

2020-21 Candidates Tournament

ROUND 8



SICILIAN DEFENSE, NAJDORF POISONED PAWN VARIATION (B97)

GM Fabiano Caruana (2820)
GM Maxime Vachier-Lagrave (2758)
2020-2021 Candidates Tournament,
Yekaterinburg, RUS (8.1), 04.19.2021

Annotations by GM Jacob Aagaard for
Chess Life Online

1. e4 c5 2. Nf3 d6 3. d4 cxd4 4. Nxd4 Nf6
5. Nc3 a6 6. Bg5 e6 7. f4 Qb6 8. Qd2 Qxb2
9. Rb1 Qa3



Caruana has in the past been successful in trapping MVL in preparation in the Najdorf Poisoned Pawn, so it was a reasonable idea to do it again. MVL has lost too many games in this line for it to be a reasonable choice for him. But as GM Alexei Shirov before him, he sticks to his openings no matter how often they fail him.

10. e5

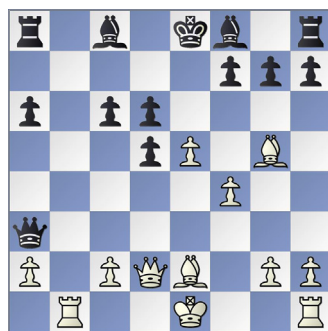
The last time the two played the Najdorf was in Wijk aan Zee. After 10. Be2!? Nc6 11. Nxc6 bxc6 12. e5 Nd5 13. Nxd5 MVL chose the wrong recapture. 13. ... exd5?

(see diagram at top of next column)

14. e6!! White already had a winning attack. 14. ... f6 (14. ... Bxe6 15. f5 Bxf5 16. 0-0 was the key point. White has a winning attack.) 15. Bh5+ Kd8 16. Bh4 White had a winning position and won the game in Caruana – Vachier-Lagrave, Wijk aan Zee 2021.

10. ... h6 11. Bh4 dxe5 12. fxe5 Nfd7

Another main line is 12. ... g5 13. exf6 gxf4



14. Be2 Qa5 15. 0-0 h3 16. Qe3 Rg8 17. g3 Rg5, which also looks good for Black.

13. Ne4 Qxa2 14. Rd1 Qd5

14. ... Qb2 has also been played with success.

15. Qe3 Qxe5 16. c3

Here 16. Be2 Bc5 17. Bg3 Qd5 18. c4 Bxd4 19. Rxd4 Qa5+ 20. Rd2 0-0 21. Bd6 f5 has been tested many times and has been understood as equal for a long time. In Giri – Vachier-Lagrave, Paris 2019, MVL even won the game.

16. ... Bc5

Another line begins with 16. ... Be7, and to me it looks quite solid. But there is nothing wrong with the game line either. MVL decided on which line to play only after 18 minutes of thinking.

17. Bg3 Qd5



18. Bc4!!N

This is an idea found by Caruana's second, GM Rustam Kazimdzanov, and one which was apparently found a good deal of time ago.

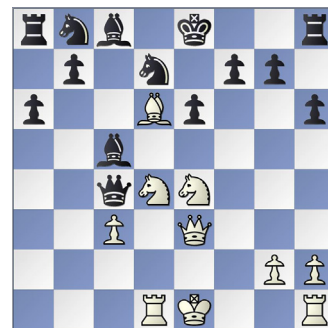
Objectively I have to say that this is not a good move, but it is a stunning novelty nonetheless. And it is certainly an effective one, once we get to the end of the opening. Before the restart of the tournament, I was quite lukewarm on the power of great opening preparation. If you look back to the games I annotated last year, you can see that the advanced concepts from Giri in round one and Caruana in round three backfired. You can argue that the same is the case in this game. But we will come to this later on...

18. Bd6 had been played exclusively up to this point. White has no advantage after 18. ... Bxd6 19. Nb5 Qxd1+ 20. Kxd1 axb5 21. Nxd6+ Ke7 with enough pieces for the queen.

18. ... Qxc4

Black has to accept the sacrifice. Note that 18. ... Qh5? 19. Bd6 with a winning attack was not really in the cards.

19. Bd6



At this point Black has a lot of options and obviously, MVL spent a lot of time.

