

2023 WORLD CHAMPIONSHIP

APRIL 24, 2023 ■ ROUND 11

BY **JJ LANG** ■ ANNOTATIONS BY **IM ROBERT SHLYAKHTENKO**



Ian Nepomniachtchi

Round Score

1/2 - 1/2

Match Score

6 - 5



Ding Liren

Match Recap

2023 WORLD CHESS CHAMPIONSHIP

	White	Result	Moves	ECO	Summary
1	Nepomniachtchi - Ding	1/2-1/2	49	C85	Ding defends well after opening surprise.
2	Ding - Nepomniachtchi	0-1	29	E10	Nepo wins without much resistance.
3	Nepomniachtchi - Ding	1/2-1/2	30	D35	Not much excitement; even Hikaru couldn't muster a recap!
4	Ding - Nepomniachtchi	1-0	47	A28	Strong middlegame play and an Exchange sac bring Ding his first win.
5	Nepomniachtchi - Ding	1-0	48	C84	Nepo strikes back with thematic Ruy Lopez kingside attack.
6	Ding - Nepomniachtchi	1-0	44	D02	Ding's positional London masterpiece ends in spectacular fireworks!
7	Nepomniachtchi - Ding	1-0	37	C07	Ding quells Nepo's initiative with Exchange sac, but the clock is a piece.
8	Ding - Nepomniachtchi	1/2-1/2	45	E28	A trendy Nimzo gives Ding real chances, but Nepo holds the draw.
9	Nepomniachtchi - Ding	1/2-1/2	82	C65	Ding employs the Berlin, holds the draw, but Nepo didn't make it easy.
10	Ding - Nepomniachtchi	1/2-1/2	45	A28	Resilient defense gives Nepo an easy draw.
11	Nepomniachtchi - Ding	1/2-1/2	39	C84	After a critical moment on move 19, the game fizzles out to a draw.

After four consecutive wins in the 2023 FIDE World Chess Championship, things have returned to business as usual after round 11 ushered in the fourth consecutive draw. With GM Ian Nepomniachtchi clinging onto his slim lead, GM Ding Liren now only has three chances (but two with the white piec-

es) to send the match into tiebreaks. Match strategy is now pivotal!

Nepomniachtchi stuck to his trusty 1. e4, and the two entered into a different kind of Ruy Lopez, albeit one where Nepomniachtchi had previously had success against Ding. One question will be whether Ding

chooses to stick to 1. ... e5 in his final game with the black pieces on Thursday. If so, he might set up a must-win last game. If not, it would mark the first occurrence of the more imbalanced Sicilian Defense in the match.

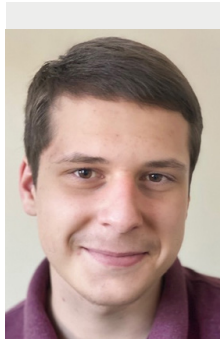
As this game progressed, the critical moment occurred after White's move 19. Ding



followed a pattern of picking a slightly risky, yet concretely sound, defense over some slightly more present options. Nepomni-

achtchi then broke character, steering the game towards a peaceful end.

Today's annotations show just how much venom was in some of the variations that the Nepomniachtchi of the first half of the match surely would have jumped at.



IM ROBERT SHLYAKHTENKO

is one of the top 100 American players as of April 2023, and is currently the 17th ranked junior. In 2019, he became the youngest ever Southern Californ-

nia state champion, was co-champion of the (now) Dewain Barber National Tournament of Middle School State Champions, and won the Southern California Open. In 2020 he won a CJA award for "Best Instruction." After a long wait, his International Master title has been approved by FIDE, and he is currently seeking GM norms while preparing to begin his freshman year at Brown University this fall!

RUY LOPEZ, MARTINEZ VARIATION (C84)

GM Ian Nepomniachtchi (2795)

GM Ding Liren (2788)

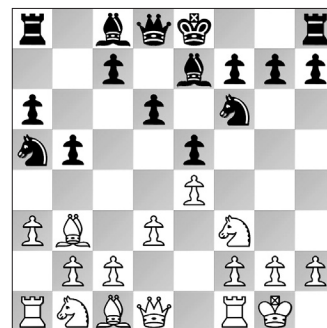
FIDE World Chess Championship (11), Astana, 04.24.2023

Annotations by IM Robert Shlyakhtenko

1. e4 e5 2. Nf3 Nc6 3. Bb5 a6 4. Ba4 Nf6 5. 0-0 Be7 6. d3 b5 7. Bb3 d6 8. a3

Nepomniachtchi faced a minor dilemma before today's round. Leading by a point, there was no need for him to unbalance the play, but neither did he want to waste his chance to score as White. From this perspective, Nepomniachtchi's choice makes sense: the quiet line with 8. a3 risks nothing but provides White with some possibilities to press.

8. ... Na5



It was not the first time that Nepomniachtchi had essayed this line with 8. a3 against Ding. In two games — the first in the 2020 Candidates tournament, and the second in a rapid game last year — Ding had played a different eighth move and stuck to his guns all the way to move 20.

