

# 2023 WORLD CHAMPIONSHIP

APRIL 9, 2023 ■ ROUND 01

BY **JJ LANG** ■ ANNOTATIONS BY **GM AWONDER LIANG**



**Ian Nepomniachtchi**

Round Score  
**1/2 - 1/2**

Match Score  
**1/2 - 1/2**



**Ding Liren**

TO PARAPHRASE JAN MARKOS PARAPHRASING George Orwell, “All draws are equal. But some are more equal than others.” Many predicted the first game of the 2023 FIDE World Chess Championship to end peacefully. But far fewer predicted an early opening surprise and one player on the brink of victory before the dust settled. As far as draws go, this was about as unequal as it could get.

The quest to be crowned the 17th undisputed World Chess Champion began in Astana, Kazakhstan on Sunday, April 8, between the second- and third-highest ranked players in the world. With reigning champ GM Magnus Carlsen sitting this one out after a decade of dominance, his last challenger GM Ian Nepomniachtchi — a Russian playing under the FIDE flag yet again — fights Chinese GM Ding Liren in a 14-game match over the next three weeks. After one game,

the score remains equal, but the game itself painted a much different picture.

Out of the opening, Ding was surprised as early as the seventh move in a position where even Carlsen admitted he had forgotten his analysis. He decided to avoid the most testing variations, which was an understandable choice considering that the alternatives involved sacrificing a knight.

Perhaps this cautious attitude followed Ding a little too long, however, as he continued to choose unnecessarily passive forms of defense as the game progressed.

At one point, Nepomniachtchi had a serious advantage, although nothing close to a concrete win. He eventually let Ding off the hook, although not without some serious drama as Ding had under 14 minutes for his final 14 moves of the first time control. He was up to the task, however, and the players agreed to a draw shortly thereafter.

Neither player appeared thrilled with the result. Ding was surprised out of the opening and admitted in the press conference that he had trouble focusing and was perhaps feeling the pressure of the match. But Nepomniachtchi missed a chance to convert an advantage out of a surprising opening choice, and he appeared visibly frustrated as the game progressed.

Watching the game in real time, it was difficult to understand how much trouble Ding was in. Was Nepomniachtchi's opening surprise a real bomb, or were the commentators hyperbolic? Was the position before Nepomniachtchi's 29th move actually close to winning, or was this just another case of the masses following Stockfish off a ledge?

To answer these questions, let's turn over to GM Awonder Liang, who has graciously provided some remarkably detailed and instructive analysis.

**RUY LOPEZ, DELAYED EXCHANGE VARIATION (C85)**

GM Ian Nepomniachtchi (2795)

GM Ding Liren (2788)

2023 FIDE World Championship (1), Astana, 04.09.2023

Annotations by GM Awonder Liang

A more action-packed game compared to the rather tame draw that I was expecting. Nepo got in the first surprise with a delayed Exchange Ruy Lopez, and Ding reacted rather poorly, in my opinion. There were definitely a lot of nerves at play in this game, and I think more so on Ding's part, as he made several serious inaccuracies and was under a good amount of pressure on the board and the clock. As for Nepo, he never had an objectively winning advantage, although he could have posed more difficult problems to Ding right before the time control.

**1. e4**

Most pundits suggested 1. e4 as Ian's most likely choice for the first game, and they were correct. Still, it was interesting to see the idea prepared against Ding's Marshall, which has long been his main weapon as Black.

**1. ... e5 2. Nf3 Nc6 3. Bb5 a6 4. Ba4**

To compare with the delayed Exchange Variation, we can see the difference most clearly in the following line: 4. Bxc6 dxc6 5. 0-0 f6 and now:

a) 6. Re1 g5! and White is already getting quite a bit worse.

b) Black is harmonious after 6. d3 Ne7 7. Nc3 Ng6 8. Be3 Bd6 with a nice structure, supporting the e5-pawn, preparing against the f2-f4 break, and preparing ...Bc8-e6, and



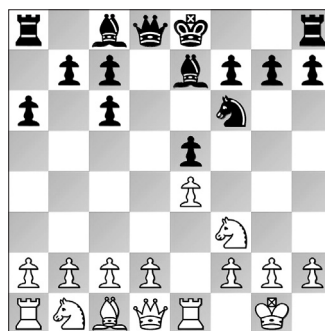
...Qd8-c7, when castling on either side would be reasonable.

c) The main move is 6. d4 with approximate equality in the ensuing endgame.

**4. ... Nf6 5. 0-0 Be7 6. Bxc6!?**

An opening I've tried once or twice as White. Essentially White takes advantage of the fact that the e7-bishop and f6-knight are (some-what) misplaced.

**6. ... dxc6 7. Re1!?**



Delaying d2-d3 temporarily, and now there are a wide range of options for Black. I doubt Nepomniachtchi will repeat this line, as there are a few clear ways to equality. Black seems okay in the following main lines, so Nepomniachtchi tries his luck with a somewhat rare idea.

The main line goes 7. d3 Nd7 8. Nbd2 (Ding has played 8. Nc3 in the bullet portion of the SCC, and he eventually won this game 8. ... 0-0 9. Be3 Re8 10. Nd2 Nf8 11. a4 Ng6 Grischuk - Ding, Chess.com, 2022) 8. ... f6 9. Nc4 (9. Nh4 g6 10. f4 exf4 11. Rxf4 Ne5) 9. ... Nc5 10. Nh4 Be6 11. Nf5 Bf8 with a better position.

**7. ... Nd7**

Ding played this after a good think, probably trying to understand Ian's idea. Somehow not losing is 7. ... Qd6!? where d2-d4 does not give White much.

The alternative ... Bc8-g4 (as given in GM Jan Gustafsson's famous Chessable course) was not a realistic attempt if he didn't know the line.

