



17-year-old Indian GM emerges as the surprising winner in Toronto, becoming the youngest ever World Chess Championship challenger!

Incredible Stamina and Nerves of Steel

Now that the Candidates Tournament has finished, there is the question of how a teenager prevailed over his more experienced rivals. In short, Dommaraju Gukesh remained extremely solid at all times, patiently waiting for his chances and striking when necessary. It was definitely something that is not usually associated with someone so young, but he was able to make it work.

By GM Prithu Gupta

In my opinion Gukesh's performance at the Candidates needs to be looked at from a broader perspective. What worked for him in Toronto wasn't a 'Candidates specific strategy' per se. As we all know, the Candidates Tournament is a showdown of the best of the best. Nowadays elite players have top level preparation, the best seconds and tons of experience – and in this case everyone barring Abasov was arguably more experienced than Gukesh. So, I think that it is actually more of a psychological and longevity battle than the game itself.

Consider the following example of a grade curve in my business school – we have a professor who's a very strict grader and on a scale of 1-100, the highest is 78 while most of the class is between 60-70 and some are below 60, too. Now, just because the highest is 78, it doesn't mean that the highest letter grade will be a C and everyone else will get a D(60-70) and the rest an F(0-60). The curve would guarantee that the person with the highest score would get an A.

Similarly, the nerves of steel that Gukesh possessed made him the guy with a 78 getting an A, which in this case translates to a tournament victory. His perseverance dates back to his earliest days and even more around the time when he became a GM. Instead of simply resigning clearly lost games, he would just hang on until the end and one couldn't help thinking whether that was his sole reward. One game that clearly



▲ Dommaraju Gukesh Photo by FIDE

stands out in my memory is his game against Nigel Short in the Bangkok Open 2018 (where Gukesh gained one of his GM norms), when he defended an inferior opposite-color bishops endgame for more than 20 moves, before he finally resigned.

Back then many theorized Gukesh's rise as pure luck, but history has now proved otherwise!

Before the tournament Gukesh was certainly not counted as one of the favorites. However, the overall level of play he demonstrated in Toronto brought him great success. There is an almost unified impression that Gukesh never faced problems in a single game at the Candidates – even in the only game he lost, he had things under control until the last blunder in time trouble.

What impressed most was his ability to play move-by-move without committing any major mistakes and, then, patiently waiting for his chances to come up (does this sound familiar?). All-in-all, a very practical approach supported by a great desire to do well in a tournament in which he has been long dreaming of competing.

Amazing Patience And Endurance

Gukesh's only tournament defeat occurred in round 7 against Alireza Firouzja (see page 12). In the penultimate round, the same opponents faced each other, and Gukesh was ready for revenge...but by means of an exceptional waiting strategy and patience learned at sessions with former World Champion Vladimir Kramnik!

C65

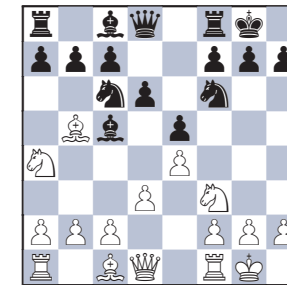
Dommaraju Gukesh	2743
Alireza Firouzja	2760

FIDE Candidates, Toronto 2024

1.e4! Right from the start I give this move an exclamation mark, since it was best suited to the heated tournament situation – going all out for the kill, when most needed. As long as I can remember, since his childhood games in India with some dating way back to 2014, for the most part Gukesh was a 1.d4 or Reti player. Diversifying his repertoire to meet the needs of cutting edge top-level preparation was a must and something that he adapted to very well and quickly, as he advanced. In retrospect, this is one of the many reasons for his meteoric and ongoing rise to the very top.

1...e5 2.d3 d6 3.b5 d7 4.d3 c5 5.0-0 d4 5...d6 is the more common

choice, in which both parties had prior experience. 6.d3 0-0 7.a4

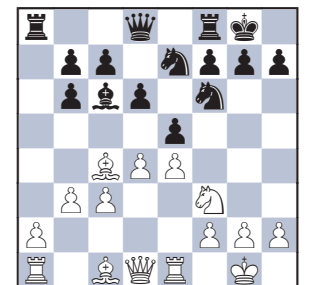


A) 7...d4?! 8.dxc5 dxb5 9.a4 dxc5 10.axb5 d6 11.d4 d8 12.e2 g4 13.f3 e6 14.b3 b6 15.h1 xb5 16.g5± already gave the man of the moment a tangible edge against another compatriot/candidate, only a few weeks before the ultimate showdown in Toronto. The game ended in a draw on move 38 in D.Gukesh 2743 - S.Vidit 2747, Prague 2024.



Prithu Gupta became India's 64th grandmaster in 2019, at the age of 15, which earned him the National Child Award in his home country. Prithu had the privilege of training with two former world champions – Vladimir Kramnik and Vishy Anand. He is currently studying at the Emory University in Atlanta, GA.

B) 7...b6 is the main move here. But not one that comes without the evil of giving up the bishop pair and playing in a rather passive manner – something that goes against the Iranian-French phenomenon's nature. 8.dxb6 axb6 9.c3 e7 10.e1 (Or 10.a4 g6 11.h3 d5 12.exd5 dxd5) 10...d7 11.c4 a4 12.b3 c6 13.d4 (Another direction for White is 13.b4 a4 14.b3 d7 15.g5 xb3 16.xb3 g6 17.xf6 gxf6 18.d4, when Black should be fine after both 18...b5 or 18...h8.)



B1) 13...exd4 14.dxd4 xe4 15.g5 d5 16.f1 c5? 17.d5 d6 18.f3 f5 19.d2 d7 20.d1 fe8 21.xe8+ xe8 22.xf6 gxf6 23.xd5± White has the upper hand and later won in A.Firouzja 2759 - J.K.Duda 2732, Internet blitz 2024. It is quite understandable that Firouzja might have not wanted to suffer a similar fate as Black.

B2) However, 13...dxe4 14.dxe5 d6 15.d4 dxe5 16.dxe5 dxe5 17.xe5 b5 18.f1 e8= was one of the many ways to avoid it.

6.dxd4 dxd4 7.d2 c6

FINAL RANKING CROSSTABLE AFTER 14 ROUNDS

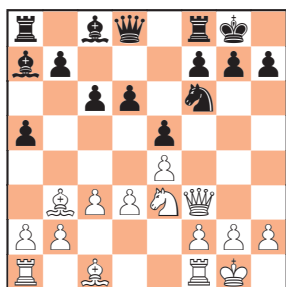
Rk.	Name	Rtg	FED	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	Pts	TB1	TB2
1	Dommaraju GUKESH	2743	IND		½ · ½	½ · ½	½ · ½	1 · ½	½ · 1	0 · 1	1 · 1	9	57.00	5
2	Hikaru NAKAMURA	2789	USA	½ · ½		½ · ½	½ · 1	½ · 1	0 · 0	1 · 1	½ · 1	8½	56.00	5
3	Ian NEPOMNIACHTCHI	2758	FID	½ · ½	½ · ½		½ · ½	½ · ½	1 · 1	1 · ½	½ · ½	8½	56.00	3
4	Fabiano CARUANA	2803	USA	½ · ½	½ · 0	½ · ½		½ · 1	½ · 1	½ · 1	1 · ½	8½	54.00	4
5	R. PRAGGNANANDHAA	2747	IND	0 · ½	½ · 0	½ · ½	½ · 0		1 · ½	½ · ½	1 · 1	7	42.50	3
6	Santosh VIDIT	2727	IND	½ · 0	1 · 1	0 · 0	½ · 0	0 · ½		1 · ½	½ · ½	6	40.25	3
7	Alireza FIROUZJA	2760	FRA	1 · 0	0 · 0	0 · ½	½ · 0	½ · ½	0 · ½		½ · 1	5	32.75	2
8	Nijat ABASOV	2632	AZE	0 · 0	½ · 0	½ · ½	0 · ½	0 · 0	½ · ½	½ · 0		3½	25.50	0



8.♖c4!? 8.♖a4 is the more common bishop sortie, which Firouzja had successfully defended against in the past. 8...d6 9.♘f3 ♖b6 10.♗e3 0-0= would lead to an excessively simplified game that Gukesh had to avoid at all costs. The position is equal and indeed a predeceasing game ended in a draw on move 50 in D.Naroditsky 2617 - A.Firouzja 2785, Internet blitz 2022.

