

A Normal Result

Performances in Zagreb and London indicative of a player growing in strength

BY GM JACOB AAGAARD



HANS NIEMANN HAD A career-best result in the “Tournament of Peace,” held in Zagreb, Croatia. With a score of 8/9 and a tournament

performance of 2946 — the best performance of the year — the wind was in his sails as never before.

Niemann’s opponents were predominantly older players, many of whom have moved from active playing into coaching. With their solid, technical playing styles, they allowed his strengths to show in full — just as Magnus Carlsen did at the Sinquefeld Cup in 2022. These strengths include strong opening preparation and a great feeling for natural moves, coming from his long hours of chess study each day. His weaknesses were not probed, and thus did not cause him problems.

It is almost inevitable that a 2700-level player will have a great result if he plays 30+ tournaments a year. That Niemann is at this level is not in doubt; but as with most people, he plays above and below his typical strength from time to time.

Hans started well, scoring 1½/2 with Black, before playing a great technical game against one of the greats of yesteryear.

PETROFF DEFENSE (C42)

GM Hans Moke Niemann (2659)

GM Vasyl Ivanchuk (2653)

Zagreb (3), 11.24.2023

1. e4 e5 2. Nf3 Nf6 3. Nxe5 d6 4. Nf3 Nxe4 5. d4 d5 6. Bd3 Nc6 7. 0-0 Be7 8. Nbd2

This has proven to be the most consistent way to play against the Petroff lately. No

doubt Hans was theoretically well prepared here.

8. ... Nxd2 9. Bxd2 Bg4 10. c3 0-0 11. h3 Bh5! 12. g3 Qd7 13. Kg2 Bg6 14. Bf4 Bxd3 15. Qxd3 Bd6



16. Ng5!?

A small novelty. It should not put great fear into Petroff players, but it’s a good practical chance. 16. Bxd6 had previously been played.

16. ... g6! 17. Bxd6 Qxd6 18. Rae1 Rae8 19. h4 Nd8 20. h5 Ne6 21. Nf3



21. ... c6?!

My friend IM Renier Castellanos has pointed out the great frequency with which even strong grandmasters are reluctant to play a move like 21. ... gxh5!. In this case White is slightly better after 22. Re5 Ng7 23. Qb5!?, but Black’s position is quite defensible all in all.

22. Rh1?!

This move keeps the pressure on, but stronger was 22. hxg6! hxg6!? (22. ... fxg6 is positionally undesirable, yet still what Black must play) 23. Ne5. Now White is ready to play Rf1-h1 with a winning attack. Black has to try 23. ... Kg7, when it would be quite fantastical to play 24. f4! f5 25. g4! with a winning attack. The computer line continues 25. ... Nd8 26. Re3 fxg4 27. f5 gxf5 28. Rxf5 etc.

22. ... g5?

This leaves the Black position full of weaknesses. Instead 22. ... Ng7! was necessary.



After 23. hxg6 fxg6 24. Ne5 White's position is pleasant, but Black's position is not too uncomfortable.

23. Ne5 h6 24. Qf5!

This is a logical move, invading the Black position. Stockfish wants 24. b4, but who would decide to play on the queenside at this moment?

24. ... Ng7 25. Qd7 Qxd7 26. Nxd7 Rxe1 27. Nf6+!

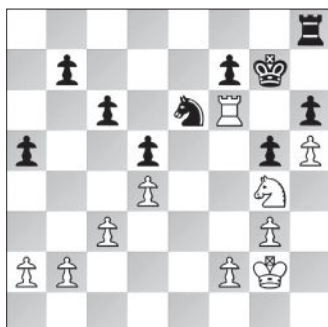


Keeping Black tied down.

27. ... Kh8 28. Rxe1 Ne6 29. Re5 a5 30. Ng4 Kh7?!

Here 30. ... Kg7 would invite 31. Ne3, which is indeed very unpleasant for Black. But what happened in the game ends up being even worse.

31. Rf5! Kg7 32. Rf6 Rh8



33. a4!?

This looks like a natural technical move, fixing the a5-pawn. In truth, it exposes the pawn for counterplay. The strongest plan would be to bring the king to a better square with 33. Kf1!.

33. ... b6?

