was optimistic here and rightfully so. It is already difficult for White to prove equality.

20. h3

The alternative 20. Rf1 Nd7 21. Qf2 is suggested by Stockfish as a path to something like equality; but it seems entirely mysterious. Probably the simplest is 21. ... h6 with a slight edge for Black.

20. ... Nd7 21. Qh2

The queen was better placed on f2, but it would not solve all the problems.

21. ... h6!

Before winning the pawn, I improve my structure.

22. g4

It is difficult to determine if 22. Re1 Bb4 23. Bd2 Bxd2 24. Kxd2 Re8, where the dark-squared bishops are exchanged, is a better defensive try. Black remains slightly better after 25. Kd1!.

22. ... Nxe5



23. gxf5

Actually, I was expecting the move 23. Re1, not realizing that the endgame after 23. ... Nxf3 24. Rxe6 Nxe2 25. Rxe7 fxg4 26. hxg4 Nxe5 is simply winning for Black. The bishop on c1 is close to worthless.

Another idea is 23. Qe2 f4 24. Re1, when I wanted to play 24. ... Bf6, but thought White had a lot of compensation. Which is true, but if I had played well, I would still have had good winning chances.

23. ... Nxf3 24. fxe6 Nxe2 25. Rxh2

Here I played too fast, feeling too confident about my next move.

25. ... Rf8?

Correct was 25. ... Kc7! when the idea ... Kc7-d6 is natural, but I had already rejected it because of 26. h4!?. But if I had looked a bit deeper, I would have seen that 26. ... gxh4! 27. Bf4+ Kc8 28. Bxh6 Rg8 is completely winning for Black.

26. Bb2 Rf4?!

Also inaccurate. Stronger was 26. ... c5!, as White would not have d3-d4 later.

27. c3 dxc3 28. Bxc3 Kd8 29. Be5 Rf1+ 30. Kc2 Bf6 31. Re2 Ke7 32. d4!



White has managed to get more counterplay than I expected.

32. ... Kxe6 33. Bxf6+ Kxf6 34. d5 cxd5 35. cxd5 Ra1 36. Re6+ Kf5 37. Rxh6!?

A committal decision, giving Black two connected passed pawns.

37. ... Rxa2+ 38. Kb3 Ra1 39. Kc4?!

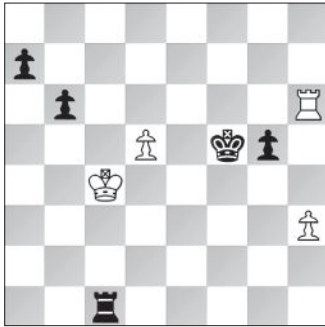
It was hard to see that after 39. d6! Rd1 40. Kc4 a6 41. Kb4 there is no easy way for Black to make progress.

39. ... Rc1+!

(see diagram next page)

40. Kd4?

It was fortunate for me that this was move 40 and not 41. Here he had to find 40. Kb3!., when after 40. ... Ke5 41. d6 Rd1 42. Rg6 Rxd6 43. Rxg5+ White should hold the endgame, even if in practice this will not be that easy.



40. ... Rd1+ 41. Kc4 b5+!

I am sure he had missed or underestimated the strength of this.

42. Kc5

Of course 42. Kxb5 Rxd5+ 43. Ka6 Rd4! and ... Rd4-h4 wins for Black too.

42. ... b4!

Black is winning. The pawn is too strong.

43. Rh8 b3 44. Rf8+

After this Black wins quickly. Instead 44. Rb8 was a better defensive try. I wanted to play 44. ... Ke4 45. Rb4+ (45. Re8+ Kd3! is like the game) 45. ... Ke5 46. Rxb3 Rxd5+ and the extra pawn wins the day.

44. ... Ke4! 45. Re8+ Kd3 46. d6 b2 47. d7 Kc2, White resigned.

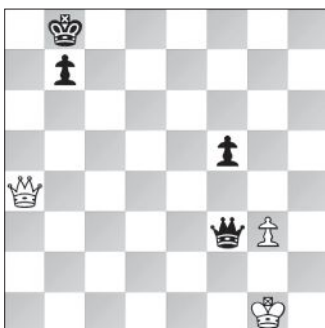
Abdusattorov then repeated Giri's feat in round five by beating Carlsen with the black pieces (!!). It was the first time Carlsen has lost two classical games in a row since 2015.