I've tried to find Ian's idea here, but I'm not quite sure what it could be. I think he was counting more on the surprise effect rather than trying too hard to get a game: there are definitely bail-out options for White in this line. After 7. ... Bg4 8. h3 Bh5 (Not 8. ... Bxf3 9. Qxf3 Nd7 10. d3 when White has a clear advantage with the better pawn structure, as Black has given up the bishop pair) 9. g4 Nxg4 10. hxg4 Bxg4 and here there are many ideas for White, and I've thrown in a few sample lines to get us started:

a1) 11. d3 f5 12. d4!? This is kind of cute, but not very serious. (After 12. exf5 0-0 13. Qe2 Bb4 there is some kind of draw at the end.) 12. ... Rf8 (12. ... exd4 13. Qd3 0-0 14. exf5 (14. Nbd2) 14. ... Bd6 15. Ne5 Qh4 16. Qb3+ Kh8 17. Qg3 Qxg3+ 18. fxg3 Bxf5 19. c3 With three pawns for the piece, Black should be alright.) 13. Nbd2 f4 14. Nc4 exd4 15. Qd3



POSITION AFTER 15. Qd3

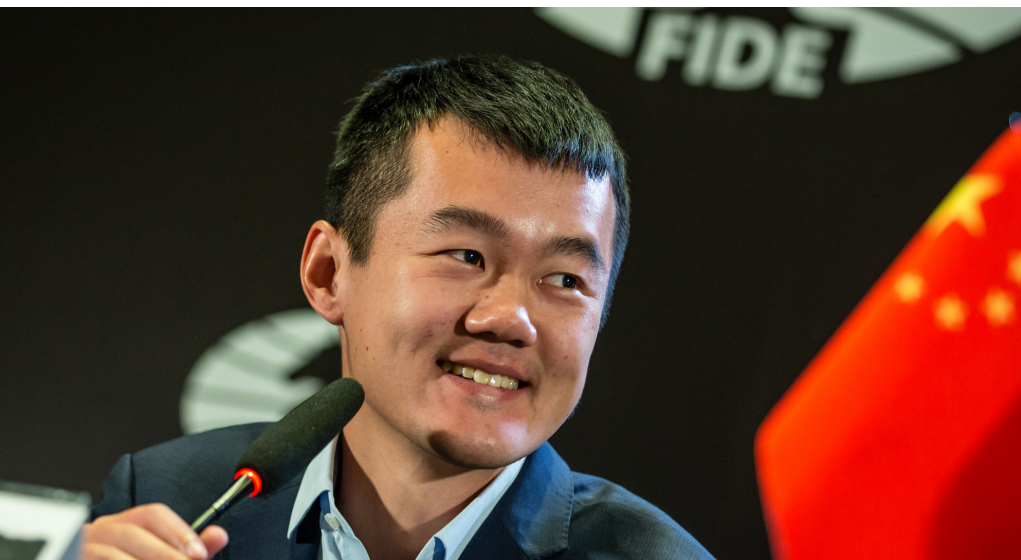


**GM AWONDER LIANG**

GM Awonder Liang is a 20-year-old undergraduate at the University of Chicago. Born and raised in Madison, Wisconsin, Liang is the third-youngest American to

earn the grandmaster title. He has won two World Youth championships and competed in four U.S. Championships, including a tie for third in the 2022 edition.

PHOTOS: SLCC (LIANG); STEV BONHAGE / FIDE (HANDSHAKE)



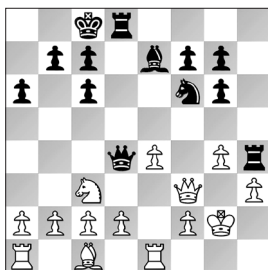
And this is a big mess.

a2) 11. d4 exd4 12. Qd3 (After 12. Bf4!? Bc5 [12. ... c5 13. Nbd2 Qd7 14. Qe2 0-0-0 15. Ne5 Bxe2 16. Nxd7 Bg4 17. Ne5 Be6] 13. Kg2 g5 14. Bh2 h5 15. Qd3 Qe7 16. Nbd2 there is a lot of uncertainty) 12. ... c5 13. Nbd2 (13. c3 c4 14. Qe2 d3 15. Qe3 a5 16. Nbd2 Ra6) 13. ... Qd6 14. c3 Bd7 15. Nf1.

The alternative to sacrificing is 9. ... Bg6!? 10. Nxe5 Qd4 11. Nxc6 hxg6 12. Qf3 and now:

(b1) 12. ... Nh7 13. d3 Ng5 14. Bxg5 Bxg5 15. Nc3 Bd2 16. Re2 Bxc3 17. bxc3 Qxc3 and it's hard to imagine Black suffering too much here, despite the lack of center. White just has a lot of weaknesses.

The alternative is (b2) 12. ... 0-0-0 13. Nc3 Rh4 14. Kg2



POSITION AFTER 14. Kg2

which is fine for White, although the line continues 14. ... Rdh8 15. Ne2 Qc5 16. Ng1 Nxc4!? with some mess at the end.

#### 8. d4!?

It is somewhat counter-intuitive to open up the center with bishops on the board, but the position is pretty concrete.

#### 8. ... exd4 9. Qxd4 0-0 10. Bf4

This is basically the idea: White targets the weak black c7-pawn, which will haunt Black for the entire game.

#### 10. ... Nc5 11. Qe3

The alternative 11. Qxd8 Bxd8 12. Nc3 Ne6 is not serious for White.

#### 11...Bg4?!

Ding's first inaccuracy of this game. The idea — to bring the bishop out before playing ... Nc5-e6 — is natural, but Black's position is somewhat loose here. Here's some analysis: 11. ... Ne6 12. Bg3 (or 12. Nc3 Nxf4 13. Qxf4 Qd6 14. e5 Qg6) and now the ways part again:

a) 12. ... Re8 13. Nc3 Bf8 14. Rad1 Qe7 15. Ne5 f6 16. Nd3. If Black plays passively, it can be somewhat hard to develop, with f2-f4 coming soon.