Black misses his last chance to fight with 33. ... c5! 34. dxc5 d4, when White would have to prove his advantage with 35. Rf3! (35. cxd4? Rd8! would offer Black great counterplay) 35. ... Rd8 and now:



POSITION AFTER 35. ... Rd8

36. c6!! bxc6 37. Ne5 f6 38. Nxc6 Rd6 39. Ne7! and White wins. It's not clear that Niemann would have found this continuation at the board. Given how he got into trouble against Bartel later in this article, we can see that it is in such complexities that he becomes most prone to errors.

34. f4!?

Again strongest was 34. Kf1!. There is no reason to act immediately, as Black's position is devoid of counterplay.

34. ... gxf4 35. gxf4 Rc8?!

White would also be winning after 35. ... b5! 36. f5 Nf4+ 37. Kf3 Nxh5, where taking on c6 is most natural, but Stockfish gives the odd 38. Rd6! bxa4 39. Rxc6! as even stronger. Black is in a surprising *zugzwang*.

36. f5

White wins easily now.

36. ... Ng5

Hopeless is 36. ... Nf4+ 37. Kf3 Nxh5 38. Rxh6.

37. Rxh6 Ne4 38. Kf3 Rc7 39. Kf4 Nd2 40. Rd6 Nc4 41. h6+ Kh7 42. Rd8, Black resigned.

ENGLISH OPENING (A29)

GM Ivan Cheparinov (2649)
GM Hans Moke Niemann (2659)
Zagreb (6), 11.27.2023

1. c4 Nf6 2. Nc3 e5 3. Nf3 Nc6 4. g3 Bb4 5. Nd5 e4 6. Nh4 0-0 7. a3 Bc5 8. Bg2 d6 9. 0-0 Re8



I have the feeling that Hans was slightly surprised in the opening and risked falling into danger. Unfortunately for Cheparinov, it appears that he was no better prepared here, quickly getting into trouble.

10. d3?!

This allows Black to get active.

A famous game went: 10. e3 g5 11. b4 Bb6? (11. ... gxh4 12. bxc5 Ne5!?) with a complex game was needed) 12. Bb2 Nxd5 13.

Tournament of Peace

ZAGREB, NOVEMBER 22-30, 2023

			1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	
1	GM Hans Moke Niemann	2659	*	½	1	1	1	1	½	1	1	1	8/9
2	GM Ante Brkic	2622	½	*	½	½	½	1	½	½	½	½	5/9
3	GM Anton Korobov	2667	0	½	*	½	½	½	1	½	½	1	5/9
4	GM Vasyl Ivanchuk	2653	0	½	½	*	½	½	½	½	1	1	5/9
5	GM Alexander Motylev	2619	0	½	½	½	*	½	½	1	½	½	4½/9
6	GM Ivan Sokolov	2588	0	0	½	½	½	*	½	1	½	1	4½/9
7	GM Hrvoje Stevic	2549	½	½	0	½	½	½	*	½	½	½	4/9
8	GM Zdenko Kozul	2531	0	½	½	½	0	0	½	*	1	½	3½/9
9	GM Robert Zelcic	2478	0	½	½	0	½	½	½	0	*	½	3/9
10	GM Ivan Cheparinov	2649	0	½	0	0	½	0	½	½	½	*	2½/9

cx d5 Nd4 14. d3!! gxh4 15. dxe4 Ne6 16. dxe6 Rxe6 17. e5 hxg3 18. hxg3 Qg5 19. exd6 Rxd6 20. Qb3 h5 21. Rad1 Rh6 22. Rd5 Qe7 23. Qc4 Bg4 24. Qf4 Rg6 25. Re5 Qd6 26. Be4 and Black resigned in Nakamura – Anand, Moscow 2016.

But perhaps even stronger is 10. b4! Bd4 (10. ... Bb6!?) 11. Rb1 g5 12. e3 gxh4 13. exd4 Nxd4 14. Bb2 when White is fighting for an advantage.

10. ... exd3 11. Qxd3 Ne5 12. Qc2 c6



13. Nc3?

The root of all of White's problems in this game. After 13. Nxf6+ Qxf6 14. Ra2!? a5 15. b3 White would still be fine.

13. ... Nxc4 14. Na4 Be6! 15. Rd1

Walking into a simple tactic, but White would also be a clear pawn down after 15. Nxc5 dxc5 16. b3 Nd6.



15. ... Bxf2+!

Amusingly Stockfish suggests that the unnatural 15. ... Bb6 is just as good, if not better!

16. Kxf2 Ng4+

A natural follow-up, but 16. ... b5! was stronger, leaving White in serious trouble.

