

2022 Candidates Tournament Recap

By: Ian Harris

After defending his title in the 2021 World Championships against Russian GM Ian “Nepo” Nepomniachtchi, World Champion Magnus Carlsen mused that it could be his last time participating in the championship unless, perhaps, the next challenger were to be GM Alireza Firouzja, the young superstar from France that qualified for the next Candidates cycle by convincingly winning last year’s FIDE Grand Swiss.

It is with this backdrop that the 2022 FIDE Candidates (June 17-July 5) took place in Madrid with Firouzja as one of the pre-tournament favorites. The other qualifiers for the Candidates included a veritable who’s who of the elite chess world:



With so many star players, and anyone capable of beating anyone else in any single game, there were many exciting story lines that developed as the tournament progressed. None was more important or inspiring than Nepomniachtchi’s undefeated run to his second consecutive victory in the Candidates, securing himself a second chance to challenge for the World Championship title!

Despite being the previous challenger, few pundits had selected him as the likely winner of the event. But Nepo surprised almost everyone by starting the event with a round one win against Ding Liren and then cruising in a dominating performance, scoring 9.5/14, a full point and a half ahead of the rest of the field.

FINAL STANDINGS

#		POINTS	W	D	L
1	GM Ian Nepomniachtchi	9.5	5	9	0
2	GM Ding Liren	8	4	8	2
T-3	GM Teimour Radjabov	7.5	3	9	2
T-3	GM Hikaru Nakamura	7.5	4	7	3
5	GM Fabiano Caruana	6.5	3	7	4
6	GM Alireza Firouzja	6	2	8	4
T-7	GM Jan-Krzysztof Duda	5.5	1	9	4
T-7	GM Richard Rapport	5.5	1	9	4

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Nepo would take a half point lead in the event as early as round four after a crucial win against Firouzja:

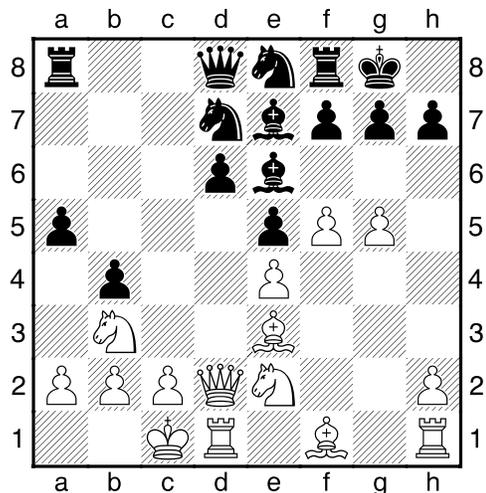
Nepomniachtchi, Ian (2773) - Firouzja, Alireza (2804) B90
 FIDE Candidates Tournament 2022
 Madrid (4.2), 21.06.2022

9.Qd2 0-0 10.0-0-0 Nbd7 11.g4 b5 12.g5 b4 13.Ne2 Ne8 14.f4 a5 15.f5 So far the players have been following theory.

1.e4 c5 2.Nf3 d6 3.d4 cxd4 4.Nxd4 Nf6 5.Nc3 a6 6.f3 A rarer move in the Sicilian Najdorf. Nepo had only played this move once before in a prior game against Alexander Grischuk.

6...e5 7.Nb3 Be6 8.Be3 Be7 Firouzja follows the mainline, deviating from the only prior instance of this line that Nepo had previously played.

8...Nbd7 9.Qd2 b5 10.0-0-0 h5 11.Kb1 Rc8 12.g3 Nb6 13.Bxb6 Qxb6 14.Nd5 Bxd5 15.exd5 g6 16.Bh3 Bh6 17.f4 Rc4 18.Qa5 Qxa5 19.Nxa5 Re4 20.fxe5 Rxe5 21.Rhe1 Rxe1 22.Rxe1+ Kf8 23.Nb7 Kg7 ½-½ (23) Nepomniachtchi,I (2733)-Grischuk,A (2773) Wijk aan Zee 2011



15...Bc4?!± Black seeks to keep the bishop on the board, but at the cost of a tempo. It is difficult to criticize this move

as it is the preferred move by Stockfish, however, in practice it scores poorly. The mainline with 15...a4 continues for several more moves and has been seen at the top level many times prior to this so it would be surprising if Firouzja was unaware of it. Having made the move in just 15 seconds it would appear that Firouzja was deliberately looking to avoid the mainline. Nepomniachtchi can now claim a significant edge.

