



THE CANDIDATES



GUKESH AND TAN
WIN IN TORONTO
TO ADVANCE TO
THE WORLD
CHAMPIONSHIP

BY **GM EUGENE
PERELSHTEYN**

Top: GMs Tan Zhongyi and Dommaraju Gukesh with their awards. Left: The friendly rivalry between GMs Fabiano Caruana and Hikaru Nakamura continued in Toronto.

PHOTOS: COURTESY FIDE / MICHAL WALUSZA



WITH HUNDREDS OF thousands of chess fans watching around the world — more than 200,000 were watching the English language Chess.com stream

alone! — and some of the chess world's elite onsite in Toronto, the final round of the 2024 Candidates tournament was everything the organizers could have hoped for.

Entering the final round with a half-point lead, GM Dommaraju Gukesh only needed a draw to guarantee at least a rapid tiebreak match for the overall victory. His final round opponent, GM Hikaru Nakamura, as well as GMs Fabiano Caruana and Ian Nepomniachtchi, who faced off with one another, all needed to win to get to the tiebreak.

The Fates could not have designed a more dramatic finale.

With Gukesh comfortably holding the draw as Black in a fighting game against Nakamura, all eyes turned to the battle between Caruana and Nepomniachtchi. And this game did not disappoint, with Caruana gaining a winning position with elegant play, only for tragedy to strike:

QUEEN'S GAMBIT, EXCHANGE VARIATION (D35)

GM Fabiano Caruana (2803)

GM Ian Nepomniachtchi (2758)

FIDE Candidates (14), Toronto, 04.21.2024

Caruana opted for 1. e4 in all his previous games in Toronto, but now he decides to surprise Nepo and possibly avoid facing the Petroff. It turned out to be the right decision!

1. d4 Nf6 2. c4 e6 3. Nc3 d5

Slightly surprisingly, Nepo sticks to his guns for now, as he has used this move order to reach Queen's Gambit Declined structures before. But, given that he is in a must-win situation, perhaps the Nimzo-Indian would have been a good option?

4. cxd5 exd5 5. Bg5 Bb4!?

Nepo goes for the Ragozin Defense setup, a much sharper option for Black. 5. ... Be7 is the classic QGD approach.

6. e3 h6 7. Bh4 g5 8. Bg3 Ne4

Black goes for the sharpest option. This position is quite topical, with many recent GM battles.

9. Qc2 h5! 10. f3

A necessary move to save the bishop.

10. ... Nxg3 11. hgx3



Both players must have been happy in this position. Nepo has reached an imbalanced position due to the bishop pair, providing him a way to play for a win. At the same time, Fabi also had reason for optimism, since Black has significantly weakened his kingside.

11. ... Be6

A rare move. Strangely enough, Gukesh once used this move in a rapid game to beat none other than "Mr. Theory" — Anish Giri — himself!

12. Bd3

Now 12. 0-0-0 is perhaps less accurate as after 12. ... Nd7 13. a3 Bxc3! (improving on 13. ... Bd6 14. e4 Nb6 15. e5 Be7 16. f4 with complex play as in Giri – Gukesh, chess24.com 2022) gives Black an easy game, for example: 14. Qxc3 Qe7! 15. Bd3 (after 15. Qxc7 Bf5! White's king is quite weak) 15. ... 0-0-0 16. Ne2 Kb8 17. e4 dxe4 18. fxe4 Bg4 with a nice edge for Black.

12. ... c6 13. 0-0-0

Fabi goes for the most complex line. The alternative 13. a3 Bxc3+ 14. Qxc3 feels safer for White. He has the better bishop but Black is rock-solid with plenty of fight left.

13. ... Nd7 14. f4!

While objectively the position may be equal per the engines, our considerations are quite different when humans are involved. Black has to solve many practical problems, including (a) should he trade on f4?; (b) how should he deal with the threat of f4-f5, trapping the bishop?; and finally, (c) how to castle queenside?

14. ... Bg4 15. Nf3!?

Caruana plays the most logical move, developing his last piece. But Black is fine with accurate play.

The unusual backwards move 15. Be2! is best! After 15. ... Bxe2 16. Ngxe2 gxf4 17. gxf4 Nf6 18. e4!? dxe4 19. d5! White's attack is very promising from a human perspective, even if the engine spits out triple zeros.

15. ... Qe7

Inserting 15. ... gxf4! is much stronger; for example, 16. gxf4 Qe7 17. e4 dxe4 18. Bxe4 0-0-0 19. Nd5 Qd6 20. Nxb4 Qxb4 and Black is totally fine.

16. e4



16. ... Bxc3?

A decision that Nepo probably regretted after the game. After this move, White firmly takes over the initiative.

The right way was 16. ... dxe4! 17. Bxe4 gxf4 and now perhaps Fabi's idea was 18. Bxc6!?. It turns out that survival requires engine-like precision with 18. ... bxc6 19. Rhe1 Be6 20. gxf4 0-0-0 21. d5 Nb6! but Black should hold.

