

History

ON WALL STREET



Perseverance, titles, and
drama abound
at the World Rapid & Blitz

BY **FM ALISA MELEKHINA**



THE USUAL HUSTLE AND BUSTLE OF WALL Street was replaced with a new type of intellectual intensity and rigor last December as around 300 players from across the world converged in New York City to battle it out in the 2024 FIDE World Rapid & Blitz Chess Championships, held in North America for the first time.

The Rapid (G/15+10) and Blitz (G/3+2)

championships were held between Christmas and New Year's, Dec. 26-31. The Open sections were held in the iconic Cipriani 55 Wall Street building, in the heart of the financial district, while the Women's took place across the street in the cozier but more festive 48 Wall Street.

Sponsored by Freedom Holding Corp., the tournament fused the playbook of a world championship event with a unique



spectator experience. Strict coat and bag checks, as well as electronic Fair Play security screening measures, were in place for players and spectators.

When tickets weren't sold out, spectators could purchase per-round general admission rapid tickets or passes (\$60-\$220), or VIP admission (\$1,500-\$5,000), which let them be steps away from the top boards and enjoy

a VIP lounge with hors d'oeuvres, an open bar, and an up-close seat for interviews with top players led by IM Levy Rozman (a.k.a. GothamChess) for *Take, Take, Take*.

The Rapid Open section featured 13 rounds over three days; the Women's, 11. The field comprised a melting pot of players, including top-10 superstars and up-and-coming future stars, as well as local champions and popular content creators. It felt like the American Dream come to life — players of various strengths came in with their own experiences, and through grit and determination, all had a shot at vying for the top spots.

Personally, I took time out of my day job as a corporate litigator to throw my hat back into the ring. Most players partake in both the Rapid and the Blitz, but having grown up as purely a classical player, I opted to play only in the Rapid, since it was more in my comfort zone.

RAPID: A STORY OF GENERATIONS AND JEANS

The Women's section of the Rapid saw a major tie for first going into the last round, with seven players scoring 8/10. All the leaders drew in the final round, except one legend: GM Humpy Koneru, who won a theoretically drawn rook endgame against top Indonesian player IM Irine Kharisma Sukandar to clinch clear first.

Humpy almost sat out this event; she had recently had a string of bad tournaments where she finished last and revealed in the post-tournament press conference that she had lacked the motivation to compete and had even contemplated retiring. She noted that she had been "in a low state" and was contemplating whether she "deserved" to continue playing, a feeling many of us experiencing tournament downswings could relate to.

Her hesitations were compounded by the time and climate difference between India and America, and inevitable jet lag, and flagging with white against WIM Amina Kairbekova from Kazakhstan in the first round probably didn't help either. Humpy reflected that after this upset, she never thought she would be playing for first place by the end.

But at age 37, Humpy has added a second world Rapid title to her collection. She remarked that as one gets older, it gets more difficult to "keep that motivation and stay



sharp when required.” She added, “This victory was very special and gave me the boost to fight.” Her achievement cemented India’s dominance of 2024, following its Olympiad victory and 18-year-old GM Gukesh Dommaraju’s classical chess crown.

It was not only the year of India in chess, but the year of juniors: Another 18-year-old was turning heads in the Open Rapid. Russian GM Volodar Murzin, originally seeded 59th, finished at the top of the leaderboard with a formidable and undefeated 10/13. However, a top contender was conspicuously missing from the final battles.

Defending Rapid champion GM Magnus Carlsen had an uncharacteristically shaky start. Out of the first five rounds, Carlsen drew three (against GMs Awonder Liang, Gleb Dudin, and Aleksandr Shimanov) and lost to up-and-coming GM Denis Lazavik. He rebounded by scoring 2½ points in the first three rounds of the second day, putting him on 5/8 going into Round 9, the last round of the day.

Being in the bubble of the Women’s section across the street, it was not until the end of the day, when I picked up my phone from the long coat check line, that I saw the messages and headlines announcing what would later be known as “jeans-gate.” Magnus had worn jeans to his games that day, seemingly in violation of FIDE’s dress code, and was not paired for Round 9.

The head arbiter fined Magnus \$200 after

Round 7, asking him to change before Round 9 or be forfeited for a game. Magnus did not dispute the fine, but refused to change that day. In an interview for *Take, Take, Take* with Rozman, Magnus later explained his decision was “a matter of principle.” Although he agreed to change for the final day, the arbiter enforced the rule and Magnus was not paired.

Magnus could have continued in the Rapid tournament on the final day, but he withdrew. In the same interview, Magnus indicated he was pulling out of the Blitz championships as well — he wanted to leave NYC and go somewhere with nicer weather. Magnus ended his interview with choice words to FIDE. This turn of events would reverberate throughout the rest of the tournament and was picked up in the mainstream news, including a New Year’s Eve appearance on NPR’s *Here & Now* by *Chess Life* editor John Hartmann.

