



How great are the chances in Toronto for the two U.S. candidates?

Another Quest for Fabi and

Both elite grandmasters from the United States, Fabiano Caruana and Hikaru Nakamura, had significant results in 2023. Will they be able to showcase their best form at the 2024 Candidates Tournament in Toronto, and who has better chances of becoming the new challenger for the classical world title?

By GM John Burke

At the time of reading this article the most important individual tournament of the year is underway – the 2024 Candidates Tournament. It takes place in Toronto from April 3–22, and features a diverse mix of eight players, both veterans and newcomers. The winner will get a chance to challenge the reigning World Champion Ding Liren (CHN) for the title.

On the one hand, we have the Americans, Fabiano Caruana and Hikaru Nakamura, who have both played this event multiple times

CARUANA

NAKAMURA



TORONTO



John Burke was the 2020 US Junior Champion. The young grandmaster from New Jersey had already stunned the chess world in 2015 by breaking the record as youngest player ever to surpass 2600+ ELO. John's most notable victories include the 2018 U.S. Masters, the 2018 New York International Championship, and the 2019 Washington International Open. In 2021 he shared first at the Cherry Blossom Classic in Dulles, VA, and also in the World Open in Philadelphia, PA.



Hikaru

and know what to expect by now. There's also the Russian Ian Nepomniachtchi, who has won the previous two editions and played in the last two World Championship matches. The Iranian-French GM Alireza Firouzja could almost be considered a sort of "veteran" in this field as well, despite his age of 20! He's been a top player for a while now, and competed in the last Candidates Tournament, where he had a disappointing result that he'll surely be looking to improve on.

The other four players (half the field, that is) are competing in their very first Candidates Tournament. Nijat Abasov from Azerbaijan finished fourth in the 2023 World Cup, and we've assumed for a while that Magnus Carlsen, who finished third, would not play the Candidates, thus handing his spot to Abasov. Recently, this has been confirmed, so Abasov is officially in. He's 28 years old and is outrated by 100 points behind the rest of the field, but he could definitely score some upsets in this event.

The remaining three players are Indians. Vidit Gujrathi is 29 years old, but has recently hit his career peak of 2747 and surely will look to continue his good form in Toronto. The other two players are ones we've known will make the Candidates at some point, it was only a matter of "when", not "if". Praggnanandhaa and Gukesh are 18 and 17, respectively, but they are established top players who have been vying for the India #1 ranking in recent times.

To highlight the chances of the American players, Nakamura and Caruana, I thought I'd show some games played between them and the other participants in the past couple of years.



Fabiano Caruana has had a great return to form after his slump which began around the time of the previous Candidates Tournament held in Madrid in 2022. He's returned to number two in the world and crossed 2800, and there's no reason to consider him anything but one of the favorites in Toronto.

The game played between Firouzja and Caruana at the Norway Chess tournament in 2023 is a perfect example of how Caruana wins games when he is at his best. He prepares well, and calculates extremely accurately (probably better than anyone in the world) when his opponent goes astray.

C11

Alireza Firouzja	2785
Fabiano Caruana	2764

Norway Chess, Stavanger 2023

1.e4 e6 The French Defense is a pretty rare choice on the elite level, where most people have a liking for 1...e5. It hasn't been refuted though, and can be used as a powerful surprise weapon, especially if you play a sharp variation backed up by good preparation, as Caruana does in this game.

2.d4 d5 3.♖c3 ♘f6 4.e5 ♘fd7 5.f4 c5 6.♗f3 ♗c6 7.♙e3 cxd4 8.♗xd4 ♖b6 I don't know what the official name of this line is, but I'd call it the "Poisoned Pawn French." It was first played by strong GMs like Chernin, Ehlvest, and the legendary Korchnoi in the 80s, and grew in popularity as engines got stronger and confirmed its soundness.

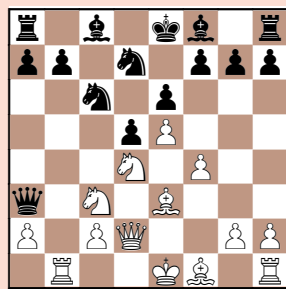
9.♖d2 9.a3 is the main alternative to sacrificing the pawn.



9...♙e3 (9...♖xb2?? **10.♗a4** A typical idea – the b4 square is covered, so the queen is trapped.) **10.♗cb5** ♗xd4 **11.♙xd4** 0-0 **12.b4 ♙xd4 13.♖xd4** This position has been reached several times. White has a typical French space advantage, but Black has adequate counterplay with the pawn breaks ...a5 and/or ...f6. **9...♖xb2 10.♖b1 ♖a3**



▲ Alireza Firouzja Photo by Lennart Ootes



11.♙cb5!? A very rare choice. Perhaps Firouzja was surprised by Caruana's opening choice, and hoped to spring a counter-surprise of his own.

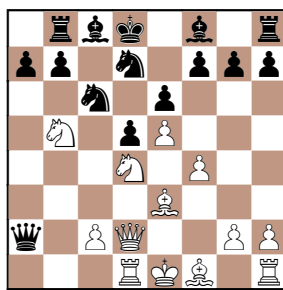
11...♙b5 The vast majority of the games continue like this. **11...♗xd4 12.♙xd4 a6 13.♙xd7+ ♙xd7 14.♖b3** Kicking the queen back before recapturing the pawn. **14...♖e7 15.♖xb7** This is the main position of the whole line. Black has three good choices here – ...♖c8, ...♖d8, or ...♖h4+ followed by ...♖d8. You could study this position for years and not understand everything, so I certainly won't try to explain every detail. The main point of Black's play is that he has the bishop pair and a solid position with no weaknesses. If he can develop and castle without falling under attack, he is simply much better. However, he is still far away from doing that. Therefore, the battle will revolve around Black's king safety. White will hope to use his active pieces and the critical f4-f5 pawn break, while Black will try to dodge the threats, trade

pieces, and make his way to a superior endgame.

11...♖xa2 Grabbing more material and attacking the b1 rook, so ♗c7+ is not a worry yet.

12.♙d1 ♖b8 Black is now two pawns up and wants to play ...♙b4 followed by ...0-0, so White is pretty much obliged to throw in a check and keep the opponent's king in the center.

13.♗c7+ ♗d8 14.♗cb5



So let's assess this position – what do we have here?

Black is two pawns up. Sure, his king is in the center, but it's pretty well guarded by pawns and pieces at the moment. Black can play ...a6 at any moment to induce ♗d6, upon which ...♙xd6 is always a possibility, followed by ganging up on the weak d6 pawn after the trade. There's also a simple plan of development with ...♗c5 and ...♙d7, getting the last of the pieces out. White may be able to stir something up after castling and connecting his rooks, but it still takes a couple of moves. Just visually, it isn't obvious to me that White has enough for the sacrificed material. The computer shows it as close to equal (as always) but it doesn't seem like Black's moves are too difficult to play, which is the main concern in sharp positions like this. I would only go into such a position as White if I was extremely confident in my preparation, and I knew exactly how to proceed against all of Black's obvious replies. As the next few moves show, this wasn't exactly the case with Firouzja, which makes his decision to play so riskily a bit baffling.

14...♗c5 15.♙d3 A knight jump to e4 definitely can't be allowed.

15...♗xd3+ 16.♖xd3 ♙d7 17.♗d6? Almost the decisive mistake already. White is just not ready for this move. With his king still in the center, he loses all his attacking chances after the trade on d6.

17.0-0 is the most natural choice, and normally there isn't really a reason to play a move like ♗d6 without being provoked by ...a6, so there must have been



Let's turn to Hikaru Nakamura. Since becoming a popular streamer, his career has gone in a different direction than many expected. I admit that I was someone who thought he'd be fairly relaxed about his OTB career, and would not maintain a level in classical chess comparable to his online dominance.

