



The 17th

GM Ding Liren becomes World Champion in a compelling playoff victory over GM Ian Nepomniachtchi.

BY **JJ LANG**

GM DING LIREN WASN'T, according to one popular narrative, even supposed to be here.

Looking for a final springboard into the 2022 Candidates, and with only the 2022 Belgrade Grand Prix event remaining, visa troubles prevented Ding from traveling to Serbia, effectively ending his chances of qualifying for the 2023 FIDE World Chess Championship.

Then, after FIDE suspended Russian GM Sergey Karjakin for pro-war comments on March 21, 2022, they decided to give his spot to the highest rated player who had played at least 30 games in the past year as of April 28, 2022. While Ding was the highest rated player, he had played only four FIDE-rated games in that time frame.

Thanks to some creative organizing from the Chinese Chess Federation, Ding nevertheless played 28 — two more games than needed! — FIDE-rated classical games from March 27 through April 24 to qualify for the candidates.

Of course, there was a reason Ding had played so few rated games. Chinese players were cut off from the return to over-the-board chess due to travel restrictions.

Considering that Ding already seemed like a ghost of himself after the quarantined portion of the 2020-21 Candidates Tournament, there was a question as to whether he would be in top form.

These questions were only amplified after he lost with the white pieces to GM Ian Nepomniachtchi in the first round of the 2022 Candidates. “Nepo” went on to win the tournament in convincing fashion, mere months after being written off after his 7½-3½ defeat in the 2021 World Chess Championship.

As Nepo built his lead, the narrative turned to whether GM Magnus Carlsen would defend his title. By the final round, it looked like GM Hikaru Nakamura could also qualify for the world championship if he could hold a draw against Ding.

Fifty-eight moves later, Ding scored an improbable victory to take second place. Three weeks later, Ding scored a second improbable victory: Carlsen announced he would not defend his title.

But a focus on the improbable poses a bit of a recency bias. Before the pandemic, Ding’s appearance in a world championship match felt closer to inevitable. GM Fabiano Caruana had his chance in 2018, but Ding’s play and rating had only increased since then as he gained more experience. Add to that Ding’s rapid playoff victory over Carlsen in the 2019 Sinquefeld Cup, and he was a clear front-runner to become Carlsen’s next challenger. Ding *was* supposed to be here.

Or was he? He seemed out of sorts in the first game and lost the second in disappointing fashion, as our most frequent *CLO* annotator, GM Elshan Moradiabadi, observed.

IN HIS FEELINGS

GM Ding Liren (2788)
GM Ian Nepomniachtchi (2795)
2023 FIDE World Championship (2),
Astana, 04.10.2023
Annotations by GM Elshan Moradiabadi



BLACK TO MOVE

20. ... Rxc5!
 Well, it is kind of an obvious move, but we should compliment Nepo for getting the kind of position from which this move flows!

21. Nxc5 Nxd4 22. Qh5 f6 23. Nf3??
 Effectively resigning already. Ding doesn’t even try to hope for some cheapos with

Ng5xh7, although it must be said that Black is still crushing after 23. Nxc5 Bc5.

23. ... Nxc2 24. Rxc2 Bxe4
 The rest is, as they say, just a matter of technique.

25. Rd2 Bd6 26. Kh1? c3
 Push ‘em!

27. bxc3 bxc3 28. Rd4 c2 29. Qh6 e5,
White resigned.

Despite the loss, there were two positive signs for Ding. First, he was unusually candid about his own mental state. This is important, as the first step is always admitting that there’s a problem. Second, Ding’s on-site second was Hungarian-Romanian GM Richard Rapport, who seemed to have convinced Ding to abandon his ultra-solid repertoire in favor of pushing the h-pawn up one square just (it appears) for giggles.

Indeed, while Nepo stuck with the Ruy Lopez for almost the entire match, Ding took a strategy of “sampling” numerous offbeat openings, beginning with a fourth-round win in the English. After losing to Nepo’s tremendous attack in the following round, he equalized once again with a positional masterpiece in the London System in game six. WGM Jennifer Yu explains:

SHOWING HIS CLASS

GM Ding Liren (2788)
GM Ian Nepomniachtchi (2795)
FIDE World Championship (6), Astana,
04.17.2023
Annotations by WGM Jennifer Yu



WHITE TO MOVE

16. a5!
 This fixes the queenside and creates the permanent b-pawn target for White to attack. This is a common idea when there’s a pawn push like ... a7-a6, as it prevents the b-pawn from moving forward, in turn



Shaking hands before the start of the fourth match game.

PHOTO: COURTESY FIDE / STEV BONHAGE (THIS PAGE, PREVIOUS SPREAD)

allowing White to take control of the c5-square since there are no more possibilities of Black pushing ... b7-b6 to kick the knight off of its quasi-outpost.

