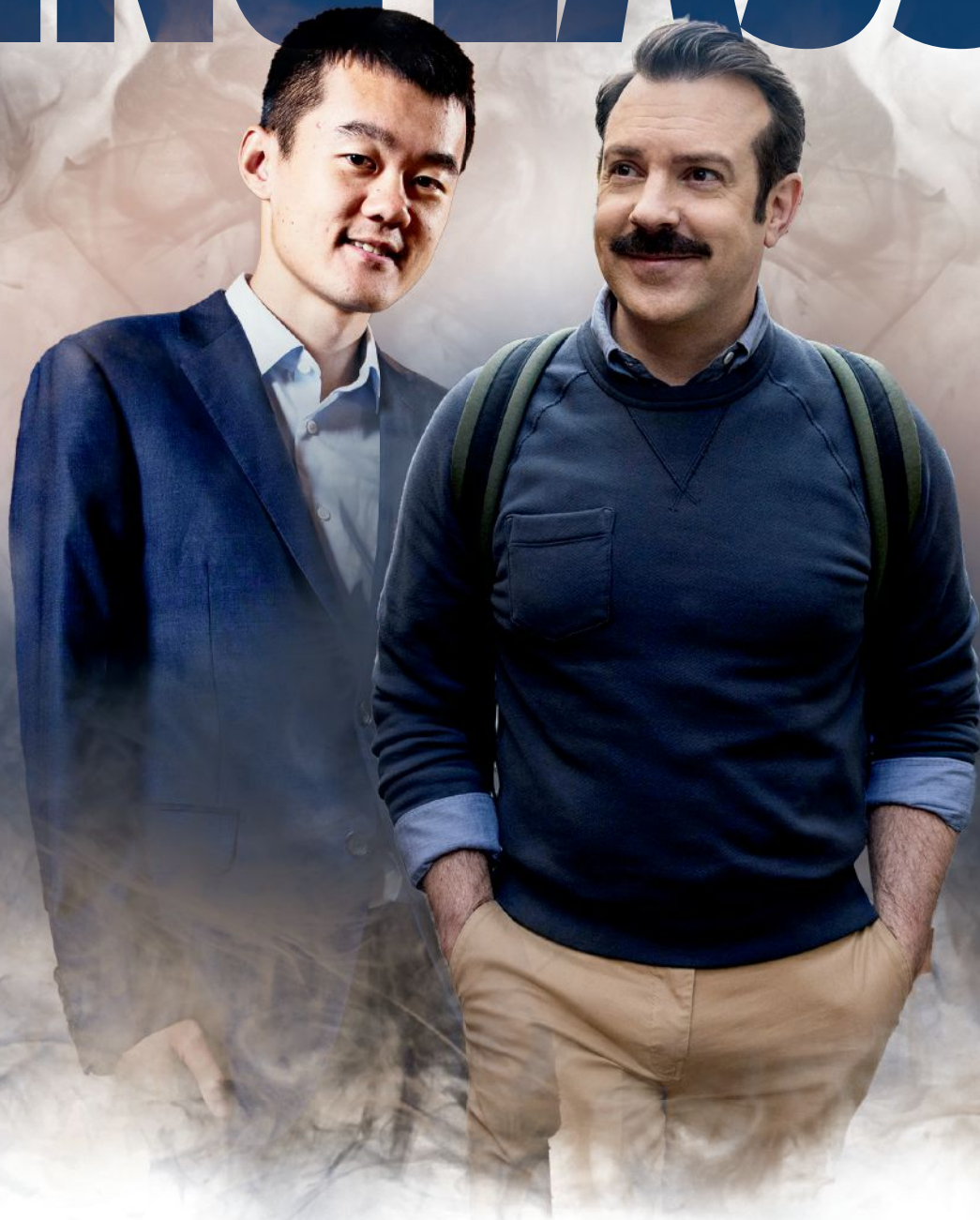


DING LASSO



The unlikely kinship between the new
World Champion and everyone's favorite football coach

BY **FM MIKE KLEIN WITH WFM KINGA POLAK**

COMPARED TO THE past decade's matches, a large swath of fans went into this world championship feeling tepid interest.

The match was not in a major world city, and many regarded it as a battle for the world's second-best player. That slowly changed over the course of April. At first, the flurry of decisive results piqued interest. Then, slowly, the candor of the eventual winner won over fans both on-line and in-person. When we see the current champion, we now see ourselves.

Ding Liren was much more forthcoming and candid than any other world championship player in our lifetime. Gone was the mercurial Magnus; in his place was the thoughtful, quiet Ding, a player that few had heard speak in depth before this match. And what we heard, we liked.