On the contrary, Hikaru has had a renaissance at age of 36, playing his best classical chess in many years and surging to No. 2 in the world. It turns out that constantly playing chess, even if it's mostly online blitz, is good for keeping you in good form. So, maybe we should have seen it coming!

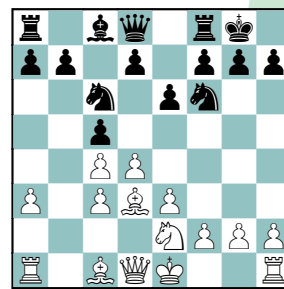
The following game between Gukesh and Nakamura is from an online rapid event, and it shows Nakamura's familiarity in structures from openings he's been playing for a long time, such as the Nimzo-Indian.

E29

Dommaraju Gukesh	2718
Hikaru Nakamura	2768

Airthings Masters (rapid), Internet 2023

1.d4 ♗f6 2.c4 e6 3.♗c3 ♙b4 4.e3 0-0 5.a3 This is a very fighting option for White against the Nimzo-Indian. It's similar to the Saemisch variation, 4.a3. The difference here is that Black has already castled, taking some options away. White, of course, has already committed to e2-e3, so he also loses some options, most importantly the pin with ♙g5. **5...♙xc3+ 6.bxc3 c5 7.♙d3 ♗c6 8.♗e2**



8...♙b6 Black plans to gang up on White's weak pawns – specifically the c4 one. He can easily attack it with ...♙a6, ...♗a5, ...♖c8, etc. White often ends up sacrificing this pawn, when, in return, he tries to attack on the kingside with the e4-e5 advance. The attack can be very dangerous if Black doesn't know what he's doing.

9.e4 ♗e8 This move might seem surprising if you're unfamiliar with the line, but it's been Black's main defensive idea for many

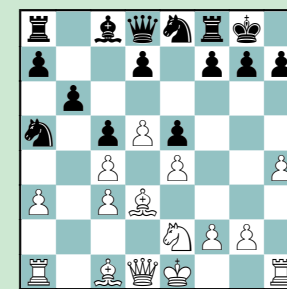
years. In fact, there's a classic Botvinnik–Reshevsky game from the 1948 World Championship Tournament you should check out if you're curious about the origins of this variation. **9...♗e8** is a prophylactic move, getting out of the way of the potential e5 advance. Also, Black is now ready to meet f2-f4 with ...f7-f5, halting White's attack and blocking up the kingside.

10.h4?! A really rare move, trying to attack in a different direction. The idea is to advance the pawn up to h6 and weaken Black's dark squares. ♖h3-g3 can also be an idea sometimes.

10...e5?! This is a typical idea in these pawn structures. It might look logical to close the position, thinking this would blunt White's attack, but it actually enables White to favorably gain space.

10...♙a6 is the most logical continuation. After **11.h5 ♗a5 12.h6 g6 13.0-0 ♙xc4 14.♙xc4 ♗xc4** White had compensation for the pawn, but not more in A.Gupta 2628 – M.Karthikeyan 2622, Internet 2022, although White managed to win on move 56.

11.h5 11.d5! ♗a5



12.f4! d6 (Or **12...♗d6 13.♗g3 ♗axc4 14.f5**.) **13.f5 ♙a6** The c4 pawn is doomed, but White can proceed by sacrificing it with **14.g4** or **14.♗g3**. In each case he has great attacking prospects.

11...d6 12.h6 Surprisingly, this normal move might be a bit of a positional mistake here. The point is that once Black has committed to ...e6-e5, a lot of White's play revolves around getting a knight to f5 (counting on Black's bishop getting developed with ...♙a6). Inserting h5-h6 takes away this flexibility.

12.d5 ♗a5 13.♗g3 ♙a6 Not the best move, but it illustrates White's idea well. **14.♗f5 ♙xc4 15.♙xc4 ♗xc4 16.♖a4!** It's nice to drive the knight back and secure the center. **16...♗a5 17.c4** White is down a pawn, but basically has a free attack. His many ideas include **g4-g5** and **♖h3-g3**.

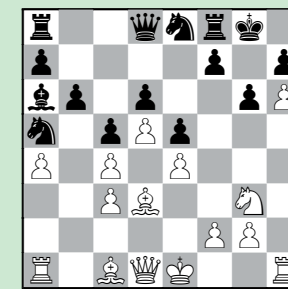
12...g6 13.♙e3? This is just too slow.



▲ Dommaraju Gukesh Photo by Lennart Ootes

Gukesh intends to solidify his center, and, as you will see in a couple of moves, attempts to defend the c4 pawn. But this just misses the whole point of the line – if you get stuck trying to cling to the weak pawn, you'll just be positionally worse and on the defensive. White's whole idea should be to sacrifice this pawn and pursue an attack.

13.d5! is still best, just like before. **13...♗a5 14.♗g3 ♙a6 15.a4!**

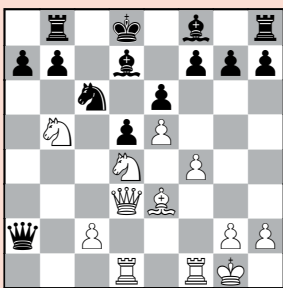


I like this move a lot – it stops Black from following up with ...b6-b5 after taking on c4. **15...♙xc4** Perhaps Black should wait and not take this pawn immediately. **16.♙xc4 ♗xc4 17.♖d3 ♗a5 18.c4** Again, White is down a pawn, but has a huge space advantage and future attacking prospects. It's not exactly clear how he will break through, but White is definitely for choice here.

13...♗a5 Now Black just has a very comfortable position.



something that scared Firouzja here. Let's try to figure out what it could be.



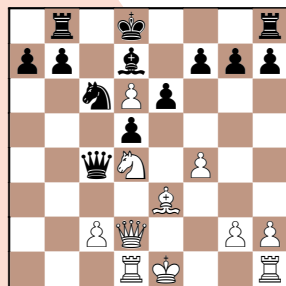
A) 17...♞c4 18.♞xc4 White really should cash in and trade queens at this point, instead of pushing his luck too far. (18.♞d2? ♜xd4 19.♜xd4 ♙b4 20.♞f2 ♝c8 21.f5 b6 Black's king will find safety on the queenside, and White doesn't really have enough for the two pawn deficit.) 18...dxc4 19.♜xc6+ bxc6 20.♜d6 ♙xd6 21.♞xd6 ♝c7 22.♞a1 White will regain the a-pawn and has a dark-squared bind. The game should end in a draw.

B) 17...♜b4 This variation involves the sacrifice of a third pawn by White! 18.♞d2 ♙xb5 19.♜xb5 ♞xc2 20.♞e1! A very nice move – the queen can change directions to h4 or g3 in the future, but it still keeps an eye on the b4 knight. White has a potential pawn break with f4-f5, and he can also begin using his rooks on the open files. This looks like a very dangerous attack that I'm sure Firouzja would have loved to play with White, so I doubt this line fazed him.

C) 17...♜xd4 18.♙xd4 ♞a6! This move looks a bit troublesome from afar. It disrupts White's coordination. 19.♜xa7 Not the most fun continuation for White I guess, but the most prudent. (19.♞b1 Natural, but risky. Remember, each time that White forgoes winning the a7 pawn, he is going all-in, trusting that his attack will make up for his material deficit. 19...b6 20.f5 ♙xb5 21.♞xb5 ♞c8 White still doesn't have an obvious breakthrough.; 19.c4?? would work if White's king was on h1... 19...dxc4 20.♙b6+ ♞xb6+ check!) 19...♞xd3 20.♙b6+ ♝e8 21.cxd3 ♙e7 22.♞b1 The knight on a7 looks odd, but it paralyzes Black's pieces somewhat. White's other rook will come to c1 and he should be able to make a draw. My guess is that Firouzja saw some of these continuations after 17.0-0 and realized he might have to trade queens in some lines, leading him to reject it. Sometimes you have to be objective, though, and it turns out

White has no more than equality, so he should have settled for it.

