

A BLISTERING 5½/6 START FOR A RECORD-BREAKING FINISH

# SINDAROV IN FISCHER GOD MODE

Javokhir Sindarov, the 20-year-old Uzbek, opened the 2026 Candidates with five wins that effectively decided the tournament. He earned the right to challenge Gukesh D for the world title.

● by GM Nikola Nestorovic



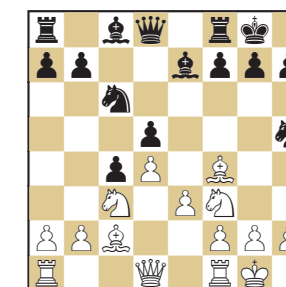
Nikola Nestorovic became a Grandmaster in 2016 and a FIDE Trainer in 2018. Mostly dedicated to chess teaching, he co-authored three chess books with his father, IM Dejan, on defense, counterattack, and positional sacrifice.



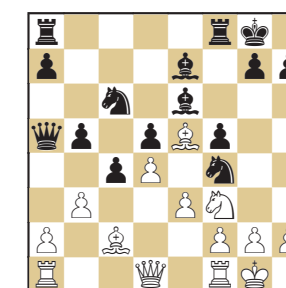
▲ The Winners Photo FIDE/Michal Walusza



face serious challenges over the board. 1...d5 2.c4 e6 3.♘f3 ♘f6 4.♗c3 ♗e7 5.cxd5 exd5 6.♗f4!? A rather interesting opening choice!? So far, Sindarov has never played any games with White in this line, whereas it is Esipenko's main repertoire as Black. 6...0-0 7.e3 c5!? 8.♗d3 8.dxc5!? is a typical way of creating an isolated queen's pawn. After 8...♗xc5 9.♗e2 ♗c6 10.0-0 ♗e6 11.♗c1, the game enters a rich position with mutual chances. 8...♗c6 Esipenko repeats the line he had previously played against Firouzja. 9.0-0 c4!? With this move, Black changes the character of the position. Now the pawn majorities on different wings become the factor that will determine the initiative. 10.♗c2 ♗h5



11.♗e5! An excellent move that makes it harder for Black to trade a pair of minor pieces. This bishop is particularly important for Black to exchange. 11...f6 11...♗xe5? 12.dxe5 This recapture highlights the stranded Black's knight on h5. 12...♗e6 13.♗d4 g6 14.g4 ♗g7 15.f4+-. 12.♗g3 f5 13.♗e5 ♗e6 14.b3 ♖a5! This is a very good move aimed at putting pressure on the knight on c3, thus accelerating the formation of a pawn majority on the queenside for Black. 15.♗e2 b5 16.♗f4 ♗xf4



17.exf4! At this point, we can say that both players have completed the opening and early middlegame stages

his looks historical. A run like this reminds us of Fischer's 6-0 wins over Taimanov and Larsen in 1971. Javokhir Sindarov is not Bobby, but legends are made through great results at the highest level, and this is as high as it gets.

He did not come out of nowhere. Last November he became the youngest World Cup winner in history, winning a long series of high-stakes mini-matches in Goa. In January he finished second at Tata Steel behind compatriot Abdusattorov, undefeated. The signs were there.

And yet it still feels like a shock. There is an almost unbearable lightness to his play. The ease, the clarity, the clock advantages. Elite opposition suddenly looking fragile.

We were closing this issue after round six. Those first six rounds were already a story of their own, and the final outcome made it in as late-breaking news. A sixth win (!) followed against Praggnanandhaa in round ten.

In Issue #49 we wrote about Abdusattorov and the rise of a new chess world. Sindarov now confirms it. We had our hopes in Fabiano, and Hikaru always carries the potential to surprise, but chess today belongs to players barely out of their teenage years.

Later this year we will have an Asian duel for the world title: Gukesh of India defending against Sindarov of Uzbekistan. There is perhaps only one player capable of challenging them, and Magnus may well have a good reason to reconsider his return to the championship scene.

In the meantime, we celebrate the new chess hero. Enjoy Nikola Nestorovic's analysis of Sindarov's blistering 5½/6 start.

Josip Asik, Editor-in-Chief

# T



Explosive 5½/6 start

1

1/2

1

1

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1

Esipenko

Bluebaum

Praggnanandhaa

Caruana

Nakamura

Wei Yi

Round 1

D35

Javokhir Sindarov 2745

Andrey Esipenko 2698

FIDE Candidates, Paphos 2026

1.d4 The first-round game always proves extremely important for the further course of a player's entire tournament. Practically, this was the only game of the first leg in which Sindarov had to

Photo FIDE/Yoav Nis  
▲ Javokhir Sindarov

at the highest level. 17.♙xf4?! ♖b4!  
18.a3 (18.♙b1? ♖a3?) 18...♗xc2  
19.♗xc2 ♖d8?

17...♗d8 18.♙e1 ♖d7 19.♙e3  
♙ae8 20.h4 A correct continuation  
that may lead White to ideas that will  
pose problems for Black.

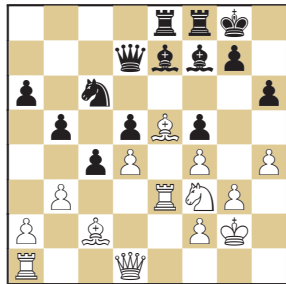
20...h6! Esipenko responds  
accurately.

21.g3?! A dubious reaction! White  
aims to restrict the dark squares,  
and it seems like a principled way  
to play this position. However, at the  
same time, he misses the nuance of  
weakening the light squares!

21.♙b1 was the correct path  
toward an unclear position. 21...a6  
22.a4 b4 23.♗e2 ♙f7! 24.h5!∞ This  
move allows White to shut down  
his opponent's counterplay on the  
light squares and potentially force

him to block the queenside. 24...c3?  
would be a huge strategic mistake, as it  
allows White to strike on the kingside.  
25.g4!! fxg4 26.♗d3+- This line reveals  
the main theme of the game – the light  
squares and the light-squared bishops.

21...a6 22.♗g2 ♙f7! This magnificent  
plan of activating the light-squared  
bishop undoubtedly gives the initiative  
to Esipenko.



23.♗d2 ♙b4 Black's bishops are taking  
over the board. White's pieces seem to  
lack space, and Sindarov is required to  
show great precision and avoid serious  
trouble.