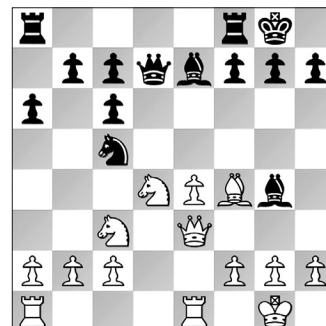
b) Giri suggested 12. ... b5 in commentary, with a very complex position. 13. Nbd2 (13. Nc3 Bc5 14. Qe2 Qe7) 13. ... c5 14. Rad1 Qe8 was Lanin – Khairullin (Tomsk, 2004), and there are many ideas here for both players.

c) I like the concrete 12. ... Bc5!, solving the issue by harassing White's queen: 13. Qc3 (13. Qe2 Qf6 14. Nc3 [14. e5 Qg6] 14. ... Re8 15. Rad1 b5 and with ... Bc5-b6 coming to defend c7, White's pressure has dissipated a little bit) 13. ... a5! 14. Nbd2 (worse is 14. a3 Bb4) 14. ... Bb4 15. Qe3 Bc5 16. Qe2 Re8 17. Rad1 Qf6 18. c3 a4 19. a3 b6 and Black has pretty good counterplay here.

#### 12. Nd4

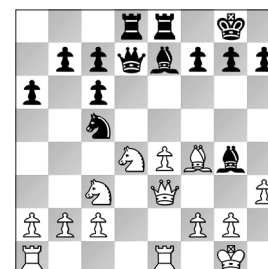
This was probably also preparation, although it's hard to tell exactly. Things are unclear after 12. Ne5 Bh5 13. g4 Bg6 14. Nc3 f6 15. Nxc6 hxg6 16. Rad1.

#### 12. ... Qd7 13. Nc3



Here Nepo had his first long think, as Black's last move was undoubtedly not part of his preparation. On the other hand, it's not super clear where White's advantage lies. As it happens with these types of lines, Black often makes a small inaccuracy, and White needs to be very accurate to put on the pressure.

An interesting alternative would be 13. h3!? Rad8 (13. ... Ne6 14. Nxe6 Bxe6 15. Nc3 Bd6 16. Rad1 Bxf4 17. Qxf4 Qe7 18. Nd5 cxd5 19. exd5 Qc5 20. dxe6 fxe6) 14. Nc3 (not 14. Nb3 Nxb3 15. Qxb3 Be6 16. Qxb7 Rb8 17. Qxa6 Rxb2 with very good compensation for Black) 14. ... Rfe8!. (Note that Giri and, separately, Anand, both mentioned 14. ... Qxd4 15. Nd5! in commentary as a nice trick.)



POSITION AFTER 14. ... Rfe8

This very weird move is somewhat forced. Play might continue 15. hxg4 Qxd4 16. Qxd4 Rxd4 17. Bxc7 Ne6 18. Be5 Rd2 19. Rac1 Bg5 20. Kf1 h6. While unrealistic, 15. Qg3 Qxd4 16. Bxc7 Rd7 17. hxg4 Bf8 18. Rad1 Qb4 19. Rxd7 Nxd7 20. Rb1 Nf6 Black has enough compensation here.

#### 13. ... Rad8 14. Nf5 Ne6?!

I think this move shows a bit of nerves from Ding's part, as there was a clear path to equality. Of course, everything is easier behind the computer screen, but this was definitely findable for a player of Ding's caliber.

I can't quite understand what Ding missed when evaluating 14. ... Bxf5 as Black goes for the patented and true strategy of "trade

everything.” 15. exf5 Rfe8 16. g4 (alternatives: ineffective is 16. Rad1 Bd6, while Black is fine after 16. f6 Bf8 17. Qg3 g6 18. Bxc7 Qd2!) 16. ... Bd6 17. Qf3 Bxf4 18. Qxf4 Qd6 with a draw soon to come.

**15. Nxe7+ Qxe7 16. Bg3 Bh5**

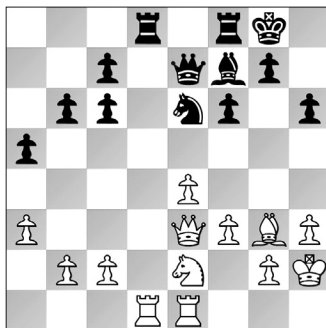
Keeping in line with his previous play, Ding prefers to defend somewhat passively.

Black would have more counterplay with 16. ... f5!? 17. Ne2 fxe4 (slightly worse is 17. ... Qf6 18. f3 f4 19. e5 fxe3 20. exf6 Bf5 21. fxe7 Rfe8 22. Be5 Nxe7 23. f4) 18. Qxe4 Bf5 19. Qc4 Qf7 20. Rad1 c5. Sometimes such structures can appear in the Berlin endgame, and there can be some pressure. But here Black is kind of okay, in my opinion.

**17. f3 f6 18. h3 h6 19. Kh2 Bf7 20. Rad1 b6 21. a3**

Both sides play natural improving moves as the position settles down. White has made their king a bit safer, getting out of the way of any checks, and has also prevented ... Qe7-b4 ideas. Black has also created some *luft* and now seeks to gain a bit of space on the queenside.

**21. ... a5 22. Ne2**



Just keeping the tension, without making any committal moves.

