

2023 WORLD CHAMPIONSHIP

APRIL 12, 2023 ■ ROUND 03

BY JJ LANG ■ ANNOTATIONS BY WGM KATERINA NEMCOVA



Ian Nepomniachtchi

Round Score

$\frac{1}{2} - \frac{1}{2}$

Match Score

$1\frac{1}{2} - \frac{1}{2}$



Ding Liren

Current Standings

2022 FIDE CANDIDATES

	White	Result	Moves	ECO	Summary
1	Nepomniachtchi - Ding	$\frac{1}{2}$ - $\frac{1}{2}$	49	C85	Ding defends well after opening surprise.
2	Ding - Nepomniachtchi	0-1	29	E10	Nepo wins without much resistance.
3	Nepomniachtchi - Ding	$\frac{1}{2}$ - $\frac{1}{2}$	30	D35	Deceptively quiet; even Hikaru couldn't muster a recap!



KATERINA NEMCOVA

WGM Katerina Nemcova is a Czech-American women's grandmaster who has played under the United States flag since 2013. She was the 2008 European Youth Championship in the Girls U18 division and World Youth runner-up the year prior.

She also won the Czech Women's Championship in 2008 and 2010, and has competed in four U.S. Women's Championships (most recently in 2021). Her last competition was the 2023 American Cup in St. Louis. Nemcova balances her playing career with teaching chess and pursuing a Ph.D. in Communications at the University of Arizona.

GM Ian Nepomniachtchi's second turn with the white pieces ended peacefully in the third game of the 2023 FIDE World Championship, but, in hindsight, this might be a crucial turning point in the trajectory of the match.

For starters, "Nepo" opened with a move other than 1. e4 for the first time in either of his FIDE World Championship appearances. GM Ding Liren appeared confident, staying at the board longer rather than retreating to the rest area.

More significantly, it was the first game of the match where the Chinese player was never in any danger. Not only was Ding was able to stop the bleeding, but he was able to do so while choosing whether to keep pushing for an advantage. After the game, Ding appeared smiling in the press conference and said he felt much more prepared mentally.

That Ding appeared in control this game should come as no surprise, however, as Nepomniachtchi actually (and deliberately, apparently) chose to follow a rapid game GM Anish Giri had played against Ding just last year until White's 17th move. It was unclear what Nepomniachtchi hoped to achieve out of the opening, as Giri had mentioned during live commentary that he found his experience playing this sort of Carlsbad position against Ding to be demoralizing.

Admittedly, at the time of writing, game four had already concluded, which could contribute to a bias in coverage. Had game four gone differently, we might

even be praising Nepo for keeping an even keel here.

Instead, it is hard not to wonder whether Nepomniachtchi felt a bit flustered during this game, similar to Giri's experience last year in the same position, and whether this at all contributed to his dangerously fast play in the decisive fourth game.

QUEEN'S GAMBIT DECLINED (D36)

GM Ian Nepomniachtchi (2795)

GM Ding Liren (2788)

2023 FIDE World Chess Championship
(3), Astana, 04.12.2023

Annotations by WGM Katerina Nemcova

1. d4

Surprise! Right from the first move we see that Nepomniachtchi is not going for his main weapon 1. e4 and instead chooses the queen's pawn. Even Ding mentioned this move came as a "total surprise."

1. ... Nf6 2. c4 e6 3. Nc3

This position occurred only a few days ago in round two, the only decisive game so far, when Ding, with the white pieces, continued with 3. Nf3 d5 4. h3.

3. ... d5

Black is going into the waters of Queen's Gambit Declined.

Ding could have tried to go for the very complex Nimzo Indian Defense with 3. ... Bb4 here to test Nepomniachtchi's preparation for this match. Given Nepo's lower familiarity with 1. d4 compared to 1. e4, it would be quite interesting to see what he had planned for this game.

4. cxd5 exd5

A rather risky alternative for Black would be 4. ... Nxd5. White can opt for a number of aggressive plans here, and the database shows that Nepomniachtchi has experience with them. His game against Wesley So went as follows: 5. e4 Nxc3 6. bxc3 c5 7. Rb1 Be7 8. Nf3 0-0 9. h4!?, Nepomniachtchi – So, *Chess24.com*, 2021.