The mainline continues: 15...a4 16.Nbd4 exd4 17.Nxd4 b3 18.Kb1 bxc2+ 19.Nxc2 Bb3 20.axb3 axb3 21.Na3 Ne5 22.h4 with play continuing, for example: 22...Ra5 23.Qc3 Qa8 24.Bg2 Nc7 25.Qxc7 Rc8 26.Qxe7 Nc4 27.g6 hxg6 28.fxg6 Nxa3+ 29.bxa3 Rxa3 30.gxf7+ Kh7 31.f8N+ Rxf8 32.Qxf8 Ra1+ 33.Kb2 Ra2+ 34.Kc3 Qa5+ 35.Kd3 Qb5+ 36.Kd4 Ra4+ 37.Kc3 Qc4+ 0–1 (37) Karjakin,S (2660)-Anand,V (2792) Wijk aan Zee 2006



Ian Nepomniachtchi vs. Alireza Firouzja Photo: Maria Emelianova/Chess.com

16.Kb1 Played instantly by Nepo.

16...a4 17.Nbc1 d5 Black attacks the center and simultaneously opens the diagonal for the e7–bishop and the d6–square for Black's knight on e8.

18.f6! It is important for both sides to fight for the initiative. The attack must go

forward!

18.exd5 has scored poorly in practice. 18...Nd6 19.f6 gxf6 20.gxf6 Nxf6 21.Bh6 Kh8 22.Qg5 Rg8 White's attack peters out.

18...gxf6 19.gxf6 Ndx6 20.Ng3 White wants to exchange off his undeveloped light-squared bishop for Black's very

active light-squared bishop. The players now slowed down with Firouzja spending 30 minutes to decide the best way forward. His difficulty in the position likely stemmed from the fact that there are several perfectly fine moves for Black to choose from (Nd6, Kh8 and Qc7), in addition to the tempting Bxf1 and other attacking moves.

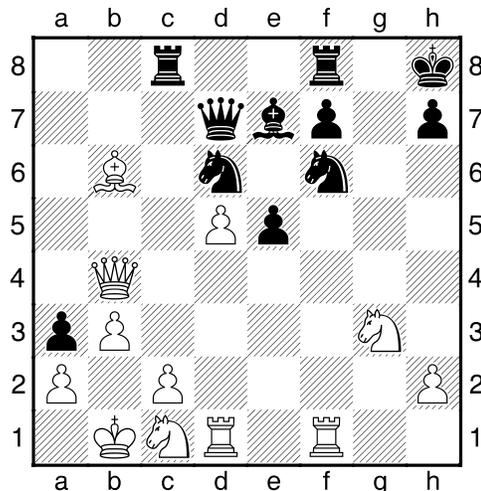
20...Bxf1?! This move loses another tempo with the bishop and helps White develop his rook.

21.Rhxf1 a3 22.b3 Absolutely necessary. Black's pawns appear imposing, but it is difficult to get through White's formation.

22...Kh8 23.exd5 Nd6? A very strange mistake. Mostly likely Firouzja judged that giving up the b-pawn would help facilitate an attack on the b-file, however, with correct play by White Black will be unsuccessful in manifesting the attack. In any case Firouzja followed up with another inaccuracy.

23...Qc7 pressuring c2 and to prepare ...Rd8 attacking the d5-pawn would be the correct way for Black to proceed. In order for White to maintain an advantage he would have to find the following difficult continuation: **24.Rxf6 Bxf6 25.d6 Qc6 26.Qxb4**

24.Qxb4 Rc8 25.Bb6 Qd7



26.Qe1!+- An excellent idea by Nepomniachtchi which was surely foreseen prior to his move Bb6. White intends to maneuver the bishop to c3 where it will simultaneously defend his king and play a devastating role in the attack on Black's vulnerable king.

26...Rb8 27.Ba5 Nc4 28.d6 Bd8 28...Nxd6 29.Qxe5+-; 28...Bxd6 29.Rxf6+-

29.Bc3 Qe6 30.Nd3 Black's pieces are in complete disarray while White's are continuously maneuvering into better attacking positions.

30...Nd5 31.Nf4! Nxf4 32.Rxf4 f6 Black is trying to keep the a1-h8 file closed, but it is too late.