24.♗e2 ♙h5 25.a4! The move itself is  
perhaps not the best one here. However,  
White seeks to change the scenery by  
creating counterchances. Certainly,  
some help from the opponent is required  
to turn the tables.

25...♙a5 Esipenko switches to exerting  
pressure on the d4 pawn.

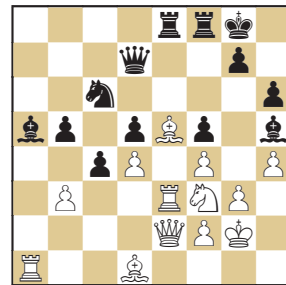
26.axb5 axb5 27.♙d1! One thing is  
certain: Sindarov finds the best solutions  
when things seemingly start going  
against him. With this move, he finds a



▲ Javokhir Sindarov vs Andrey Esipenko

Photo FIDE/Michal Walusza

purpose for his bishop and liberates his  
queen from defensive duties.



27...♙xf3+? I assume that  
miscalculation is the main reason behind  
this erroneous trade. It is possible that  
Esipenko thought that, in the coming  
complications, he would gain material  
or some other advantage. Generally, the  
trade on f3 is strategically wrong for  
Black.

27...♙b6! was correct, after which  
Black certainly has an edge. 28.♗b2 b4?

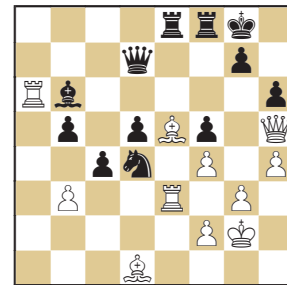
28.♗xf3 ♙b6? It really seems like  
Black is winning material – but is he?  
28...♙d2! When analyzing this  
position, it is easy to say that Esipenko  
should have abandoned his predesigned  
plan. However, this is far from realistic  
when playing over the board. 29.♙e2  
c3∞.

29.♙a6! Counterplay! Sindarov was  
patiently waiting for his “five minutes of  
glory” and executes it in a phenomenal  
way.

29...♗xd4 Esipenko remains faithful to  
his calculations.

30.♗h5! The key move that should

have been considered with more care – a  
difficult task to foresee from afar.



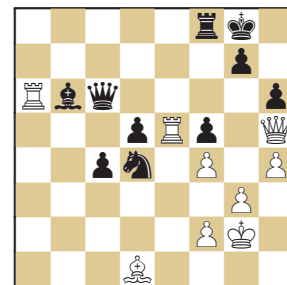
30...♙xe5 Unfortunately for Black, there  
is nothing better here. 30...♙c5? runs  
into 31.♙xh6!+-; whereas 30...♗b7? is  
met by 31.♙xb6! ♗xb6 32.♙xd4+-.

31.♙xe5 ♖c6? Probably the last  
mistake of the game. Sindarov follows  
with a series of very precise moves and  
completely turns the tables.

After 31...♗b7! 32.♗g6 ♙c5 33.♙e8  
c3 34.♙aa8

34...♗f7!⇐, there is no doubt that  
White obtains the initiative, but the fight  
is far from over.

32.bxc4 bxc4 32...dxc4+ 33.♙f3 ♗xf3  
34.♗xf3+-.

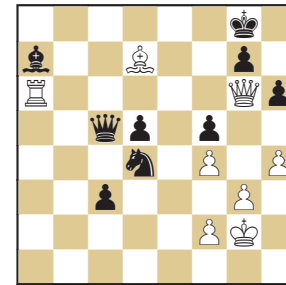


33.♙a4! An interesting detail to note:  
the dance of the light-squared bishops  
– what Esipenko started, Sindarov has  
just concluded!

33...♗c5 34.♗g6 Activating the  
queen with tempo enables both rooks  
to engage decisively.

34...♙a7 35.♙e8 Esipenko must have  
regretted his decision to prematurely  
trade his light-squared bishop – the  
light squares in Black's camp are  
screaming for protection.

35...♙xe8 36.♗xe8+ ♗h7 37.♗g6+  
♗g8 38.♙d7 c3 39.♗e8+ ♗h7  
40.♗g6+ ♗g8 There is no defense  
against the mating net on the light  
squares.



41.♙e6! Black resigned

Sindarov demonstrated outstanding  
skills in critical moments of the game.  
He found solutions that changed the  
character of the struggle by choosing  
active options at times when Esipenko  
had everything under control. In  
my humble opinion, this result  
significantly affected the course of the  
tournament.

## SINDAROV ARRIVES

Javokhir Sindarov became a grandmaster at 12 years and 10 months, one of the youngest in history. Junior titles and podium finishes at world cadet events followed, but he moved quickly into senior chess. He was part of the Uzbek team that won Olympiad gold in Chennai 2022 and bronze in Budapest 2024. The last six months have produced his breakthrough: he won the 2025 World Cup in Goa, earning his Candidates spot, and took second at Wijk aan Zee in January.

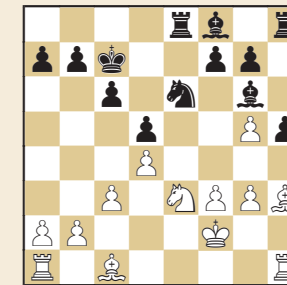
His career has been a steady climb rather than a meteoric rise, built on systematic work. At the Candidates, that work was visible. A long-time 1.e4 player, he has overhauled his entire opening repertoire and now plays 1.d4 as well, creating real preparation problems for his opponents. He plays every game to the very end, looking for chances in any position. His piece play and calculation are of the highest class.

## Round 2

Javokhir Sindarov 2745

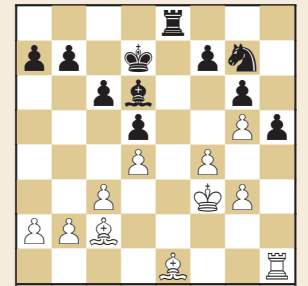
Matthias Bluebaum 2698

FIDE Candidates, Paphos 2026



22.♗f5?! After this inaccuracy,  
the position becomes fully balanced.  
However, Black is still the one  
required to play with precision.