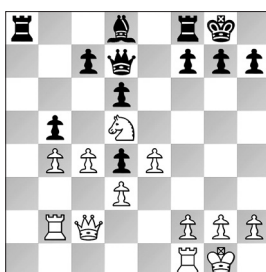
Each game continued with 8. ... 0-0 9. Nc3 Na5 10. Ba2 Be6 11. b4 Bxa2 12. Rxa2 Nc6 13. Bg5 Qd7 14. Bxf6 Bxf6 15. Nd5 a5 16. Rb2 axb4 17. axb4 Bd8 18. c4 Nd4 19. Nxd4 exd4 20. Qc2

(see diagram next page)

and here the paths diverged.

The 2020 Candidates game continued

PHOTO: THE SUBJECT (SHLYAKHTENKO); FIDE / STEV BONHAGE (WCC)



POSITION AFTER 20. Qc2

with (a) 20. ... Re8 21. g3 bxc4?! 22. Qxc4 c6 23. Nf4 Bg5 24. Ne2 d5 25. exd5 cxd5 26. Qb3 and Black had to develop his initiative with extraordinary accuracy to compensate for his strategically worse position. Ding did not manage to do so, and White won in Nepomniachtchi – Ding, Ekaterinburg, 2020.

The Ding of 2022 equalized with (b) 20. ... c6 21. Nf4 Qb7 22. cxb5 Qxb5 23. Ne2 Bf6 and an eventual draw in Nepomniachtchi – Ding, Chess24.com, 2022.

9. Ba2 c5 10. Nc3 Be6

The point of this move order.

If Black started with 10. ... 0-0, it would allow 11. b4 Nc6 12. Nd5 when White's knight is secure on its outpost square.

11. Bg5

No longer testing is 11. b4 because of 11. ... cxb4! 12. axb4 Nc6 and White is not in time to prevent ... d6-d5.

While the main move is 11. Nh4, Nepomniachtchi has other ideas.

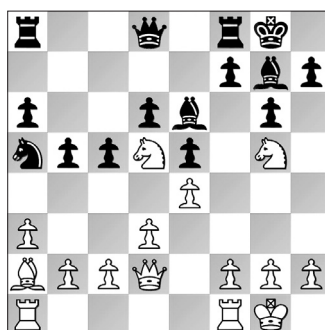
11. ... 0-0 12. Bxf6

A typical exchange to secure the d5-square for the knight.

12. ... Bxf6 13. Nd5 g6

Perhaps Ding wanted to keep the knight on a5 for a couple of moves in view of the following idea: 13. ... Nc6 14. a4 b4!? 15. a5! with some pressure. Also, the knight on a5 helps prepare ... c5-c4.

14. Qd2 Bg7 15. Ng5!



The most principled move. Now Black has to make a difficult decision: how should he modify the pawn structure?

15. ... c4?!

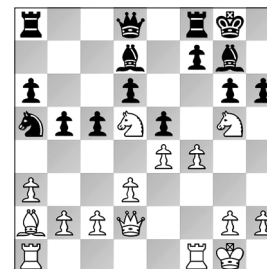
A risky move, compromising the pawn structure for the sake of dynamics. It was not easy to assess the alternatives.

It would be dangerous to play 15. ... Bd7?! as after 16. f4! the position is once again critical:

a) 16. ... exf4 17. Qxf4 Be6 (not 17. ... Bxb2? when 18. c3! Bxa1 19. Qh4 h5 20. Nf6+ Kg7 21. Nxb5+ gxh5 22. Qxh5+- is deadly) 18. Qg3!

with the idea of 19. Nxe6 followed by 20. Nf4. Black's position is unpleasant.

b) The real danger follows after 16. ... h6?



POSITION AFTER 16. ... h6?

when 17. f5!! hxg5 18. f6 and Black is in big trouble, in view of 18. ... Bh6? 19. h4! and White is winning.

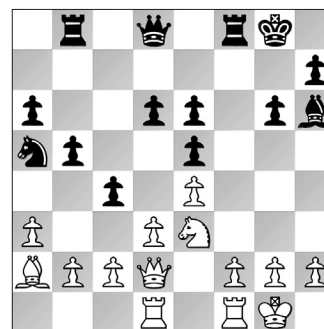
Instead, 15. ... Nc6! seems best.

a) After 16. f4 Black defends with the accurate 16. ... Ne7!, exchanging one of the attackers.

b) Black is fine after 16. Nxe6 fxe6 17. Ne3 Qe7. He will activate his bishop with ... h7-h5 and ... Bg7-h6, creating enough counterplay.

Another possibility for Ding was 15. ... Ra7!?. By keeping the knight on a5, Black is ready to meet f2-f4 with ... c5-c4.

16. Nxe6 fxe6 17. Ne3 Bh6 18. Rad1 Rb8



The critical moment of the game. After the inaccurate 15. ... c4, White suddenly has realistic chances for an edge.