17...♙xd6 18.exd6 ♞c4 Obvious and good. The queen comes back into play, and it is hard to expel it from c4. 19.♞d2



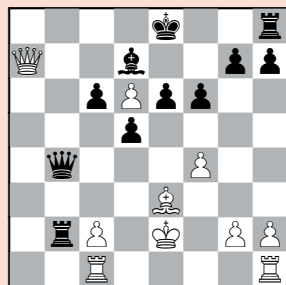
19...f6! I like this move – Black's king is ready to go to g7, where it will arguably be as safe, or even safer than its counterpart. Just like that, Firouzja's pretty much lost. He has no attack and has to go in for a forced sequence now.

20.♜xc6+ bxc6 21.♞a5+ ♝e8 22.♞xa7 Now is the choice for Caruana – how safe does he want to play this?

22...♞b2! This move requires some calculation, since it's sacrificing the h8 rook, but it's well worth it.

23.♞a8+ Objectively, this makes matters worse, but it's hard to blame Firouzja for this decision. His position is already bad, so it's understandable that he at least wants to accept the sacrifice and make Caruana show that he has a win.

23.♞c1! would still have made Caruana's job difficult. 23...♞b4+ 24.♝e2! Normally, in opposite-colored bishops positions, you want to put your king on the opposite color square of your opponent's bishop. This is an exception, due to a specific tactical detail. (24.♝f2? ♞xd6 25.♞b1 ♞xc2+ 26.♝g3 ♝f7 Black consolidates and wins.)



Black's next move is very difficult, but it's actually findable by process of elimination. I think Caruana would have certainly found it, had this position arose. Let me explain.

A) 24...♞xd6? fails to 25.♞b1 ♞xc2+

DING LIREN

After becoming the classical World Champion a year ago, Ding Liren's classical performances were far below his reputation. In June 2023 he took part in the GCT Superbet in Romania, where he ended up on -1 score (+1-2=6) and lost 9 rating points. He repeated the same negative score in Wijk Aan Zee in January this year (+2-3=8), having lost another 18 rating points.

▶ Ding Liren

Photo by FIDE

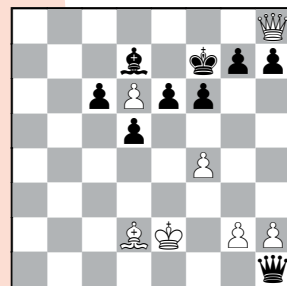


26.♝d3! Hitting the rook with tempo, when ♞b8+ comes next. White has very dangerous play on the b-file. He always has the idea of checking on the 8th rank, and then taking the rook on h8. This is why 24.♝e2 was preferable to 24.♝f2.

B) Why doesn't 24...♞f8 work as well, you ask? Well, then Black would have to worry about White playing ♙c5 after ...♞d6, skewering the queen and the rook.

C) Thus, Black should simply play 24...♞g8!! now. Upon the back-rank threats, he'll always be able to play ...♝f7 and defend the rook. Easy as that! 25.h4 is just an example move – White actually doesn't have much he can do here in the meantime. 25...♞xd6 26.♞b1 ♞xc2+ 27.♝d3 ♞xg2 28.♞b8+ ♝f7-+ That's why the rook needs to be exactly on g8!

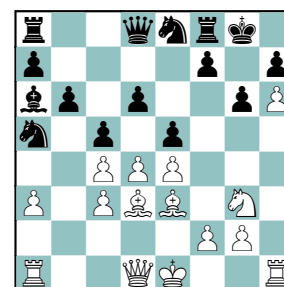
23...♝f7 24.♞xb8 ♞xc2 25.♙d2 25.♞d2 ♞c1+ 26.♝e2 ♞xd2+ 27.♙xd2 ♞xb1 The line doesn't end here, you still have to see how to save the d7 bishop.



28.♞d8 ♞xg2+ The trick is that Black either gets the queen to g4 and plays ...e5, or gets the queen to b5/a4 and then plays ...c5, in each case securing the d7 bishop. 29.♝d3 (Or 29.♝e1 ♞g1+ 30.♝e2 ♞g4+ 31.♝e1 e5-+) 29...♞e4+ 30.♝c3 ♞c4+ 31.♝b2 ♞b5+ 32.♝c2 c5-+.

25...♞e4+ 26.♝f1 ♞d3+ 27.♝e1

14.♜g3 ♙a6

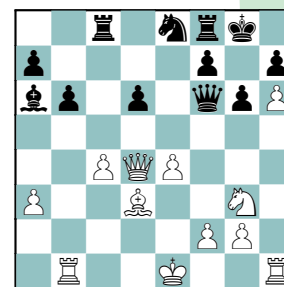


15.♞e2 15.d5 is met by 15...♙xc4, and here we see why the bishop stands poorly on e3 – if White trades on c4, it will come under attack.

15.♞a4 This construction is pretty flimsy for White after 15...♜c7, when ...♞e8 will come next, driving White's queen away.

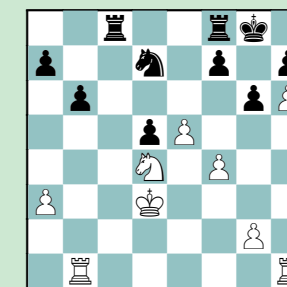
15...cxd4 16.cxd4 ♜b3 17.♞b1 ♜xd4 18.♙xd4 exd4 19.♞b2 ♞c8 Black could also defend the pawn with 19...♞f6, but Nakamura sees the chance to offer a queen trade.

20.♞xd4 ♞f6

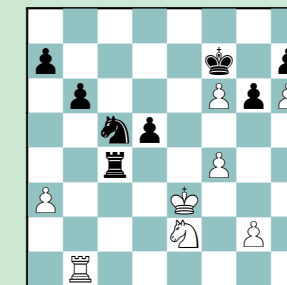


21.♜e2?! 21.♞e3 I wonder if this move would have made more sense. White is losing a pawn anyway in the

game continuation, so why not keep the queens on, rather than enter a dreary endgame? 21...♞c3+ may have scared Gukesh off. (After 21...♙xc4 22.♞c1 d5 23.0-0 Black is up a pawn, but his pieces are not coordinated. His rooks aren't connected, and the h6 pawn will always cause him worry with potential mate threats.) 22.♞d2! Now the circumstances are much more favorable for a queen trade. 22...♞xd2+ (Or 22...♞xa3 23.0-0 ♙xc4 24.♙xc4 ♞xc4 25.♞a1) 23.♝xd2 ♙xc4 24.♞bc1! The correct rook. (Upon 24.♞hc1? ♙xd3, the b1 rook is hit here.) 24...b5 25.a4 26.♙xc4 bxc4 27.♞hd1 Black's pawns are too weak, and he is way behind in development to claim an advantage here, despite his extra pawn. 21...♞xd4 22.♜xd4 ♜f6 23.♝d2 ♙xc4 Now it's just one-way traffic. White's position may still be holdable, but it's a very difficult defensive task, and Nakamura makes it look easy. 24.f3 d5! 25.e5 ♙xd3 26.♝xd3 ♜d7 27.f4



27...♞c4 Invading on the c-file. 28.♞hc1 ♞fc8 29.♜e2 f6 Now Black's king can finally come in, and the extra pawn advantage will be too much to deal with. 30.exf6 ♝f7 31.♞xc4 ♞xc4 32.♝e3 ♜c5

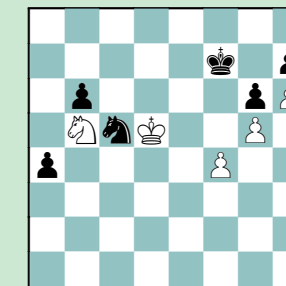


33.♞d1 33.♞b4! was a chance to chase Black's rook out of its ideal outpost. 33...♞a4! Now Black will have two connected passed pawns on the queenside. 34.♞xd5 ♞xa3+ 35.♝d4 ♞d3+ 36.♝c4 ♞xd5 37.♝xd5 ♝xf6 The rest is pretty



straightforward – knights aren't that good at dealing with outside passed pawns, and here Black has not just one, but two of them!