22.♗g2!? would have preserved  
some advantage for White. In fact,  
it is all about the evaluation of the  
pieces – which minor pieces should  
remain on the board? Sindarov  
probably thought that his bishop  
pair might provide him with an  
edge. However, Black's knight is the  
piece that keeps his position stable.  
22...♙d6 23.♙e3 ♙d3 24.♙ae1 g6  
25.♙xe6! This trade is the key to  
securing an advantage! If White  
exchanges the dark-squared bishops,  
his knight would then dominate



the opponent's bishop. 25...♙xe6  
26.♙f4!?± (It is also possible to go  
for the opposite-colored bishops  
ending, where White's position is  
preferable. 26.♗f4!?±)

22...♙xf5 23.♙xf5 g6! It is  
necessary to form a pawn chain on  
the light squares in order to neutralize  
White's bishop pair.

24.♙c2 ♙d6 25.♙e3 ♙e7! Black  
doubles his rooks on the e-file, which  
will force White to trade more pieces.  
26.♙ae1 ♙he8 27.f4! ♗g7  
Controlling both f5 and h5.

28.♗f3 ♗d7 29.♙f2 ♙xe1  
30.♙xe1! White keeps one pair of  
rooks, as it is the only way to retain  
some chances to press. This is a clear  
statement of Sindarov's fighting spirit.

30...♙f8! A brilliant plan. Black  
insists on further trades that should  
simplify the position. His primary  
idea is to advance the f-pawn. An  
ideal scenario for Bluebaum is to  
remain with a knight against the  
dark-squared bishop. So Sindarov  
has to be careful, too.

31.g4! f5! 32.gxh5! The correct  
capture. The position becomes  
simplified, and equality becomes  
increasingly evident. Practically,  
there are no real chances for either  
side to play for an advantage.

32...♗xh5 33.♙d2 ♙h8 34.♙d3  
♙h7 35.♙xf5+ gxf5 36.g6 ♙g7  
37.♙xh5 ♗e6 38.♙h6 ♗f6 39.♙e1  
♙xg6 40.♙h7 ♙g7 41.♙h6+ ♙g6  
42.♙h7 ♙g7 Draw

On paper, Sindarov was the clear  
favorite in this game. However,  
a draw was a fair result and had  
no effect on his mood afterward –  
confirming his strong character and  
resilient mindset for the games ahead.

## Round

3

## D37

Praggnanandhaa R. 2741

Javokhir Sindarov 2745

FIDE Candidates, Paphos 2026

1.d4 d5 An interesting opening choice.

A recent encounter between these players saw White convincingly win an unusual Queen's Gambit. It should be noted that 1...d5 has appeared in Sindarov's repertoire only against very strong players – aiming to remain solid in these symmetrical systems.

2.c4 e6 3.♘c3 ♗e7 4.♖f3 ♜f6 5.♙f4

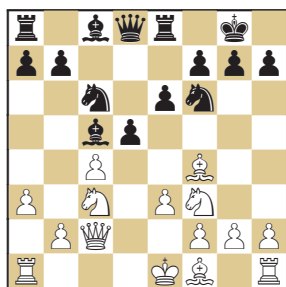
A curiosity is that both players are entering this position for the first time in a top-level encounter.

5...0-0 6.e3 c5! The most active option.

7.dxc5 ♗xc5 8.a3 ♜c6 9.♖c2 ♗e8

Definitely nothing new, but certainly a far more rare continuation. Black's idea is to meet any b2-b4 with ...♙f8.

9...♖a5 is considered Black's main weapon by far. For example, 10.♗d1 ♗e7 11.♙e2 ♜e4!⇒

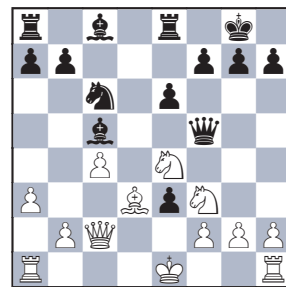


10.♙g5 d4! Sindarov prefers active play, challenging his opponent to find the best options to complete development. This move has not been seen in top-level games, so I assume that Sindarov's choice was decided during preparation with his team. Interestingly, both Carlsen and Nakamura preferred 10...♙e7, which is seemingly a safer option for Black.

11.♙xf6 ♖xf6 12.♜e4 ♖f5 This is a novelty, and objectively a better one than 12...♖g6, which has previously been seen in only one game. It can be said that this is what was cooked in Sindarov's kitchen!

13.b4!? White challenges fate.

13.♙d3!? is an extremely interesting option that will surely find its place in elite repertoires in future games. 13...dxe3!



14.0-0!! White completes his development in style! In addition, his king finds a safe haven – something that never happened in the actual game. (14.♜d6? runs into the spectacular countershot 14...♜d4!⇒) 14...exf2+ 15.♙h1 ♗d8! 16.♜xc5 ♖xc5 17.♙xh7+ ♙h8 18.♙e4, with an unclear position and mutual chances.

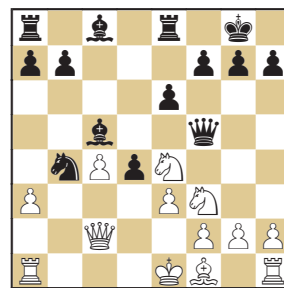
13...♜xb4!! A perfect choice to challenge the opponent over the board! Black sacrifices a piece for two pawns but gains attacking chances against the white king in return. A highly practical decision, since it is very tricky for White to find shelter for his king with the clock ticking. Cold-blooded engines suggest a large advantage for White, but this game is played by humans after all!

▼ Javokhir Sindarov

Photo FIDE/Michal Walusza



13...♙f8!? would be a logical choice for most players – but not Sindarov.

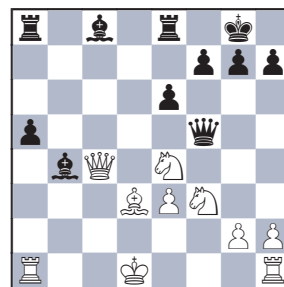


14.axb4 ♙xb4+ 15.♙d1! Best so far. Pragg ventures his king in search of safety – no easy task over the board in a high-stakes game.

15...dxe3 Logically, Black must open more files.

16.♙d3 Threatening ♜d6.

16.fxe3!? b5! 17.♙d3 bxc4 18.♖xc4 a5!