16. ... Qc7 17. Qf3 Rfc8 18. Ra3



Although this move looks strange, there are several different ideas behind it. One is that White has the option to add extra support to the a5-pawn, such as in the case of a Nd2-b3 maneuver to get to c5, when Black might play ... Ne7-c6 and White can now play, e.g., Qd1-a1 to provide backup for the rook on the a-file. The rook has other useful functions on the third rank as well, which we will see later on in the game with Ra3-b3, adding extra pressure on the b7-pawn. It also opens the possibility of a b2-b4 pawn push.

Another reasonable idea would be to prepare the b2-b4 push by protecting the c3-pawn with 18. Rec1, followed by maneuvering the knight to c5, with a clamp on the queenside. After 18. ... Bg6 19. b4 Nf5 20. Nb3, White should be in control.

18. ... Bg6

A smart “waiting move” that opens up the f5-square for the knight and preemptively responds to any attacks on the bishop (such as g2-g4 pushes) that now will no longer come with tempo.

19. Nb3 Nc6 20. Qg3 Qe7

Although the position is evaluated as only slightly better for White, it’s hard for Black to find productive moves here. This move avoids the queen trade, after which White could have maintained his pressure on Black’s queenside. However, Ding now has time to further improve on his position.

21. h4

No rush! Ding takes the time to grab space on the kingside.

21. ... Re8 22. Nc5 e5

An active move, hoping to create some counterplay and chances.

After something like 22. ... Rac8 23. b4 White can comfortably push on for the rest of the game.

It is important to not play 22. ... Nxa5??



POSITION AFTER 22. ... Nxa5??

This move doesn’t work because after 23. Rxa5 b6 24. h5! we discover another reason that the h4-pawn push was so useful.

a) After 24. ... Bxh5 25. Nxe6 fxe6 26. Rxd5! exd5? 27. Rxe7 Rxe7 28. Qh4 the tactics work out in White’s favor.

b) Instead, if 24. ... bxa5 then simply 25. hxg6 and Black’s kingside will fall apart soon.

c) Finally, after 24. ... Bh7 25. Nxe6 fxe6 26. Rxd5 exd5 27. Rxe7 Rxe7 28. Qd6 then White is winning.

23. Rb3

White forces an exchange of pieces that opens up the center.

A clever, and more accurate, alternative is 23. b4!, defending the c5-knight while threatening to capture on e5.

a) After 23. ... e4 White can put pressure on Black’s center without allowing chances of counterplay on the queenside as in the game, and after 24. f3 e3 25. Ra2 the e3-pawn will fall at some point.

b) If Black instead plays a waiting move like 23. ... Bf5 then 24. dxe5 Nxe5 25. Raa1 and Black has too many weaknesses to defend, as White is threatening Nc5xb7 and f2-f4.

23. ... Nxa5 24. Rxe5 Qf6 25. Ra3 Nc4

Or 25. ... b6 26. Nd7 Qc6 27. Rxe8+ Rxe8 28. Ne5 and White is much better.

26. Bxc4 dxc4 27. h5?!

A good alternative is 27. Nxb7, as after 27. ... Qb6 28. Nd6 Rxe5 29. Qxe5 Qxb2 30. Nxc4 White has a solid extra pawn.

27. ... Bc2

A critical moment. Black could have played 27. ... Rxe5! 28. dxe5 Qd8!

(see diagram top of next column)

This is the clever idea behind the trade of rooks, creating counterplay. This move takes



POSITION AFTER 28. ... Qd8!

advantage of the now-awkward position of the a3-rook that would much rather be on the back rank defending against a possible perpetual check.

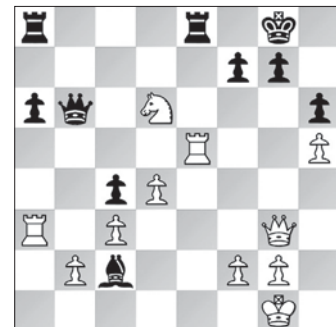
a) White can try 29. Qf3 Bc2 but after 30. Ra1 (or 30. Nxb7? Qd2! 31. Ra1 Bd3 with good chances of holding a draw due to Black’s active pieces) 30. ... b6 31. Nb7 Qd3 there is nothing of substance.

b) White has no edge after 29. hxg6 Qd1+ 30. Kh2 Qh5+ 31. Kg1 Qd1+ 32. Kh2 Qh5+ 33. Qh3, when the position is equal.

28. Nxb7

The b7-pawn finally goes down. At a quick glance, it looks like Black can get the material back quickly, but some clever tactical ideas work out in White’s favor, keeping the advantage.

28. ... Qb6 29. Nd6!



A monster square for the knight, attacking the c4-pawn and creating ideas of a kingside attack.