Intuitively I feel 22. f4 is the way to press as White, threatening f4-f5 with a dangerous strategic hold. Black has some randomness to keep the equality as follows: 22. ... Rxd1 23. Rxd1 Bh5, gaining a tempo while avoiding f5xe6 in the future (not 23. ... Rd8 24. f5 Nc5 25. Re1 with the threat of e4-e5 and a dangerous attack on the queenside). Play continues 24. Re1 Qd7! 25. f5 Nd4 26. Qf2 Re8 and Black controls the activity in the center, equalizing after 27. e5 fxe5 28. Rxe5 c5 29. f6 Rxe5 30. Bxe5 g5. Compare 24. Rd2 Rd8 25. f5 Rxd2 and in the other line, f5xe6 with e6xf7 would have been possible, i.e., 26. Qxd2 Ng5 27. Qf4 b5 28. Qxc7 Qxc7 29.

Bxc7 b4 30. axb4 with equality.

**22. ... Rxd1 23. Rxd1 Rd8 24. Rd3**

Very clever! White wants to play Qe3-d2, forcing ...Rd8-xd3 after which White has inroads into Black’s queenside.

**24. ... c5?!**

A bit panicky, in my opinion. At the risk of excessively criticizing Ding’s play, there was a more natural way to deal with the problem of the c7-pawn.

Black could equalize with 24. ... Kf8! 25. Qd2 (or 25. Rxd8+ Qxd8 26. f4 c5 27. f5 Nd4 28. Qd3 Qd7 29. Nf4 Ke7 30. c3 Nc6 31. Qa6 Ne5) 25. ... Ke8 26. Qc3 Rxd3 (or 26. ... c5 27. Rd5 Rd7 28. Qd3) 27. Qxd3 Qd7 28. Qa6 Qd2 29. Qc8+ Ke7 30. Nf4 Nd4 31. Qxc7+ Ke8.

Somehow 24. ... Rxd3 25. Qxd3 b5 26. Qd2 a4 27. Nc3 Kh7 is also okay, but I would think there is some strategic risk here as Black has no active plan.

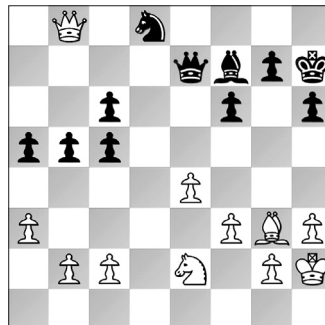
**25. Qd2 c6**

The computer’s preferred method is 25. ... Rxd3 26. Qxd3 Be8, but it’s all a bit unpleasant.

**26. Rxd8+ Nxd8 27. Qf4**

Now this is Nepo’s first serious advantage of the game, and Black needs to be very careful to hold.

**27. ... b5 28. Qb8 Kh7**



**29. Bd6?!**

Ian spent a lot of time here, and goes for a typical Ian move, keeping a lot of tension on the board and not simplifying the position. I think he was probably trying to play on Ding’s time pressure, but when it really mattered, Ding was completely up to the task. I’ve spent some time analyzing the position after 29. Bc7, and it’s objectively still not winning for White. Thus, we cannot criticize Ian’s decision too much, because it’s not easy to say which move posed stronger



practical problems. See the appendix for a full discussion of these variations.

**29. ... Qd7 30. Ng3!**

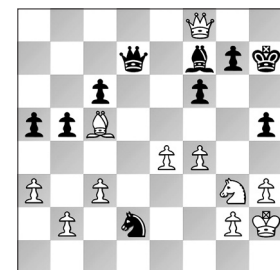
Ian’s concept: he wants to put Black into a bind and advance on the kingside.

**30. ... Ne6 31. f4**

Black should be able to defend after 31. c3 c4 32. f4 Qd8 33. Qxd8 Nxd8.

**31. ... h5**

Black also achieves good counterplay after 31. ... Nd4 32. c3 Nb3 33. Qf8 Nd2 34. Bxc5 h5:



POSITION AFTER 34. ... h5

... although it is understandable that Ding was focused on trading off the queens.



The traditional signing of scoresheets after the draw was agreed.

**32. c3 c4**

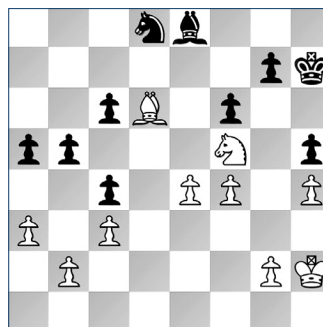
Preparing ... Qd7-d8, and somehow White doesn't really have a way to prevent this. Black earns some semblance of dynamic equality after 32. ... h4 33. Nf1 Bh5 34. Ne3 c4 35. Nf5 Bg6.

**33. h4**

After 33. f5 h4 34. Nf1 Ng5 35. Nd2 Be8 Black doesn't seem to have real problems here, although practically it could be difficult still after, e.g., 36. Bf4 Bh5 37. Qc7 Qxc7 38. Bxc7 Bd1 39. Bf4 Nf7 40. Kg1 where White is advancing strongly in the center. However, the opposite-colored bishops provide black a lot of drawing chances.

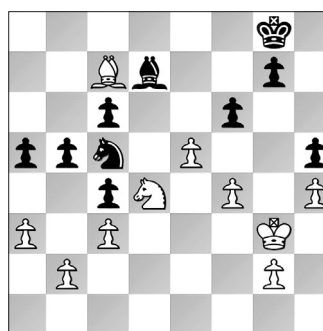
**33. ... Qd8 34. Qb7 Be8 35. Nf5 Qd7 36. Qb8 Qd8 37. Qxd8 Nxd8**

The worst is over: Ding can breathe a sigh of relief. Black's light-squared bishop can happily defend the weak queenside pawns without being doomed to passivity. White's dark-squared bishop, on the other hand, will be unable to defend the backwards b2-pawn even if it manages to catch the weak a5-pawn. Black will reach move 40 with ease.



**38. Nd4 Nb7 39. e5 Kg8 40. Kg3 Bd7 41. Bc7 Nc5!**

Accurately calculated. Basically, the game is drawn now, as Black has no weaknesses.