17. Ke1?

White misses the chance to fight with 17. Kg1! b5 18. Bxc6 bxa4 19. Nf3! and although Black's game is easier, it does not provide him with an overwhelming advantage.

17. ... b5 18. Rd4 Nce3 19. Bxe3 Nxe3

20. Qc3



20. ... Bd5!

A nice solution.

21. Be4

White would also have to resign after 21. Bxd5 cxd5 22. Rd3 d4!

21. ... Bxe4 22. Qxe3 Bd5 23. Qd2 bxa4 24. Rxa4 Re5

Setting up a simple threat of trapping the other white knight.

25. Rd4?! g5, White resigned.

A game played below Cheparinov's usual level, making it easier for Hans than it would be in London.

Towards the end of the tournament there were some strange, half-spoken accusations made towards Niemann. Statistics of his playing at "98% accuracy" were thrown around, and the organizers made public statements about a player giving "indications of cheating."

Let me begin my comments by noting that I was not in Zagreb, and it's hard to speak with authority on something you have not witnessed first-hand. I am also friends with some of the players raising concerns about the integrity of the event, and I trust their judgment immensely.

That said, the tournament had a 15-minute delay from its start, which was later expanded to 30 minutes. A study of the games themselves shows that Hans' play was not marked by single moments of brilliance, but continuous, high-level consistency. To cheat in such a way, a stream of moves would have to be fed to the player.

Another friend of mine – one even closer to those concerned about the integrity of the event – came to a similar conclusion. These were entirely human games. When there was only one good move, Hans would find it, unless it was too difficult. The games were all contested on his home court of

simple positional play, an area of the game where (as he displayed in a training camp with me two years ago) he has great feeling and talent. In situations where there were many good options, his choices were a bit random, and at times not all that inspired. The only thing missing from his play were big mistakes – there were certainly little ones.

Take the following game, where Hans failed to exert maximum pressure on moves 15 and 16. Sokolov then made a horrible mistake on move 21, losing the game.

GIUOCO PIANO (C54)

GM Hans Moke Niemann (2659)

GM Ivan Sokolov (2588)

Zagreb (7), 11.28.2023

1. e4 e5 2. Nf3 Nc6 3. Bc4 Bc5 4. c3 Nf6 5. d3 d6 6. 0-0 h6 7. Nbd2 a5 8. Re1 0-0 9. Nf1 Ne7 10. d4 exd4 11. cxd4 Bb6

I suspect that Hans was out of preparation around here.

12. h3 d5 13. e5 Ne4 14. Bd3 c5



15. Ng3?!

An odd decision. The doubled pawns do not make a good impression. Either 15. N1d2!? or 15. dxc5! Nxc5 16. Be3 would both put the onus on Black to prove the viability of his position.

15. ... Bf5?!

Here the correct 15. ... Nxg3 16. fxxg3 Bf5 provided Black with easy equality.

16. Nxf5?!

A clumsy move order. It was stronger to play 16. Bxe4! dxe4 17. Nxe4 cxd4 18. Nd6 d3 19. Nh4 Bh7 20. Qg4 with some pressure.

16. ... Nxf5 17. Bxe4 dxe4 18. Rxe4 Qd5 19. Rg4 Kh8

Here 19. ... cxd4! was simpler, but Black is still fine after the game continuation.

Now Hans thought for 40 minutes in this

position, trying to find a path forward. He came up with an interesting idea.

20. Qd3!? Nxd4 21. Ng5!



21. ... hxg5??

A tough mistake.

Finding the path for Black was not easy, but the first move was 21. ... g6. The position looks porous after 22. Ne4! and Black has to find 22. ... h5! 23. Rg5 Bd8! 24. Nf6 Bxf6 25. exf6 Qd6 when things would be level after something like 26. Qe3 Qxf6 27. Rxc5 Rad8.

22. Bxg5 Nf3+

Played after five minutes. It appears Sokolov might have had other plans, but lost his faith in them. Here 22. ... f5 23. exf6 *e.p.* Kg8 24. Bh6 ends with Black's death as well.

23. Qxf3 Qxf3 24. gxf3 Bd8?!

The last chance to provide resistance was 24. ... Bc7! 25. f4 f6.

25. Be3 Be7 26. Kh1 Rfe8 27. f4 Bf8 28. a4!

A nice technical move, but not a difficult one.

28. ... Ra6 29. Bd2!

A sound rerouting of the bishop. Black's position is hopeless.