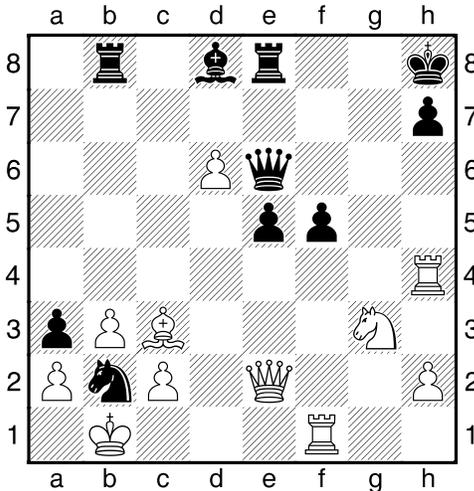
33.Qe2 Threatens the knight on c4 while simultaneously activating the remaining white pieces for the attack.

33...Nb2 An ugly square for the knight which will never escape. In a worst case scenario White can resort to eventually winning the a-pawn and then the knight.

34.Rdf1 Re8 35.Rh4 Targeting the weak

h7-square.

35...f5



36.Rxh7+!! Kxh7 37.Qh5+ Kg8
37...Qh6 38.Qxe8 The position is hopeless.

38.Nxf5 Bf6 39.Rg1+ with mate to follow.

1-0

The tournament was not without close calls for Nepo as in just the next round he found himself in a difficult situation against US Grandmaster Hikaru Nakamura.

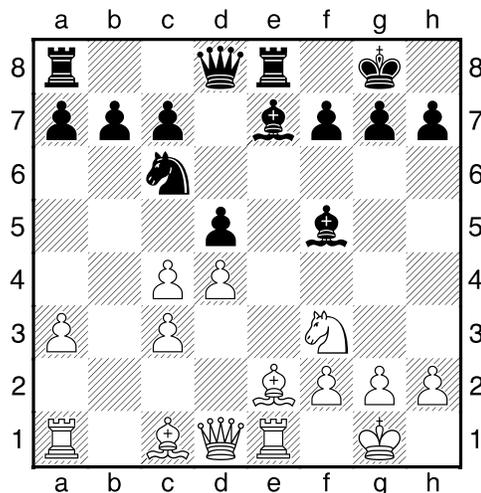
Nakamura, Hikaru (2760) - Nepomniachtchi, Ian (2773) C42
FIDE Candidates Tournament 2022
Madrid (5.4), 22.06.2022

1.e4 e5 2.Nf3 Nf6 Petroff Defense has been essayed frequently by Nepo in recent years.

3.Nxe5 d6 4.Nf3 Nxe4 5.d4 d5 6.Bd3 Nc6 7.0-0 Be7 8.c4

An earlier encounter between Caruana and Nepo continued with the less usual 8.Nbd2 Bf5 9.Qe2 Nd6 10.Bxf5 Nxf5 11.Qd3 Qd7 12.Nb3 0-0 13.Nc5 Qc8 14.Bf4 Nfxd4 15.Nxd4 Bxc5 16.Nb3 Bb6 17.Qxd5 Qg4 18.Qg5 Qxg5 19.Bxg5 Rfe8 20.Rfe1 Nb4 21.Rxe8+ Rxe8 22.Bd2 Nxc2 23.Rc1 Re2 24.Rxc2 Rxf2 25.Nc5 Bxc5 26.Rxc5 Rxd2 27.Rxc7 h5 28.Rxb7 h4 29.a4 a5 30.Rb5 f6 31.h3 Kf7 32.b3 Rb2 33.Rxa5 Rxb3 34.Rb5 Ra3 35.Rb4 g5 36.Kf2 Kg6 37.Rc4 Kf5 38.Rb4 Kg6 39.Rc4 Kf5 40.Rb4 ½-½ (40) Caruana,F (2786)-Nepomniachtchi,I (2773) Bucharest 2022

8...Nb4 9.Be2 0-0 10.Nc3 Bf5 11.a3 Nxc3 12.bxc3 Nc6 13.Re1 Re8 Played after 9 minutes of thought. While it is the top move, it is clear that Nepo is beginning to reach the end of his prior knowledge.



14.Ra2! Nakamura repeats this move from his win against Akobian at the 2016 US Championships where he won the game in just 37 moves.

14...Bf8 While not a blunder, this move is an inaccuracy played after 16 minutes of

thought. Nakamura's preparation has caught Nepo off guard. A win here for Nakamura would propel him into the lead in the tournament after five rounds.

15.cxd5 Qxd5 16.c4N Qe4?! Nepo played this move in his characteristically quick style. However, the situation called for more accuracy. Finding a safe spot for the queen is of critical importance. The queen will now find itself under constant threat for the remainder of the game.