38.g4 a5 39.♜d4 a4 40.g5+ ♝f7 41.♜b5



At first, this position might not look so simple to win – after all, White's knight blockades Black's pawns. However, it's easy to solve this problem.

41...♜e6 42.♝e5 ♜c7! If the knight is taken, the a-pawn runs.

43.♜c3 a3 44.f5 gxf5 45.♝xf5 b5 46.♜a2 ♜a6 47.♜c1 b4 48.♝e5 ♜c5 **White resigned**

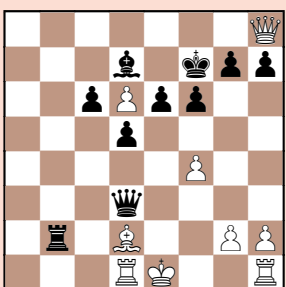
Gukesh is a player that strikes me as being more of a calculator than an intuitive player. When he's at his best, he's extremely accurate and can get to the heart of a position. But when he's not, then he doesn't have as strong of an intuition to fall back on. Keep in mind I'm talking in relatives here – his intuition is obviously better than 99.99% of all players, but at the Candidates the margin is so thin, and any minor weakness will be highlighted.

Even though this was just an online game and not a classical one, it still seems as if he didn't quite have a feel for the opening he was playing. Compared to someone like Pragg, Gukesh is not as consistent, with higher highs and lower lows. At the 2022 Olympiad he had one of the greatest performances ever, starting with 8/8 and victories over players like Shirov, Sargissian, and Caruana. On the other hand, the Grand Swiss of the following year was a bitter disappointment, as he scored 5/11 against much weaker competition and dropped 26 rating points. I'm curious to see which Gukesh will show up in the Candidates this year.

Next, we have the most recent game out of all the ones I'll be showing, and it was played between Abasov and Nakamura at the Bundesliga, on February 25, 2024.

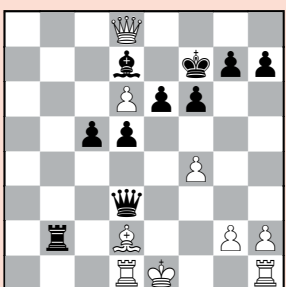


Caruana probably saw up to this point and realized there was a perpetual at worst, but I'm sure he also saw this next move from afar.



27...c5! A quiet move, but it suggests itself. Black gets his last piece into the game. ♖b5 is coming and White really has no adequate defense. His poor queen is stuck on h8, out of the game.

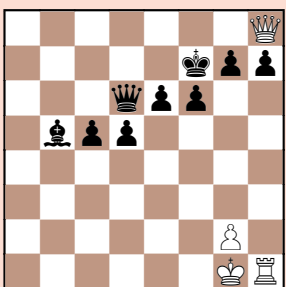
28.h4 Maybe 28.♖d8 was a better practical try.



A) 28...♖b5? 29.♖e7+ ♔g6 30.♖xe6 Defending against mate – this is White's idea.

B) 28...♖e4+ 29.♔f2 ♖xf4+ 30.♔e1 ♖h4+! 31.g3 ♖e4+ 32.♔f2 ♖b5 33.♖he1 ♖d4+ 34.♔g2 ♖xd2+-.

28...♖b5 29.♔f2 ♖xd2+ 30.♖xd2 ♖xd2+ 31.♔g3 ♖e3+ White is about to lose almost all his pawns with check. 32.♔h2 ♖xf4+ 33.♔g1 ♖d4+ 34.♔h2 ♖xh4+ 35.♔g1 ♖d4+ 36.♔h2 ♖e5+ 37.♔g1 ♖xd6



38.♖xh7 38.♖xh7 ♖e5 Black's king is safe, and White can't really get his rook into the game. Here's a sample line. 39.♖b1 ♖e3+ 40.♔h2 ♖d3 41.♖b7+ ♔g6 42.♖c8 c4 43.♖e8+ ♔g5+- The

king is totally safe and Black will win with his passed pawns.

38...♖f8 The queens will be traded and Black's pawns will win the day. **White resigned**

This game also shows some potential weaknesses of Firouzja – a poor opening choice – walking straight into a complex line without enough knowledge, and then impulsively trying to attack in a bad position rather than trying to equalize and save the game. The young talent has been struggling lately, after becoming the youngest player in history to reach 2800 in December 2021.

His first appearance at the Candidates was underwhelming, but he'll be sure to learn from that experience and take a different approach this year. I think in order to succeed, he has to make smarter opening choices and control his impulses. Let the position guide the direction of your play, rather than the other way around.

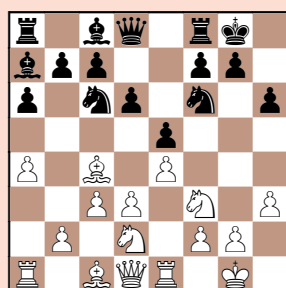
The next game is from the 2023 World Cup semifinal match between Caruana and Pragg. This was an extremely important tournament for both players, as they qualified for the Candidates by making it in the top three places. The two classical games were drawn, and this is the first game of the rapid tiebreak. By missing a win in this game, Caruana's momentum was halted, and he went on to lose the tiebreak match in the end.

C54

Fabiano Caruana	2782
R. Praggnanandhaa	2690

FIDE World Cup (rapid), Baku 2023

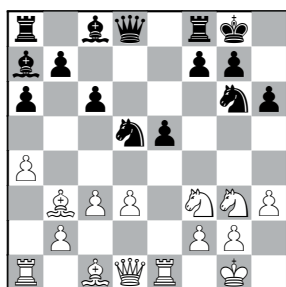
1.e4 e5 2.♖f3 ♗c6 3.♖c4 The Italian Game is a sensible choice in a rapid game – both players are just aiming for a normal position where they can play quickly without too much thought. 3...♖c5 4.c3 ♗f6 5.d3 h6 6.0-0 d6 7.♖e1 0-0 8.h3 a6 9.a4 ♖a7 10.♗bd2



10...♗e7 A very popular plan, rerouting the knight to g6. The downside is that White can expand in the center with d2-d4, but Black can deal with that pretty easily. Besides this ...♗e7-g6 idea, the other main idea for Black is to play ...♖e6, with or without ...♖e8, which has its own body of theory.

11.♖b3 ♗g6 12.♗f1 c6 13.♗g3 13.d4 d5 is a typical response for Black, provoking direct play in the center. Most likely a bunch of pawns will be traded and the position will remain close to equal. Caruana probably figured Pragg would be well-prepared here, so he went for a less forcing line.

13...d5 14.♖e3 After 14.exd5 ♗xd5, the e5 pawn isn't really hanging.



