

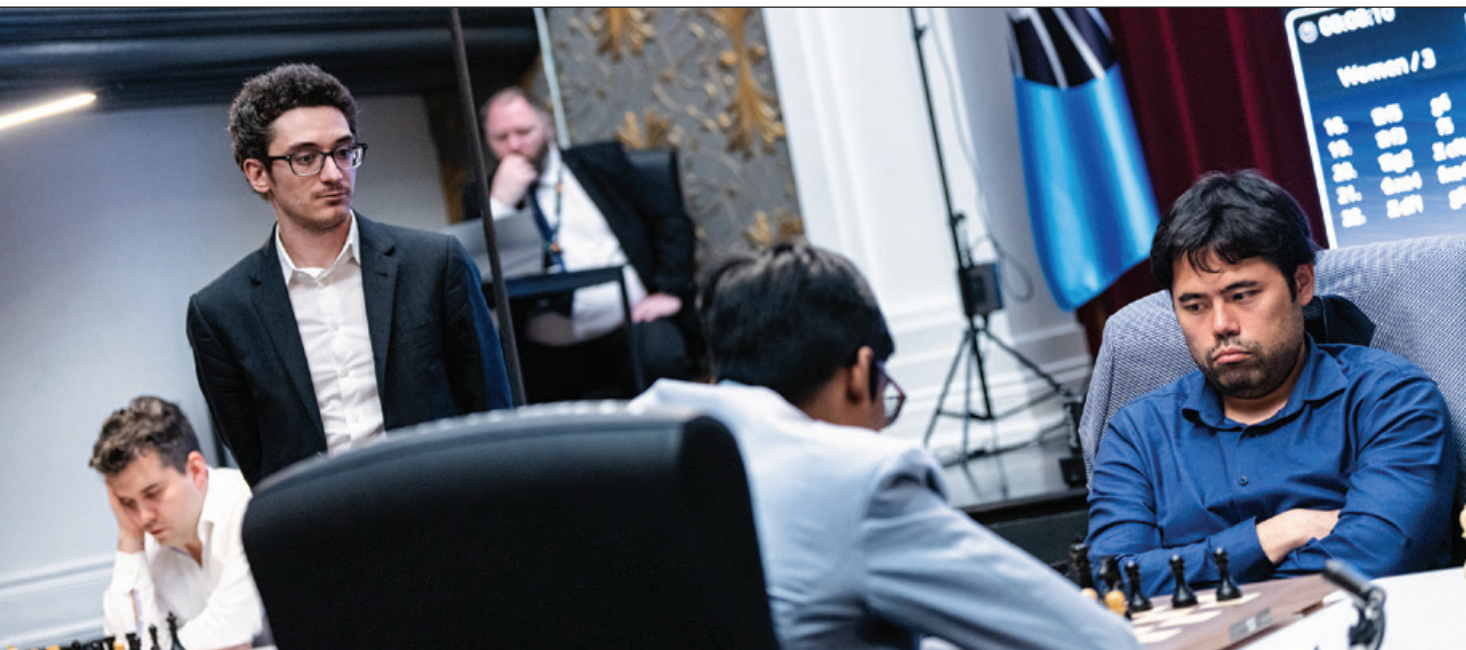


In the tournament where only first place matters, both American representatives in Toronto finished in shared second place

Tough Fight and Missed Chances

The outcome of the 2024 Candidates tournament eventually came down to the very last round – and a single decisive game. The winner of Caruana – Nepomniachtchi would have to enter a playoff with Gukesh, who drew his final game (against Nakamura) and was a full point ahead of the two. Caruana played an enterprising game, but in the end missed several chances against his incredibly resourceful opponent.

By GM John Burke



▲ Caruana kibitzing the Praggnanandhaa-Nakamura game

The

2024 Candidates has come and gone, with much more excitement than the previous edition. Two years ago, Ian Nepomniachtchi dominated and ran away with the event, but this time, half the field (4 out of the 8 players) was in contention for first place before the final round. In addition, they were all playing each other! But let's back up for a second.

Before I get into the specifics of how the event unfolded, I have to mention the time control, which played a huge role in many of these games. Players had 2 hours for the first 40 moves, and then 30 minutes for the rest of the game. Unusually, there was no 30-second increment until move 41, so players had to leave themselves sufficient time, without the safety net of the increment. This resulted in wild time scrambles, and I'll point out which games had this extra element as a prominent factor.

A Hitchcock-like culmination and a heartbreaking miss for Fabiano

In the penultimate round, Nakamura held Nepomniachtchi with Black after getting in a bit of trouble from the opening. Caruana won a clutch game against Praggnanandhaa. The biggest story of all was that Gukesh took down Firouzja to vault himself into the sole lead with one round to play! A remarkable fact is that this was the first moment in the previous 3(!) Candidates in which Nepomniachtchi did not have at least a share of the lead.



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.



▲ Live commentary for the audience by GM Peter Svidler

Before the last round, Gukesh was a half point ahead of Nakamura, Caruana, and Nepomniachtchi. The pairings were Nakamura White against Gukesh, and Caruana White against Nepomniachtchi. The scriptwriters couldn't have drawn it up any better! If two players tied for first, there would be a playoff the following day.

In terms of excitement on the board, it ended up only occurring in one game, as Nakamura failed to get any chances from the opening against Gukesh. In fact, he was slightly worse for most of the game, but Gukesh wisely played it safe and steered the game toward a draw, guaranteeing himself at least a tie for first.

So it all came down to the Caruana – Nepo clash. A draw wouldn't help either player – they both needed a win to reach a playoff. Caruana was winning shortly before time control, but the clock was ticking down!

D35

Fabiano Caruana	2803
Ian Nepomniachtchi	2758

FIDE Candidates, Toronto 2024

Besides the actual chess content of this game, there is a psychological element which is fascinating as well. The battle began before the game even started – how should the players approach the game? What openings to choose?

Caruana was obviously in a more favorable situation, having the white pieces. His main move is 1.e4, and he had played it in every game in the tournament so far. However, Nepo is very well-versed in the Petroff, which is sound theoretically and hard to break down. Then again, Nepo needs to win, so maybe he'll try a sharp Sicilian and make the game complex? Or, should he play the Petroff anyway, which would in a way blackmail Fabi and force him to do something aggressive, giving both players winning chances. Chess is a

hard enough game as it is without all these behind-the-scenes considerations!

1.d4 In the end, Caruana avoided the Petroff question entirely by starting with a queen's pawn. In the past, Nepo was a Grünfeld player, but in recent years he's been relying on a repertoire of the Nimzo and the QGD. So, Caruana could reasonably expect to get an opening along those lines.

1...d5f6 2.c4 e6 3.dxc3 I think inviting the Nimzo is the correct choice under the circumstances. It narrows the scope of preparation greatly. After 3.dxf3 d5 4.dxc3, Nepo could choose from so many moves here, with 4...b4, 4...e7, and 4...c5 being just some of the options. Caruana would

have to be ready for so many lines, and it doesn't make sense to give the opponent such a wide choice in a must-win game.

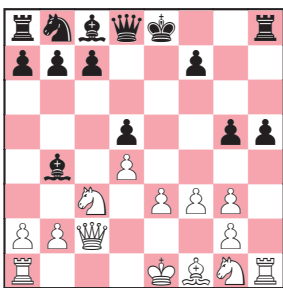
3...d5 Nepo shies away from the Nimzo, but now Caruana can play the Exchange Variation of the QGD. If Nepo played 3...b4, Caruana would have quite a few lines to choose from. 4.♖c2 is one of the main lines but is probably too solid for such a game. 4.e3 is similarly popular but leads to a greater variety of positions, so maybe that would have been his choice. There are also some less popular but still playable lines like 4.a3, inviting the doubled pawns and immediately initiating an unbalanced game. Perhaps that would have been ideal for both players.

4.cxd5 exd5 5.♗g5 ♗b4 This is sort of a modern twist that many top players have adopted. It's a mix of the Exchange QGD and the Ragozin. 5...♗e7 is the historical main line. It's still a sound, solid option that keeps all the pieces on the board and promises a long fight.

6.e3 h6 7.♗h4 g5 This is how Black justifies the bishop on b4 – he breaks the pin immediately and initiates direct play. He'll end up snagging White's dark-squared bishop for his knight, but obviously the weakened kingside could come back to haunt him.



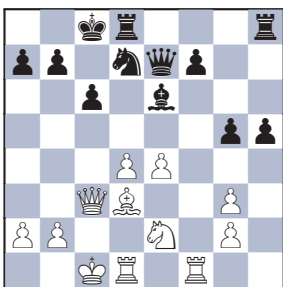
8.♔g3 ♖e4 9.♗c2 h5 10.f3 ♜xg3
11.hxg3



11...♔e6 Both players were probably happy here – Black has the bishop pair and long-term prospects if he can get his king safe, while White can try and break through in the center and prove that Black has overextended his pawns too early.

12.♔d3 c6 13.0-0-0 ♖d7 14.f4 Not the first move that comes to mind – it looks like White's center is built to support the move e3-e4, but instead White advances his f-pawn. It's a direct idea – Black is inconvenienced by the threat of f4-f5, trapping his bishop.

After 14.e4 dxe4 15.fxe4, White's center looks nice, but it can easily come under pressure. 15...♗f6 16.♖ge2 ♔xc3 Black has to remove this knight first. It's the ideal time to do so, as recapturing with the knight would hang the d4 pawn. (16...0-0-0 runs into 17.♖d5.) 17.♗xc3 0-0-0 18.♗hf1 ♗e7

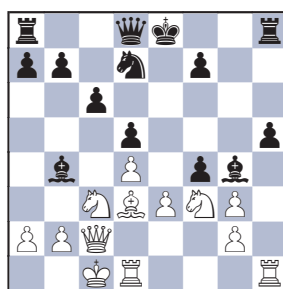


White actually doesn't have a clear path forward. Particularly, his e2 knight doesn't have a bright future. The tempting 19.d5 push doesn't amount to much. After 19...♔g4 20.dxc6 ♖e5 21.cxb7+ ♔xb7, White is up a pawn, but his king is in danger on the open c-file, and Black's pieces are all great, particularly the knight on e5.

14...♔g4 15.♖f3 ♗e7 Natural, but it allows White a very dangerous central push. 15...gxf4 looks scary as it opens the e-file with the king on e8, but Black is fine.

