

# Candidates you can get excited about this year

There are multiple intriguing story lines to pursue as the FIDE Candidates and Women's Candidates tournaments start their clocks this week in Toronto — the first time the events staged to pick the next challenger for the open and women's world titles will be held in North America.

For the first time in more than a decade, the winner of the open tournament will not

be awarded the dubious honor of earning a shot at world No. 1 GM Magnus Carlsen of Norway, who abdicated his throne last year after four successful title defenses.

Instead, Chinese GM Ding Liren, whose recent play has failed to impress, will make his first title defense against the winner of the eight-grandmaster, double-round robin tournament in Toronto. Awaiting the parallel Women's Candidates winner is another Chinese star, GM Ju Wenjun, who has successfully defended her title twice since becoming women's world champ in 2018.

Russian GM Ian Nepomniachtchi, winner of two straight Candidates tournaments and loser of two straight world title matches — to Carlsen and Ding — is looking for a historic three-peat, but veteran U.S. stars GM Fabiano Caruana and Hikaru Nakamura are the two highest-rated players in the field and may be the co-favorites. (By the luck of the draw, the two Americans are paired off in the very first round.) No U.S. women qualified this year, with Russia's GM Aleksandra Goryachkina the favorite to secure what would be her second shot at the title.

More story lines: Indian chess, building on the legacy of the great world champ Viswanathan Anand, is having a major moment, with three players in the Candidates' field and two more in the Women's



Keymer-Ding after 23...d3

Candidates entry list. Two of the rising Indian stars, GMs D Gukesh Rameshbabu Praggnanandhaa, are making their Candidates' debut at the tender ages of 17 and 18, respectively.

And "Pragg" will have some Big Sister Energy to feed off of: Vaishali Praggnanandhaa, 22, is in the women's field after her impressive win at the 2023 Women's World Cup, making the "Praggs" the first brother-sister tandem in the history of the championship qualification cycle.

Opening ceremonies are set for Wednesday and play begins in earnest Thursday. We will of course have all the action and color in the coming weeks.



As noted above, Ding has struggled since barely wresting the crown from Nepomniachtchi in their epic overtime match last year, apparently hampered by some health issues and some rust at the chessboard.

He posted another disappointing minus-2 result (0-2-8) at last month's Grenke Chess Classic in Karlsruhe, Germany, tying for last in the six-player field three points behind Carlsen. The shorter time control (45 minutes for the game, with a 10-second increment) may have played a role, but the new champ has been shaky in critical positions, as can be seen in his loss to young German star GM Vincent Keymer on the Black side of a Barcza System Reti Opening.

The opening isn't the problem and Ding's 15. Rcl Nd4! shows his trademark affection

for early and aggressive knight forays. But Black gets into trouble as the play sharpens: 17. Qb3 c6?! (heading down the wrong path; 17...a4 18. Qxb7 Rb8 19. Qc6 Rxb2 kept things equal, while provocative 17... Rb8 18. Qxd5!? Qxd5 19. Nf6+ Bxf6 20. Bxd5 Bxe2 21. Rxc7 Bxf1 22. Kxf1 produces a nicely unbalanced struggle) 18. Qxb7 Bxe2?! 19. Rfel Bxd3 20. Nc5!, and there are a lot of loose rivets in Black's positional foundation.

The rickety structure buckles after 20...Rb8 (Bb5 21. a4 Rb8 22. Qa7 Ra8 23. Qd7 Qxd7 24. Nxd7 Bxa4 25. Nxf8 Bxf8 26. Rc4, and White's strong rooks and bishops give him the clear edge) 21. Qxc6 Rxb2 (tricky is 21...Nb4 22. Bxb4 Bb5 23. Ne6!, and White emerges a clear pawn to the good after 23...Bxc6 24. Nxd8 Rfxd8 25. Bxa5 Bxg2 26. Kxg2 Rd5 27. b4) 22. Bxd5 Bb5 23. Qb7 d3 (see diagram; Black was perhaps hoping to get in 24...Rxd2 25. Rbl Re2!, saving the game) 24. Ne6! fxe6 25. Rxe6 (Bxe6+? Kh8 26. Rc7 Bc6! 27. Qxc6 Rxd2 allows Black to equalize), and White's threats are too powerful and numerous to handle.