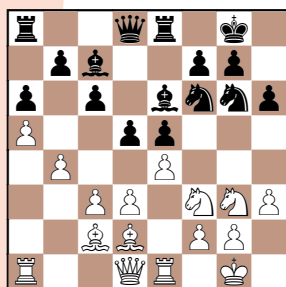
A) 15.♗xe5 ♗xe5 16.♖xe5 ♖xf2+ 17.♔xf2 ♖f6+ is a typical idea in this opening.

B) 15.d4 15...exd4 16.♗xd4 Again, we have one of those positions where White is microscopically better, since he played the first move, but it's almost symmetrical, so a draw is the most likely result.

14...♖b8 Also 14...♖xe3 is perfectly fine, but the text makes sure that the e5 pawn will be securely protected.

15.♖c2 ♖e8 16.a5 This is always a useful move, gaining space and clamping down on Black's pawn structure. In many endgames, the b7 pawn becomes a serious weakness. We're quite far away from that, though.

16...♖c7 17.b4 ♖e6 18.♖d2



18...♖c8 Certainly not a mistake, but I don't really see the need for this move.

**D30**

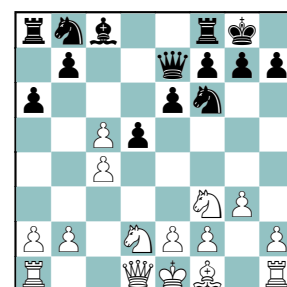
Nijat Abasov	2641
Hikaru Nakamura	2788

Schachbundesliga 23/24, Germany 2024

1.d4 d5 2.c4 e6 3.♗f3 a6 This sideline has been used increasingly frequently in recent years, mostly by people who are aiming for a normal QGD position devoid of much theory.

4.♖g5 4.♗c3 dxc4 is the one thing White shouldn't do – now Black's ...a6 move is ideal, since it supports ...b5.

4...♖e7 5.♖xe7 ♖xe7 6.♗bd2 ♗f6 7.g3 c5 8.dxc5 0-0



9.♖g2 9.♖c1 was evidently a variation that Nakamura looked at in his preparation, when the idea that he played in the game would make sense. 9...d4 10.♗xd4 ♖d8 11.♗b3 (11.♗4f3 e5; 11.♗c2? ♗e4) 11...a5 12.♖g2 (Upon 12.a4 ♖d7, the a4 pawn is loose here, and if 13.♖a1, then 13...♖c6 comes.) 12...a4 13.♗a1 ♗c6 14.0-0 ♖xc5 White's a bit tied up and his knight is currently awful on a1, so Black has enough for the pawn here.

9...d4? A totally senseless move, confusing two different variations of preparation. I've noticed this as a frequent problem of Nakamura – blitzing out a move as if it's preparation, but it turns out to be a mistake. Granted, he's done this less frequently in recent years, but it's evidently still a problem. Two examples of this phenomenon are Nisipeanu-Nakamura, World Cup 2019, where Nakamura was lost after 15 moves and Carlsen-Nakamura, Tata Steel Rapid Kolkata 2019, where he was close to lost after 6(!) moves.

10.♗xd4 ♖d8 11.♗b3 This is totally different than the 9.♖c1 variation. Here White is a move away from castling, so there's no way that Black has enough compensation for two pawns. He'll get the c5 one back, but that's not enough.

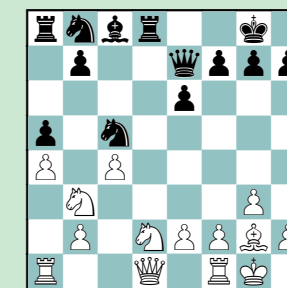
11...a5 12.a4 Also, the a4 pawn is defended now, because White didn't play



▲ Nijat Abasov Photo by Lennart Ootes

♖c1. Anyone can make "chess" mistakes – anyone can blunder, miss something, etc, but this type of mistake by Nakamura I frankly find totally ridiculous – it's a discipline mistake. He's so strong that it would only take all of 1 or 2 minutes of him double-checking the position to realize that 10...d4 doesn't work in this variation and it's not what he prepared. C'mon, you're a professional, you can't gift your opponent material odds right out of the opening. The further course and result of this game notwithstanding, of course!

12...♗fd7 13.0-0 ♗xc5



So, Black is a pawn down for nothing. He has some control over the dark squares, but White's g2 bishop is just a monster and Black is still far away from completing development.

14.♗xc5 14.♖c2! is the most accurate – Black can't develop in a satisfactory manner.

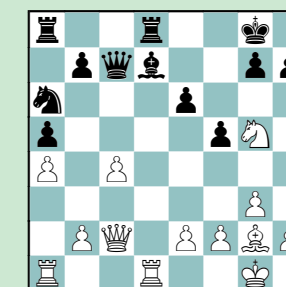
A) 14...♗ba6 15.♗xa5 ♗b4 16.♖c3+-.

B) 14...♗c6 15.♖xc6 Black would prefer to avoid this trade. 15...bxc6 16.♗xc5 ♖xc5 17.♗e4 ♖b4 18.♖fd1+-.

C) 14...♗xb3 15.♗xb3 ♖c7 This is relatively best I guess – keeping the b7 and a5 pawns under watch, and preparing ...♖d7. Compare this to the game continuation, where Nakamura got his queen to c7 under much better circumstances. (15...♗a6 16.♖fd1 ♗b4 17.♖xd8+ ♖xd8 18.♖d1 ♖c7 19.♖d2+-) 16.♖fd1 ♖d7 17.c5! ♗a6 18.♖c3 ♗b4 19.♗d4 (19.♖d6 is strong, too.) With ♗b5 coming, I don't think even Nakamura would have saved this one.

14...♖xc5 15.♗e4 ♖c7 16.♖c2 ♗a6 Now Black at least has some hope – he can consolidate by bringing his bishop to c6, and his knight can aim for b4 or c5 depending on how White plays.

17.♖fd1 ♖d7 18.♗g5 f5



19.e4 Very natural, but it was better to bring the knight back into play, content with provoking the ...f5 weakness.

19.♗f3 ♖c6 20.♗e1! This is a very instructive move – the knight belongs on d3, where it controls Black's knight beautifully. White is still a clear pawn up with every chance of winning the game.

19...h6 20.♗f3 fxe4 21.♖xe4 ♗c5 22.♖c2 ♖c6 Suddenly Black's pieces are pretty much ideal. He's still down a pawn, but White is annoyingly stuck defending the a4 pawn, and how in the world is he going to get rid of that c5 knight?

23.♖e1 ♖xf3 This might not be the objectively correct decision, but from a practical perspective it makes total sense. Black now can play with a knight on c5 that can't be assailed.

23...♖d6 24.♗e5 White's knight is very well-placed here, and his play is straightforward now.

24.♖xf3 ♖d4 25.♖ad1 ♖ad8 26.♖xd4 ♖xd4 27.♖e3 ♖d7 28.♖h5! A creative attacking move, taking advantage of the weak light squares.



The ... hxh3 capture will never work, and the queen is just in the way. I think it made more sense to connect rooks.

18... we7 Maybe it looks a little weird visually to put the queen opposite White's rook, but there's really nothing to fear. 19. we2 (19. exd5 cxd5 leads nowhere; and the same goes for 19. df5 wd7 .) 19... wad8 20.c4? This was Caruana's plan that he employed in the game, but here it would be a disastrous mistake. 20... df4 21. wf1 dxc4 22. dxc4 wxd2 ! 23. dxh2 wxb4 With the loss of the dark-squared bishop, White's coordination has totally been shattered. The a5 pawn will be picked off at some point, and the c4 pawn is loose, too. Kasparov once said that a knight firmly entrenched on f4/f5 is worth a pawn, so if we factor that in the "material" count, then Black is already fine in that regard, too! 24. wed1 xa5+- .