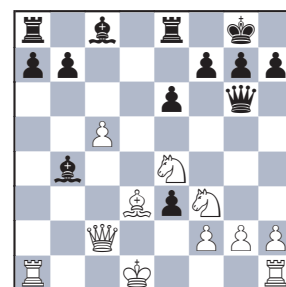


19.♜f2! ♖f6 20.♖d4 e5! In practical play, Black's compensation is beyond doubt. It is White who must proceed carefully at every turn.

16...♖g6! Simply beautiful. Black prepares counterthreats in view of ...♖xg2 and ...f7-f5.

17.fxe3 17.♜d6?? runs into 17...♖xg2-+.

17.c5!? is a very difficult move to play. For the moment, Black's bishop on b4 is restricted; White threatens ♜d6 and plans to hide his king – surprisingly on e2.



A) 17...♖xg2?? 18.♙e2!+- The



▲ Praggnanandhaa R. vs. Javokhir Sindarov

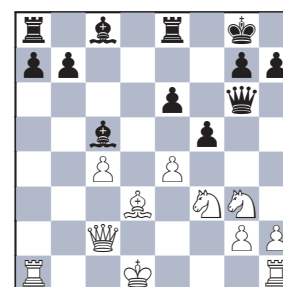
Photo FIDE/Michal Walusza

brave king steps forward, coordinating his rooks. New targets appear along the g-file!

B) 17...f5 18.♜g3 a5! (18...♙d7? 19.♖b1! a5 20.♜e5!+-) 19.fxe3 ♗d8 20.♙e2!! b6! To sum up: White finds a perfect placement for his king, but Black has sufficient compensation. In practical terms, both sides have fair chances.

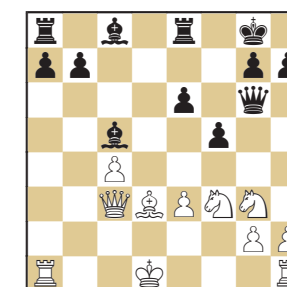
17...f5 What follows is a very instructive phase of the game – how to gradually build compensation without forced events. 18.♜g3 ♗c5 19.♖c3?! This move slows down White's central advance e3-e4. At the same time, the king fails to reach c2, largely due to Black's next response.

19.e4! is a very concrete move, but an uneasy decision to play with a king on e2 for an extended period.



19...♗d8 20.♙e2!! a5!?! Black intends to complete development, increase the tension, and preserve the complexity of the position by avoiding further trades. These factors pose practical challenges

for White who must spend time dealing with difficult decisions. Remember that there is no increment before move 40 in this tournament! (20...f4! would force matters. 21.e5! ♗xd3! 22.♖xd3 ♖xd3+ 23.♙xd3 fxc3 In my opinion, this is a typical line that Sindarov would have avoided. The reason is simple: the game transitions into an endgame where White's king is no longer vulnerable. This recalls the great Mikhail Tal, who achieved incredible results in similar positions – unbalanced material, constant initiative, and exhausting calculations. Then, at certain point, mistakes galore regardless of the opponent's strength. Sindarov has the potential to play in a similar fashion and often opts for sharp positions.)



19...e5! Excellent timing for this central break, aimed at opening the position with the vulnerable white king. 20.♙c2 e4 21.♜d2 After 21.♜d4 f4! 22.♜ge2, Black has more than sufficient compensation and a pleasant

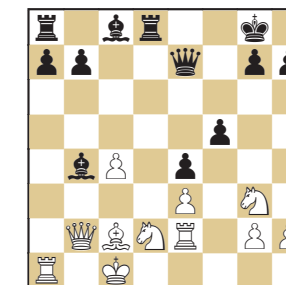
choice between 22...fxe3, 22...♙xd4 and 22...♙g4.

21...♗d8 22.♙c1 ♖g5! It feels as though Black is gradually taking over.

23.♗e1 ♖e7 Threatening ...♙b4.

24.♗e2? The rook looks somewhat clumsy here. 24.♗d1 was correct. 24...♙b4 25.♖b2 ♙e6!.

24...♙b4 25.♖b2



25...a5!? Each of Sindarov's moves is logical and active – he improves his pieces, advances his pawns, gains space, and increases the pressure on White's position. 25...♙e6 26.♜h5 a5 27.g4! ♗ac8⇒.

26.♜b3 ♗a6 27.♜d4 ♖g5!? Sindarov's choice is highly pragmatic. He aims to disrupt the knight on g3 by threatening ...h7-h5-h4 while preserving threats across the board. 27...g6⇒ was perhaps simpler.

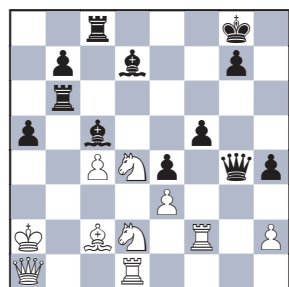
28.♙b1 h5! 29.♙a2 h4 30.♜f1 ♙d7 31.♗d1 ♗c8 Slowly but surely, all Black's pieces reach their optimal positions. White is pressed both on the board and on the clock! 31...♖b6!?

32.♜d2 ♗b6



33.c5? With only a couple of minutes remaining for the next seven or eight moves, White is in deep trouble. This mistake results from the accumulation of problems.

Engines claim that the position remains unclear after 33.g4! But is it realistic to play in such fashion? My answer is definitely NO. 33...♖xg4 34.♗f2! ♙c5 35.♖a1



This should be a position with mutual chances. However, there is a light-year gap between engine “wisdom” and human calculation and evaluation in such complex positions.

**33...♞xc5** Clearly Black reaps the rewards of favorable tactics based on his increasing activity and strong initiative. What follows are relatively easy straightforward moves leading to a convincing victory.

**34.♞b3+ ♖h8 35.♞f7 ♞xc2+!** An elegant sacrifice with which Black wins material.

**36.♖b1 36.♗xc2?? ♗e6+--.**

**36...♞xd2!** Sindarov opts for the simplest solution.

**37.♞dx2 ♗xd2+ 38.♖a2 ♗xe3**

**39.♞xd7 ♗xd4 40.♞xd4 ♞f6**

**White resigned**

#### My two cents:

This was Sindarov’s most convincing win in the first leg. His sharp style, excellent calculation, and impeccable preparation proved too much to handle for his opponents in this tournament.

