



CHESS TOUR

L'affaire Niemann

Chess is overshadowed by off-the-board controversy at three flagship St. Louis events. **BY JOHN HARTMANN**

What has come to be known as the “butterfly effect” is a complicated mathematical definition within modern chaos theory that can be grasped with a simple metaphor.

Imagine a butterfly, flittering around the milkweed plants in your garden. The tiny atmospheric disturbance caused by the monarch’s beating wings might — not *will*, but *might* — be the first element in a causal chain that leads to, or prevents, a major weather event like a tornado. This is the butterfly effect: the idea that a small, local action might unpredictably snowball beyond its immediate conditions and change the world.

GM Richard Rapport is just such a butterfly.

Were one to “let the chess speak for itself,” the story of the 2022 editions of the Saint Louis Rapid and Blitz, the Sinquefeld Cup, and the Champions Showdown 9LX tournaments at the Saint Louis Chess Club would be the play of GM Alireza Firouzja. After a disappointing performance in the 2022 Candidates Tournament, Firouzja was absolutely dominant, winning the Rapid and Blitz outright, and sharing first in the Sinquefeld Cup and Champions Showdown 9LX, taking the former in a playoff.

This was the breakout performance that everyone had been waiting for, including the young French-Iranian himself, who revealed in an interview with GM Cristian Chirila that had he had vowed to win his first tournament on Missouri soil. Firouzja played creative and combative chess on the way to becoming the 2022 Grand Chess Tour

champion, and it signaled his place both as a potential title challenger in the future, and as one of today’s elite now.

But no one talks about Firouzja’s victories. After leaving St. Louis, and outside of his weekly Titled Tuesday appearances, he has largely retreated from the contemporary chess landscape. Instead, with a few flaps of Rapport’s wings, another name has been inserted into its beating heart.



GM Hans Niemann wasn’t even supposed to be there. The peripatetic American was playing in the Turkish league when he got the call. COVID-19 related travel restrictions forced Rapport to withdraw from the Rapid

and Blitz and the Sinquefeld Cup. Could Hans make it back to St. Louis and fill one of the spots?

The Rapid and Blitz was too soon — GM Jeffery Xiong filled in admirably there — but soon enough Niemann was back in St. Louis, taking his place among the simultaneous exhibitors at the Sinquefeld Cup opening ceremony.

I was there, that Thursday night in Forest Park. If you look at the various photos from the event, you’ll see me in my Star Wars themed RSVLTS shirt, looking haggard while playing blitz, or holding up a copy of *Chess Life* for the cameras. And looking back at what I saw, already there were hints that something was not quite right.

Carlsen was a little chippy as he was in-



Left: Niemann interviewed after round four. Right: Carlsen and Niemann, making the first moves in their round three game.

PHOTOS: COURTESY SLCC / OOTES



so much depends upon

COVID travel restrictions

an Elon Musk tweet

and long held suspicions

**with apologies to William Carlos Williams*

Left: Now-essential arbiter gear. Right: Elon Musk's now-deleted tweet, reprinted here for its historical value, if not its accuracy.

interviewed during the simul by GM Cristian Chirila and WGM Anastasiya Karlovich, taking what very much felt like digs at Niemann as the two made their respective moves. As soon as the games were ended and the autographs signed, Team Carlsen disappeared, making for a very awkward moment at the event opening when Carlsen's name was called and he was nowhere to be found.

By itself, this might not have meant anything at all. But in the weeks since "*l'affaire Niemann*" began, we've come to know quite a lot about the behind-the-scenes machinations of top-level chess. One of the things we learned from Chirila and GM Fabiano Caruana's must-listen "C-Squared Podcast" is that Carlsen was protesting Niemann's playing in the Sinquefeld Cup as soon as he learned of it.

What could have caused this rift? After all, Niemann was a regular participant in Play Magnus tour events, and we now know that Carlsen and Niemann played friendly games on a Miami beach on August 12. So what happened in the intervening days between the 12th and 25th, when Niemann's participation was announced?

Perhaps it was Niemann's petulant proclamation "the chess speaks for itself," spat at a Chess24 reporter after defeating Carlsen in the first game of their FTX (yes, *that* FTX) Crypto Cup match — a match that Carlsen went on to win by a score of 3-1.

But perhaps there was more to it. Niemann, it seems, has been the subject of long-standing rumors regarding online cheating, a subject that had not received much public attention, but was of great concern to the world's leading players. It's not clear how Carlsen could have come to know of Niemann's juvenile bans from *Chess.com* events — he had been playing in *Chess.com* prize tournaments regularly, and Chess24 had no apparent problems with Niemann's participation — but, for whatever reason, he was perturbed.

