

IS CLASSICAL CHESS DEAD?

Long Live Classical Chess!

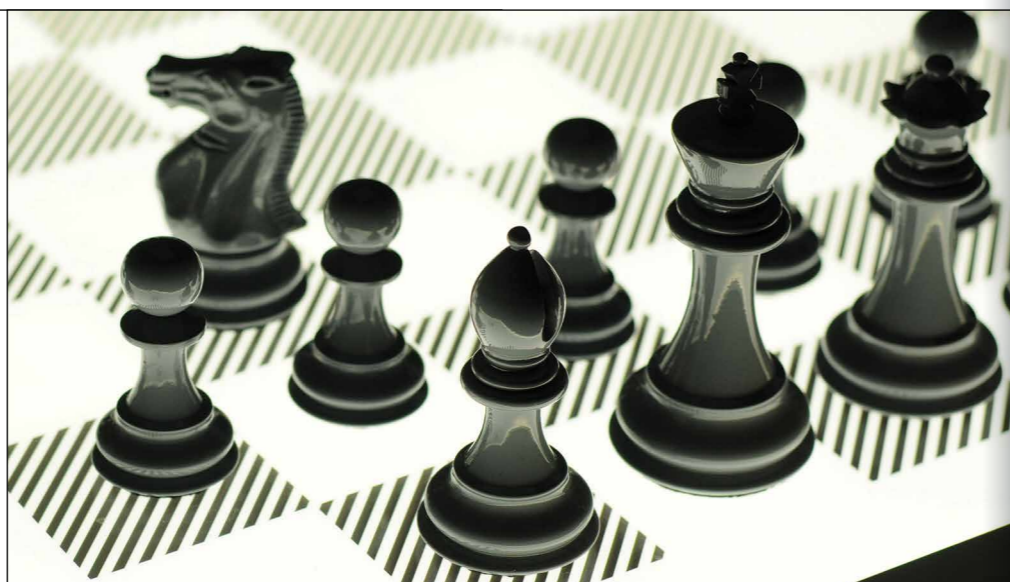
This past decade has seen a huge increase in the number of events held at faster rates of play – rapid and blitz. With the modern level of preparation and high drawing percentage at elite tournaments in classical chess, more and more of the world’s leading players see classical chess coming to its melting point. Well, is it?



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By Dylan Loeb McClain

For the longest time, hundreds of years really, when people talked about the best players in the world, what they meant was clear – the best players at classical, or slow, chess. While top players would entertain themselves, and often others, by playing fast or blitz chess, it was not taken too seriously. That is clearly no longer true. Faster time controls – rapid, blitz, lightning or bullet, and even faster games like hyper-bullet and ultra-bullet (15 seconds per player per game!) – have become more respectable and prowess in them has become more valued. As they have become more popular, there has been an erosion of respect and interest in classical chess.



Fabiano Caruana, who is ranked No. 2 in classical chess, said on a recent C-Squared podcast with his friend grandmaster Cristian Chirila, “If the trend continues, classical chess is getting phased out within a few years.”

It is not hard to understand his thinking. Consider Magnus Carlsen, who has dominated chess in all its forms for more than a decade. After holding the classical crown for 10 years, Carlsen declined to defend the title this year because of his dwindling interest in that form of the game.

In an interview on a Norwegian podcast in May, he said of classical chess, “It’s nice to have time to think for a while and figure things out, but I am quite fed up with all the preparation. It’s frustrating to come up with new ideas every time in order to get a game at all.”

Carlsen’s last comment was a reference to how well-prepared opponents make it

increasingly difficult for players to gain an edge in classical games.

That is one reason that Carlsen has played less classical chess in the last couple of years, preferring to concentrate on faster time controls in which preparation can be a smaller factor because players don’t have time to recall all that they know. Faster time controls also encourage experimenting with different openings, even off-beat ones, because there is a smaller risk that opponents will have time to figure out how to try to refute them.

Carlsen does not speak, or act, for every chess player, but his views, as the star of the chess world and the No. 1 ranked player since 2008, carry a lot of weight. He has also contributed directly to diminishing the popularity of classical chess.

When the pandemic hit in 2020 and

all in-person competition was suspended, Carlsen helped organize, and lent his name, to an online series of five tournaments with a prize fund of \$1 million. The tournaments were all at rapid time controls, likely because no one wants to sit staring at a computer screen thinking about one game for hours.