▼ Paphos, Cyprus



## Round

# 4

### D28

**Javokhir Sindarov 2745**

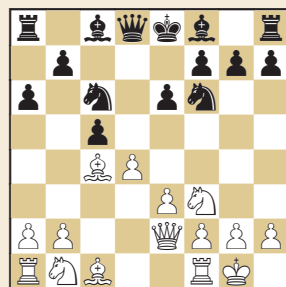
**Fabiano Caruana 2795**

FIDE Candidates, Paphos 2026

**1.d4 d5 2.c4 e6 3.♗f3 dxc4!?** Caruana is one of the world’s greatest connoisseurs of this type of position. On the other hand, Sindarov is practically playing it for the first time at the elite level.

**4.e3 ♗f6 5.♗xc4** This variation of the Queen’s Gambit Accepted has been seen in thousands of games.

**5...c5 6.0-0 ♗c6 7.♞e2 a6**



**8.♗c3** Finally, we arrive at a position that neither player had previously played! When it comes to opening choices, it is interesting that Sindarov’s team – or Sindarov himself – shows a preference for positions with many pieces remaining on the board, where deep and accurate calculation is required.

**8...♗d1** leads to a completely different type of positions, featuring early queenside play:

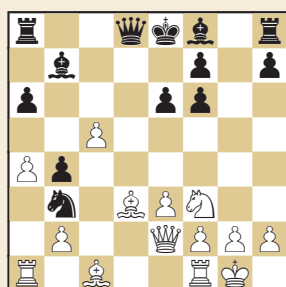
**8...b5 9.dxc5 ♞c7 10.♗d3 ♗xc5 11.a4!**  
**8...b5 9.♗d3** A far rarer choice than ♗b3.  
**9...♗b7 10.a4 b4** This position has been seen only once in tournament practice, and at a lower level. Apparently, the value of preparation becomes extremely significant. Judging by the speed at which the opening moves were played, it is clear that Sindarov’s team had “plowed” the position to the tiniest detail, and Caruana soon found himself on slippery ground.

**10...bxa4!?** Jorden Van Foreest has successfully employed this move, although White appears to obtain the initiative against Black’s weak queenside pawns. Black won on move 49 in B.Adhiban 2671 – J.Van Foreest 2609, Hoogeveen 2023.

**11.♗e4 ♗a5** A suboptimal solution leading to a position in which Sindarov gained the initiative – one he did not relinquish until the end of the game.

**11...♗xe4** seems the most logical way to proceed and resolve any opening problems. After **12.♗xe4 ♞b6 13.b3! ♗a5 14.♗c2 ♗e7 15.♗b2**, White exerts some pressure, but Black should be fine with accurate play.  
**12.♗xf6+ gxf6!** **12...♞xf6?** **13.e4± cxd4?**  
**14.♗g5 ♞g6 15.♞ac1+.**

**13.dxc5 ♗b3** Caruana bravely enters into complications.



▲ Javokhir Sindarov vs. Fabiano Caruana

Photo FIDE/Michal Waluszka

**14.c6!** Sindarov returns the pawn in order to gain an important tempo and develop the initiative.

**14...♗xc6 14...♗xa1?? 15.cxb7 ♞b8 16.♗xa6+.**

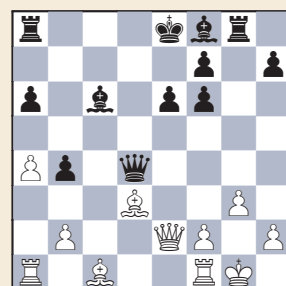
**15.♗d4!** In all his games, Sindarov’s pattern is clearly visible: excellent preparation – clearly dominant over his opposition, and outstanding calculation when he seizes the initiative. His last move appears to be a rook sacrifice; however, closer analysis reveals that Black must trade on d4, leading to the direct opening of the position.

**15...♗xd4!** **15...♗xa1 16.♗xc6 ♞b6 17.♗d4+.**

**16.exd4 ♞g8** It becomes evident that the black king will never castle in this game.

**17.g3 f5?!** This is the moment when Caruana definitely steps in the wrong direction.

**17...♞xd4!** The critical moment of the game, when everything could have remained within the bounds of a small initiative. Accurate calculation and correct evaluation were required.

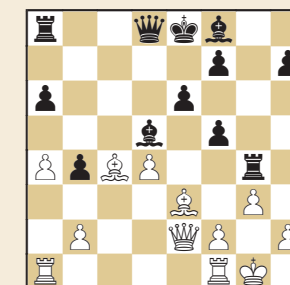


**18.♗e3 ♞d5 19.f3 f5! 20.♖h1 ♗b7 21.♗f4!?** (**21.♞ad1∞**) **21...♞g6!** In my view, this was a difficult plan to evaluate, since it appears that White quickly obtains strong play in the center and on the queenside. **22.♞ac1 ♗h6! 23.♗xh6 ♞xh6 24.♞c7∞.**

**18.♗c4** White prepares to open the center.

**18...♞g4** Perhaps a bit too active. **18...♞xd4!?** was an attempt to transition into an endgame. **19.♗xe6! ♞e4 20.♞xe4 ♗xe4 21.♗b3±** Apparently, Caruana was not satisfied with this ending and instead chose to take risks with his king in the center.

**19.♗e3 ♗d5**



**20.♞ac1** After several logical developing moves, White obtains a huge advantage. **20...♗e7 21.♗xa6** White wins a pawn without any obvious compensation. **21.♞fd1!?**

**21...♖f8** An attempt to find at least some safety.

**22.♗b5** A logical human choice, preserving the extra pawn.

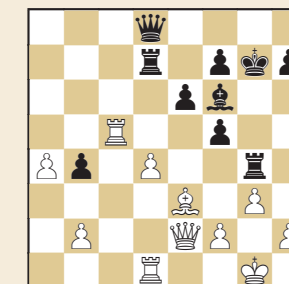
**22.♗c4!?** is a more concrete approach, typical of engine recommendations, suggesting that it is easier to open the position and attack the black king. **22...h5 (22...♞xa4? 23.♗h6+ ♖g8 24.♗xd5 ♞xd5 25.♞c8+ ♗d8 26.♞b5!+–) 23.♗f4 h4 24.♞fd1+–.**

**22...♗f6 23.♞fd1 ♖g7 24.♗c6!** Eventually, the position opens – but only after careful preparation, in true human fashion.