KING OF QUEENS

GM Magnus Carlsen (2859)

GM Nodirbek Abdusattorov (2713)

Tata Steel Masters (5), 01.19.2023



WHITE TO MOVE

Since Carlsen lost in round four, he was eager to bounce back immediately, especially as Abdusattorov started the tournament

really well. He therefore played extremely riskily, sacrificing a full Exchange, but it didn't quite work out. By move 43 he found himself on the worse side of a queen and pawn endgame.

43. Kh2?

The game is highly reminiscent of the player's duel from the 2021 World Rapid Championship, where Carlsen also cracked under pressure and lost an equal queen endgame. Here, this might be the decisive mistake as it was more important to activate the queen first.

Better was 43. Qe8+ as the queen is more active here than on a4. Now 43. ... Ka7 44. Kh2 Qf2+ 45. Kh3 Qf1+ 46. Kh4 b5 doesn't do anything due to a perpetual: 47. Qe7+ Ka6 48. Qd6+ Ka5 49. Qa3+.

43. ... Qe2+ 44. Kg1?

Another mistake in a difficult position.

I think that 44. Kh3 would have made Black's task more difficult, although after 44. ... Qf1+ 45. Kh4 b5 (note that this is possible here and not in the 43. Qe8+ line) 46. Qa5 Kb7 and there is no perpetual, so White has to keep defending. It is difficult to say whether this is closer to a win or a draw, but in a practical game, it seems impossible to defend for White.

44. ... Qe5

Strong centralization. Now the b-pawn will decide the issue, and indeed, Abdusattorov went on to convert his advantage.

45. Kf2 b5 46. Qb4 Kb7 47. g4 fxg4 48.

Qxg4 Kb6 49. Qg8 b4 50. Kf3 Kb5 51. Kg2

Qe2+ 52. Kg3 Qe3+ 53. Kg2 b3 54. Qb8+

Kc4 55. Qg8+ Kc3 56. Qc8+ Kd2 57. Qh8

Kc2 58. Qc8+ Kd1 59. Qh8 Qd2+ 60. Kg3

b2, White resigned.

This gave Abdusattorov the lead at the half-way point, with Giri trailing close behind. As for Carlsen, it seemed like all hope for a real comeback was gone.

But for the umpteenth time, the World Champion showed just what a special player he is. By winning four of his last eight games, including this victory (annotated exclusively for *Chess Life* by Carlsen's trainer, GM Peter Heine Nielsen) over GM Fabiano Caruana, he pushed his way back up the crosstable, ensuring a dramatic end to the tournament.

Right: our two guest annotators, GM Nodirbek Abdusattorov and GM Magnus Carlsen's trainer, GM Peter Heine Nielsen.

GM Nodirbek Abdusattorov



GM Peter Heine Nielsen



RUY LOPEZ (C88)

GM Fabiano Caruana (2766)

GM Magnus Carlsen (2859)

Tata Steel Masters, (8), 01.22.2023

Annotations by Heine Nielsen

Four years have passed since these two players faced off in one of the more interesting World Championship matches. Despite all 12 games being drawn, it was obvious that the players were a great match stylistically, and that Caruana was in no way intimidated by his opponent, always trying to push hard with the White pieces. Since then their encounters have been less frequent, but a Carlsen-Caruana game always feels like something to look forward to, both for spectators, and the players themselves!

1. e4 e5!?

It might be strange to call this move a surprise from Magnus, but against Fabi, it somewhat is. In the match it was always 1. ... c5 and the Sveshnikov, a theoretical battle that continued last year in Wijk. This time, it was back to basics.

2. Nf3 Nc6 3. Bb5 a6 4. Ba4 Nf6 5. 0-0 Be7 6. Re1 b5 7. Bb3 0-0

Both players stick to their principles: no Italian from Fabi, no offbeat Spanish from Magnus!

8. a4!

As expected. Fabi was doing commentary during the 2021 World Championship match and admitted that this move — used by Nepomniachtchi in Dubai — was his preparation in 2018.

White's problem is that after 8. c3 d5 Black has been doing very well theoretically in the sharp, forced lines of the Marshall. The search for a more positional and flexible approach always seems to end up with 8. a4.