29. ... Rxe5

Not 29. ... Qxd6?? 30. Rxe8+ ending the game instantly.

30. Qxe5 Qxb2 31. Ra5

White’s rook is getting back into the game and now he is threatening the deadly Nd6-e8.

The immediate 31. Ne8? doesn’t work because of 31. ... Rxe8! 32. Qxe8+ Kh7 and there is no way for White to prevent the perpetual check while still defending the

rook. After 33. Ra5 Qc1+ 34. Kh2 Qf4+ White cannot avoid the repetition.

31. ... Kh7

A useful move to get the king off the back rank and out of some tactical troubles. Ding uses this time to improve his pieces further.

After 31. ... Qxc3??



POSITION AFTER 31. ... Qxc3??

White's attack works now, with 32. Ne8! f6 33. Nxf6+! gxf6 34. Qd5+ Kg7 35. Qb7+! and Black can resign.

32. Rc5?!

I think Nepo's idea was that after 32. Ne8 Rxe8 33. Qxe8 no longer is with check, allowing Black to play 33. ... Qc1+ 34. Kh2 Qf4+.

Worse is 32. Nxf7?? Rf8 33. Nd6 Qb1+ 34. Kh2 Rxf2 and Black is back in the game.

Instead, White should have played 32. Qe1!



POSITION AFTER 32. Qe1

Going backwards in this position is the correct idea. Now that Black has multiple weaknesses that can't be simultaneously covered, White has the time to defend his own weaknesses. Play continues 32. ... Bd3 33. Nxc4! Qb7 (or 33. ... Bxc4 34. Qe4+ winning) 34. Ne5 with a solid advantage.

32. ... Qc1+?

After this, Black loses his opportunities for counterplay. White's superior pieces and Black's weak king will be the deciding factor. Nepomniachtchi did spend nine minutes on this decision, but he still had 36 minutes remaining to Ding's 19 after he played it.

It wouldn't be easy, but after 32. ... Qxc3!, Black has some good ideas that may hold the position.

a) For instance, after 33. Nxf7 Bd3 34. Rc7 Qc1+ 35. Kh2 Re8!!



POSITION AFTER 35. ... Re8!!

This is the idea! The activated black rook is a game-changer, as after 36. Qg3 (or 36. Qxe8 Qf4+ 37. Kg1 Qc1+ with another repetition) 36. ... Re1 equalizes.

b) After 33. Rc7 Qd2! 34. Rxf7 Qc1+ 35. Kh2 Qg5 everything is defended for now, and in the upcoming moves, Black can push his a-pawn to create some counterplay. After a queen trade, there are good chances for Black to hold the endgame.

33. Kh2 f6 34. Qg3 a5 35. Nxc4 a4 36. Ne3 Bb1 37. Rc7! Rg8 38. Nd5 Kh8 39. Ra7 a3 40. Ne7 Rf8 41. d5



Preparing a very sneaky idea...

41. ... a2 42. Qc7!

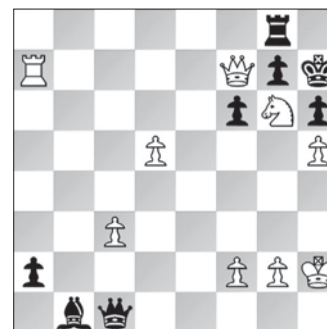
Forced mate is incoming! The d5-pawn takes away the escape square on e6 for Black's king in the situation where White sacrifices the queen for the rook.

42. ... Kh7 43. Ng6 Rg8 44. Qf7!, Black resigned.

(see diagram top of next column)

The point is that Qf7xg8 is coming with a beautiful forced mate.

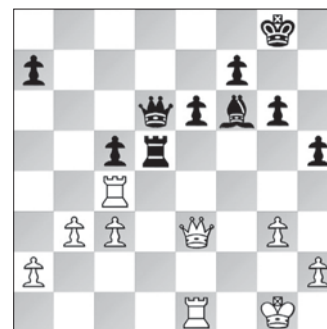
A tied match after six games was unsurprising. But a tied match with only two draws?! This turned out to just be the appetizer, too. Ding decided to surprise Nepo in game



seven with a French Defense, sacrificing an Exchange for excellent chances until an uncharacteristically committal move under time pressure. GM Christopher Yoo tries to make sense of it all here:

BACK AND FORTH

GM Ian Nepomniachtchi (2795)
GM Ding Liren (2788)
FIDE World Championship (7), Astana, 04.18.2023
Annotations by GM Christopher Yoo



BLACK TO MOVE

31. ... h4

[Immediately after the game, Nepomniachtchi pointed out 31. ... Kg7 to Ding. I think his point was that Black had no need to change the structure, inducing even more complications, before the time control. I mention this simply to note that certain brave players, such as GM Yoo, seem to have no problem with Ding's choice, provided he finds the proper continuation, while others thought the h-pawn push was already a practical error. ~JLL]

32. gxh4?!