**24...♞a5 24...♗xc6 25.♞xc6 ♞d5 26.♞c5 ♞b3 27.d5!+–.**

**25.♗xd5 ♞xd5 26.♞c5!** Only one opposing piece remains to be removed from d5 before the position opens decisively in White’s favor.

**26...♞d7**



**27.d5!** A temporary pawn sacrifice that breaks Black’s pawn structure and opens roads toward the black king. The value of the passed a-pawn increases – therefore, the end is near.

**27...exd5 28.♞f3 ♗xb2 28...d4 29.♗d2+–.**

**29.♞xcd5 ♞xd5 30.♞xd5 ♞e8 31.♞xf5** With enough pieces remaining on the board, it becomes clear that Sindarov’s attack is indefensible.

**31...♞g6 32.h4 ♗c3 33.h5 ♞a6 34.♞g4+ ♖h8 35.♗d4+** White is winning in more than one way, but Sindarov chooses the cleanest.

**35...f6 35...♗xd4 36.♞xd4+ f6 37.♞d5 ♞a8 38.♞xf6+ ♖g8 39.♞g5+–.**

**36.♞c5 Black resigned** as **36...♞a8**, to protect from ♞c8, is met by **37.♞xc3!**

Once again, we witness the efforts of the “miracle workers” from Sindarov’s team, precisely targeting their opponent’s weak points. Building on that, Sindarov’s excellent play after seizing the initiative deserves special praise. These “ingredients” seem to form a recipe for success.



Round

5

D31

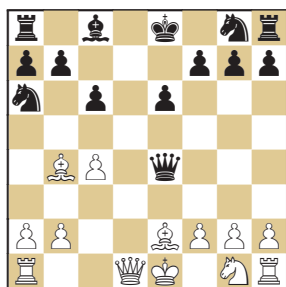
Hikaru Nakamura 2810

Javokhir Sindarov 2745

FIDE Candidates, Paphos 2026

1.d4 d5 2.c4 e6 3.♘c3 c6 4.e4 When following this game live, my first thought was that this was an unusual opening choice. Nakamura has played this position twice so far, with both games ending in draws. Therefore, one cannot really speak of extensive experience in this type of position. It is evident that Nakamura's team prepared the line very well, opting for forced variations in which it is crucial to calculate one move further than your opponent. On the other hand, Sindarov had never played this position before, so he could only prepare and practice with his teammates. Knowing how the game ended, it would be easy to say that it was a wrong choice for White!

4...dxe4 5.♗xe4 ♘b4+ 6.♘d2 ♗xd4 7.♘xb4 ♗xe4+ 8.♘e2 ♗a6



9.♘d6 White reaches a crossroads. Since Nakamura had already tried two options without much success, he now opts for a third.

9.♘a5 ♘d7 was played in Hi.Nakamura 2775 - Y.Shulman 2571, Saint Louis 2012, which ended in a draw on move 101.

9.♘c3 f6 10.♗d6 occurred in Hi.Nakamura 2772 - E.Tomashevsky 2706, Elancourt 2013, ending in a draw on move 30.

9...♗xg2 What follows is a series of forced moves without too many secrets.

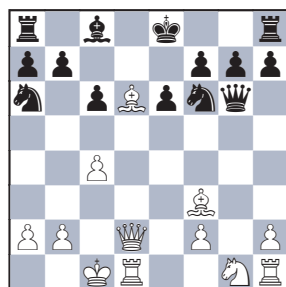
10.♘f3 10.♗d2!? In my opinion, this is the line in which White could seek adequate compensation or even more.



▲ Hikaru Nakamura vs Javokhir Sindarov

Photo FIDE/Michal Waluszka

10...♗f6! (10...♗xh1?? 11.♗g5+-, threatening both 0-0-0 and ♘f3.) 11.♘f3 ♗g6 12.0-0-0



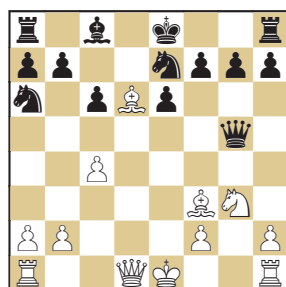
12...e5! 13.♘xe5 ♘e6 14.♗e2 ♗f5! 15.♘f4∞.

10...♗g5! The best retreat.

10...♗g6!? also deserves attention. 11.♗e2 ♗e7 This is a new move that somewhat rehabilitates the entire line. (11...♗f6? 12.♗g1+-) 12.♗d2± (Or 12.♗g1 ♗f6 13.♗c3±)

11.♗e2 ♗e7 Both players are still on well-trodden paths. 11...♗h6!? is another new idea worth mentioning.

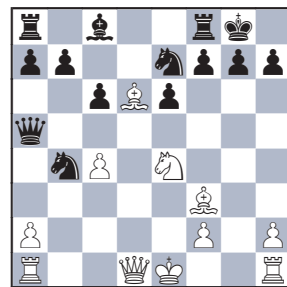
12.♗g3 What follows resembles a bomb.



12...0-0!! This move is practically new

at the elite level. There is only one game in my database, and at a much lower level compared to our protagonists. According to Nakamura's post-game interview, this move came as a shock, as it was not included in the file he received from his team. Thus, he was left alone to "dig" at the board while his opponent had everything worked out beforehand. Definitely an uneasy situation – add some nerves, and you have a serious problem to deal with. This surely influenced Nakamura's next move, which came after more than an hour of thought. It was only natural that he would find a suboptimal solution.

13.h4?! 13.♗e4! is best. Then, 13...♗a5+ 14.b4! ♗xb4



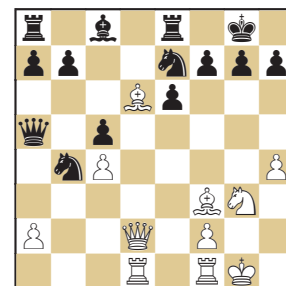
15.0-0!! An extremely difficult move to find, considering the material imbalance. White must justify sacrificing no fewer than three (!) pawns. Engines readily agree that the long-term initiative – based on superior piece activity and sustained pressure – should ultimately yield dividends. For a human, even one Hikaru Nakamura, this is almost mission impossible. 15...♗e8 16.♗d2

c5! 17.♘xe7 ♗xe7 18.♗ad1 To conclude: White has excellent compensation for three pawns. However, as Nakamura stated after the game, "It is surreal to find the correct plan without previously gathered knowledge of the position!"