8. ... b4!?

A shift for Magnus, avoiding a continuance of the theoretical debate from the 2021 match where he preferred 8. ... Bb7 or 8. ... Rb8. While putting the bishop on b7 might look logical, it often finds itself blocked by White's solid pawn construction on d3 and e4, when it would rather end up on the e6-square, exchanging itself for White's strong b3-bishop.

Certainly 8. ... Rb8 serves that purpose, and unlike the game continuation, it does not cede control of the c4-square. One could even argue that 8. ... Rb8 is the most "positional" move, as it keeps the bishop at its

preferred square without weakening Black's position, but it does give White control of the a-file. And as we saw in the match, while Black is solid and can gradually equalize, the position is not so exciting.

9. a5!?

The modern, ambitious approach, depriving the black knight of the a5-square.

Back in 2007, when Anand became the World Champion in Mexico, Magnus visited the Anand training camp right before the event, and he and Vishy debated the positions after 9. d3 d6 10. Nbd2 Na5 11. Ba2 c5 12. c3, believing in White's chances for a long-term positional edge. Vishy won a beautiful game against Grischuk in this line, but later, as often happens, Black found a concrete way to neutralize White's initiative with 12. ... Rb8 13. d4 Qc7 14. dxe5!?. This leads to Magnus' preferred pawn structure after 14. ... dxe5 15. Nc4 but now both the direct 15. ... b3 (or first 15. ... Rd8) have proven satisfactory for Black.

9. ... d6 10. c3!?

Fabi played the more positional 10. d3 at the 2021 Candidates against Ding, but after being surprised by Magnus' 8. ... b4, he chooses to deviate, even at the cost of playing less solidly. Typical of Caruana's courage — not backing down on principle.

10. ... Rb8 11. h3

I guess we expected 11. Bc4 (something Fabi has played before) but as is so often the case, such moves lead to forced lines where Black is eventually ok. Now both players are most likely "out of book." The preparation part is over, and they can start doing what they really like: playing chess.

11. ... h6



A typical Carlsen move. The computer wants 11. ... Rb5!?, but Magnus feels assured in the solidity of his position. While White perhaps has a small edge, it's of the temporary variety, and with some solid moves Black will equalize.

12. d4

Caruana's play has been systematic and ambitious, preventing Black's ... Nc6-a5 and ... Bc8-g4 options, both of which are typical attempts at relieving pressure, and then immediately taking control of the center with c2-c3 and d3-d4.

12. ... bxc3!

A good move, exchanging a weak pawn and opening the b-file for the rook.

13. bxc3 exd4!

Again, good timing.

14. Nxd4!

Black willingly surrenders the center, the point being that 14. cxd4 d5! creates immediate counterplay.

14. ... Bd7!?

It was possible to challenge the center with 14. ... Nxd4 15. cxd4 d5, when the computer gives the curious line 16. e5 Ne4 17. Nd2 Bb4 18. Re3! Nxf2 19. Kxf2 Qh4+ 20. Ke2 Qxd4 21. Ra2 with approximate equality.

15. Bf4

White has been given somewhat of a free hand to regroup, and chooses a logical setup by developing the bishop to f4, planning to reply to the standard 15. ... Re8 with 16. Nd2, consolidating and keeping a small edge.

15. ... Ne5!?



A good move, and thwarting White's plan as now 16. Nd2? can be met by 16. ... Nd3!.

Critical now would be 16. Bh2 (or 16. Bg3) when Black's best is 16. ... c5 17. Bxe5 dxe5 18. Nf3 c4! 19. Bxc4 Qc7 20. Bxa6 Bc5 when Black has sufficient compensation for the pawns, as the dominant c5-bishop both attacks the f2-square and renders White's extra pawns immobile.

16. Na3!?

Defending against the pawn sacrifice on c4, but this also is the first step down a bad path.

The scene from the key battle between Caruana and Carlsen



16. ... Re8!

After the game Magnus said that he grew optimistic after this move. That might seem strange, as Black is just making a standard defensive move, regrouping on the back-rank with no aggressive intentions apparent, but he understood that the “narrative” of the position favored him for concrete tactical reasons.

17. Bg3 Bf8 18. f4?!

As expected, Caruana starts pushing the black pieces back, but there’s a tactical flaw.

