

2023 WORLD CHAMPIONSHIP

APRIL 10, 2023 ■ ROUND 02

BY JJ LANG ■ ANNOTATIONS BY GM ELSHAN MORADIABADI



Ding Liren

Round Score

0 - 1

Match Score

1/2 - 1 1/2



Ian Nepomniachtchi



ELSHAN MORADIABADI
GM Elshan Moradiabadi is an Iranian-American GM and the second Iranian player to reach a 2600 FIDE rating. Moradiabadi moved to the United States to

attend Texas Tech University in 2012, and has represented the United States since 2017. In 2022, he tied for first in the U.S. Open, earning a qualifying spot in the U.S. Championship as a result. Moradiabadi is also a distinguished coach, having coached the U.S. national team in the 2019 World Team Championships and the Pan Am team that same year. He currently resides in Durham, NC.

The opening act of the 2023 FIDE World Championship served two purposes. First, it provided us an opportunity to learn a thing or two about endgames from GM Awonder Liang. Second, it raised a host of psychological questions, many of which certainly appeared to be answered in the second game.

Would GM Ian Nepomniachtchi smell blood in the water, or would he get caught up in the frustration of a missed opportunity? Would GM Ding Liren bounce back after being jolted awake by the pressure of the match, or would the emotional hangover prove harder to shake?

Put briefly, it sure seems like Nepo was more encouraged than dejected by his chances, and Ding hardly appears in top form. Nepo won with the black pieces in a brutal 29 moves, responding on the fly to an experimental opening and out-strategizing his opponent nevertheless.

The post-game press conference was also telling. Nepo was nonchalant in explaining his play, suggesting that the attack played itself. Ding was again very forthcoming, admitting that in the 30-plus minutes he spent on his 12th move, he did not even consider Nepo's quick (not to mention correct) reply of doubling his own f-pawns.

Headed into the first rest day, it sure appears as if the trajectory of the match is set. But with 12 more games to be played, there is plenty of time for Ding to change course.

Another point of intrigue is, so far, neither player has shown their hand much with the white pieces. Nepo likely will not repeat a delayed Exchange Ruy Lopez, but will he play into Ding's favored Marshall, decline it, or avoid the Ruy altogether? For Ding, we do not know what else GM Richard Rapport has prepared for him, or whether he will return to more traditional paths.

QUEEN'S GAMBIT (D30) GM Ding Liren (2788) GM Ian Nepomniachtchi (2795)

2023 FIDE World Championship (2),
Astana, 04.10.2023

Annotations by GM Elshan Moradiabadi

A disappointing day for chess lovers and fans of Ding Liren, as the Chinese GM proved to be a mere shadow of his usual self. After yesterday's post-game conference, it was apparent that Ding is somewhat "tilted." I thought that perhaps he would "take the day off" by playing something prosaic, taking the draw, and using the rest day to collect himself. However, perhaps feeling compelled to show something with the white pieces, Ding sprung the first surprise with 4. h3. Nepomniachtchi was visibly amused, but he was not adversely affected by this h-pawn shove, and he responded confidently by entering a QGA setting where White's h2-h3 is hardly useful. In the ensuing fight, as you will see, Ding missed a number of ideas, and Nepomniachtchi deservedly picked up the full point without really breaking a sweat. To me, coming back from such a start would be equal to Korchnoi's comeback against Karpov in Baguio 1978, when the maverick GM equalized the match after being down 2-5. Let's hope that Ding can return to his usual level of play after the rest day.

1. d4 Nf6 2. c4 e6 3. Nf3 d5 4. h3!?



Not a popular move in high-level events, to say the least.

4. ... dxc4!

A very sensible response. Nepo decides to play a QGA where h2-h3 is hardly of any harm.

5. e3 c5 6. Bxc4 a6 7. 0-0 Nc6 8. Nc3

8. dxc5 has been tried in correspondence

games: 8. ... Qxd1 9. Rxd1 Bxc5 10. b3 (10. Be2 0-0 11. a3 Be7 12. b4 Bd7 13. Bb2 Rfd8 14. Nbd2 Be8 15. Nb3 Rac8 is absolutely balanced and leads to not much of a practical difficulty for Black. 16. Rdc1 Ne4 17. g4 Kf8 18. Rc4 Nd6 19. Rcc1, Nichols – Ozen, LSS 2022) 10. ... 0-0 11. Bb2 b5 (11. ... Be7 12. Be2 Bd7 13. Nbd2 Rfd8 14. Rac1 Rac8 was seen in Dutra Neto – Dziejdzina, LSS email 2009, when White has a microscopic advantage. In all these discussions, one can hardly tell what does h2-h3 did for White, except encouraging a good version of QGA for Black! This surely could have given something to Ding, had he chosen to play this but I doubt that Nepo would have even considered such a reckless move. 12. Be2 Be7 13. a4 b4? This is surely a mistake. I guess we all know that the engines weren't exactly accurate back in 2009. 14. Ne5 Nxe5 15. Bxe5 Bb7 16. Nd2 with a slight edge in Hladecek – Kuta, ICCF 2009.

8. ... b5 9. Bd3 Bb7

The best move. Again, Nepo avoids some reckless play that appeared in correspondence games: 9. ... c4 10. Bc2 Bb7 11. e4 Be7 12. Bf4 0-0 13. d5 Nb4 14. d6 Bxd6 15. Bxd6 Nxc2 16. Rc1 b4 17. Bxf8 bxc3 18. Qxc2 Qxf8 19. Qxc3 Nxe4 20. Qxc4 and White was winning in Boehme - Hannig, freechess.de 2020.

10. a4

So far, the players are following the engine's top choice at as high of a depth as 74!