17. Qxc3 Bxf3

Likely Nepo also calculated 17. ... dxe4 18. Bxe4 0-0-0 (18. ... Qxe4?? 19. Rhe1) and here 19. Rde1! is a tough move to find, but this rook shift is most uncomfortable for Black to meet. After 19. ... Qf6 20. fxg5 Qg7 21. Kb1 White has an extra pawn, but with tripled pawns it's not easy to press for a big edge.

18. gxf3 dxe4 19. Bxe4!



Fabi shows great poise and finds the most

accurate move. When I was doing live commentary of this game, 19. fxe4 felt like an autopilot move, obtaining a massive center. Yes, White is a bit better after 19. ... 0-0-0, but it's not clear how to breakthrough. Instead Fabi uses precise calculation to get an even bigger edge!

19. ... gxf4 20. g4!

The key idea. Black now has too many problems to solve.

20. ... 0-0-0

A practical decision by Nepo to abandon the h-pawn.

21. d5!

The only move to maintain the advantage. Now Fabi played many moves of perfect chess, and everyone was certain of his impending victory.

21. ... h4 22. dxc6 Nc5 23. Bf5+ Kb8 24. Kb1!

An excellent time for prophylaxis.

24. ... b6 25. Rd7! Rxd7

Of course 25. ... Nxd7 26. c7+! wins for White.

26. cxd7 Rd8 27. Qd4 Nxd7 28. Rd1

Excellent centralization. Black is hopelessly pinned.

28. ... Qc5 29. Qxf4+ Qc7 30. Qd2!

Keeping the pin alive.

30. ... h3



Black is totally lost, but Nepo saved so many lost positions in this tournament that one should never underestimate his defensive

skills. And with time pressure starting to become a factor...

31. Be4!

A nice idea, with a threat of Qd2-d5.

31. ... a5 32. Qd5 Ka7 33. Qxf7

Many moves win, but why not snack on another pawn?

33. ... h2 34. Qh7 Kb8 35. a3

The natural instinct for a practical player. Fabi knows he's winning, and with Black totally paralyzed he makes *Luft* for the king. However, he could have finished the game in one move with the simple, strong 35. Rd2!. Once the h2-pawn falls, it's all over. White will easily convert his two pawn advantage.

35. ... Qe5!

Nepo plays for tricks.

36. Qh6!

Here 36. Rd2? would fail to 36. ... Rh8!.

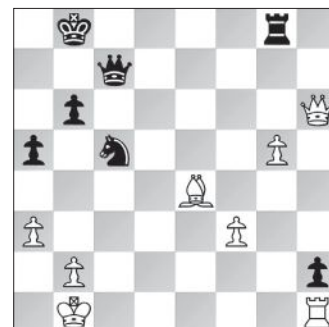
36. ... Qc7

Now 36. ... Rh8 would be met by 37. Qc6! and Black gets mated.

37. g5

Again, 37. Rd2! would be an easy win.

37. ... Rg8 38. Rh1 Nc5



39. Bh7?

While this move doesn't let go of the win, it makes it exponentially more difficult, allowing Nepo a tricky Exchange sacrifice to muddy the waters. 39. Bc2! would have finished the game on the spot. Now the h2-pawn falls.

39. ... Rxc5!

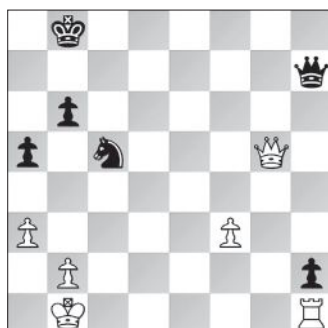
A great defensive resource!

The many faces of "Nepo": utter relief at holding the draw against Caruana (middle) and the pain of not qualifying (bottom).





40. Qxg5 Qxh7+



41. Ka1?

Fabi makes the time control... and immediately goes wrong. In truth, the game has become incredibly complex, and even strong GMs in the comfort of their homes would have trouble figuring it out.

Paradoxically, the winning path begins with 41. Ka2!, walking into a check from the queen! After 41. ... Qf7+ 42. Ka1! Nb3+ 43. Kb1 Qh7+ 44. Ka2! White uses an odd triangulation to bring the king to a2 and threaten the knight, winning an important tempo. Now after 44. ... Qf7 45. Rxh2! Black has no good discoveries and finds himself totally lost! This is not at all easy to see from afar, of course.

41. ... Qc2! 42. Qg8+ Ka7 43. Ka2 a4!

(see diagram top next column)

Black has reached a fortress, but the game is far from over!

44. f4 Nb3?

A logical move with the idea of ... Nb3-c1+, but it's wrong. The only move that maintains equality is 44. ... Ka6!.



POSITION AFTER 43. ... a4

45. Qg7+ Ka6 46. Qc3!

Fabi spots the key idea.

46. ... Qg2 47. Qc4+ Kb7 48. Re1!