The series proved to be a big enough success, among players and fans, that it has led to an annual series of elite online tournaments, renamed the Champions Tour. The prize funds have also increased, with this year’s being \$2 million. All the tournaments have had rapid and blitz time controls (usually to break ties when the rapid matches are knotted at the end).

The staggering growth of online chess has also made faster time controls more popular. (Again, no one really wants to sit and stare at a screen for hours on one game.)

One other factor has contributed to popularizing fast play: The official recognition of those skills by the International Chess Federation, or FIDE. Though there had been “one-off” events over the decades, including the first World Blitz Championship in 1970 in Herceg Novi, which was won by Bobby Fischer, in 2006, FIDE began recognizing official World Blitz Championships. Then, in 2012, FIDE began organizing the World Rapid and Blitz Championships. As part of that effort, FIDE also created rapid and blitz rating and rankings.

In the same podcast in which Caruana suggested that classical chess might be phased out, Chirila noted, “Nowadays, as a coach, you could probably direct your players to be good in rapid and blitz. That is probably going to be more financially feasible for them.”

Indeed, Andrew Tang, who is a good, but not world-class grandmaster, is an example. He is in the top five in the world in bullet, which allows him, if he so desires, to make a good living as a streamer because people love to watch him play bullet online. Tang, a recent graduate of Princeton, may decide to take a more conventional path, but that is another story.

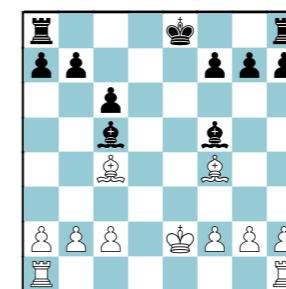
Is classical chess on its deathbed then? Probably not. To paraphrase Mark Twain, the American writer and humorist, the rumors of the death of classical chess are greatly exaggerated.

Take the recently completed World Cup, for example. Who showed up at the last minute to play in it? Carlsen, despite a format that required mini-matches of two classical games followed by rapid and blitz games if the mini-matches were tied. Though he second-guessed his decision to participate early on, saying in a post-match interview, “Honestly, like almost since Day 1, I have been wondering, like, what am I doing here?” he went on to win the tournament.

Afterwards, in an interview with grandmaster Daniel Naroditsky, Carlsen admitted that his decision to play in the event was partially motivated by his poor showing in Norway Chess, a classical tournament in June in which he lost one classical game and drew the rest – the first time in 16 years that he had failed to win a classical game in a competition. “Maybe it was a bit emotional,” he said. “I played so poorly in Norway Chess, I don’t want that to be the impression of me in classical chess.” In other words, Carlsen still cares about classical chess.

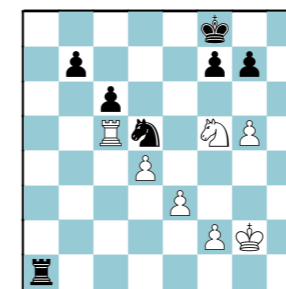
He is not the only one. Most of the world’s top players competed in the World Cup, including Caruana, who finished third and thereby qualified for the next Candidates tournament to select a challenger for the Classical World Championship. (Carlsen also qualified but has already indicated that he is not going to play.)

Classical chess is still chess, so whatever the speed of the game, it can still be exciting. During the World Cup, there were some insipid games, as for example Carlsen’s second game against Rameshbabu Pragganandhaa, where the players reached an almost perfectly symmetrical position after 14...♙f5.



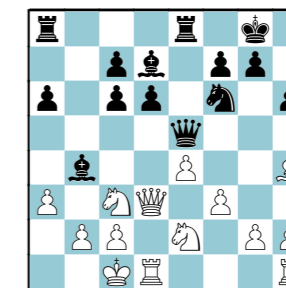
But there were also many exciting moments, a result of blunders, oversights and desperation because players had to win in Game 2 of the mini-matches after losing Game 1. All of those elements arose in Carlsen’s match with Vincent Keymer in Round 4.

In the following position in Game 1, Carlsen had plenty of time on his clock, while Keymer only had a few minutes to make four moves before the time control.



Carlsen, perhaps too used to playing rapidly, blitzed out 36...♘c7, but after 37.♘d6, threatening both ♘xb7 and ♙f5, Carlsen had to lose a pawn. Keymer then converted the ending to take the lead. That put Carlsen in a must win position to survive.

