

3/19/24

Divides in world makes for divides in chess too

The good news: The Aeroflot Open, long one of the world's strongest annual Swiss tournaments, was held again in Moscow this month after a four-year, COVID-linked hiatus.

The less-good news: The field for the 2024 tournament reflected the growing global divisions elsewhere, as a kind of Iron Curtain-lite descends upon the chess world.

Aeroflot has produced some memorable international winners, including Russian-born, Kentucky-based GM Gregory Kaidanov's sensational win in the inaugural edition in 2002 and back-to-back wins by rising Vietnamese superstar GM Le Quang Liem in 2010 and 2011.

But with the fallout from the war in Ukraine sharply limiting travel by Western stars to Russia, this year's tournament was heavy with local stars and players from a dozen countries that still get along with Moscow. There have been some exceptions, but at times it appears we're going back to the bad old Cold War days when players from hostile blocs rarely got to put geopolitics aside and compete over the board together. (Even tournament sponsor Aeroflot, Russia's national carrier isn't flying to Western destinations because of war-related sanctions.)

The truncated field at Aeroflot still produced some fine chess, of course, including a nice win by tournament winner GM Amin Tabatabaei of Iran over veteran Russian star GM Alexander Grischuk. White's 4. d3 is one of many attempts now seen to avoid the super-solid main lines of the Ruy Lopez Berlin Defense (3...Nf6), a variation that has proven a bane for aggressive-minded 1. e4 players in recent years.

Tabatabaei clearly strains to keep the position alive early



Caruana-So after 46...Rxb8

on: 10. Na5!? (one of those anti-positional moves only a grandmaster or a rank beginner would likely consider) Qc8 (Bb4+ 11. Bd2 Bxa5 12. Bxa5 Qe7 is equal, but Black still has that busted queenside pawn structure to deal with) 11. Nh4 b6 12. Nc4 (Nxc6?? Qb7 traps the knight) Qe6.

Black defends well, but a single lapse in concentration allows White to seize an initiative he never relinquishes: 19. Kb1 Nb8?! (understandably wanting to upgrade the knight's position, but it drops Black's guard for just a second; 19... Bf7 or 19...b5 were better choices) 20. f4! exf4 21. Qf2 hxg4 22. hxg4 Nc6 23. Qxf4 Nd4 24. Qf2, and now Black must make a major position concession to ease the pressure on d4: 24...Bxf5 25. gxf5, opening the g-file and giving Tabatabaei a juicy target in the backward Black g-pawn.

White expertly pins his opponent to the defense of the weak pawn before opening up operations on a different front: 31. Rh7 Rg8 32. e5! Nd4 (Nxe5 33. Bxe5 fxe5 34. Nxe5 Qe8 35. Nc6+ Kc8 36. Nxe7+ Qxe7 38. Qa8+ and wins) 33. e6, completely tying down Black's pieces and setting up the decisive attack.

Grischuk's misplaced army and his airy king defenses spell doom: 38. Qc6 (already with the threat of 39. Nxb6! cxb6 40. Qb7 mate) Be7 39. Qd7 Rg7 40. Rxd7 Qxd7 41 a5! (with Black's queen offside and his bishop pinned, this modest move explodes

Grischuk's last line of defense) bxa5 (Bf8 42. Qxg7 Bxg7 43. e7 is winning) 42. Nxa5 Qg1+ 43. Kb2 Ba3+ (one last trick; 44. Kxa3?? Qal+ 45. Kb4 Qc3+ 46. Ka4 Qal+ draws by perpetual check) 43. Ka2! Qc1 (Black does threaten mate in one, but unfortunately it's not his turn) 45. Qd8+, and Black resigned not needing to see 45...Ka7 46. Qxc7+ Ka8 47. Qb7 mate.



It is, more fittingly, an all-American field at the current American Cup men's and women's knockout tournaments wrapping up this week in St. Louis this week.

The slightly convoluted format includes classical/rapid/blitz knockout matches, a champions' bracket and an elimination bracket, and a title match pairing off bracket winners. We can say that GMs Levon Aronian and Wesley So will be playing for the men's title this week, while 8-time U.S. women's champ GM Irina Krush and WGM Gulrukhbegim Tokhirjonova are squaring off on the women's side.

So qualified for the final by defeating U.S. No. 1 Fabiano Caruana in a hard-fought match in the Elimination Bracket last week, a game that features the very same Ruy Lopez Berlin sideline (4. d3) we just saw in Tabatabaei's game. This time it's Black who comes out on top, but only after a long, subtle positional battle.

