

2023 WOMEN'S WORLD CHAMPIONSHIP

JULY 7, 2023 ■ ROUND 02

BY **JJ LANG** ■ ANNOTATIONS BY **WGM GULRUKBEGIM TOKHIRJONOVA**



Ju Wenjun

Round Score

1/2 - 1/2

Match Score

1 - 1



Lei Tingjie

GULRUKBEGIM TOKHIRJONOVA



WGM Gulrukbegim “Begim” Tokhirjonova is an Uzbek-born American chess player. The 23-year-old attended the University of Missouri and majored in business while competing on their chess team. In 2021, she finished second in the U.S. Women’s Championship, and has been a regular in Saint Louis Chess Club invitational events since. After playing for Uzbekistan in the 2016 and 2018 Olympiads, she made her debut appearance on the U.S. Olympiad squad in 2022.

Even those who (unfairly) claim all Berlin Defenses are boring must at least admit that each Berlin Defense is boring in its own unique way.

The first game of the 2023 Women’s World Championship might have been a Berlin draw, but it still featured a surprise on the first move, a gambit of a central pawn, and a defending champion on the ropes in the middlegame. If this is what counts as a “boring” game between defending champion GM Ju Wenjun and challenger GM Lei Tingjie, then we’re in for quite a match.

Playing with the white pieces, Tingjie deviated from her queen’s pawn opening that served her well throughout the Candidates cycle, and Ju was ready with a Ruy Lopez defense. Tingjie’s choice to play into the main line of the Berlin at first suggested an unwillingness to take risks in the first game. But, by move 13, she was in the sideline of a sideline of a gambit that had only been

played once over the board before (successfully, I might add, last December by GM Jordan van Foreest over GM Alireza Firouzja). This appeared to be the move that took Ju out of her prep, but Lei continued to blitz out another half-dozen moves on her way to a comfortable position with full compensation for the sacrificed pawn.

At this point, Ju elected to return the pawn to simplify the position, but White was clearly better at this point with the bishop pair and equal material. A key moment occurred after Black’s 28th move, where the defending champion miscalculated her position. Her decision to open the kingside was understandable, but also put her in serious danger of losing the resulting endgame.

Instead, a few very subtle inaccuracies from Lei allowed Black to come closer to equalizing the position, and eventually Lei’s decision to swap down to a pure rook endgame cemented the game as a draw.

PHOTOS: BONHAGE / FIDE (WWCC); ADAMS / SLCC (TOKHIRJONOVA)



TARRASCH DEFENSE, SYMMETRICAL VARIATION (B32)

GM Ju Wenjun (2564)

GM Lei Tingjie (2554)

2023 FIDE Women's World Chess Championship (2), 07.06.2023

Annotations by WGM Gulrukhbegim Tokhirjonova

1. d4

No Surprises Today! Ju Wenjun sticks to her main move, which has served her well for many years.

1. ... d5

Lei, on the other hand, tends to play 1. ... Nf6 more than 1. ... d5, as the Grunfeld is in her repertoire, so this was slightly unexpected.

2. c4 e6 3. Nf3 Nf6 4. Nc3 c5 5. e3

It is a well-known opening for both players, for sure. This is the line Ju likes to play, and she has many games here. Even though Lei uses different move orders, she still goes with ... c7-c5 lines and has many games in this and similar positions.

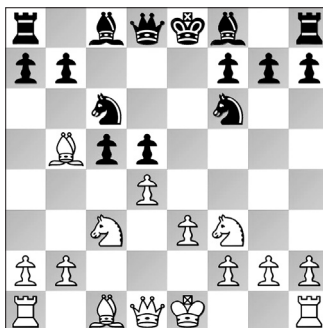
5. ... Nc6

This is still the main line and the only move Lei ever plays here.

Another interesting option is 5. ... a6. It prevents Bf1-b5 and takes the game in a different direction after 6. cxd5 exd5 7. Be2 Nc6, for instance. Of course, both players are still

blitzing out moves here, so 5. ... Nc6 was in Black's preparation.