19. ... Nf6

This is objectively the best move. But it does not mean that there is an easy ride ahead.

Here 19. ... Bxd4 20. Rxd4 Qa2 21. 0-0 looks very dangerous for Black. Using an engine, we can find a path through the labyrinth that leads to a slightly better endgame for White, which is not easy to hold in practice.

The most practical solution is also the most imaginative. Black could play 19. ... f5! 20. Nxc5 Kf7!

(see diagram at top of next column)

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Here Black has returned the piece and is ready to bring the pieces into the game. White does not have anything better than 21. Nxf5! (21. Nd3 Nc6 22. 0-0 Re8 Black is absolutely safe) 21. ... exf5 22. Rd4 Qa2 23. Rd2 Qc4 with a draw.

20. Nxc5 Nd5

It must have been rather confusing to calculate variations like 20. ... b6!? Even analyzing it with an engine is not straight forward. The following variation is just a taste: 21. Nf5 Nd5 22. Nxc7+ Kd8 23. Rxd5!? Qxd5 24. Nxc6+ Kd7! 25. Nc7 Qxd6 26. Nxa8 Qc5 27. Nxb6+ Kc6 with a drawn ending approaching.

21. Qe5 Rg8!

The intermediate move 21. ... Qxc3+? 22. Kf2 is a disaster: 22. ... Rg8?! (22. ... Nf6 is better, but after 23. Qe2! Black is still in grave danger. He is not managing to get the pieces into the game) 23. Rhe1 Nf6 24. Qf5! is a scary proposition. White is about to sacrifice on e6. The black king is stuck in the center.



22. Ndx6!

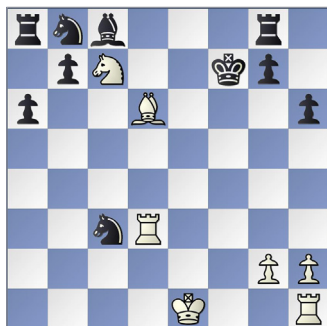
White has to go all in. Caruana was obviously still in preparation.

22. ... fxe6 23. Nxe6 Qxc3+!?

It is very hard to fault MVL for this decision. If you were under combined attack from Stockfish and Caruana, you would also be desperately attracted to chopping the queens off at the first possibility.

Black would have been closer to solve his problems if he had played 23. ... Nf6!, when after the knight retracts, for example to 24. Nf8+, Black will play 24. ... Be6!! White cannot play 25. Nxe6 Kf7, and Black wins. Instead he has to exchange queens, but this time on Black's terms, i.e. 25. Qxe6+ Qxe6+ 26. Nxe6 Kf7 27. Nc7 Ra7 and White has to play a few accurate moves not to be worse. Certainly Caruana knew of this and was prepared for it, so he would have shown a straight path to a draw, for sure.

24. Qxc3 Nxc3 25. Nc7+ Kf7 26. Rd3



Compared to the onslaught he has been faced with, MVL has reacted well and in decent time. At this point he had 34 minutes and was almost out of the woods. And this is as good a place as any to revisit my claims about the danger of "too deep" preparation.

What can happen is that a player and his team spend all their time on opening preparation and limited time on practical skills. The success of Nepomniachtchi in the first half of the tournament was closely connected to playing well, while his preparation was (it must be said) not a great success — with Black he got into big trouble twice in the French Defense. But he managed to outplay his opponents in three games, especially through practical and well-timed choices. Against Ding Liren he played superficially, as he is known to do. In general the thing that has given him first place after eight rounds is good play.

26. ... Ne4?

Played after two minutes.

MVL is a dynamic player, so sacrificing the rook in the corner must have been tempting. But this is not the middlegame. Activity is not as relevant in the endgame. Obviously MVL had decided in advance to give up the exchange, but still it was the right time to look seriously at 26. ... Ra7!. After 27. Rxc3 there are all kinds of tricks with 0-0+ and Nd5-e7 to worry about. If MVL had tried to solve these problems, he would have. The simplest way to do this is 27. ... Kg6! and here:

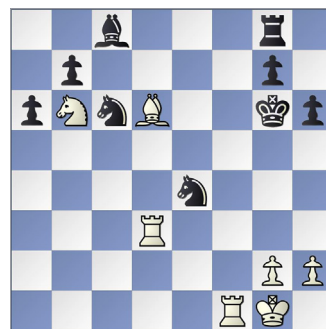
(a) The strongest for White is not 28. 0-0 Kh7, with a balanced position. It is time to look for the brakes.