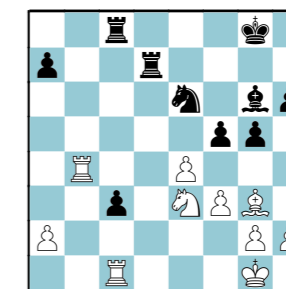
In Game 2, Keymer missed a shot that would have put Carlsen away. Carlsen had just played 16.a3, when he realized to his horror that he had blundered.



Amazingly, after Keymer played 16...♙xc3 17.♙xc3 (Not 17.♘c3 because then 17...♙f4 forks the king and bishop, winning a piece.), Keymer missed 17...♘xe4, which would have won at least a pawn. If 18.fxe4, then 18...♙xe4 forks the white knight and bishop. And if 18.♙xe5 ♙xe5 19.fxe4, then 19...♙xe4 still forks the knight and bishop. When Keymer instead continued 17...♙xc3, Carlsen was visibly relieved. (There is a great short video on X, formerly Twitter, of him looking to his right and exhaling after seeing Keymer’s move.) Carlsen was able to even the match by squeezing Keymer in an endgame in his trademark style.

Interestingly, Carlsen noted after winning the tournament that he feels that Dommaraju Gukesh, the 17-year-old Indian grandmaster who has risen to No.8 in the world in the classical rankings, supplanting Viswanathan Anand as the top Indian for the first time in 37 years, might now be the best player at slow time controls.

Carlsen beat him in the quarterfinals, but he said that was because he played his best game of the tournament in Game 1, to take the lead. Gukesh had shown his class in the previous round with a smooth win over Wang Hao in Game 1 of their match.



In this position, Gukesh crashed through Wang’s defenses with 31...fxe4 (Not 31...f4? 32.♘d5! and White is in control.) 32.fxe4 ♙d3 33. ♙f2 ♘f4 34.♙c2 ♘d2! 35.h3 ♘d3 36.♙d2 cxd2 37.♙d4 ♙c1+ 38.♙h2 ♘f2, and Wang threw in the towel.

While the World Cup shows that classical chess is alive and well, its method for breaking ties – two rapid games, then, if necessary, two blitz games, and if there

2 The MAGNIFICENT 3 REMARKABLE RECENT GAMES

By GM Sarunas Sulskis

WITH THE BLACK PIECES, BERKES MAKES IT A BLACK DAY FOR GELFAND

Before I embark on Salimova's Cinderella story in Baku, I have found it fitting to stop over and take a look at the progress of the Hungarian GM Ferenc Berkes. Though a middle ranking player at the World Cup, Berkes began drawing attention to himself right after knocking out the former World Championship contender (Moscow 2012), a world top-GM for quite a few decades, Boris Gelfand from Israel.

Despite being a remarkable feat in itself, Berkes didn't stop there and proceeded to knock out a strong 2700+ club member, Nikita Vitiugov, followed by the former World Champion Ruslan Ponomarev from Ukraine. An impressive run by Ferenc Berkes, possibly the best in his career so far! And I believe it had been set in motion by his confident win on the Black side against Gelfand in the game below.

The game features professional opening preparation which brings out Berkes' trust not in some unruly engine lines or assessments, but in the sound strategy of engaging all his pieces in the battle - even if it comes at the cost of a pawn or two. By snatching the a4 pawn early in the game, Gelfand tried hard to make his younger opponent recant the strategy of piece liberation. Berkes, however, remained firm and didn't back down. When he suddenly thrust the black queen close to the white king by ...♖b5-e2!, all the fun was over for Gelfand. The veteran tried desperately to hold his ground with the passive ♗c3-e1, but once Berkes uncorked the ...♗e4-g5-h3+ maneuver, as skillful as it was deadly, the white king's residence went up in flames.

A brilliant attack which immediately took Berkes through to Round 3, without any need to play annoying tiebreak games!

E11

Boris Gelfand	2668
Ferenc Berkes	2615

Round 2, Game 2, World Cup, Baku 2023

1.d4 ♗f6 2.c4 e6 3.♗f3 ♗b4+ 4.♗bd2 d5 5.♖a4+ A well-known method in the Bogó-Indian Defense. Gelfand forces the black knight to c6, thereby disabling Black's trademark attack in the center by ...c7-c5.
5...♗c6 6.e3 a5 7.a3 ♗e7 8.♖c2 The first critical moment of the game. After some consideration Gelfand cautiously retreats his queen. The principled line is undoubtedly 8.b4, when Black resorted to 8...0-0 9.c5 ♗d7 10.b5 ♗cb8 in A. Smirnov 2448 - J.Stocek 2567, Teplice 2015.