Now the threats against Black's king are real.

48. ... Nc5 49. Qf1!

This beautiful regrouping to rescue the rook from h1 is complete. White is winning again!

49. ... Qd5+ 50. Kb1 Qf5+ 51. Ka1 Qc2 52. f5 Nd3 53. Rb1 Nc5 54. f6 Nb3+ 55. Ka2 Nd2 56. Qh1+ Ka7 57. Rc1 Qb3+ 58. Ka1 Qe6



59. Rc7+?

The position is so hard, and inevitably errors

like this one will creep in.

The win is there with 59. Rd1 Nb3+ 60. Kb1 Qxf6 (or 60. ... Qf5+ 61. Ka2 Qe6 62. Qxh2) 61. Qxh2, while 59. Re1 also wins.

59. ... Ka6 60. f7 Nb3+ 61. Kb1 Qf5+?

Nepo returns the favor! White can't escape the checks after 61. ... Nd2+! 62. Kc2 (62. Ka1 Nb3+ is just a repetition) 62. ... Qf5+ 63. Kxd2 Qf2+ 64. Kd3 Qf5+ 65. Ke2 Qg4+ and the position will repeat.

62. Ka2 Nc5 63. Qa8+ Kb5 64. Qc6+

Fabi repeats to gain time.

64. ... Ka6 65. Qa8+ Kb5

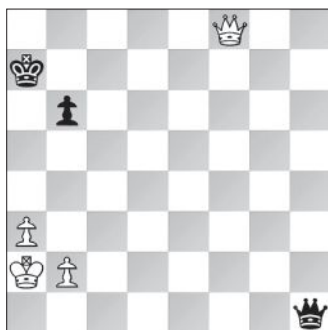


66. Qc6+?

Time pressure and Nepo's defensive tenacity take their toll. Now the game is drawn.

66. Qe8+! is the only winning move, but the key idea is 66. ... Ka6 67. Qe2+! — the black king is too open, and White wins in all lines. For instance, 67. ... b5 (alternatives: 67. ... Ka5 68. Ra7+; 67. ... Nd3 68. Qxh2) 68. Rc6+ Ka7 (68. ... Ka5 69. Qe1+ b4 70. Qxb4 mate; 68. ... Kb7 69. Qxb5+ also leads to mate) 69. Qe7+ Nb7 70. Qe3+ Kb8 71. Qe6! Qxe6+ 72. Rxe6 h1=Q 73. f8=Q+ and White should win.

66. ... Ka6 67. Re7 Qf1 68. Qa8+ Kb5
69. Qe8+ Ka6 70. Qa8+ Kb5 71. Qe8+ Ka6
72. Re4 Nxe4 73. Qxa4+ Kb7 74. Qxe4+
Ka7 75. Qa4+ Kb7 76. Qd7+ Ka6 77. Qc8+
Ka7 78. f8=Q Qxf8 79. Qxf8 h1=Q



The dust has settled, and while Caruana has an extra pawn, this is an easy draw for Nepo. The plan is simple: just wait and keep checking White's king. If White trades one of his pawns then an easy draw is reached, even with the trade of queens.

80. a4 Qd5+ 81. Ka3 Qd3+ 82. b3 Qd4
83. Qf7+ Kb8 84. Qe8+ Ka7 85. Qe7+ Kb8
86. Qe1 Qd6+ 87. Qb4 Qf6 88. Qd2 Qe7+
89. b4 Qe6 90. Qd3 Ka7 91. Qc3 Kb8
92. Qb3 Qf6 93. Qe3

Not much has changed, and Fabi knows it's a draw. Yet he continues to play out of sheer inertia.

93. ... Qd6 94. Kb3 Qd5+ 95. Kb2 Qd6

96. Qe8+ Ka7 97. Qf7+ Kb8 98. Kc3 Qe5+
99. Kd3 Qd6+ 100. Kc4 Qc6+ 101. Kb3 Qd6
102. Qf3 Qd4 103. Qe2 Qd5+ 104. Ka3
Qd6 105. Qb5 Qd4 106. Kb3 Ka7 107. Qe2
Qd5+ 108. Ka3 Qd4 109. Kb3, draw.

Fabi called it a day and offered a draw. Both players clearly were emotionally drained. Those watching the livestream could see the mutual distress — Nepo could be heard saying "I'm so sorry," to which Fabi stoically replied, "My fault."

This was a heartbreaking result for Caruana and his fans. But this kind of scenario is played out in every tournament, from weekend amateur event up to the Candidates. Nepomniachtchi's tricky and resourceful play managed to set problems, and the combination of nerves and time pressure led to blunders. Once given the chance, Nepomniachtchi grabbed it with both hands.

As soon as the clocks were stopped in the Caruana – Nepomniachtchi game, Gukesh could finally exhale as the tournament winner. The 17-year-old Indian is the youngest-ever challenger for the World Championship, a fact that is not completely surprising for a game that has gotten younger and younger with every passing year! He will face Ding Liren in the next World Championship match this coming fall.