**42. Bxa5 Kf7 43. Bb4 Nd3 44. e6+ Bxe6 45. Nxc6 Bd7**

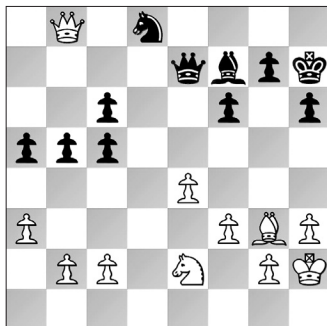
At this point, White is just shuffling pieces. There is no way to find improvements, and Ding has earned substantial time on the clock. The only question was whether Nepo would insist on trudging along for a number of moves, almost as a form of self-punishment for letting an opportunity slip by.

**46. Nd4 Nxb2 47. Kf3 Nd3 48. g3 Nc1 49. Ke3 Nb3, draw.**

Overall, Nepomniachtchi came prepared with a somewhat innocuous but annoying idea. Ding didn't defend in the best way and Ian created some very dangerous pressure.

It's hard to draw so many conclusions from the first game, but my impression is that Ding has some nerves to settle — especially not playing 14. ... Bxf5 seems to show a little too much respect for Ian. I think Ian has good reason to be pleased with the outcome of this game, while Ding is also somewhat fortunate to have survived a dangerous time trouble phase. The question is whether Nepo will be able to focus on the positive signs or get hung up on his missed opportunities.

# APPENDIX 1: WHAT IF NEPO PLAYED THE OBJECTIVELY STRONGER MOVE?



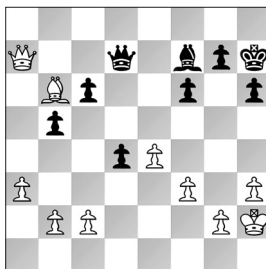
POSITION AFTER 28. ... Kh7

### 29. Bc7!

As mentioned by every random person with an engine, this was by far the best try. The position is still objectively holdable for Black, however. Here, I briefly switch into analyzing from a practical perspective into a purely objective perspective, so many lines are just for entertainment only. As a quick aside, I will try my best to abstract away from evaluations like “+1,” which are basically completely meaningless, and provide some reasoning for White’s best tries in this endgame.

### 29. ... Ne6 30. Bxa5 Qd7!

A strong move, taking control of the d-file. This endgame after 30. ...Nd4? is objectively losing, and in fact, many opposite colored bishop endgames are, which makes this position quite tricky to navigate. 31. Nxd4 cxd4 32. Bb6! Qd7 33. Qa7!



POSITION AFTER 33. Qa7

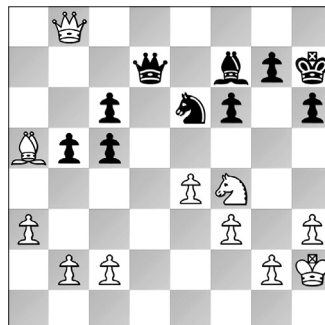
33. ... Qxa7 34. Bxa7 Ba2 35. Bxd4 Bb1 36. c4 winning. White also wins after 33. ... Qd6+ 34. Kh1 Qf4 35. Bxd4 Qc1+ 36. Bg1 Bg8 37. a4 bxa4 38. Qxa4 c5 39. e5! fxe5 40. Qe4+ Kh8 41. Qxe5 when two extra pawns combined with Black’s weak king suffice.

To illustrate how narrow Black’s path to the



draw is, it is worth noting that White also has a technical win after 32. ... c5 33. Kg1! getting out of any checks while also threatening to move the queen to c8. 33. ... Bg6 34. Qa7 Qe5 35. Bxc5 Qf4 36. Bxd4 Qc1+ 37. Kh2 Qf4+ 38. Kh1 Qc1+ 39. Bg1 Qxb2 40. Qb8 and with two extra pawns, this is winning.

### 31. Nf4



Here’s the key in this endgame: White has the possibility to create an outside passed pawn with b2-b3 and a2-a4, which means most pure opposite colored bishop endgames will be winning. White creates some threats with a passed pawns on the kingside to distract

Black’s king, then creates an outside passer on the queenside to win the game. Thus, Black’s entire game revolves around either provoking c2-c3, or avoiding the trade of knights.

### 31. ... Nd4!

To understand why this move is played, it’s useful to look at the lines after 31. ...Ne6xf4. See Appendix 2.

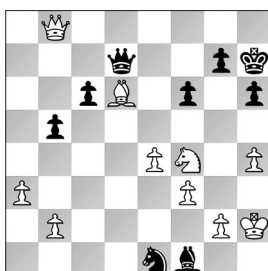
### 32. Bb6

No good is 32. c3 Ne6! 33. Nxe6 Bxe6 as White can no longer play on the queenside, so White must advance on the kingside. However, Black is perfectly situated, as White must trade lots of pawns to make progress, which will open up his king.

### 32. ... c4

Also fine is 32. ... Nxc2, with the following variations: 33. Bxc5 Ne1 34. Qa7 Qxa7 35. Bxa7 g5 36. Ne2 Nd3 37. b4 Kg6 38. Be3 Be8 39. Nd4 Bd7 40. Kg1 c5 41. bxc5 Nxc5 42. Nxb5 Nxe4 43. a4 This is White’s best try, and White is still pressing, although objectively, Black should hold (I’ll spare the details).

Or 34. Bd6 Bc4! 35. h4 Bf1! preparing to capture on g2.