The first days of the Sinquefeld Cup saw nothing out of the ordinary. Carlsen stylishly defeated GM Ian Nepomniachtchi in round one. Nepo took out his frustrations on Firouzja in round two, while Niemann won a nice game against GM Shakhriyar Mamedyarov.

And then came round three, and this pairing — one that overturned the chess world as we know it.

PHOTO: COURTESY SLCC / OOTES

NIMZO-INDIAN DEFENSE (E20)

GM Magnus Carlsen (2861)

GM Hans Niemann (2688)

Sinquefield Cup (3), St. Louis,
09.04.2022

1. d4 Nf6 2. c4 e6 3. Nc3 Bb4 4. g3 0-0 5. Bg2 d5 6. a3 Bxc3+ 7. bxc3 dxc4 8. Nf3 c5 9. 0-0 cxd4 10. Qxd4 Nc6 11. Qxc4 e5 12. Bg5 h6 13. Rfd1 Be6 14. Rxd8 Bxc4 15. Rxa8 Rxa8 16. Bxf6 gxf6 17. Kf1 Rd8 18. Ke1 Na5 19. Rd1 Rc8 20. Nd2 Be6 21. c4 Bxc4 22. Nxc4 Rxc4 23. Rd8+ Kg7 24. Bd5 Rc7 25. Ra8 a6 26. Rb8 f5 27. Re8 e4 28. g4 Rc5 29. Ba2 Nc4 30. a4 Nd6 31. Re7 fxe4 32. Rd7 e3 33. fxe3 Ne4 34. Kf1 Rc1+ 35. Kg2 Rc2 36. Bxf7 Rxe2+ 37. Kg1 Re1+ 38. Kg2 Re2+ 39. Kg1 Kf6 40. Bd5 Rd2 41. Rf7+ Kg6 42. Rd7 Ng5 43. Bf7+ Kf5 44. Rxd2 Nf3+ 45. Kg2 Nxd2 46. a5 Ke5 47. Kg3 Nf1+ 48. Kf2 Nxe2 49. e4 Kxe4 50. Be6 Kf4 51. Bc8 Nf3 52. Bxb7 Ne5 53. Bxa6 Nc6 54. Bb7 Nxa5 55. Bd5 h5 56. Bf7 h4 57. Bd5, White resigned.

Niemann's post-game interview raised more than a few eyebrows. Switching in and out of a strange accent, he told GM Alejandro Ramirez that he had "by some miracle" checked the opening position that day — an admission that got a lot of air time in the ensuing social media melee — and, with his usual bravado, claimed that Magnus must be shattered to "lose against such an idiot like me. It must be embarrassing for the World Champion to lose to me. I feel bad for him."

For his part, Carlsen had seen enough. The rumors started to circulate on social media as round four began with a 15-minute broadcast delay; soon, we learned that Carlsen failed to show up for his game with Mamedyarov, choosing instead to withdraw from the event. His only comment was a cryptic tweet announcing his departure, giving a curious link to a Jose Mourinho "If I speak, I am in big trouble" video as a chaser. For those not in the know: Mourinho was referring to what he saw as colossal refereeing errors during a 2014 Chelsea football game.

Chess social media exploded: while Carlsen coyly avoided fingering Niemann as a cheat, everyone very quickly read between the lines and began to speculate. Prominent chess streamers like GMs Hikaru Nakamura and Eric Hansen immediately talked about and around rumors of Niemann's past online cheating, his bans from *Chess.com*, and the various ways that he might have cheated over-the-board against Carlsen. Multiple theories, some very strange, began to emerge.



Elon Musk
@elonmusk

"Talent hits a target no one else can hit, genius hits a target no one can see (cause it's in ur butt)" – Schopenhauer



Babble @Babble_ · 18h

Currently obsessed with the notion that Hans Niemann has been cheating at the Sinquefield Cup chess tournament using wireless anal beads that vibrate him the correct moves.



3:52 AM · Sep 8, 2022 · Twitter for iPhone

Some focused on leaked prep from Carlsen's camp. Others were more... *esoteric*.

Now, I was in the room for the beginning of the first round, and I watched as IA Chris Bird explained the security measures to the players. I can't prove that Niemann didn't cheat — it's nearly impossible to prove a negative — but it's very hard to see how he could have pulled it off.

Spectators weren't allowed in the hall, and journalists / guests of the event had to leave after the first 10 minutes. Players were wanded at the door, and all electronics had to be surrendered upon entry. The players could not leave the playing hall without a chaperone, and with only one bathroom, there was no place to hide a cell phone *à la* Igor Rausis.