29. ... c4 30. Bc3 Rh6 31. Kh2 Bb4 32. Rag1 g6 33. Rd1 Bxc3 34. bxc3 Re7 35. Rd5 b6 36. Rd4 Rc7 37. Rd6, Black resigned.

The final game of the tournament was probably Niemann's best; at the same time, it was the one where his moves found the least affection from Stockfish! His strategic play was focused and sharp.

SICILIAN DEFENSE, MOSCOW VARIATION (B51)

GM Hans Moke Niemann (2659)
GM Anton Korobov (2667)
Zagreb (9), 11.30.2023

1. e4 c5 2. Nf3 d6 3. Bb5+ Nd7 4. 0-0 a6 5. Bd3 Ngf6 6. Re1 e6 7. Bf1 b6 8. c4 Bb7 9. Nc3 Ne5 10. d4 Nxf3+ 11. gxf3 g6 12. Be3
 A natural looking move, but not the most testing according to the digital overlords.

12. ... Bg7 13. Qd2 0-0 14. Rad1 Bc6!



Brilliant play by Korobov. Now Niemann took a long think.

15. Bg5

We see the point of Black's last move with 15. d5 exd5 16. cxd5 Bb5! and great counterplay.

15. ... Qb8?

Black had to solve his problems before they became structural. After 15. ... cxd4 16. Qxd4 h6! 17. Qxd6 Qxd6 18. Rxd6 hxg5 19. Rxc6 Nd7 Black would by no means be worse. His play on the dark squares is venomous.

16. d5 exd5 17. cxd5 Bd7

Now 17. ... Bb5?! no longer works, as 18. Nxb5 axb5 19. Bxb5 Rxa2 20. e5! dxe5 21. d6 would give White a winning positional advantage.

18. Ne2!

More aggressive is 18. f4!? but this is a move that can feel somewhat risky. Niemann is not a natural attacking player, and decides to maneuver his pieces into position before taking such risks.

18. ... Re8 19. Bg2 b5 20. Kh1?!

Stronger was 20. Ng3!, but Niemann's way of playing also makes sense.

20. ... a5 21. Ng3 h5?!

This creates extra weaknesses in the black position. Preferable was 21. ... Qd8, bringing assistance to the kingside.

22. Rg1 Ra7?

It is not easy to see how this should help Black.

23. Bf1!?

Niemann cautiously regroups before initiating the attack.

Stockfish highly recommends 23. Nf5!, and it also quite likes 23. f4!?, both with potent attacks.

23. ... c4 24. Be2

Here 24. Nf5! was still strong.

24. ... Bc8 25. Bxf6 Bxf6 26. Nxh5 Bh8 27. Qh6 Qb6 28. Rg2 Ree7



29. f4! Rxe4 30. Rxg6+! fxf6 31. Qxg6+ Kf8 32. Qh6+!

It's totally unclear after 32. Qxe4? Qxf2.

32. ... Bg7



After 32. ... Kf7 33. Rg1 White wins.

33. Nxc7! Rxc7 34. Rg1 Bg4

If 34. ... Qd4 35. Qh8+ Kf7 36. Bh5+ and mate is imminent.

35. Bxc4!

Not a difficult move to find. Note that 35. Rxc7? would fail to 35. ... Qd4!

35. ... Qd4 36. Be6 Qxb2 37. Qh8+ Ke7 38. Rxc7+ Kf6 39. Qh6, mate.

Niemann faced another type of opposition in London. The players were younger and stronger. They did not seek to play in the classical style that suits Niemann so very well, but instead, they put difficult problems to him that he resolved according to his strengths, but without the glorious outcomes of Zagreb.



The field for the 2023 London Chess Classic

Here GM Matusz Bartel did what he did in every game of the London Classic – he went bananas. The aggressive Polish GM had just one draw in London!

B-A-N-A-N-A-S

GM Hans Moke Niemann (2667)

GM Matusz Bartel (2659)

London (7), 12.08.2023



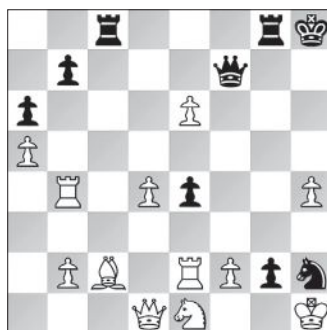
BLACK TO MOVE

32. ... Nh4!?

Not correct, but White has to play a lot of accurate moves to refute the attack.