In this critical moment, Ding only had five minutes left and decided to use up four of them, leaving himself 50 seconds to play eight moves! This was very problematic, and partially led to his position collapsing. The right continuation is difficult, but I think he should have moved faster here.

32. ... Rd2

The key continuation was 32. ... Be5! when White has a bit of trouble defending the kingside and the h2-pawn in the long term. After 33. Qf2 Rd2 34. Re2 Rd1+ 35. Re1 Rd2 36. Re2, the worst case was Ding could have repeated moves with ... Rd1-d2, but he can even play for the win with 36. ... Rd3! 37. Re3 Bxh2+ 38. Kh1 Rd5. I doubt you can find all these moves as Black with little time, but if Ding had 15 or more minutes, it would be possible to press with this position.

33. Re2 Rd3??



A panicked blunder under time pressure.

It is necessary to admit the inaccuracy and move back with 33. ... Rd5. This is quite difficult to do in practice, as we do not like to admit our inaccuracies or mistakes. Ding tried to justify his last move, but simply blundered as there was no time to calculate.

34. Qxc5 Rd1+ 35. Kg2 Qd3

Ding might have thought there was an attack, but it does not exist as there are not enough pieces to checkmate.

36. Rf2

Despite Nepo's approach not being completely sound, it put a lot of pressure on Ding, and eventually led to time pressure and a decisive blunder. The risky, but innovative, approach paid off.

36. ... Kg7 37. Rcf4

With the rooks eyeing the f6-bishop and the f7-pawn, there is nothing for Black to do. The game is over.

37. ... Qxc3, and Black resigned.

Ding played this move with seconds on his clock but resigned without waiting for White's reply of trading queens and capturing the f7-pawn with the rook battery.

Ding once again looked ready to level the match until Nepo essayed the most daring escape of the match to preserve a 4½-3½

lead. As GM Awonder Liang put it in his annotations, this game aptly summed up the tenor of the match:

EMBLEMATIC

GM Ding Liren (2788)
GM Ian Nepomniachtchi (2795)
FIDE World Championship (8), Astana,
07. 04. 2023
Annotations by GM Awonder Liang



BLACK TO MOVE

31. ... Qh4!!

An astonishing bluff, or a stroke of genius? In either case, Nepo's strength as an incredible practical player comes into full force as he brings about a fantastic save.

The normal way to play was 31. ... Qf8, but White is basically getting the game with an extra tempo: 32. Kd1 Qe7 33. Kc2 Qxg5 (other tries are bad too: 33. ... e5 34. Rd5 e4 35. Bh3, and 33. ... Nh4 34. f4 e5 35. Bh3 exf4 36. Qxf4) 34. Qxa7 Qe7 35. Qc7 and White stops ... Nf5-d6, while Black is short on ideas.

32. Kd1

In the post-game interviews, Nepo revealed he didn't see 32. Qxd8!



POSITION AFTER 32. Qxd8

when playing his 31st move, so he definitely rode his luck in this game! As everyone knows by now, this wins for White, and the lines are not particularly difficult to calculate. If Ding had spent a minute to work it out, I'm sure he would have seen the way.

Here are the main ideas: 32. ... Qe4+ 33. Re2 Qb1+ 34. Kd2 Qb2+ 35. Kd3 Qb1+ 36. Rc2 Qd1+ (36. ... Qxf1+ 37. Kd2 Nd6 38. Qh8+ Kxh8 39. d8=Q+) 37. Ke4 Qxc2+ (37. ... Nd6+ 38. Ke5 Nb7 39. Qc7) 38. Bd3 Nd6+ 39. Ke3 Qc1+ (39. ... Nxc4+ 40. Bxc4 Qxc3+ 41. Bd3 Qd4+ 42. Ke2 Qe5+ 43. Kf1 Qa1+ 44. Kg2) 40. Ke2 Qb2+ 41. Kf3 and White wins.

32. ... Qxg5 33. Kc2 Qe7 34. Bg2

(see diagram next page)

White prepares Bg2-c6 before taking on a7; otherwise, Black has ... Nf5-d6.

Two other lines of note: (a) 34. Kb3 e5 35. Rd5 f6 36. Bg2 Nh6 37. Qxa7 Qe6 38. Be4 Nf7





39. Qc7 Qg4 40. f3 Qe6 and White is drifting; (b) 34. Qxa7 Nd6! 35. Qxb6 Ne4! and Black wins the d7-pawn and a bit more.

34. ... e5

Here 34. ... Nd4+! was fine, although with mutual time pressure, it's understandable that Nepo didn't want to make such a decision. After 35. cxd4 Rxd7 36. Qe5+ f6 37. Qg3 Rxd4 Black is alright, with three healthy pawns for the piece.