Ding's traits were our traits. For the first time in a long time, chess amateurs could actually relate to a 2800 — the fear, the uncertainty, the disappointment, and ultimately, the triumph. (Now, of course, it occurs to me that if Ding had lost the tiebreaker, that might have produced an even more apt mirror of ourselves, depending on current feelings about one's own life and chess abilities.)

I was on-site for the match, doing live reporting for *Chess.com* and *ChessKid.com*, and as a globetrotter with an Apple+ subscription, some of my evenings were spent in search of new entertainment. (Not to say anything bad about the nightlife in Astana, of course.) Some friends suggested I check out "Ted Lasso," whose third and final season had premiered a few weeks before Nepomniachtchi's e-pawn made its first venture forward.

Suddenly I found myself confusing the soon-to-be world-champion with the eponymous "football" coach from Kansas.

What the world saw in those emotional games and plainspoken press conferences was certainly Ding Liren, but to me, plowing through episodes on sometimes-questionable wifi, it was also Ted Lasso castling and charming the room.

The surface-level similarities are plain. (Don't worry — we will minimize serious spoilies for those who haven't seen everything yet.) Both become known to the world after a romantic breakup — Ding split with his girlfriend before the match, while Ted slogs through an emotional divorce. Both are also trying their best in press conferences using a version of English that sometimes bewilders them. For example, recall this trans-Atlantic linguistic mashup from the second episode:

Ted: "If I were to get fired from my job where I'm puttin' cleats in the trunk of my car?"

Coach Beard: "You got the boot from puttin' boots in the boot."

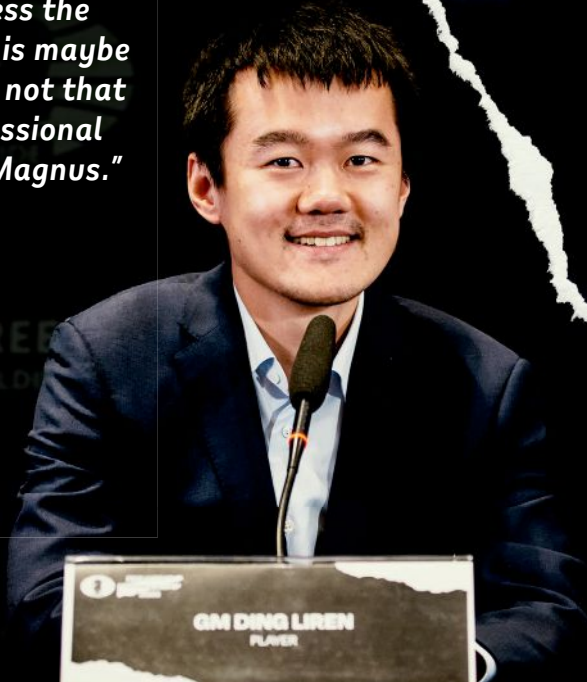
But the television show serves as a much deeper allegory to what we saw unfold in Astana. The reason audiences engage with Ted is the same reason we feel an affinity with Ding. It's not the results, but the process, the struggle, and the willingness of the protagonists to be open about everything they are experiencing. Ted uses intuition and emotional intelligence to make his decisions, and so too does Ding, his real-life counterpart.

Witness some of the overlap between Ted Lasso and Ding Liren, as seen in quotes from the show and the post-match press conferences:

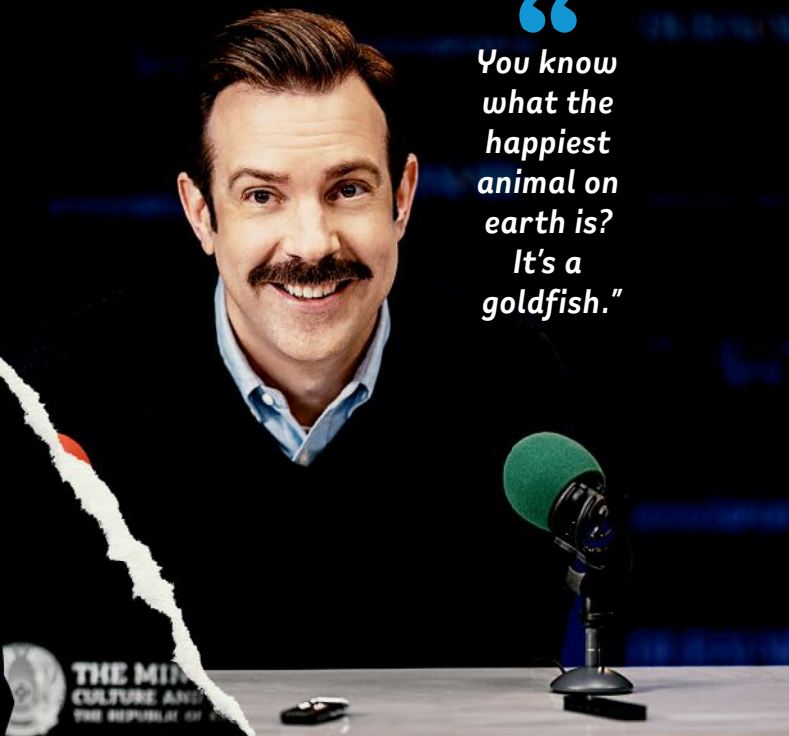
Ted: "You know what the happiest animal on earth is? It's a goldfish. You know why? Got a ten-second memory. Be a goldfish."