33. gxh4 Nf3+ 34. Kh1 Nxh2 35. cxd5! g3

36. dxe6 g2+ 37. N3xg2! hxg2+



38. Kg1!

After 38. Nxc2? Qf3 39. Bxe4 Qh3! White is mated. For example: 40. Kg1 Nf3+ 41. Bxf3 Qxf3 42. Kf1 Rxc2! 43. Qd2 Qh3 and mate cannot be postponed for long.

38. ... Qf4 39. Rxe4!

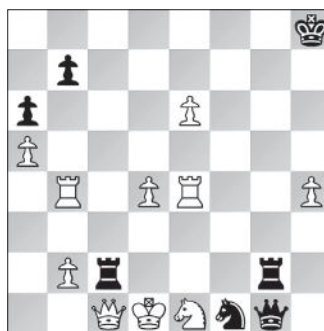
The other recapture 39. Bxe4? would allow Black to play 39. ... Ng4 40. Nf3 Nxf2! (40. ... Rc1? 41. Qxc1 Qxc1+ 42. Re1 Qf4 43. Rxb7 is hopeless for Black), where there is enough counterplay to make a draw.

39. ... Qxf2+ 40. Kxf2 g1=Q+ 41. Ke2 Nf1

42. Qc1!?

Stronger was 42. d5!, with the key idea being a queen check on d4.

42. ... Rg2+ 43. Kd1 Rxc2



44. Qxc2?

Played after just over two minutes of thought.

White had two winning continuations. Neither can really be calculated to the end, which is part of the problem for White. Instead Hans went for what seemed like the simplest win.

After 44. e7? Rxc1+ 45. Kxc1 Rg8 46. e8=Q Rxe8 47. Rxe8+ Kg7 48. Rxb7+ Kf6 49. Nf3 White is winning, but there is a lot of work

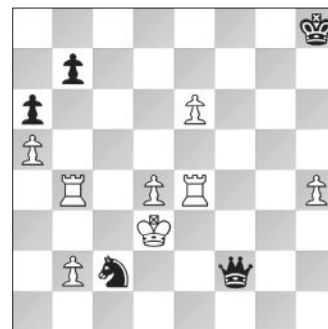
left to be done.

The most convincing win was 44. Qh6+! Kg8 45. e7 Rgd2+ 46. Qxd2 Rxd2+ 47. Kc1, but even here, it is easy to think you may have missed something. After 47. ... Rd1+ 48. Kxd1 Ne3+ 49. Kd2 Qf2+ 50. Kc3! Nd5+ 51. Kc4 Ne3+ 52. Kb3 Qf7+ 53. Ka3 White wins.

44. ... Rxc2 45. Nxc2

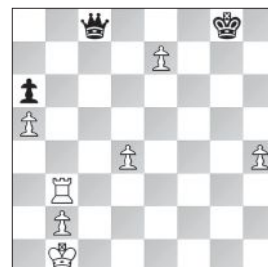
Hans definitely intended to play 45. e7? but would only now have seen that Black has 45. ... Qg4+!! 46. Rxc4 Ne3 mate!

45. ... Ne3+ 46. Kd2 Qf2+ 47. Kd3 Nxc2



48. d5?

White had a fantastic draw with 48. Rxb7! Qf3+ 49. Kd2! Qxe4 50. e7 Qg2+ 51. Kc1! Qg8 52. Kxc2 Qc8+ 53. Kb1 Kg8 54. Rb3!



POSITION AFTER 54. Rb3

The position is a theoretical draw. You can remove the a5-, d4-, e7-, and h4-pawns. White will still shuffle Rb3-a3-c3, and there is no zugzwang!

48. ... Nxb4+ 49. Rxb4 Qc5?

Black could have won with something like: 49. ... Qf3+ 50. Kc4 Qf4+!, where the winning idea is rather exceptional: 51. Kc5 Qc7+ 52. Kd4 Qe7 53. Kc4 Kg7 54. h5 Kf6 55. h6 Ke5 and the black king eliminates the pawns. The key point is that the b7-pawn remains. There are no fortresses on the horizon.

50. Rd4 Qd6 51. Ke4 Kg7 52. Rd3?

The engine suggests that 52. h5, but the practical difficulty looked too difficult for Hans.

52. ... Qh2

The white pawns get picked off, one by one. The game could have ended now.

53. Rc3

Here 53. d6 Qe2+ 54. Re3 Qc4+ 55. Kf3 Qd5+ 56. Ke2 Kf8! is another winning line for Black.