One could hardly ascribe the youngster's success to luck. Gukesh simply played the best chess in Toronto. A combination of deep — but not boring! — solidity, a steadiness of nerves, and some high-level opening preparation combined to bring him his greatest success so far. Witness his smooth victory against his countryman, GM Santosh Vidit Gujrathi, with the black pieces. Gukesh was able to subtly exploit his opponent's overextension and conclude with an elegant king hunt.

GIUOCO PIANO (C55)

GM Vidit Santosh Gujrathi (2727)

GM Dommaraju Gukesh (2743)

FIDE Candidates (8), Toronto,
04.13.2024

1. e4 e5 2. Nf3 Nc6 3. Bc4 Nf6 4. d3 a6!?

A fresh idea from Gukesh and his team. I was watching the game live on-site with a few GM friends, and we were trying to guess the point. It will be clear in a few more moves...

5. 0-0 h6!?

Another waiting move from Black, stopping the aggressive Bc1-g5 pin setup. The point is also to wait for White to determine which



plan he will choose (6. a4 or 6. c3) and then decide where to put the bishop (6. ... Bc5 or 6. ... Be7).

6. a4

I suspect that Gukesh prepared 6. c3 Be7, when he would meet 7. d4 with 7. ... d6 and a solid structure.

6. ... Bc5!

The point! Gukesh transposes to a well-known Italian Game setup known to be good for Black.

7. Be3?!

Vidit was clearly out of book as he burnt about 40 minutes on his previous moves. But this plan is totally harmless for Black. Standard is 7. c3 with complex play.

7. ... d6 8. Nbd2 0-0 9. c3

Here 9. Bxc5 dxc5 leads to a roughly even position, despite White's nominally better pawn structure.

9. ... Re8

A slightly risky decision from Gukesh, which ultimately paid off. Instead 9. ... Bxe3 10. fxe3 Ne7 is a standard plan for these positions. Black reroutes the knight to g6, followed by ... c7-c6 and ... d6-d5.

10. b4?!

This push is more common with bishop still on c1. Here Black can capture on e3, which he wants to do anyways. 10. Qb3!? is an interesting idea to push pressure on f7, for example: 10. ... Re7 11. Bxc5 dxc5 12. Qc2 with a slightly better structure for White, but Black is solid.

10. ... Bxe3 11. fxe3 Be6

Black has obtained easy equality. Being lower on time, Vidit should have started to be more careful.

12. b5?



It's clear that Vidit was in a fighting mood,

but unfortunately this only creates more weaknesses, overextending the white position. White could still keep equality with 12. Bxe6 Rxe6 13. Qc2.

12. ... Nb8 13. Bxe6 Rxe6 14. Qc2 Nbd7

15. d4

Fighting for the center in this way was presumably Vidit's idea, but White's pawn mass is totally harmless.

15. ... Qe8 16. Rae1?

Giving up the a-file is a big strategic concession, but already it's hard to come up with an active plan.

The engine recommendation is 16. d5, but to me it feels like strategic suicide to give up the c5-outpost. White has counterplay after 16. ... Re7 17. c4 Nc5 (17. ... b6!?) 18. Nh4!.

16. ... axb5 17. axb5 Ra5 18. c4 Qa8 19. h3 Re8



Black's simple regrouping gives him a nice edge, while White is still struggling to come up with a plan.

20. Kh2 b6 21. Rf2 Ra2 22. Qd3 Ra3

23. Qb1 Qa4 24. Nh4

White's last hope for counterplay is to put the knight on f5, but in reality, even that knight would be just a paper tiger. Meanwhile Gukesh continues with straightforward play on the queenside.

24. ... Ra8!

Letting White do his worst. Perhaps 24. ... g6 25. Ref1 Kg7 would be a more prudent approach, when Black is still clearly better.

25. Nf5



25. ... Kf8!

An amazing move. The idea is simple: Black stops any Nf5-e7+ counterplay and is ready to invade with ... Ra3-a1 next.

26. Ref1 Ra1 27. Qd3 Qb4 28. Rxa1 Rxa1

29. c5?

A move that smacks of desperation, but it's hard to give White good advice here.

29. ... bxc5 30. Nc4 Qe1!

The new Challenger was a popular figure in the fan zone.



All of a sudden, White's king finds himself in a mating net. There's no defense against ... Qe1-g1+ and ... Nf6-h5+.

31. Re2 Qg1+ 32. Kg3 Nh5+ 33. Kh4 Ndf6



34. Nxh6 Qh2!

The most direct win, although there was nothing wrong with taking the knight.

35. Nf5 Rf1 36. g4

The central capture 36. dxe5 would give Black a choice of which checkmate to execute: 36. ... Rf4+ (or 36. ... Rxf5 37. exf5 Qg3 mate) 37. exf4 (alternatives: 37. g4 Rxg4 mate; 37. Kg5 Rg4+! 38. hxg4 Nh7 mate is another attractive checkmate) 37. ... Qxf4+ 38. g4 g5 mate.