18. ... Nc6 19. e5 dxe5 20. fxe5 Nxd4 21. cxd4



This position looks very promising for White at first glance. Black is being pushed back, and after 21. ... Nh7 22. Bc4 White first attacks the a6-pawn and then later on the f-file. Black might defend, but obviously the position is promising for White. The alter-

native 21. ... Nh5 is possible, as 22. Qxh5 Rxb3 would be good for Black, but White can insert 22. Bxf7+! keeping an edge.

21. ... Bc6!

Undoubtedly a shock for Caruana. The problem is that 22. exf6 loses to 22. ... Rxe1+ 23. Bxe1 Rxb3 24. Qxb3 Qxd4+ recovering the rook. This means Black suddenly controls the d5-square, and instead of passively retreating, he can plant the knight in the center of the board.

22. Bc2??

No doubt affected by the last move, Caruana blunders. This move is logical in that Black’s natural 22. ... Nd5 can be met with 23. Qd3 g6 24. e6!?, but Carlsen exploits the fact that his knight is not yet on d5 to win the game with very straightforward tactics.

White’s position was still very savable, e.g. 22. Rc1 Bd5 and now after 23. Bxd5 Nxd5 24. Qf3 Qd7 25. Nc4 White has stabilized the position, and will be able to gradually equalize. Black’s position is only visually better.

22. ... Qd5!

Perhaps Caruana had a blindspot on the d5-square, as “mentally” the f6-knight was already there. This move threatens mate on g2, and White has no reasonable reply.

23. Re2 Rb4! 24. Kh2

Of course 24. Bf2, defending the d4-pawn, is impossible due to the mate on g2, and

24. Rd2 Rxd4 loses for similar reasons, so White’s position collapses and the d4-pawn cannot be saved.

24. ... Rxd4 25. Qb1 Ne4!?



A curious choice. Here 25. ... Rd2 wins tactically, with the lines being in no way murky or difficult, but Magnus decided not to bother, instead satisfying himself with a pawn-up ending.

26. Bxe4 Rxe4 27. Rxe4 Qxe4 28. Qxe4 Bxe4 29. Nc4 Rb8

Why settle for merely being a pawn up when there’s an immediate win? Because Black also has the bishop pair in a dominant position. The computer agrees, thinking this +5 for Black.

30. Rc1 Rb5 31. e6 fxe6 32. Bxc7 Rc5 33. Bf4 Bd5, White resigned.

With the a5-pawn dropping too, Fabiano

had enough and resigned. In some ways it is a bit unkind to Fabi to annotate this game, and I apologize for that, as it is no way representative of his play. I think the way he continually tries to push hard against everyone, including Magnus, is praiseworthy. It makes the chess world a much more interesting place.

Heading into the final round, Abdusattorov lead with an undefeated 8½/12, while Giri lurked a half-point back. Carlsen and GM Wesley So shared third place with 7½ points.

Since Abdusattorov had White against GM Jorden van Foreest, who was struggling through the event, it seemed very unlikely that he would lose, and many were already anticipating his coronation as the winner of the 2023 Tata Steel Masters.

But van Foreest showed his mettle, playing a remarkable game with the black pieces to completely outplay the leader, handing him his first and only defeat of the tournament.

This opened the door for the field to try and snatch a piece of first place. So could not win with Black against Praggnanandhaa, but Carlsen showed deep understanding in

defeating Erigaisi to get to 8½ points. Unfortunately for Carlsen, it was not enough.

Giri finally broke his Tata Steel duck, snatching a win against Rapport after the latter blundered in an unpleasant, position.

GOODBYE DUCK!

GM Anish Giri (2764)

GM Richard Rapport (2740)

Tata Steel Masters (13), 01.29.2023



BLACK TO MOVE

The culminating point of the 2023 Tata Steel

Masters. Black's position is practically unpleasant, but objectively, he is completely fine.

34. ... Kg6??

The wrong direction, falling for a cheapo and losing the game on the spot.

Going to the back rank with 34. ... Kg8 would have been sufficient for equality, even though it looks scary to allow a check along the first rank.

35. Rxd6

The rook is immune due to Qf3xf5 mate, and Black collapses!

35. ... Kg5 36. Rd5 Qe1+ 37. Kg2 Be7 38. Rxf5+ Kh4 39. Qg3+, Black resigned.