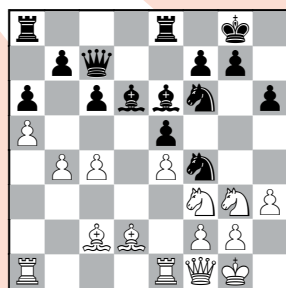
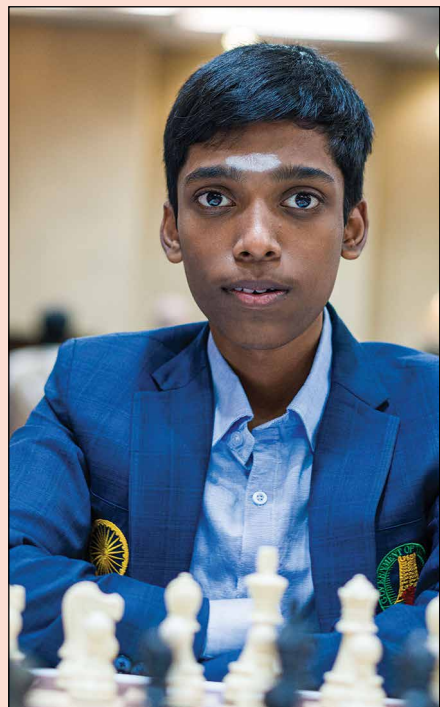
19. we2 xd6 20.c4 Challenging Black's center and freeing up some space.

20... dxc4 21. dxc4 df4 22. wf1 c5 This is one of those decisions that is really hard to assess. It's even harder than usual in a rapid game. White will push forward with b4-b5 and, after the trade, Black will have a passed pawn, while White will have a potential passed pawn.

22... wc7? is an example of a lazy move, which would allow White to show his plan in full force.

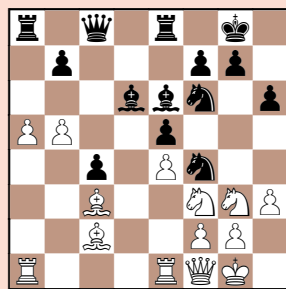
▼ R. Pragganandhaa

Photo by FIDE



23.c5! xf8 24. xc3 dh7 25. ead1 It might not look so bad for Black. After all, he's got everything covered, and White has no pawn breaks. But the lack of space is going to hurt him. Here's a sample line. 25...g6 Preparing ... hg7 to further defend the e5 pawn. 26. xd2 hg7 27. ead1 wad8 28. we1 ! White can just slowly improve - xd6 is an idea, as well as df1-e3 . Black is in huge trouble, despite not making any obvious errors.

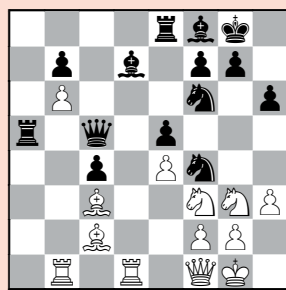
23.b5 axb5 24.cxb5 c4 25. xc3



25... hd7 Rerouting the knight by 25... hd7 ! is better. The bishop is already fine on e6, defending the c4 pawn, but the f6 knight is certainly more useful here. It can hope to jump to c5 (and then b3 or d3) in the future.

26. ed1 wc5 27. wab1 Threatening xb4 .

27... xf8 28.b6 g6 It was time to break out with 28... xa5 !. In a rapid game, you want to make your life as easy as possible. After this, Black's moves are natural.



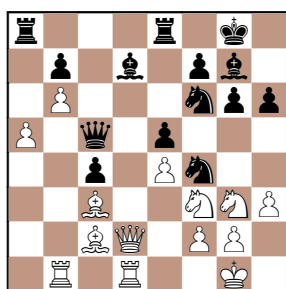
A) In case of 29. xa5 wa5 , Black has an exchange for the pawn and fantastic control over the dark squares. It's clear that the only concern is

if the move 30. wxc4 works, but it fails tactically after 30... xc8 31. wb3 xc3 32. wb2 xc5 !+- This is a tough move to appreciate from afar, but it wasn't necessary to spot this to opt for 29... xa5 . Black had 33... dxh3+ (or 33... hxh3) at least, and he is not worse, but it turns out this move, preparing those ideas, is even stronger, and Black is basically winning.

B) 29. xb4 wxb4 30. wxb4 dxh4 31. wxc4 xf8 = Black's minor pieces coordinate very well, and it will be difficult for White to make use of the queen here.

29. we1 ! Caruana alertly denies Black the second chance to sacrifice on a5.

29... hg7 30. wd2



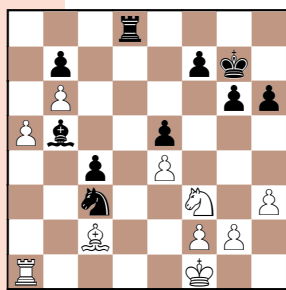
30... wad8 ? This is essentially a self-pinning move, as the d7 bishop can't move due to wd8 , when White wins. So, basically anything wins for White here, with the easiest being 31.a6, creating a passed pawn. But, it's understandable that you get nervous as White, and you don't want to leave your queen opposing the d8 rook.

31. wd6 ? Losing a lot of the advantage, but the endgame is still great for White. 31... wxd6 32. wxd6 dh5 ! A good fighting chance.

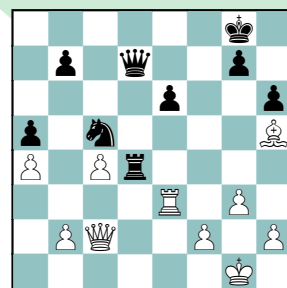
33. dxh5 de2+ 34. df1 dxc3 35. dxg7 dxg7 35... dxb1 36. dxe8+- .

36. wa1 xb5 36... db5? is an easy trap to fall for. 37. wxd7 ! wxd7 38. xa4+- .

37. wxd8 wxd8



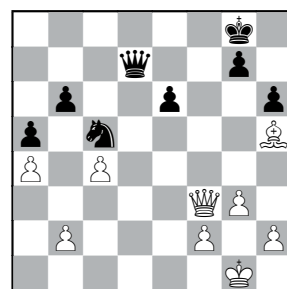
38. de1 Now wa3 is a true threat, since the knight has nowhere to go. However, upon the immediate 38... wa3 the knight isn't quite trapped here - Black has 38... hd1



28... wd3 The a4 pawn shouldn't be touched here either in case of 28... wa4 29. wg6 ! wd7 30. xf3 ; or 28... dxa4 29. xf3 , when both xf7 and wg6 are on White's agenda.

29. we2 b6 30. hg6 ? Finally giving away the advantage completely.

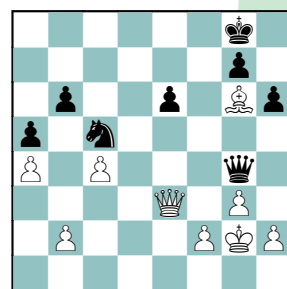
30... xf3 ! Not at all an easy move to find. Black now has to trade under unfavorable circumstances. 30... xf3 31. wxf3 The queen on f3 is fantastic, perusing all the key light squares.



A) 31... dxa4? 32. wa8+ dh7 33. xe8 wd1+ 34. dg2 dc5 35. xf7+- .

B) 31... dh7 32. wa8 g6 A really ugly move to have to play, but ... dxa4 would transpose to the previous variation. After 33. xf3 Black's king will always be weak and he is faced with a monstrous defensive task.

30... wxe3 31. wxe3 wd1+ 32. dg2 wg4 ! Abasov probably overlooked this.



