



Ding Liren is the new World Champion

# A King Emerges from the Mayhem

DING LIREN 9½ - IAN NEPOMNIACHTCHI 8½

Game by game, bravely weathering a storm of powerful blows and tottering on the edge of defeat, Ding resiliently bounced back. And in the end, after a thrilling turn of events, the decisive knockout was his, thereby securing a hard-fought victory and the greatest chess title of all.

By GM John Burke

In one of the most exciting and unpredictable world championship matches in recent chess history, for the most part Ding Liren found himself on his back foot. Nevertheless, despite Nepomniachtchi's early lead, the players continued to exchange blows with Ding never allowing his opponent to gain more than a one point lead. Indeed, he was able to strike back whenever necessary and leave no doubt about his stamina by winning the very last game of the rapid tiebreak – and with it the World Championship title. The 2023 World Chess Championship between Ding Liren and Ian Nepomniachtchi, played in Astana, Kazakhstan, was one of the most thrilling contests in recent memory. Beforehand, a few clouds hung over the match, as Magnus Carlsen had voluntarily abdicated the throne. Would the match still generate a level of intrigue comparable to the past few World Championship matches?

However, once the match started, these questions drifted away, as we were treated to a thrilling battle with six out of the fourteen classical games ending decisively. That's as many as the previous three world title matches combined. Both players displayed moments of brilliance as well as inexplicable mistakes. Ding even managed to make a really bizarre error off the board, as he and his second Richard Rapport played many public training games on Lichess, which was revealed in the middle of the match. It was therefore only fitting that they fought to a 7-7 tie in the classical stage and headed for a four-game rapid tiebreak.

John Burke was the 2020 US Junior Champion. The young grandmaster from New Jersey had already stunned the chess world in 2015 by breaking the record as youngest player ever to surpass 2600+ ELO. John's most notable victories include the 2018 U.S. Masters, the 2018 New York International Championship, and the 2019 Washington International Open. In 2021 he shared first at the Cherry Blossom Classic in Dulles, VA, and also in the World Open in Philadelphia, PA.



Photos by David Llada, Anna Shtourman, Stev Bonhage



# DING The KING

No matter how hard he was punched, he always came back fighting in the next round.





RAPID TIEBREAK, GAME

4

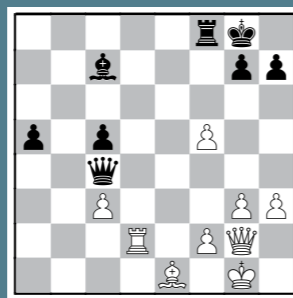
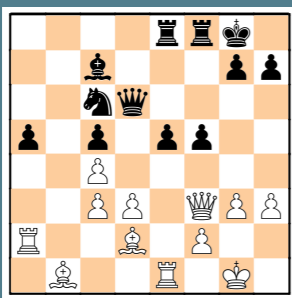
C84

Ian Nepomniachtchi 2795 - Ding Liren 2788

Rapid Tiebreak, World Championship Match 2023

The quality of play in the tiebreak was extraordinarily high considering the stakes, and neither player was able to gain much ground, as the first three games all ended in draws. Then came the fourth game...

1.e4 e5 2.♘f3 ♘c6 3.♗b5 a6 4.♗a4 ♘f6 5.0-0 ♗e7 6.d3 b5 7.♗b3 d6 8.a4 ♗d7 9.h3 0-0 10.♗e3 ♗a5 11.♗a2 bxa4 12.♘c3 ♗b8 13.♗b1 ♖e8 14.b3 c5 15.♘xa4 ♘c6 16.♘c3 a5 17.♘d2 ♗e6 18.♘c4 d5 19.exd5 ♘xd5 20.♗d2 ♘xc3 21.♗xc3 ♗xc4 22.bxc4 ♗d8 23.♗d2 ♗c7 24.c3 f5 25.♗e1 ♗d8 26.♗a2 ♖g6 27.♖e2 ♖d6 28.g3 ♗de8 29.♖f3

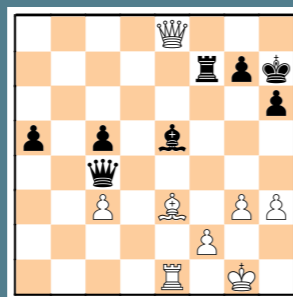


The position looks stable for Black, but it's still slightly uncomfortable to play. White has an annoying idea of playing ♗d5 here, which isn't easy to meet.

For example, 35...♖xc3 looks too greedy after 36.♗d5+ ♗h8 37.♖e6, when White's attack is very dangerous.

35...♗xf5 36.♗d2 h6 37.♖c6 ♗f7 38.♗e1 ♗h7 Now Black has stabilized his king position and the game is level.

39.♗e3 ♗e5 40.♖e8



29...e4 For a rapid game, I like this decision. The knight will be activated and Black will no longer be pressed for a plan.

After 29...♗h8 30.♗d5 Black has to trade queens or give away the c5 pawn, neither of which are very appealing.

29...♘e7 is the engine's suggestion, preventing ♗d5 for good, but it looks very artificial to me and I'm not surprised that Ding took a more active approach.

30.dxe4 ♘e5 31.♖g2 White would like to stop ...♘d3 by 31.♖e2? - but this fails tactically to 31...fxe4 32.♗xe4 ♘f3+!

31...♘d3 32.♗xd3 ♖xd3 33.exf5 ♗xe1+ 34.♗xe1 ♖xc4 Now Black will probably win back the f5 pawn and be doing well in every sense except king safety. His missing f-pawn causes some concern.

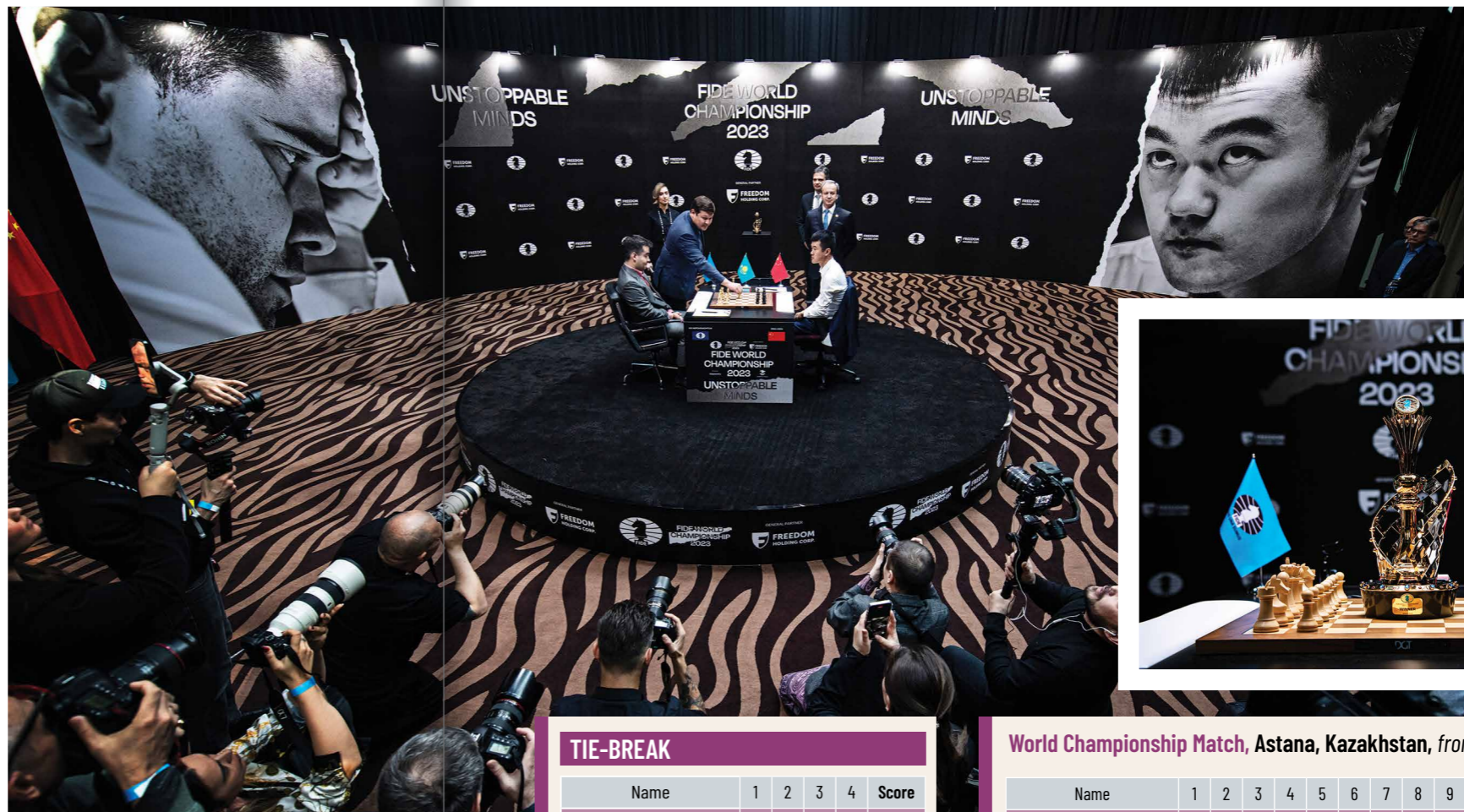
35.♗a1 35.♗d2! is very natural, with the idea of ♗d7, so I'm not sure what Nepo didn't like here.

40...♗xc3! Allowing a self-pin is a remarkably brave decision.

41.♗c1 The threat is ♗xc3.

41...♗f6 The only move.

42.♖d7 42.♗d2 ♖d4 43.♗xc3 ♖xf2+ 44.♗h1 ♖f3+ 45.♗h2 ♖f2+=.



**TIE-BREAK**

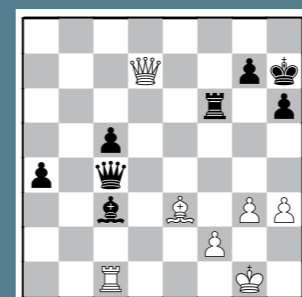
Name	1	2	3	4	Score
Ding LIREN	½	½	½	1	2½
Ian NEPOMNIACHTCHI	½	½	½	0	1½

**World Championship Match, Astana, Kazakhstan, from April 7 to May 1**

Name	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	Score
Ding LIREN	½	0	½	1	0	1	0	½	½	½	½	1	½	½	7
Ian NEPOMNIACHTCHI	½	1	½	0	1	0	1	½	½	½	½	0	½	½	7



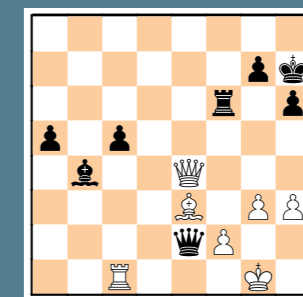
42...♖e2! Another only move! The bishop is immune because of ...♖e1+. After 42...a4 it looks like White has no threat, since ♗d2 is still met with ...♖d4, but White has a beautiful winning move.