17.Bf1 Qg4?

17...Qb1 The only safe move, but it leads to massive complications. Stockfish gives the following example: 18.Rxe8 Rxe8 19.Rb2 Qa1 20.Rxb7 Be4 21.Rxc7 Bd6 22.Rd7 Bxa3 23.Nd2 Qxc1 24.Qxc1 Bxc1 25.Nxe4 Rxe4 26.d5±

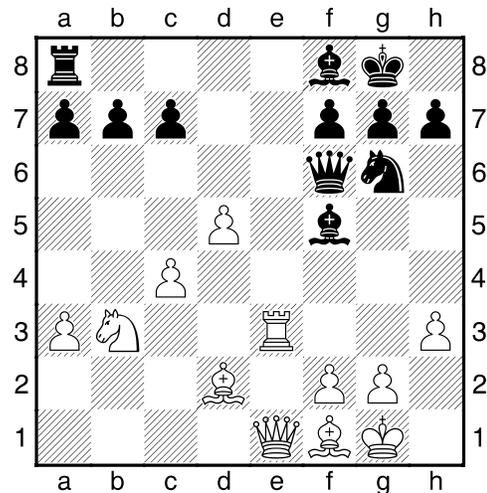
18.h3!+- Rxe1

18...Qg6? 19.d5 Rxe1 20.Qxe1 Ne7 21.g4 Threatening Nh4. 21...Bc8 Black's position is incredibly passive while White has free reign for all of his pieces.

19.Qxe1 Qe4 20.Re2 Qd3 21.Rb2 Qe4 22.Re2 Qd3 23.Re3 Qb1 24.d5 Ne7 25.Nd2 Qa1 26.Nb3 Qf6 Ten of Black's 26 moves have been with the queen as he continues to dodge threat after threat.

27.Bd2 Preparing further queen harassment with Bc3.

27...Ng6



28.Na5? Nakamura was understandably tempted by the vulnerability of Black's queenside, but this move gives up his initiative against Black's queen and with it his advantage.

After 28.Bc3 Qd8 29.g3 dominating the knight and clearing g2 for the light-squared bishop. White would maintain the advantage with a strong positional bind. After 29...Bxa3 White can at least regain the material with 30.Bxg7 Kxg7 31.Qa1±

28...b6 29.Nc6 The knight looks great on c6, but it has no targets and Black can evict it.

29...Bd7 30.Bc3 Qd6 31.Bb4 Nakamura could have played on with 31.g3, but it is difficult to see how to handle all of Black's various replies including ...Bxc6 and ...Qxa3.

31...Qf6 32.Bc3 Qd6 33.Bb4 Realizing his advantage has slipped, Nakamura acquiesces to a draw before his queenside pawns become vulnerable.

33...Qf6 34.Bc3 A fortunate escape for Nepo, who would go on to maintain his

lead without losing the initiative.

1/2-1/2



Hikaru Nakamura Photo: Maria Emelianova/Chess.com

Nepo's ability to win games as well as his superb defense made him an unstoppable force. He again saved a critical game against his closest competitor Fabiano Caruana in round 9.

**Caruana, Fabiano (2786) -
Nepomniachtchi, Ian (2773) C42**
FIDE Candidates Tournament 2022
Madrid (9.3), 27.06.2022

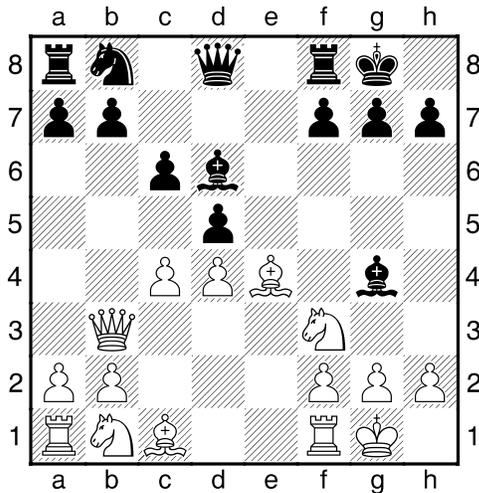
Another critical escape, in which Nepomniachtchi needed to demonstrate continuous superb defense came in his round nine game against Caruana. With Nepo on the verge of running away with the tournament, this was likely Caruana's best chance to change the course of the tournament in his favor. As the closest chaser this game was of pivotal importance.

1.e4 e5 2.Nf3 Nf6 Nepo sticks with his solid Petroff.