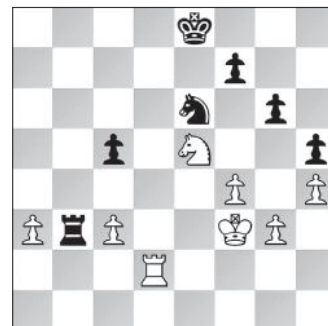
While the chess world contemplated what the future would hold without its mainstay of the last decade, the Rapid tournament continued with business as usual, and amid the confusion and speculation, Murzin quietly but surely paved his way, becoming the second-youngest World Rapid champion in history. Murzin had already defeated Grandmaster Fabiano Caruana in Round 2; in Round 9, he skillfully converted his advantage against GM Hikaru Nakamura in a long endgame.

A TWISTY ENDGAME

GM Hikaru Nakamura (2802)

GM Volodar Murzin (2664)

World Rapid (9), New York, 12.27.2024



WHITE TO MOVE

After prolonged maneuvering in a typical Italian middlegame, we reach this position where it seems that White is playing for two results.

48. Ra2

If 48. Ke4 Black can hold, but only after finding a sequence of precise and only moves: 48. ... Rxc3 49. Rd3 Rc1 50. Kd5 Nc7+! 51. Kd6 (or 51. Kc6 Ne6) 51. ... Nb5+ 52. Kc6 c4! 53. Nxc4 Nxa3!.

48. ... Rxc3+ 49. Kf2 c4 50. a4 Nc5 51. a5 f6 52. Nf3



PHOTOS, THIS PAGE: COURTESY FIDE / WALUZA ; PREVIOUS SPREAD, COURTESY FIDE (BLITZ), COURTESY MELEKHINA (WALL STREET)

White can go wrong if he tries too hard to win here: 52. Nxg6 Ne4+ 53. Kf1 Rf3+ 54. Ke1 Rxg3 55. a6? Rg1+ 56. Ke2 Rg2+ 57. Ke3 Rxa2 and Black wins.

52. ... Na6 53. Ke2 Kd7 54. Rb2 Ra3 55. Rb6 Ra2+ 56. Kd1 Nc5 57. Rb4?

It looks like 57. Rxf6 loses to 57. ... c3, but with 58. Rb6 covering the b3-square, White holds after 58. ... c2+ 59. Kd2.

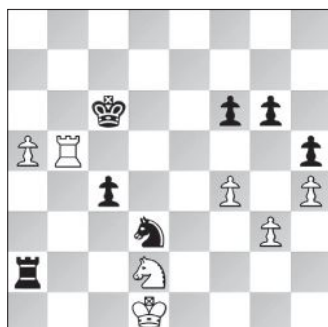
57. ... Nd3 58. Rb5

Not 58. Rxc4? Nb2+.

58. ... Kd6 59. Nd2

White had to find a knight maneuver to preserve drawing chances: 59. Nd4 c3 60. Nc2 Nf2+ 61. Kc1 Nd3+ 62. Kd1 looks uncomfortable, but White should be able to hold.

59. ... Kc6



There was a win for Black with 59. ... Nf2+ 60. Kc1 c3 61. Nc4+ Kc6 62. Rb6+ Kc5.

60. Rb8?

White still had hope with 60. Rb6+ Kd5 61. Nb1 trying to sacrifice his knight for the c-pawn while capturing the kingside pawns. A sample variation: 61. ... Kd4 62. Rxf6 Nb4 63. Rxg6 c3 64. Nxc3 Kxc3 and now 65. g4?? runs into 65. ... hxg4 66. Rxg4 Nd3 67. Rg8 Rd2 mate. But 65. a6! diverts the knight from d3 so White can play g3-g4 and force the exchange of Black's last pawn: 65. ... Nxa6 (or 65. ... Rxa6 66. Rxa6 Nxa6 67. Ke2 Kd4 68. Kf3 Nb4 69. g4 Nd5 70. gxh5) 66. g4 hxg4 67. Rxg4 Nb4 68. Rg8 Nd3 69. Rc8+ will eventually reach a theoretically drawn rook and knight versus rook ending.

60. ... Kc7!, White resigned.

Not 60. ... c3? 61. Rc8+ Kd5 62. Rxc3, but now there's no good way to stop the c-pawn.

In the post-tournament press conference, Murzin noted that his preparation for the Rapid included studying secondary and tertiary lines of lesser-known endgames. He

indicated that his strategy for rapid chess is to play solidly and induce his opponents to make mistakes, whereas in classical and blitz he might try to play more "aggressively."

I found this a mature and subtle take on preparation, and it certainly paid off. Rapid chess is a hybrid that presents its own challenges: The time control can provide a false sense of security regarding thinking deeply through lines, but the game will often abruptly transition into a time scramble. In the Swiss rapid format, where one cannot generally prepare specific opening lines and players tend towards middlegame positions they are comfortable in, it makes sense that games would be decided based on nuances in the endgame, when players simply don't have sufficient time to calculate through the complications. I noticed this trend in many of the decisive games throughout,

and I suffered several endgame misses in my own games.