43.♖d1! followed by the unstoppable ♖c2.

43.♖d5 ♗b4 Black is up a pawn, but his king is still too exposed to claim any advantage.

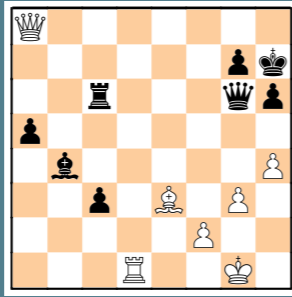
44.♖e4+ ♗g8 45.♖d5+ ♗h7 46.♖e4+



46...♗g6! Declining the repetition in this way has been widely praised, but apparently Ding himself didn't consider it anything special. He just thought that it was the objectively best move. In his eyes, his chances of winning the game were greater than losing after this move. It's not super-risky for Black, either, since White has no way to attack the rook



on g6 effectively, as the queen on e2 controls both the d1 square (a possible entry square for White's rook) and the h5 square (a possible square for White's pawn). In the meantime, Black will push his passed pawns, and it's not obvious how White will deal with that.

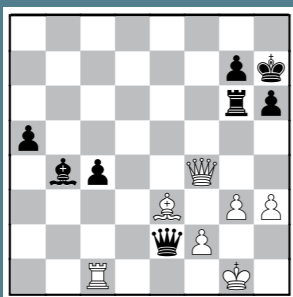


**47. ♖f5?** Nepo immediately goes wrong. The game can still be salvaged after this, but only with great difficulty. 47.h4 is one of many fine moves for White, then after 47...h5 48. ♖c2 ♖d1+ 49. ♖h2 the threat of ♗xc5 keeps Black occupied, so he never has time to play ...a5-a4. Following 49... ♖g4 50. ♖d3 ♖h8 it's time to give back the pawn: 51. ♗xc5 ♖c6=. I have the feeling that if the game proceeded like this, we would have quickly forgotten about Ding's ... ♖g6 move.

**47...c4** Not only does Black get to push his pawn and remove it from attack on c5, but he also prepares to unpin his rook and claim control of the key diagonal by playing ♖d3.

**48.h4?** 48. ♖e4 is the obvious move, but it loses because it steps into a pin. I'm sure this is the first thing Nepo considered, and when he saw it didn't work, he panicked somewhat. 48... ♗c5! 49. ♖xc4 ♗xe3 50. ♖xe3 ♖e1+ 51. ♖g2 ♖xg3+-.

Then again, 48. ♖f4! is difficult to spot as it's much more natural to stay on the light squares.



White has to provoke the advance of the c-pawn in order to do away with the ... ♖d3 idea. After 48...c3 49. ♖f5 White would still be able to hang on.

**48... ♖d3 49. ♖f3 ♖f6 50. ♖g4 c3** Now Black has an extra pawn and complete control, so it should be an easy win.

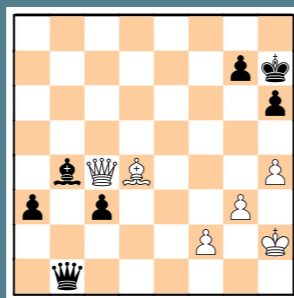
**51. ♖d1 ♖g6 52. ♖c8** A good last try, going for an all-out attack.

**52... ♖c6 53. ♖a8**

**53... ♖d6?** I'm sure Ding suspected that 53...c2 was the best move, and in a classical game he would've calculated it properly, but instead he preferred to play it safe. After 54. ♖d8 c1 ♖+ it must have been 55. ♖h2 that Ding feared from afar. He has two queens, but White threatens mate. (55. ♗xc1 makes things easy for Black, since he can force a queen trade right away. 55... ♖xc1+ 56. ♖h2 ♖c6 57. ♖h8+ ♖g6-+) 55... ♖f7! This very calm move is the easiest way to win: 56. ♗xc1 ♖xf2+ 57. ♖h3 ♖f1+ 58. ♖h2 ♖c2+ 59. ♗d2 ♖e2+ 60. ♖h3 ♖e6+ 61. ♖h2 ♖xd2+-.

**54. ♖xd6 ♖xd6 55. ♖e4+ ♖g6 56. ♖c4** Now Nepo is back in the game.

**56... ♖b1+ 57. ♖h2 a4 58. ♗d4 a3**



**59. ♖c7??** This is just a one-move threat – Black can defend against the mate without difficulty.

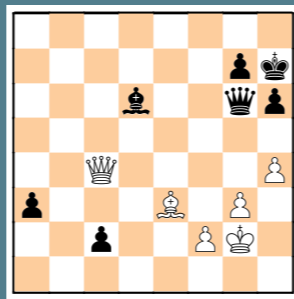
The surprising 59. ♗xg7! is a beautiful try for a perpetual. Although it seems Black should be able to bring his pieces back to defend the king, in fact that's just not possible: 59... ♖xg7 60. ♖c7+ ♖f6 61. ♖c6+ ♖e5 62. ♖e8+ ♖d4 63. ♖d7+ ♖c4 64. ♖f7+ ♖b5 (64... ♖d3 65. ♖g6+) 65. ♖d7+=.

I think 59.h5! was a real possibility. White denies his opponent the ... ♖g6 defense, and should hold after, for example, 59... ♗f8 60. ♖f7 ♖d3 61. ♗e5 ♖e4 62. ♗xc3=.



**59... ♖g6 60. ♖c4** Following 60. ♗xc3 ♗xc3 61. ♖xc3 a2 Black will continue with ... ♖b1. The black queen controls the only diagonal along which White could ever give checks.

**60...c2 61. ♗e3 ♗d6 62. ♖g2**



**62...h5!** The last important move, preventing White from ever playing h5 himself. But not 62... ♗e5?? (It's never too late to blunder!) as after 63.h5 the black queen will be kicked off the diagonal and c2 will fall: 63... ♖f5 64.g4 ♖f6 65. ♖xc2+=.

**63. ♖f1 ♗e5 64.g4** Desperation.

**64...hgx4 65.h5 ♖f5 66. ♖d5 g3 67.f4 a2 68. ♖xa2 ♗xf4** White resigned.

In a way, this game was representative of much of the match. If you nitpick and analyze closely, you can find mistakes, but there was also so much creativity and fighting spirit.



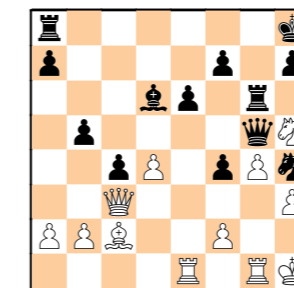
## GAME 12

DO4

Ding Liren	2788
Ian Nepomniachtchi	2795

World Championship Match, Astana 2023

1.d4 ♖f6 2. ♖f3 d5 3.e3 c5 4. ♖bd2 cxd4 5.exd4 ♖c7 6.c3 ♗d7 7. ♗d3 ♖c6 8.0-0 ♗g4 9. ♖e1 e6 10. ♖f1 ♗d6 11. ♗g5 0-0 12. ♗xf6 gxf6 13. ♖g3 f5 14.h3 ♗xf3 15. ♖xf3 ♖e7 16. ♖h5 ♖h8 17.g4 ♖g8 18. ♖h1 ♖g6 19. ♗c2 ♖h4 20. ♖e3 ♖g6 21. ♖g1 f4 22. ♖d3 ♖e7 23. ♖ae1 ♖g5 24.c4 dxc4 25. ♖c3 b5

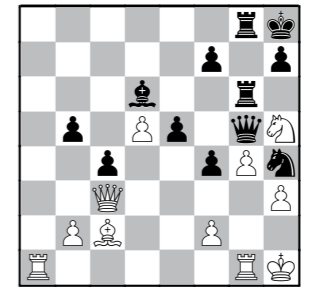


**26.a4** Nepo has taken over the game, and much of his advantage, besides his extra pawn, is a consequence of White's awful knight on h5. This knight is the reason why ♗xg6 almost never works for White, since Black would just recapture by ...hgx6 and the knight would be doomed.

**26...b4** Objectively, this is the best move, but it's only good if you see the specific winning sequence that follows, which Nepo clearly didn't.

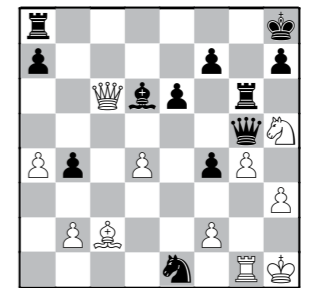
26...a6 is the most sensible, keeping everything under control. I assume Nepo

didn't like the idea of conceding the a-file, but in reality White has nothing. After 27.axb5 axb5 28.d5+ e5 29. ♖a1 ♖ag8 it's just lost for White.



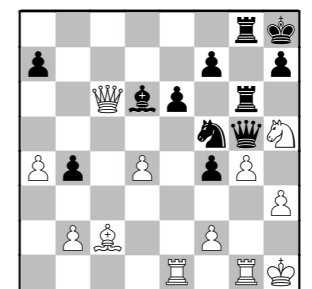
Here's a nice sample line. 30. ♖a6 b4! (30... ♖xh5? 31. ♖xd6) 31. ♖xc4 ♖xh5 32. ♖xd6 ♖f3!-+.

**27. ♖xc4 ♖ag8?** 27... ♖f3! 28. ♖c6 ♖xe1



29. ♖xa8+ (Or 29. ♗xg6 ♖d8 30. ♗e4 ♖h4-+) 29... ♖g8 30. ♖e4 ♖xc2 31. ♖xc2 ♖h4! 32. ♖d3 f5 33. ♖f3 fxe4 34. ♖xg4 ♖xg4 35. ♖xg4 ♖xg4 36.hxg4 b3 and Black wins because ... ♗a3 is coming. Yeah, that's not easy.

**28. ♖c6 ♗b8?** 28... ♖f5! would've been a nice idea, exploiting mating ideas on the g-file to bring the knight into play.

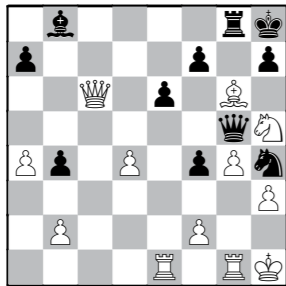


29.gxf5? ♖xg1+ 30. ♖xg1 ♖xg1+ 31. ♖h2 f3+ 32. ♖g3 ♖g2+ 33. ♖h1 ♗xg3 34.fxe3 ♖2xg3-+.