(b) If White pushes too hard, we see the point of the king move: 28. Nd5 Nc6! 29. Bc5 Re8+ 30. Kf2 b6! and there is space for a check on f7 and White will have to defend an endgame a pawn down.

27. 0-0+ Kg6?!

It turns out that the king is not better off on the queenside after the exchange sacrifice: 27. ... Nf6 28. Nxa8 Be6 with a small edge for White was a better go.

28. Nxa8 Nc6 29. Nb6



This is a good moment to talk about the endgame. At first glance, Black is equal in material, but in reality it will be very difficult to defend the pawns on the queenside. The knights will eventually belong on the kingside, where they will not be lost. But g7 is a weakness and the opposite-colored bishops — which so often are a drawing factor or a good way to ensure compensation for an exchange — are here really

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just the absence of a dark squared bishop for Black.

All of these considerations, if we approach them in the spirit of Swedish endgame legend GM Ulf Andersson, leaves Black scrambling for a final endgame where Black is drawing. I was watching the Chess24 broadcast with Magnus Carlsen, David Howell and Tania Sachdev. There they were a little too busy talking what I would characterize as idolization of MVL's defensive skills, rather than debating the properties of the endgame. Those who followed the Chess24 coverage would probably be surprised that my view is so different from that of the World Champion and his co-hosts, but the commentary team simply did not get past the first glance.

29. ... Rd8?!

As it is hard to imagine many setups on the kingside, where Black will draw with a rook versus knight, it made a lot of sense to keep the bishop. Better was 29. ... Bg4 with a very dangerous position.

30. Nxc8! Rxc8



Everything has gone wrong for Black. At this point Caruana had to slow down and work out the best way to convert the advantage.

31. Ba3!?

This is still winning, but it was worth looking for simplicity. 31. Re1! would have been a strong intermediate move: 31. ... Re8 (31. ... Nxd6 32. Rxd6+ Kh7 33. Rd7 will soon mean the end of the black queenside, as he will have to defend the second weakness on g7) 32. Ba3! (threatening Rd3-e3, winning a piece) 32. ... Nf6 33. Rxe8 Nxe8 34. Rd7 b5 35. Rb7 and here White wins the queenside and later the game.

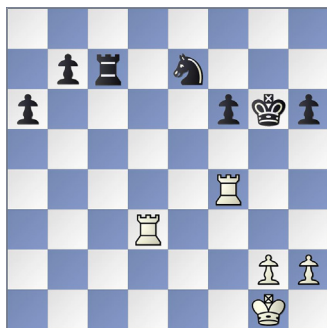
31. ... Rc7 32. Rf4 Nf6 33. Bb2!

White creates more weaknesses in Black's position.

33. ... Ne7

White is also winning after 33. ... Na5 34. Bxf6 gxf6 35. Rd6 Rf7 36. Rg4+ Kf5 37. Rh4 and either 37. ... Kg6 38. Rd3! or 37. ... Kg5 38. Rhd4 with 39. Rd7. Black cannot hold the queenside and the split pawns on the kingside are easy targets.

34. Bxf6 gxf6



Everything has worked as it should for Caruana. The position is winning and he has over 50 minutes on the clock to take him to move 40 and beyond. So what does the World

no. 2 do? He makes a committal move after 29 seconds.

35. h4??

Quick, confident and bad, this violates the Steinitz rule, which states: Don't make unnecessary pawn moves in the endgame. It is clear that Caruana is dreaming of playing h4-h5 and that he believes that the tactics are in his favor.

35. h3!? makes some sort of sense, controlling important squares and then bringing out the king. But the strongest move is 35. Rd6!, where 35. ... Rc1+ is met with 36. Rf1! and after 35. ... Nf5 36. Rb6 the queenside is doomed. White will still have to play accurately, as he picks off the pawns. For example: 36. ... h5 37. h3 a5 38. Kh2! Rc2 39. Rf3 White is in control and will pick off the black pawns one by one.