Despite the ups and downs of my tournament, I at least came away with a game I could be proud of. I did not expect to execute such a rare checkmate-in-two motif in the middlegame in a world championship event.

BREAKING THROUGH

FM Alisa Melekhina (2176)

Svetlana Berezovska (1857)

World Women's Rapid (3), New York, 12.26.2024

(see diagram next page)

33. e5 Nf4 34. Rxf4

After a drawn-out attack, this Exchange sacrifice can be played without much thought,

FREE DAY AND CORPORATE CHESS

The format changes included a free day in between the World Rapid and Blitz championships. Sunday, Dec. 29, was allotted for a new chess-finance conference, the Wall Street Gambit.

The conference combined time-odds exhibition matches against headliners Vishy Anand, Magnus Carlsen (who returned in time to play), and Fabiano Caruana, along with keynotes and roundtables. GM Maurice Ashley and WGM Ketj Tsatsalashvili emceed the event.

The overlap between chess, finance, economics, and AI was explored in engaging presentations by Kaggle CEO J.D. Sculley, Saba Capital founder NM Boaz Weinstein, and GM Kenneth Rogoff, professor of economics at Harvard. Rogoff summed up the influence of the game: "Chess taught me to think in a disciplined, strategic way, which is essential in economics and finance."

The conference was held in the same venue as the Open tournament, giving attendees a chance to play at the same tables as the greats. The venue is no stranger to corporate chess, as it was the site of the inaugural in-person finals of the 2024 FIDE World Corporate Team championships in June.

Before the afternoon conference, the NYC Corporate Chess League (NYCCL) hosted a holiday Blitz & Brunch. The informal tournament, sponsored by Kirkland & Ellis LLP, featured our core member teams. Finishing at the top were Google, Goldman Sachs, and Deutsche Bank.

Left: You never know who will show up at a NYCCL event! Right: What could be better than a holiday blitz and brunch with friends?





WHITE TO MOVE

given that Black's last defenses come crashing down.

34. ... gxf4 35. Qxf4 dxe5 36. Qxe5 Re7
37. Ne8+!
Double check!

37. ... Kg8 38. Qg7 mate.



BLITZ: UPS AND DOWNS, RETURNING AND SPLIT CHAMPIONS

On the free day, Magnus announced on *Take, Take, Take* that after discussions with FIDE he would be returning to play in the Blitz after all. Among the factors informing his change of mind, Magnus said, he was reminded that he “loves playing blitz” and wanted to give fans an opportunity to see him play: “If it’s going to be the last time, who knows.”

Also on the free day, FIDE released a statement to all Blitz participants with a slightly modified dress code: “The principle is simple: it is still required to follow the official dress-code, but elegant minor deviations (that may, in particular, include appropriate jeans matching the jacket) are allowed.” Magnus availed himself of this new flexibility the next day when rushing into the first Blitz round against German GM Michael Bezold a minute late, and again wearing jeans. Despite being down a crucial minute on the clock and having the black pieces, Magnus won the game and resumed his ascent.

As the dust from jeans-gate settled, attention turned back to the chess. This year introduced a new two-day format: an initial



Top: A fan meets one of his heroes. Middle: Hardaway, Woodward, and Adewumi at the Rapid. Bottom: Our author in the VIP room!

PHOTOS: COURTESY FIDE / WALUZSA (DOMINGUEZ, VIP); COURTESY HARTMANN (JUNIORS)

Swiss qualifier followed by an eight-player knockout stage. The fast-paced blitz games highlighted the human elements of chess. Even 2700s and legends were not immune from time scrambles and wild evaluation swings. For example, in a heartbreaking game in Round 11, Ukrainian legend GM Vasyl Ivanchuk flagged against well-known commentator GM Daniel Naroditsky.

KING'S INDIAN DEFENSE, SÄMISCH VARIATION (E81)

GM Vasyl Ivanchuk (2630)

GM Daniel Naroditsky (2619)

World Blitz (11), New York, 12.30.2024

1. d4 Nf6 2. c4 g6 3. f3

This is often played as an anti-Grünfeld, but Naroditsky is known to be a King's Indian player so he allows the game to transpose to a KID Sämisch variation.

3. ... Bg7 4. e4 d6 5. Be3 0-0 6. Nc3 a6

A useful move, anticipating the ensuing Benoni structure where Black typically aims for a ... b7-b5 break. However, if White prevents this by 7. a4, then Black may change his mind and point out the b4 weakness with 7. ... a5.

7. Bd3 Nfd7

This prepares the typical ... c7-c5 break against the Sämisch without having to sacrifice the pawn with the immediate 7. ... c5, which is also playable.

8. Nge2 c5 9. d5 Ne5

It also would have made sense for Black to get the pawn break in with 9. ... b5!? before White has a chance to prevent it with a2-a4. Black gets excellent Benko-style compensation after 10. cxb5 Ne5.

10. a4 Nbd7

Black had another pawn break to consider: 10. ... f5!?