8...d6 9.c3 9.♘f3 ♖b6 10.♗e3 0-0= would lead to an equally dull structure, just as in Firouzja's game against Naroditsky above.

9...♖b6 10.♖b3 a5 11.♘c4 ♖a7 12.♘e3 0-0 13.♗f3



I assure you that the position is not nearly as simple as it appears. While learning the Italian/Ruy Lopez structures back in India as a beginner, I was often taught about the paramount importance of the "six big squares" – f5, g5 and h5 for White, and their counterparts on the fourth rank for Black. As my coach reiterated not once, not twice, but a thousand times, as long as any side had control of these squares, all hell could be unleashed, no matter how simplified the position looked.

13...d5 14.♗c2 g6! Avoiding a potentially venomous knight jump to f5, way in advance.

15.♗e1 ♗e6 16.exd5 cxd5 17.h3! A great application of the concept of waiting moves, taught by the legendary Vladimir Kramnik to a group of six baffled Indian kids (Gukesh, Pragg, Raunak, Iniyen P,

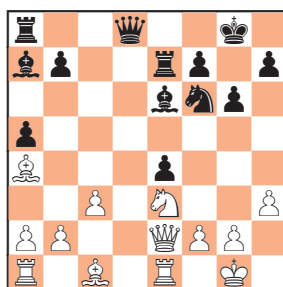
Leon Mendonca and yours truly), during our training session with him in Geneva in 2019. When asked about why he made random moves like a3, h3 etc, his reply was simple – "we're doing nothing and waiting for the opponent to do something substantial".

17...♗e8 17...♗g7!? is the top line of the engine, but maybe not so natural for a human. A nice sample variation may follow: 18.♘f1 ♖b8 19.♗g5 h6 20.♖h4 ♗a6! This strong move defends against any pressure along the sixth rank and Black himself is now ready to start attacking with ...g5-g4 in the near future.

18.♖a4 e4 19.dxe4 dxe4 20.♗e2 Kramnik's strategy of "active nothingness" has clearly worked since there is some activity in the position – a slight glimmer of hope, so to speak. Nothing substantial at all, but in top-level games

like these, small chances are all you can hope to exploit.

20...♗e7



21.♘f1! Opening the path for the c1 bishop to hop onto squares such as g5 or h6, or just be traded off on e3 if and when required.

21...♗c7 Quite a natural move, aiming to avoid the pin in case of ♗g5, and generate activity of his own with ...♘d5-f4 or ...♗c4.

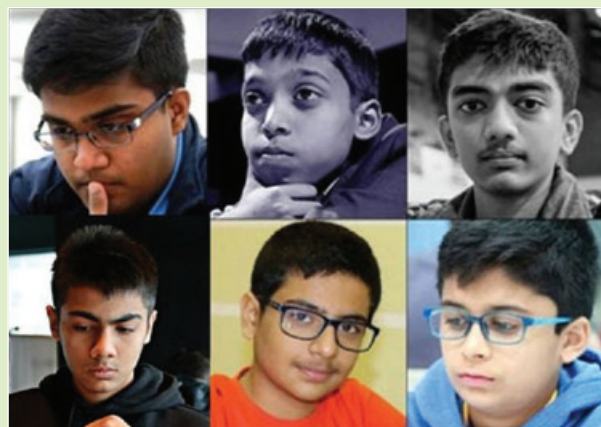
Kramnik's Lectures and a Prophecy

It was after the Wijk Aan Zee supertournament in 2019, when the 14th World Chess Champion Vladimir Kramnik decided to retire from playing chess professionally. A few days after, his good friend Frederic Friedel, the co-founder of ChessBase, called Kramnik to suggest an idea of a training camp with a super-talented generation of Indian teenagers. Kramnik was curious about who these youngsters were and, when Friedel mentioned Gukesh's name (then world's youngest grandmaster at the age of twelve), he reacted with "This boy is going to be in the top ten in five years from now – and World Champion in eight!"

After learning the names of all potential students for his training camp, Kramnik gave the following evaluation: "I think the current Indian chess crop is the strongest generation in the world now, maybe the strongest ever in any country. India has got some really very talented kids with a very big potential of being top players, maybe even World Champions in the future. I am now retired from chess and not playing competitively anymore, but it means a lot to me that I can share my knowledge with the most promising juniors who can achieve something big in the future."

Finally, the idea came to life in August 2019, when Kramnik shared his vast knowledge with six of India's brightest talents at the training camp held in Geneva.

Left to right, top to bottom, with titles and ratings at that time: GM P. Iniyen (2517), GM R. Praggnanadhaa (2569), GM D. Gukesh (2528), GM Prithu Gupta (2493), IM Raunak Sadhwani (2493) and IM Leon Mendonca (2401).



▲ Dommaraju Gukesh vs. Alireza Firouzja

Photo by FIDE

22.♖b3 a4! You can always count on Firouzja to be tactically alert. 22...♘d5 can be strongly met by 23.♗g5!, attacking e7 and connecting the rooks. Now White really threatens to take on e4. (An immediate 23.♗xe4?? runs into 23...♗f5-+, since the e1 rook is not protected.) 23...f6 24.♗xe4±.

23.♗xe6 This trade is forced, since if 23.♗xa4?, then after 23...♗c4 24.♗d2 ♖xf1 25.♗xf1 ♖b8-+, Black wins a piece.

23...♗xe6 24.♗e3 a3 24...♘d5 25.♗ad1 ♘f4 26.♖xf4 ♗xf4 27.♗d7= could have been something that Firouzja wanted to avoid.

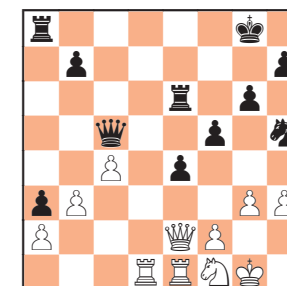
25.c4 White's pawn advantage is on the queenside, so it looks natural to try to advance on that side of the board. In the process, White takes away the d5 square from the black knight.

25...♘h5 Black reacts by taking an alternative route to f4, but also intending ...f7-f5.

26.g3 White has to prevent any ...♘f4.

26...♗c5!? Firouzja clearly wants to have his queen already on c5 once the inevitable trade happens.

27.b3 f5 28.♗xc5 ♗xc5 29.♗ad1



29...♗f8 Not the most precise. 29...♗ae8 was natural, with the same idea of preparing for the ...f5-f4 break. Here, 30.b4 is an interesting pawn sacrifice, as tempi really matter. 30...♗xb4 31.♘e3 Once this knight reaches d5 (with tempo!), White's pieces gain activity. What is more, White has the direct threat of ♘xf5 which his opponent needs to address immediately.