The players strive for the smallest of edges for much of the game, but White finally goes wrong just when he might have claimed a clear advantage: 42. Qc3!? (White could pretty much guarantee the half-point with 42. Rb8 Qc7 43. Qxd8+ Qxd8 44. Qc3 Qd3 45. Bd4) Rd3 43. Qe1 Rd8!? (Caruana dodges one bullet as 43...Qd7! would have put more pressure on White in lines such 44. Bf2 c3 45. Qe2 Bb5 46. Rcl Rd2) 44. Qe7 c3 45. Rb8 Qxb8 46. Qxb8 Rxb8 (see diagram), and

now White has to find the only saving move: 47. Qd6, which holds — just barely — on 47... Rbl+ 48. Kh2 c2 49. Qxa6 cl=Q 50. Qa8+ Kh7 51. Qe4+ Kg8 52. Qe8+, and Black's king has no shelter from the checks) c2, and now the Black pawn can't be stopped.

It's over on 49. Qcl Bd3 (ending any faint hopes of a perpetual check along this diagonal) 50. Ke3 Bg6 51. a6 (g4 Rd8 52. Ke2 Rdl 53. Qxd1 cxd1=Q+ 54. Kxd1 Bd3 and wins) Ra8 52. g4 (Qa3 Rxa6!) Rxa6 53. h4 Rd6, and White resigned as there's no good way to stop the coming 54...Rdl.

Tabatabaei-Grischuk, 2024 Aeroflot Open, Moscow, March 2024

1. e4 e5 2. Nf3 Nc6 3. Bb5 Nf6 4. d3 Bc5 5. Bxc6 dxc6 6. Nbd2 Bg4 7. h3 Bh5 8. g4 Bg6 9. Nb3 Bd6 10. Na5 Qc8 11. Nh4 b6 12. Nc4 Qe6 13. Qe2 Nd7 14. Nf5 Bf8 15. b3 h5 16. Rg1 0-0-0 17. Bb2 f6 18. 0-0-0 c5 19. Kb1 Nb8 20. f4 exf4 21. Qf2 hxg4 22. hxg4 Nc6 23. Qxf4 Nd4 24. Qf2 Bxf5 25. gxf5 Qf7 26. Qg2 Kb8 27. Rdf1 a6 28. Rh1 Be7 29. Rf1 Rxl 30. Rxl Nc6 31. Rh7 Rg8 32. e5 Nd4 33. e6 Qf8 34. Ne3 Bd6 35. a4 g6 36. Bxd4 cxd4 37. Nc4 gxf5 38. Qc6 Be7 39. Qd7 Rg7 40. Rxd7 Qxg7 41. a5 bxa5 42. Nxa5 Qg1+ 43. Kb2 Ba3+ 44. Ka2 Qc1 45. Qd8+ Black resigns

Caruana-So, American Chess Cup, St. Louis, March 2024

1. e4 e5 2. Nf3 Nc6 3. Bb5 Nf6 4. d3 Bc5 5. Bxc6 dxc6 6. Nbd2 Nd7 7. 0-0 a5 8. Nc4 Qe7 9. Be3 f6 10. Qd2 b6 11. a3 Qf7 12. b4 Be7 13. bxa5 b5 14. Nb2 0-0 15. c4 Nc5 16. Qc3 Ne6 17. d4 exd4 18. Nxd4 Nxd4 19. Bxd4 c5 20. Be3 b4 21. axb4 cxb4 22. Qb3 Ba6 23. Rfc1 Qe6 24. Nd3 Qxe4 25. Nc5 Bxc5 26. Bxc5 Rfb8 27. f3 Qf5 28. Bf2 c5 29. Rd1 Rd8 30. Rd5 Rxd5 31. cxd5 Rc8 32. Rc1 c4 33. Qxb4 Qxd5 34. h3 h6 35. Qe1 Kh7 36. Rd1 Qb7 37. Bd4 Rd8 38. Rb1 Qc8 39. Qc3 Rd6 40. Qe2+ Kh8 41. Ba7 Rd8 42. Qc3 Rd3 43. Qe1 Rd8 44. Qe7 c3 45. Rb8 Qxb8 46. Bxb8 Rxb8 47. Kf2 c2 48. Qe3 Rc8 49. Qc1 Bd3 50. Ke3 Bg6 51. a6 Ra8 52. g4 Rxa6 53. h4 Rd6 White resigns

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