11. b3

Without this additional protection of c4, White can't move the d3-bishop out of the way and also cannot get rid of Black's knighthold on e5 without creating further weaknesses. At the same time, White is not concerned about trading the light-squared bishop for the knight, and might even prefer this exchange given that the bishop is blocked in by its own pawns.

11. ... Nxd3+ 12. Qxd3 f5

Now that Black's ... b7-b5 break is stalled

for the time being, he turns to the kingside to open up the game, which benefits Black due to his two bishops.

13. Rd1?

Getting out of the pin, but perhaps 13. Ra2 would have been better as now Black achieves ...

13. ... b5!



Black strikes while the iron is hot — before White has castled.

14. cxb5 axb5 15. axb5

Not 15. Nxb5? Ne5 16. Qc2 fxe4 17. fxe4 (17. Qxe4 Bf5 18. Qh4 Bc2) 17. ... Ba6 and with the White king stranded in the center, Black is already winning with the usual Benko-style queenside play: 18. Nec3 Qa5.

15. ... Ne5 16. Qc2 fxe4 17. Nxe4 Qa5+ 18. N2c3 Nxf3+!

(see diagram top of next column)

Perhaps White could have consolidated given a few moves, but this powerful sacrifice forecloses castling.



POSITION AFTER 18. ... Nxf3+

19. gxf3 Rxf3 20. Kd2

It was more accurate to play 20. Ke2, but it is understandable that Ivanchuk didn't want to voluntarily walk into 20. ... Bg4. That said, even better is 20. ... Rf8! 21. Ra1 Qb4! 22. Rxa8 Bg4+ 23. Kd2 Rxa8 when Black is down a piece but winning, as White is completely tied down.

20. ... Bd4?

Missing the next move, which turns the tide in White's favor! Black needed to step the queen out of the way with 20. ... Qb4!, and White cannot prevent Black from winning back a piece (and the game) with ... Bc8-f5. For example, White is lost after 21. Ra1 Bxc3+ 22. Qxc3 Qxe4 23. Rxa8 Qxd5+! 24. Ke2 Qxa8.

21. Ra1! Bxe3+ 22. Ke2 Bg4

Black's pieces look threatening, but it isn't enough; White is now winning.

23. Rxa5 Rxa5 24. Kd3!

Seeking shelter for the king on c4! Impressively accurate and bold defense by Ivanchuk.



A dejected Ivanchuk after his loss to Naroditsky

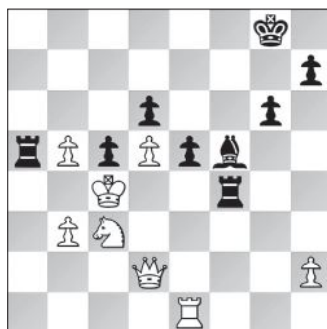
24. ... Bd4+ 25. Kc4 Bf5

Although White is now better, Naroditsky does not make it easy for Ivanchuk to convert, especially with the seconds counting down.

26. Qd2 Bxc3 27. Nxc3 e5 28. Re1

White could win with 28. dxe6 Bxe6+ 29. Nd5 Rf5 30. Rd1 Bxd5+ 31. Qxd5+ Rxd5 32. Rxd5, but it admittedly is not easy to relinquish such a large material advantage. Perhaps White was concerned about opening another diagonal that could be used against his king, though it is quickly blocked by the knight.

28. ... Rf4+



29. Qxf4

Thwarting the last of Black's threats by transforming the advantage into a still-winning ending, although 29. Ne4 was probably the best way to convert, because White's attack on the rook on a5 gives them enough time to play 30. Qxf4 followed by Ne4xd6.

29. ... exf4 30. Ne4 Bxe4 31. Rxe4 g5 32. b6 Ra8 33. Kb5

The plan for White — easier said than done — is to prevent Black's kingside pawns from advancing and push through on the queenside.

33. ... f3 34. Re1 g4 35. Kc6 h5

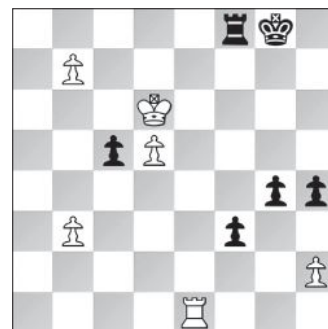
Again, Black poses problems for White to convert in an already pressurized situation.

36. Kxd6

White can win with 36. b7 Rf8 37. Rf1 or 37. Kxd6, but the natural 37. Kc7?? h4 38. b8=Q?? actually loses for White after 38. ... Rxb8 39. Kxb8 g3 40. hxg3 f2 41. Rf1 hxg3, which might be what caused Ivanchuk to try to consolidate before rushing to promote.

The simplest way, though, might have been 36. Rg1!?, holding up Black's h- and g-pawns: 36. ... Rf8 37. b7 f2 38. Rf1 h4 39. Rxf2 and White is winning.