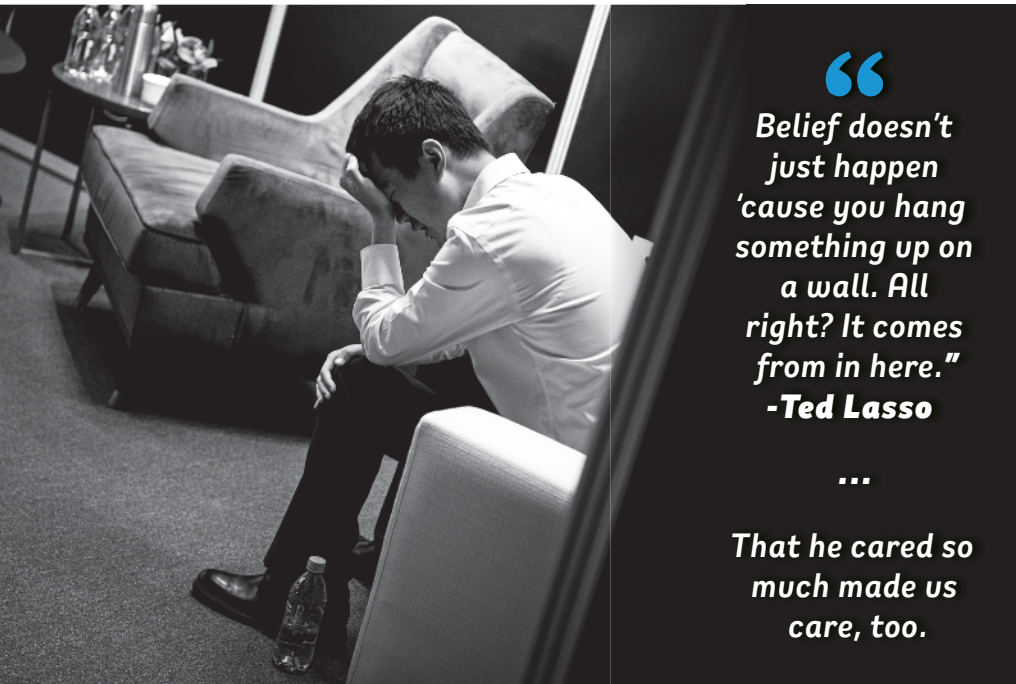
Ding: Not only did he recover immediately from losses and multiple match deficits to continuously get back to even in the match, but he also said, "I thought... at one point I feel it's totally silent in the playing hall and ... I didn't feel anybody watching the games. It seems to be a very important game but I didn't feel it at all."

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...

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Ted: “Hey, here’s a little trick of the trade. Just make fun of yourself right off the bat, a little joke. Folks will love that.”

Ding, explaining why there were so many more decisive games than in recent world championships: “I guess the reason is maybe we are not that professional than Magnus.”

Ted: “I want you to be grateful that you’re going through this sad moment with all these other folks. Because I promise you, there is something worse out there than being sad, and that is being alone and being sad.”

Ding, who was visibly unfocused during his pitiful round two loss: “Yeah, I would like to say to my friends, they helped me to deal with my ... emotional problems. Now I feel more comfortable ... One of my friends said to think about the things from the positive side. I think that’s the best advice for me during this tournament.”



Anxiety is a major theme in “Ted Lasso,” and both Ted and Ding originally dealt with their anxieties in similar ways: by running from the source in the middle of the competition. For Ted, this meant leaving the playing field. Ditto for Ding, who played much of the first two rounds from the player’s rest area.

In fact, Ding looked about as uncomfortable in the first two rounds as you will ever see a world-class player. (Here I recalled Ted on challenges: “Taking on a challenge is a lot like riding a horse, isn’t it? If you’re

comfortable while you’re doing it, you’re probably doing it wrong.”) Ultimately, both learned coping mechanisms, and how to face their fears head-on. Not only did Ding camp out at the board much more in the remaining rounds, but after leaving the site hotel after round one, Ding returned to the St. Regis Astana, despite knowing he was greatly outnumbered there by Team Nepo.