POSITION AFTER 35. ...Bf1

Now White cannot win: e.g., 36. Qc7 (36. h5 Bxc7 37. Nxc2 Nxf3+ 38. Kg3 Ng5!) 36. ... Qxc7 37. Bxc7 g5 38. Kg1 Bc4 39. Kf2 Nxf3 40. gxf3 gxf4 41. Bxf4 Bb3 42. Ke3 Kg6 with a draw. This endgame is very similar to some that we've seen, although here Black holds in an easier way, as there isn't a weakness on b5. 43. Bc7 Bd1 44. f4 f5 45. e5 Kf7 46. Kd4 Ke6 47. Kc5 Kd7 48. Bb6 h5 49. Kb4 Ke6 50. b3 Kd5 51. a4 bxa4 52. bxa4 Bf3 53. a5 Be2.

**33. e5!?**

Very sharp, playing against Black's king. Black has a path to equality here, however. Also insufficient is 33. c3 Ne6 34. Kg3 Nxf4 35. Qxf4 Be6 36. Bd4 f5! 37. Kf2 Qf7 38. Qe5 (38. e5 g5) 38. ... h5 39. exf5 Bxf5 40. Qf4 Qg6 with a small edge. This is still a long

battle, but ultimately I think Black should objectively hold.

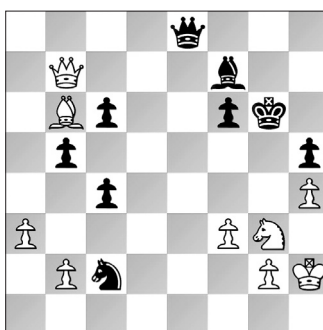
**33. ... Nxc2 34. exf6**

After 34. Qd6 Qf5 35. e6 Be8 36. Bf2 Qe5 37. Qd2 g5 38. Qxc2+ Kg7 39. Qd1 gxf4 40. Qd8 Qxe6 Black is equal.

**34. ... gxf6 35. Ne2**

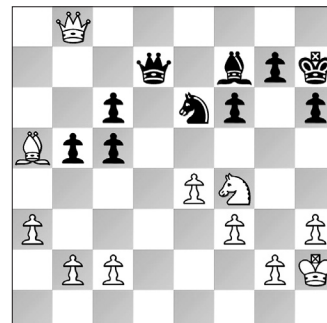
No different is 35. Bc5 Ne1 36. Bb4 Nd3 37. Bc3 Qe7 38. Nxd3 cxd3 39. Qf4 Kg7 40. g4 c5 41. h4 b4.

**35. ... Qe8 36. Qb7 Kg6 37. Ng3 h5 38. h4**



While there is enormous practical pressure, White cannot claim a decisive advantage.

**APPENDIX 2: WHAT'S WRONG WITH 31. ...NXF4?**



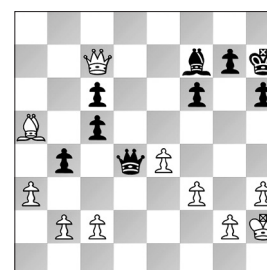
**31. ... Nxf4?**

The simplifying move nicely illustrates why Black is in such danger of losing. Basically, Black needs to force White to play c2-c3, and otherwise, Black fails to generate sufficient counterplay. Although these lines are pretty long, I think a lot of them contain instructive value and are interesting from an analytical perspective.

**32. Qxf4 Be6!**

The best try, setting up a devilish trap. A clear win comes after 32. ... c4? 33. Qc7. Another attempt is 32. ... Kg8 33. Qc7 Qxc7+ 34. Bxc7 c4 (34. ... Ba2 35. b3 c4 [35. ... b4 36. a4 White now promotes with check, so this doesn't work] 36. a4 cxb3 37. cxb3) 35. Kg3 Be6 36. Bb6 Kf7 37. Kf4 Ke7 38. Bc5+ Ke8 (38. ... Kf7 39. Ke3) 39. Ke3 f5 40. Kf4 fxe4 41. fxe4 Bg8 42. g4 Bh7 (42. ... Kf7 43. Ke5 Ke8 44. Kd6) 43. Ke5 Bg6 44. h4 h5 45. g5 Bh7 46. b3 White is winning.

Black can also try 32. ... Qd4 trying to provoke either c2-c3 or Ba5-c3, after which Black can avoid the trade of queens. However, White wins by force in this position with a long line: After 33. Qc7! b4!



POSITION AFTER 33. ...b4!

This is an absolutely insane try, but White wins in the end: 34. axb4 (the point of ... b5-b4 reveals itself after 34. Qxf7 Qd6+! 35.