35. Be4!

Precise, kicking away the black knight before mopping up the queenside.

35. ... Nh6 36. Qxa7 Ng4!

Straining to find counterplay. Other ideas are no better, i.e., 36. ... Qe6 37. Qc7 Qe7 38. Bc6; and 36. ... f6 37. Qxb6 Nf7 38. Bc6.

37. Bf3?



A moment of carelessness, and an inexplicable blunder. Was it nerves or all the pressure? In contrast to the previous wins we've analyzed, here Ding needed to just check carefully for Black's ideas.

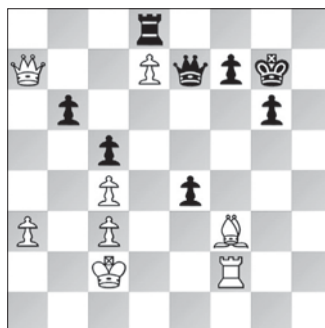
Of course conversion wouldn't have been easy, especially against a defender like Nepo, but with Bf3-c6, the game would have been all but over. To wit: 37. Bc6 e4 38. Qxb6 Ne5 39. Bb5 Nd3 40. Qc7 Qg5 (or 40. ... f5 41. a4) 41. Qg3 Qh5 42. a4 Qh1 43. Rd1 and wins.

Note that White also wins after 37. Qxb6 Rxd7 38. Rxd7 Qxd7 39. Qxc5 Qa4+ 40. Kd2! Qb3 41. f3.

37. ... Nxf2!

You don't need to ask Ian twice!

38. Rxf2 e4!



The point — if White had managed to secure the bishop on d5, the game would soon be over, but now the bishop is locked behind Black's phalanx of pawns.

39. Re2

Not 39. Bg4 e3 and Black wins.

39. ... f5 40. Qxb6 Rxd7 41. Qb8 Qd6 42. Qxd6 Rxd6 43. Bxe4 fxe4 44. Rxe4 Kf6 45. Re8, draw.

Before there was even time for his now-customary post-game embrace with Rapport, Ding was whisked away to discuss ... something. While he would not comment on the time, it was clear that he was informed that a Reddit user had discovered a treasure trove of online rapid games by two anonymous players that closely followed Ding's match repertoire.

A series of draws ensued, with Nepo clinging to his lead and Ding scrambling for new ideas. Nepo's determination became palpable as Ding's play grew desperate. In the antepenultimate round, Nepo overcame Ding's speculative attack and looked poised to take a two-game lead. Then, as Ding created unexpected complications, Nepo began to drift, culminating in the blunder of the match. FM Alice Lee has the details:

TURNING POINT

GM Ding Liren (2788)
GM Ian Nepomniachtchi (2792)
FIDE World Championship 2023 (12),
Astana, 04.26.2023
Annotations by FM Alice Lee

(see diagram top of next column)

26. ... b4?!

Arguably Nepomniachtchi's first error of



BLACK TO MOVE

the day. Here, 26. ... a6! was a very good move. Black prevents White from breaking the pawn chain, and White has no counterplay After 27. axb5 axb5 28. Be4 Rag8 29. f3 f5! 30. Bc6 fxg4 31. hxg4 Rh6, White can resign.

27. Qxc4 Rag8?

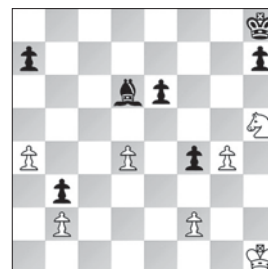
Nepo played this move in less than a minute. This was a mistake as there was a winning variation for Black. However, it was not easy to see from far in advance, and Black is still slightly better here (although it does allow White a chance).

The winning line began with the critical 27. ... Nf3!



POSITION AFTER 27. ... Nf3!

This is necessary for Black to gain an advantage. Nepo was probably worried about 28. Qc6, forcing mass simplifications after 28. ... Nxe1 29. Qxa8+ Rg8 30. Qe4 Nxc2 31. Qxc2 Qh4 32. Qd3 f5! 33. Qf3 fxg4 34. Rxc4 Rxc4 35. Qxc4 Qxc4 36. hxg4 b3!



POSITION AFTER 36. ... b3!

This is the only winning variation for Black, and not easy to calculate from ten moves

away. Black should be winning with ... Bd6-a3 to come next. In other words, Nepo had to calculate through all the trades and find a clever endgame tactic at the end of the sequence. This is why 26. ... a6 was stronger.

28. Qc6?

Interestingly, it turns out that 28. Bxg6! works now, even though the h5-knight is still trapped.