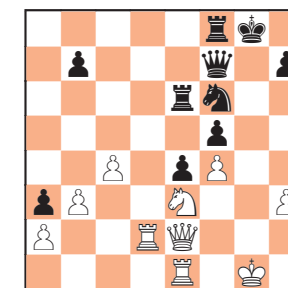
30.♗d5 This is perhaps too aggressive. 30.♗d2, preparing a trade of queens, was more in the spirit of the position. Then, after, for example, 30...f4 31.g4 e3 32.♗d4 ♗g5 33.♗d5 exf2+ 34.♘xf2= Possibly, Gukesh didn't like this idea, as his king is in the open and might feel rather unsafe.

30...♗e7 31.f4 The engine doesn't hesitate to show a slight edge for Black, but it is hardly tangible. The position seems way too dull for Black to act and, with weaknesses of his own on the d-file

and the d5 square, he could run into trouble in case of any mishap.

31...♘f6 32.♗d2 g5?! Firouzja decides to go all in. Safer was 32...♗d8, when 33.♗xd8+ ♗xd8 34.♗d1 ♗b6+ 35.♘e3 ♗d6 36.♗xd6 ♗xd6 37.♗d1 ♗b6 38.♗d2 h5 39.b4 looks equal.

33.♘e3! gxf4 34.gxf4 ♗f7



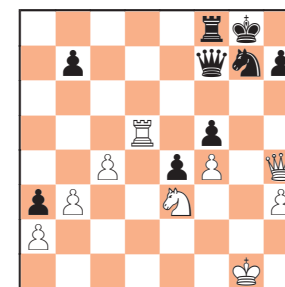
35.♗h2 Now, all of a sudden, White seems to be in the driver's seat. The pawn on f5 and the open g-file introduce some very dangerous prospects directed against Black's position.

35...♘h5 36.♗f2 ♗g6 37.♗d5 ♘g7 38.♗ed1 Gukesh makes full use of the open file, while his opponent's knight is passively tasked with defending the f5 pawn. 38.♗h4 was another option to scare Black.

38...♗h6! The only way to avoid a near-imminent collapse, by creating threats of his own. A tactician like Firouzja grabs such opportunities automatically.

39.♗g1 ♗g6 40.♗gd1 "Buying" some time before reaching the first time control and thereby obtaining the additional increment.

40...♗h6 41.♗g1 ♗g6 42.♗h4 ♗xg1 43.♗xg1



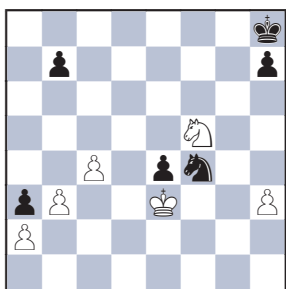
43...♗h8 An inaccuracy. 43...♗g6+ 44.♘f2 ♘e6 45.♗d1 ♗h8 46.♗g1 ♗f7



47.♖d5 ♖g8 48.♗xg8+ ♗xg8 49.♗g3+ ♗g7= was a simple, yet precise series of moves that Black needed to find in order to fully equalize. It just shows how much easier it is to play this position as White.

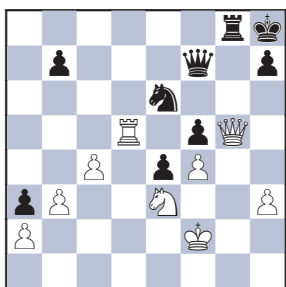
44.♖f2 44.♗g5 ♖e6 45.♗h6 ♗g6+ explains why 44.♖f2 was necessary first.

44...♗g8 44...♗g6!? is the top choice of the silicon monster, perhaps an attempt to prevent ♗g5? 45.♗d8 (45.♗g5 is met by 45...♖e6, when there's nothing better for White than 46.♗xg6 hxg6=.) 45...♗f7! 46.♗xf8+ ♗xf8 47.♗g5 ♖e6 48.♗xf5 ♗xf5 49.♖xf5 ♖xf4 50.♖e3



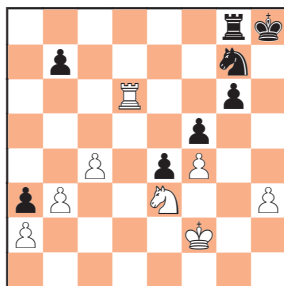
50...♖d3! Heading for c1. 51.♖d4 ♖g7! The key move in this line, which is virtually impossible to spot over the board, especially under such pressure, clock ticking, endless fatigue, etc. 52.♖b5 ♖f6! 53.♖xa3 ♖e5! 54.♖b5 ♖f4= Here there is nothing White can really do, but accept a peaceful outcome.

45.♗g5 ♗g6? A grave and, probably, the crucial mistake. 45...♖e6! was a final hope of preventing damage by doing some himself.



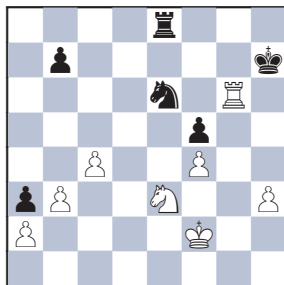
46.♗xf5 ♗g7! 47.♗e5 (47.♗xe6?? would even lose after 47...♗g1+ 48.♖e2 ♗h2+) 47...♗xe5 48.♗xe5 ♖xf4 49.♗xe4 ♖xh3+ 50.♖e2 ♗f8=.

46.♗xg6 hxg6 47.♗d6 With the over-extended pawn structure and passive placement of his pieces, Black's fate was almost sealed here.



47...♗e8 48.♗xg6 ♖e6 49.♖d5 ♖d4 After this, Gukesh demonstrates excellent technique to finish the game and score an important win.

49...e3+!? could have been an interesting last attempt at redemption. White needs to find a precise way to claim a decisive advantage. 50.♖xe3 ♖h7



51.♗g1! ♖xf4 52.♖f3 ♖d3 53.♖d5+–.

50.♗b6 ♖c2 51.♗xb7 ♗e6 52.♗e7 ♗h6 53.c5 ♖d4 54.♖g2 ♗g6+ 55.♖f2 ♗h6 56.b4 ♗xh3 57.♖g2 ♗h6 58.♗b7 ♖g8 59.b5 ♖f8 60.b6 ♗g6+ 61.♖f2 ♗h6 62.♗c7 ♗h2+ 63.♖g3

Black resigned

With this win Gukesh took a half-point lead going into the final round. As we now know, by securing a draw against Nakamura, he was able to become the youngest Candidates winner ever.

Warfare And A Sudden Slip

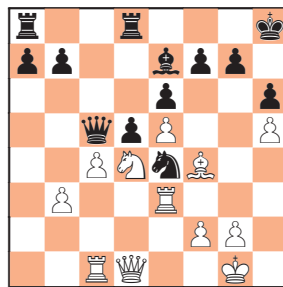
In round 7, Firouzja (White) went for a tricky line in the London System (as we will see in the opening report on page 50). Gukesh (Black) was able to emerge from the opening with a very satisfactory position, when Firouzja tried to complicate matters with a pawn sacrifice.

Then, the critical position occurred after move 25, when White had less than 5 minutes

on his clock as opposed to Black's 15 minutes. The tension going towards the first time control increased as there was no 30-second increment before move 41. However, the game finished abruptly before that!

Alireza Firouzja	2760
Dommaraju Gukesh	2743

FIDE Candidates, Toronto 2024



26.b4 ♗xb4 The start of over-the-board warfare. 26...♗b6! would enable Black to take back on d5 with the pawn, unlike in



Behind the Chess Boom in India

The LEGENDS & The GOLDEN GENERATION

India has recently celebrated its 85th grandmaster, won bronze in 2022 Chess Olympiad and now has a challenger for the World Championship title!