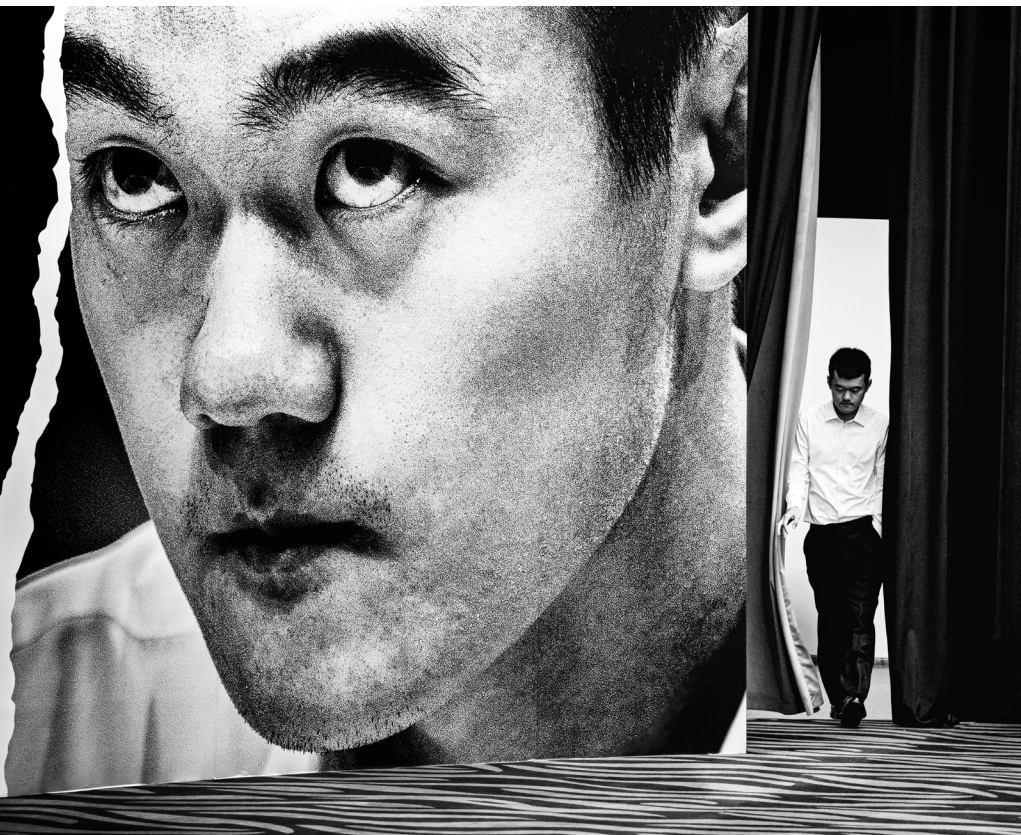


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Kg1 Qd1+ 36. Kf2 Qd2) 34. ... Qxb2 35. Qxf7 (35. bxc5 Bc4 36. Qf4 Qxc2 37. Bd2 Bf7 38. Qd6 Qa2 39. Bc3 Qe6) 35. ... Qe5+ 36. g3 Qd4! (36. ... cxb4 37. Qa7 Qb2 38. Qc5 b3 39. Bb4 Qa2 40. Qc4) 37. h4! Qf2+ 38. Kh3 Qxf3 39. Qc4 h5 40. Kh2 Qf2+ 41. Kh1 Qf3+ 42. Kg1 Qxg3+ 43. Kf1 cxb4 44. Bxb4 Qh3+ 45. Ke2 Qxh4 46. Bd6 Qg4+ 47. Kd2 h4 48. Qxc6 h3 49. Qb5 Qg2+ 50. Qe2 Although these were far from the only moves, White's extra bishop should be enough to avoid perpetual in all lines.

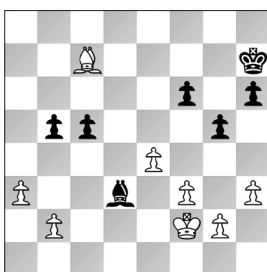
But the ridiculous 33. ...b4! is not Black's only try. One alternative is 33. ... Be8 34. Bc3 Qd7 35. Qxd7 Bxd7 36. Kg3 when White wins in the following manner: 36. ... Kg6 37. Kf4 Kf7 38. Ke3 Be6 39. b3 c4 40. a4 cxb3 41. cxb3 bxa4 42. bxa4 c5 43. h4 h5 44. Kf4 Bc8 45. a5 g6 46. g4 hxg4 47. fxg4 Ba6 48. Bd2 (48. h5 g5+ 49. Kg3 Kg7) 48. ... Bb7 49. h5 g5+ 50. Kg3 Bxe4 51. a6 Bc6 52. a7.

Black could also try 33. ... Kg8, but White wins after 34. Bc3 Qe3 35. h4! c4 36. Qxc6 Qf4+ 37. Kg1 Qe3+ 38. Kf1 Qc1+ 39. Kf2 Qxc2+ 40. Kg3.

**33. Qd2!**

The naive 33. Qc7? doesn't work here. 33. ... Qxc7+ 34. Bxc7 Ba2!! 35. b3 b4!! Absolutely stunning! Black survives just in the nick of time. 36. a4 Bxb3 37. a5 (37. cxb3 c4 38. Bf4 cxb3 39. Bc1 c5 40. a5 c4 41. a6 c3 42. a7 b2 43. Bxb2 cxb2 44. a8=Q b1=Q) 37. ... Bxc2 38. a6 b3 39. a7 b2 40. a8=Q.

To see how necessary Black's 35. ...b4!! was, we should look at why 35. Kg3 falls just short. 35. ... Bb1 36. c4 Bd3 37. cxb5 (37. Bd6 Bxc4 38. Kf2 Kg6 39. Bxc5 f5 40. h4 fxe4 41. fxe4) 37. ... cxb5 38. Kf2 g5!!



POSITION AFTER 38. ... g5!!

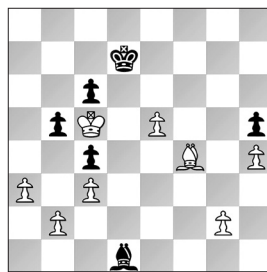
Black needs to stop White's kingside advance. After 39. g3 Kg6 40. Ke3 Bf1 41. h4 gxh4 42. gxh4 f5 43. e5 Bc4 44. Kf4 Be6 45. Ba5 h5 46. Ke3 Kf7 47. Bb6 c4 48. Kd4 Ke7 49. Bc5+ Kd7 50. Bf8 Kc6 51. Ke3 Kd7 52. Kf4 Bd5! Black holds.

As an example of an inadequate alternative, White actually wins after 38. ... Kg6? with the plan of 39. Bd6 c4 40. g3 Kf7 41.