In doing so, Giri overtook Abdusattorov to win his first-ever Tata Steel, while Abdusattorov and Carlsen had to content themselves with shared second place. One man's disappointment was another's triumph — another reminder that expectations color the stories we tell about our doings just as much as the doings themselves.

WR MASTERS



Aronian analyzes with the young phenom Praggnanandhaa.

Consciously or not, the organizers of the brand-new super-tournament WR Masters emulated their Dutch colleagues by inviting a mix of established top players and up-and-comers. And just like in Wijk aan Zee, the “clash of generations” in Düsseldorf would end favorably for the old guard. With one key exception, the younger players held up the end of the table.

The WR Masters was GM Levon Aronian's time to shine. After a disastrous 2022, the newest American super-GM had a solid, if uninspired, performance at Tata Steel, but here he played enterprising and exciting chess from the outset. Not only did he start with 3/5, but he beat both Abdusattorov and Giri with the white pieces.

THE TRUTH HURTS

GM Levon Aronian (2736)

GM Nodirbek Abdusattorov (2734)

WR Chess Masters (3), 02.18.2023

(see diagram top of next column)

In this game, Abdusattorov decided to go for a very risky opening choice in the form of the Sicilian Dragon. And even though he obtained a playable position out of the

PHOTO: LENNART OOTES



BLACK TO MOVE

opening, his position was quite difficult to play. Already on move 14 he made a decisive mistake.

14. ... f6?

This move, violating GM Ben Finegold's basic postulate ("never play ...f7-f6"), is premature. Black opens up the position and voluntarily ruins his structure while the opponent has the two bishops. More importantly — it allows the exchange of the knight on c6.

A move like 14. ... Nd4 avoiding the exchange of the knights and the spoiling of the structure was necessary. White is still better, but Black is very much in the game.

15. Nxc6 bxc6 16. gxf6

Now White has a better structure to go with the bishop pair, and the position is already strategically won. Aronian had no trouble converting his advantage.

16. ... Nxf6 17. Bh6 Re8 18. Bc4+ Kh7 19. Bg5 Kg7 20. Rhg1 a5 21. Rg2 Nd7 22. Rdg1 Ba6 23. Bb3 Nf8 24. Bd2 Bc8 25. a4 e5 26. Bc3 Be6 27. Rd2 Bxb3 28. cxb3 Re6 29. Rgd1 Rd8 30. f4 g5 31. f5, Black resigned.

For his part, Abdusattorov struggled a bit in Düsseldorf, but he did play a barnburner of a game in round two. Here's that battle, with his exclusive annotations.

NIMZO-INDIAN DEFENSE (E46)

GM Nodirbek Abdusattorov (2734)

GM Andrey Esipenko (2675)

WR Chess Masters (2), 02.17.2023

Annotations by Abdusattorov

The WR Masters in Düsseldorf was not a great event for me, but I did play a great game. After a narrow miss in round one, I played my best game in round two, where my opponent miscalculated and ran into a firestorm.

1. d4 Nf6 2. c4 e6 3. Nc3 Bb4 4. e3 0-0 5. Bd2 b6 6. Bd3 d5 7. cxd5 exd5 8. Nf3 Re8 9. Rc1 Bf8 10. 0-0 Bb7 11. Ne5 c5 12. f4 Nc6 13. Ne2 Ne4

My opponent mixed up the lines. 13. ... Rc8! is more accurate.



14. Ng3 Nxd2?



GM Gukesh Dommaraju



GM Ian Nepomniachtchi stares down GM Vincent Keymer

Esipenko did not like his position and could not calculate the variations to a clear conclusion (nor could I, evidently), so he decided to make an intuitive decision and hope that White has no more than a perpetual.

Deeper analysis shows that Black holds equality after 14. ... Nxe5 15. fxe5 g6, although it requires a few additional accurate moves to find clarity.

15. Bxh7+

I knew that 14. Ng3 was supposed to be strong, so I played this natural move quickly.

15. ... Kxh7 16. Qh5+ Kg8 17. Qxf7+ Kh8

17. ... Kh7 would lose to 18. Qg6+ Kg8 19. Nf5! with the threat Nf5-h6+. After 19. ... Nxe5 20. fxe5 Kh8 21. Rf4 the attack cannot be stopped.