**29. ♖b7?** Instead it turns out that 29. ♗xg6! wins easily, but I understand why Ding missed it. For a long time this move has been bad for White, since it would just



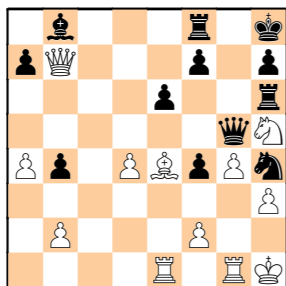
leave his h5 knight trapped. So, at some point, if you're White, you would tend not even to consider this as a candidate move.



If the players were given this position only as an exercise, they would see the win easily, but during the actual game, other psychological factors come into play. If 29...hxg6 White can use the time it takes for Black to take the h5 knight to break open the position. 30.d5 gxh5 (30...e5 can be met by 31.♟f6+- now that the queen controls f6.) 31.dxe6+-.

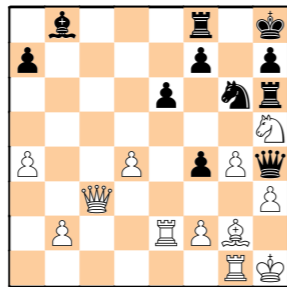
29...♟h6 29...♟f5 would be just as good as it was before.

30.♟e4 ♟f8



31.♟xb4 Now White has consolidated and is up a pawn. Normally, the win would still be quite far off, but Nepo fails to handle the sudden turn of events.

31...♟d8 32.♟c3 ♟g6 33.♟g2 ♟h4 34.♟e2



34...f5?? This is loses outright without any real complications, so the only explanation can be that Nepo simply missed 35.♟xe6.

35.♟xe6 Now White will play d5+, which is deadly since Black can no longer meet it with ...e5.

35...♟xh5 Or 35...f3 36.d5+ ♟e5 37.♟xe5 fxg2+ 38.♟xg2+-.

36.gxh5 ♟xh5 37.d5+ ♟g8 38.d6  
Black resigned.

At this critical moment, one of Nepo's weaknesses in the match became very evident - he wasn't willing to sit down and calculate critical lines thoroughly. He relied more on his fantastic intuition, which enabled him to put pressure on his opponent's clock. When it worked, it worked wonders, but when it didn't, it left

him open to the criticism of rushing.

On that same theme, game 8 could easily have been a fifth decisive game in a row, but Nepo pulled off one of the most impressive semi-bluffs I've ever seen.

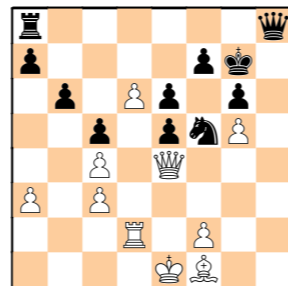
## GAME 8

E28

Ding Liren	2788
Ian Nepomniachtchi	2795

World Championship Match, Astana 2023

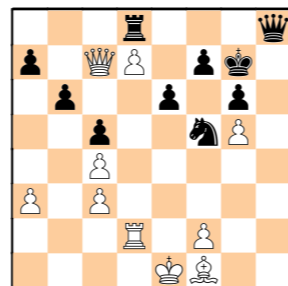
1.d4 ♟f6 2.c4 e6 3.♟c3 ♟b4 4.e3 0-0 5.a3 ♟xc3+ 6.bxc3 d6 7.♟e2 c5 8.♟g3 ♟c6 9.♟a2 b6 10.e4 ♟a6 11.♟g5 h6 12.h4 hxg5 13.hxg5 g6 14.gxf6 ♟xf6 15.e5 dxe5 16.d5 ♟e7 17.d6 ♟f5 18.♟e4 ♟d8 19.♟d3 ♟g7 20.g4 ♟b7 21.♟h3 ♟h4 22.g5 ♟xe4 23.♟xe4 ♟f5 24.♟d2 ♟h8 25.♟xh8 ♟xh8



Ding has outplayed his opponent with the help of some great opening preparation and could now win immediately.

26.d7? It's tempting to push the pawn automatically, but this gives Black an important tempo to bring his rook to safety. After 26.♟d3! Black just does not have time to deal with ♟h3 ideas. Note that rook on a8 is loose, so Black cannot play a move like ...♟h2 or ...♟h4. 26...♟d8 27.♟h3 ♟g8 28.♟xe5+ ♟f8 29.♟h8+-.

26...♟d8 27.♟xe5+ ♟h7 28.♟h2+ ♟g7 29.♟e5+ ♟h7 30.♟h2+ ♟g7 31.♟c7



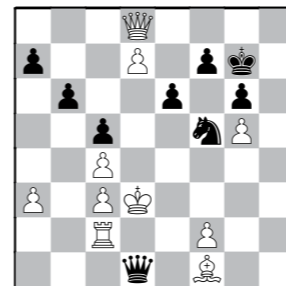
Despite the missed win, it still looks great



for White as Black's pieces are completely tied down and his queenside pawns look doomed to fall.

31...♟h4?! This move should lose, but it ends up saving the game! I call it a semi-bluff since Nepo said afterwards that he did not realize that the move loses until after he played it. Still, it's crazy to me that he could just throw down this move without calculating it fully, and his confidence was such that his opponent didn't bother to calculate it fully either!

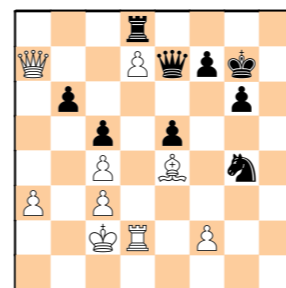
32.♟d1? Remarkably, Ding just believes his opponent. 32.♟xd8 might look like a perpetual, but that's not good enough as an assessment. You have to calculate it precisely. 32...♟e4+ 33.♟e2 ♟b1+ 34.♟d2 ♟b2+ 35.♟d3 ♟b1+ 36.♟c2 ♟d1+ (36...♟xf1+ 37.♟d2 ♟xf2+ 38.♟c1+-)



The players probably stopped analyzing here, but White can actually give away his rook with check, which is unusual. 37.♟e4! ♟xc2+ 38.♟d3 ♟d6+ 39.♟e3 ♟c1+ (39...♟f5+ 40.♟xf5+-) 40.♟e2 ♟b2+ 41.♟f3+- It's a long line but pretty much forced, and there aren't a lot of branches so it should be discovered by players of this caliber.

32...♟xg5 Now it's a different story. The g5 pawn was restricting Black's position so much, but now that it's gone he might want to start pushing his own kingside pawns up the board.

33.♟c2 ♟e7 34.♟g2 e5 35.♟e4 ♟h6 36.♟xa7 ♟g4

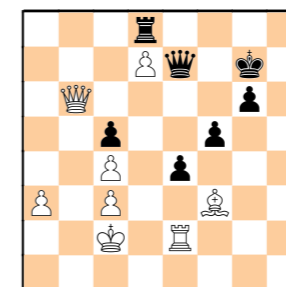


37.♟f3? Another bad decision. Instead of the natural ♟c6, Ding wanted to attack the knight first and then play that move. However, Black does not have to cooperate. After 37.♟c6 White still has every chance of winning the game.

37...♟xf2! If 37...♟f6 then 38.♟c6 which I guess was what Ding had in mind. He wanted to drive the knight back before protecting the pawn. But this is a clear case of thinking too much. In a blitz game he would've played the correct move in one second.

38.♟xf2 e4 39.♟e2 f5 Now Black is in absolutely no danger, as he will take the d7 pawn at last.

40.♟xb6



40...♟xd7 40...♟xd7 looks winning, getting out of the pin and preparing ...♟d1+, but White can save the game with 41.♟g2! when the counter-threat on the g6 pawn maintains the balance.

41.♟b8 ♟d6 42.♟xd6 ♟xd6 43.♟xe4

fxe4 44.♟xe4 After all the excitement, we have a drawn rook endgame.

44...♟f6 45.♟e8 Draw.

As crazy as the second half of the match was, one could almost call it calm compared to the first seven games. We knew we were in for a wild ride after game 2, in which Ding pretty much played a novelty in one of the most common positions in chess.

## GAME 2

D30

Ding Liren	2788
Ian Nepomniachtchi	2795

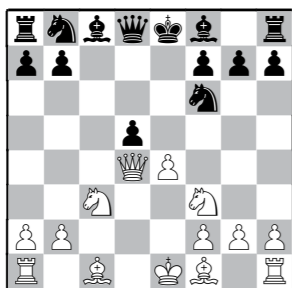
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1.d4 ♟f6 2.c4 e6 3.♟f3 d5 4.h3 The first surprise of the game, and already quite a big one.

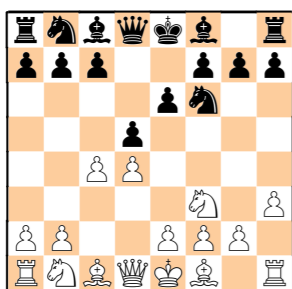
4.♟c3 did not appear on the board at all in this match (or even in the Carlsen vs. Nepo one, in fact!), so it's impossible to say for sure what Ian had prepared here. I would wager that 4...c5 is the most likely candidate, with 4...♟b4 also being a possibility. A lot of top players have adopted 4...c5 as Black because it is very direct, and you can analyze deeply to a draw in many variations. For a World Championship match, it is a very sensible strategy to try to kill your Black games as quickly as possible, and try to score points as White. 5.cxd5 (5.e3 is a way to try to keep pieces on the board, and,



in fact, Ding beat Nakamura from this position in the crucial last game of the Candidates to make it to the final match!) 5...cxd4 6. ♖xd4 exd5 7.e4



As far as I know, people discovered you could play 7...dxe4 sometime in 2020, with Wesley So being one of its pioneers. The old main line had been 7...♗c6, but this capture is better. Then, after 8. ♖xd8+ ♘xd8 9. ♗g5 ♕e6 10. ♗xe6+ fxe6 11. ♗g5 ♗c6, people have been banging their heads against this endgame for a while, but without much success, and a strong engine will give complete equality here.



The move 4.h3 looks rather pointless, and had never been played by a titled player in a serious over-the-board game before. So, what's the explanation?

First of all, players at the elite level are so well-prepared, particularly in World Championship matches. Just look at the last Carlsen vs. Nepo match, where Magnus was really not able to get anything out of the opening in any of the games. So, there's something to be said for finding an idea that is rare, playable, and which your opponent likely has not analyzed. By avoiding the mainlines, Ding is trying to fight on his own turf, and rely on the fact that he has analyzed this position after 4.h3 and knows it better than his opponent. Secondly, he is trying to get Ian out of his comfort zone by avoiding some specific variations, which I've shown in the lines after 4.♗c3.