36. ... Rxf5! 37. exf5

If 37. Rxh2 g5 mate is a pretty finale! Some players would be happy to allow fans the joy

Below: Firouzja and Gukesh stare intently at the computer screen, while FIDE Press officer Anna Burtasova looks on.

of seeing this mate played out on the board.

37. ... Qg3+ 38. Kg5 Nh7+, White resigned.

Gukesh only lost one game, but it was one that — for a player with less strength of character — could have ruined the tournament:

GET THAT MOJO WORKING

GM Alireza Firouzja (2760)

GM Dommaraju Gukesh (2743)

FIDE Candidates (7), Toronto,
04.11.2024



Through this point Gukesh had played very well, and it looks like Black is cruising to victory with the strong e4-knight and an extra pawn. But Firouzja finds a way to muddy the waters.

26. b4!

This strong pawn sacrifice is objectively best.

26. ... Qxb4 27. cxd5 Nxf2!

Gukesh finds the best reply. Black gets three pawns for the piece, and White will be tied up on the d-file. After 27. ... exd5 28. Rb3 Qa4 29. Rxb7 Qxd1+ 30. Rxd1 White has enough counterplay to keep the balance.

28. Kxf2 Rxd5 29. Re4

Black's position looks better, and it seems like the d4-knight may fall due to the pin. In truth, however, the game is close to even!

29. ... Rad8 30. Be3 Bc5 31. Qb3!

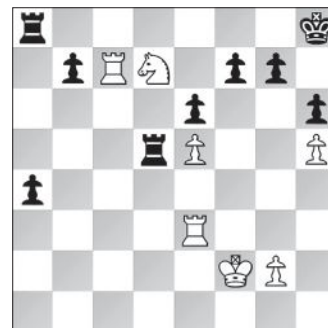
The only move to keep equality.

31. ... Qxb3 32. Nxb3 Bxe3+ 33. Rxe3 a5

34. Rc7!

Activity at any cost!

34. ... a4 35. Nc5 Ra8 36. Nd7



36. ... Kh7??

The losing move, played amidst horrible time pressure. One of the unusual things about this tournament is that there was no increment or delay in the first time control.

After the game, Gukesh mentioned 36. ...



a3 37. Rxa3 Rd8 38. Nc5 Rxe5, which likely leads to a draw, but clearly he was still trying to play for a win.

The alternative 36. ... b5! is a fun way to make a draw: 37. Rf3 b4 38. Rxf7 Rxd7! (the key move!) 39. Rfxd7 b3! 40. Rxc7 a3. Now White can't stop the pawns and has to settle for a perpetual, i.e., 41. Rh7+ Kg8 42. Rhg7+.

37. Rf3! a3 38. Rxf7 Kh8 39. Nf8!

Now, Black is getting mated.

39. ... a2 40. Ng6+, Black resigned.

And yet, paradoxically, this was the moment that Gukesh later said he felt he had a chance to win the tournament. Going into the rest day after such a loss would normally only magnify the suffering. But Gukesh realized that he was playing well, feeling his best, and that this loss was just a spot of bad luck — a black swan. As he said, “Maybe this loss gave me so much motivation.” What amazing poise, and especially for a 17-year-old!

When asked about the respective qualities of the great Indian players Viswanathan Anand and Gukesh, GM Grzegorz Gajewski (who has seconded both of them) expressed the opinion that while Anand's greatest strength was his ability to rapidly find brilliant ideas, Gukesh's main strength was his calm nerves and ability to keep his composure even in the most stressful moments.

Gukesh's closest pursuers were the winner of the previous two Candidates tournaments — Nepomniachtchi, as well as Americans Caruana and Nakamura.

Caruana started off slowly, but won consecutive games in rounds 12 and 13 against Vidit and GM Rameshbabu Pragganandhaa. Had he converted his winning position against Nepomniachtchi in the 14th and final round, it would surely have been one of the great comebacks in Candidates history!

Throughout the three Candidates tournaments in which he has participated, the only time Nepomniachtchi trailed another player was during the last round in Toronto! He went undefeated in this tournament, and his play was solid, showing great resourcefulness in the few games where he stood worse.

Nakamura, the oldest player in the tournament at 36(!!!), showed a bit of the wild and uncompromising chess for which he has been known since his earliest days. Between rounds eight and 12, all of his games were decisive. Were it not for his two losses against his “kryptonite” Vidit, we might have seen Nakamura in the World Championship match.

RUY LOPEZ, CLASSICAL DEFENSE (C65)

GM Hikaru Nakamura (2789)
GM Vidit Santosh Gujrathi (2727)
FIDE Candidates (2), Toronto,
04.05.2024

This game from round two was highlighted by Vidit's excellent opening preparation, which allowed him to obtain an advantage as Black after only 12 moves.