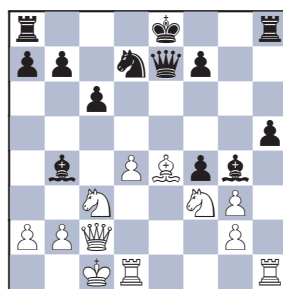


▲ The pressure of the decisive game



- A) 16.gxf4 Compared to the game, Black doesn't have to worry about his g5 pawn hanging anymore. 16...♗e7 17.e4?! dxe4 18.♔xe4 0-0-0 19.♖d5 ♗d6 20.♖xb4 ♗xb4 Black can be more than satisfied here, as 21.d5? runs into 21...♖f6, when suddenly it is White who faces serious problems. For example, after 22.♔f5+ ♔b8!, White's position is hanging all over.
- B) 16.exf4 ♔xf3 17.gxf3 ♗f6 18.♔de1+ ♔d8 Black's king is safe, and White's g3 and d4 pawns are quite weak.

16.e4 Now Black has a narrow path to survival. 16...♔xc3?! 16...dxe4 17.♔xe4gxf4! Scary, allowing all sorts of tactics on the e-file, but Black survives. (17...0-0-0 works only with the ...gxf4 trade included, but not here. 18.♖d5 ♗d6 19.♖xb4 ♗xb4 20.d5 ♖f6 21.♔f5+ ♔b8 22.dxc6 bxc6 23.fxc5±)



- A) 18.♔xc6 ♔xc3 (After 18...bxc6?! 19.♔he1 ♔e6 20.gxf4 White will regain the piece with f4-f5 next, maintaining a slight edge.)

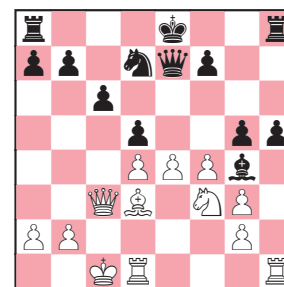
- A1) 19.♗xc3? ♔c8! 20.d5 (20.♔he1 ♔xc6 21.♔xe7+ ♔xe7+) 20...♗e3+ 21.♗xe3+ fxe3+;
- A2) 19.♔xb7 ♔b8 20.♗xc3 0-0 The craziness continues here, with all three results possible. Practically, it seems easier to play Black – he will aim for the c-file and try to attack.
- B) 18.♔he1 0-0-0 19.♔xc6 ♗f8 20.♖d5 ♔xe1 21.♔xb7+ (21.♔xd7+ ♔b8 Chess isn't checkers – captures aren't mandatory.) 21...♔xb7 22.♗c7+ ♔a8 23.♗c6+ ♔b8 24.♗c7+ leads to perpetual.
- 17.♗xc3



▲ Caruana posing with young fans



▲ All eyes were on the Caruana-Nepomniachtchi last-round game



17...♔xf3 After 17...dxe4 18.♔xe4 0-0-0 19.♔de1! Black is in an awkward spot here, having to deal with ideas of ♔xc6, d4-d5, and fxc5/♖xg5.

18.gxf3 18.exd5 was worth considering, but Black gets a lot of material for the queen after 18...♔xd1 19.♔e1 ♔g4 20.d6 ♗xe1+ 21.♗xe1+ ♔d8 22.♗e7+ ♔c8 23.fxc5 b5 It's still a crazy position, but Black will play ...♔b7 next and he has everything protected.

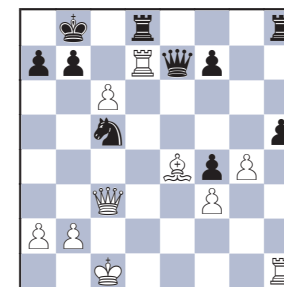
18...dxe4 19.♔xe4 19.fxe4 would be the positionally correct move, but recapturing with the bishop is the more ambitious one, as it will end up giving Black's king nightmares.

19...gxf4 20.g4! 0-0-0?! After 20...h4 Black doesn't have to worry about this pawn hanging in so many lines. 21.♔b1 Safeguarding the king and getting out of a

future...♗e3+ if the bishop moves. 21...0-0-0 22.d5 Black is still under pressure.

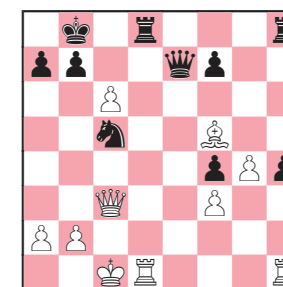
21.d5! Now there are serious problems as the threats of dxc6 and gxf4 are looming, and you can't stop both! In case of 21.gxf4 ♖f6, Black threatens ...♖xe4 just in time and is fine.

21...h4? A move too late – now White crashes through. After the more precise 21...♔b8, there is 22.dxc6 ♖c5 23.♔d7 – a very nice touch.



- A) 23...♖xd7 24.c7+ ♔a8 25.♔xh5!! No need to take the rook yet. 25...♔he8 Now taking the rook is more than enough to win, but I'll invite the reader to explore why the beautiful 26.♗c6! is even more crushing!
- B) 23...♔xd7 24.cxd7 ♔d8 25.gxf4± And there's the importance of this pawn – now White has a passer and great winning chances.

22.dxc6 ♖c5 23.♔f5+ ♔b8



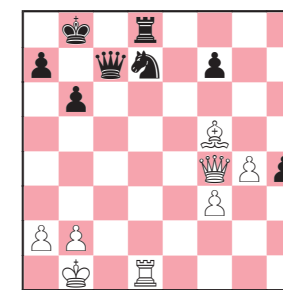
24.♔b1! Very precise – the only move to keep a winning position. 24.♔d7 doesn't lead anywhere yet. 24...♖xd7 25.c7+ ♔a8 26.cxd8♗+ ♔xd8=. However, 24.cxb7 ♔xd1+ 25.♔xd1 ♗e3+ is what we want to avoid – hence 24.♔b1.

24...b6 25.♔d7 One of many good options at this point – but the advantage of this choice is its forcing nature. It will take us closer to move 40.

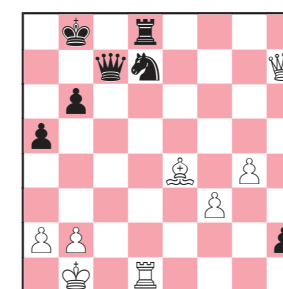
25...♔xd7 25...♖xd7 26.c7+ Now Black's light squares are weak, so this is untenable.

26.cxd7 ♔d8 27.♗d4 ♖xd7 28.♔d1 White has lost his great passed pawn, but gained something as valuable in return – total domination. Black is all pinned up and his light squares are weak, meaning his king will never be safe. The only hope is the passed h-pawn, which is far from queening at the moment.

28...♗c5 29.♗xf4+ ♗c7



30.♗d2 h3 31.♔e4 a5 32.♗d5 ♔a7 33.♗xf7 h2 34.♗h7 ♔b8





Caruana has played an excellent game so far, holding his nerves well. Black is all pinned up at the moment, in addition to being down a pawn. The only trump for Black is the h2 pawn. It won't become a queen, but it hopes to serve as a distraction.

35.a3! White has many good moves, but I like this move for its patience. It creates an escape hatch for White's king just in case. 35.♖h1 is an example of how going after the pawn immediately could bring difficulties for White. 35...♗f6 36.♜xc7+ ♗xc7 37.♜xh2 ♗xe4 38.fxe4 White is two pawns up in a rook endgame, but his king is far away and Black can activate his rook immediately. 38...♗d1+ 39.♗c2 ♗g1 40.♜h4 ♗g3 It's still winning for White, but it looks really ugly with White's king cut off and his rook stuck on h4. So why go for this?

35...♜e5 35...♜e8 Nepo could have tried to unpin, since if his knight is taken then his h-pawn queens. He now wants to play ...♗f6. However, White has a killer resource. 36.♜f7! ♜h8 37.♜d5 Threatening mate in one. 37...♗a7 38.♜xd7 ♜xd7 39.♜xd7+ ♗b8 40.f4+-. This variation shows the strength of the e4 bishop and White's light square dominance. In addition to making Black's king uncomfortable, in many variations it saves the day by guarding the h1 promotion square.

36.♜h6 Now that ♜c6 is coming, Black's queen has to return.

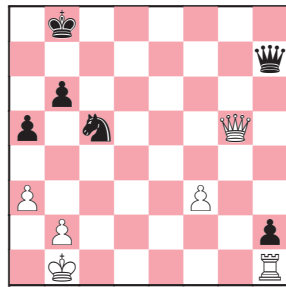
36...♜c7 **37.g5** This doesn't give anything away, but White had a simple win. He doesn't need to do anything with his passed pawns at the moment – they're well-defended as they are. Just focus on winning the h2 pawn and then the game wins itself. It's basically resignable for Black after 37.♜d2 – as he has no satisfactory way to continue. 37...♗c5 (37...♜c8 38.♜xh2+-) 38.♜xd8+ ♜xd8 39.♜xh2+-.

37...♜g8 **38.♜h1** ♗c5 **39.♜h7?** This doesn't give away the win, but I would still classify it as a huge mistake, since it severely complicates White's task. Upon 39.♜c2, the bishop is safe here and Black can't really create threats. He can't go anywhere with his queen, like 39...♜g3 for example, since the b6 pawn would hang.

39...♜xg5 The only chance, sacrificing an exchange for counterplay. Nepo doesn't miss chances like this.



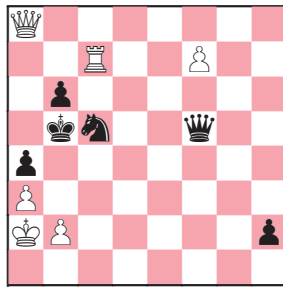
40.♜xg5 ♜xh7+ It's move 40, so there's time to calculate now, but Caruana still makes the wrong choice. Granted, it's easy to overlook Black's idea, and the position is suddenly murky. The queen and knight work well together, and Black also has the idea of ...a5-a4 at certain moments, cementing control over the b3 square and conjuring up perpetual check mechanisms.



41.♗a1 41.♗a2! It's surprising to walk into a check on the a2-g8 diagonal, but it turns out it works for White. 41...♜f7+ 42.♗a1 ♗b3+ 43.♗b1 ♜xf3 (43...♜h7+ 44.♗a2+-) 44.♜e5+ ♗a7 45.♜xh2 It'll still take some work, but White should eventually find a way to trade queens and win. For example – 45...♜d3+ 46.♗a2 ♜c4 Now the tricky part is having nerves of steel and allowing a discovered check! 47.♜d1! It turns out everything is covered. 47...♗d2+ 48.♗a1 ♗b3+ 49.♗b1 ♜e4+ 50.♗a2+-.