13...♗a5+ 14.b4 ♗xb4! 15.0-0 This forced solution leads to a weaker position for White. 15.♘e7? ♗d5+-+. 15...♗e8 16.♗d2 Logically seeking practical chances, Nakamura tries to find targets for his queen on the kingside. 16.♗e1! c5 17.♗d1 ♗g6! 18.h5 ♗h4 19.♘e4 ♗c6!±.

16...c5 Black's advantage increases with each move.

17.♗ad1



17...♗f5! Trading pieces is Black's correct strategy.

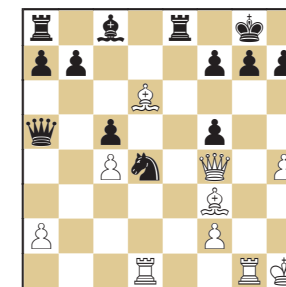
18.♗xf5 exf5 19.♗f4 White finally brings his queen closer to the kingside.

19...♗c6! Sindarov's logical moves gradually neutralize any attempts at counterplay by White. His goal is to establish control over the vital squares.

20.♗h1 20.♘xc6!? bxc6 21.♘e5 f6! 22.♘xf6! gxf6 23.♗h1 ♗h8 24.♗g1 ♗c3! The black queen actively defends weak

squares – taking away the g3 square from its counterpart and preparing to move to e5.

20...♗d4 21.♗g1 The motif of a rook sacrifice on g7 appears on the horizon.



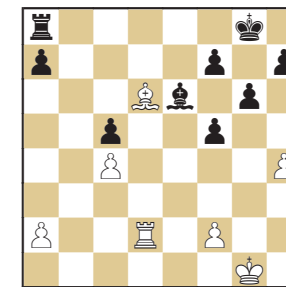
21...g6! This is a must. Sindarov remains calm and focused.

22.♘d5 ♘e6! Black first neutralizes White's threats before switching to active play. That is why he refrains from winning additional material with ...♗e2.

23.♘b7 ♗e2 Having completed his development, Sindarov is now ready to play for material. 23...♗ad8!?-+ was also strong.

24.♗d2 Practically forced.

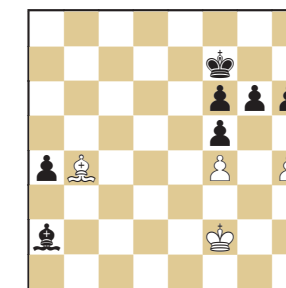
24...♗xd2 25.♗xd2 ♗xg1 26.♘xa8 ♗xa8 27.♗xg1



27...♗d8! A correct assessment – the opposite-colored bishops ending is easily winning for Black.

28.♘f4 ♗xd2 A large number of pieces leave the board in hurricane fashion. Nakamura's chances of saving the game are reduced to a minimum.

29.♘xd2 ♘xc4 30.♘e3 ♘xa2 31.♘xc5 a5 32.f4 f6 33.♗f2 ♗f7 34.♘a3 ♗e6 35.♘f8 a4 36.♗e3 ♗f7 37.♘b4 h6 38.♗f2



38...g5 39.♗g3 ♘d5 40.♘a3 ♘e4 41.♘c1 gxh4+ White resigned

Another excellent preparation by Sindarov's team. It is interesting to note that this "bomb" is only the third recommendation of modern engines! One may assume that other teams will prepare against Sindarov from a completely different perspective in the future. Certainly, kudos to Javokhir for his outstanding calculation, cold-blooded defense, and flawless technical conversion.

▼ Playing hall

Photo FIDE/Michal Waluszka



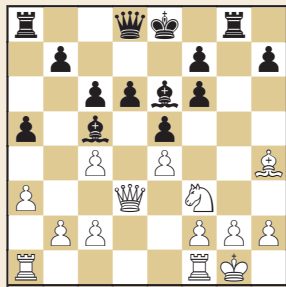
Round

6

Wei Yi 2754

Javokhir Sindarov 2745

FIDE Candidates, Paphos 2026



13...a4!? This is a logical way to further strengthen the bishop on c5, establish a favorable pawn structure, and prevent White from attempting to gain the initiative on the queenside.

14.b4!? Wei Yi demonstrates energetic play and does not hesitate to take responsibility with ambitious decisions.

14...axb3 15.cxb3 ♖g4 Sindarov rejects a pawn offer, which is quite an interesting approach. A common strategy in all his games is to opt for the initiative, choosing defensive resources only when necessary!

After 15...♞xa3!? 16.♞xa3 ♘xa3 17.♞d1♞, there is no doubt that White has sufficient compensation for a pawn, though hardly more than that.

16.b4 It is not entirely clear which pawn formation is better: pawns on a4 and b3, or the one chosen by Wei Yi.

16.♔h1!? was an interesting alternative. 16...♞g6 17.a4!? A necessary move to free the rook on a1. 17...♞d7 18.♔d2 ♘d4 19.♞ae1±.

16...♙f3! Sindarov opts for a trade that enables him to cement the bishop on d4. 17.♞xf3 ♘d4



## TWO COVERS, ONE WORLD TITLE MATCH AHEAD

Gukesh (ACM #39) vs. Sindarov (ACM #50)



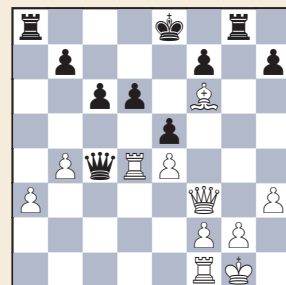
18.♙xf6?! As previously noted, White tends to take bold decisions that sometimes appear overambitious.

There is far less risk for White after 18.♞a2! ♞d7 19.♞xf6! ♞e6♞.

18...♞d7 19.♞ad1 ♞e6 20.h3 ♞xc4 After 20...♞g6!? 21.♙h4 ♞xc4, Black would gradually take over the initiative.

21.♞d3? A wrong plan that puts White in trouble.

21.♞xd4!? White misses the first opportunity for an exchange sacrifice.



A) 21...exd4!? 22.♞d1 ♞g6 23.♞xd4 ♞e6 24.e5!♞.