1. e4 e5 2. Nf3 Nc6 3. Bb5 Nf6 4. d3 Bc5 5. c3 0-0 6. 0-0 d6 7. h3 Ne7 8. d4

We've reached one of the topical lines of the 4. d3 Anti-Berlin, and now Vidit surprises Hikaru with some home cooking.

8. ... c6!?

The autopilot move has always been 8. ... Bb6, but after 9. Re1 c6 White has the extra option of 10. Bf1.

9. Bd3

Here 9. dxc5 cxb5 10. cxd6 Ng6 is what Vidit had in mind. The position is about even, despite the disruptive pawn on d6.

9. ... Bb6 10. dxe5?!

It's unclear what Nakamura had in mind when he decided to win the pawn, as clearly Vidit was loaded for bear. Hikaru is known as a good practical player, so it's strange that he didn't choose something simpler like 10. Re1 or 10. Nbd2.

Middle: Nakamura looks up at the spectators above the playing hall. Bottom: Vidit blocks everything out to concentrate.

10. ... dxe5 11. Nxe5



11. ... Bxh3!!

A shocking sacrifice that Hikaru likely missed. Now White faces a tough task to defend against a well-prepared opponent.



12. Nc4?

A serious mistake, after which Black is clearly better. After 12. gxh3 Qb8! 13. Bf4 Bc7 14. Bg3 Bxe5 15. f4 Bc7 the game is balanced, with plenty of fight left.

12. ... Bg4 13. Qc2 Bc7 14. e5 Nd7!?

Vidit doesn't mind giving up the h7-pawn as he correctly sees that it is White who has the weaker king.

15. Bxh7+ Kh8 16. Bd3 b5! 17. Ne3 Nxe5 18. Be2 f5!

Black has obtained a winning advantage. Now he proceeds to win the game with strong, energetic play.

19. f4 Bb6 20. Kf2 Nd5 21. Rh1+ Kg8 22. fxe5 Qg5 23. Ke1 Bxe3 24. Bxg4 Qxg4 25. Bxe3 Nxe3 26. Qe2 Qg3+ 27. Kd2 Rad8+ 28. Kc1 Qg5 29. b3 Nf1+, White resigned.

A shocking loss for the American, and with the white pieces! Despite losing his other game to Vidit as well, Nakamura was nevertheless able to forge an amazing run in the second half, putting himself position to fight for first in the final round!

Looking back, this Candidates tournament was marked by a high percentage of decisive games to accompany its dramatic finish. Stale, safe draws were hardly seen, and every round featured enterprising chess.

FORTUNE FAVORS THE BOLD

Along with the "Open" Candidates was the Women's Candidates. As with its twin, this tournament consisted of a double round robin between eight players. One curious difference was in its time controls. While the "Open" event was played at a rate of 40/120 (without increment) followed by G/30+30, the women voted to play 40/90,

G/30 with a 30 second increment beginning on move one.

A quick glance at the crosstable suggests that GM Tan Zhongyi of China ran away with the tournament, scoring +4 while nobody else finished above +1. But I have learned that the battle of chess is never really as simple as a crude tally of points.

Tan took the lead from the start, and after seven rounds she was in clear first. In the eighth round, however, she faced her compatriot GM Lei Tingjie and made a risky — in retrospect, even incorrect — choice to play for a win, suffering a bad loss as a result:

LONDON SYSTEM (D02)

GM Tan Zhongyi (2521)

GM Lei Tingjie (2550)

FIDE Women's Candidates (8), Toronto, 04.13.2024

With this game Lei was able to take revenge for her first round loss to Tan, and thereby catch her in shared first place.

1. d4 d5 2. Nf3 Nf6 3. Bf4

Another London System! We saw Firouzja use it against Gukesh in round seven, but there the opening didn't go smoothly for Firouzja. Tan also won with the Jobava London in round two against Vaishali.

3. ... c5 4. e3 Nc6 5. Nbd2 Bg4

This solid system is a good choice for those who don't want to learn too much theory and prefer their bishop outside the pawn chain. Another option is 5. ... cxd4 6. exd4 and here Black can play 6. ... Bg4 or 6. ... Bf5.

6. c3 e6 7. Qb3 Qc8

Typically, White is happy to force the queen to c8. However, in this system it's not easy

for White to put pressure on the c-file with the pawns being on c3 and c5.

8. h3 Bh5 9. Nh4

The idea is to win the bishop pair with g2-g4 followed by Nh4xg6.

9. ... Be7 10. g4 Bg6 11. Nxg6 hxg6

Now the game resembles a normal Slav structure: White has the bishop pair but Black is rock-solid.

12. Be2 a6 13. h4

An aggressive approach, but so long as Black doesn't castle short, she will be fine.

13. ... b5 14. h5 c4 15. Qd1 Qd8**16. Rg1**

Now 16. Bf3! would have been a clever waiting move, since Black can't immediately play 16. ... b4? due to 17. Nxc4.

16. ... gxh5!

A good decision from Lei, as she correctly saw that giving White the g-file was not a big deal.