For many years, chess in India was synonymous with Vishy Anand, until a new wave of talented players such as Sasikiran, Harikrishna, Sethuraman, Adhiban, and Ganguly emerged. Today, an even more promising generation led by Gukesh, Praggnanandhaa, Vidit, Erigaisi, and Nihal is making headlines. We reached out to some of the sport's legends in India to gather their insights and opinions on Gukesh's remarkable rise and the ongoing chess boom in India. In this issue of American Chess Magazine, we feature thoughts from grandmasters Viswanathan Anand, the 15th World Chess Champion, K. Sasikiran, and S.P. Sethuraman.



Viswanathan Anand

FIRST GRANDMASTER FROM INDIA IN 1988, FIVE-TIME WORLD CHESS CHAMPION, HIGHEST RATING 2817 (MARCH 2011), FIDE DEPUTY PRESIDENT

CHESS BOOM

It's probably a bit of both – that each generation helped the next one. So, many of the Indian players that are currently on the top, were coached by or worked with our best grandmasters from a generation ago. Also, this group is a particularly talented one – I have referred to them many times as “the golden generation.” They are really very talented and, because they are all competing together, their rivalry is very fierce and keeps them on their toes.

SUPPORT

I think that game of chess has matured in India, in the sense that it gets a lot of media coverage. A huge fanbase is developed and, therefore, sponsors are willing to be involved and everyone works together to help. There isn't probably a national plan, but there are many people trying to work together to help these youngsters.

In my particular case, I met a sponsor five years ago called Westbridge Capital, and they themselves suggested that maybe we can do some work together. I thought that perhaps I can do something like Botvinnik Chess Academy (Botvinnik Chess School) from many years ago. That was my inspiration and they have been supporting this project called WACA (Westbridge Anand Chess Academy). We've been running this for five years now. Praggnanandhaa, Gukesh, Vaishali are all products of this academy. Also, there are other initiatives going on and it's a good space to be part of.

STYLE

I don't think I have someone whose style stands out. Also, they are all very young – which means their style and approach to chess will evolve constantly. Secondly, computer engines are always present in the background, shaping those tendencies. I think the key factor here is that they all are willing to learn, to fight and take big risks, and they have a lot of ambition.

ADVICE

I would advise Gukesh just to enjoy the occasion of this fantastic opportunity. He is the youngest challenger in history and he's been given a great chance early on. I don't think I want to give him some uncharted advice that he hasn't thought about.

PREDICTIONS

I think that now we have a very young, good and balanced team – and we are definitely one of the favorites! I assume the other favorites are generally the higher-rated teams, but we have seen that in the Olympiads lots of surprises are possible and a lot of team dynamics takes over. Historical case is a team like Armenia, which almost always over-performs because of their team spirit. So, I hope our guys will do well.

Both India and Uzbekistan had great results in the previous Chess Olympiad in Chennai two years ago and let's see if India can improve on that.

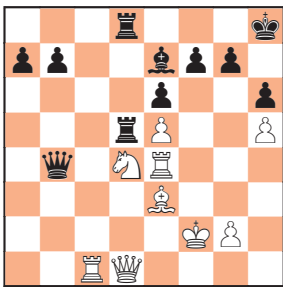


the case of 26...♖b4, when White has ♖b3. After 27.cxd5 exd5 White would definitely struggle to prove he had sufficient compensation for the pawn.

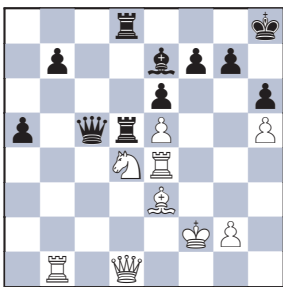
27.cxd5 ♖xf2! An excellent practical decision by Gukesh. After the calm 27...exd5, White has the unpleasant 28.♖b3 (but not 28.♖b1 ♖c3+), when 28...♖a4 is the only correct square for the black queen. (28...♖a5? 29.♖xb7 puts Black in a lot of danger, due to lack of coordination.) 29.♖xb7 ♖xd1+ 30.♖xd1 ♖c5 31.♖e3=. (The greedy 31.♖xf7?? is punished by 31...♖c3+)

28.♖xf2 ♖xd5 29.♖e4 ♖ad8 29...a5!? This pawn runs very fast! For example, 30.♖d2 (or 30.♖b1 ♖c5 31.♖e3 a4! 32.♖xb7 a3!?) 30...♖xd2+ 31.♖xd2 a4.

30.♖e3



30...♖c5 30...a5!? seems appealing to me as it would have avoided the trade of queens in order to maintain tension along the d-file. 31.♖b1 (31.♖e1 ♖xd4 is the key theme of this variation. After 32.♖xd4 ♖xd4 33.♖xb4 ♖xb4 34.♖xb4 ♖xb4 35.♖c7 ♖g8 36.♖xb7 ♖c3, Black is playing for two results.) 31...♖c5



A) 32.♖xb7 f5! is a key trick in this line. 33.exf6 ♖xf6 34.♖g4 ♖xd4! The g7 pawn is far too well-protected and Black has more than enough material and activity to effectively compensate for the missing exchange.

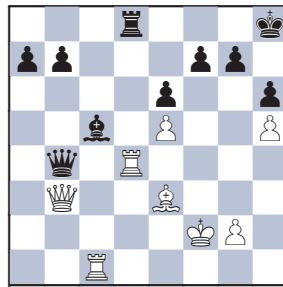
B) 32.♖c2 ♖xd4! 33.♖xc5 ♖xc5 34.♖xd4 ♖xd4 35.♖xd4 ♖xd4+ 36.♖f3 ♖xe5 37.♖xb7 ♖g8 38.♖b5 f6 39.♖xa5 ♖f7=;

30...♖a5 Black threatens ...♖xe5. Thus, 31.♖a1 ♖c7 32.♖c1 ♖c5 33.♖b1 a5= (or 33...♖xe5 34.♖f4 ♖d6! 35.♖xe5 ♖xe5 36.♖a4 ♖d5 37.♖f3 b5 38.♖ab4 ♖c5+ 39.♖e2 a5= Three fat zeroes are pointed out by the computer again. While it seems nearly impossible for a human to come up with this, I wouldn't be surprised if we see another 17 or maybe even a 13-year-old unearth such a variation, to save or triumph in a crucial game in the Candidates or even World Championship match, in 20 years from now!)

31.♖b3! Trading queens as quickly as possible, to reduce the possibility of any major threats along the way.

31...♖xb3 31...a5 32.♖xb4 ♖xb4 33.♖f3±=. This might not be a big deal either way, but Black's best chances definitely lay in getting as many pieces off the board as possible.

After 31...♖xd4 the same trick does not work nearly as well as it did in the variation above, because of the 32.♖xd4! hiccup.



A) 32...♖xd4 33.♖xb4 ♖xb4 34.♖xc5 ♖h4 35.♖c8+ ♖h7 36.♖f8 ♖xh5 37.♖xf7 ♖xe5 38.♖xb7 a5 39.♖f3 ♖f5+ 40.♖e4 ♖g6 41.♖a7 might not be very pleasant to defend as Black.

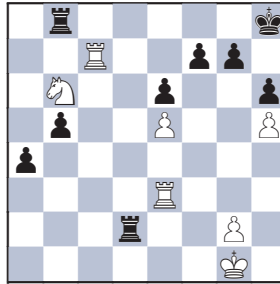
B) 32...♖xb3 33.♖xd8+ ♖h7 34.♖xc5±.