6. cxd5 exd5 7. Bb5



The main line is 7. ... Be2, which leads to a totally different structure. If 7. ... cxd4 (or 7. ... Be7 8. 0-0 0-0 9. dxc5 Bxc5 10. b3, but again, it depends what kind of structure white wants to play) 8. Nxd4 Bd6 9. 0-0 0-0 10. b3, then White plays against the isolated pawn on d5, while Black has more active pieces as compensation.

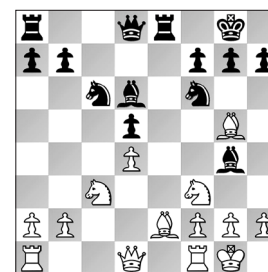
7. ... cxd4 8. exd4

Even here, 8. Nf3xd4 is played more. However, Ju preferred to play a different structure which is more precise and manageable. It could be the result of her feeling about yesterday's game. She had a dangerous position, and today, she wanted to get a more straightforward position to warm up to the match safely. Play is unclear after 8. ... Bd7

9. 0-0 Bd6 10. Qb3 a6 11. Be2.

8. ... Bd6 9. 0-0 0-0 10. Bg5 Bg4 11. Be2 Be6

Another good option is 11. ... Re8 because the attack on the d5-pawn appears to be not dangerous at all.



POSITION AFTER 11. ... Re8

White's best move might be 12. h3, but after 12. ... Be6 the position reaches a better version of the game for Black; they get back with the bishop on e6 after provoking h2-h3.

The more ambitious 12. Nxd5? gets into trouble after 12. ... Bxh2+ 13. Kxh2 Qxd5 14. Bxf6 gxf6.

Also bad is 12. Bxf6? Qxf6 13. Nxd5 Qh6 when, unexpectedly, Black's attack is strong! For instance, 14. h3 Bxh3! is winning! After 15. gxh3 Qxh3 there is no way to stop eventual deflections on the f3-knight. What an unexpected mating attack!

12. Re1 h6 13. Bh4

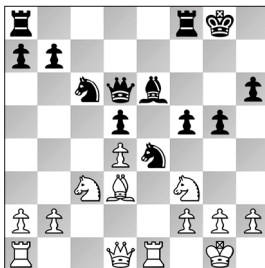
Keeping the pin!



13. ... Rc8

When the world championship is not on the line, I imagine many players would be tempted by 13. ... g5. I was curious whether it would work, and it appears that it is already played by some strong players such as Vidit, Sethuraman, and Tari. The idea is to get out of the pin and get some activity as compensation for the inclusion of ... g7-g5.

However, this early in the match it is understandable why Lei does not want to court the kinds of positions she'd reach after 14. Bg3 Ne4 15. Bxd6 Qxd6 16. Bd3 f5:



POSITION AFTER 16. ... f5

This is a fun position to play! Well at least it would be fun for us to watch!

14. a3

White should avoid 14. Rc1 as it faces 14. ... Bf4.

Instead, 14. Qd2 is better, preventing ... Bd6-f4.

14. ... Re8

Again, 14. ... g5 is still an option! It feels even better after a2-a3 because Black's rook on c8 is also included in the game. It could

be an excellent attempt to exploit White's passive play.

15. Bb5 a6

If Lei did not want to play with ... g7-g5, then 15. ... Be7 was another way to get rid of the pin. That said, after 16. Ne5 Nd7 17. Bxe7 Nxe7, I am pretty sure she did not like this position where White's knight is active on e5.

16. Ba4



Such moves were patterns for this game. Neither player wanted to have any imbalance in the position. They were too careful the whole game, trying to avoid any messy or overly dynamic position.

A good attempt to play for some imbalances and create more of a game would be 16. Bxc6. Now after 16. ... bxc6 17. Qd3 a5 it is important that White plays 18. Re2 (not 18. Rac1 Bf4, which is a bit unpleasant). How should Black proceed?