41...♜c2! A very easy idea to overlook – it turns out Black doesn't need to play ...♗b3+ immediately. Now if White plays ♜e5+ and ♜xh2, there is a perpetual with ...♗b3+ and ...♗c1+. Black can objectively draw now, but it's still super complex, and both players made mistakes until it finally

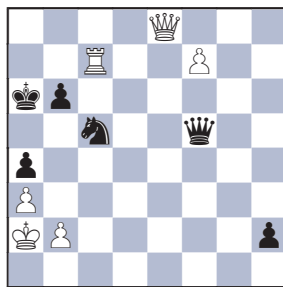
looked like Caruana would win... **42.♜g8+** ♗a7 **43.♗a2** a4 **44.f4** ♗b3 **45.♜g7+** ♗a6 **46.♜c3** ♜g2 **47.♜c4+** ♗b7 **48.♜e1** ♗c5 **49.♜f1** ♜d5+ **50.♗b1** ♜f5+ **51.♗a1** ♜c2 **52.f5** ♗d3 **53.♜b1** ♗c5 **54.f6** ♗b3+ **55.♗a2** ♗d2 **56.♜h1+** ♗a7 **57.♜c1** ♜b3+ **58.♗a1** ♜e6 **59.♜c7+** ♗a6 **60.f7** ♗b3+ **61.♗b1** ♜f5+ **62.♗a2** ♗c5 **63.♜a8+** ♗b5



Here's the last critical moment. If White queens, Black delivers a perpetual, but Caruana has a forced win with checks.

64.♜c6+ Not the way to go, but it's just a repetition, so no harm done yet... 64.f8 ♜ ♜e6+ 65.♗b1 ♜e1+ 66.♗a2 ♜e6+=

64...♗a6 **65.♜a8+** ♗b5 **66.♜c6+??** Missing it for good. 66.♜e8+ ♗a6



▲ Fabiano Caruana kept his eye close on all the games in the Candidates

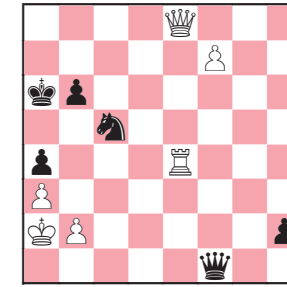
67.♜e2+! I guess the players missed this retreating move. (But not 67.f8 ♜?? ♜d5+) 67...♗d3 (Or 67...b5 68.♜c6+ ♗a7 69.♜e7+ ♗b7 70.♜e3+ ♗b8 71.♜e6+-) 68.♜xh2 ♜e6+ 69.♗b1 ♜e1+ 70.♗c2+-.

66...♗a6 **67.♜e7** ♜f1! Both ...♜c4+ and ...h1=♜ are ideas, so Black has enough counterplay.

68.♜a8+ ♗b5 **69.♜e8+** ♗a6 **70.♜a8+** ♗b5 **71.♜e8+** ♗a6 **72.♜e4** Forcing a liquidation into a queen endgame.

▼ Hikaru Nakamura also enjoyed his fame as world's leading chess streamer

Photo by FIDE



72...♗xe4 **72...h1** ♜?? **73.♜a8+** ♗b5 **74.♜b4** mate.

73.♜xa4+ ♗b7 **74.♜xe4+** ♗a7 **75.♜a4+** ♗b7 **76.♜d7+** ♗a6 **77.♜c8+** ♗a7 **78.f8** ♜ ♜xf8 **79.♜xf8** h1 ♜ One extra pawn is not nearly enough to win – White's king will always be harassed with checks. A fun fact that many people may not know is that this is even a theoretical draw without Black's b6 pawn! I remember I was pretty surprised when I first learned that (I was already a GM at the time) – check a tablebase if you don't believe me.

80.a4 ♜d5+ **81.♗a3** ♜d3+ **82.b3** ♜d4 **83.♜f7+** ♗b8 **84.♜e8+** ♗a7 **85.♜e7+** ♗b8 **86.♜e1** ♜d6+ **87.♜b4** ♜f6 **88.♜d2** ♜e7+ **89.b4** ♜e6 **90.♜d3** ♗a7 **91.♜c3** ♗b8 **92.♜b3** ♜f6 **93.♜e3** ♜d6 **94.♗b3** ♜d5+ **95.♗b2** ♜d6 **96.♜e8+** ♗a7 **97.♜f7+** ♗b8 **98.♗c3** ♜e5+ **99.♗d3** ♜d6+ **100.♗c4** ♜c6+ **101.♗b3** ♜d6 **102.♜f3** ♜d4 **103.♜e2**

♜d5+ **104.♗a3** ♜d6 **105.♜b5** ♜d4 **106.♗b3** ♗a7 **107.♜e2** ♜d5+ **108.♗a3** ♜d4 **109.♗b3** Draw

This was certainly a heartbreaking miss for Fabiano that will probably haunt him for a while. Let's hope he's able to recover and continue playing at a high level.

First Half

Fabiano Caruana and Hikaru Nakamura came in as strong favorites, being the two highest rated players in the event, as well as the most consistent players in recent times. Let's examine their paths leading up to the dramatic final round.

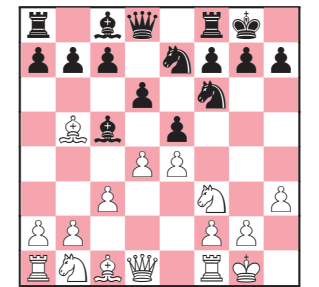
As always in the Candidates, players from the same federation must play each other in the first round, so the two Americans had an interesting battle to start things off. Caruana had a great position against Nakamura's offbeat Sicilian, but failed to make the most of it, and the game ended in a draw. The second round brought disaster for Nakamura, as he collapsed against Vidit as White right from the opening.

C65

Hikaru Nakamura	2789
Vidit Santosh Gujrathi	2727

FIDE Candidates, Toronto 2024

1.e4 e5 **2.♗f3** ♗c6 **3.♗b5** ♗f6 **4.d3** ♗c5 **5.c3** 0-0 **6.0-0** d6 **7.h3** ♗e7 **8.d4**



In this theoretical Berlin position, in which practically everyone to this point had preferred the obvious 8...♗b6, Vidit managed to spring a prepared novelty.

8...c6N This involves a pawn sacrifice. A predeceasing game followed 8...♗b6 9.♜e1 d5 10.♗xe5 ♗xe4 11.♗d2 ♗d6 12.♗d3 f6 13.♗ef3 ♗f5 14.♗b3 ♗xd3 15.♜xd3 which ended in a draw in M.Carlsen 2830 - W.So 2752, CCT Final playoff (rapid), Toronto 2023.

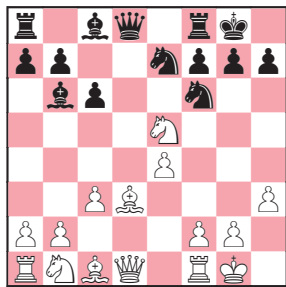


9.♔d3 Now the other point of Vidit's prep is revealed. It looks strange to voluntarily kick the bishop to d3, where it stands well, defending the e4 pawn. However, it turns out Black can still maintain the central tension.

Upon 9.dxc5 cxb5 10.cxd6 ♖g6 White is up a pawn for now, but the pawn on d6 is far advanced and it's difficult to protect it. Here's a sample line. 11.♞e1 ♙e6 12.b3 This looks like a natural try to activate the bishop on a3 and defend the d6 pawn, but Black can adequately meet it with 12...♞b6! 13.♙a3 a5 Black is ready to put a rook on d8 and shut the door on the a3 bishop with ...b5-b4. This was certainly not the best way for White to play, but Black has a fine position in all lines.

9...♙b6! Another pawn sacrifice, but it's only temporary. 9...exd4? 10.cxd4 Of course, Black should always avoid giving up the center without a good reason.

10.dxe5 dxe5 11.♞xe5



11...♙xh3! A surprising tactic, striking on the kingside seemingly out of nowhere.

12.♞c4? It's a bit surprising just how bad this decision turns out to be. Nakamura decides to keep pieces on the board, but his kingside will sorely miss that h3 pawn. It's not totally apparent at the moment that White's king will come under great danger, but all will become clear in the next few moves.

12.gxh3 ♞b8! If the knight moves then ...♞g3+, using the pin, is very powerful. The next move will show why the queen must be on b8, not c7. 13.♙f4 ♙c7 Black can recover the knight, and I would say his position is pretty comfortable to play, due to White's weakened kingside. Still, Nakamura should have gone for this.

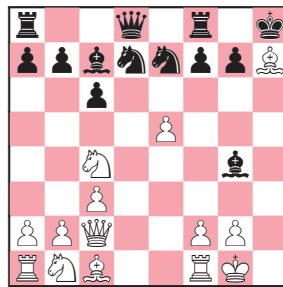
12...♙g4 13.♞c2 ♙c7 14.e5 The best move under the circumstances, blocking Black's dark-squared bishop and snatching the h7 pawn. A normal development move like 14.♙e3? loses the game pretty much



▲ Hikaru Nakamura kibitzing the Nepomniachtchi-Firouzja game

on the spot after 14...b5 15.♞cd2 ♖g6 16.♞a3 ♞h5+. The knight is coming to f4, the queen is coming to h4, and the game won't last very long.

14...♞d7 15.♙xh7+ ♔h8



16.♙d3!? The position is tough to play, but Nakamura probably should've tried something else here. 16.f3 ♙h5 (After 16...♙e6 17.g3!, suddenly White switches to the kingside with ♞h2, and things aren't so simple.) 17.g4 ♙g6 17...b5 is also worth considering, but let's keep things simple. 18.♙xg6 ♞xg6 19.f4 ♔g8 White's king feels really unsafe.

16.♞e4 is a pretty crazy possibility that both players probably discarded after seeing Black's reply. 16...f5 looks like it wins for Black, but we have to go further. 17.♙xf5! ♙xf5 18.♞h4+ ♔g8 19.♙g5 It turns out Black is tied up and has to give some material back. 19...♙f7 20.♞d6 ♞xe5 21.♙xe7! (21.♞d7 ♔xf7+) 21...♙xe7 22.♞xf5 ♙f7 and Black is still slightly

better thanks to his much greater piece activity.