Black's efforts to cover up prove futile: 26. Rxg6 Bd7 27. Rxh6+! Bxh6 28. Qxb2+ Bg7 29. Bc3, and Keymer is up two pawns with a far safer king. Black concedes after 30. Qxc3+ Qf6 31. Be4 — the d-pawn will soon fall, leaving White with a three-pawn edge.



The world champion may not even be the best player in his native China these days. GM Bu Xiangzhi tied for first at the very strong 5th Shenzhen Longgang Masters tournament in March, defeating yet another up-and-coming Indian GM Arjun Erigaisi along the way.

It's a lively Petroff sideline leading to active play, and as in the first game, Erigaisi loses the thread when the play sharpens: 16. Bg5! f6 17. exf6 gxf6 18. Qxe7 Bxe7 19. Rfel (Be3 Bxf5 20. gxf5 Bd6 is pleasant for Black) Bxf5

20. gxf5 d4! 21. Rxe7 dxc3 22. Bxf6 Rhg8+ — White's extra pawn is trivial given his busted-up kingside and the open files available to Black's rooks, while that Black pawn on c3 will soon prove invaluable.

Bu breaks on top after 26. Rxc5 Rge8 27. Rbl (White dare not trade to relieve the pressure as he must keep an eye on the annoying passed pawn) Ne4 28. Rc4 (Rxb2?? Rdl+ 29. Kg2 [Ke2 Nc3 mate, or 29. Nel Nd2+ and wins] Rg8+ 30. Kh2 Nxf2, and Black mates in short order) Rd5 29. f6 Rf5, and the pressure grows on the White king.

With 31...Rg5+ 32. Kh2, the White king is walled off and the end is near. Black finishes in style with 34. Khl Ne4! 35. Nc6+ Ka8 36. Rxe4 (picking off the knight and stopping 36...Nxf2 mate, but Bu has another path to victory) Rgl+!, and White resigned as 37. Rxgl (Kh2 R8g2 mate) Rxgl+ 38. Kxgl bl=Q+ 39. Kg2 bxc6 is an easy win for Black.

## Keymer-Ding, Grenke Chess Classic 2024, Karlsruhe, Germany, March 2024

1. Nf3 d5 2. g3 Nf6 3. Bg2 g6 4. c4 dxc4 5. Qa4+ Nfd7 6. h4 Nc6 7. Qxc4 Bg7 8. Nc3 Nb6 9. Qb3 h6 10. d3 0-0 11. 0-0 e5 12. Ne4 a5 13. Bd2 Bg4 14. Qd1 Nd5 15. Rc1 Nd4 16. Nxd4 exd4 17. Qb3 c6 18. Qxb7 Bxe2 19. Rfel Bxd3 20. Nc5 Rb8 21. Qxc6 Rxb2 22. Bxd5 Bb5 23. Qb7 d3 24. Ne6 fxe6 25. Rxe6 Kh8 26. Rxg6 Bd7 27. Rxh6+ Bxh6 28. Qxb2+ Bg7 29. Bc3 Bxc3 30. Qxc3+ Qf6 31. Be4 Black resigns

## Erigaisi-Bu, 5th Shenzhen Longgang Chess Masters, Shenzhen, China, March 2024

1. e4 e5 2. Nf3 Nf6 3. d4 Nxe4 4. dxe5 d5 5. Nbd2 Qd7 6. Nd4 Qe7 7. N2f3 Nd7 8. Nb5 Nb6 9. Bd3 a6 10. Nc3 Bg4 11. 0-0 0-0 12. h3 Bh5 13. Qe2 Nc5 14. Bf5+ Kb8 15. g4 Bg6 16. Bg5 f6 17. exf6 gxf6 18. Qxe7 Bxe7 19. Rfel Bxf5 20. gxf5 d4 21. Rxe7 dxc3 22. Bxf6 Rhg8+ 23. Kf1 Nd5 24. Re5 cxb2 25. Rae1 Nxf6 26. Rxc5 Rge8 27. Rb1 Ne4 28. Rc4 Rd5 29. f6 Rf5 30. Kg2 Nxf6 31. Nd4 Rg5+ 32. Kh2 Reg8 33. Rb4 Rg2+ 34. Kh1 Ne4 35. Nc6+ Ka8 36. Rxe4 Rg1+ White resigns

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