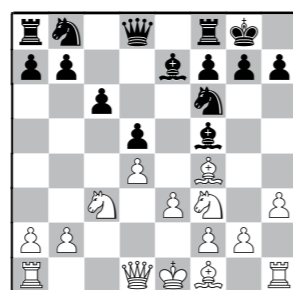
**4...dxc4** A very logical approach – Nepo goes for a Queen's Gambit Accepted

structure, where White doesn't normally play h2-h3. Ding's argument is that Nepo doesn't normally play the QGA, and he's avoided the 4.♗c3 c5 line.

4...c5 5.cxd5 Now, note that ...cxd4 is senseless, since it does not attack a knight on c3! I would say that this is the main perk of the 4.h3 lines. After 5...exd5, of course, Black can still play a regular Tarrasch a tempo up, but White's argument is that he still gets to play a regular game full of pieces, in a structure he may be more familiar with than his opponent, even if objectively he has no advantage.

4...♗b4+ With the knight on c3 this would be a Ragozin, a very sound opening which Nepo sometimes plays, but here White can adopt a different approach: 5.♗d2 ♗xd2+ 6.♗bxd2 0-0 7.e3 with a very comfortable, risk-free position for White.

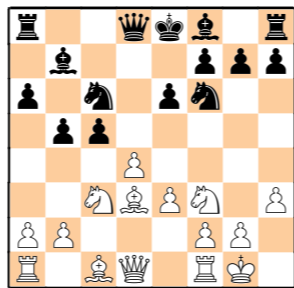
4...♗e7 is a very logical response, especially since Nepo had played this move in classical play against 4.♗c3, winning a nice game against Aronian shortly before the match, at the WR Masters. Then clarifying the structure immediately by 5.cxd5 makes the most sense, since when the bishop lands on f4, the h3 move will serve a purpose, as it gives the square on h2 for the bishop to drop back to if Black should ever play ...♗h5. I would say I "suspect" that Ding would have adopted this approach...but it's all there in the lichess games! 5...exd5 6.♗c3 0-0 7.♗f4 c6 8.e3 ♗f5



9.g4 There were alternatives along the way, but this is one example of a position that Ding was aiming for – very interesting and full of pieces, and not super theoretical or forcing. Fascinatingly, it wouldn't have been the first occurrence of this position in a World Championship match – this was reached in game 22 of Karpov vs. Kasparov 1985. Although Karpov won with the White pieces to reduce his deficit in the match to one point with

two games to play, Kasparov went on to win the match and become the youngest world champion in history.

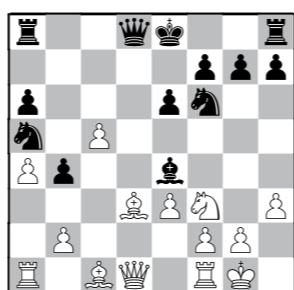
5.e3 c5 6.♗xc4 a6 7.0-0 ♗c6 8.♗c3 b5 9.♗d3 ♗b7 Up to this point both sides have played logical moves.



**10.a4** The only way to create any problems for Black – prodding the queenside and trying to create some weaknesses. Without this, Black would develop comfortably and be fine.

**10...b4 11.♗e4 ♗a5!** Black wants to trade knights on his terms. In case of 11...♗xe4 12.♗xe4, the bishop on e4 exerts some unpleasant pressure.

**12.♗xf6+** Interestingly, Ding had a game against Aronian from a QGA, with the rook on e1 instead of the pawn on h3, and there he continued 12.♗xc5. He probably did not choose that in this game because Black can simplify the position, after which he has a high drawing margin in the resulting lines. 12...♗xc5 13.dxc5 ♗e4! (It should be noted that 13...♗d7 also makes sense, but this is the most accurate.)

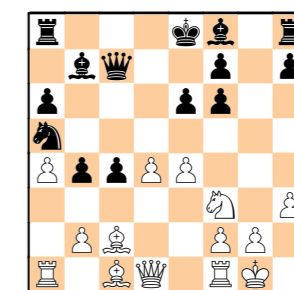


**A) 14.♗e2 ♖xd1 15.♗xd1 (15.♗xd1 ♗b3) 15...0-0-0** Black is very active, and will eventually collect the stranded c5 pawn.

**B) 14.♗xe4 ♖xd1 15.♗xd1 ♗xe4 16.c6!** Maybe this was worth a shot for Ding, since if Black mechanically recaptures the c-pawn, he would stand worse.



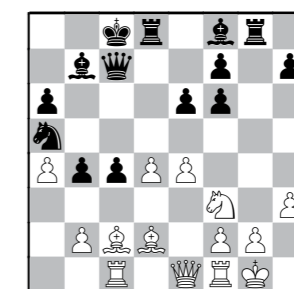
14.♗c2 ♖c7



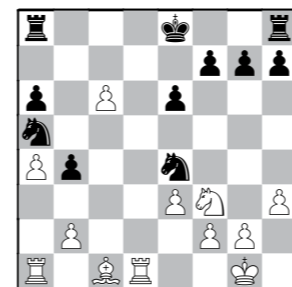
The problem is that those queenside pawns on b4 and c4, combined with the knight on a5, form some sort of wall. In previous lines, Black had to be nervous about castling queenside because his a6 pawn was weak, and the c-file was open. Now, he has none of those concerns. White will never really be able to organize any breakthrough on the queenside. He will not be able to play b3 under favorable circumstances and, even if he does, ...c3 by Black will likely be a fine reply. Ding probably underestimated Nepo's approach because ...c4 releases the tension in the center, and we're generally taught that maintaining one's central pawns is very important. Here, though, king safety is critical, and White is lacking that.

**15.♗d2 ♗g8 16.♗c1 0-0-0 17.♗d3?** Again Ding comes up against the "wall" I was talking about before. It's simply impossible to break open the c-file. He probably wanted to transfer his bishop to f1 for defensive purposes, but it doesn't work out concretely.

17.♗e1! was the best way to try to pierce the "wall"



17...f5! is likely what Ding feared, since the f3 knight is undefended now. (Or 17...♗b6? 18.♗d3, when, with the queen distracted on b6, the c4 pawn suddenly becomes vulnerable.) 18.♗h1 ♗c6 19.♗e2 ♗xd4 20.♗xd4 ♗xd4 21.f3 This is a very weird conception – just giving



**B1)** After 16...♗xc6? 17.♗d2, suddenly White is significantly better, as Black's pawns are weak and easy to attack.

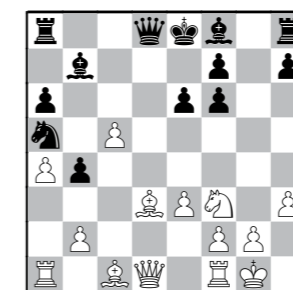
**B2)** 16...♗c8 is another possible trap that Black could fall into. 17.♗d4! ♗b3 18.♗xe4 ♗xa1 19.♗xb4 0-0 20.♗b6 and Black's knight is way offside.

**B3)** 16...♗b3! Playing for domination, hindering White's development rather than focusing on material. The c-pawn is doomed in the long run, so there's no rush to take it. 17.♗b1 ♗d8 18.♗d4 ♗e7 None of this is so easy to evaluate, but with accurate play Black is fine. (18...e5?? doesn't win a piece, due to the intermediate 19.c7+–)

**12...gxf6** A very enterprising move, damaging the pawn structure but preparing to attack on the g-file. Ding admitted that he simply hadn't seriously considered this reply.

12...♗xf6 13.e4 is what Ding was hoping for, with a very dangerous attack. ♗g5 is a big threat. Upon 13...h6 White has many possible ways to proceed – here's one. 14.♗e2 cxd4 15.e5 ♗d8 16.♗f4 ♗e7 17.♗d2 and with possible ideas of ♗e4 and ♗g4 coming, Black has to be careful.

**13.e4?** I would call this a pretty serious mistake. It's not like White's position is so bad after this move, but it becomes so hard to play once you allow Black to push ...c5-c4 and choke the queenside pieces. 13.dxc5



**A)** Upon 13...♗xc5 14.e4, White has time to play ♗e2 and ♗e1, and develop comfortably.

**B)** 13...♗d7! The most accurate move, not giving White time to play e4 and ♗e2.

**B1)** 14.♗e2 is met by 14...♗b3. **B2)** If 14.e4, then 14...♗d8 is the point of 13...♗d7 – Black breaks White's coordination just in time.

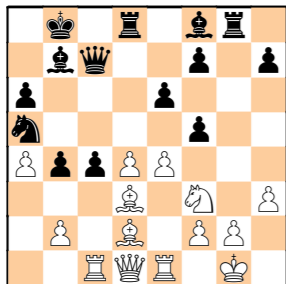
**B3)** However 14.c6! is a difficult move in reply – just chucking the pawn back in order to gain a tempo on the bishop. 14...♗xc6 15.♗d4 ♗b7 16.♗e2 After this whole weird sequence, we land in a position which is dynamically equal. Black can try to attack on the g-file, but his king does not really feel safe – maybe it will have to stay in the center for a while.

**13...c4!** Nepo does not need to be asked twice.

up a pawn for apparently nothing. But the knight trade helps White immensely – now that long diagonal is blunted and Black has to start thinking about his own king safety.

17...♖b8 18.♞e1 18.♙xc4 This tactic never works. 18...♗xc4 19.b3 ♖b2+.

18...f5!



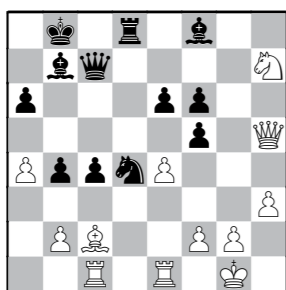
Nepo is relentless. Whenever he feels the dynamic potential of his position, he is extremely strong. He doesn't give Ding a moment to breathe and bring his bishop to f1.

19.♙c2 If 19.exf5 ♗xd4! 20.♗xd4 ♞xg2+ 21.♖f1 ♞xf2+ 22.♖xf2 ♞h2+ 23.♖f1 ♞g2 mate.

19...♗c6 Now the game is basically over. White's center and kingside are collapsing. He is also light years away from creating any sort of counterplay against Black's king.

20.♙g5 ♞xg5 This move is just screaming to be played. For just the exchange, Black gains a pawn and complete control of dark squares.

21.♗xg5 ♗xd4 22.♞h5 f6 23.♗f3 If you're lost anyway, you might as well grab material and hope that you can escape in one piece. 23.♗xh7

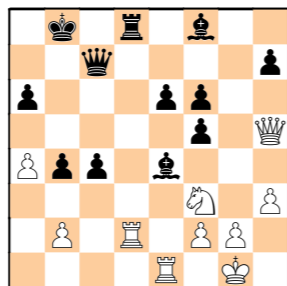


White is still lost in any case, but I feel like this approach gives the best practical chances. 23...♙c5! 24.♗xf6 ♞f4 The



attack is devastating – it's hard to find a sensible move for White that doesn't lose immediately.