19. dxc4?!

Nepomniachtchi chooses to simplify the position, tacitly acquiescing to a draw. Instead, he could have favorably kept the tension with 19. Qe2! and here we have to analyze three moves.

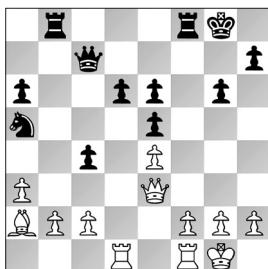
a) Black might be able to play 19. ... Kg7 20. dxc4 Bxe3 but has to watch out for 21. fxe3!, though he can probably draw with accurate play.

b) Most natural is 19. ... Qc7 is most natural, but this is not completely sufficient after

20. dxc4 Bxe3 21. Qxe3 when now:

b1) Forced is 21. ... Nxc4, for concrete reasons. After 22. Bxc4 (Also interesting is 22. Qc3!?) 22. ... bxc4 23. b4 cxb3 24. cxb3 White has a definite and, most importantly, risk-free advantage. For example, he can meet 24. ... Qb6 with 25. Qg5! Qxb3 26. Qe7! and torture his opponent.

b2) Black could not afford to play 21. ... bxc4?!



POSITION AFTER 21. ... Bxc4?!

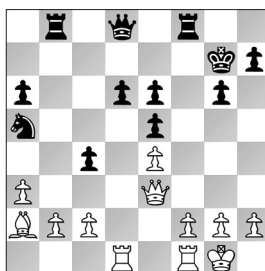
As after 22. b4! cxb3 23. cxb3 Nc6 24. b4 Nd4, White has the resourceful 25. Rxd4!. If not for this move, Black would be fine. Instead, after 25. ... exd4 26. Bxe6+ Kh8 27. Qxd4+ Qg7 28. Qd3, White is for choice.

c) The best defense is 19. ... Bxe3! 20. Qxe3 (here 20. fxe3 is now met by 20. ... Qc7! and Black is relatively safe after 21. b4!?! cxb3 22. cxb3 b4! 23. axb4 Nc6 24. b5 axb5 25. b4 Qd7 when Black holds on) 20. ... Kg7! 21. dxc4 bxc4!

(see diagram top of next column)

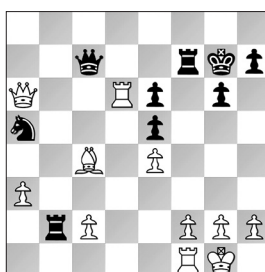
Now Black can recapture this way, keeping the bishop shut in on a2.

c1) After 22. Qa7+ 22. ... Rf7 23. Qxa6 Qc7! and it's difficult for White to consolidate the



POSITION AFTER 21. ... Bxc4!

extra pawn. For instance: 24. Rxd6 Rxb2 25. Bxc4



POSITION AFTER 25. Bxc4

Black has the fantastic 25. ... Qc5!!, intending 26. Bxe6 Rxf2!.

c2) There is no threat behind 22. b4 as the position following 22. ... cxb3 23. cxb3 Nc6 24. b4 Nd4 is equal; compare with 19. ... Qc7.

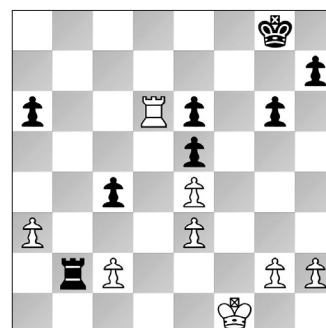
The point of the above lines is not to provide a conclusive analysis of the position after 19. Qe2, but to show the precision with which Black must play to avoid a position in which he is slightly worse and aiming at best for a draw. In my view, this was a significant missed opportunity by Nepomniachtchi.

19. ... Nxc4 20. Bxc4 bxc4 21. Qxd6



White has nothing after 21. Qe2 Bxe3 22. Qxe3 Rxb2 23. Qc3 Rb6 24. Qxc4 Qc8.

21. ... Qxd6 22. Rxd6 Bxe3 23. fxe3 Rxf1+ 24. Kxf1 Rxb2



The rest is straightforward.

25. Rxe6 Rxc2 26. Rxa6 Ra2 27. Rc6 Rxa3 28. Rxc4 Rxe3 29. Kf2 Ra3 30. Rc5 Ra2+ 31. Kf3 Ra3+ 32. Kg4 Ra2 33. Kh3 Re2 34. Rxe5 Kf7 35. Kg3 Kf6 36. Re8 Kf7 37. Re5 Kf6 38. Re8 Kf7 39. Re5, draw.

In principle, Nepomniachtchi should be satisfied with the result, but his lack of desire to press with 19. Qe2 is surprising and signals that he is no longer as fresh as at the beginning of the match. In such a long contest, stamina decides everything and Nepomniachtchi will need to channel all his remaining reserves of energy if he is to emerge victorious. After four successive draws, the time is ripe for a decisive result, and we can expect Ding to push hard with White after the rest day.