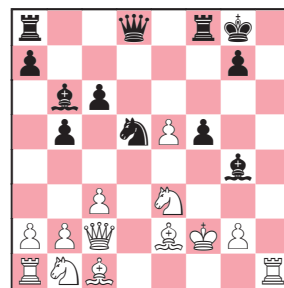
16...b5 17.♞e3 ♞xe5 18.♙e2 18.♞xg4 was objectively the last chance to take this bishop before it is supported by the f-pawn. 18...♞xg4 19.g3 f5 Black is ready with ...♞d6 and ...f4, and I don't know how White should survive this kingside assault. Maybe a computer would hold on, but if I had this on the board as White, I'd already be in despair.

18...f5! Now Black is always ready to recapture with ...fxg4, and his attack flows easily.

19.f4 ♙b6! Not the only way, but the strongest. The pin will decide the game.

20.♔f2 20.fxe5 ♞d5 21.♙xg4 ♞xe3 22.♙xe3 ♙xe3+ 23.♔h1 fxg4+-.

20...♞d5 21.♙h1+ ♔g8 22.fxe5



▲ Nakamura and Vidit in a post-mortem discussion



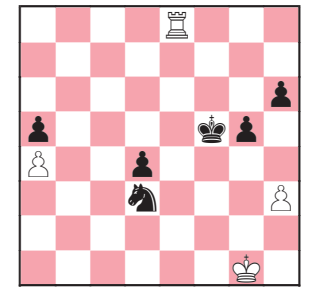
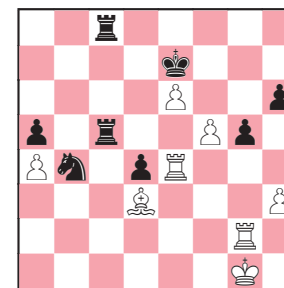
▲ Nakamura was able to press and win against Firouzja

22...♞g5 23.♔e1 ♙xe3 White's position is in total tatters, so I don't think it's necessary to show the rest of the game. **Black won** in short order.

Nakamura drew his next two games without excitement and then got a badly needed win in round 5 against Alireza Firouzja, kickstarting his comeback.

Alireza Firouzja	2760
Hikaru Nakamura	2789

FIDE Candidates, Toronto 2024

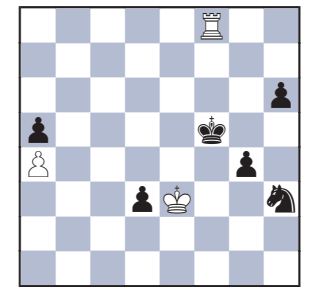


The forced sequence has ended and we have an unclear endgame. It still should be a draw with best play, but both players can still go wrong. If Black is careless, then White can take the a5 pawn and start running it up the board. Knights are notoriously bad at stopping passed pawns, especially a- or h-pawns, so this is a serious danger. On the other hand, Black already has a passed pawn, and potentially two more connected ones if he can snag the h3 pawn.

58...♞f4! I love this decision. Now it's Hikaru's turn to take risks. 58...♞b2 would practically secure the draw. If Black takes the a4 pawn he can never lose. The only way for White to stop this is 59.♙a8, but this would lose for him. 59.♙a8?? (59.♔f1 ♞xa4 60.♙a8=) 59...d3 60.♙xa5+ ♔e4 61.♙a8 d2+-.

59.♔f1 59.♙d8? ♔e4 White shouldn't let the black king come closer.

59...d3 60.♔f2 ♞xh3+ 61.♔e3 g4 62.♔xd3?? With seconds on the clock, Firouzja blunders and loses immediately. Correct was 62.♙f8+.



White has many moves that objectively draw, but none of them are easy, especially in time trouble. 62...♔g5 63.♙g8+ ♔h4 64.♔xd3 h5 65.♔e3 ♔g3 Now that White has temporarily halted Black's pawns, he has to create his own passed pawn on the other side of the board. 66.♙a8 ♔h2 (66...h4 67.♙xa5 ♞f4 68.♙f5 ♞g2+ 69.♔e4 h3 70.a5 h2 71.♙f1 ♞f4 72.a6 ♞e6 73.a7 ♞c7 74.♙c1 ♔g2 75.♔e3 h1♞ 76.♙xh1 ♔xh1 77.♔f4=) 67.♙xa5 g3 68.♙a8 g2 69.♙g8 If



Black queens then White's pawn is too fast. 69...g1♖+ 70.♔xg1 ♜xg1 71.a5 h4 72.a6 ♖f4! 73.♜xf4 (73.a7 ♖d5+ 74.♜f3 ♖b6 75.♜g4=) 73...h3 74.a7 h2 75.a8♖ h1♖=.

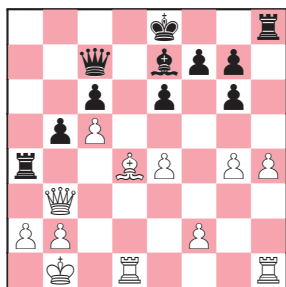
62...g3 Black wins thanks to a fork trick. 63.♔f8+ 63.♔g8 g2 64.♔xg2 ♖f4++.

63...♜e6 **White resigned**

In the same round, Caruana preserved his plus one score with a miraculous save against Vidit.

Vidit Santosh	2727
Fabiano Caruana	2803

FIDE Candidates, Toronto 2024



▶▶ Vidit Santosh vs. Fabiano Caruana

Vidit has played a great game to this point and has a nice position. He's up a pawn, and Black's king is still in the center. Black's main hope lies in the open a-file – if he can bring his other rook into play, he could develop counterplay. But if Black castles, he runs into h4-h5. So what to do?

22...e5? A big oversight. After 22...♔xh4 23.♔xh4 ♜xh4 24.♜xg7, White is a clear pawn up.

22...0-0 was probably the best try, scary as it is. 23.h5 ♖f4 (23...g5 24.h6+-) 24.f3 (24.hxg6 ♖xe4+ 25.♜a1 ♖xg4 26.gxf7+ ♔xf7 It's shaky, but Black's position is holding together for now.) 24...♔d8 25.♖e3 ♖xe3 26.♜xe3 ♔da8 27.a3 b4 Black survives to a pawn-down endgame in which he can at least activate his rooks and create some play.

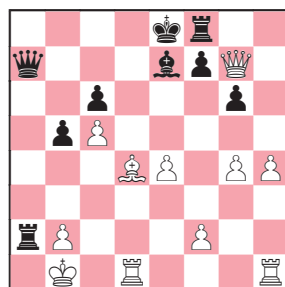
23.♖g3! It seems Caruana simply missed this move. Now he doesn't have a good way to defend the e5 pawn and is just lost.

23...♖a7 After 23...f6 24.g5+- White crashes through on the kingside.

24.♖xe5 ♔xa2 25.♖xg7 Black's checks don't lead anywhere, so Vidit calmly takes a free pawn.

25...♔f8 Now there's only one important

move left to find and White will be home free. But Vidit fails to stop his opponent's idea. The immediate 25...♔a1+ fails, due to 26.♜c2 ♖a4+ 27.b3 ♔a2+ 28.♜b2 ♖xe4+ 29.♜c1 ♖f4+ 30.♔d2+-.



26.♖e5? 26.♜c2! White's king will find safety on the other side of the board. Black's queen and one rook can't harm White. 26...♖a4+ 27.♜d2 ♖b3 28.♜e2+-.

26...♖a4 Now White's king can't escape and he has to choose between giving a perpetual, or playing the unclear 27.b3.

27.♖b8+ After 27.♜c1? f6, the queen must give up defense of the bishop. 28.♖e6 ♔a1+ 29.♜d2 ♖xd4+-.

27.b3 ♖xb3+ 28.♜b2 f6 (Black can also play 28...♔a8, keeping the queens on.) 29.♖c3 ♖xc3 30.♜xc3 ♔xf2=.



27...♜d8 28.♖e5+ ♜e7 29.♖b8+ ♜d8 30.♖e5+ ♜e7 **Draw**

At the end of the first cycle, the standings were as follows. Nepomniachtchi led with 4½/7. He was closely followed by Caruana and the two young Indian prodigies, Gukesh and Praggnanandhaa, all with 4/7. Nakamura and Vidit were on an even score, 3½/7. The two other players, Alireza Firouzja and Nijat Abasov, were out of contention, with 2½ and 2 points respectively.



▲ Hikaru Nakamura, entrepreneur Michael Hyatt and Fabiano Caruana

Second Half

The Nakamura – Caruana clash in round 8 proved crucial for the paths of both players. Nakamura won a phenomenal game to bring himself closer to the lead.

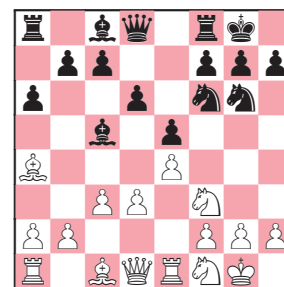
C78

Hikaru Nakamura	2789
Fabiano Caruana	2803

FIDE Candidates, Toronto 2024

1.e4 e5 2.♖f3 ♖c6 3.♜b5 a6 4.♜a4 ♖f6 5.d3 ♜c5 6.0-0 d6 7.c3 0-0 8.♔e1 ♖e7 The game started as a Ruy Lopez, but Nakamura opted for a quiet, non-theoretical path, and we will soon see structures that resemble the Italian.

9.♖bd2 ♖g6 10.♖f1



10...d5 A novelty in this exact position, but one that always should be considered. If it works for Black, it can often equalize immediately.

11.exd5 ♖xd5 12.♜b3 12.♖xe5 The bishop

is on c5 and not a7, so this actually merits consideration, as there is a fork trick.

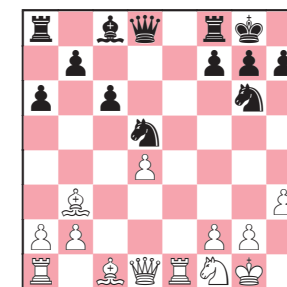
A) 12...♖xe5 13.d4! (13.♔xe5 ♜xf2+ 14.♜xf2 ♖f6+);

B) 12...♜xf2+ 13.♜xf2 ♖xe5 14.♜g1 ♖g6 White has the bishop pair and a reasonable position. White's king might have some problems down the road thanks to the missing f-pawn, but it's not a huge deal at the moment.

12...c6 13.d4 exd4 14.♖xd4 This might not look like the most interesting position in the world, but there's plenty of room for both players to outplay the opponent.

14...♖f6 One of many fine approaches, aiming to give White an isolated pawn. 14...♜e6 is also a typical move in such positions – developing the bishop to a comfortable square. If it is ever taken, then White will have to deal with pressure along the f-file on the f2 pawn.