18. Ng6+



I am not going for the perpetual, but for the heart.

18. ... Kh7 19. Nh5 Re6!

Looking back, I learned a minor lesson from this game. When you see something is not working in your opening preparation, you should check out the lines till the end. This does not take a lot of time, but it can prove highly valuable when the opponent goes wrong.

Of course 19. ... Qd6 20. Nxf8+ Qxf8 would defend g7, but 21. Nf6+ is mate next move.

20. f5?



The winning continuation was 20. Qxe6! Nxf1 21. Rxf1 Qe8 22. Nxf8+ Qxf8 23. Rf3 with the idea 23. ... Qe8 24. Nf6+ gxf6 25. Rh3+ Kg7 26. Rg3+ and mate is close.

20. ... Nxf1!

Honestly, I hardly considered this move, as it would allow the rook on c1 to join the game and open up for Rf3-h3 ideas. But it also wins the Exchange!

21. Rxf1 Qg5?

Esipenko found it hard choosing between the two options and in the end allowed his intuition to guide – and fail – him.

Against 21. ... Qe8!, I had originally wanted 22. Nf6+ Rxf6 23. Rf3 but then realized that after 23. ... Kh6!! there is nothing but perpetual check. Stronger therefore is 22. Nxf8+ Qxf8 23. fxe6 Qxf7 24. Rxf7! Ba6, where Black still has some problems to solve.

22. Qxe6 Qxh5 23. Rf3 cxd4 24. Qf7!!



Winning an important tempo. After 24. Rh3 Qxh3 25. gxh3 dxe3! 26. Qf7 e2 27. Kf2 Bc5+ 28. Kxe2 Nd8 there are still decent drawing chances.

24. ... Bd6

After 24. ... Qh6 White has 25. Rh3 Qxh3 26. gxh3 dxe3 27. f6! and the mate is near.

25. Nf8+! Rxf8 26. Qxh5+ Kg8 27. f6!

White is winning. Black has to give up material to save the king.

27. ... Ne5 28. Rf5 g6 29. Qg5 dxe3 30. Rxe5 Kf7 31. Rxe3 Bc5 32. b4 Bxe3+ 33. Qxe3 Re8 34. Qc3 Bc8 35. a4 Bf5 36. h3 Rd8 37. Qd4 Be6 38. g4 Rc8 39. g5 Rc1+ 40. Kf2 Rc2+ 41. Kg3, Black resigned.

With Aronian at +3 after six rounds, it looked as if the winner of the tournament was already decided. But he lost in round seven (with White!) to World Championship challenger GM Ian Nepomniachtchi, throwing the tournament table into chaos. While

Aronian kept a share of the lead at 4½/7, the young Indian GM Gukesh Dommaraju joined him there after defeating GM Andrey Esipenko, while Nepo and So were a half-point behind at 4.

So lost to Keymer in round eight, knocking him out of contention, but the remaining three leaders all drew, setting up a highly anticipated pairing between Aronian and Gukesh in round nine. Unfortunately, the result was a quick draw in 18 moves. This ensured that they would both move to the playoffs, but from a fan's perspective, this was a disappointment.

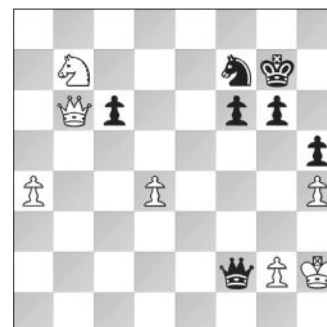
Still, not all was lost. In yet another impressive performance, Nepomniachtchi managed to catch the leaders by grinding down the talented German hope GM Vincent Keymer.

A BRIDGE TOO FAR

GM Vincent Keymer (2690)

GM Ian Nepomniachtchi (2793)

WR Chess Masters (9), 02.25.2023



WHITE TO MOVE

The endgame has been equal for a long time, but Keymer kept playing for the win. This bold decision backfired:

59. a5??

Keymer has pinned his hopes on the advancing a-pawn, but this is too slow. Black has a decisive attack against the white king.

There were many ways to draw but one clear-cut idea was 59. Nd8, attacking the knight on f7 and preventing the ... g6-g5 / ... Nf7-h6-g4 idea that could have occurred in the game.