36. ... Rf8 37. b7 h4



38. Rg1??

Counterintuitively, moving the rook to the f-file prevents ... g4-g3 (i.e., 38. Rf1! g3 39. hxg3 hxg3 40. Rxf3), but moving to the g-file allows it!

38. ... f2??

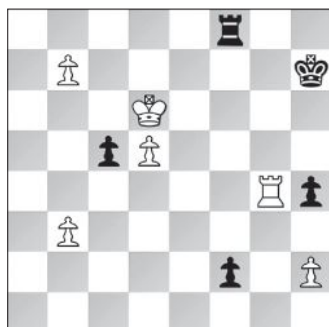
Black wins with 38. ... g3! 39. hxg3 f2! 40. Rf1 hxg3.

39. Rxc4+ Kh7

(see diagram top of next column)

A remarkable position! White is winning,





POSITION AFTER 39. ... Kh7

but only if he doesn't take the h4-pawn with check, which seems to be the obvious choice!

40. Rxh4+

Amazingly, White wins with 40. b8=Q, but only because the computer finds a series of only-moves to eventually thwart Black's checks and cash in on the pawn advantage in a complicated queen vs. rook ending. It is natural that any human would first take on h4 with check, which turns out to be an unfortunate error — apparently, White's queen and rook coordination is now disrupted if White queens. White wins after 40. ... f1=Q

41. Qc7+ Rf7 42. Qd8 Qa6+ 43. Ke5 Qe2+ 44. Re4 Qh5+ 45. Kd6 Qh6+ 46. Kxc5 Qc1+ 47. Rc4 Qa3+ 48. b4 Qa7+ 49. Kd6 Qa6+ 50. Rc6.

40. ... Kg6 41. Rg4+, White lost on time.

After a heartbreaking turn of events, White flagged in the course of making this move. He's losing after 41. ... Kf5, however, which allows Black to promote unencumbered.

White can promote, but the unforeseen difference from the previous line is that now White doesn't have a queen check on c7 to protect the f6-square in time: 41. b8=Q f1=Q 42. Qc7 (42. Rg4+ Kh5) 42. ... Qf6+ wins.

It was worth trying 41. Rf4 — Black would have to sidestep some landmines, but could eventually run the king to cover and remain up a rook: 41. ... Rxf4 42. b8=Q f1=Q 43. Qg8+ Kf5 44. Qe6+ Kg5 45. Qg8+ Kh5 46. Qh7+ Kg4 47. Qg6+ Kf3 (not 47. ... Kh3?? 48. Qg3 mate).

After 13 blitz rounds in the Open, 10 players separated themselves from the pack and tied with 9½ points. GM Fabiano Caruana had an impressive performance, creating buzz around the prospect of America's first World Blitz title.

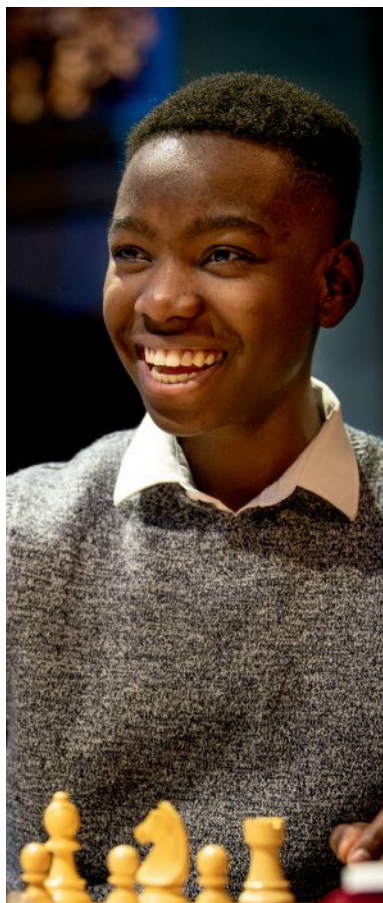
Naroditsky and GM Daniil Dubov narrowly missed the top eight on tiebreaks. Dubov's

tiebreaks were affected by his Round 10 forfeit against GM Hans Niemann. Dubov failed to show up to the game, purportedly due to oversleeping. In a later interview for *Take, Take, Take*, Dubov was cryptic: "When something like that happens, unless you're an idiot, you know what happened." He later said it was his first time in the U.S. "and it's hard to control the jet lag here — that's life."

Later on X, Dubov challenged Niemann to a 24-game blitz match on the condition he pass a lie detector test about cheating, while Niemann responded that he was "happy to play Dubov in a blitz match under ANY conditions." That match was played as we went to press, with Dubov narrowly winning.

The quarterfinals included the much-anticipated Carlsen-Niemann clash, as they faced each other over-the-board for the first time in this event since the notorious Sinquefeld Cup of 2022. After a draw in the first game, Hans was the first to strike in the second, mating Magnus in a complicated double-rook ending.

Left to right: Niemann, Nakamura, Yip, Naroditsky, So, Abrahamyan, Adewumi, and Benjamin.