35. ... h5!

MVL must have found it hard to believe his own luck. Just a moment ago his pawns were scattered and weak, and now they work beautifully together with the knight, which can be well placed on either f5 or g4.

36. Rg3+

There are other options, but this was obviously the idea.



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36. ... Kf7 37. Rg5 Rc1+!

Caruana had by now understood that this was coming. It is safe to understand that Caruana had planned for 37. ... Ng6? 38. Rxh5!, winning because of the check on the 7th rank.

38. Kh2 Ng6 39. Rf2 Nxh4

While MVL expected this to be leading to an easy draw, Caruana was expecting a more dynamic approach from the Frenchman: 39. ... Kg7 40. Rxh5 Ne5 hoping to advance the queenside. This is a misunderstanding of the position entirely. Caruana wanted to play 41. Kf3, but even stronger is 41. Rf4! and then Rh5-f5, after which the pawns will advance on the kingside and Black will be unable to do anything on the queenside.

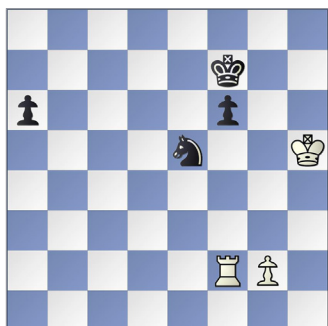
40. Rxh5 Ng6 41. Rh7+ Ke6 42. Rxb7 Ne5! 43. Rb6+ Rc6 44. Rxc6+ Nxc6 45. Kg3



45. ... Kf7!

It is important to keep the king out.

45. ... Ne5? would lose as the white king penetrates and cannot be kicked out: 46. Kh4! Kf7 47. Kh5!



47. ... Kg7 (If Black tries to defend with the king from the other side, White wins with: 47. ... Ke6 48. Ra2 Nd3 49. Rxa6+ Kf7 50. Kh6 Ne5 51. Ra4 Nc6 52. Rf4 Ne5 53. g4 Ke6 54. Kg7 Ke7 White needs to lose a tempo. 55. Re4 Ke6 56. Ra4 Ke7 57. Rf4 Nd7 58. Re4+ Kd6 59. Rd4+ White takes on d7 and wins) 48. Ra2 Nf7 (Trying to go for the g2-pawn also fails. After 48. ... Nd3 49. Rxa6 Nf4+ 50. Kg4 Nxe2 51. Re6 the knight is trapped) 49. Rxa6 Ne5 50. Ra7+ Nf7 51. g4 Kf8 52. Kg6 Ne5+ and now either the technically correct 53. Kf5! or 53. Kxf6!? Nxe4+ 54. Kf5! when the black knight is far away from the protective assistance of the king. White wins with 54. ... Nh6+ 55. Kg6 Ng4 56. Ra5! for example.

46. Rc2 Nb4 47. Rd2 Nc6 48. Kf4 Kg6 49. Rd6 Ne5 50. Rxa6 Nf7

Caruana was unsure about the correct evaluation of this endgame, but he also could not see how to make progress. This endgame is a draw, but it is by no means easy to play, as was apparent from how the players played. What Black needed to work out was how to organize the pieces. It turns out that the key idea is to put the knight on g7. The pawn will take care of the e5- and g5-squares, so the king and knight will take care of the light squares. This is the reason for putting the knight on g7.

51. Ke4 Nh6 52. Ra5

It is key to understand that the king cannot penetrate from the back. After 52. Kd5 Nf5 53. Ke6 Ng7+ 54. Ke7 Nf5+ 55. Kf8 almost any knight move will hold the fortress, while Black can even go for counterplay with 55. ... Kg5?!, which is entirely unnecessary, but after 56. Kf7 Kg4 57. Kxf6 Nh4 Black holds nonetheless.

52. ... Nf7 53. Ra3 Nd6+ 54. Kf4 Nf5 55. Rd3 Nh6?

55. ... Ng7! was a draw as described above. In the press conference, MVL said that he expected this to lose, but Caruana assumed, correctly, that it would be a draw.