59. ... Qxh4+ 60. Kg1 Qe1+ 61. Kh2 g5

Now Black is completely winning due to the threat of ... Nf7-h6-g4 with a mating attack. Nepomniachtchi went on to convert this position relatively seamlessly.

62. Qc7 Qh4+ 63. Kg1 Qxd4+ 64. Kf1 Qd1+

65. Kf2 Qd2+ 66. Kf1 g4 67. a6 Qd3+ 68. Kf2 Kg6 69. Qxc6 Ne5 70. Qc1 g3+ 71. Ke1 Qe4+ 72. Kf1 Qf5+ 73. Kg1 Qf2+ 74. Kh1 Qd4 75. Qc5 Qh4+ 76. Kg1 Nf3+ 77. Kf1 Qh1+ 78. Ke2 Qxg2+ 79. Ke3 Qf2+ 80. Ke4 Ne5 81. Qd5 Qf3+ 82. Kd4 Nc6+, White resigned.

Having just played a six-hour marathon of a game, Nepomniachtchi was less than thrilled about the playoff being scheduled for the same day as the final round. And sure

enough, he ended up in third place, losing to the well-rested Aronian and Gukesh.

While this unfortunate ending to the tournament surely left Nepo with a bitter taste in his mouth, he must have been happy with his overall performance in what was essentially a training event for his April World Championship match. If we compare this to Ding's rather poor performance at Tata Steel (5½/13), there's little question as to which player has more reason for confi-

dence heading into the match.

But back to Düsseldorf. In the end, the inaugural WR Masters title was convincingly won by Aronian, who defeated both Nepomniachtchi and Gukesh (twice!) to earn victory in the playoff. One hopes this is a return to form for Aronian, and for his American and Armenian fans. After all, as no less than GM Garry Kasparov remarked back in 2015, "The chess world is a better place when Aronian is playing well!"

LOOKING FORWARD

The internet has been buzzing in recent months about the future of chess played at classical time controls. Some claim it is the most interesting and compelling form of our ancient game, while others argue that it is not the way forward, and that it should gradually be made obsolete.

A glance at the crosstables of major events in late 2022 saw very few major classical tournaments, while a whole lot of events were played at faster time controls. This might suggest that the second group is slowly winning the debate.

Perhaps this is not a real surprise given the popularity of online chess and streaming, but it seems to me that Carlsen's influence is also notable here. He has publicly

stated that he believes classical chess will be phased out in the near future, citing the unfathomable depth of computer preparation as the driving factor, and as the major reason for his abdicating his title. Importantly, he does see a future for Fischer Random played at longer time controls.

It is interesting to reflect on Tata Steel and WR Masters in this context. In the opinion of this author, both of these tournaments exhibited all the traits that continue to make classical chess special:

FIGHTING CHESS

Despite constant chatter about "draw death," both tournaments demonstrated that the right field of players can produce extremely

fighting chess — something the organizers in Wijk realized a long time ago! Maghsoodloo, for example, had more decisive games than draws at Tata Steel, and no small number of the drawn games in both events were played to "bare kings."

MEMORABLE GAMES

There is something about games played at classical time controls that make them more memorable than blitz or rapid encounters. You might disagree, but think for a second — do you know a single game from the 2018 World Blitz Championship or the 2022 Champions Chess Tour by heart?

I think that the reduced number of games played at classical events makes them easier to follow. But it is also true that the deepest ideas and combinations are usually played with longer time controls.

While these are essential components of a memorable game, they are not the only ones. The context, the stories, and the off-the-board events also matter.

This leads me to my final point.

DRAMAS, STORIES AND NARRATIVES

What makes classical tournaments so special is their tendency to feature multiple dramatic moments and narrative arcs. In Tata Steel, we saw Giri defeat Carlsen for the first time in 12 years. Carlsen lost two consecutive games for the first time in eight years, followed by one of the most impressive comebacks in recent years. And what about Abdusattorov crumbling in the final round, after a perfectly played tournament?

These stories and narratives are what make classical tournaments memorable. There is something special about the tension that builds up over the course of a week or two, culminating in an exciting last few rounds. The same level of intensity, nerves, and drama are very seldom reached at events with faster time controls. ♠



The post-mortem between Abdusattorov and Espenko

PHOTO: LENNART OOTES