The bishop has to retreat, and just like that, White's light-square control, coordination, and attacking possibilities all vanish instantly.

33. hd3 wd1 34. he2 Considering that he was winning out of the opening, it's understandable that White does not

want to repeat moves, but the position is objectively equal now.

34... wa4 35. we5 dh7 36. wd6 wb3 37. wd2 e5 38. hg4 ? Just hangs a key pawn for nothing. I can't even begin to guess what White missed. 38.h4 makes the most sense to me - expanding on the kingside and hinting at clamping down on the light squares with h5.

38... wxc4 39. xf5+ g6 Did he miss that wd7+ was impossible?

40. db1 wd4 Now Black is in total control. That doesn't mean he's winning, mind you (White can still hang on), but his position is safe and he can push for a long time.

41. we2 e4 42.h4 42... wg4 ! Not an easy move to spot at all, but this appears to be a necessary bid for activity.

A) 42... we5 43. wc8 h5 44.h4 It's still not easy to make progress, as 44... wxb2 doesn't really work here after 45. wc7+ wg7 46. wxb6 .

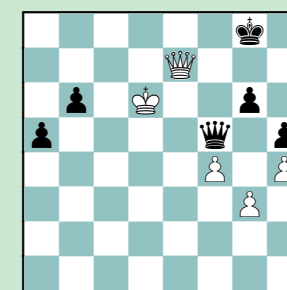
B) 42... wxb2 43. dxe4 dxe4 44. wxe4 The connected passed pawns look scary, but Black's king will always be susceptible to checks. 44... wg7 45. wc6 wa7 46.h4 h5 47.g4! hxg4 48.h5 White will open the kingside and deliver a perpetual.

42...h5 43.f3? Losing patience.

43...e3 43... exf3+ was even easier. 44. wxf3 wxb2+ 45. dh3 dg7 ! The key move - all perpetuals are avoided and Black wins. (Not 45... wxb1?? 46. wf7+=)

44.f4 wd2 45. df3 db3 46. wxe3 dh4+ 47. de4 wxb2 48. hd5 ! The only try - threatening a perpetual check with we7+ .

48... df5 49. dxf5 wb5+ 50. hd6 wxf5 51. we7+ dg8 Black should be winning here with his pawns, but queen endgames are always tricky, and there are more twists to come.



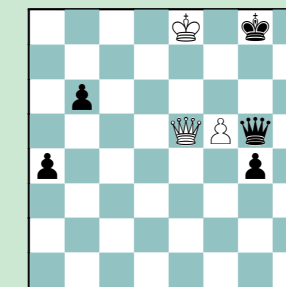
52. we5 Very alert to realize that the pawn endgame is acceptable for White.

52... wf8+ 52... wxe5+?? 53. fxe5 a4 54.e6 a3 55.e7+-.

53. dc6 wc5+ 53...a4! 54. dxb6 a3 55. wd5+ dg7+- Eventually Black will usher the pawn through.

54. hd7 a4 55.g4! White has to create

play somehow. 55... hxg4 56.h5 wf8 57. hxg6 wg7+ 58. hd8 wxg6 59.f5 wg5+ 60. de8

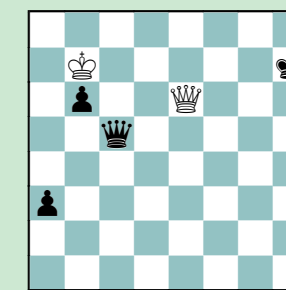


60...g3 60... wh5+ This endgame is really tricky, so far be it from me to criticize the players at this point, but this would have been the way to go - driving the king away and then switching focus to the a-pawn. 61. hd8 a3+- .

61. we6+ dh7 62.f6 g2 63.f7 wb5+ 63...g1?? is an amusing trap. 64.f8 d+ ! dh8 65. wh3+ dg7 66. wd7+ df6 67. we6+ dg7 68. wf7+ dh6 69. wh7 mate.

64. hd8 g1 65.f8 w Four queens are a rare sight, but it won't last long.

65... wd4+ 66. dc7 wbc5+ 67. wxc5 wxc5+ 68. db7 a3 After fighting back so well from being totally lost, Abasov now has a chance to save the game. Granted, it's really difficult to spot, but he had over 20 minutes on the clock compared to Nakamura's 7 minutes, and used practically none of his time to make the losing move. There's no shame in missing the drawing idea, but you should at least try to find it!



69. wf6 69. da6 ! Why does this save the game?

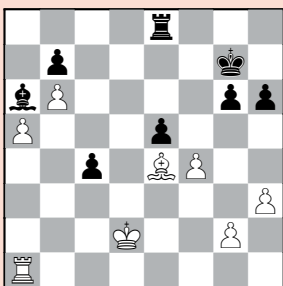
Well, the key is that, at some point, White will start checking the black king, which will be forced to run up the board. Black will interpose his queen at the right moment, but this may leave his b-pawn undefended. If Black now plays ...b6-b5, this pawn will still be in contact with White's king, which enables him to save the game. Also, the king on a6 takes away squares from its counterpart once it runs to that side of the board! It's easier



as well as the surprising 38...b1!. For example, 38...b1! (38...d1 39.e1 b2 40.e5±) 39.xb1 d1+ 40.e2 xb1 41.d2! This is the key move you have to see to go for this line – and you also have to realize why 41...b2+ loses. The answer is 42.c3 xf2 43.a6!+-.

38...a6 Perhaps 38...f5! was the better way to save the knight, but it's tough to criticize the players, who were probably low on time at this point.

39.e5 e8 40.d2 40.f4! Including this move was better, but you have to spot an insane resource to understand why. 40...f6 41.d2 e4+ 42.e4 fxe5



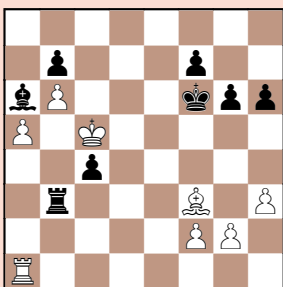
White to move and win! Good luck spotting this with 30 seconds remaining on your clock.

43.e1! exf4 (43...f6 44.c3 Now that ...exf4 is prevented (due to the same xb7 trick), Black is basically stuck.) 44.xb7! xe1 (Or 44...d8+ 45.c3 xb7 46.e7+-) 45.xa6+-.

40...e4+ 41.e4 xe5 42.f3 It's still very scary for Black, since White has these menacing pawns. Sure, they're blockaded at the moment, but if they ever get unblockaded, they are very close to queening.

42...b5 43.c3 b3+ This just helps White's king invade. 43...f6=.

44.d4 f6 45.c3



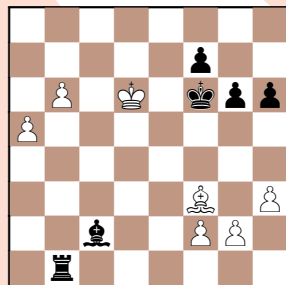
45...c3 45...e7! was the last chance to stop the march of White's king.

46.d6! This move involves a rook sacrifice, but Caruana has correctly assessed the position.

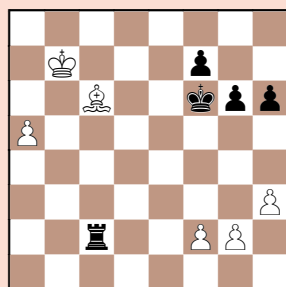
46...c2 47.c1 d3 48.xb7 b1 49.xc2 xc2 Who cares about a rook

when you have these amazing passed pawns!

50.f3 Clearing the way for the b-pawn.