17. gxh5 Bd6! 18. Bg5

Watching live, I thought White was making a good practical decision with this move to



The round eight matchup between Tan and Lei

force the repetition, as in doing so Tan would maintain her lead in first place.

18. ... Be7 19. Bf4 Bd6 20. Bg5 Be7 21. f4?



Baffling! White could have claimed a draw by threefold repetition, but instead she goes for it! While it's a brave decision, objectively Black is better as she has a clear plan with ... b5-b4, and it's not obvious how White plans on attacking, since Nd2-f3 weakens the e4-outpost.

21. ... Rb8

Preparing the logical ... b5-b4 push. Naturally 21. ... b4! right away is also quite strong.

22. a3 a5 23. Bh4?!

A dubious regrouping.

23. ... Kf8 24. Bg3 Bd6

Black is clearly better now. I don't understand what Tan was thinking in playing for the win.

25. Bh4 Ne7!

Excellent play from Lei — she's making good progress.

26. Bxf6 gxf6 27. Bf1



27. ... b4!

Black breaks through.

28. axb4 axb4 29. Bh3 f5!

No counterplay for you! The bishop on h3 is quite sad.

30. Qf3 Bc7 31. Ke2 Ng8!

A clever regrouping. The knight heads to e4 via the f6-square.

32. Qg3 Nf6 33. h6 Ke7!

The king is quite safe on e7.

34. Qg5 Qf8

Even stronger was 34. ... Kd7!.

35. Ra7 Rc8



36. Bg2

White had one last chance to garner counterplay with the surprising sacrifice 36. Bxf5! exf5 37. Rh1!, when Black is so tied up that she's not winning despite her material advantage! The resulting position is a great example of domination!

36. ... Rxh6

Now, as my coach GM Roman Dzindzichashvili used to say, Black has the pawn *and* the compensation! It's not hard to see that White is totally lost.

37. Nf3 Rh5 38. Qg3 Ne4 39. Qe1 bxc3 40. bxc3 Qg7 41. Bf1 Qh8 42. Qa1 Kf6 43. Rg2 Rh3 44. Ne5 Qh5+ 45. Ke1 Rxe3+

Now it's all over...

46. Re2 Qh4+ 47. Kd1 Rxe2 48. Bxe2 Qxf4 49. Qb2 Rh8 50. Bf3 Rh2 51. Qc1, and White resigned.

A great game from Lei!

But fortune, as they say, favors the bold. Tan's uncompromising play might not have worked out in this game, but over the course of an entire tournament it brought her success. One example: she bounced back in the very next round with a nice miniature against GM Vaishali Rameshbabu:

SICILIAN DEFENSE, ALAPIN VARIATION (B22)

GM Vaishali Rameshbabu (2475)

GM Tan Zhongyi (2521)

FIDE Women's Candidates (9), Toronto, 04.14.2024

1. e4 c5 2. c3 e6 3. d4 d5 4. exd5 exd5 5. Nf3

This pawn structure commonly arises from the Exchange French. Surprisingly, this setup was a big hit as in several games White essayed it vs the Petroff as well.

5. ... a6

Here 5. ... Nf6 6. Bd3 is Nakamura – Abasov from round 10 via transposition from a Petroff. Hikaru got a dream position out the opening: 6. ... c4 7. Bc2 Bd6 8. 0-0 0-0 9. h3 Nc6 10. Bg5 h6 11. Bh4 b5 12. Re1 a5 13. Ne5 Ra6 14. Nd2 Bc7 15. Qf3 and White won on move 58.

6. Bd3 c4 7. Bc2 Bd6 8. 0-0 Ne7 9. b3 cxb3 10. axb3 0-0

Black has obtained a comfortable position and just needs to finish her development to claim full equality. How can White drum up some chances?



Tan studies the board in her round nine game with Vaishali.

**11. Ng5!?**

Sensing that she's about to lose the initiative, Vaishali launches a probing knight jump to induce some weaknesses around the black king.

11. ... g6

Naturally 11. ... Bf5 is also fine, as White runs out of attacking resources after 12. Bxf5 Nxf5 13. Qh5 h6.

12. Qf3

Perhaps a bit too straightforward, as neither this nor the next move manage to create any real threats. The typical plan would be 12. Na3 with the idea of Na3-b5.

12. ... Qc7 13. h4

White is desperately trying to create an attack, but Black's position is rock-solid.

13. ... Nbc6 14. Ba3 Kg7!

A strong reaction from Tan — the king protects the key dark squares.

15. Re1 h5!

Another solid move, preparing ... Bc8-g4.

16. c4?

Now White must have miscalculated something as she gives up the d4-pawn without good reason. After 16. Bxd6 Qxd6 17. Nh3! Bg4 18. Qf4! it's time for White to circle the wagons and seek equality.

16. ... f6!

A nice intermezzo!

17. Bxd6 Qxd6 18. c5 Qc7 19. Nh3 Nxd4

And just like that, White is totally lost.