5. Bg5 c6 6. e3

Players have now reached the well-known, solid, and thoroughly analyzed Carlsbad structure. This pawn formation offers several strategic plans for both colors and we can expect both contenders to be familiar



with them. The two most common plans for White include the so-called minority attack (b2-b4-b5) to create weaknesses on the queenside or the f2-f3 and e3-e4 push to gain space in the center. Depending on White's plan, Black will react.

6. ... h6

Another quite popular move is 6. ... Bf5, which was recently played in a noteworthy game between Aronian and Dominguez. White goes to trade queens quickly and keeps a slight edge in the endgame. Play continued 7. Qf3 Bg6 8. Bxf6 Qxf6 9. Qxf6 gxf6 10. Nf3 Nd7 11. Nh4 Be7 12. Ne2 f5 13. Nf3 Bb4+ 14. Kd1 Bd6 15. Ne1 Ke7 16. Nd3 Bh5 17. f3 (Aronian – Dominguez, Saint Louis, 2023).

7. Bh4 Be7 8. Bd3 0-0

Both players are naturally developing their pieces.

9. Qc2

Ding's go-to move here is 9. Nge2, which he has experience with from both the white and black sides. It's interesting to see the power of the ... b7-b5 move, which not only gets space for Black but also allows for ... b5-b4 attacking the knight. For example: 9. ... Re8 10. 0-0 Nbd7 (10. ... a5 11. Rc1 Nbd7 12. f3 b5 13. Bf2 Ding – Artemiev, *Chess24.com*, 2022) 11. f3 (11. a4!? The idea is to stop the ... b7-b5 plan. 11. ... Nh5 12. Bxe7 Qxe7 13. a5 Nf8 14. Nc1 Nf6 15. Nb3 Rb8 16. Qc2 b6 17. axb6 axb6 18. Nd2 c5 as in Pragganandhaa – Ding, *Chess24.com*, 2022) 11. ... b5!? 12. Bf2 (12. e4 b4! 13. Na4? dxe4 14. fxe4 Nxe4!) 12. ... a5 13. Ng3 Ba6 14. Kh1 b4 15. Nce2 Bxd3 16. Qxd3 c5 17. dxc5 Nxc5 was Grischuk – Ding *Chess.com*, 2022.

9. ... Re8 10. Nge2 Nbd7 11. 0-0 a5

Black is gaining space on the queenside and preparing for either the ... b7-b5 or the ... c6-c5 break.

Another logical option for Black is 11. ... Nh5. 12. Bxe7 Qxe7 13. Rab1. White is going for the first plan – the minority attack – to create a weakness on the queenside. After 13. ... a5 Black will delay the attack and later develop his pieces. Results show a lot of draws in these positions.

The alternative 11. ... b5 may be a little premature here. White will attack the pawn with 12. a4 b4 13. Na2 with the idea Na2-c1-b3. White will also control the c-file and enjoy a nice positional advantage.

12. a3 Nh5

A typical move in the Carlsbad structure offering a bishop trade. Black needs to free up his rook on the e-file to pressure e3-pawn. Moving the black bishop to f8 would allow White to keep the annoying pin.



Less powerful is 12. ... b5 13. f3 b4 14. axb6 because Black cannot recapture with his pawn.

13. Bxe7 Qxe7 14. Rae1

At first look, this move may appear strange because it locks the other rook on f1. However, when we understand the plan of playing f2-f3 and e3-e4, it suddenly makes sense to have both rooks on potentially open files.

14. ... Nf8

Black is transferring the knight to a better square, such as e6, while allowing the c8-bishop to get out.

15. Nc1

White needs to remove the knight to defend the e3-pawn with this rook. Then he can be serious about pushing his pawns to the center.

15. ... Nf6 16. f3

The pawns are ready to go!

16. ... Ne6

Black is pressuring the pawn on d4 and not allowing further advance in the center. As a sidenote, it is very interesting that we are still

in the Ding's game against Giri (mentioned in the notes to White's next move) yet Ding has already spent one hour on his clock.