After 28. Bxg6! hxg6 29. Qc6:

a) The right response would be 29. ... gxh5 30. Qxd6 Nf3 31. Qc5 hxg4 32. Qxg5 Rxc3 33. hxg4 Nxc3 34. Rxc3 when Black might be slightly better, but White should hold.

b) The most intuitive move for Black, 29. ... Bb8?, gives White a very nice win after 30. d5!:

b1) The queen recapture 30. ... Qxd5+ fails to a trap with 31. Qxd5 exd5 32. Nf6.

b2) The pawn recapture fails no better after 30. ... exd5 31. Nf6 Rd8 32. Re8+ Rxe8 33. Qxe8+ Kg7 34. Qg8+ Kxf6 35. Qd8+ and Black can resign.

b3) The critical continuation begins after Black captures the knight with 30. ... gxh5 31. dxe6 fxe6 32. gxh5.



POSITION AFTER 32. ... gxh5

Here, the open g-file is worth the knight! After 32. ... Qxh5 33. Rxc3+ Kxc3 34. Qxe6+ Kh8 35. Qf6+ Kg8 36. Rg1+, White is winning.

28. ... Bb8??

Black had a win here, but it was not obvious. After 28. ... Nf5! the key idea involves a queen sacrifice for a mating net!

a) White can take, with 29. gxf5, but will lose.



POSITION AFTER 29. gxf5

After the fantastic 29. ... Qxc3+ (29. ... Qxh5

is quicker per the engine) 30. Rxc3 Rxc3+ 31. Kh2 f3+ 32. Ng3 (not 32. Qxd6?? R8g2 mate) 32. ... Rg2+ 33. Kh1 Bxc3 34. fxc3 R8xc3, White can resign.

b) Black is also better after 29. Rd1 Qh4 30. Qf3 b3 31. Be4 Ng3+ 32. Rxc3 fxc3 33. Bxc3 Qxc3+ 34. Kg1 Rxc3 35. fxc3 Qxc4.

29. Qb7??

White could transpose to variations we looked at earlier with 29. Bxg6!, see lines after note to White's move 28. This is still winning for White after 29. ... hxg6 30. d5 exd5 (alternatives: 30. ... Qxd5+ 31. Qxd5 exd5 32. Nf6 winning; 30. ... gxh5 31. dxe6 Qf6 32. Qd7 wins too) 31. Nf6 with a huge advantage.

29. ... Rh6?!

Again, the very nice idea of 29. ... Nf5! works here, and Black should keep an edge after 30. Rd1 Qh4 31. Qf3 Ng3+ 32. Rxc3 fxc3 33. Bxc3 Qxc3+ 34. Kg1 gxf2+ 35. Kxf2 Qxf3+ 36. Kxf3 hxg6.

30. Be4 Rf8?!

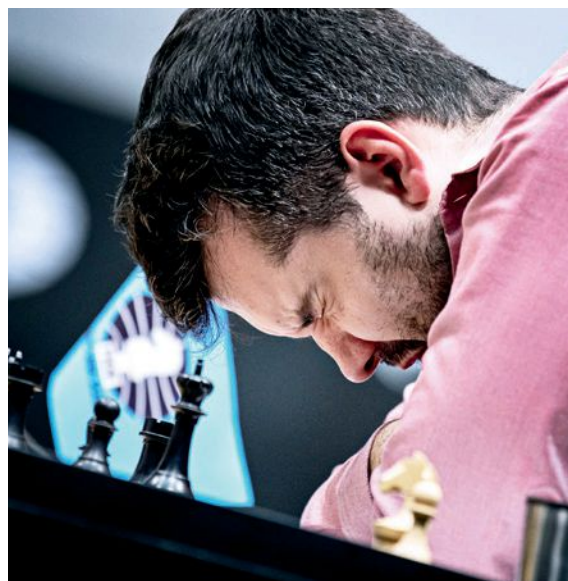
An easier path to equality was to play 30. ... f3 31. Qxf7 Ng2 32. Qxf3 Nxe1 33. Rxe1 Qh4 34. Rg1 Qg5 35. Rf1 Qh4 36. Rg1.

31. Qxb4 Qd8 32. Qc3

White has successfully managed to parry Black's attack, and is up a pawn in a slightly more pleasant position.

A more ambitious move would be 32. d5!?, when after 32. ... e5, Black threatens the dangerous ... f7-f5 with a continued

Right and below: Ian Nepomniachtchi's pain was on display for all to see during his round 12 game and eventual loss to Ding Liren.



attack. White wants to be able to meet this thrust with Qb4-b7, threatening mate on g7. To do this, a prophylactic move is required. The right path is 33. Rc1!



POSITION AFTER 33. Rc1!

This is the only way to keep an advantage. If play continues with 33. ... a5 34. Qb7 it happens that now that the c7-square is under White's control, the threat of ... f7-f5 has been met.