3.Nxe5 d6 4.Nf3 Nxe4 5.d4 d5 6.Bd3 Bd6 Nepo avoids the same continuation from his earlier encounter with Nakamura.

7.0-0 0-0 8.c4 c6 9.Re1 Earlier in the same tournament Nepo had won an incredible game against Richard Rapport after 9.Qb3 Bg4 10.Bxe4

(it will be captured) and his king will not be safe in the resulting middlegame.

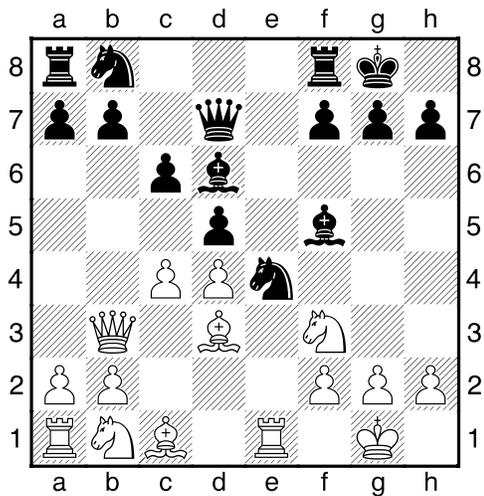


22...Qd7 23.Ne4 Na6 24.Qxf8+ Bxf8
 25.Bf4 Qxh3 26.Rad1 h6 27.Bg3 Nc5
 28.Rfe1 Ne6 29.a3 h5 30.Rd3 Qf5 31.b4
 h4 32.Bb8 Ng5 33.Rde3 Nxe4 34.fxe4
 Qf2 35.h3 Be7 36.Bh2 Bg5 37.Bg1 Qd2
 38.R3e2 Qd3 39.Be3 Bf6 40.Bxa7
 Qxh3+ 41.Kg1 Qg3+ 42.Kf1 h3 43.Bg1
 Bh4 0–1 (43) Rapport,R (2764)-
 Nepomniachtchi,I (2766) Madrid 2022

9...Bf5 10.Qb3 Qd7

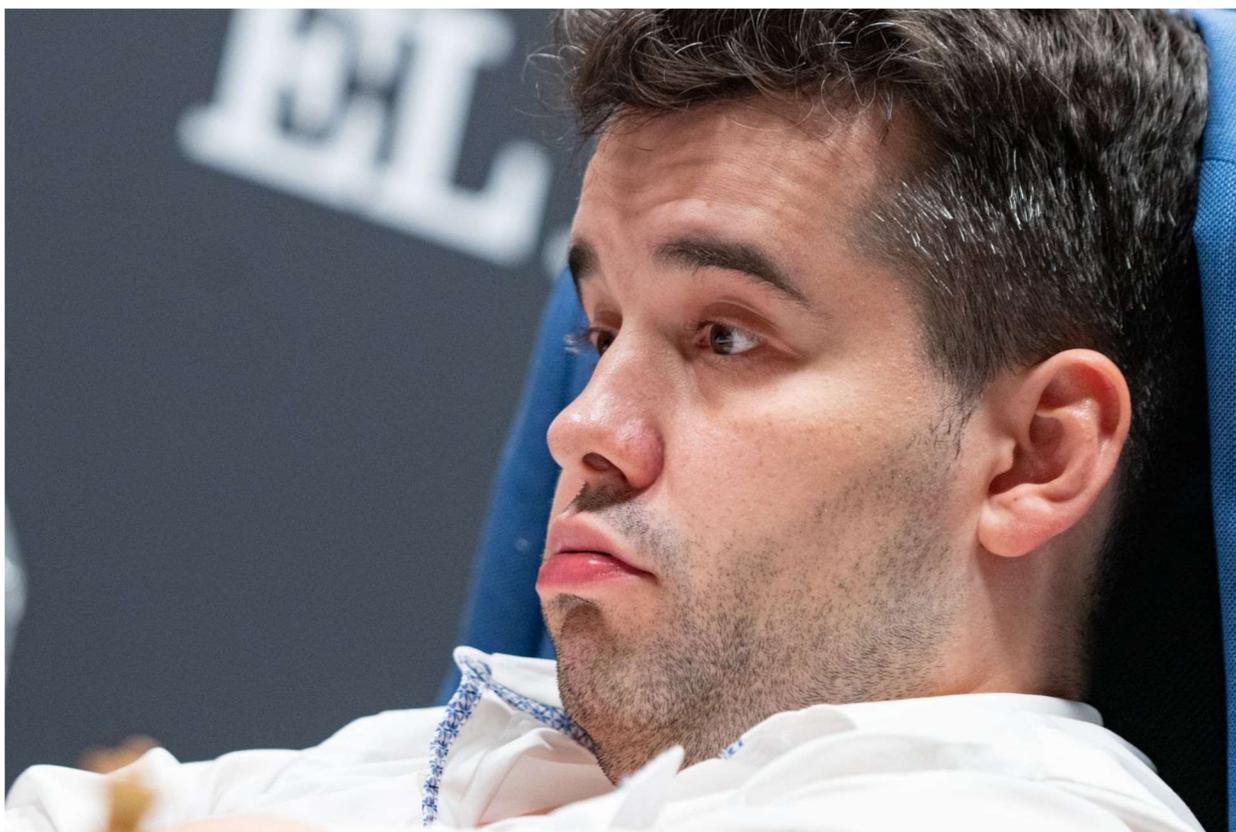
Apparently this move leads to a known draw! The only games in the database to have reached this position can only be found in the correspondence database! In this case, the preparation by both players is simply incredible.