32.♖xb3 ♖xe3+ 33.♖xe3 a5 34.♖c7 A pretty natural series of moves. Both sides try to become as active as possible. White's best chances lie in creating threats along the seventh rank by attacking the f7 and b7 pawns and potentially sacrificing their knight for the a-pawn, while trying to penetrate with the other rook by capturing the pawn on g7.

34...a4 35.♖c5 ♖a8 35...b5!? Pushing the pawns seemed like a great attempt at creating counterplay. 36.♖f3 ♖xe5 37.♖xf7 a3 38.♖xg7 (38.g4 is the only attempt at avoiding a trade of rooks on f5. 38...♖a8 39.♖b3 ♖g5 40.♖f3 a2 41.♖a7 ♖xa7 42.♖xa7 ♖d5=) 38...♖xc5=.

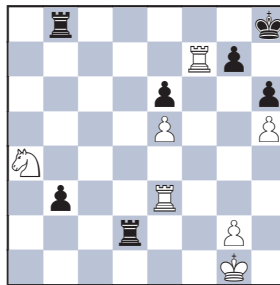
36.♖d7 ♖h7?? The decisive mistake.

36...b5 is the most valiant attempt as boldly pointed out by my computer. It makes perfect sense, given the trajectory of the game. 37.♖b6 ♖d2+ 38.♖g1 (38.♖e1 ♖ad8! 39.♖xf7 ♖xg2 40.♖d7 ♖g5=) 38...♖b8



A) 39.♖f3!? b4! (39...♖xb6?? 40.♖c8+ ♖h7 41.♖xf7+-);

B) 39.♖xf7 b4! It seems that creating computeresque counterplay was the only effective solution to saving most difficult games throughout the course of this tournament. (Again 39...♖xb6?? 40.♖f8+ ♖h7 41.♖c3+- leads to a winning mating attack.) 40.♖xa4 b3



B1) 41.♖g3 ♖a2! 42.♖c3 ♖c2!, followed by ...♖c3 and ...b3-b2 to save the day. 43.♖b1 (43.♖h2 ♖xc3 44.♖xc3 b2 45.♖f1 b1! 46.♖xb1 ♖xb1 47.♖c6 ♖g8 48.♖xe6 ♖f7=) 43...b2;

B2) 41.♖c3 b2 42.♖b1 ♖c2 43.♖g3 ♖c1+ 44.♖f1 ♖f8 and White just doesn't have enough piece activity to help convert the material advantage.

36...♖d2+ 37.♖e1 ♖d4! prevents the decisive ♖c3-♖c8 by staring at the d7 knight, but is understandably difficult for humans to spot. (37...♖xg2 38.♖ec3+- might have been the reason why Gukesh refused to go for the check.) 38.♖f3 (Or 38.♖ec3 ♖h7 39.♖b6 ♖a6; Upon 38.♖b6 ♖a6 39.♖c4 b5 40.♖d6 a3 41.♖c8+ ♖h7 42.♖xf7, Black needs to spot 42...g5!. Finding an effective way to sacrifice the f7 pawn, while advancing the a-pawn, is pivotal in almost all lines here.) 38...b5! 39.♖xf7 (39.♖e2 ♖g8=

Sasikiran K.

FIFTH GRANDMASTER FROM INDIA IN 2000, HIGHEST RATING 2720 (MAY 2012), ANAND'S SECOND IN TWO WORLD CHAMPIONSHIP MATCHES

CHESS BOOM

I think it happened just before the start of Covid-19 pandemic. The All India Chess Federation (AICF) invited Kramnik and Gelfand to train some of the top talents of the country around early 2020. Anand might have initiated the idea as he visited the camp at that time.

After the pandemic began, Anand began working with the youngsters online through his WACA. They continued to work quite hard during the pandemic. Working with a former world champion for a continuous period of time is bound to have its effect in that you learn from one of the best prepared players about how to go about openings. It also helped that a lot of online rapid events became available, where the young players could get to play against some of the best players in the world.

SUPPORT

AICF has had a long history (probably more than 20 years) of sending young players (those who did well in National Cadet Championships) to open tournaments in Europe, with support from the central government so that they could gain valuable experience against strong opposition. AICF also conducts regular training camps by IMs/GMs for identifying local talents. AICF has been trying to implement Chess In Schools in India as a mandatory subject and many states have implemented it already. It is quite natural that we have a surplus amount of young talents who are being spotted and trained as early as age 5. AICF also conducts at least 10 open tournaments with decent prize money (good enough to attract many Europeans). After a long time we have had a supertournament last December 2023 (average rating

over 2700) and I believe there will be more such events in the near future.

Private sponsorship started getting better when the Covid-19 pandemic started. Many companies wanted to associate themselves with players who were doing well in the many rapid events that were going on. Sponsors found visibility was excellent due to the increase in general viewership of chess events at that time.



STYLE

It is hard to say as most of the players are still developing. Gukesh seems to have a dynamic style with a preference for sharp play. But he needs to improve his technical skills (especially when he is slightly better). Pragg has a pragmatic approach to the game and seems to rely more on his technique to win. But, in the Candidates, his play was extremely sharp and he seems to be working in the right direction. Expanding one's arsenal is to play a wide variety of positions.

Vidit is the oldest of this lot,

but again he has changed his style completely in the last few years. I believe he just needs to control his emotions over the board, especially when he is faced with a surprise.

Nihal and Erigaisi have very similar styles; quick and sound positional play, but at times they become extremely greedy for material. However, that is the by-product of working with modern engines that teach us to defend with extreme precision.

ADVICE

Gukesh needs to play strong tournaments before the final match with Ding. With the amount of playable theory that is expanding, it is quite difficult to keep track of everything. It is much more important to stay in top shape before the World Championship and a few top level events would do a lot of good.

At this point, he shall definitely need the experience against world class opposition before the match. Ding Liren is vastly experienced in playing top-class opposition.

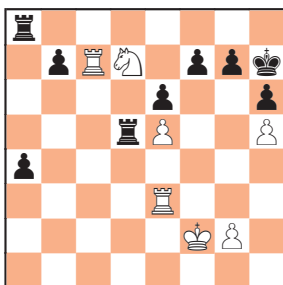
Whoever keeps the better nerve (recovering from setbacks during the game and between the match itself) will win the World Championship.

PREDICTIONS

As for the Olympiad, the Indian team has very good chances (about 90 percent of winning any medal). But then, we need at least three players in top form to make it happen. The Uzbeks will try to repeat their success. The US, China, Russia, Azerbaijan, France, Germany are all strong contenders for medals.



The level material provides almost no chances for either side to make progress.) 39...a3 40.♖f8 ♖g4 41.♘g6+ ♖xg6 42.hxg6 a2=.



37.♖f3! Black has too many weaknesses to immediately construct a successful defense.

37...a3 38.♖xf7 Low on time, Black gets trapped in the mating net.

38...♗h8 39.♘f8 a2 40.♘g6+ Black resigned as he will be checkmated next move.

A heartbreaking loss for Gukesh, but he was able to quickly recover from it in the very next round.

Quickly Getting Back On His Feet

Before the tournament, many thought that Gukesh might not be in contention for the top spots due to his young age and potential instability. However, what Gukesh displayed in Toronto was quite the opposite!

C55

Vidit Santosh Gujrathi	2727
Dommaraju Gukesh	2743

FIDE Candidates, Toronto 2024

1.e4 e5 2.♖f3 ♘c6 3.♗c4 ♖f6 The Italian is no stranger to top level chess.