20. Qe3 Nxc2 21. Qxe7+ Rf7, White resigned.

A tough loss for Vaishali, but a great win for Tan. With this quick win she regained the sole lead in the tournament.

Vaishali is the older sister of Praggnanand-

haa, and it was very nice to see both siblings competing for the highest honors in their respective tournaments. While she started poorly, Vaishali had an incredible finish, winning five games on the bounce! Here is how she played spoiler for Lei:

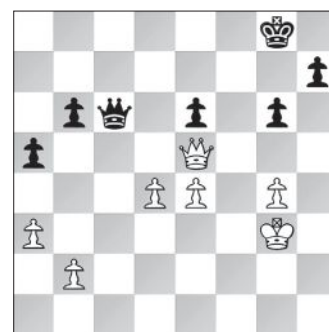
ONE FALSE MOVE

GM Vaishali Rameshbabu (2475)

GM Lei Tingjie (2550)

FIDE Women's Candidates (13),

Toronto, 04.20.2024



Deep into the endgame, and with time ticking away, Black now blunders with an innocuous-looking king move.

61. ... Kf7?

The careful 61. ... h6! keeps equality.

62. g5!

White fixes Black's pawns. Now all pawn endgames are winning for White.

62. ... Qc1?

Another blunder, but Black is already objectively lost.

63. Qf4+ Qxf4+ 64. Kxf4

White is essentially playing with an extra pawn. The remainder is easy.

64. ... a4 65. Ke5 Ke7 66. d5 exd5 67. exd5, Black resigned.

I was deeply impressed by Vaishali's play. After recently receiving her GM title, she has joined her brother to establish the first ever brother-sister grandmaster combination in history!

BEING THERE

It's not often that you get to see an event of this caliber in North America, so I decided



The final moments of the game between Lei and Vaishali

to visit Toronto with my friends and witness the Candidates first-hand.

The tournament took place in the historic Great Hall, established in 1889 — five years prior to Lasker defeating Steinitz in Montreal as part of the first World Championship match. Upon arriving, I was worried when I was told that the tickets for the match were already sold out. But Caïssa was with me. I was able to get a VIP pass, and I met so many interesting people. One of the most memorable was Professor Ken Regan, who was in charge of the anti-cheating committee.

Given all of the events of the last few years, the organizers implemented reasonable and robust anti-cheating measures. All spectators had to check their electronics, and each person was searched with a wand prior to entering the playing hall.

One curious feature of the tournament hall was its setup. Fans were able to observe the playing hall from a surrounding balcony. Not surprisingly the area was always filled with fans of all ages, who managed to patiently observe the games without making any real noise!

Kudos to the volunteers and organizers for creating a fun and friendly atmosphere, including a “Fan Zone” where attendees could meet with the players, ask questions, and get autographs. All the top players were approachable and happy to interact with the fans, even after long and grueling games. Such access really added to the welcoming feel of the tournament.

The Candidates were a great success, and I hope to see more world-class events on our continent in the future! ♠



2024 FIDE Candidates

TORONTO, APRIL 3-22, 2024

			1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	
1	GM Gukesh Dommaraju	2743	**	½½	½½	½½	1½	½1	01	11	9/14
2	GM Hikaru Nakamura	2789	½½	**	½½	½1	½1	00	11	½1	8½/14
3	GM Ian Nepomniachtchi	2758	½½	½½	**	½½	½½	11	1½	½½	8½/14
4	GM Fabiano Caruana	2803	½½	½0	½½	**	½1	½1	½1	1½	8½/14
5	GM Praggnanandhaa Rameshbabu	2747	0½	½0	½½	½0	**	1½	½½	11	7/14
6	GM Vidit Santosh Gujrathi	2727	½0	11	00	½0	0½	**	1½	½½	6/14
7	GM Alireza Firouzja	2760	10	00	0½	½0	½½	0½	**	½1	5/14
8	GM Nijat Abasov	2632	00	½0	½½	0½	00	½½	½0	**	3½/14

2024 FIDE Women's Candidates

TORONTO, APRIL 3-22, 2024

			1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	
1	GM Tan Zhongyi	2521	**	½½	10	11	½½	½1	½½	1½	9/14
2	GM Humpy Koneru	2546	½½	**	01	½1	½½	½½	01	½½	7½/14
3	GM Lei Tingjie	2550	01	10	**	10	½1	½½	½½	½½	7½/14
4	GM Vaishali Rameshbabu	2475	00	½0	01	**	½1	01	11	½1	7½/14
5	GM Aleksandra Goryachkina	2553	½½	½½	½0	½0	**	½½	1½	1½	7/14
6	GM Kateryna Lagno	2542	½0	½½	½½	10	½½	**	½½	½½	6½/14
7	IM Nurgyul Salimova	2432	½½	10	½½	00	0½	½½	**	½½	5½/14
8	GM Anna Muzychuk	2520	0½	½½	½½	½0	0½	½½	½½	**	5½/14