10...dxe4 11.Ng5 Be7 12.Nxe4 Qxd4
 13.Qxb7 Qxe4 14.Qxa8 Bh3 Forcing
 perpetual check. 15.gxh3 Qg6+ 16.Kh1
 Qe4+ 17.Kg1 Qg6+ 18.Kh1 Qe4+ 19.f3
 Qd3 20.Kg2 Qg6+ 21.Kh1 Qd3 22.Nd2??



But Rapport decides to play on! The fact that Nepo already had a significant lead and Rapport needed wins in order to have a chance to catch up likely contributed to this dubious decision. White has only a temporary material advantage as his queen is trapped on a8

11.Nh4! Caruana has come to the game with incredible preparation. This move deviated from last year's World Championship match where Carlsen chose the computer's top move 11.Nc3.



Ian Nepomniachtchi Photo: Maria Emelianova/Chess.com

11.Nc3 Nxc3 12.Bxf5 Qxf5 13.bxc3 b6
14.cxd5 cxd5 15.Qb5 Qd7 16.a4 Qxb5
17.axb5 a5 18.Nh4 g6 19.g4 Nd7 20.Ng2
Rfc8 21.Bf4 Bxf4 22.Nxf4 Rxc3 23.Nxd5
Rd3 24.Re7 Nf8 25.Nf6+ Kg7 26.Ne8+
Kg8 27.d5 a4 28.Nf6+ Kg7 29.g5 a3
30.Ne8+ Kg8 31.Nf6+ Kg7 32.Ne8+ Kg8
33.Nf6+ $\frac{1}{2}$ - $\frac{1}{2}$ (33) Carlsen,M (2855)-
Nepomniachtchi,I (2782) Dubai 2021

11...Be6 In order to maintain the bishop pair, but now the b1–h7 diagonal is weak.

12.Qc2 After 12.Bxe4 dxe4 13.Rxe4 b5 Black keeps a slight edge.

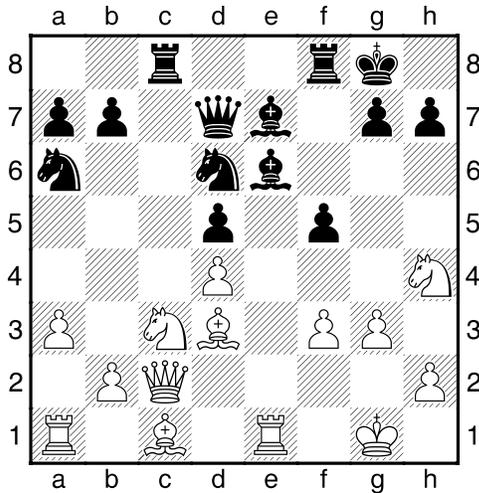
12...Na6 13.a3 f5 Necessary, but now Black will have difficulties on the e-file, the same file his bishop was pushed to by White's earlier Nh4. Caruana's idea is deep as he still has not spent any significant time on the clock.

14.cxd5 cxd5 15.Nc3 Rac8 16.f3 Be7

16...Nf6? 17.Bxf5+–;

After 16...Nxc3 17.bxc3 Be7 18.g3 White does not fear the exchange 18...Bxh4 19.gxh4± Since White's weak pawns are difficult to exploit and it is actually White that will likely gain an attack on the open g-file. The knight on a6 remains out of play for some time and White's bishops are perfectly poised to participate in a kingside attack.