4.d3 a6!? At first I just could not understand the point behind this move. His idea might have been to provoke the extremely tempting ♗g5.

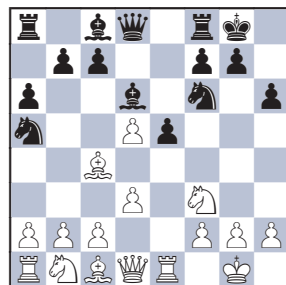
5.0-0 Vidit does not fall for the trick. It was only when I decided to have a look at the position after 5.♗g5 that I realized what was the motive behind the extremely cunning move ...a6. 5...d5! 6.exd5 ♖a5. Unlike the same idea occurring a move



▲ Vidit Santosh Gujrathi vs. Dommaraju Gukesh

Photo by FIDE

before, with no d3 and ...a6 having been played, White does not have the option of playing ♗b5 here. Thus, we could call this a much improved version of that line. A sample line here could be 7.0-0 h6 8.♖f3 ♗d6 9.♖e1 0-0



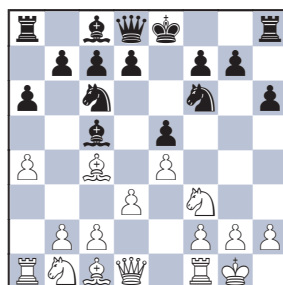
A) After 10.♗bd2 b5 11.♗b3 ♖xb3 12.axb3 ♖xd5 13.♖xe5 ♗b7 14.d4 ♖e8= Black's setup greatly resembles the Marshall Attack in the Ruy Lopez.

B) 10.♖xe5 ♖e8 11.♖f3 b5 12.♖xe8+ ♖xe8 13.♗b3 ♖xb3 14.axb3 ♖xd5 15.♗bd2 c5 16.♖e4 ♗f8= Black's bishop pair guarantees more than enough compensation.

5...h6!? Another artistic move. Black might have wanted to keep his options open, instead of committing to a certain kind of position after either an immediate ...♗e7, or ...♗c5.

6.a4 ♗c5 6...g5!? could have been an idea under optimal circumstances, but it is just not one that works well here, because of improper timing. 7.d4 exd4 8.♖xd4 ♗c5

9.♗e3 ♖e5 10.♖f3 ♖xc4 11.♗xc5 d6 12.♗d4 ♖e7 13.b3 ♖e5 14.♖xe5 dxe5 15.♗b2 ♗d7 16.♖f3 0-0-0 17.c4±.



7.♗e3 A novelty as early as on move 7! The idea of playing with an open f-file might have seemed appealing to Vidit. 7.c3 d6 8.♖e1 0-0 9.h3 ♗a7 10.♗bd2 ♗e6 is the main line.

7...d6 7...♗xe3 8.fxe3 0-0 9.♖c3± is nothing major, but would have given White exactly what he was looking for. It goes a long way to explaining the nature of present day elite chess and how it more often than not also involves psychological warfare.

8.♗bd2 0-0 9.c3 ♖e8 10.b4 ♗xe3 11.fxe3 ♗e6 A pretty natural series of moves.

12.b5 In top level chess, nobody is ever satisfied with a draw when playing White. 12.♗xe6 ♖xe6 13.♖c2 a5 14.b5 ♖b8 leads to a very dull game, with no immediate chances for either side.

Sethuraman S.P.

24TH GRANDMASTER FROM INDIA IN 2011, HIGHEST RATING 2673 (SEPTEMBER 2018), U-16 WORLD CHAMPION IN 2009, OLYMPIC BRONZE MEDALLIST IN 2014, ASIAN CHAMPION IN 2016

CHESS BOOM

Perhaps some of the reasons for this boom lay in ready access to online chess where you can get to play strong players frequently, and grasp world class material available online. I would also like to pinpoint the huge role of the Vishy Anand Chess Academy (WACA) which started during the time of the Pandemic and where young players can interact with the World Champion himself. All these tools have helped the young generation, giving them immense exposure to the best training methods to promote their practical play which is of great importance in today's chess world.

SUPPORT

To be honest, not everyone is backed by big sponsors. As far as I know, Gukesh, despite being India's No.1 for quite some time, was struggling with sponsorship unlike his other compatriots who have been heavily sponsored by big corporations in India. Hopefully things are changing now for him after his victory in the Candidates. So, actually, there is no proper system at work here. It basically depends on other outside factors like marketing, popularity, etc. A number of deserving people are still struggling and only a few enjoy this privilege. Having said that, of course, things have improved drastically from what it was in my generation on this front, but there is still a long way to go.

STYLE

Yes, everyone is unique in their own way and all these players are extremely combative and ambitious, which is a great quality. Gukesh is well-rounded, extremely disciplined as a person, highly focused and with unmatched energy. At one point I remember he was playing non-stop in Europe for five months straight. Coming to Arjun, he has a very interesting style, aggressive and threatening. This makes him exceptionally effective in rapid and blitz. He calculates very

fast and has a unique approach to opening preparation. Moreover, he is prepared to take risks in every game. Prag is extremely solid and hard to beat. He has a mature approach to the game and his emotional stability is particularly strong, which helps him to recover from losses quite quickly. I think these players will remain at the top for a long time to come.



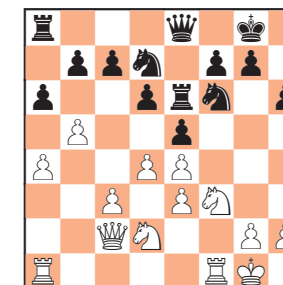
ADVICE

Gukesh is generally very calm even when under huge pressure in high stakes events. His nickname is Mr.Iceman in the world of X (formerly Twitter). I would like to see him keeping his cool the same way in the World Championship match, when I believe things would go his way.

PREDICTIONS

I think India has a great team for the upcoming Olympiad in Budapest. So far we have won bronze twice – in 2014 and in 2022. Now it's high time to go for gold. Of course, other strong teams are USA, China and Uzbekistan.

12...♖b8 13.♗xe6 ♖xe6 14.♖c2 ♖bd7 15.d4 ♖e8 Here it is Black who has a slightly advantageous structure, because of White's over-extended queenside.

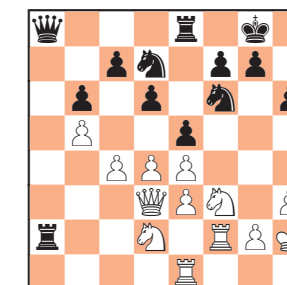


16.♖ae1 16.d5 ♖e7 17.c4 led to a closed position with not many ideas for White. Knowing how the game developed, this might have been the lesser evil for White.

16...axb5 17.axb5 ♖a5 Gukesh gains control of the open a-file, ready to penetrate whenever needed. We can say that Black is already slightly better.

18.c4 ♖a8! 19.h3 ♖e8!? Intending to triple on the a-file when needed, since the kingside is already well-defended.

20.♗h2 b6 21.♖f2 ♖a2 22.♖d3

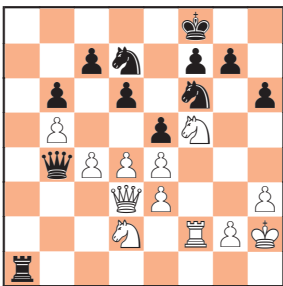


22...♖a3 22...♖a3 is the engine's top choice, when after, for example, 23.♖xa3 ♖xa3 24.♗g1 ♖ea8 25.♗f1 ♖c3 26.♖fe2 ♖c2 27.♖f2 ♗f8 28.g3 ♖a3 29.g4 ♖aa2 30.♖ee2 ♖c1+ 31.♗g2, while it is sufficiently clear that Black stands better even if not almost winning, as pointed out by the machine, it is incredibly tough to break through White's super inactive, yet tightly held structure.