32. ... Ng6 33. Bg2

No different is 33. Re2 Qh4, transposing to the game.

33. ... Qh4

Black gains nothing with 33. ... Bd6 34. Re4 Qg5 35. d5+ e5 36. Rc4 f5 37. Bf3 fxe4 38. hxe4 Nh4 39. Rc8 Nxf3 40. Rxf8+ Bxf8 41. Qxf3 e4 42. Qc3+ Kg8 43. Qc4 when the computer insists the game is drawn, showing how any attempts from White to push will be met by a perpetual check: 43. ... Kf7 44. d6+ Re6 45. Qc7+ Be7 46. dxe7 Qh4+ with White's king unable to escape.

34. Re2 f5??



Perhaps Nepo saw this idea in advance and decided to play it here. However, this just hangs the e6 pawn.

A safer, but by no means equal, try would be to play 34. ... Rg8, allowing White to begin pushing the extra pawn with 35. b4 Qg5 36. Qc5 Qd8 37. Qc3 Qg5 38. d5+ e5. Now, a key difference with Black's bishop being on b8 instead of d6 is that White can return the pawn to open the central file with 39. d6!?

Bxd6 40. Rd1 f3 41. Qxf3 Bxb4 42. Re4 Bc5 when White should have a small, but enduring, advantage.

35. Rxe6

With d4-d5 and checkmate threatened next, there is no defense for Black now that there is no e-pawn ready to block with ... e6-e5.

35. ... Rxh5

Played after seventeen minutes, most of which Nepo spent not looking at the board.

36. gxh5 Qxh5 37. d5+ Kg8 38. d6, Black resigned.

After two more draws, the rapid tiebreak produced a thrilling four-game mini-match. Ding had great initiative in the first game, but an absolutely spectacular in-between move from Nepo shot the advantage into his favor. Here's Moradiabadi on what could have been the "swindle of the century:"

FORTUNE FAVORS THE BOLD

GM Ding Liren (2788)
GM Ian Nepomniachtchi (2795)
2023 FIDE World Chess Championship Tiebreak (1), Astana, 04.30.2023
Annotations by GM Elshan Moradiabadi



WHITE TO MOVE

23. Rb1?

A massive oversight by Ding, from which he managed to quickly recover.

Instead, the rook belonged on c1 with 23. Rfc1! Ne5 24. e4 as now ... b7-b6 is met with f2-f4!! For instance, 24. ... b6 25. f4 Ng6 (or 25. ... bxc5 26. fxe5 Rxe5 27. Rd3 winning) 26. e5 and White is happy.

23. ... Ne5! 24. e4 b6! 25. cxb6

(see diagram top of next column)

25. ... axb6! 26. Nb5!

Ding fights back.



The obvious 26. Rxc7?!, allowing 26. ... Nf3+ would have been the swindle of the century, but you cannot expect that big of a blunder in the final of the world championship!

26. ... Rxd2 27. Nxc7 Bh3

More annoying would be 27. ... Nd3 28. Rf1 Rc5. This does not give a lot of chances to Black, but it at least could pressure Ding a lot longer than the text, where Ding forces Nepo to take a perpetual in order to avoid losing.

28. Bxh3 Rxh3 29. Kg2 Rh5 30. Rb5 Rd1 31. Nd5 Rdh1 32. Ne7+ Kh7 33. Rxe5 R1h2+ 34. Kg1 Rh1+ 35. Kg2, draw.

In the second game, Nepo watched his great initiative evaporate, and found nothing in the third game. Things seemed headed towards a draw in the final rapid game, with commentators explaining that, with under two minutes on their clock, absolutely nobody would decline the perpetual check Nepo was offering.

But Ding Liren is not nobody. He is the 17th World Champion. He shocked his opponent, "self-pinning" his rook in a way that could not be exploited.

SELF-PIN TO WIN

GM Ian Nepomniachtchi (2795)
GM Ding Liren (2788)
2023 FIDE World Chess Championship Tiebreak (4), Astana, 04.30.2023
Annotations by GM Elshan Moradiabadi

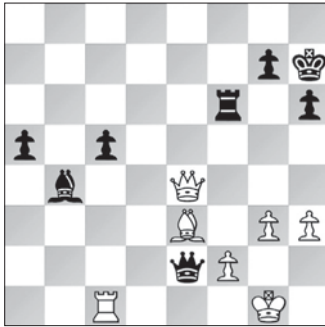
(see diagram next page)

46. ... Rg6!!

Ding tries to play for a win with under two minutes on his clock. This time around, his move does not even introduce any threat to his position!