17.g3 Nd6?



Until now it was clear that Caruana was still in his prep. Here he took his first think (32 minutes) to decide how he wanted to punish Black's retreat and opening of the e-file.

Black's best choice: 17...Bf6 18.fxe4 Bxd4+ 19.Kh1 fxe4 20.Bb5 Qf7± Black's extra two pawns do not quite compensate for White's extra knight.



Fabiano Caruana Photo: Maria Emelianova/Chess.com

18.Qa4 The position is incredibly sharp and Black's moves are very difficult to find.

18...Bf6

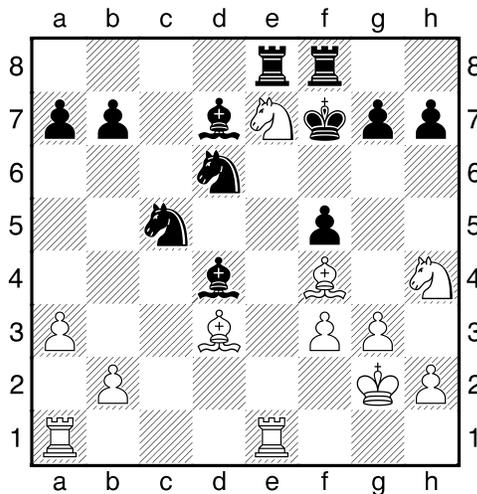
18...Qxa4? 19.Nxa4 Kf7 20.Bxa6 bxa6 21.Nc5±;

The best continuation is 18...Rc6 19.Bxa6 Bxh4 (But not 19...Rxa6?? 20.Qxd7 Bxd7 21.Rxe7+-) 20.gxh4 Rxa6

21.Qxd7 Bxd7 22.Bf4 Nb5 23.Nxb5 Bxb5
24.Rac1± White's pieces are more active and danger lurks on the dark-squares near Black's king.

19.Qxd7 Bxd7 20.Nxd5 Bxd4+ 21.Kg2 Rce8 22.Bf4 Although material is balanced, Black's pieces are on incredibly awkward squares, making it difficult to deal with White's attack in the center.

22...Nc5 23.Ne7+ Kf7



23...Kh8? 24.Rad1+– All of Black's hanging pieces on the d-file are now in danger and there is not time to remove them to safety!; 23...Rxe7? 24.Rxe7 Nxd3 25.Rxd7 Once again Black's pieces along the d-file find themselves in trouble. 25...Nxf4+ 26.gxf4 Bxb2 27.Ra2 Bf6 28.Rxd6 Bxh4 29.Rd7+– with a winning endgame.

24.Bxf5?=- In time pressure, Caruana likely saw the simplified ending that this move guaranteed and went for it, however, this move gives up the tension and the advantage.

24.Bf1! avoiding simplifications and threatening Rad1 would have kept the pressure on Black and White's position would remain superior. For example, after 24...Rxe7 25.Bxd6 Rxe1 26.Rxe1 Rd8 27.Rd1 Ne6 28.Nxf5 Bf6 29.Bc4+– White's light-squared bishop returns to the game and Black's pieces are completely paralyzed.

24...Nxf5 25.Nhxf5 Bxf5 26.Nxf5 Rxe1 27.Rxe1 Nd3 28.Re4 Bxb2 29.Be3 Bxa3 30.Bxa7 Ra8 31.Bd4 In the time scramble the game has fizzled into a drawn ending.

31...Bf8 32.Re2 g6 33.Ne3 Rd8 34.Bb6 Rd6 35.Nc4 Rc6 36.Re4 Bg7 37.f4 Re6 38.Kf3 Ne1+ 39.Ke3 Nc2+ 40.Kf3 Ne1+ A critical miss by Caruana and a nice save by Nepomniachtchi who would go on to remain unscathed and win the candidates!

1/2–1/2

With nearly all of the other chasing players trading wins/losses among each other, Nepomniachtchi was able to clinch victory with a draw against Richard Rapport in the penultimate round. Despite this early clarity, the final round still held importance for two players, Hikaru Nakamura and Ding Liren. The two faced each other with the winner (a draw would be enough for Nakamura) guaranteed second place. In the event that Magnus Carlsen decides not to participate in the next World Championship match the runner-up of the candidates would play the match against Nepo for the title.