15.h3 ♜xd4 16.cxd4 ♖d5



So, Black has a better pawn structure and good prospects in the endgame, while

White has the bishop pair and potential kingside attacking chances.

17.♜c2 ♜e6 18.♖g3 ♖df4 Hinting at playing ...♜d5, which would put some pressure on White's kingside.

19.♔e4 ♖d5 It looks like Black just lost a tempo, which he technically did, but White's rook on e4 also kind of gets in the way. It could be a target soon, and it also interferes with his nice bishop on c2. Additionally, White had ideas of playing ♖e4 and bringing the knight to c5 or g5, so the rook stands in the way of that, too.

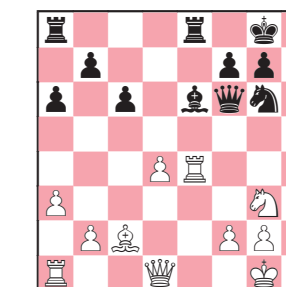
20.a3 Always a useful move, preventing ...♖b4 permanently.

For instance, White may want to play ♖d3 in the future, setting up a battery, but then ...♖b4 could be a problem, hence this prophylactic move.

20...♔e8 21.♜d2 ♖f6 Not a mistake by any means, but it allows White strong practical pressure. The knight is good on d5 – no need to move it. I like 21...♖b6 the most, trying to break White's coordination by attacking the b2 pawn.

22.♜g5 Of course, this was the idea – Nakamura wasn't planning on giving away the d4 pawn.

22...h6 23.♜xf6 ♖xf6



24.♖d2 On the surface, Black's problems are completely solved – he has gotten rid of White's bishop pair, while the weak pawn on d4 remains. That would be my first impression upon seeing this position. However, a closer look reveals that it's not easy for Black to deal with White's attacking possibilities. White has easy play – he can double on the e-file, he can bring his knight to h5 or e4 in the future, and also



there is the idea of pushing his h-pawn to h5 to kick Black's knight away.

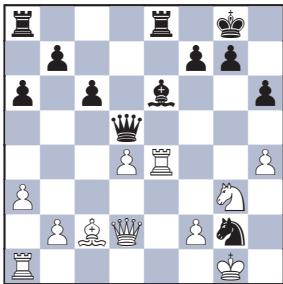
24...♖g5 24...♗d5 is the most natural move. If Black trades a pair of rooks he doesn't have to worry about any attack, but there's a strong reply in 25.♔g4!. Then, after 25...♙e6 26.♖h5 ♖d8 27.♔g3, White has tremendous pressure.

25.♔e3 ♖f4 This move is good, but what's not good is that Caruana spent 20 minutes on it! He went from 33 minutes down to 13, and in this time control, that's unforgivable.

26.h4! A key move to see from afar – the queen is kicked away from its active post, enabling White to keep attacking.

26...♖d5 26...♖xh4? 27.♔e4 g5 Black can keep the knight, but at the cost of ruining his king safety. 28.♔ae1 looks like a nightmare for Black – his king is weak and his queen is completely out of play.

27.♔e4 ♖g6 27...♗xg2!? A totally strange possibility – maybe in hindsight Caruana should have gone for it to change the course of the game, but for a human this move looks ridiculous. The knight can't be taken immediately due to ...f7-f5, but if White doesn't take it immediately, how exactly does it escape?



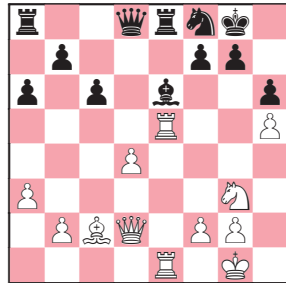
28.♖c3! Getting out of any ...♖xh4-f3 fork tricks. (28.♔e5?? ♖xh4! 29.♔xd5 ♖f3+-) 28...♗h3 29.♖h2 ♖f4 The knight escapes miraculously due to mate threat on g2. 30.♔g1 ♔xe4 31.♖xe4 ♖f5 32.d5 ♗g2 Defending against the mate on g7. The line continues and it looks like Black survives by the skin of his teeth, but most people wouldn't go for this.

28.♔ae1 Now Black's position is really difficult – White's rooks are monsters and his play is straightforward.

28...♖f8 28...♔ad8 29.f4! An extremely strong idea – threatening f5. 29.♔e5 ♖d8 30.h5



▲ Fabiano Caruana vs. Alireza Firouzja



30...♗d7? It's tempting to try to trade rooks, but this allows White's knight to enter with decisive effect. Both 30...♖d7 and 30...♖b6 would prolong the fight, although White has an unquestionable advantage.

31.♔xe8 ♗xe8 32.♖f5 ♖f6 33.♖b4 b5? Ends the game immediately, but the position was lost already. 33...♗d7 34.♖xb7 ♗xf5 35.♖xa8 ♗xc2 36.♔e8 ♖d6 37.♔c8 Materially Black is doing okay, but he's tied down completely. There's a nice trick if he tries to defend the c6 pawn. 37...♗e4 38.♔d8 ♖e7 39.♔e8+-.

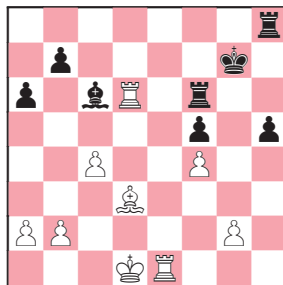
34.♖e7+ ♖h8 35.♖d5 Black resigned

Nakamura suffered yet another crushing defeat in the rematch against Vidit in the following round, which threatened to kill all the momentum he had built up from defeating Fabi. Nonetheless, he brought himself back up and in round 10 scored a win against Abasov, who fought his hardest in this tournament despite being outrated, but tended to be outplayed at critical moments.

In the same round, Caruana scored a nice win against Firouzja. By this point it was clear that the young talent was not in his best form, and was having a second disappointing Candidates Tournament in a row. Both players had less than 10 minutes with 10 moves to play until time control, but Caruana held his nerves far better than his opponent.

Fabiano Caruana	2803
Alireza Firouzja	2760

FIDE Candidates, Toronto 2024



This endgame is around equal, but White is probably slightly happier here, since Black has a fixed target on a light square – the f5 pawn. On the other hand, White's pawn on g2 isn't so safe – it's currently under attack, and if it ever moves to g3, then Black can try ...h5-h4 or putting a rook on the g-file. If White could get his king to f2 and defend it, then that would be a dream come true, but that takes time.

30.c5! Here 30...♗xg2 fails to 31.♔g1, so White takes time to cement his rook.

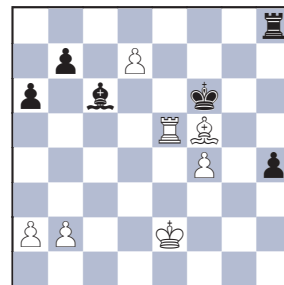
30...h4? Allowing White to execute a

nice maneuver. 30...♔xd6! No need to fear giving White a passed pawn – it's not going to advance very far. 31.cxd6 ♔d8 32.♔e7+ (32.♔e6 ♗d5) 32...♖f6 33.♔e5 It looks like White will take the f5 pawn with check and Black will have to defend an unpleasant endgame, but there's a simple solution. 33...♗d7! is the key move that the players probably missed from afar. Everything is secure and Black can play ...♗e6 next, followed by ...♔xd6.

31.♔e7+ ♖g6 32.♔e5! Now Black is in all sorts of tactical trouble.

32...♔h5 Again 32...♗xg2 doesn't work, because of 33.♗xf5+ ♖g7 34.♔e7+ ♔f7 (34...♖f8 35.♔c7 ♔xd6+ 36.cxd6+-) 35.♔g6+-.

Interesting line was 32...♔xd6 33.cxd6 ♗xg2 34.d7 ♗c6 35.♗xf5+ ♖f6 36.♖e2, when Black can't play ...h3 since White can simply take it.



36...♗xd7 This trick almost works... (36...♔d8 37.♖f2! ♗xd7 38.♔d5 ♖e7

▼ Hikaru Nakamura and Fabiano Caruana

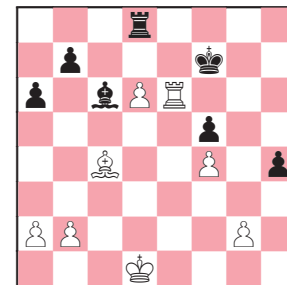


39.♔xd7+ ♔xd7 40.♗xd7 ♖xd7 41.♖f3+-) 37.♗xd7 h3 What to do about the h-pawn? 38.♔e6+ ♖g7 39.♔b6! h2 40.♔xb7 h1♔ 41.♗c6+ ♖f6 42.♗xh1 ♔xh1 43.♖d3+-.

33.♗f1 Safe, but there was a knockout. 33.♔d8! Invading the newly available eighth rank. Black's king is getting hunted. 33...♖g7 (33...♗xg2 34.♔g8+-) 34.♗c4+-.

33...♔xd6+ 34.cxd6 ♔h8 35.♔e6+ ♖f7 It seems a bit strange to me to walk right into a discovered attack. 35...♖g7 Black can kick the rook next with ♗d5 and try to fight on.

36.♗c4 ♔d8



37.♖e1! Excellent patience under pressure. Instead of trying to give a check right away, Caruana uses the threat of the discovered attack to move his king closer to the critical g2 pawn.

37...♖g7 37...♗xg2 38.♔e2+-.

38.♖f2 Now everything is safe for White and the d6 pawn remains on the board, so it's completely winning.

38...a5 39.a3 b5 40.♗d3 Time control is reached and the rest is easy.

40...♗d5 41.♔e7+ ♗f7 41...♖f6 42.♗xb5 ♔xd6 43.♔d7+- Once the rooks come off White can create a passed pawn on the queenside and/or bring his king to h3 and target the h4 pawn. Black will always be tied to his f5 pawn, so he can't really do much to resist.

42.♗xb5 ♖f6 43.♔c7 ♔xd6 44.♔c6 ♔xc6

45.♗xc6 ♗b3 46.♗d7 ♖g6 47.♖g1 Black resigned

With four rounds to play, Gukesh and Nepo had 6 points, and Caruana, Nakamura, and Pragg were only a half point behind with 5½ points.

Getting Closer To The Goal

Round 11 was one of the most exciting yet. Gukesh and Caruana faced off, and played a high-level game which resulted in a draw. Both players could be satisfied with this result. Caruana had the black pieces, which meant that he couldn't really play for a win without taking huge risks. On another board, Nakamura outplayed Pragg in a beautiful endgame victory. The most dramatic game of the whole tournament (besides the last round) took place between Vidit and Nepo. Vidit missed multiple wins, but none were that easy, and after nearly 6 hours of play, he collapsed, and Nepo took the full point, jumping back into the lead.