23...♗xc2 24.♞xc2 ♙xe4 25.♞d2



25...♙d6! Avoiding the rook trade is the final key. Now ...c3 is coming. Also ...♙xf3 followed by ...♙h2+ is a threat.

26.♖h1 c3 27.bxc3 bxc3 28.♞d4 c2 29.♞h6 e5 The only safe square for the rook is d2, but then the pawn queens, so **White resigned.**

After this game, I heard a GM suggest that Ding was psychologically finished, and that the match would be a bloodbath in Nepo's favor. While, in hindsight, this couldn't have been more wrong, it wasn't so implausible at the time. After all, he had lost his first White game without a fight, in a line that he had studied for months and which his opponent had probably never checked in his life. However, it turned out the fun was only beginning.

## GAME 4

A28

Ding Liren 2788  
Ian Nepomniachtchi 2795

World Championship Match, Astana 2023

1.c4 Rather than search for something in the Nimzo/QGD complex, Ding goes for the English. Like all good openings, it's been analyzed a great deal, but there's still room for fresh positions, which may be harder to achieve with 1.d4 or 1.e4.

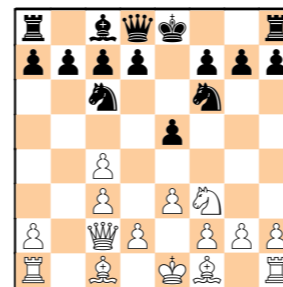
1...♗f6 2.♗c3 e5 3.♗f3 ♗c6 4.e3 White has many choices on move 4, including the trendy 4.e4, which was played by Ding in game 10 of this match.

4...♙b4 The main line by far. 4...d5 would be some sort of reversed Taimanov Sicilian structure, but White's extra tempo helps a lot here. After 5.cxd5 ♗xd5 6.♙b5 ♗xc3 7.bxc3 ♙d6 8.d4 White handles the structure and stands comfortably – although Black's position is completely fine, the top players rarely go here with Black anymore.

5.♞c2 ♙xc3 Again, by far the main line nowadays. Eventually people decided that it was worth giving up the bishop immediately to stop ♗d5. 5...0-0 6.♗d5 ♞e8 7.♞f5 d6 8.♗xf6+ gxf6 9.♞h5 is one example of an old line with many games. Black is okay, but damaging the pawn structure around your king is not to everyone's taste.

6.bxc3 This is an interesting line that a lot of fighting players have taken up with the white pieces over the years. Even though he is doubling his pawns, Ding is happy to play a relatively non-forcing game with little concrete theory.

Normally, 6.♞xc3 would be a no-brainer. Black just gives up his bishop without any provocation, so why is White not better here? The answer is that Black will castle and probably quickly play ...d5, and the queen on c3 will get kicked around a bit, losing time. One way of playing is 6...♞e7 7.♙e2 0-0 8.0-0 d5 9.cxd5 ♗xd5 10.♞b3 ♗b6. White has the bishop pair, which is a long-term asset, but Black has no weaknesses, and it's not easy for White to break open the position for his own benefit.



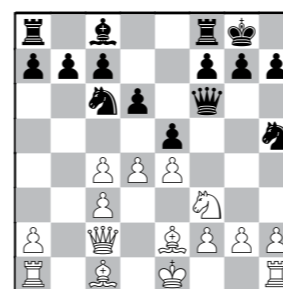
6...d6 7.e4 0-0 8.♙e2 People used to play 8.g3 a lot more, but eventually Black found some good plans against it, including ...a6, ...b5 and ...♙e6, ...♞d7, ...♙h3.

8...♗h5 Not the only move, but the most direct one for sure. It serves two purposes – preparing to play ...f5 and/or to land his knight on f4.

9.d4 Now that Black's knight has abandoned its pressure in the center, this move makes the most sense.

9...♗f4 I don't really understand this move as it just wrecks Black's structure for no apparent reason. That may not be the end of the world, but it seems unnecessary. The only explanation is that Nepo did not feel completely prepared and wanted to avoid the principled 9...♞f6, but if that's the case, then why did he go ...♗h5 in the first place?

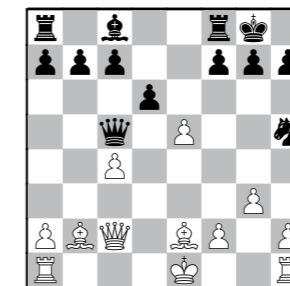
9...♞f6 is the most logical continuation, and Ding definitely had something prepared here. Probably he should play g3 to keep the knight out, either before or after playing d4–d5.



A) A lot of correspondence players have played 10.d5, which isn't surprising, since the decision to give up the c5 square feels very "computerish." The whole point is to be able to play g3 without sacking a pawn, even at the cost of giving up all the tension in the center. 10...♗b8 11.g3 ♗a6 12.♙e3 ♙g4 13.♗h4 ♙xe2 14.♞xe2 g6 leads to a strategically complex position. It

looks to me like White has the easier long-term plan of playing on the kingside at the right moment. White's doubled c-pawns aren't a big deal at the moment, but in an endgame they could be disastrously weak.

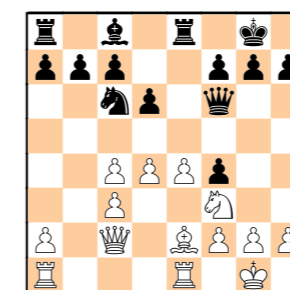
B) 10.g3 is an interesting pawn sac, but Black is fine so long as he isn't intimidated. After 10...exd4 11.♗xd4 ♗xd4 12.cxd4 ♞xd4 13.♙b2 ♞c5 from afar and without preparation, 14.e5!, cutting off the queen's defense of the h5 knight, looks extremely scary.



Nonetheless, Black survives here. 14...g6 15.♞d2 dxe5 16.♙xh5 ♞c6! The key move, gaining a tempo on the h1 rook and shoring up the sixth rank. (16...gxh5?? 17.♞g5+ ♖h8 18.♙xe5+-) 17.0-0 g6 18.♞g5+ ♞g6 19.♞xe5 f6=.

10.♙xf4 exf4 11.0-0 ♞f6 Now White has a free hand in the center and can try to make use of his pawn mass.

12.♞fe1 ♞e8



13.♙d3 There's no need to rush matters, I suppose, but 13.c5 was already very interesting. Then after 13...dxc5 14.e5 ♞e7 I like 15.h4! a lot – Black may be fine with accurate play, but it feels like he has to deal with a lot of threats: ♗g5, ♙c4, or ♞e4, followed by ♙d3, which all look enticing.

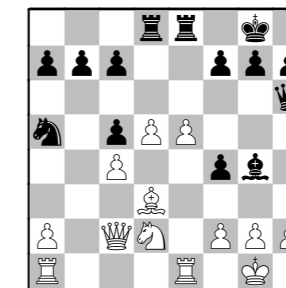
13...♙g4 The modest 13...♙d7 was the alternative.

14.♗d2 ♗a5!? This removes the knight

from the center and hints at the idea that Black will play ...c5 next, thus encouraging White to play c5 himself. This seems like a strange move to encourage, since it looks optically quite nice for White! A waiting game with 14...♞ad8 makes more sense – placing a rook in the center discourages White from attempting any funny business there.

15.c5 There were other moves too, but who could blame Ding for going for this? He gets two pawns on e5 and d5 and strands Black's knight on a5.

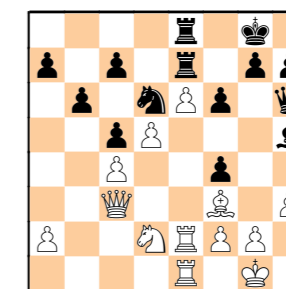
15...dxc5 16.e5 ♞h6 17.d5 ♞ad8 18.c4 On the surface this position looks nice for White – but looks can be deceptive.



The time has not yet come to discount Black's chances just yet. First of all, the stranded knight is only a temporary issue, as he can bring it back to b7 after playing ...b7-b6. Then he can play ...f7-f6 to induce e5-e6, and land the knight on d6, where it will be a useful blockader. Although White's pawns are very nicely placed and choke Black's pieces, he lacks a clear plan to break through.

18...b6 19.h3 ♙h5 20.♙e4 ♞e7 21.♞c3 ♞de8 22.♙f3 ♗b7 23.♞e2 f6 24.e6 ♗d6 After a series of logical moves from both sides, Black has landed his knight on the ideal blockading square, and should now adopt a waiting policy for the rest of the game.

25.♞ae1



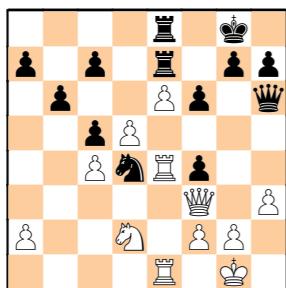
25...♗f5 25...♙g6! is better. A bishop



trade has been available to both sides for the last few moves, but each ignored the possibility. This was probably the last moment when Black could have avoided it, and it makes sense, as e4 is a critical square for White to use to trade off the d6 knight. By keeping his bishop on g6, Black can attempt to ensure that ♖e4 is always met by ...♗xe4 and not ...♗xe4, thereby retaining the strong knight on d6.

26.♗xh5 ♖xh5 27.♗e4 Now there are concrete problems - how to defend the f4 pawn?

27...♖h6 28.♖f3 ♘d4?? This gives the game away in one move. 28...g5 was necessary to defend the pawn. 29.g4 ♘d6 30.♗e2 still looks nice for White, and he can try to win for a long time to come, but Black is solid and it's not clear if there's any avenue of infiltration.



29.♗xd4! 29.♖xf4? would release all the pressure and play right into Black's hands. Then, after 29...♖xf4 30.♗xf4 c6, with the queens off Black can undermine the pawns freely. But now they feel overextended and suddenly White has to take care not to end up worse.

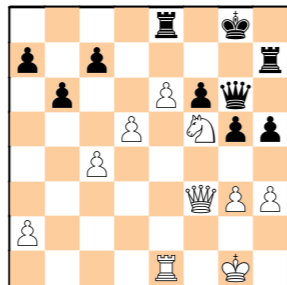
29...cxd4 30.♘b3 In a blocked position like this, a knight is often stronger than a rook. On top of that, White will win the d4 pawn and land his knight on f5 or c6.

30...g5 Black would like to defend the pawn with 30...c5, but it loses immediately after 31.d6!. I guess it's possible that Nepo missed this move in advance, but it must be said that even without this tactic, Black's position is rotten to the core, as White's connected passed pawns completely clog his position. For example, after 31...♗xe6 32.♗xe6 ♗xe6 33.d7 ♗d6 34.♖a8+ ♔f7 35.♖e8 mate.