B) 21...♞xd4!? 22.♞d1 Now it is Black who must find accurate moves to maintain balance. 22...♞xa3! 23.♞xd4 ♞xf3 24.♞xd6 ♞xf6! Final precision! 25.♞xf6♞ The rook ending remains tricky but should be equal.

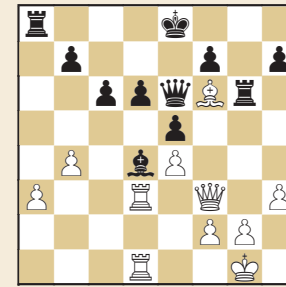
21...♞e6!? Also possible was 21...♞g6!?♞. 22.♞fd1?! 22.♞xd4! This was the



▲ Javokhir Sindarov Photo FIDE/Michal Walusza

second moment when White missed a promising exchange sacrifice. 22...exd4 23.♙xd4 0-0-0! 24.♞e1 ♞df8 Black retains chances to play for more, but this would have been much better for White than what occurred in the game.

22...♞g6 22...c5!? 23.bxc5 dxc5 24.♞b3 ♞g6 25.♙h4 b6♞.



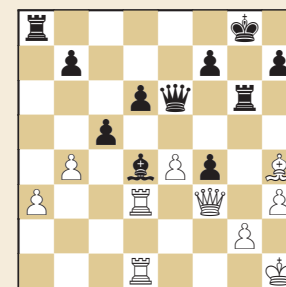
23.♙h4!? 23.♞xd4!? Once again, the exchange sacrifice offers White considerable practical chances. 23...exd4 24.♙xd4 0-0-0 25.♔h2 ♞e8♞.

23...♔f8! Black finally solves the problem of his king and heads for g8. After this, he can focus on advancing his pawns and activating his rook on a8. Also possible was 23...c5!?

24.♞h5 ♔g8 25.♔h1 c5! The bishop is strengthened, Black obtains a dangerous passed pawn, and his advantage is stabilized.

26.f4?! An interesting question is why Wei Yi lost this game. Possibly because of his numerous and dubious pawn moves, missed active opportunities, and moments of overambition. 26.bxc5 dxc5♞ was preferable.

26...exf4 27.♞f3



27...♞e8? This logical move relinquishes almost all of Black's advantage.

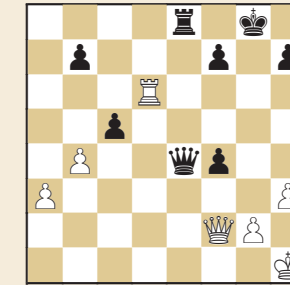
27...♙e5 was the simple and strongest continuation, leaving White without chances of salvation. Evidently, Sindarov aimed to avoid granting his opponent any initiative! 28.bxc5 dxc5 29.♞d7 ♞e8+.

28.♙f2! Sindarov played his previous move quickly, while Wei Yi had six minutes remaining for the next 13 moves to reach time control. It is likely that the bishop trade was overlooked or misjudged by Sindarov.

28...♙xf2 29.♞xf2 ♞xe4 30.♞xd6? The final mistake.

30.bxc5! was the correct way to achieve dynamic balance. 30...dxc5 31.♞f3!♞.

30...♞xd6 31.♞xd6



31...♞e3! Black gains an important tempo to advance his c-pawn.

32.♞f3 32.♞f1 c4!+.

32...c4! 33.♞g4+ ♔f8! Black's king is perfectly safe here.

34.♞d1 34.♞g5 f3!? (also 34...♞g3!?+)

35.♞xe3 ♞xe3 36.gxf3 c3 37.♞d1 c2 38.♞c1 ♞e2+.

The threats ...♞d2 and ...♞d1+ follow swiftly.

34...c3 35.♞g5 f3! 36.♞xe3 ♞xe3

White resigned

Another difficult and very important victory for Sindarov. His principled style, emphasizing the initiative – even on the borderline of objective correctness – puts opponents in uncomfortable positions and forces them to make difficult decisions. Under constant time pressure caused by demanding pace of play, mistakes are inevitable. What ultimately matters is who makes the last mistake!



▼ Javokhir Sindarov vs. Praggnanandhaa R. Photo FIDE/Michal Walusza

## SINDAROV'S SIXTH WIN

After a magnificent run of five wins in the first six rounds, Sindarov continued to set the pace, consolidating his lead with a series of hard-fought draws and adding another victory along the way. We include his Round 10 win here as a case in point.

D37

Javokhir Sindarov 2745

Praggnanandhaa R. 2741

FIDE Candidates (10), Paphos 2026

1.d4 ♘f6 2.c4 e6 3.♘f3 d5 4.♘c3 ♘bd7 5.♙f4 ♙b4 6.cxd5 exd5 7.e3 ♘e4 8.♞c2 g5 9.♙g3 h5 10.♙d3 h4 11.♙xe4 dxe4 12.♞xe4+ ♔f8 13.♙e5 f6 14.♘g5 ♙xc3+ 15.bxc3 ♘xe5 16.dxe5 fxg5 17.f4 h3 18.♞d1 ♞e7 19.g3 gxf4 20.0-0 ♞h6 21.♞xf4+ ♔g8 22.♞df1

22...♙d7?? 22...♙e6 23.♞f6 ♞h7 24.♞xh7+ ♔xh7 25.♞xh6+ ♔xh6 26.♞f6+ ♔g5! 27.♞xe6 ♞d8!♞ 23.♞f7!+ ♞xf7 24.♞xf7 ♔xf7 25.♞f4+! ♔g7 26.♞g5+ ♔h7 27.♞e7+ ♔g8 28.♞xd7 ♞f8 29.♞g4+ ♔h8 30.a4 a5 31.♞g5 ♞h7 32.e6 ♞e8 33.♞xa5 b6 34.♞e5+ ♔g8 35.♞g5+ ♞g7 36.♞f5 ♞ge7 37.♞g4+ ♔f8 38.♞xh3 ♞xe6 39.♔f2 ♞e7 40.♞h8+ ♔f7 41.g4 ♞e4 42.♞h5+ ♔g7 43.♞g5+ ♔f7 44.♔f3 ♞xa4 45.h4 ♞a5 46.♞h6 ♞ae5 47.♞h7+ ♔f8. 48.♞h8+ ♔f7 49.e4 b5 50.h5 c5 51.h6 ♞g5 52.♞d8 ♞g8 53.♞d5+

Black resigned