23.♖b1 ♖a4 24.♖h4 ♖a8 So Black has managed to triple on the only open a-file.



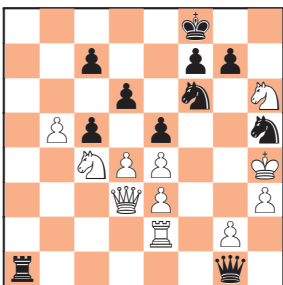
25.♟f5 ♘f8 26.♞e1 ♞a1 27.♞d3 ♞b4 28.♞xa1 ♞xa1



29.c5? This drops even more material. However, if nothing was done, White would have faced imminent collapse anyway. For example, after 29.♟f3 ♞a3 30.♞xa3 ♞xa3 31.dxe5 dxe5 32.♞d2 ♞a4+, White has too many weaknesses to defend.

29...bxc5 30.♟c4 ♞e1 The beginning of the end.

31.♞e2 ♞g1+ 32.♟g3 ♟h5+ 33.♟h4 ♟df6 34.♟xh6



34...♞h2 The rope inexorably tightens around White's king.

35.♟f5 ♞f1 36.g4 ♞xf5 37.exf5 37.♞xh2 g5 mate.

▼ Dommaraju Gukesh with fans



Photo by FIDE

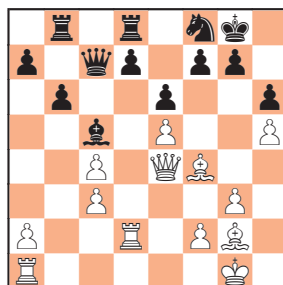
37...♞g3+38.♟g5 ♟h7+ **Whiteresigned** before getting checkmated on the next move. This win enabled Gukesh to bounce back after his round 7 loss to Firouzja and regain the lead with Nepomniachtchi, his predecessor as we now know!

A Timely Switch To Dynamic Play

In the following game played in round 12, we can see how Gukesh finds timely solutions in switching from defense to offense. He takes the initiative almost effortlessly, putting a lot of pressure on his opponent.

Nijat Abasov	2632
Dommaraju Gukesh	2743

FIDE Candidates, Toronto 2024



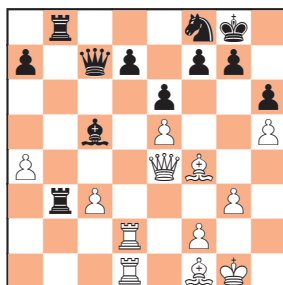
20...b5!? An interesting idea aimed at potentially tapping the weakness on c3. Gukesh demonstrates his sense of dynamic play from an optically passive position.

21.cxb5 ♞xb5 22.♟f1 ♞b6 23.♞ad1 ♞db8 Despite the two bishops, White has no real threats. Black's kingside is far too well-defended and the d7 pawn is hardly

a weakness. Somehow the knight on f8 is placed passively yet perfectly, since it keeps a hold on all the weak points, while the activity of Black's rooks and bishops sufficiently compensates for the inactivity of the knight.

24.a4 White's best was 24.g4!? attempting to generate some activity on the kingside. 24...♞b2 25.g5 ♞xd2 26.♞xd2 hxg5 27.♞xg5 ♟h7 28.♟f4 ♟f8 29.♞d3 (29.h6 ♟g6) 29...♞a3 30.h6 g6 (But not 30...♟g6?, because of 31.♞g2+-) 31.♞c2 d5 32.♞f3 ♞d8 33.♟g2 ♞b2 34.♞xb2 ♞xb2= Again there isn't much that either side could do, but nevertheless it would have been Nijat's best attempt to press on for something substantial.

24...♞b3



25.♞d3?! This is where things start to go slightly wrong for White. Better was 25.♞c2, emphasizing the key point of not allowing Black's rooks to hop onto the second rank and create more play. 25...♞b1 (25...♞b2 26.♟b5! ♞xc2 27.♞xc2±/=). This might even end up giving White a very slight edge, since Black's rook is totally restricted.) 26.♞xb1 ♞xb1 27.♟g2 ♞a1 28.♟b5 ♞c8=.

25...♞a3! Maintaining pressure on the a4 and c3 pawns, while making way for the other rook to hop onto the second rank.

26.♞f3? 26.♟c1 ♞a1 (26...♞a2 27.♞f3 ♞c6 28.♞f4! would allow White to successfully avoid a disadvantageous trade of queens.) 27.♟f4=.

26...♞c6! The endgame favors Black for obvious reasons, which Gukesh correctly assessed. 27.♞xc6 dxc6 Already a very tough position to play from White's side.

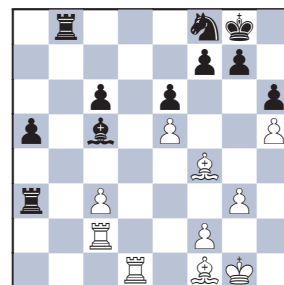
28.♞fd3 ♞xa4 29.♟g2 29.♞d2!? is the first line of the computer, aiming at creating a fortress-like position. However, given the course of the sample line, it is clear why humans would fail to foresee



▼ Dommaraju Gukesh vs. Nijat Abasov

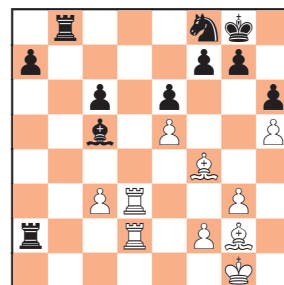
Photo by FIDE

this. 29...♞a3 30.♞c2 a5



31.♟g2! The key move which prevents a trade of rooks. (After 31.♟e2 ♞ab3 the exchange of rooks could be problematic for White.) 31...♞ab3 (31...a4 32.♟c4!=) 32.♞a1 ♞b2 33.♞e2 ♞xe2 34.♟xe2 ♞a8 35.♟f3 ♞a6 36.♟e2 ♞a7 37.♟f3 a4 38.♟xc6 a3 39.♟f3=.

29...♞a2 30.♞d2 30.♞d2! would have prevented the check on a1.



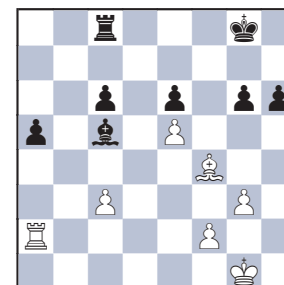
30...♞xd2?! 30...♞a1+ 31.♟h2 a5 Advancing the a-pawn would have yielded Black more than just saving the one on c6. 32.♟xc6 a4 33.♟e3 ♟xe3 34.♞xe3 g6!.

31.♞xd2 ♞c8 31...♞b3 32.♟xc6 g5 33.hxg6 ♟xg6 34.♞c2 a5 might have exerted more pressure.

32.♟e4 a5 33.♟c2 33.♞a2 would maintain more activity after 33...♟b6

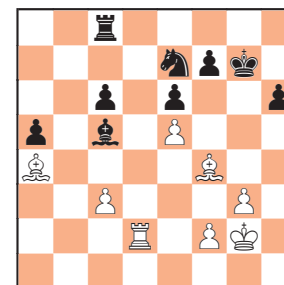
34.g4 ♟c7 35.♟g2.

33...g5 34.hxg6 ♟xg6 35.♟g2 Abasov here missed 35.♟xg6! fxg6 36.♞a2! after which there is little Black can do to press on further.