8...a4! A risky, but brave move. Berkes consciously sends his foot soldier to his death. The game itself will explain why.
9.cxd5 And Gelfand goes for it head-on. However, he pays a significant cost for this acquisition. Berkes obtains a free pass for both his bishop on the c8-h3 diagonal and his rook on the e-file.

Instead, White had a couple of alternatives, which further restrict Black's aforementioned pieces: 9.c5 0-0 10.♗b5; and 9.♗d3 0-0 10.0-0, whereupon 10...♗a5?! is met by 11.♖xa4.



...and still gained good compensation after 12.♗xc6 ♗xc6 13.0-0 ♖a6 14.♖e1 ♗d6 in A.Korobov 2680 - Y.Kuzubov 2661, Lvov 2014.

12.0-0 Fair enough, Gelfand finds 12.♗xc6 bxc6 13.♖xc6 ♗a6 too scary.
12...♖e8! The rook has a lot to say down the open e-file. To begin with, it supports the landing operation starting with ...♗f6-e4. The ease with which Berkes directs his pieces towards the white king makes Gelfand regret his release of the central tension on move 9.



13.b4?! Allowing Berkes a good kick on the queenside. 13.♗xc6 bxc6 allows Black's light-squared bishop to rule the a6-f1 diagonal. The peril in store for White is well-illustrated by the line 14.♖e1 ♗e4 15.♖xc6 ♖a6 16.♖b5 ♖b6 17.♖f1 ♗a6.

Gelfand, however, had a few more cautious alternatives in 13.♖d1 ♗e4 14.♗b3, tucking away his bishop, and 13.b

9...exd5 10.♗b5 0-0 Berkes continues to play quickly, having confidence in his preparation. This apparently makes Gelfand feel uneasy as he now frequently takes copious amounts of time to consider his responses.

11.♗xa4 There's not much point in commenting on 11.♗xc6 bxc6 12.♖xc6, since Berkes later allowed it even without the a4 pawn. Suffice to say, it exposes White on the a6-f1 diagonal.

11...♗d6 According to my database, this is a valuable novelty featuring a repeat sacrifice of yet another pawn. Again, it was played by Berkes almost instantly.

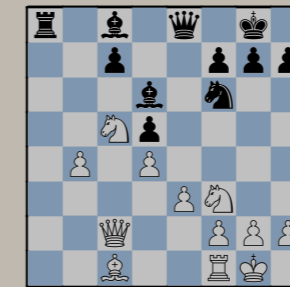
In a preceding game Black was more careful with 11...♗d7



▲ Ferenc Berkes

which prevents Berkes' kick in the game.
13...♗xb4! 14.axb4 b5 Though this tactical operation will not result in Berkes recovering his pawn investment, it does undermine Gelfand's queenside pawns and, more importantly, grants Berkes the bishop pair.

15.♗xb5 ♖xa1 16.♗b3 ♖a8 17.♗xe8 ♖xe8 18.♗c5 On 18.♗d2 ♗e4 19.♖a1 ♖a4! is strong.

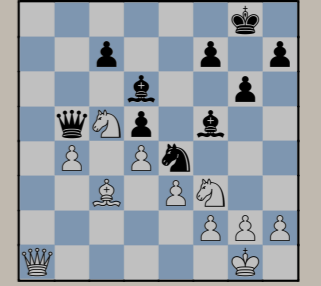


18...♖b5! A nice diagonal queen leap that foreshadows far greater trouble in store for Gelfand.

19.♗d2 g6 Berkes gets ready to reinforce his grip on the light squares. Gelfand can do little to prevent it.

20.♗c3 ♗f5 21.♖b2 ♗e4 22.♖a1 This allows Black to invade deep inside his territory. However, upon 22.♗xe4 Gelfand possibly didn't like 22...dxe4 23.♗e5 ♖d5 (but not the hasty 23...f6?, because of 24.♖b3+) 24.♖a1 (24.b5 ♖a2) 24...♖xa1+ 25.♖xa1 f6+, and the white knight is caught in the middle of the board.

22...♖xa1 + 23.♖xa1



23...♖e2! Here you are! Berkes dives his queen deep into the white king's quarters. Taken by a surprise attack with all Black's pieces fully engaged, Gelfand is unable to hold on for even ten more moves. The main culprit of such a quick demise is perhaps his own bishop. The next move merely underscores his deplorable state.