Ke3 Bf1 42. h4 h5 (42. ... g5 43. Kd4) 43. Kd4 Bg2 44. f4 Ke6 45. Bb4 g6 (45. ... Bf1 46. f5+ Kf7 47. Kc5 Bd3 48. Bc3 Bxe4 49. Kxb5 Bd3 50. Kc5 Ke7 51. Kd5 Kd7 52. Be1 Bxf5 53. Kxc4 Kc6 54. Kb4 Bg4 55. Ka5) 46. Kc5 Bxe4 47. Kxb5 Bd3 48. Kc5. Here white wins in the following instructive way: 48. ... f5 49. Bc3 Be2 50. Bd4 Kd7 (50. ... Bd3 51. a4 Kd7 52. Kd5 Bc2 53. a5) 51. Kd5 Kc7 52. Ke6 Bd1 53. Kf6 Kd7 54. Kxg6 Bg4 55. Bc3 Kc6 56. a4 Kc5 57. Kf7 Kd5 58. Bb4 Bd1 59. Kf6 Bg4. White forces zugzwang and boxes Black out after 60. Ke7 Bd1 61. Kf7 Bg4 62. Kf6 Bh3 63. Ke7 with a threat of Ke7-d7, so Black has nothing better than the doomed-to-fail 63. ... Kc6 64. Ke6 Bg4 65. Ke5 Bh3 66. Kd4 Bf1 67. g4! fxg4 68. Be1.

**33. ... Qa7**

Preventing Ba5-b6 for the time being, but now White has a direct win. 33. ... Qe7 After taking the d-file, White wins slowly, eventually forcing an exchange of queens. 34. Bb6 h5 35. Qf4 c4 36. Ba5 Qd7 37. Bb4 Qd4 38. Bc3 Qd8 39. Kg3 Kg6 40. Bb4 Qd4 41. Qd6 Qxd6+ 42. Bxd6 The win here is still quite complicated, so I show the exact path for White here. 42. ... Kf7 43. Kf2 g5 44. Ke3 f5 45. Kd4 fxe4 46. fxe4 Ke8 (46. ... h4 47. Kc5 c3 48. bxc3 Ba2 49. Bc7 Bb1 50. Kxc6 Bxc2 51. Kxb5 Bxe4 52. c4 Bxg2 53. c5 Bxh3 54. c6 and White promotes the a-pawn.) 47. Bb4 Kd7 48. Bd2 g4 49. h4 g3!! Black has a very serious try here to set up a blockade, but it doesn't quite work. 50. Be1 Bg4 51. Bxg3 Bd1 52. c3 (52. Kc3 c5 53. Kd2 Bg4 54. Bf4 Ke6) 52. ... Ke6 53. Kc5 Kd7 54. Bh2 Be2 55. e5 Bd1 56. Bf4 (Not 56. e6+ Kxe6 57. Kxc6 Ba4 with a draw)



POSITION AFTER 56. Bf4

Zugzwang! Black's bishop can't keep an eye on a4 and g4 at the same time. 56. ... Bg4 57. a4! bxa4 58. Kxc4 Ke7 59. Kc5 Kd7 60. Kb4 Bd1 61. g4! hxg4 62. Bg3 Ke6 63. Kc5 Bf3 64. h5 Be4 65. h6 Kd7 66. c4 Ke6 67. Kb6 Kd7 68. c5 Kd8 69. h7 Bxh7 70. Kxc6.

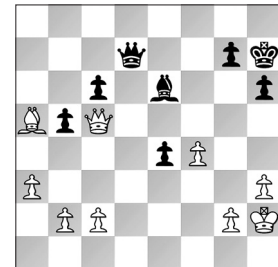
**34. Qd8 f5 35. Qb6**

Here White wins. Here are some sample lines.

**35. ... Qxb6**

After 35. ... Qe7 36. Qxc6 Bd7 37. Qc7 fxe4 38. fxe4 wins for White.

No better is 35. ... Qd7 36. Qxc5 fxe4 37. f4!! (not 37. fxe4 Ba2 38. Bc3 Bb1 39. Qf2 Qd6+ 40. e5 Qg6 with a draw)



POSITION AFTER 37. f4

Really a beautiful conceptual idea, and the only winning move. White shuts out Black's bishop and prepares an outside passer. There are some details which I provide below.

a) 37. ... Bd5 38. Qe3 Qf5 39. Bb6 Qf6 40. Bd4 Qe7 41. Bc5 Qc7 42. Kg1 Qf7 43. b3 Qf6 (43. ... Qe6 44. a4 bxa4 45. bxa4) 44. Kh2 Qb2 45. c4 Bf7 46. Qxe4+ Bg6 47. f5.

b) 37. ... Qf7 38. Bd2 (38. Qe3 c5 39. Bb6 c4 40. Bd4) 38. ... e3 39. Bxe3 Bd5 40. c4 Bxc4 (40. ... bxc4 41. Qd4) 41. Qxc6 h5 (41. ... Qe6 42. Qxe6 Bxe6 43. g4) 42. a4 bxa4 43. Qxa4.

c) 37. ... Qd5 38. Qxd5 Bxd5 39. Bb6 Ba2 40. g4 Bb1 41. c3 g6 42. Kg3 Kg7 43. Bd4+ Kf7 44. f5 gxf5 (44. ... g5 45. Kf2 Bd3 46. Bb6 Kg7 47. Bd8 Kf7 48. h4 gxh4 49. Bxh4 Kg7 50. Ke3 Kf7 51. Kd4 Ke8 52. Kc5 Kd7 53. f6 Bc4 54. a4 and wins.) 45. gxf5 Bc2 46. Kf4.

**36. Bxb6**

As we've seen in some other lines, White wins in this endgame as Black is unable to force c2-c3.

**36. ... c4 37. Kg3 g5 38. Kf2 fxe4 39. fxe4 Kg6 40. Ke3 Bg8 41. Kd4 Kf6 42. Ba5 Ke6 43. Bc3 Bf7**

Or 43. ... Kd6 44. Bb4+ Kd7 45. Ke5 h5 46. Bd2 g4 47. h4.

**44. b3 cxb3 45. cxb3 Kd6 46. Bb4+ Kc7 47. a4 Bxb3 48. a5** and White is winning.

As I mentioned, my point in including all of these lines was to try and make sense of what the engine means when it spits out a moderate numerical advantage for one player. Black's paths to holding the draw were often narrow, as this analysis shows. But White was not "obviously" winning, either. ♠