10. ... b4

This is a must as ... c5-c4 would have left White with a strong center. Not to mention that the in-between move a4xb5 is also annoying: 10. ... c4? 11. axb5 axb5 12. Rxa8 Bxa8 13. Bb1 b4 14. Ne4 with an edge for White.

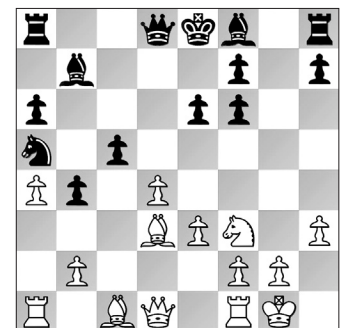
11. Ne4 Na5!

The casual 11. ... cxd4 12. exd4 Be7 13. Re1 0-0 14. Be3! leaves White with some initiative.

12. Nxf6+?!

A psychological inaccuracy, especially in light of Ding's admission that he had not considered Black's next move! It's clear that White had to pull the ripcord and play 12. Nxc5 Bxc5 13. dxc5, although the positions after 13. ... Be4 (13. ... Nd7 14. c6 Bxc6 15. Nd4 Nc5 16. Bc2 Bd5 17. Qg4 Qf6 18. Bd2 Rb8) 14. Bxe4 Qxd1 15. Rxd1 Nxe4 16. c6 Nb3 17. Rb1 Rd8 18. Nd4 Ke7 19. f3 Nec5 20. Bd2 a5 21. c7 Rd6 may not have been to Ding's liking.

12. ... gxf6!





Natural and strong. The alternative 12. ... Qxf6 13. e4 h6 14. Re1 cxd4 15. e5 Qd8 is totally playable, but the two-times winner of the Candidates does not miss a chance of getting an even and balanced fight. After 12. ... Qxf6 the position is practically very convenient for White.

13. e4?!

Already playing with fire. 13. dxc5 is the only testing move: 13. ... Qd7! (13. ... Bxc5?! 14. e4 Qd6 15. Qe2 0-0-0 16. Rd1 Qb6 17. Bf4 e5 18. Bg3 Rd7 19. Kh2 and White is more comfortable) 14. c6 Bxc6 (and not 14. ... Nxc6? 15. Qe2 with a big advantage).

13. ... c4!

Neпо confidently seizes the initiative.

14. Bc2 Qc7 15. Bd2 Rg8?!

Engines do not like this move, but I find it hard to believe this 'microscopic' inaccuracy matters much in any practical sense. Black is preparing long castle and ... f6-f5, and that is good enough to scare anyone.

After 15. ... 0-0-0 16. Rc1 Kb8 17. Qe1 Qb6 White cannot play Bc2-d3 now.

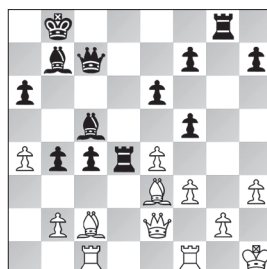
16. Rc1?!

Ding misses his chance. He is surely out of sorts. After 16. Qe1 f5 (16. ... Qb6 17. Rc1 and Black cannot castle due to Bc2-d3) 17. Qe2 0-0-0 18. Rad1 White is back to maintaining a practical balance.

16. ... 0-0-0 17. Bd3?

This is the losing blunder.

Instead 17. Qe1 is a must: 17. ... f5 (worse is 17. ... Qb6 18. Bd3 and Black's king is not on b8 yet) 18. Kh1 Nc6 19. Qe2 Nxd4 20. Nxd4 Rxd4 21. f3 Kb8 22. Be3 Bc5!



POSITION AFTER 22. ... Bc5

The engines give a 0.00 evaluation here, but at least 7 out of 10 GMs would tell you that it is not comfortable to play this as White.

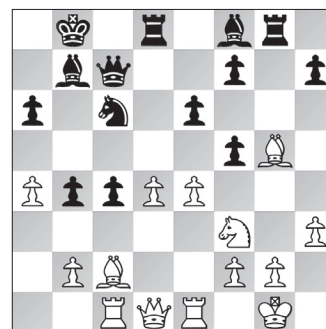
17. ... Kb8 18. Re1?!

Making things worse.

On 18. Bxc4 Nxc4 19. b3 Nb2 20. Qe2 Qd6! is the only winning move. 21. Rc2 f5 and Black is winning.

The alternative 18. Qe1 f5 19. Kh1 Qb6 20. Bc2 Bd6 21. Rg1 puts up far better resistance. After 21. ... Nc6 (21. ... Ka8 seems to be a killer move, but it is a bit inhuman) 22. d5 exd5 23. exd5 Ne7 24. Bd1 Bxd5 25. Ne5 Black is much better, but it is messy enough to present Black with practical difficulties.

18. ... f5 19. Bc2 Nc6 20. Bg5



Here 20. d5 is the last try. Nevertheless it loses to 20. ... Bc5! 21. Kh1 (21. dxc6 Qg3) 21. ... exd5 22. e5 Bc8 and Black is a healthy pawn up.

20. ... Rxc5!

Well, it is kind of an obvious move, but we should compliment Neпо for getting the kind of position from which this move flows!

21. Nxc5 Nxd4 22. Qh5 f6 23. Nf3??

Effectively resigning already. Ding doesn't even try to hope for some 'cheapos' with Ng5xh7, although it must be said that Black is still crushing after 23. Nxc5 Bc5.

23. ... Nxc2 24. Rxc2 Bxe4

The rest is, as they say, just a matter of technique.

25. Rd2 Bd6 26. Kh1? c3

Push 'em!

27. bxc3 bxc3 28. Rd4 c2 29. Qh6 e5, White resigned.

After two rounds, Neпо is confident and calm, while Ding is dealing with a lot of emotions. I personally hope that the Chinese super-GM manages to find his usual form after a rest day.