SICILIAN DEFENSE (B30)

GM Hans Moke Niemann (2734)

GM Magnus Carlsen (2831)

World Blitz, New York, 12.31.2024

1. e4 c5 2. Nf3 Nc6 3. Bb5 e5 4. Nc3 d6
5. Bc4

This position is typically reached with an extra tempo for White via the anti-Sveshnikov move order 3. Nc3 e5 4. Bc4 d6.

5. ... Be7 6. d3 Nf6 7. h3 0-0 8. Nh2 Be6
9. Ng4 Nd4 10. a4 a6 11. Nxf6+ Bxf6 12.
Nd5 b5?!



An inaccuracy; Black's queen is now overloaded.

13. axb5 Nxb5

Black had to recapture with the knight, because White is much better after 13. ... axb5 14. Rxa8 Qxa8 15. Nxf6+ gxf6 16. Bxe6 Nxe6 17. Bh6. But now he is left with a permanent weakness on a6.

14. Bd2 Bg5 15. Ba5 Qb8 16. 0-0 Kh8 17.
Qh5 Bd8 18. Bxd8 Qxd8 19. f4 f6 20. fxe5
dxe5 21. Kh2

White missed 21. Nxf6!, although it's understandable given the unusual motif. White's winning after 21. ... Rxf6 (21. ... gxf6 22. Bxe6) 22. Rxf6 Bxc4 (22. ... Qxf6 23. Bxb5) 23. Rfxa6 Rxa6 24. Rxa6 Qd4+ 25. Kh2 Bg8 26. Rb6.

21. ... Nd6 22. b3 a5 23. Nc3 Nxc4 24. dxc4
Qd2 25. Na4 Qxc2 26. Nxc5 Bf7 27. Qd1
Qxd1 28. Rfxd1 Rfb8 29. Ra3 Rc8 30. Nb7
Rab8?

**31. Nd6!**

It's possible Black was expecting 31. Nxa5, which would have allowed him to put pressure on the weaknesses on e4 and b3. It's unclear after 31. ... Bg6 32. Re1 h5 33. Kg3 Kh7.

31. ... Rc7 32. Rxa5 Kg8

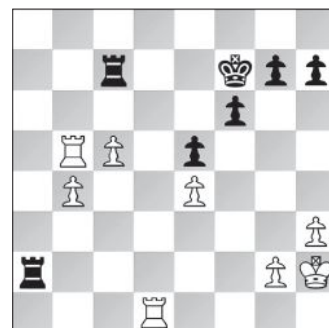
Black can't take because of the back-rank problems: 32. ... Rxb3 33. Nxf7+ Rxf7 34. Rd8+ Rf8 35. Rxf8 mate.

33. Rb5 Ra8 34. Nxf7

White opts to liquidate, but the computer finds it more efficient to simply push the pawns with 34. Ra1! Rd8 35. c5 Kf8 36. b4.

34. ... Kxf7 35. c5

Black doesn't have a lot of ideas other than doubling on the second rank, so 35. Rd2 would have been good prophylaxis.

35. ... Ra2 36. b4**36. ... Rb2?**

It's not entirely clear how White makes progress after 36. ... Rc2.

37. Rb8

The win was there after 37. Rc1! Ke7 38. c6 g6 39. Rb8 Kd6 40. b5 f5 41. Rd1+ Kc5 (or 41. ... Ke6 42. Re8+ Kf7 43. Red8 Rxb5 44. R8d7+ Rxd7 45. cxd7) 42. Rb7 (42. Rd7 Rxc6!) 42. ... Rxb7 43. cxb7 Rxb5 44. Rd5+! Kc6 45. Rxb5 Kxb5 46. b8=Q+.

37. ... Rxc5 38. Rd7+

Not 38. bxc5 Rxb8 39. Rd7+ Ke6 40. Rxg7 Rc8 41. Rxh7 Rxc5 with a likely draw.

38. ... Ke6??

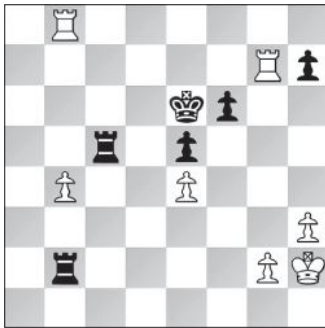
Black had to play 38. ... Kg6. After 39. Rbb7

Left: Carlsen and Nepomniachtchi "commence hostilities." Right: The papers are signed, and the title is split.



Rc4 40. Rxg7+ Kh6 41. Rxh7+ Kg5 Black's king lives to see another day.

39. Rxg7



Now Black has to suddenly contend with the threat of Rb8-b6 mate.

39. ... Rc6 40. b5 Rd6

Black can avoid immediate mate with 40. ... f5 41. Re8+ Kf6 42. bxc6, but the pawn will queen after 42. ... Kxg7 43. c7.

41. Re8 mate.

It's not every day that you see a checkmate on the board against a world champion.