But what about getting professional help?

Ted, when initially asked for his thoughts on therapy: “General apprehension and a modest Midwestern skepticism.”

Ding: “[My friends] talked to me and even suggested if I need a doctor, but maybe it’s not that serious.”



What about the “leaked” openings, where internet sleuths found games on *Chess.com* and *Lichess.org* remarkably similar to some of Ding’s world championship efforts? The eventual world champion was not fazed by the discovery at all, downplaying their importance. Ted also has nothing to hide, asking some unhappy fans, “Why don’t you come watch training tomorrow? See for yourselves. We ain’t running a chocolate factory or Deutsche Bank. We got nothing to hide from y’all.”



Both use decision making that is much at least as intuitive as analytical.

Ted: “You just listen to your gut, OK? And on your way down to your gut, check in with your heart. Between those two things, they’ll let you know what’s what.”

Ding chose a large number of openings while at the board, which is almost unheard of at the world championship level. He even spent time on move number one in several games; for example, he only decided to play the French after the clock started and 1. e4 was on the board.

Ted: “Belief doesn’t just happen ‘cause you hang something up on a wall. All right? It comes from in here. You know? And up here. Down here. Only problem is, we all got so much junk floating through us, a lot of time we end up getting in our own way. You know, crap like envy or fear, shame.”

Moments after winning the title, Ding had to let go of all he had been bottling up inside: “I cannot control my emotions at that point. And I know myself, just before the tournament I have told somebody: ‘If I win, I will cry.’” Indeed, Ding did cry at the board. Chess audiences have almost never seen that from a professional. That he cared so much made us care, too.

Ted: “Just going from position to position until positions don’t really, um, even exist anymore. It’s fast, fluid, free.”

Ding: “Before the tournament I said to Richard, ‘I’d like to play something new and the good things will happen then I’m right at that point.’ I played something new, and in the end, the good things really happened ... I wanted to play something but I don’t have this kind of creativity so that’s why I saw Rapport is a very good player to work with because he has such interesting ideas over the openings ... He has this kind of artist’s character, not like me.”



This brings us to Richard Rapport, Ding’s second with strengths and weaknesses that perfectly augment those of his boss.

Think of him as a beardless Coach Beard. Coach Beard’s season three idea to open up the pitch by playing “Total Football” yields success in the same way that Rapport’s unique style does. As Beard explained, “Players are no longer in set positions. Defenders are free to attack. Attackers are trusted to defend. It’s about taking risks and supporting each other’s choices.” Sounds a lot like how Rapport plays chess.

And for those that thought it weird that Ding’s former rival in the Candidates’ Tournament suddenly became his partner, Coach

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Beard has an answer for that, too. “You know, we used to believe that trees competed with each other for light ... We now realize that the forest is a socialist community. Trees work in harmony to share the sunlight.” Chess fans suddenly had three daily events to follow — the game itself, the post-match press conference, and the daily Ding-Rapport embrace.

This was more than just a second. This was a quirky but heartfelt fraternity of two. Ruff ruff — Ding had found his Diamond Dog.

There’s much more to the friendships than work talk, of course. Ding/Rapport and Ted/Coach Beard also share a fondness for classic bands when talking to each other. Musical references fly fast and furious on Ted Lasso, and just like Rapport’s daily fashion statements, Trent Crimm’s t-shirts were the stuff of Reddit legend. (Unassociated: do I have to forever announce myself as “Mike Klein, Chess.com” now?) Similarly, Ding and Richard share a fondness for “80s music;” Ding also specifically mentioned “Blowin’ in the Wind” by Bob Dylan as a Team Ding favorite.

Could Nepomniachtchi be included in this Lasso-look-alike analogy? Although in some hair styles he looks a little like Zava, perhaps he is more closely aligned with Nate, at least in one way. While Ted’s fellow Premiership manager tries to out-duel him on the field, away from the stadium Nate shows clear fondness for the man he is



trying to beat. So too did Nepomniachtchi: following round five, Ian admitted about Ding, “After the rest day, I al-

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ready missed him.” When have you ever heard *that* at a world championship?



So where are we now? The world no longer has Magnus, perhaps the greatest player of all time, as the title holder. Many thought we’d inherit a paper champion, but Magnus’ departure actually helped pave the way for an even more relatable king. A king who bucked all the world championship norms, like secrecy and insularity. A king who reads Michel Foucault and channels Albert Camus in times of distress. A king who admits his weaknesses, a king who fails, a king who needs encouragement, a king who needs his friends.

In short, a king like Ding. ♠