Therefore, the only explanation I have for 28...♘d4 is that he simply did not consider 29.♗xd4 at all, since it doesn't take long to see that the position is just bad for Black.

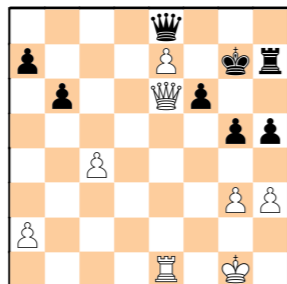
31.♘xd4 ♗g6 32.g4! Best, since f5 is the ideal square for the knight as there it's in close proximity to Black's king and also keeps his queen in a cage.

32...fxg3 33.fxg3 h5 34.♗f5 ♗h7



Black has no counterplay whatsoever and can only await White's pawn breakthrough, whether that be by c4-c5 or d5-d6.

35.♖e4 ♗h8 36.e7 ♗f7 37.d6 cxd6 38.♘xd6 ♗g8 39.♗xe8 ♗xe8 40.♖e6 ♔g7



41.♗f1 It's hard to find a move that doesn't win, but it's important to be accurate until the end and not give your opponent a single chance. This move is best, dragging the h7 rook off the seventh rank.

After 41.♗d1 ♔g6, now ♗d8 doesn't work because of ♖xe7, and Black can limp on.

41...♗h6 42.♗d1 f5 43.♖e5+ ♔f7 44.♖xf5+ ♗f6 45.♖h7+ ♔e6 46.♖g7 ♗g6 47.♖f8 **Black resigned.**

One possible finish might have been 47...♗g8 48.♖xg8+ ♖xg8 49.♗d8+-.

These two games are examples of a narrative that has persisted around this match, which is that many games were decided by poor play by the loser, rather than brilliant play by the winner. There's some truth to this statement, but I think the next two games (games 5 and 6), which I am about to show, run counter to that view.

Game 5 showed Nepo at his absolute best,

and game 6 showed Ding at his absolute best. They won these games in fantastic fashion. While the losing player could have defended better at certain moments, they hardly handed their opponent the game on a silver platter. Of course players make mistakes - if we all played perfectly, every game would be a draw!

However, I invite you take a look at these next two games unbiased, as I think the winning side played terrific chess in each of them.

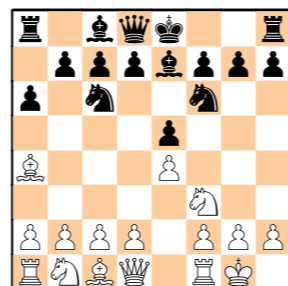
## GAME 5

C84

Ian Nepomniachtchi	2795
Ding Liren	2788

World Championship Match, Astana 2023

1.e4 e5 2.♗f3 ♘c6 3.♗b5 a6 4.♗a4 ♘f6 5.0-0 ♗e7



6.d3 Nepo had tried the sideline 6.♗xc6 in Game 1 and got a promising position, but Ding would surely have checked it out and been ready with an improvement, so there was no sense in repeating it. The 6.d3 line then became a sort of tabiya for the match, appearing in five games (including rapid). Nepo did not venture the move 6.♗e1 at all in the match.

In his match against Magnus, after 6.♗e1 b5 7.♗b3 0-0, Nepo went for Anti-Marshall lines here, such as 8.h3 and 8.a4.

6...b5 7.♗b3 d6 8.c3 0-0 9.h3 This is a nice move-order subtlety that has become popular in the last few years. The point is that White can aim to play d3-d4 sometimes, without allowing ...♗g4.

9.♗e1 is the old way of playing, but then Black's typical plan of ...♘a5, followed by ...c7-c5 works perfectly, i.e. 9...♘a5 10.♗c2 c5 11.d4 exd4 12.cxd4 ♗g4 when the pin creates annoying pressure.

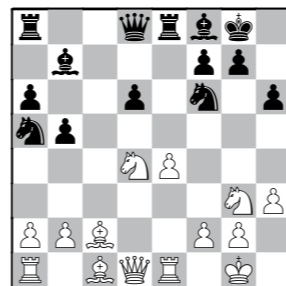


9...♗b7 This move is a bit counter-intuitive, since typically the bishop is not that strong on b7 if White has placed his pawn on d3, reinforcing the e4 pawn. The point is that Black is playing against White's potential d3-d4 push. In fact, I myself was on the Black side of one of the important theoretical games in this line, in the 2021 U.S. Championship against Ray Robson.

Following 9...♘a5 10.♗c2 c5 11.d4 ♗c7 12.d5 White is willing to enter into Chigorin structures even though he's lost a tempo playing d3 first, and only then d4. The logic is that the position is very closed and that lost tempo doesn't matter too much.

10.a4 A different way of playing compared to the typical ♗e1 and ♘bd2 plans. The point is that the bishop will retreat to a2 when ...♘a5 comes, rather than c2.

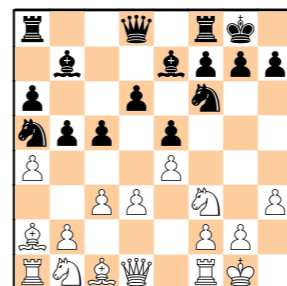
10.♘bd2 ♘a5 11.♗c2 c5 12.♗e1 ♗e8 13.♘f1 h6 14.♗g3 ♗f8 15.d4 Again, as is typical in this line, White plays d4 at the optimal moment, even if it means losing a tempo. 15...cxd4 16.cxd4 exd4 17.♘xd4



17...♗c7 was now an important move - the point is that I have ideas of playing ...d6-d5, since White can't play e4-e5 in response as my queen covers that square. 18.♗f4 ♘c4 19.♘df5 ♘xb2 20.♖c1 ♘c4

21.♗xh6 gxh6 22.♘xh6+ ♗xh6 23.♖xh6 ♗e6 24.♘f5 ♗e8 R.Robson 2669 - J.Burke 2554, Saint Louis 2021. Robson went all-in attacking my king, but I have enough pieces on that side of the board to defend. The game was drawn in the end.

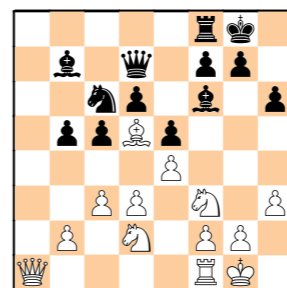
10...♘a5 11.♗a2 c5



12.♗g5 The first new move, and a logical one. White is aiming to take the knight on f6 and apply long-term positional pressure on the light squares.

12...h6 13.♗xf6 ♗xf6 14.axb5 axb5 15.♘bd2 ♘c6 The knight no longer really serves much purpose on a5, as the main reason it moved there was to clear the way for the c-pawn to reach c5 - so it returns.

16.♗d5 ♗xa1 17.♖xa1 ♖d7



The position is equal, but I would say that it's slightly easier to play for White. The only weakness in the position is the d5 square, which is far from being a big deal at the moment, since Black can easily contest it. But there are scenarios in which you could imagine that the position might go wrong for Black. For example, if all the minor pieces were traded except for one of White's knights and also Black's dark-squared bishop, and White had the possibility of landing his knight on d5, then it would probably be terrible for Black.

18.♗e1 The knight is preparing to go to f1 and then e3, eyeing the light squares.

18...♗a8 I wonder if 18...♗c8 would have been a more practical choice. It looks rather bizarre to leave the rook on f8 and not contest the a-file, but the point is that Black wants to play ...♗e7 without trading off his light-squared bishop. Then 19.♘f1 ♗e7 20.♗e3 ♘xd5 21.♘xd5 ♗d8 leaves Black's pieces looking rather passive at the moment, although White has no way to infiltrate, and ...♗b7 will come next.

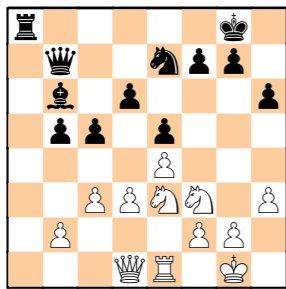
19.♖d1 The point is that now ...♗c8 still doesn't prepare ...♗e7, since the rook would be hanging on a8. From an objective point of view, basically every move is fine for Black in this position, but sometimes when you look back and analyze a game, you can find certain moments where one side could have made their lives easier from a practical perspective.

19...♗d8 19...♗c8 is a little less effective now, but still worth considering. After 20.♘f1 ♗a7, the rook on a7 stands pretty well, and ...♗e7 is coming again.

20.♘f1 ♗e7 21.♗xb7 ♖xb7 22.♗e3 Black's position is not disastrous, but now he has no choice but to sit and wait. By trading off his light-squared bishop, he will find it more difficult to defend d5 in the future. The factor that keeps this position equal is that White's f3 knight is not really doing much. If it finds a useful role in the fight for the d5 square, that would spell trouble for Ding.

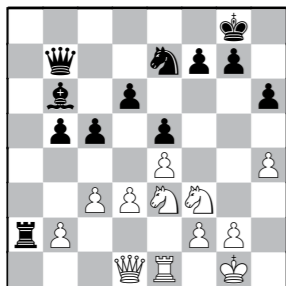


22...♖b6



23.h4! I like this move a lot as it strives to gain kingside space. 23.♗h4 is a logical move, aiming for ♗f5, but Black has an obvious reply in 23...g6. This is why Nepo wanted to push his pawn to h5 before attempting ♗h4.

23...♖c6!? 23...♗a2! I think Ding should have jumped at the chance to create counterplay. This was the last moment he could have equalized comfortably.



Black's idea is ...c5-c4 in a lot of cases, thereby increasing the scope of his bishop.

- A) 24.♖b1 ♖a6 25.h5 c4!
- B) 24.♖b3 ♖a6 and with ...♖a4 on the way in order to trade queens, Black is fine.
- C) 24.h5 c4! (Not 24...♗xb2?? 25.♖a1 ♗b3 26.♗d2, trapping the rook and winning.) 25.dxc4 ♗xe3 26.♗xe3 bxc4.

24.h5 Now ♗h4 is coming, followed by ♗f5, so there's no longer time to wait around.

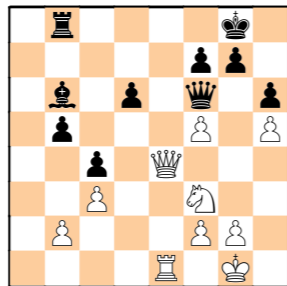
24...c4 25.d4 exd4 White's loose central pawn is poisoned! 25...♖xe4?? 26.♗xc4 ♖c6 27.♗xb6 ♖xb6 28.dxe5+-.