50...d3 51.b7 a6 52.c7 c1+ 53.c6 xb7 54.xb7 c2



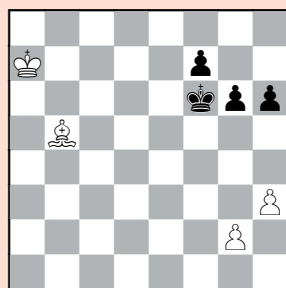
The situation is clear now – Black will end up having to give his rook for the a-pawn. The question is if he can trade off all the kingside pawns and save the draw after that. Caruana has two choices – spend a tempo to play f2-f4 to protect his pawn, or just go straight ahead with a6. It's a tough decision, and he unfortunately chooses the wrong one.

55.f4? Now it's a draw, since Black's king can march forward much more easily and attack White's pawns.

55.a6!

A) 55...b2+ Checking doesn't change anything – the pawn is unstoppable 56.c7 a2 57.b6 b2+ 58.b5+-.

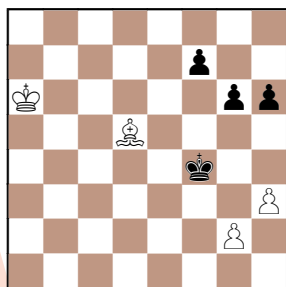
B) 55...xf2 56.a7 a2 57.b5 Queening immediately wins, too, but this is slightly more accurate. The threat is a6, so Black has to give up the rook immediately, and White's king will be slightly closer on a7 rather than a8. 57...xa7+ 58.xa7



58...g5 (58...e5 59.e8! This is the key idea in a lot of variations – Black's king is forced back to defend his pawns.) 59.e8! f5 60.b6 f4 (Also 60...f4 61.c5 f5 isn't even close to work for Black after 62.d4 g5 63.h5+-) 61.xg6 g3 62.xf5 xg2 Wait, White has the wrong-colored bishop. Draw? In fact, Black is not in time to reach the h8 corner. 63.c5 g3 64.d5 f4 65.e6 g5 66.e5 h5 67.e6 h6 68.f6 h4 69.d3 h5 70.g7 g5 71.g6 f4 72.f6 g3 73.f5 f4 74.e6 e4 75.g5 e5 76.b3 d6 77.xh4 e7 78.g5 f8 79.f6+- It's not human to see all this from move 55...

55...f5 56.a6 56.g3 White doesn't have time to defend the pawns further. 56...c3.

56...b2+ 57.c7 a2 58.b6 xf4 59.d5 xa6+ 60.xa6



You can see the difference in comparison with the 55.a6 line – Black's king is so much further advanced. Black can draw comfortably now.

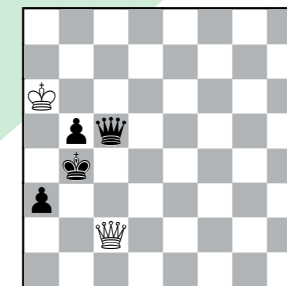
60...g3 61.b5 f5 62.c5 g5 63.d4 g4 64.hxg4 fxg4 65.e5 h5 66.f5 h4 67.g5 h3 68.gxh3 gxh3 69.c6 h2 70.d5 h1 71.xh1 Draw

I have to say, out of all the players in the tournament outside the "big 3" (Caruana, Nakamura, and Nepo), I think Pragg has the best chance of making a splash. He impresses me more than all the other juniors, besides Abdusattorov, who won't be playing in the 2024 Candidates. Pragg has seemingly no weaknesses – he's good at all time controls, shows stable nerves, has great opening preparation, can play tactically or positionally comfortably, and most of all he's consistent, never having bad tournaments.

I'm sure this is the first of many Candidates Tournaments for him, and I wouldn't bet against him winning one at some point. It's probably still a little bit too early for him in Toronto, but you never know.



to illustrate with a variation than describe with words, so take a look. 69...b5 (Or 69...a5+ 70.b7 when the black queen is too far out of play after 70...a2 71.f7+ h6 72.f6+ h5 73.f3+ g5 74.g3+ f5 75.f3+ e5 76.e3+ d5 77.d3+ c5 78.c2+ d4 79.b2+ d3 80.b3+ d2 81.b2+ d1 82.b3+ c1 83.c4+=) 70.h3+ g6 71.g3+! (71.g4+ actually loses after 71...g5 72.e4+ f7 73.b7+ e7 White can't check now, since Black will always have a cross-check. 74.xb5 a2 75.h5+ g8 76.g4+ g7 77.e6+ f7 78.g4+ h7 79.h4+ g7+-) 71...f5 (If 71...g5, then 72.xa3) 72.f3+ e6 73.h3+ e5 74.h2+ d4 75.f2+ c4 76.c2+ b4



77.b1+ If the white king was still on b7, then Black could play ...a5, winning. Here that option doesn't exist, so 77...a4 78.d1+ ends in perpetual check.

69...b5 White resigned here, which is far too premature in my opinion, but it is true

that Black is now winning. His pawns are securely defended and his king can escape the checks. Here's a sample line. 69...b5 70.a6 b4 71.f7+ h6 72.f6+ h5 73.f3+ g5 74.g3+ f5 75.f3+ e6 76.e4+ e5 77.c4+ d5 78.g4+ e5 79.g5+ d4 80.d2+ c5 81.e3+ d4 82.g5+ c4 83.c1+ b3 84.b1+ a4 85.c2+ b3 86.c6+ b4 87.b5+ c3 88.a5+ b2+- There are many different checking permutations, but you get the point.

It may seem as if I was a bit harsh on Nakamura's opening mix-up in this game, but it simply can't happen against the top players in the Candidates if he wants to win it. He was able to turn this game around thanks to his amazing practical strength, but imagine that say, Caruana, was on the white side. Do you really picture Hikaru saving the game then?

Azeri GM Nijat Abasov had an amazing hot streak in the 2023 World Cup, that can't be denied. He won matches against Giri, Svidler, and Vidit, so he absolutely earned his place in the 2024 Candidates. Still, a few months after the World Cup, he lost all the rating he gained in that event and then some, and at the time of writing he's at 2632 and out of the top 100. He's a great player, of course, but against this field I'd be surprised if he manages to be a serious contender. He can definitely win some individual games, though, so don't count out any upsets!

The other two players who I haven't touched on yet are Vidit and Nepo

Vidit has always been lurking on the scene, but has been somewhat overlooked in recent years by all the young talents coming out of India. I find this to be somewhat unfair, as he's a great player in his own right. He recently hit his all-time rating peak, and I think that's just because he's become better at critical moments. He has all the tools to be a great player, but some people are just able to give that extra 10% when it matters most. Vidit appears to have unlocked this ability in recent months. He still doesn't quite strike me as someone who could run up a big score in this event (like Pragg, for instance), but I would be absolutely unsurprised if he finishes in the top half of the score table.

That leaves us with Ian Nepomniachtchi, who is an absolute top player of course, but who curiously always seems to overperform at the Candidates. He won in the 2020-2021 event (postponed due to COVID), and then absolutely torched the field in 2023. I mean, it wasn't even close. He just ran away with it without losing a game.

Then, Nepomniachtchi lost a heartbreaking world title match to Ding, and hasn't had good results since. His performances have ranged from mediocre to bad. However, I just find him impossible to count out. He always brings his best chess for this event, which is why I'd put him as one of the favorites, alongside Nakamura and Caruana.

Santosh Gujrathi Vidit

Photo by FIDE

Ian Nepomniachtchi

Photo by Lennart Ootes



CONCLUSION

That's all for the punditry! When it comes down to it, the only thing that matters is what happens on the board in Toronto. We can make predictions based off past performances, but it's rare that things go exactly how we expect them. Let's see what surprises this year's edition has in store for us.