47. Qf5?

Shocked by the move, Nepo reacts poorly. The best continuation was 47. h4 h5



BLACK TO MOVE

48. Kg2 a4 49. Qf5 Qg4 50. Qd3 a3 51. Bxc5 with equality.



POSITION AFTER 51. Bxc5

But, again, how easy is it to play this with very little time on your clock? Going deeper, after 51. ... a2 52. Bd4 Qd7 53. Qe4, now it is clearer, but we are sitting here with engines running!

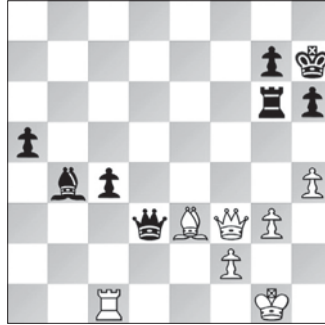
47. ... c4 48. h4??

The beginning of a very dramatic end with

the first in a series of mutual blunders.

Close to balanced was 48. Qf4 c3 49. Qf5, when after 49. ... a4 50. Rb1 Qc4 51. Bf4 c2 52. Rc1 Qe6 53. Qxc2 a3 54. h4 Kg8 55. Qa4 White should be fine.

48. ... Qd3!



49. Qf3

Not 49. Qh3 c3, winning for Black.

49. ... Rf6?!

Better was 49. ... Bd2 50. Rd1 c3 51. Kh2 a4 52. h5 Rf6, when Black wins without much of a fuss.

50. Qg4 c3 51. Rd1 Qg6 52. Qc8?!

White loses a tempo, but he is losing anyway. After the relatively strongest 52. Qe2 Re6 53. h5 Qe4 54. Qa2 c2 55. Rd4 Qxd4 56. Qxe6 Qd3 57. Kg2 a4 58. Bc1 a3 White can resign.

52. ... Rc6 53. Qa8 Rd6?

This squanders a substantial portion of Black's winning advantage.

Instead, Black had a faster win with 53. ... c2 54. Rd8 c1=Q+ 55. Kh2 Qf7!



POSITION AFTER 55. ... Qf7

This move, making *luft*, must have been what Ding missed with just a minute on his clock.

54. Rxd6 Qxd6?!

Black loses a valuable tempo.

Precise was 54. ... Bxd6! 55. Qxa5 Bxg3! 56. h5 Qd3!. Again none of these lines are too hard for Ding, but with a minute on the clock and what is at stake, he can be forgiven.

55. Qe4+ Qg6 56. Qc4 Qb1+ 57. Kh2 a4?!

Now it is a draw!

In a classical game, 57. ... Qf5 58. g4 Qf3 59. h5 Kh8 60. Qc8+ Kh7 61. Qc4 Be7 62. Kg1 Bf6 would likely still be a draw, but it is a solid practical try. Ding's choice is perhaps better for rapid, given the precision required from White to refute it.



The ceremonial first move before game one of the match, made by Askhat Oralov (L) and Arkady Dvorkovich (R).

58. Bd4 a3 59. Qc7??

And here Nepomniachtchi functionally resigns. If 59. Bxg7 was too complex to calculate, then 59. h5 was a very simple, intuitive move, taking away the g6-square from Black's queen.

Objectively the best move was 59. Bxg7 Kxg7 and now White has 60. Qc7+ Kf8 61. Qc8+ Kf7 62. Qb7+ Kf6 63. Qb6+ Ke5 64. Qb8+ Kd4 65. Qd8+ Kc4 with equality.

The simplest was 59. h5.



POSITION AFTER 59. h5

Now 59. ... Bf8 (not 59. ... a2?? 60. Qf7, when White has swindled the title) 60. Qf7 Qe4 61. Bxc3 Qe7 62. Qd5 is equal.

59. ... Qg6

The rest is easy for a player of Ding Liren's caliber.

60. Qc4 c2 61. Be3 Bd6 62. Kg2 h5 63. Kf1 Be5 64. g4 hxg4 65. h5 Qf5 66. Qd5 g3 67. f4 a2 68. Qxa2 Bxf4, White resigned.

Ding sat at the board alone, head in his hands. He looked more exhausted than exuberant, experiencing what he later described as "relief." Excitement followed a few minutes later, but for now, immediately after the handshake, all he could think about was that one of the bravest gambles in chess history paid off. After so much had to fall into place, Ding took his place in the chess pantheon as the 17th world champion. ♠

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- GM Awonder Liang
- GM Elshan Moradiabadi
- GM Christopher Yu
- WGM Tatev Abrahamyan
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- FM Carsten Hansen
- FM Alice Lee

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MAIN EVENT

TIE BREAK

			1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	1	2	3	4		
1	Ian Nepomniachtchi	2795	½	1	½	0	1	0	1	½	½	½	½	0	½	½	7	½	½	½	0	1½
2	Ding Liren	2788	½	0	½	1	0	1	0	½	½	½	½	1	½	½	7	½	½	½	1	2½

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