Ding, Liren (2806) - Nakamura, Hikaru (2760) D40 Candidates Tournament Madrid (14), 04.07.2022

1.d4 Nf6 2.c4 e6 3.Nf3 d5 4.Nc3 c5 5.e3 Nc6 6.a3 dxc4 7.Bxc4 a6 Queen's Gambit Declined: Semi-Tarrasch

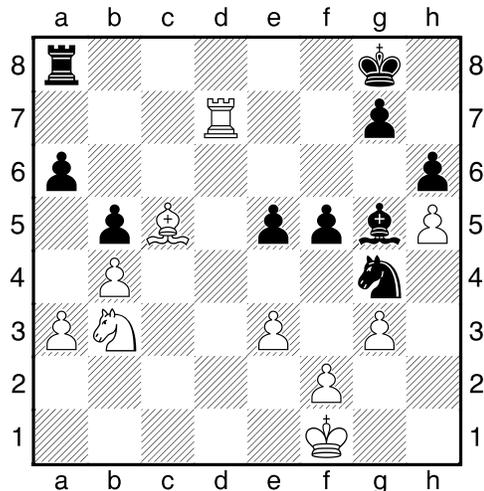
8.Bd3 b5 9.dxc5 Bxc5 10.b4 Be7 11.0-0 Bb7 12.Bb2 0-0 13.Ne4 Nxe4 14.Bxe4 f5= Unsurprisingly both players have handled the opening accurately.

15.Bb1 White intends to re-route the bishop to a2 where it will be an effective attacker of the e6-pawn.

15...Qxd1 16.Rxd1 Rfd8 17.Ba2 Kf7 18.h4 h6 19.Rdc1 Rxc6 followed by Ne5+ is threatened.

19...Bd6 20.Rc2 Ne7 21.Nd4 Bd5 22.Bxd5 Nxd5 23.Rac1 Rd7 24.Nb3 Be7 25.h5 Bf6 26.Bd4 e5 27.Bc5 Bd8 28.Rd2 The symmetrical nature of the pawn structure would suggest the game is drawish and the computer confirms it is equal. Still, it is hard to deny White's initiative. Black needs to play carefully to avoid problems on the d-file. Rcd1 is a threat.

28...Nf6 29.Rxd7+ Nxd7 30.Rd1 Nf6 31.Bd6 Ng4 32.Bc5 Bh4 33.Rd7+ Kg8 34.g3 Bg5 35.Kf1



35...Bd8? Nakamura forgoes the alternative drawing variation, perhaps seeking a more direct drawing method. However, this move is too passive and for the first time a player (White) now has a significant advantage.

Black can secure a draw after 35...Rd8 36.Rxd8+ Bxd8 37.Bd6 Kf7 38.Nc5 Be7 39.Bxe7 Kxe7 40.Nxa6 Kd6 41.Nc5 Nf6=



Ding Liren Photo: Maria Emelianova/Chess.com

36.Rb7+– Perhaps this is what Nakamura missed. White's piece activity and coordination are far superior.

36...f4

36...a5 is not playable due to 37.bxa5 Bxa5 38.Nxa5 Rxa5 39.Ke2 Nf6 40.Bb4 Ra8 41.Rxb5+–

37.gxf4 exf4 38.e4 Bf6?

38...f3!= would have been more challenging for White to answer.

39.Nd4 From here on the defense for Black is an admirable, yet futile effort.

39...Re8 40.Kg2 Ne5 41.Nf5 f3+ 42.Kg3 Nc4 43.Be7 Bb2 44.Kxf3 Bxa3 45.Kg3 Ne5 46.Bc5 Nf7 47.f3 Bc1 48.Ra7 Bd2 49.Rxa6 Be1+ 50.Kg2 Bc3 51.Ra7 Ng5 52.Ne7+ Kh8 53.Ng6+ Kg8 54.Ne7+ Kh8 55.Nd5 Bb2 56.Ra2 Bc1 57.Rc2 Ba3 58.Be3

1–0

A fine win by Ding Liren!



Photo: Maria Emelianova/Chess.com

On July 20th World Champion Magnus Carlsen officially announced that he will not defend his title stating:

“...I am not motivated to play another match. I simply feel that I don't have a lot to gain, I don't particularly like it, and although I'm sure a match would be interesting for historical reasons and all of that, I don't have any inclination to play and I will simply not play the match.”

This means that the next world championship match will see a battle between the winner of the candidates Ian Nepomniachtchi and the runner up, China's number one Ding Liren, the winner of the crucial round 14 game against Hikaru Nakamura.