26.♗xd4 ♖c5 Ding wants to prevent a knight from jumping to f5 by pressuring White's f2 pawn. Instead, after 26...♖d7 27.♗ef5, Black's d6 pawn is weak and White is definitely better.

27.♖g4 27.♖f3! would have caused serious problems for Black, as now ...♖e5 can always be met with ♗g4.

27...♖e5 28.♗f3 ♖e6 29.♗f5 ♗xf5 30.exf5 ♖f6? After playing well for the last couple moves, Ding makes a serious mistake. He had to continue 30...♖d7, maintaining control of the light squares, when ♖e4 can always be met with ...d5.

31.♖e4 ♗b8



32.♗e2! I cannot heap enough praise on this move. I'm sure it's what Ding missed. It's pure prophylaxis – Black's only idea was to play ...b4. Now that the b2 pawn is defended, White can simply meet ...b4 with cxb4.

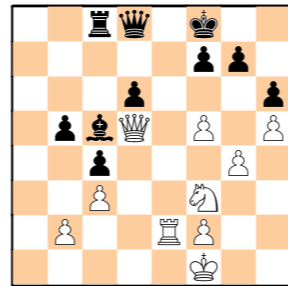
Ding was counting on 32.g4 b4!, greatly simplifying the position. After 33.♖xc4 bxc3 34.bxc3 d5! 35.♖xd5 ♖xc3, White is up a pawn, but it's doubled and everything is on the same side of the board, so it should be a draw.

32...♗c5 33.g4 Now a nightmare scenario has arisen for Black – his light-squared weaknesses remain, his king is coming under attack and he has no counterplay at all. The position is still tenable, but it's so hard for a human to defend this. In fact I'd estimate that between two elite players of similar strength, White would win about 80% of the time from here.

33...♖d8 34.♖d5 ♗f8 At some point Black might start thinking about desperately chucking a pawn by 34...b4, just to open lines. Then, although after 35.♖xc4 bxc3 36.bxc3 ♖d7, Black is down a pawn for nothing, at least his rook is now active.

35.♗f1 ♗c8 35...♖c8! was absolutely the last chance. Black has to prepare ...♖b7 to expel the queen. I understand why Ding didn't like this, as it allows f5-f6, but it's a necessary evil. He will

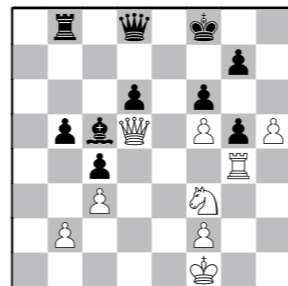
not get another chance. Admittedly, following 36.f6 gxf6 37.♖e4 and ♗h4 next, Black's position is just miserable.



36.♗e4! The start of a fantastic conception that is easy to overlook. It still doesn't look like White is threatening anything.

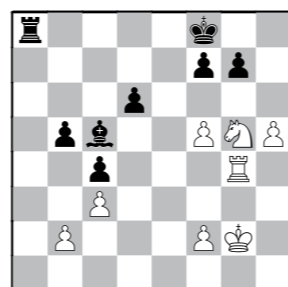
36...♗b8 37.g5 hxg5 38.♗g4 Presumably, only now did Ding see his opponent's idea.

38...♗a8 Instead, after 38...f6



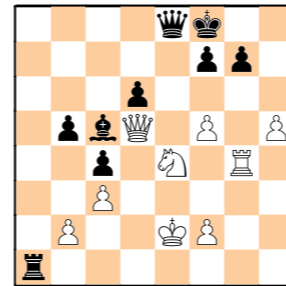
...comes 39.♗h4!! which is easy to miss – otherwise Black would be fine. 39...gxh4 is now met by 40.h6+-.

39.♗xg5 ♗a1+ 40.♗e2 40.♗g2 This also wins. Nepo probably didn't want to allow the queen trade, but White has a forcing sequence to end the game. 40...♖a8 41.♖xa8+ ♗xa8



42.f6! gxf6 43.♗h7+ ♗e7 44.♗e4+ ♗d7 45.♗xf6+ ♗c6 46.♗e8+- The h-pawn cannot be stopped.

40...♖e7+ 41.♗e4 ♖e8



42.♗f3 There's not much that Black can do about the imminent f5-f6.

42...♖a8 43.♖xa8+ ♗xa8 44.f6 g6 44...gxf6 45.♗xf6 ♗e7 46.♗g8+ ♗f8 47.h6+-.

45.hxg6 fxf6 46.♗xg6 ♗a2 47.♗g4 ♗xb2 48.♗h6 Black resigned.

Since with ♗g5 or ♗f5 on the way, Black will either get mated soon or the white pawn will get promoted.

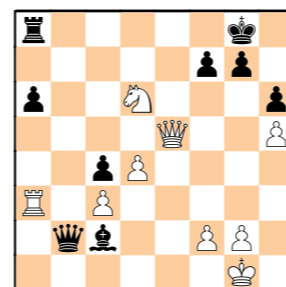
## GAME 6

D02

Ding Liren	2788
Ian Nepomniachtchi	2795

World Championship Match, Astana 2023

1.d4 ♗f6 2.♗f3 d5 3.♗f4 c5 4.e3 ♗c6 5.♗bd2 cxd4 6.exd4 ♗f5 7.c3 e6 8.♗b5 ♗d6 9.♗xd6 ♖xd6 10.0-0 11.♗e1 h6 12.♗e5 ♗e7 13.a4 a6 14.♗f1 ♗d7 15.♗xd7 ♖xd7 16.a5 ♖c7 17.♖f3 ♗fc8 18.♗a3 ♗g6 19.♗b3 ♗c6 20.♖g3 ♖e7 21.h4 ♗e8 22.♗c5 e5 23.♗b3 ♗xa5 24.♗xe5 ♖f6 25.♗a3 ♗c4 26.♗xc4 dxc4 27.h5 ♗c2 28.♗xb7 ♖b6 29.♗d6 ♗xe5 30.♖xe5 ♖xb2



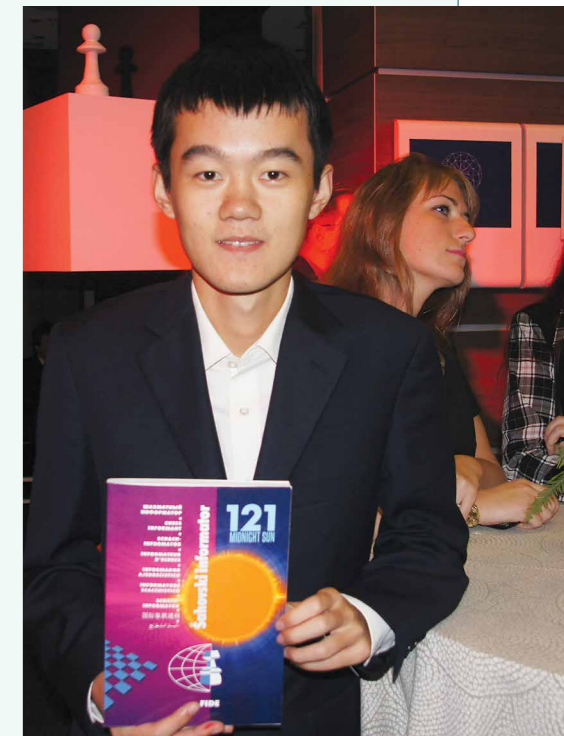
Ding has outplayed his opponent in a London system, and just needs to consolidate and get a solid grip on the position. The only problem at the moment is that Black's queen is very active. However, ♗xc4 wins a free pawn and defends the rook, so that's a no-brainer, right?

## Ding Liren and Richard Rapport in 2014

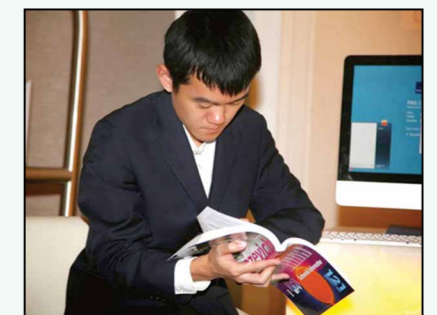
UNVEILING THE INTERPLAY BETWEEN CHESS INFORMANT, DING LIREN'S TRIUMPH, AND THE CREATION OF AMERICAN CHESS MAGAZINE

Nine years ago, I gifted Ding Liren a copy of Chess Informant 121, and at the opening ceremony of a big international tournament, he graciously posed for a promotional photograph. Later, I saw him deeply focused on the Informant, paying no attention to the cocktail party around him. That particular volume had annotations and exceptional features by Wesley So and Sam Shankland, among others, and it was clear that Ding was truly passionate about advancing in his chess career. His behavior was reminiscent of Fischer, and I had a strong feeling he would go far in his career. Today, I offer my heartfelt congratulations to him as the new world champion!

If you followed the recent title match between Ding Liren and Nepomniachtchi, you might have noticed Ding's second, the Hungarian grandmaster Richard Rapport, known for his unique playing style. Interestingly, in the same year that I gave Ding Chess Informant 121, I also introduced young Rapport to Chess Informant 120.

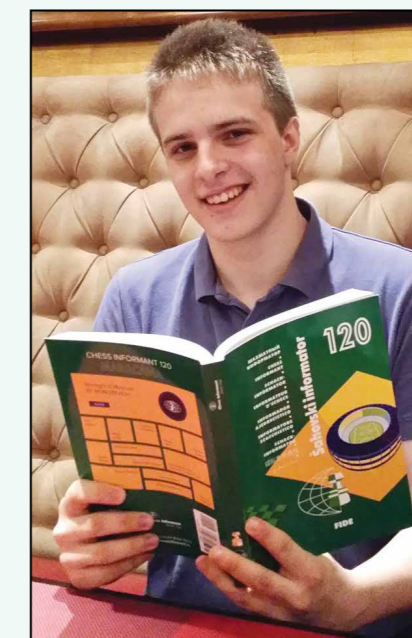


▲ Ding Liren, Moscow 2014 Photo by Josip Asik



Did you know that the specific Chess Informant series from 2010 to 2016 (volumes #109-130), which both Ding and Rapport enjoyed, effectively served as the nucleus for American Chess Magazine?

The editors and designers who worked together on Chess Informant went on to create American Chess Magazine, building on their experience to develop something new and exciting.



▲ Richard Rapport, Belgrade 2014 Photo by Josip Asik

**Josip Asik,**  
Editor, American Chess Magazine



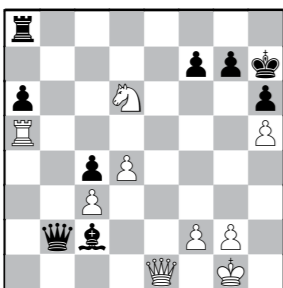


31.♖a5! It's too soon to go for 31.♗e8, as after 31...♗xe8 32.♗xe8+ ♔h7 33.♗xa6 ♗c1+ 34.♔h2 ♗f4+ 35.♔g1 ♗c1+ leads to a perpetual check.