17. N1e2

Nepomniachtchi confirmed that he was familiar with the previously mentioned game. However, here he decided to deviate. The knight is getting back to the game and is likely to aim for the luxurious f5-square where it creates discomfort for Black.

The aforementioned game continued with 17. Qf2 c5 18. Bb5 Rd8 19. dxc5 Qxc5 20. Nb3 Qb6 21. Rd1 Bd7 22. Bxd7 Rxd7 23. Nd4 Re8 (Giri – Ding, *Chess24.com*, 2022).

After 17. Qf2, Black could try 17. ... b5!



POSITION AFTER 17. ...b5!

This is best reply according to the computer, and a possible reason why Ding would have preferred for his opponent to copy Giri's moves. Black is ready to counterattack White's plan of e3-e4 with his ... b5-b4 attack.

17. ... c5

Ding continues with the same approach as in his game against Giri. He targets the pawn on d4. Caruana noted that "this move may be an inaccurate continuation."

An interesting alternative for Black, mentioned by Giri during the game, was 17. ... b5!?. This may look risky at first sight, but it is not that bad after a deeper look. 18. Ng3 Rb8 19. Nf5 Qf8



POSITION AFTER 17. ...c5

Although White looks well here and had achieved that fancy square for his knight, it is unclear whether the knight really poses a

serious challenge to Black. The knight needs to be careful of ... g7-g6 forcing it back. Black could also plan for the ... b5-b4 break followed by c6-c5. Overall, it's a complicated position for both colors.

18. Bb5

This is definitely not the only move here and probably not the best move. However, it keeps the spirit of the Ding – Giri game alive.

Not recommended is 18. dxc5. After 18. ... Qxc5 19. Ng3 Black can get rid of his potentially weak pawn and go for a pawn break with 19. ... d4!?



POSITION AFTER 19. ...d4!

20. Nge4 Nxe4 21. Nxe4 Qb6 22. Qf2 Bd7 23. exd4 Nxd4 and the position is equal.

Instead, the best move is 18. Nf4!?, as mentioned by Caruana. After 18. ... cxd4 19. exd4 Qd8 20. Nxe6 Bxe6, White has a comfortable position. Black has some issues with the light squares on both sides and his bishop is staring at his own d5-pawn. However, Ding is an extremely strong player and it is likely that he would be able to hold this position.

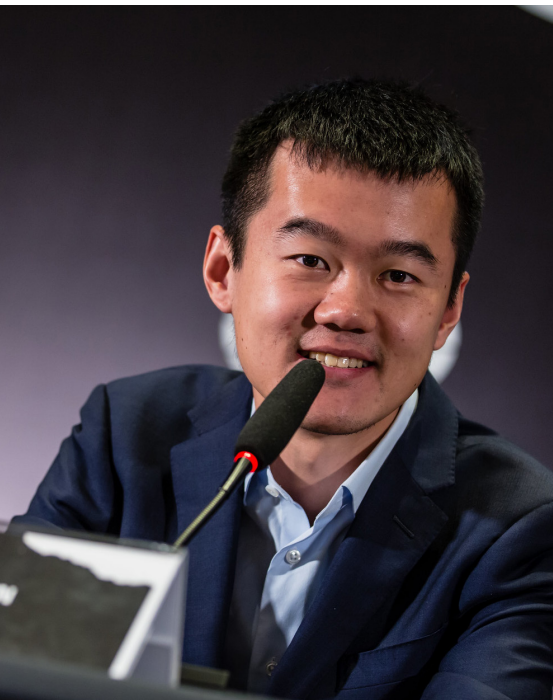
A worse response to 18. Nf4!? would have been 18. ... Nxf4 19. exf4 Qf8 20. dxc5 Qxc5+ 21. Qf2 Qxf2+ 22. Kxf2



POSITION AFTER 22. Kxf2

Surprisingly, White is doing quite well here. White's pieces are well-developed and there is a clear target on d5. After 22. ... Bd7 23. Rxe8+ Rxe8 24. Rd1, White can reroute his bishop to the a2-g8 diagonal and use his doubled f-pawns. The goal would be to create a strong pawn avalanche on the kingside, pressure the f6-knight and further attack the d5-pawn.