Carlsen was in that same room for those same announcements, and presumably he had been given similar information during the players' meeting before the tournament began. He had to have known how tricky it would be to pull off that kind of scheme. So why did he withdraw from the event, an action that is almost unthinkable at elite levels, and one that would be sure to draw the ire of the Saint Louis leadership?

I don't think outsiders were — or are — aware of just how troubled top players are by the prospect of cheating. Equipped with Stockfish, today's cell phones are more than strong enough to defeat any human alive. Consulting the engine even once or twice a game could be enough for a savvy player to turn a loss into a win. And Niemann's history with engine use in online games was not unknown to his fellow grandmasters.

Interviews with other Sinquefield participants confirmed this. With a wink and a nod, Nepomniachtchi called Niemann's victory "most impressive" in an interview after round four; soon, a year-old video of Nepo wondering how much Niemann was using an engine to harvest rating points emerged. GM Levon Aronian admitted that his colleagues could be "paranoid" about young players making leaps in strength. Caruana suggested that people were probably right to guess what made Carlsen withdraw.

I think — and here I'm just speculating — that Carlsen saw himself as taking a stand against cheating in chess, tearing the band-aid off a wound that very few outside of top-level chess knew about. Whether he could prove that Niemann cheated in their



Top: IA Chris Bird officially forfeits Carlsen in round five. Left: Mamedyarov suspects his hours preparing for Carlsen will be wasted.

game was, in some ways, irrelevant. The well was already poisoned, and Niemann's in-game behavior was just the tipping point.

Meanwhile, the other competitors soldiered on. Niemann drew a fascinating game against Firouzja; afterwards, he struggled through a post-game interview with Ramirez where, in contrast to previous days, the Lichess engine was turned off. This was more fuel for the fire: Eric Hansen called Niemann's analysis "incoherent" without access to the engine, and soon suggested that a carefully secreted, vibrating adult

toy would be one way to defeat the security checks and receive in-game assistance.

This was chum in the water, and what was a big story in the chess world suddenly took on a life beyond it. After the world's second richest man (at time of writing) and walking embodiment of the Dunning-Kreuger effect Elon Musk tweeted about Hansen's "theory," the mass media machine swarmed, and chess players everywhere had to answer uncomfortable questions from their friends.

Niemann's response to the controversy was to give one of the most remarkable interviews in chess history on September 6. For nearly 20 minutes after his round five draw with GM Leinier Dominguez Perez, Niemann addressed every aspect of the controversy in detail. He admitted to cheating in online games when he was 12 and 16, and to being banned (and then restored) for those offenses. He unequivocally denied cheating against Carlsen, and offered to play naked, if need be, to prove his innocence.

Perhaps most troubling was his assertion that *Chess.com* re-banned him because of

the charges leveled by their new business partner, Magnus Carlsen. (Recall that *Chess.com* announced plans to purchase the Play Magnus Group on August 24.) Why, he asked, would "someone very high up at *Chess.com*" — quite possibly IM Danny Rensch himself, who was on-site in St. Louis for the first days of the event — personally tell him three days earlier that he'd be welcome in the *Chess.com* Global Chess Championship, only to have his account "privately rescinded" after defeating Carlsen?

There may have been four rounds of chess to go, but for all intents and purposes, the tournament was at this point over. All of the oxygen in the room was sucked up by the insatiable churn of social media, and the "chess itself" became little more than excuse to gossip and retweet.

(For the record: Firouzja shared first with Mamedyarov, defeating him in a playoff to claim the actual Sinquefeld Cup. See key annotated games by IM John Watson in our February issue.)

The off-the-board moves slowed, but they kept coming. Niemann challenged Nakamura and Hansen to watch his interview and respond. Play Magnus published and quickly deleted a story about the "biggest cheating scandals" in chess history. *Chess.com* defended themselves in a September 8th tweet, stating that Niemann was informed as to the reasons for his removal from their events, and promising to "protect the integrity of the game that we all love."

On September 10, Sinquefeld arbiter Bird released a statement, confirming that there was "no indication that any player has been playing unfairly in the 2022 Sinquefeld Cup." That same day, four Robert Palmer video-esque "Niemann fans" held a vigil outside the playing hall in honor of their hirsute hero.

Any hopes that the controversy would subside after the final moves were played in St. Louis were quickly dashed. Rather than play Niemann in their online Julius Baer Generation Cup game, Carlsen resigned after one move. Two days later, on September 21, Carlsen fired another shot in this new Cold War, avoiding direct comment but saying, "I have to say I'm very impressed by Niemann's play, and I think his mentor Maxim Dlugy must be doing a great job." Carlsen doubled down in a September 27 statement, where he detailed his belief "that Niemann has cheated more — and more recently — than he has publicly admitted."