Here's the Pragg – Nakamura game from that round.

D06

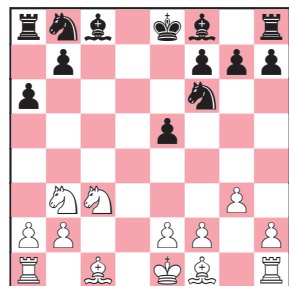
R. Praggnanandhaa	2747
Hikaru Nakamura	2789

FIDE Candidates, Toronto 2024

1.d4 d5 2.♖f3 ♖f6 3.c4 c5!? Nakamura was full of opening surprises during this event, but this one was particularly out of left field. This symmetrical sideline isn't considered bad, but it tends to lead to positions in which White is slightly better with no risk, by virtue of having played the first move. In a game where Nakamura would really like to generate winning chances, this isn't the first opening you would think of, but he is content to drag his opponent out of theory, equalize, and attempt to outplay him from there.

4.cxd5 cxd4 5.♖xd4 ♖xd5 6.♖c3 ♖xd4 7.♖xd4 a6 Necessary to stop ♖b5. **8.g3** White's light-squared bishop belongs on the long diagonal in such positions – Black sometimes has trouble developing his queenside due to pressure against the b7 pawn.

8...e5 9.♖b3



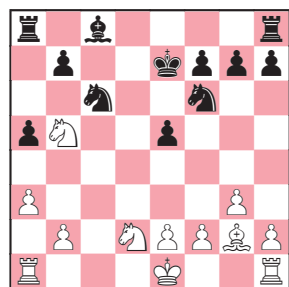
9...♖c6 9...♗d7 is the most natural way of playing, trying to activate the “problem” bishop, but it doesn’t solve Black’s problems. 10.♗g2 ♗c6 11.0-0 ♗b4 12.♗d2 ♗xg2 13.♗xg2 ♖c6 14.♗ac1 0-0-0 15.a3 ♗xc3 16.♗xc3 This sequence of moves seems to be natural for both sides. White retains a slight pull thanks to ideas of ♗xe5 and ♖a5.

10.♗g2 a5 A typical idea – knights on b3, b6, g3, or g6 can often get harassed by rook pawns. 10...♗e7?! is an example of how Black can get into trouble with lazy developing moves. After 11.0-0 0-0 12.♗e3 ♗f5 13.♗c5 White’s knight will soon land on c5. We see how positionally dangerous Black’s opening can be – White’s bishop on g2 is an unopposed monster.

11.♖b5 A novelty, immediately occupying the newly-weakened b5 square. However, it’s probably not the best try for an advantage, as Black can quickly solve his development problems with tempo. 11.0-0 a4 12.♖d2 is strongly met by 12...♗e6!. It’s critical to keep White’s knight out of c4. White’s pieces are a bit more restricted now, so Black should be able to complete his development in peace.

11...♗b4+ 12.♗d2 ♖e7 No need to castle anymore – the queens are off and the king feels perfectly safe in the center.

13.a3 ♗xd2+ 14.♖xd2



14...a4! A very nice positional decision – clamping down on the light squares and



making the b2 pawn a weakness. At the moment, it may be hard to imagine this will bring anything significant – the position is still largely symmetrical and may seem to be heading for a draw. Nevertheless, if Black is able to successfully complete development while preventing White from liquidating the b2 pawn, then White will be left without a clear path forward.

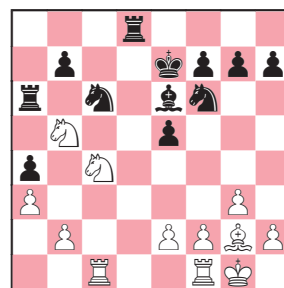
15.♖c4 15.♗xc6 This idea always has to be considered – it compromises Black’s pawn structure, but it gives away the light-squared bishop and opens the b-file for Black’s rooks. 15...bxc6 16.♖c3 ♗e6 17.♗c1 The position is still equal, but I think Black can cause practical problems with an accurate move here. 17...♗hd8! It’s not easy for White to get his h1 rook into the game thanks to this pressure on the d2 knight – plans like castling or playing f3, followed by ♗f2, are completely off the table. White should still be fine, but in my opinion his position is extremely difficult to play in practice.

15...♗e6 16.♗c1 ♗a6! An important move, and one that Nakamura had to see

for a while back. This move deals with ♖c7 ideas in a surprising way. It seems that Black is just putting his rook on a square which can still be attacked, but the tactics work out.

17.0-0 17.♖c7 ♗xc4 18.♖xa6 (18.♗xc4 ♗a5 Or 18...♗b6 is good, too. White’s knight is caught behind enemy lines.) 18...♗xa6+ This is why the whole ...♗a6 idea works.

17...♗d8



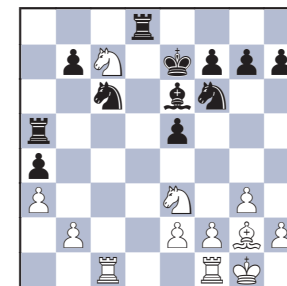
White is beaten to the punch for control of the d-file as well. It’s now clear that Nakamura has won the opening battle. It’s not like he has an advantage yet, but in the



long-term one can see how this game can turn his way. White doesn’t have any clear plans, while Black sees the b2 pawn and b3 outpost as future goals. At the moment, White can’t play ♗fd1 because the c4 knight will hang. So, White will move that knight soon (in fact, he does it next move). Then, Black will have the idea of invading with both his rooks, as ...♗b6 and/or ...♗d2 become viable. Black will also have ...♗b3 as a possibility, occupying the outpost and controlling the d1 square.

18.♖e3 ♗a5 18...♗b6 is tempting, but it leaves Black’s a4 pawn out to dry, and Nakamura probably felt that he didn’t want to let his opponent trade too many pawns so easily. 19.♖c3 ♗xb2 20.♖xa4 ♗xe2 21.♗b1 Black has won a pawn, but it’s likely premature, as White has good piece activity and can target Black’s b7 pawn.

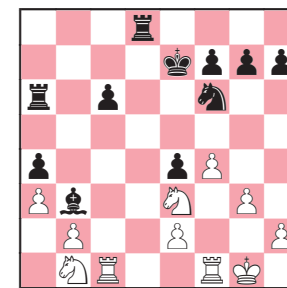
19.♗xc6 It was worth considering 19.♖c7, since it forces matters. Sometimes you have to seize the moment to go for a concrete line to stop a backslide into a worse position.



19...♖d4 (19...♗b3?! 20.♗xc6 bxc6 21.♗xc6 ♗d2 22.♗fc1 looks unpleasant for Black, who has to be highly cautious.) 20.♖xe6 ♖xe2+ 21.♗h1 fxe6 (Not 21...♗xe6? 22.♗c7 when ...♗d7 fails to ♗h3+, so Black is in trouble.) 22.♗c7+ ♗d7 23.♗xb7 ♗xb7 24.♗xb7 White should be happy with all the piece trades, especially since he’s gotten rid of Black’s bishop. The weakness of the b2 pawn should be compensated by Black’s a4 pawn, which White can target with his bishop.

19...bxc6 20.♖c3 ♗b3 21.♖b1! It’s necessary to remind Black about his own weakness – the c6 pawn, while conveniently preventing the ...♗d2 invasion.

21...♗a6 22.f4 e4 This pawn advance is pretty risky – after all, it could become weak later.



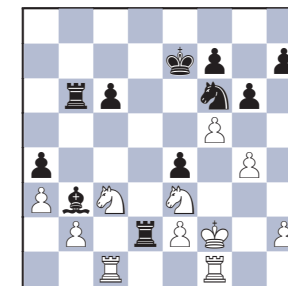
23.♗f2 I think Pragg would have been totally out of danger if he found 23.♗c5 – White should seize the opportunity to activate his pieces. 23...♗b6 (23...♖d5 24.♗f2) 24.♖c3 ♗d2 25.♗f2 Not the only move, but a safe one. 25...♗xb2 26.♗a5 White will win back the a4 pawn at least, and Black is the one who should be careful to equalize here.

23...♗b6 24.♖c3?! Again, I think 24.♗c5 is a key idea – getting the rook out first before the knight.

24...g6 25.♗b1 This move looks a little strange, but the idea is that ...♗d2 is no longer so strong for Black, since the b2

pawn is protected. In my mind, this is the final admission of passivity. Now there’s no going back.

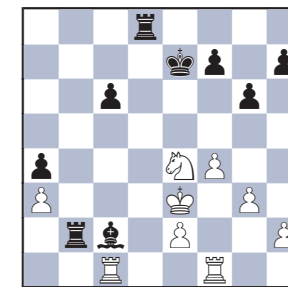
25.g4! ♗d2 26.f5! is not an easy idea whatsoever – just giving away the b2 pawn.



A) 26...g5 27.h4 h6 28.hxg5 hxg5 29.♗h1 ♗xb2 30.♗h8 The rook will come to a8 and White should draw. Not easy to see from a few moves back.

B) 26...♗xb2 27.♗b1 ♗xb1 28.♗xb1 White has threats of ♖xa4 and g5 followed by ♖xe4, so he’s fine.

25...♖d5! 26.♗bc1 After 26.♖xe4 ♖xe3 27.♗xe3 ♗c2 the b2 pawn will drop under the worst circumstances. 28.♗bc1 ♗xb2

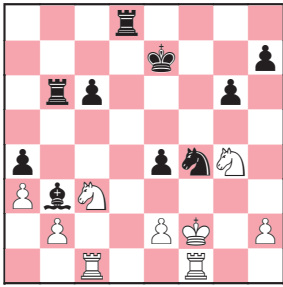


Compare this position to some of the previous lines where Black took the b2 pawn. In some of those lines Black was even ahead in material and White was okay, whereas here material is equal. The thing is, it’s not actually about the b2 pawn at all, it’s more about the activity of the pieces. Here White’s rooks are totally passive, and the c2 bishop shuts the c-file down nicely. If Black manages to win the a-pawn, he will have a passed pawn a few squares from queening.

26...f5 The pawn push on move 22 has finally been justified for Black, albeit not without some cooperation from his opponent.

27.g4 A very understandable decision – trying to break at Black’s pawn chain rather than consent to being locked up.