Nonetheless, the defending champion came back to win his next two games to advance to the next bracket. In the meantime, GM Ian Nepomniachtchi knocked out World Rapid champion Murzin; Polish GM Jan-Krzysztof Duda eliminated Caruana and American GM Wesley So knocked out GM Alireza Firouzja.

After Nepo won his semifinal match with So and Carlsen knocked out Duda, the final pairing was a throwback to the 2021 classical World Championship. Magnus started with a commanding 2-0 lead, but Nepo mounted a strong comeback, putting fans on the edge of their seats, to even the score.

FRENCH DEFENSE, STEINITZ VARIATION (C11)

GM Magnus Carlsen (2831)

GM Ian Nepomniachtchi (2755)

World Blitz Final (3), New York, 12.31.2024

1. e4 e6 2. d4 d5 3. Nc3 Nf6

The Classical system in the French has been making a comeback recently; it was Ding's weapon of choice in the 2024 World Championship.

4. e5 Nfd7 5. Nce2 c5 6. c3 Nc6 7. a3

One of Black's primary ideas in the French is to undermine White's pawn chain by

putting pressure on d4; this line reinforces a stronghold on the base of the chain.

7. ... a5 8. Nf3 a4 9. h4



Magnus and Nepo played this same setup in the final knockout of the Oslo Rapid, a mere 10 days earlier. There, Nepo castled kingside and was steamrolled by an attack in 23 moves. Clearly, he had something else in store if he chose to play the same line in this must-win situation.

9. ... Nb6

That Oslo game went 9. ... Qa5 10. Bd2 Qb6 11. Rb1 Be7 12. Be3, and after 12. ... 0-0 White broke through quickly with 13. Nf4 Qb3 14. Qc1 cxd4 15. cxd4 Na5 16. Bd3 h6 17. Rh3.

10. Nf4 Na5 11. Rb1 Bd7 12. Bd3 h6 13.

0-0 Qc7 14. Re1 Nbc4

In this opening rematch, Black's plan is to create a blockade on the queenside so that he may safely castle long.

15. Nh5 Bb5 16. dxc5! Qxc5 17. Nd4

This knight keeps an eye on the b3-square, which White needs in order to break through the blockade.

17. ... Bd7 18. Qg4 0-0-0 19. Qf4

The computer prefers 19. Nxd7? Rg8 20. Bxh6, but it is understandable that White didn't want to voluntarily enter into a self-pin.

19. ... Qe7 20. b3

White achieves the critical breakthrough, but the resulting position is still dynamically equal.

20. ... axb3 21. Nxb3 Nxb3 22. Rxb3 Bc6

23. Be3



Black's last move offered a pawn sacrifice with 23. Bxc4 dxc4 24. Qxc4 Qc5, but it's worth it for Black to open up the light-squared bishop, which is usually locked up in French structures. In fact, Black's two bishops might give him a slight edge here.

If White were to enter this line, it's worth considering not taking right away, and instead playing 24. Rb4, winning the pawn without allowing the black queen to come to c5, although the engine still calls it equal after 24. ... g5 25. Qg4 Qc7 26. Rxc4 gxh4 27. Nf6 Be7.

23. ... g5!

This thematic break is well timed. Black needs to start creating counterplay on the



kingside before White creates deadly threats on the queenside.

24. Qd4 gxh4 25. Nf6 Bg7 26. Reb1 Bxf6

27. exf6 Qc7 28. Qa7

White goes all in on his queenside attack.

28. ... Rhg8 29. Bf4??



A natural continuation of the attack, but it ignores how quickly Black's pieces can come to life.

29. ... Qxf4 30. Rxb7 Rxb2+!!

White's king is left helpless, and all of Black's remaining pieces cooperate to deliver check-mate.

31. Kxg2



31. ... Ne3+!!, White resigned.

A beautiful finish in a key game! After 32. Qxe3 (it's mate after 32. fxe3 Rg8+ 33. Kh1 Qf3+ 34. Kh2 Qg2), 32. ... d4+ cleanly picks up the queen with the help of the light-squared bishop, which is typically Black's worst piece in the French but is the star of the show here: 33. Kf1 dxe3 and mate is coming up.

In the meantime, the Women's section, playing in the Open venue at Cipriani in front of a common group of spectators, was immersed in its own battle.

The finals whittled down to a battle of the Chinese superstars: classical Women's World Champion, and World Rapid silver medalist, GM Ju Wenjun against her countrywoman,

GM Lei Tingjie. Ju had overcome an early setback in the Swiss after blundering in Round 2 to U.S. Women's Champion and Stanford student IM Carissa Yip.

Both Blitz finals ended 2-2, triggering tiebreak playoffs. While in classical chess traditional tiebreaks might typically include an Armageddon game which would force a winner (given that Black generally gets draw odds), there were no decisive tiebreaks in the FIDE regulations. Instead, the tiebreaks included repeated blitz matches at the same time G/3+2 control with alternating colors "until the first game won by one of the players."