31.♗xc4 would in fact allow his advantage to slip. For example, 31...♗c1+ 32.♔h2 ♗d3 33.♗e3 ♗d1 and Black will take the h5 pawn next and be close to equality.

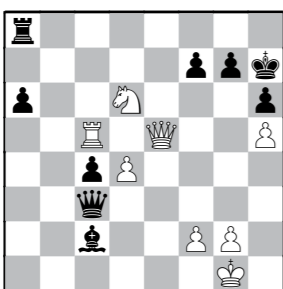
31...♔h7 31...♗xc3? 32.♗e8 Now that Black's queen isn't in position to give a perpetual check on c1 and f4, this just wins. 32...♗xe8 33.♗xe8+ ♔h7 34.♗d5+-.

32.♗c5?! Giving Black another chance. I totally understand why Ding didn't play 32.♗e1!, since it's not very intuitive to remove the queen from a very active square and assign it to a passive role. But concretely, this works out well, since Black can't defend the c4 and f7 pawns.



A) 32...♗d3 33.♗xc4! ♗xc4 34.♗e4+ g6 35.hxg6+ ♔g7 36.♗xa8 and there's no perpetual: 36...♗c1+ 37.♔h2 ♗f4+ 38.g3 ♗xf2+ 39.♗g2+-.  
B) 32...♗b3 33.♗xf7.

32...♗c1+? Black really needs to take the pawn with 32...♗xc3. In the game continuation, all his problems remained, and his king was under attack, but at least then he could have maintained material equality. True, White can capture on c4 or go on the attack (with ♗xf7 or ♗c7 for example) but Black is okay.



33.♗xf7 ♗d3! 34.♗c7 ♗c1+ 35.♔h2 ♗e8!

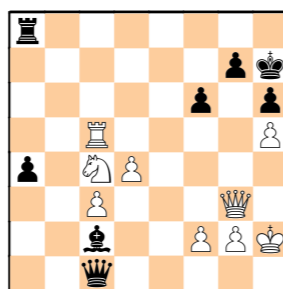


Now, if ♗xe8, Black has a perpetual check, starting with ...♗f4+. Granted, none of this was easy to see before ...♗xc3, but I think it was one of those situations where you have to take the pawn and go for it, even if you can't calculate everything. Otherwise, your position is just lost.

33.♔h2 f6 34.♗g3 Now Black's only hope is the passed a-pawn, but he will be too distracted dealing with mate threats to effectively exploit it.

34...a5 35.♗xc4 a4

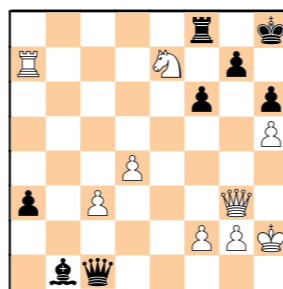
36.♗e3! An important move, preventing



the black queen from returning to g5 in many lines.

36...♗b1 Upon 36...a3 37.♗c7 ♗g8 38.♗d5 ♔h8 39.♗a7+- Black's pawn is contained and White has ideas such as ♗e7.

37.♗c7 ♗g8 38.♗d5 ♔h8 39.♗a7 a3 40.♗e7 ♗f8



41.d5 Not the only way to win, but a nice one. We'll see why controlling the e6 square is so important.

41...a2 42.♗c7 ♔h7 43.♗g6 ♗g8 44.♗f7 Black resigned

♗xg8 is an unstoppable threat, since the black king can't escape to e6! For example, 44...♗g5 45.♗xg8+ ♔xg8 46.♗a8+ ♔f7 47.♗f8 mate.

After this pair of games, the match remained tied at 3-3. We then arrived at one of the most dramatic games of the match. If Nepo had gone on to win the match, this particular game certainly would have been remembered as a turning point.

# GAME 7

Ding played the French for the first and only time, forgoing his usual Spanish as Black. Everything seemed to be normal until the clock reared its ugly head.

## C07

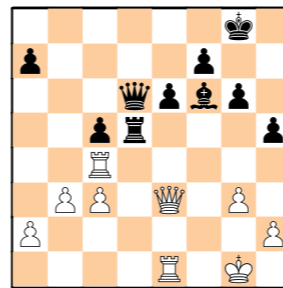
Ian Nepomniachtchi	2795
Ding Liren	2788

World Championship Match, Astana 2023

1.e4 e6 2.d4 d5 3.♗d2 c5 4.♗gf3 cxd4 5.♗xd4 ♗f6 6.exd5 ♗xd5 7.♗2f3 ♗e7 8.♗c4 ♗c6 9.♗xc6 bxc6 10.0-0 0-0 11.♗e2 ♗b7 12.♗d3 ♗c7 13.♗e4 ♗f6 14.♗h4 c5 15.♗f4 ♗b6 16.♗e5 ♗ad8 17.♗ae1 g6 18.♗g5 ♗d4 19.♗h3 ♗c7 20.b3 ♗h5 21.f4 ♗d6



22.c3 ♗xf4 23.♗xf4 ♗xf4 24.♗xf4 ♗xe5 25.♗h4 ♗d8 26.♗e4 ♗xe4 27.♗hxe4 ♗d5 28.♗h4 ♗d6 29.♗e3 h5 30.g3 ♗f6 31.♗c4



Up to this point, both sides have played an incredible game. They've navigated an extremely complicated position without making any serious errors. Black is down an exchange for a pawn, but his king is much safer than his opponent's. Also, he controls the d-file, while White's rooks are not coordinated. It should be close to equal, but practically, it feels easier to play Black. With 9 minutes left to reach move 40, spectators watched in disbelief as Ding went on to use almost all of his remaining time on the next two moves, leaving himself with less than a minute. This is even worse than it sounds, since there is no increment before move 60!

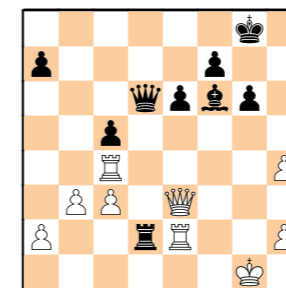
This can only be explained by nerves, and a strange misevaluation of the position, since at the press conference Ding said that he already felt like the position was going wrong for him, and he spent his time in vain trying to find an acceptable continuation. All I can say is that when you're sitting at the board, under all the pressure of the moment, it's an entirely different world than when you're looking at the computer screen at home. Under normal circumstances, Ding would never feel that Black is in any danger here, but the World Championship is a different creature altogether.

31...h4 Objectively, this is an excellent move, but perhaps it can be criticized for changing the nature of the position before reaching the time control. Maybe Ding should have "marked time" until he reached move 40, and then figured out how to proceed. Now things become concrete.

32.gxh4 ♗d2 This is just a blank shot, giving White an easy reply. Best was 32...♗e5!, when the threat of ...♗xh2+ isn't easy to meet. 33.♗e2 prevents ...♗d2 by keeping an eye on the e5 bishop, but only temporarily. (33.♗e2 ♗xh2+! 34.♗xh2

♗d1+ 35.♔g2 ♗d2+-) 33...♗f4! This is a nice square for the bishop, and it can be supported with ...e6-e5 if needed.

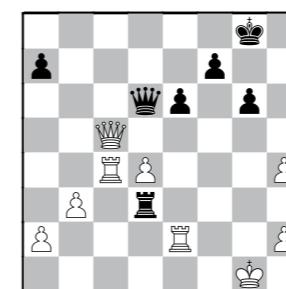
33.♗e2



33...♗d3?? He had to simply go back by 33...♗d5 and cut his losses. Despite the waste of tempi, nothing terrible has happened to Black, and his position is still fine.

34.♗xc5 This is just a free pawn. There's only one idea for Black here, but given that Ding didn't play it, one has to assume that there was not much calculation behind this series of moves - he simply panicked.

34...♗d1+ 34...♗d4+! had to be tried. Though still losing, it's extremely close to working - and it's hard to figure everything out at the board. The point is that it cuts off the white rook's protection of the f4 square. White replies 35.cxd4.



Now Black has two serious tries - ...♗f4, and ...♗d1+ followed by ...♗f4. Both look promising.

A) 35...♗f4 threatens ♗d1+ followed by ♗f1+, among other things. Then 36.♗c1! is the only way to win. (36.♗e5 ♗g4+ 37.♔f2 ♗f3+ 38.♔g1 ♗g4+=) 36...♗g4+ 37.♗g2 ♗d1+ 38.♗xd1 ♗xd1+ 39.♔f2 Arriving at a position that looks like it could be a perpetual - but it simply isn't. 39...♗d2+ 40.♔f3 ♗d3+ 41.♔g4 ♗e4+ 42.♔h3 ♗f3+ 43.♗g3 ♗f1+ 44.♔g4 If the queen wasn't on c5, then Black could play

...♗f5 mate! 44...♗e2+ 45.♔g5 ♗d2+ 46.♔f6 ♗f4+ 47.♔e7+- The king finally escapes.

B) 35...♗d1+ 36.♔g2 ♗f4 37.♗e5! Not only defending several key squares, but also threatening ♗c8+ followed by mate.

B1) 37...♗f1+ 38.♔g3 ♗d3+ (38...♗g1+ 39.♔f4 ♗f1+ 40.♔e4 ♗h1+ 41.♔d3+-) 39.♗e3 ♗g1+ 40.♔f3 ♗f1+ 41.♔g4 ♗g2+ 42.♗g3+-.

B2) 37...♗g4+ 38.♔f2 ♗xh4+ 39.♗g3 ♗f6+ 40.♔e3+-.

35.♔g2 Now Black has no hope.

35...♗d3 36.♗f2 ♔g7 37.♗cf4 ♗xc3 Ding either flagged or resigned at this point, but in any case White will just trade queens and then take on f7, with a completely winning position.

All in all, as chess fans, I'm not sure what more we could have asked for from this match. Even most of the draws, which we didn't have space to include in this report, were exciting!

One has to feel for Nepo, who lost his second World Championship match in a row, but remember how he bounced back to steamroll the Candidates tournament after losing the match to Magnus. It's still a way away, but I wouldn't be surprised if he managed to do it again.

And when it comes to Ding, how could you not admire his fighting spirit? He played in a Candidates tournament which he had originally not qualified for, then got destroyed by Nepo as White in the first round of that tournament. He pulled himself back into contention and won a critical last round game to finish in second place, which ended up being meaningful when Magnus declined to defend his title. He then was behind for most of the present match, and literally took the lead for the first time in the final rapid game. Congrats to him - he earned it fully. There were so many moments where others would have given up, but he never did.