Left: "SNL's" Heidi Gardner and Punkie Johnson point to Austin Butler's alleged cheating device, "like that chess player."

PHOTOS: COURTESY SLCC / OOTES (TOP), YOUTUBE (BOTTOM)

Right: Three of the four pro-Hans Niemann demonstrators who came to St. Louis to support their hero during round eight.

The shot at Dlugy was not an innocent jab. Once Niemann’s coach in 2014, Dlugy had long been suspected in elite circles of online fair play violations. These charges were substantiated one week later when *Chess.com* provided emails and other materials related to Dlugy to a *Vice.com* reporter.

Why *Chess.com* leaked communications that all sides agreed were private is unclear. But more confidential emails were included in the October 4 *Chess.com* “Hans report,” a document that was also given to a *Wall Street Journal* writer ahead of publication. (Note that this was the day before the U.S. Championship began — where Niemann was scheduled to participate, a fact of which *Chess.com* must have been aware.) In that report, *Chess.com* claimed evidence of more online cheating, and more recent cheating, than Niemann had admitted to in his interview.

About over-the-board cheating, the report was equivocal. While there was “no direct evidence” of foul play in the Sinquefeld game, *Chess.com* nevertheless claimed that the win over Carlsen was “suspicious.” Their decision to re-ban Niemann came after the Carlsen game, and in light of the suspicions it raised.

This is a key point. There is no evidence that Niemann cheated over-the-board. All of the amateur attempts to prove malfeasance were flawed, while both anti-cheating expert IM Kenneth Regan and the *Chess.com* report itself cleared Niemann’s over-the-board performances. So why did *Chess.com* decide to trust Carlsen’s “vibe check,” for lack of a better word, and re-suspend Niemann’s account? This has never fully been explained.

On October 20, Niemann filed a defamation lawsuit against Carlsen, *Chess.com*, Nakamura, and Rensch himself. Since then, every filing and motion nudges the controversy back into the public eye. The *New York Times* devoted the front page of their Sunday Business section to the saga on December 4, and the NPR program “Here and Now” had the co-author of that story, Dylan Loeb McClain, as a guest on December 12.

And in perhaps the ultimate sign of the impact this scandal had on the broader cultural landscape, “Saturday Night Live” name-checked the Hansen / Musk theory in a game-show skit on December 17.



This is the first feature I’ve written for *Chess*



Life in some time, and honestly, it wasn’t a lot of fun to work on. The sad truth is that no one comes off well in its telling. There are no winners here, only various grades of losers.

But this is as important a story as it is unpleasant in its content. I suspect that when we look back at “*l’affaire Niemann*” a few years down the road, it will, in fact, appear as an inflection point in the history of our game. Carlsen’s anti-Niemann gambit may have been factually false, but at root, I think it was a desperate attempt to grapple with the threat of cheating in competitive chess.

Engines aren’t going away. They’re getting smarter, and the devices they run on are getting smaller. Every chess organizer, and every chess organization — including this one — must remain vigilant to protect the integrity of their events.

There’s another part to the story here, and one that hasn’t really been discussed. That’s the growing influence of *Chess.com* and online chess on the modern chess landscape.

At launch, the *Chess.com* Global Chess Championship was called the *Chess.com World Chess Championship*. While the name was quickly changed, that it was initially designed to be a “World Championship” could be an indication of *Chess.com*’s ambition. This was perhaps less of a concern while

it was in direct competition with Chess24 and Play Magnus; now, having bought out the competition, *Chess.com* stands alone.

What is *Chess.com*’s place in international chess governance? Should a ban on their platform be a reason for FIDE to investigate a player? And does a commercial relationship with one or more competitors, or a commercial interest in their success, lead to irresolvable conflicts of interest?

Such questions are far beyond my prognosticative abilities. For now, both Carlsen and Niemann continue to ply their trade, both online and in-person, and the next chapter in their saga may have already taken place by the time you read these words.

The World Rapid and Blitz Championships are scheduled for late December in Kazakhstan, with both Carlsen and Niemann listed as competitors. What happens if they are paired? Will Carlsen forfeit again out of principle? Will he try to let “the chess speak for itself” and take his chances over-the-board?

Perhaps most significantly: what will happen the next time he’s paired with someone else — someone not named Hans Niemann — whom he suspects of foul play?

And what will happen if other players follow in Carlsen’s footsteps, or even take the lead? ♠