24.♗e1? Gelfand tries to cling on to his extra pawn until the very end. But confronting Black's aggression with passive defence fails. With hindsight, he should have abandoned the pawn count and fight hard for survival.

Both 24.♖e1 ♖c2 (24...♗xc3 25.♖xc3 ♗g4 26.♗d3) 25.♗xe4 dxe4 26.♗e5; and 24.♗xe4 ♗xe4 (24...dxe4 25.♗d2 h5 26.d5) 25.♗d2 ♗d3 26.♗f1 h5 27.♗g3 ♖c2 28.♖e1 h4 29.♗h1 h3 30.gxh3 ♗e4 31.♗g3 ♗f3 would have offered more stiff resistance.

24...h5! This run by the edge pawn towards the white king is intimidating in itself, but there are also some invisible snippets of wisdom concealed within it. Check it out when you see the black queen checkmating the king from g4 in sidelines! The impatient 24...♗xc5 25.dxc5 ♗d3 26.♗c3 is what Gelfand had counted on. **25.♖c1 25.♗xe4 ♗xe4 (25...dxe4 26.♗e5 ♗e6 27.♗c3) 26.♗g5 ♗xg2 27.♗xg2 ♖g4+ 28.♗f1 ♖xg5+** leaves Black clearly on top but White can still continue struggling.

After a good think, Gelfand has to concede that his threat 25.♖a8+ ♗g7 26.♖xd5 has failed to hold off Berkes.



A) 26...♗xc5 27.dxc5 ♗d3 initially looks like a more straightforward win, but on closer inspection White uncorks a

is still a tie, an Armageddon game - also illustrates how faster time controls have overtaken classical chess.

There was a time when the idea of using such a tiebreaking system would have seemed an abomination to purists. And it is true that the different time controls require slightly different skill sets.

After Anatoly Karpov won the 1988 World Active Chess Championship held in Mexico, he made an analogy to racing in an interview. "In track, you have the 100 meters, the 200 meters, the mile," Karpov said. Different time controls are "completely different chess."

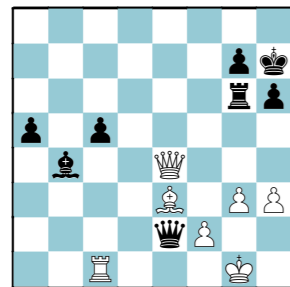
(Garry Kasparov, who at the time was the classical World Champion, refused to participate in the tournament, saying dismissively, "Active chess? What does that make me? The passive World Champion?" His comment, and the confusion sowed by the name of the title, may have been why active chess was later rechristened rapid.)

Though the classical World Championship in 2004, between Vladimir Kramnik and Peter Leko, either had an outright winner, or, if they ended in a tie, the reigning champion kept the title. Over the years, there were several matches that ended in ties (1951 between Mikhail Botvinnik and David Bronstein; 1954 between Botvinnik and Smyslov, 1987 between Kasparov and Karpov and 2004 between Kramnik and Leko). Tied matches with the champion retaining the title were unsatisfying and seemed unfair.

In 2006, in the match between Kramnik and Topalov to reunify the title after a 13-year split in the chess world, a series of four rapid games to break a tie was introduced. It was an idea born out of necessity as the competing claims of Kramnik and Topalov for the title meant that a tie would not mend the schism, since both players could continue to claim to be the rightful champion. As it turned out, the tiebreakers were necessary and Kramnik won by beating Topalov, 2½ to 1½ in the rapid games.

It was an exciting finish and it became the new standard just as faster time controls were becoming more popular and legitimized.

Since then, four other matches (in 2012, between Anand and Boris Gelfand; in 2016, between Carlsen and Sergey Karjakin; in 2018 between Carlsen and Caruana; and this year, between Ding Liren and Ian Nepomniachtchi) have been settled by rapid tiebreak games. The last game of the 2023 match, with Ding's 46...♗g6! leading to victory was a brilliant and worthy capper.



As Karpov explained, using rapid games to break a tie in classical chess is not ideal, but, at least, so far rapid tiebreakers have been sufficient. It would likely create unimaginable arguments over a classical champion's legitimacy if the title

should ever be decided in blitz games or, even worse, in an Armageddon game in which the loser goes home. Hopefully that never happens. ■