- a) The engine suggests 18. ... Bg4, claiming it is equal (of course). But after 19. Rxe8+ Qxe8 20. Bxf6 gxf6 21. h3 Bxf3 22. Qxf3, it is tough to play this position as Black from a human perspective. It is well known that the knight is great with weaknesses, and there are many of them in this position. So, playing with White and letting Black defend this position is easier.
- b) Otherwise, 18. ... g5 is another attempt to play ... c7-c5. Black must use her two bishops and open the position; it also eliminates potential c-pawn weaknesses on either c5 or c6. Things are unclear after 19. Bg3 c5 20. Rael c4 21. Qc2 Bxg3 22. hxg3 Kg7.

16. ... b5 17. Bc2

White is threatening Qd1-d3, so Black is forced to act.

17. ... g5

Finally, ... g7-g5 was played!

18. Bg3 Bxg3 19. hxg3 Qb6

Black is putting pressure on the d4-pawn and developing the queen.

The position after 19. ... Na5 20. Ne5 Nc4 21. Nxc4 dxc4 22. Qd2 would lead to a complicated position with some chances for both sides. However, Black did not like this option because of her king's weakness.

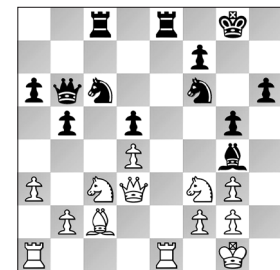
20. Qd2

If not a3-a4, another logical move is to move the queen, anticipating ... Be6-g4. But this move seems a bit passive.

White needed to remove the pressure on d4 as soon as possible, so 20. a4 seemed more fitting. Now, 20. ... Bg4 21. Rxe8+ Rxe8 22. axb5 axb5 23. Qd3 Bxf3 24. gxf3 Nxd4 25. Rd1 equalizes immediately.

Instead, 20. Qd3 is an interesting option and my favorite 20. ... Bg4 now is not working because of a nice point: 21. Nxd5! Nxd5 22. Qh7+ Kf8 23. Qh8 mate.

Instead of getting mated, Black could try 20. ... Kg7, as the engine suggests. But things are not so simple for us humans.



POSITION AFTER 20. Bg4

- a) An unclear idea is 21. Rad1 Na5 22. Ne5.



PHOTOS: BONHAGE / FIDE

b) Instead, White could try to use Black's weak kingside pawn structure by playing 21. Rxe6. But after 21. ... Rxe6 22. Nxd5 Nxd5 23. Qh7+ Black has to be careful.

b1) Black must avoid 23. ... Kf8?? 24. Qh8+ Ke7 25. Qxc8 when White wins.

b2) But after 23. ... Kf6, Black is putting the pressure on White to be surgically precise.

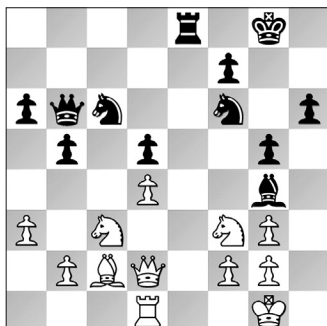
b21) The natural 24. Qxh6+ loses instantly to 24. ... Ke7 25. Qxg5+ Nf6.

b22) Therefore, 24. Bb3 is an only move. Afterwards, 24. ... Qd8 25. Qxh6+ Ke7 26. Qxg5+ Kf8 27. Bxd5 Qxg5 28. Nxc5 Rd6 29. Bxf7 Nxd4 apparently equalizes. This is a crazy engine line, which ends with equality, of course. However, it is hard to imagine humans being this accurate.

20. ... Bg4 21. Rxe8+

Instead, the ambitious idea from above still works: 21. Qd3 Bxf3 22. gxf3 Qxd4 23. Qf5 Kg7 24. Rxe8 Rxe8 25. Rd1 Qe5 26. Nxd5 Qxf5 27. Bxf5 Rd8 28. Nc3 again equalizes.

