



2023 IN REVIEW

A Year of Upheaval and Change

How will 2023 be remembered in chess history? At the very least, it was the end of an era as Magnus Carlsen's reign as classical world champion expired when he elected not to defend the crown that he had held since 2013.

By Dylan Loeb McClain

Carlsen's decision opened the door for Ding Liren to become China's first world champion after he defeated Ian Nepomniachtchi in a thrilling match that was only decided in the last game. Only time will tell if Ding can hold the title, but he certainly is not as intimidating a champion as Carlsen has been, so Ding, who is already 31, is unlikely to leave his imprint the way that the Norwegian did and continues to do. Carlsen made a conscious choice to give up the title, but as the year drew to a close, it seemed that his aura of invincibility in classical chess was slipping. Though he won the World Cup in August for the first time, it was after he had a disastrous tournament in Norway in June where he failed to win even a single classical tournament game for the first time in 16 years.

Then, in the Qatar Masters in October, something happened that had not occurred since 2006, when Carlsen was 16: He lost a classical game to someone rated in the 2500s. A few days later, Carlsen lost again, this time to Murali Karthikeyan, an Indian grandmaster rated in the low 2600s. Carlsen's standard rating is now the lowest it has been since October 2017.

Hikaru Nakamura, who has probably been Carlsen's most consistent opponent over the last 15 years, noted after his loss to Murali: "This is the future for Magnus. The Indians are coming for him. It's going to be one Indian after another, after another, after another, after another – all the disciples of Vishy!"

Chess Power Shifts To The East

Indeed, that was another theme of 2023: The (continued) rise of India.

Three Indian players stormed into the world's elite, led by Dommaraju Gukesh, who briefly supplanted the legendary Viswanathan Anand, a.k.a. Vishy, as India's top player – the first time in 37 years that Anand had not held that position.

Another one of the trio, Rameshbabu Pragnanandhaa, was the runner-up to Carlsen at the World Cup, giving him a berth in next year's Candidates Tournament to select a challenger for the World Championship.

Pragnanandhaa will be joined by one of his countrymen, Vidit Gujrathi, after he won the FIDE Grand Swiss tournament in November, which was a qualifier for the Candidates. (American GM Hikaru Nakamura also grabbed a spot in the Candidates by finishing second to Vidit.)



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▲ World Champion Ding Liren

Photo: FIDE

Gukesh could also make it into the Candidates if he becomes the highest finisher in the 2023 FIDE circuit – a ranking based on a points system of performances in top tournaments. As of early November, he lagged behind Anish Giri of the Netherlands but narrowly ahead of Wesley So of the United States – players who were eligible for a spot in the Candidates. (Players who have already wrapped up a place in the Candidates, notably Fabiano Caruana, who punched his ticket by finishing third in the World Cup, are not eligible.)

Overall, India is now No. 2 in the world rankings, according to FIDE, with six players rated over 2700, the usual standard for the world elite, which is as



Three Indian grandmasters stormed into the world's elite: Rameshbabu Pragnanandhaa, Dommaraju Gukesh, Vidit Gujrathi
Photo: FIDE

many as the United States, currently ranked No.1. Given how many young players are coming up through India's development programs, it seems like only a matter of time before India takes over the top spot.

Other countries on the rise include Uzbekistan with its two Nodirbeks – Abdusattorov, who won the world rapid championship in 2021 and currently ranked in the world top 25 in classical chess at only 19 years of age, and Yakubboev, two years older, who was the surprise winner of the Qatar Masters after he defeated his compatriot in a playoff.

With China already a force in chess, the balance of power seems to be shifting to the east.

Pajamas And Scandals

Just as Covid-19 reshaped work life, it has permanently changed elite chess. Though in-person tournaments have returned to almost their pre-pandemic levels, online tournaments have become increasingly popular, with the 2023 Champions Chess Tour, featuring eight tournaments and a \$2 million prize fund, as the most prominent example. The momentum for online tournaments is accelerating as they are easier to organize and less expensive (no need for special venues, air travel or hotels). It is probably only a matter of time before a player competes in his (or her) pajamas, which will take watching tournament chess to a whole new level.

The year saw one scandal (mostly) put to rest as the multimillion-dollar lawsuit brought by Hans Niemann against Carlsen, Chess.com and Nakamura over allegations that Niemann cheated against Carlsen in the 2022 Sinquefeld Cup, as well as repeatedly online, was settled. Terms of the settlement were not disclosed, but it seems that the parties mostly agreed to disagree and leave it at that.

There is still one shoe that has not dropped: the results of an investigation by the International Chess Federation into the matter and any possible sanctions arising out of it. FIDE has put off publishing its findings, possibly because people there think that it is in nobody's best interest to reopen that can of worms.

A new, uglier story broke in early 2023 after Jennifer Shahade, a two-time United States women's champion and the Women's Program Director at the United States Chess Federation, went public with accusations that Alejandro Ramirez, a grandmaster and the coach of Saint Louis University's national college champion team, had twice sexually assaulted her when she was young. Other women soon came forward to say that he had made unwanted advances against them, too.

Subsequently, Ramirez resigned his position at Saint Louis University and was banned as a member

of the United States Chess Federation, but Shahade resigned her position at the Federation saying that it had not given her enough support when she made her allegations. After Randy Bauer, the Federation's President, got into a heated argument online with other members of the Federation, a petition was started to try to force his removal. The story was covered extensively in the previous issue of *American Chess Magazine*.

2024 Predictions

The future is of course impossible to predict, but this seems to be a period of the changing of the guard. Generation Y, or the millennial generation, which was born around 1990 and that includes Carlsen, Ian Nepomniachtchi and Maxime Vachier-Lagrave, among others, is facing a real challenge from Generation Z, i.e. those born from 2000 and afterwards. As 2024 rolls around, it should be entertaining to watch the competition.

▼ Hans Niemann

Photo: SLCC