27...fxg4 28.♖xg4 ♖xf4



29.♔e3? One of the millions of examples that demonstrates why chess is so hard – the most natural move is a losing one. Upon 29.♖xe4? ♜f8 White can't keep his king safe. For example, 30.♔e3 ♖g2+ 31.♔d2 ♖d8+ 32.♔c3 ♕e6–+ The g4 knight is attacked and ...♖b3+ is coming. It's too much to deal with.

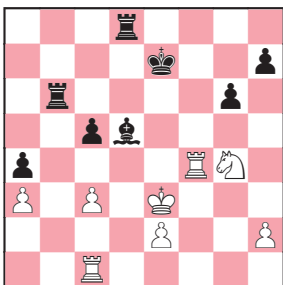
29.♔e1! is a great resource that keeps White in the game. 29...♖e6 30.♖e5 Taking the e4 pawn just opens the position and allows Black to activate his pieces, so White plays “around” the pawn and will only take it when it's convenient. A strange concept to be sure. (30.♖xe4 ♖d4 31.♖ef2 ♖f4 Threatening mate in one. 32.♖e3 ♔d6 White's pieces are pretty stuck.) 30...♔c5 31.♖f4 White still has drawing chances.

29...♔d5+ 30.♔xe4 ♖xc3+ 31.bxc3 31.♖xc3 may be better objectively, but not many people would just give away the b2 pawn for free. 31...♔d5+ 32.♔e3 ♖xb2.

31...c5! The b6 rook, which has been staring down the b2 pawn for a while, suddenly switches directions and will come to the center of the board.

32.♖f4 Losing by force, but the position was already pretty hopeless. After 32.♔f4 ♖e6 Black's rooks are way too good here, and White's knight is offside and vulnerable.

32...♔d5+ 33.♔e3

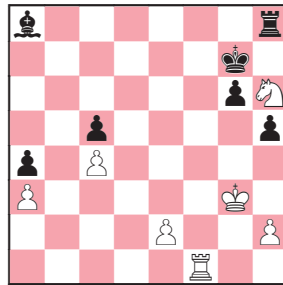


33...h5! The knight is short of good squares.

34.c4 34.♖e5 ♖e6–+ or 34.♖f2 ♖e6+ 35.♖e4 g5–+.

34...♕a8 35.♖h6 ♖e6+ 36.♔f2 ♖f6 Once the f4 rook is gone, the h6 knight will be left to its own devices.

37.♔g3 ♖h8 38.♖xf6 ♔xf6 39.♖f1+ ♔g7

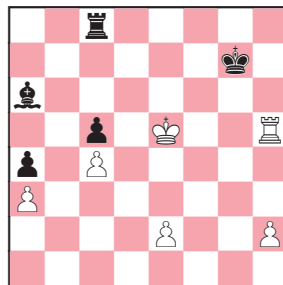


40.♖f5+ 40.♖f7 ♖f8–+.

40...gxf5 41.♖xf5 White has managed to get one pawn for the piece and will soon get a second, but his position is hopeless for two reasons. First of all, his passed pawns are not dangerous – they are neither connected nor far advanced. Second, the c4 pawn is fixed on a light square, which means that Black's bishop should be able to collect it sooner or later.

41...♖c8 Not the only way, but I like it a lot. It makes more sense to me to protect the c5 pawn rather than the h5 pawn. Maintaining the c4 pawn as a fixed target gives Black an easy plan.

42.♖xh5 ♕b7 43.♔f4 ♕a6 44.♔e5



44...♔g6! The final important move. After 44...♕xc4 45.♔d6 things suddenly become tricky since White will win the c5 pawn, and Black can't trade rooks due to having the wrong-colored bishop. It's still winning, but there's no need to complicate matters.

45.♖h4 ♔g5 46.♖h3 ♕xc4 47.♖g3+ ♔h6 48.e4 ♖c6 Keeping the king out of f6.

49.♔f5 ♕f7 50.♔e5 c4 51.♔d4 ♖d6+ 52.♔c5 ♖d3 53.♔b4 ♖b3+ 54.♔xa4 ♖xg3 White resigned

Both Americans picked up badly needed wins in round 12, while Nepo only drew. Nakamura beat Firouzja, who imploded and gave away the game in one move. Meanwhile, Caruana outplayed Vidit.

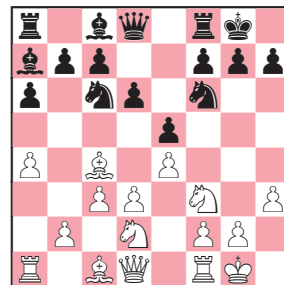
C54

Fabiano Caruana	2803
Vidit Santosh Gujrathi	2727

FIDE Candidates, Toronto 2024

1.e4 e5 2.♖f3 ♖c6 3.♕c4 When you need a win with White, sometimes it's better to avoid the Berlin. At least in the Italian you should be able to keep all the pieces on the board and play an interesting game.

3...♕c5 4.0-0 ♖f6 5.d3 d6 6.c3 a6 7.a4 ♕a7 8.♖bd2 0-0 9.h3



9...♖e7 A common idea – Black relocates the knight to g6, and can then play ...c6 and ...d5. We already saw this in the Nakamura–Caruana game from earlier.

10.♖e1 ♖g6 11.a5 A bit of a mysterious-looking move perhaps. It gains space on the queenside but might not appear to be White's first priority. The subtlety lies in the battle for both sides to play d3-d4 or ...d6-d5. There are some benefits to leaving the knight on d2 for now. Here's a sample line.

11.♖f1 c6 12.♕b3 h6 (12...d5 is also possible immediately, but then Black has to contend with 13.♕g5.) 13.♖g3 d5! 14.exd5 ♖xd5 Now 15.♖xe5 fails tactically, due to 15...♖xe5 16.♖xe5 ♕xf2+ 17.♔xf2 ♖f6+ An extremely common idea in these Italian positions. This is one of the explanations for Caruana's 11th move – he leaves the knight on d2 rather than immediately transferring it to g3. If it were still on d2 here, then ♖f3 could block the check and defend the rook.

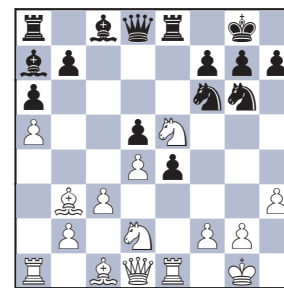


▲ Fabiano Caruana vs. Vidit Santosh Gujrathi

11...c6 12.♕b3 ♖e8 13.d4 Again, if 13.♖f1, then Black could play ...h6 followed by ...d5 with no problems, so White decides to get the central strike in first.

13...d5 A typical response, provoking liquidation in the center.

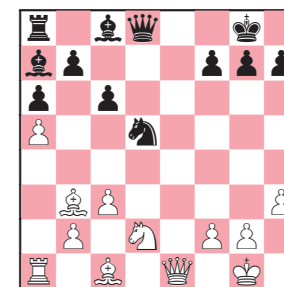
14.dxe5 Upon 14.exd5, Black's usual response is 14...e4, but it actually leads to some really unusual tactics that I don't recall seeing in these structures very often. 15.♖e5 cxd5



16.♖xe4! The f7 pawn is loose, so Black is advised against capturing on e4. 16...♖xe5 (16...♖xe4 is met by 17.♖xe4±. After 16...dxe4 17.♖xf7 ♖c7 18.♖d6+ ♕e6 19.♖xe8 ♖xe8 20.♕g5± White has two pawns and a rook for the minor pieces. Additionally, Black's e4 pawn is a bit weak.) 17.♖xf6+ ♖xf6 Now if White recaptures the knight, the f2 pawn is hanging, but he can use the fact that it is temporarily pinned. 18.♕xd5 ♕d7! 19.dxe5 ♕xf2+ 20.♔h1 (20.♔f1 ♖xe5 21.♖xe5 ♕c5+ Black gets the bishop out

of harm's way with check. 22.♖f3 ♖xe5 White can't take on f7 and open up the f-file for Black's rook, so he's worse here. 23.♖xf7+?? ♔h8 24.♖xd7 ♖e8–+) 20...♖xe5 21.♖xe5 ♖xe5 22.♕xf7+ ♔h8! White can't take on d7 because of ...♖e1+. He's up a pawn, but the activity of Black's pieces forces him to simplify. 23.♕f4 ♖xf4 24.♖xd7 ♖f8 25.♕d5 b6 White still has a material edge, but the opposite-colored bishops should enable Black both to create threats against White's king, and have the ability to hold most endgames.

14...♖xe5 15.♖xe5 ♖xe5 16.exd5 ♖xe1+ 17.♖xe1 ♖xd5



After a forced line we have a position where White has some pull, but it's largely symmetrical and Black has no weaknesses.

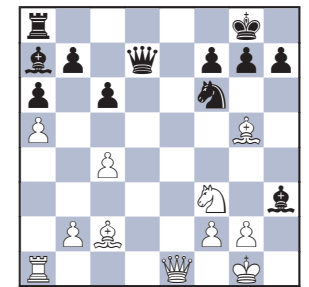
18.♕c2 Stopping ...♕f5. 18.♕xd5 White can give black an isolated pawn, but it's not worth giving up this bishop for. 18...cxd5 19.♖f3 d4! Even if Black allowed ♕e3 it would hardly be a disaster,

but this is simple enough. 20.♖xd4 ♕xd4 21.cxd4 ♕e6= Black controls the light squares very well, so White's extra pawn doesn't amount to much.

18...♕e6 19.♖f3 ♖d7 Black is ready to play ...♖e8 and/or ...♕f5, and it looks like he has no problems whatsoever. Caruana manages to pose a direct problem, though.

20.c4 Where does the knight go?

20...♖e7!? A safe option, but White gets some advantage now. 20...♖f6 Of course this is where the knight wants to go, but you have to see the response to White's next move. 21.♕g5 Now ♕xf6 is an annoying threat. 21...♕xh3! (But not 21...♕xc4?? 22.♕xf6 gxf6 23.♖e4+–) It turns out this works for Black, but you have to see so much in order to go for it, so I don't blame Vidit for not trusting this option.



A) 22.♕xf6 ♖g4! 23.♖h4 gxf6 24.♖a3 ♖xh4 25.♖xh3 ♖d4 26.♕xh7+ ♔g7 Black's king is actually safe here – ♖h8 comes next.