21. ... Rxe8 22. Rd1



22. ... Kf8

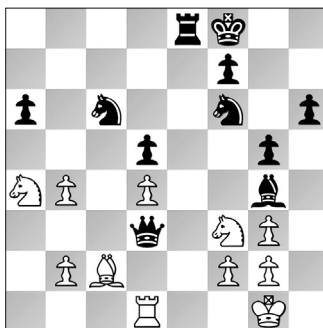
Now the idea of 22. ... Na5 is more robust because white cannot play Nf3-e5 anymore, so it is more annoying for White to deal with. 23. b3 (after 23. Bb1 Nc4 24. Qc2 Kf8, Black's c4-knight gives her an edge) 23. ... Rc8 24. Rc1 Nc6 is unclear. The knight created some weaknesses, and it can go back now satisfied

with its successful outing.

23. Qd3 b4

Instead, 23. ... Na5 still gives an edge to black. But Lei chose to put the knight on b4, which is also good.

24. Na4 Qb5 25. axb4 Qxd3



26. Rxd3

Even though it seems like a weird move, it is understandable. White did not want to give away her central pawn by taking with the bishop.

Sacrificing the pawn with 26. Bxd3 Nxd4 27. Nc5 Nxf3+ 28. gxf3 Bxf3 29. Ra1 would, however, provide White with great counterplay on the queenside. Instead, after Rd1xd3, White had to be on the defensive side. Here, it is unclear, and the game can go both ways.

26. ... Nxb4 27. Rd2 Nd7

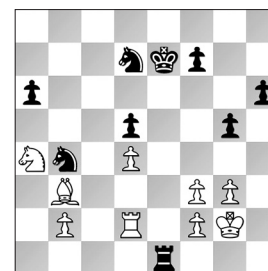
Black takes control over the central squares.

28. Bb3 Bf5

Black missed a great chance to put significant pressure on her opponent with 28. ... Bxf3 29. gxf3 Re1+ 30. Kg2 Ke7 where things are a bit dire.

(see diagram top of next column)

Try to make a move for White: it is not that easy. This was the moment that could change the outcome of the game. However, Lei only had a little time on the clock, only seven minutes. That played a role here, while Ju



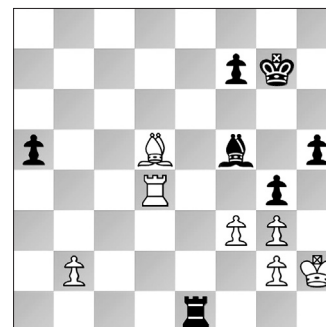
POSITION AFTER 30. Ke7

was playing faster and with more confidence the whole game. Being a challenger is not the most straightforward task.

29. Nc3 g4

Black decided to force the exchange of some pieces and equalize. At this point, Lei understood she did not have much. Also, her time was down to five minutes. So, it was an excellent decision from her perspective.

30. Ne5 Nxe5 31. dxe5 Rxe5 32. Nxd5 Nxd5 33. Bxd5 Re1+ 34. Kh2 a5 35. f3 h5 36. Rd4 Kg7 37. Ra4 Re5 38. Rd4 Re1 39. Ra4 Re5 40. Rd4 Re1



Today both sides decided to play careful chess. Ju Wenjun did not want anything complicated after yesterday, and Lei Tingjie thought a draw with the black pieces was fine and did not want many complications. However, both sides had some exciting possibilities throughout the game. **Draw agreed.** ♠

Match Recap

2023 WOMEN'S WORLD CHESS CHAMPIONSHIP

	White	Result	Moves	ECO	Summary
1	Lei - Ju	½-½	50	C67	White's gambit in the Berlin gives Lei chances, Ju holds on.
2	Ju - Lei	½-½	40	B32	Black gains edge out of the opening, Ju holds on once again.