For example, 36...♞a8 37.♟xh6 a4 38.♟c1 a3 39.♟f1 ♟e7 40.♟e2 ♞a5 41.♟d3 ♞xe5 42.♟c4=.

35...♟g7 36.♟a4 ♟e7 36...♟e7 37.♞d7 ♟g5 38.♟f3 ♞d8! 39.♞xd8 ♟xd8.



37.c4? Nearly a decisive mistake. 37.♞a2 was best. Then, after 37...♟d5 (37...♟g6 38.♞e2=) 38.♟d2 ♟b6 39.♟c1=, Black has no real way to break through.

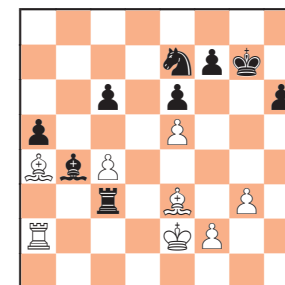
37...♞b8 38.♞a2 ♟b4 In this position Black can push forever. The extra pawn, which not so long ago could have been rendered useless by correct play, now represents a serious advantage for Black.

39.♟f3 39.♟e3 ♟f5 (39...♞d8 40.♟b6 ♞d3 41.♟c2 ♞c3 42.♟d1 ♞xc4 43.♟xa5 ♟xa5 44.♞xa5 ♟g6 45.♟e2= might hold for White, but such nuances are again impossible to see over the board, especially when one is rushing towards the time control in order to add some extra minutes to the clock.) 40.♟f4 c5.

39...♞d8 40.♟e3 ♞d3 The crucial penetration.

41.♟e2 41.♟g4 was White's last hope at creating some counterplay, but maybe to no avail. 41...♞c3 42.♟h5 ♟f5 43.♟f4 ♞xc4 44.♟c2 ♟f8.

41...♞c3 After this Black draws closer to winning.

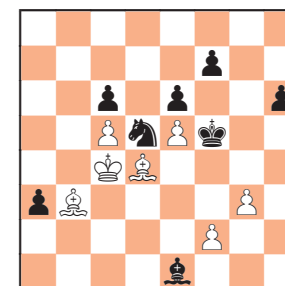


42.c5 ♟d5 43.♞c2 ♞xc2+ 44.♟xc2 a4 The pawn is immune due to a fork on c3.

45.♟d3 a3 46.♟b3 ♟g6 Gukesh works on improving his last piece.

47.♟d4 ♟g5 48.♟c4 ♟e1 The most precise. 48...♟g4? 49.♟d1+ ♟h3 (49...♟f5 50.♟c2+ ♟g5 51.♟b3!=) 50.♟f3!=.

49.♟d3 ♟g4 50.♟d1+ ♟g5 51.♟b3 ♟f5 52.♟c4



52...♟e4! 53.♟d1 a2 Threatening to promote after any piece block on c3.

54.f3+ ♟f5 55.♟c2+ 55.g4+ ♟f4 56.♟b3 ♟xf3 57.♟xa2 ♟xg4+.

55...♟g5 56.♟b3 ♟xg3 57.♟xa2 h5 **White resigned**

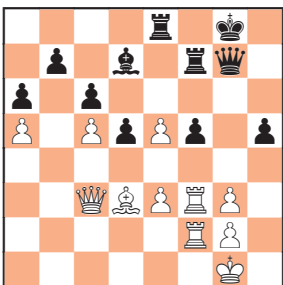


A Potential Miss

Gukesh could have triumphed in a more convincing way, had he found a promising sequence against his direct rival in round 11.

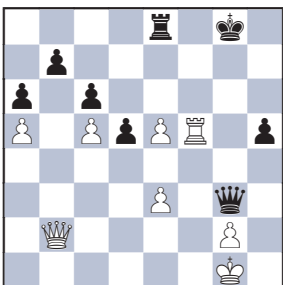
Dommaraju Gukesh	2743
Fabiano Caruana	2803

FIDE Candidates, Toronto 2024



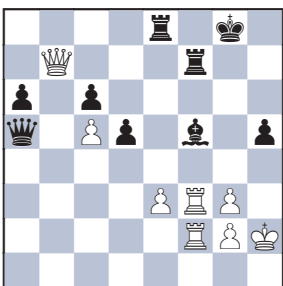
30. ♖b4?! 30. ♖b2! enables White to defend the e5 pawn in case of a similar continuation to the game and thereby save the game from fizzling out to an immediate draw.

A) 30... ♙c8 31. ♙xf5 ♙xf5 32. ♗xf5 ♗xf5 33. ♗xf5 ♗xg3



34. ♗f2!+- The rook ending is lost for Black and if he doesn't trade off queens immediately, he will be forced into an even worse position, after ♗f4 on the next move.

B) 30... ♗xe5 31. ♗xb7 ♗a1+ 32. ♖h2 ♗xa5 33. ♙xf5 ♙xf5



34. ♗xc6!! The pivotal and easy to miss detail in this variation. 34... ♗b5 35. ♗h6 ♗e5 36. ♗xf5 ♗xf5 37. ♗xf5 ♗xf5 38. ♗g6+ ♖h8 39. ♗xf5 ♗xc5 40. ♗e5+ ♖h7 41. e4±.



▲ Dommaraju Gukesh vs. Fabiano Caruana

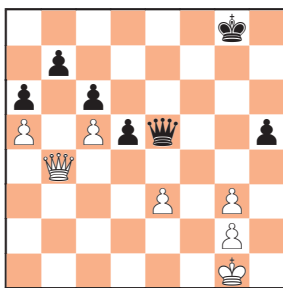
Photo by FIDE

Certainly not the simplest queen ending to convert, but possibly the most one could ask for in a game at this level.

30... ♙c8! This leads by force to the most inevitable outcome for a top level game.

31. ♙xf5 ♗xf5 32. ♗xf5 ♙xf5 33. ♗xf5 ♗xe5 34. ♗xe5 34. ♗f3 ♗e7 35. ♗f4 ♖g7 36. ♖h2 ♗e6= and there's almost nothing White can do to increase his chances.

34... ♗xe5



35. ♗xb7 If 35. ♖f2, then after 35... ♗e7 Black is safe.

35... ♗xg3 36. ♗xc6 ♗e1+ 37. ♖h2 ♗h4+ 38. ♖g1 ♗e1+ 39. ♖h2 ♗h4+ 40. ♖g1 ♗e1+ Draw

One thing is for sure – although he is still very young, Gukesh has matured a lot as a player – both chess-wise and psychologically. With further improvements in his game, it is hardly possible to predict the level he might reach

in the future. At the moment, Gukesh's FIDE rating stands at 2763, making him world No.6 – which is already incredible in itself for a recently just turned 18-year-old (his birthday is on May 29).

As for his chances against Ding, I think that Gukesh would be a clear favorite. This take, as extreme and outright as it may sound, is not without basis. First of all, we've all seen how well he performs under high pressure situations – ones to which even the best of the best may easily succumb, due to not being able to work their way through sky-high anxiety and external pressures of performance from sponsors, fans etc.

Secondly, given Ding's graph after the World Championship in 2023, it is difficult to expect him to be back in his best shape – on and off the board. Thirdly, I have this absurd feeling that, given the same above reason, Ding may even back out and we may witness something similar to the 2023 World Championship match, when the Candidates winner and runner-up would play for the biggest title in the chess world.

In such a case, Nakamura-Gukesh would enter a realm of uncertainty and, given the amount of experience and tenacity that the American has, it would be extremely tough for Gukesh to extract water out of a stone. But in any case, it would be a match for the ages, if it happens!



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