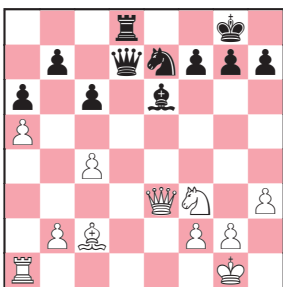
B) 22.♖e5 ♖e6 23.gxh3 ♖e8 It's not technically a pin since White can move the knight to d3 or f3, but then Black can play ...♖xh3, uncovering a dangerous attack on the queen. 24.♕f4 ♕d4 25.♖d3 ♖xh3 26.♖f1 ♖g4+ 27.♖g2 ♕xf2+! Crazy stuff. White can't touch the bishop. 28.♔h1 (28.♖xf2 ♖xf4; 28.♔xf2 ♖e2+) 28...♖h5+ 29.♖h2 ♖f3+ 30.♖g2 ♖h5+–.

C) 22.gxh3 ♖xh3 23.♖a3 ♖g4 24.♕h4 g5! The bishop can't return to g3 because of the pin, so White can't keep the defense together. It's still objectively equal (White has to give the piece back one way or another), but I won't bog you down in variations here.

21.♕e3 ♕xe3 22.♖xe3 Now we see a major downside of the knight's placement on e7 – 22...♕xc4 still can't be played due to 23.♖e4, attacking the bishop and the h7 pawn. If the knight were on f6, this would never be a problem.



22...♞d8



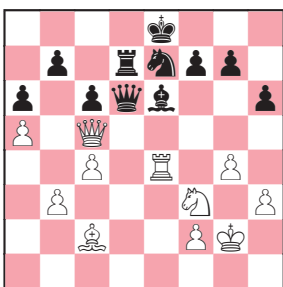
23.♞c5 By the way, remember 11.a5? See how it's shown itself to be a very useful move, freezing Black's queenside pawns. Sorry for the spoilers, but, believe it or not, Black's king is going to end up on that side of the board, and the dark-square control will give White a pretty dangerous attack!

23...h6 24.b3 ♞c7 24...♞d6 Black would like to play this to try to get rid of the white queen, but white has an annoying reply. 25.♞d1 The queen can't be taken due to the back rank problem, so it has to go back to c7 anyway.

25.♞e1 ♜f8 Black is just short of moves while White can slowly improve his position.

26.♞e3 ♜e8 27.♞h5 ♜f8 28.♞c5 ♜e8 29.g4 Making luft, controlling the f5 square, and hinting at pushing g4-g5 at some point. White really doesn't have to worry about weakening his king, as Black's pieces are quite passive and are in no position to take advantage of it.

29...♞f4 30.♜g2 ♞d7 31.♞e4 ♞d6



32.♞e3 The endgame is always going to be pleasant for White due to the space advantage, but how can you trade queens with your opponent's king on e8?

32...c5? Creating a target. I think Vidit planned to sacrifice this pawn, but miscalculated. 32...♞d8! was the best move, aimed against White's threat of ♜d4. Now the bishop can safely retreat



▲ Ian Nepomniachtchi, Hikaru Nakamura and Dommaraju Gukesh

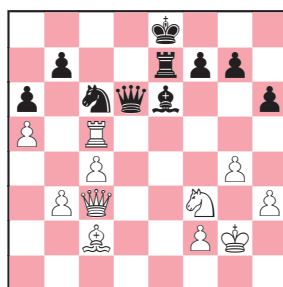
to d7 or c8. Also Black can satisfactorily meet 33.g5 with 33...♞f5 or ...♜f5. It's still bad for Black, but there's no clear breakthrough.

33.♞e5! ♜c6 33...♞c7 34.g5 Now White controls the f5 square, so Black can't play ...♞f5 or ...♜f5, meaning this advance spells huge trouble.

34.♞d5! An easy-to-miss nuance, kicking the queen before taking the pawn. 34.♞xc5 ♞e7 was Vidit's idea. The rook on c5 is a little stuck, and Black threatens a discovered attack on the queen. 35.♞e4 White still has an advantage here, but it looks a little rickety to self-pin in this manner.

34...♞c7 35.♞xc5 ♞e7 Now Black's queen is on c7 instead of d6, so White's queen is free to move and untangle.

36.♞c3 ♞d6



37.♞h5? A really bizarre decision. After outplaying his opponent so well and winning a pawn without compromising his coordination, Caruana banishes his rook to the other side of the board. 37.b4 is strong, but also simple and very natural. The rook is cemented on c5 and White doesn't have to worry about it getting trapped anymore. White has the extra material plus a strong attack, "the material and the compensation" as they say. I think the game would have ended fairly quickly here.

37...f6! Shoring up the kingside pawns. Now it's totally unclear again – with White's rook out of play, he lacks coordination.

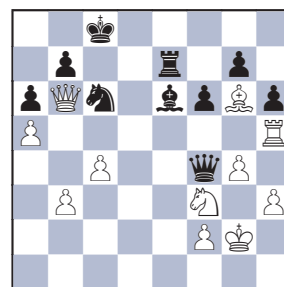
38.♞g6+ ♜d8 The king finally runs for safety on the opposite side of the board from which it castled, but there was an argument for going back home. 38...♜f8 Maybe Vidit was afraid of some kingside threat here, but they're non-existent. White can't play g5, and h4 can always be met with ♞xg4. White can try to activate his knight, but doing so takes time and would give up the d4 square, allowing Black to play ...♞d4, for instance. Also, White's rook can't do anything. So what does White do here? Your guess is as good as mine! It seems like the extra pawn doesn't help much.

39.♞e3! The one downside of 38...♜d8. If Black had one more move to get his king to safety, he would be home free, but now

White regains control of the dark squares, which will help him rescue his rook.

39...♜c8 39...♞xg4?? 40.♞b6+ is the tactical justification.

40.♞b6 ♜b8? The last move before time control, and an obvious one, but it turns out to be the decisive mistake. 40...♞f4! Black has one move to try and cause problems before White can bring his rook back into the game, and this is the best way to do it. Now ...♞xg4 is a big threat – for, example after 41.♞c5, Black strikes with it.

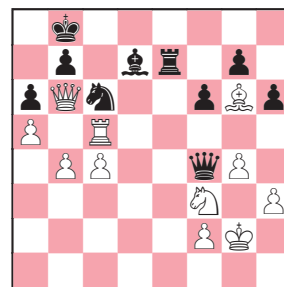


41.♞f5 ♞xf5 42.♞xf5 ♞c7 Black is still down a pawn and suffering, but his king is finally pretty safe, and White's a5 pawn might turn from a strength to a weakness as more and more pieces get traded.

41.♞c5 White has a big threat of ♞xc6 followed by ♞d8, winning material. Black has to go into full passivity, meaning his position becomes hopeless again.

41...♞d7 41...♞c7 42.♞xc6+-.

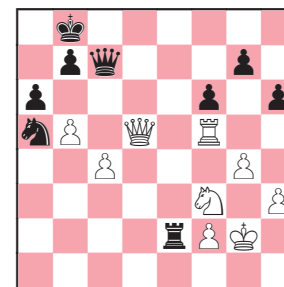
42.b4 ♞f4



43.♞f5?! This is really a "safety first" move. Black's position remains pretty undesirable, but there was an immediate win. 43.b5! It looks risky to allow 43...♞xg4. However, backwards knight moves are sometimes considered the toughest ones to spot, and 44.♜g1! is no exception. The knight does an exceptional job guarding all the key squares and Black just can't create any threats here. 44...♞xh3+ 45.♜xh3 ♞g4+ 46.♜h2 ♞xg6 47.bxc6+-.

43...♞xf5 44.♞xf5 ♞c7 45.♞c5 ♞e4 46.♞d5 ♞e2 47.b5! A really nice way to win – it's time to convert the positional advantage into a tactical one. This gives the a5 pawn away, but it's a temporary sacrifice.

47...♜xa5



48.♜d4 48.b6?? Not yet! 48...♞xb6 The f2 pawn is hanging, so there's no time to take the knight.

48...♞b2 48...♞e5 49.♞xe5 fxe5 (49...♞xe5 50.♞d8+ ♜a7 51.b6 mate.) 50.♜e6 ♞b6 (50...♞xc4+- 51.♞d6+) 51.♜c5 Every move wins for White, but I like this knight transfer, which underscores Black's helplessness. 51...♞c7 52.♜d7+ ♜c8 53.♜xe5+-.

49.bxa6 ♜c6 49...♜xc4 50.♞g8+ ♞c8 (50...♜a7 51.♜b5+ ♞xb5 52.♞xb5 ♞c6+ 53.♞d5 Everything is covered and White will win with his extra material.) 51.a7+.

50.♞g8+ ♜d8 51.♞d5 ♜a7 52.♞xd8
Black resigned

CONCLUSIONS

Congrats to Gukesh, making history at the age of 17, becoming the youngest ever challenger for the World Championship. His match with Ding will probably take place in November of this year. Let's hope the Chinese player manages to recover from a pretty disappointing performance in his last few tournaments. It would be great to see a high-level battle between these two.

As for Caruana and Nakamura, I'm sure they are both disappointed by the result. If this was any other tournament, they'd probably be quite pleased with their performance, but here, only first place matters. Interestingly, I think each player's last round game is emblematic of their tournaments. Nakamura failed to pose any problems against Gukesh and didn't seem to have killer opening weapons with White throughout the whole tournament. In the game against Vidit that I showed, he went all-out for the win even though he knew he was in his opponent's prep, and it backfired badly. Sometimes his low-key opening approach worked though, to be fair, like in the game against Caruana.

We could look back and say that if Hikaru didn't lose both games to Vidit, he would have won, but these hypotheticals are always complicated, as we could hypothetically change any result to benefit or hurt any player. There's not much more to say except that Nakamura

played great this tournament, just Gukesh was slightly better.

Caruana suffered from time management in some key moments. In his Black game against Nakamura, I mentioned a moment when he spent 20 minutes of his remaining time while still far away from move 40. One could argue that he would've put Nepo away easily in the last round if not for the stress of the clock. In general, other than the last-round game, he took advantage of his chances when he got them. If he had an advantage, he converted it into a full point. If not for his slips in the aforementioned two games, he could've won outright or at least made a playoff. But, chess isn't a game of "ifs".

In conclusion, I'm sure many of the players in this tournament will have a chance to play at least one more Candidates tournament. But, with the rise of the youngsters, is time running out for players like Nakamura, Caruana, and Nepo? Here's my bold prediction – at least one of them will fail to qualify for the next Candidates. Only time will tell, but expect the youngsters to flood the top of the rating list pretty soon. Players like Abdusattorov and Erigaisi are already 2760+ at the time of writing. And who knows? We may have our youngest ever world champion at the end of the year.

John Burke