Ju won the second tiebreak game after Lei, in keeping with the fighting spirit of the match, tried the Tarrasch Gambit. It backfired, and Ju picked up her second world championship of 2024.

QUEEN'S GAMBIT DECLINED, TARRASCH DEFENSE (D32)

GM Ju Wenjun (2563)

GM Lei Tingjie (2549)

World Women's Blitz Final (3), New York, 12.31.2024

1. d4 d5 2. c4 e6 3. Nc3 c5 4. cxd5 cxd4

(see diagram top of next column)

The Hennig-Schara (Tarrasch) Gambit, considered playable according to modern engines despite its perhaps dubious reputation.

5. Qa4+

This gets a slightly more favorable move order. White can also accept the gambit



POSITION AFTER 4. ... cxd4

straightforwardly with 5. Qxd4 Nc6 6. Qd1 exd5 7. Qxd5, but Black would have more options beyond transposing to the game with 7. ... Bd7, such as 7. ... Qc7.

5. ... Bd7 6. Qxd4 exd5 7. Qxd5 Nc6 8. Nf3 Nf6 9. Qd1

The alternative is 9. Qd3, with the idea of tucking away the queen on b1 after 9. ... Nb4.

9. ... Bc5 10. a3 a6 11. e3 0-0 12. Be2 Qe7 13. 0-0 Rfd8 14. Qc2 Rac8

As compensation for the sacrificed pawn, Black is much better developed.

15. Bd2 Ne5 16. Rfd1 Bc6 17. Qf5

(see diagram top of next column)

17. ... Ng6

Black needs to pose immediate problems for White with 17. ... Ng6 before she has a chance to consolidate. This leads to several lines where Black has the option to impose complications: 18. h3 g6 19. Qc2 and now



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POSITION AFTER 17. Qf5

(a) 19. ... Nxf2!? 20. Kxf2 Re8 with some compensation, or (b) 19. ... Rxd2!? 20. Qxd2 (White has to avoid 20. Rxd2 Nxf2 21. Kxf2 Qxe3+ 22. Ke1 Bxf3 23. gxf3 Qf2+ 24. Kd1 Qg1+ 25. Bf1 Qxf1 mate) 20. ... Nxe3 21. Re1 Rd8 22. Qc1 Nxe2 23. Kxg2 Qe5.

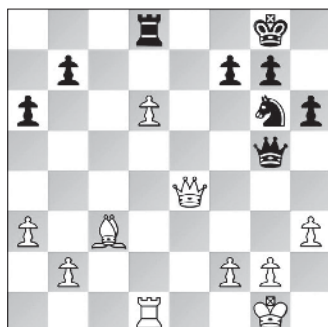
18. Rac1 Bd7 19. Qb1 Bc6 20. Be1

Now White has consolidated and is ready to exchange rooks on the d-file and start converting the pawn advantage.

20. ... Ng4 21. Nd4 Bd7 22. h3 Nf6 23. Bf3 Rb8 24. Ne4 Bxd4 25. Rxd4 Bf5 26. Nxf6+ Qxf6 27. Be4 Rxd4 28. exd4 Bxe4 29. Qxe4

White has successfully liquidated into a technically winning endgame.

29. ... Nf4 30. Bd2 Ne6 31. Be3 h6 32. d5 Nf8 33. Bd4 Qg5 34. Rd1 Rd8 35. Bc3 Ng6 36. d6



The pawn is unstoppable.

36. ... b5 37. d7 Nf4 38. Kh2 f5 39. Qf3 Ne6 40. Ba5 Rf8 41. Qd5 Qf4+ 42. Kg1 Qe4 43. Qxe4 fxe4 44. d8=Q, Black resigned.

After three Open tiebreak games ended in draws, the match paused while Magnus, set to have the white pieces, suggested something to Nepo and called the arbiter over. The audiences in the room and online, were brimming with anticipation; the initial speculation was that the players might have



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This is why we love chess and why we come to these events. Neel met a lot of his heroes and got them to sign his book. #worldrapidblitz
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6:01 PM · Dec 28, 2024 · 4,735 Views

requested a longer break between games. But after several minutes, the news came to light: Magnus had proposed to split the world blitz title and Nepo agreed.

One more step remained, which was to obtain FIDE approval. After another 15 minutes, which felt much longer, it was confirmed that this proposal was approved by FIDE President Arkady Dvorkovich. The two longtime rivals and friends signed a document, and for the first time in history, the world Blitz title was split between two players. The players rang in New Year's Eve with an eighth World Blitz title for Magnus (his 18th title overall), and Nepo's first world championship.

Reactions were mixed, but everyone can agree that this was one championship to remember. Off the board, the event raised questions as to the integrity and enforceability of dress codes and tiebreaks, as well as the potential influence of top chess players on politics. On the board, the games celebrated a diversity of playing styles, personal triumphs and tribulations — every participant, whether a player or spectator, came away with their own story.

The World Rapid & Blitz will return to Doha, Qatar, at the end of December 2025. ♠