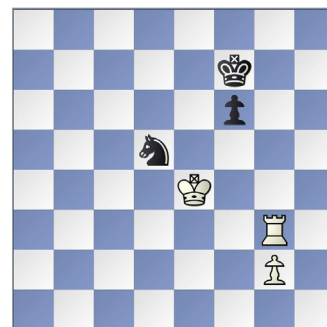
56. Rg3+ Kf7 57. Ke4 Ng8 58. Kf5 Ne7+ 59. Kf4?!

59. Kg4? Kg6! would be a draw. The accurate 59. Ke4! was the thing to play.

59. ... Nd5+ 60. Kg4?

A small misstep. As we shall see, the right path was: 60. Kf5 Ne7+ 61. Ke4!.

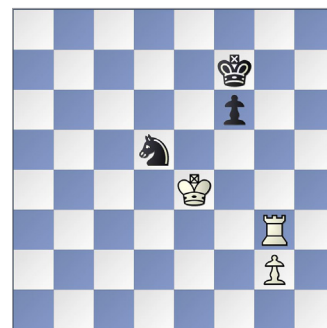
60. ... Kg6 61. Kf3+ Kf7 62. Ke4



62. ... Ne7?

Knowing where the knight belongs make this position easy. If you do not know where it belongs, you would find 62. ... Nc7! as the only move to be an act of digital wizardry! In light of our analysis, 63. Kf4 Ne6+ 64. Kg4 Ng7!, building a fortress, is not so difficult to understand.

63. Kf4 Nd5+ 64. Kf5! Ne7+



65. Ke4!

This time Caruana finds the winning line.

65. ... Ng8

If 65. ... Ke6 66. Ra3 Kf7 67. Ra7 Ke6 68. Kf3! and the right path to the kingside is avoiding checks. Play continues 68. ... Nd5 69. Ra5 Ne7 70. Kg4 when White wins after a lot of more action.

66. Rh3 Kg6 67. Ra3 Kf7

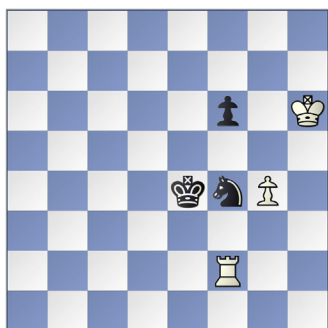
There are other variations here, but they all

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show White's dominance. An example: 67. ... Ne7 68. Ra5 Nc6 69. Rd5 Ne7 70. Rb5! (to be out of reach from checks) 70. ... Nc6 71. Kd5 Ne5 72. Ke6 Nf7 73. Rb6! Ng5+ 74. Ke7 Nh7 75. Rb8 Ng5 76. Rg8+ Kf5 77. g4+ (a nice trick) 77. ... Ke5 78. Ra8 Kf4 79. Ra4+ Ke5 (79. ... Ne4 80. Rxe4+ and the pawn ending wins) 80. Kf8 Ne4 81. Kg7 Ng3 82. Kg6 Ne2 83. Ra2 Nf4+ 84. Kh6 Nh3 85. Rh2 Nf4 86. Rf2 Ke4

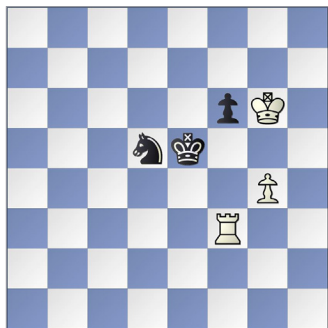


87. Rf1! (87. Kg7 f5 88. g5 Nh3! would allow Black to keep his pawn and escape with a draw) 87. ... Ke5 88. Kh7! Ke4 89. Kg7 Ke5 90. Re1+ and White wins.

68. Kf4 Nh6 69. Rg3! Ng8 70. Kg4 Ne7

If 70. ... Kg6 71. Kh4+

71. Kh5 Nd5 72. Rf3 Ke6 73. g4 Ke5 74. Kg6, Black resigned.



The key line is 74. ... Ke6 75. Rf1 Ne7+ 76. Kg7 Nd5 77. Re1+ and White wins.

In the press conference Caruana said that the only thing he could have done to avoid getting into the endgame was probably not to exchange rooks after move 40. This points to an interesting

hole in his endgame understanding. Again, I want to point to the fact that you do not learn a

lot about the endgame from analyzing openings and finding deep novelties...