18. ... Rd8

A tempting, but unnecessarily complicated, alternative would be 18. ...Bxd7. It looks logical, but after 19. Bxd7 Qxd7 (19. ... Nxd7 20. Nxd5! Qd6 21. Ndc3 cxd4 22. Rd1 with an advantage) 20. Na4, White should be pleased.

19. dxc5 Qxc5 20. Qd2 Bd7

Black is not forgetting about his piece development. Finally, it's time for the bishop to get out.

A logical, but risky, alternative is 20. ...d4!?. Black is happy to get rid of his pawn weakness; however, his underdeveloped pieces may struggle in an open position. After 21. exd4 Nxd4 22. Nxd4 Rxd4 23. Qf2



POSITION AFTER 23. Qf2

Black has to be laser-focused here and not make a normal-looking yet terrible move: 23. ... Bf5?? 24. Rd1! Black is losing a piece and White is winning after 24. ... Rad8 25. Ne2.

21. Bxd7?!



21. Nd4 is a safer option for White. It leads to an equal position after 21. ... Nxd4 22. Qxd4 Qxd4 23. exd4.

21. ... Nxd7!

A big surprise from Ding!

Nepomniachtchi called this "quite a move" at the press conference. This move works tactically and its power lies in the transfer of a somewhat useless f6-knight to much better pastures.

22. Nd4

White's queen would be in big trouble after 22. Qxd5? Qxe3+ 23. Kh1 Ndc5. Instead, 22. Nxd5?? Nb6! loses a knight immediately, as there is no e3-e4 resource because of the pin.

22. ... Nb6

Black's plan is pretty straightforward now: transfer the knight to c4 to attack the pawns on e3 and b2 as well as the queen on d2.

23. Rd1

An interesting move choice by Nepo.

23. ... Nc4 24. Qf2 Rac8

A natural move. Black got his last piece into the game and is now threatening ... Nc4xb2 winning material.

An interesting but also risky idea for Black was 24. ... Nxa3!?. After 25. e4!, White is a pawn down but ready to attack in the center. Black needs to be very accurate with his following moves. For instance, 25. ... dxe4?? 26. Nxe6 Qxf2+ 27. Kxf2 fxe6 28. bxa3 loses for Black.

Instead, 24. ... b5 is a nice positional sacrifice. 25. Ncxb5 (not 25. Ndx5 Nxe3 winning for Black) 25. ... a4 could provide more chances.

25. Na4

White is forcing the queen to go away from her active square.

25. ... Qe7 26. Rfe1!?

White is also concerned with his pieces, improving the last one! The rook on f1 was somewhat bored while now it is guarding the e3-pawn.

26. ... Qf6



Black simply attacks the knight on d4.

An interesting try would have been 26. ... Qe8!?. 27. Nc3 Nxa3 28. Nf5!?. attacking the pawn on d5 and allowing counterplay on the kingside with the idea of Qf2-g3. Play continues 28. ... Rc5 29. Qg3 threatening to chop on h6 with the knight, and after 29. ... Kf8 there is a complicated game ahead. Note that White could not play 28. bxa3 because of 28. ... Rxc3!

The best choice for Black may have been 26. ... Nxd4!?. Although to me it looks like a transformation to an equal endgame, the computer feels that Black is doing better. Now 27. exd4 (27. Rxd4 b5! 28. Nc3 Qc5 with some chances for Black) 27. ... Qf6 28. Nc5 b6 29. Nd3 Re8 is pleasant.

27. Nb5!

A strong move that keeps the position in balance (according to the computer). Given the previous analysis, it is clear that White is happy to keep both knights on the board and not allowing the trades on d4. White's a4-knight also gets some credit now for defending the b2-pawn.

27. ... Nc7

Ding mentioned that he also considered 27. ... d4!?. but found it too risky. The idea behind the pawn sacrifice is that after 28. exd4 Nf4, Black gets excellent squares for his pieces. Black's activity should be enough for one pawn, but this decision is still risky. Given that Ding was just recovering from a loss, making a draw may have been a better practical decision in this World Championship match.

28. Nd4 Ne6 29. Nb5 Nc7 30. Nd4 Ne6, draw.