53. ... Qxh4+ 54. Kf5 Qh5+ 55. Ke4 Qh4+ 56. Kf5 Qh2 57. Ke4 Kg6 58. Rc8 Qd6 59. Rc2 Qg3 60. Rc8 Kg7 61. Kd4 Qf4+ 62. Kd3 Qd6 63. Kc4 Kf6 64. Rh8 Qc7+ 65. Kd4 Qg7 66. Rh1 Ke7+ 67. Kc5 Qg6 68. Rc1 Qd3 69. Rc4 Qe3+ 70. Rd4 Qc1+ 71. Rc4 Qxb2 72. Re4 Qb5+ 73. Kd4 Qxa5 74. Ke5 Qc7+ 75. Kf5, and White resigned.

A last-round triumph saved the tournament for Niemann.

GIUOCO PIANO (C54)

GM Hans Moke Niemann (2667)

GM Gukesh D (2720)

London (9), 12.10.2023

1. e4 e5 2. Nf3 Nc6 3. Bc4 Bc5 4. d3 Nf6 5. 0-0 d6 6. c3 a6 7. a4 Ba7 8. Re1

In this position 8. a5 h6 9. Be3 might be better, although admittedly I am not a great expert in the complexities of the Italian Game.

8. ... h6 9. a5



9. ... g5!

The variations with ... g7-g5 have proven to be just as dangerous for White as for Black. For players looking to win, it's worth the risk.

10. Be3 g4 11. Nfd2 Bxe3 12. fxe3?!

This move does not make sense after having put the rook on e1. White had to play 12. Rxe3 h5 and now something like 13. d4!?, with a complicated game where Black's advance on the kingside is double-edged.

12. ... Nh7 13. Nf1?!

This maneuver looks a bit odd. Here 13. Rf1

Ng5 14. d4 was probably better, but Black's position is quite comfortable.

13. ... h5 14. Ng3



14. ... Qg5?

This is the moment where Gukesh errs.

I don't think Hans would have missed 14. ... h4! with a simple advantage after 15. Nf5 Bxf5 16. exf5 d5 17. Bb3 Nf6!. This is the type of play he excels at.

15. Nd2 Ne7 16. Qa4+ c6 17. Qb4!

With this move White manages to create counterplay.

17. ... h4 18. Nf5 Bxf5 19. exf5 d5 20. Bb3

(see diagram top of next column)

20. ... 0-0?

Black should have played something like 20. ... 0-0-0, when the position is messy indeed. Now White takes over the position and the game.



21. Ra4!

Perhaps this is not a difficult move to find... but you do have to see it!

It would appear that Gukesh had missed this idea, or something connected to it. Now White is winning.

21. ... g3

It's true that 21. ... Nf6 would defend the pawn, but the drawback is that it also hangs the e7-knight. Not much else recommends itself for Black.

22. Qxh4 Qxh4 23. Rxh4 gxh2+ 24. Rxh2 f6 25. e4 Rf7 26. Nf3 Rg7 27. d4 exd4 28. Nxd4 Ng5 29. exd5 Nxd5 30. Rh6 Kf7 31. Kf1 Rag8 32. c4 Nc7 33. c5+ Nd5 34. Bxd5+ cxd5 35. Ne6, Black resigned. ♠

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London Chess Classic

LONDON, DECEMBER 1-10, 2023

			1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	
1	GM Michael Adams	2670	*	1	½	½	½	1	½	1	½	½	6/9
2	GM M. Amin Tabatabaei	2694	0	*	½	1	½	1	0	½	1	1	5½/9
3	GM Gukesh D	2746	½	½	*	1	0	1	½	0	½	1	5/9
4	GM Andrei Volokitin	2660	½	0	0	*	1	1	1	½	½	½	5/9
5	GM Hans Moke Niemann	2659	½	½	1	0	*	0	1	½	½	½	4½/9
6	GM Mateusz Bartel	2651	0	0	0	0	1	*	1	1	½	1	4½/9
7	IM Shreyas Royal	2404	½	1	½	0	0	0	*	1	½	½	4/9
8	GM Jules Moussard	2639	0	½	1	½	½	0	0	*	1	½	4/9
9	GM Nikita Vitiugov	2712	½	0	½	½	½	½	½	0	*	½	3½/9
10	GM Luke McShane	2626	½	0	0	½	½	0	½	½	½	*	3/9