

# SHOWDOWN

## in Singapore

Gukesh challenges Ding this month for World Championship

BY RICK MASSIMO



THE FIRST CHINESE WORLD champion defends his title this month against a grandmaster who is looking to become — by far — the youngest champ ever.

The World Chess Championship starts Nov. 25 in Singapore, and 18-year-old GM Gukesh Dommaraju, of India, is looking to take the crown from champion GM Ding Liren.

If he wins, Gukesh would be the youngest world champion ever, easily breaking the record set by GM Garry Kasparov, who was 22 when he won it in 1985. And Gukesh was only 17 when he won the right to challenge Ding by winning the 2024 Candidates Tournament, held in Toronto.

### HOW THEY GOT HERE

It was a bit of a surprise when Gukesh won this year's Candidates Tournament by a half-point. He was seeded into the Candidates Tournament after he placed second in the 2023 FIDE Circuit; the winner, American GM Fabiano Caruana, was already qualified for the Candidates. Gukesh won the Candidates in a dramatic last round, in which he held off American GM Hikaru Nakamura while Caruana and Russian GM Ian Nepomniachtchi, either of whom could have forced a playoff by winning, battled to an epic 109-move draw.

Ding, 31, is of course the reigning world champion, having defeated GM Ian Nepomniachtchi in a thrilling tiebreaker in last year's match. He also took an unlikely route to the title: He finished second in the 2022 Candidates Tournament and made it into the match when GM Magnus Carlsen, still the world's highest-rated player, resigned his title.

### WHAT'S HAPPENED TO DING?

After winning the title, however, Ding didn't play for nine months. Since the beginning of last year, his rating has fallen from 2811 to 2728, and his spot in the world rankings from second to 21st. (Gukesh is No. 5.)

He recently told *The Straits Times* that "I don't know if I will ever reach that level again." Always very honest about his emotional state, added, "I'm not at my lowest and have walked out of the darkness from the last 1½ years ... I've moved past that now and I feel like I have been playing decent chess but have not been winning."

The champion added that he's ready to prove his doubters wrong: "I like the fact that the media are saying this and the feeling of being the underdog. I'll then surprise them."

### THE RULES

The match format calls for up to 14 classical games (40/2, then G/30, with a 30-second increment kicking in at move 41). If the classical portion ends in a tie, Ding and Gukesh will play rapid and, if necessary, blitz tiebreak games at progressively faster time controls — faster than last year's match between Ding and Nepomniachtchi.

First up is a four-game mini-match at G/15 with a 10-second increment; if that's a tie as well, the next step is a two-game mini-match at G/10 with a 5-second increment. From there, it goes to blitz: two games of G/3 with a 2-second increment. If that's still tied, they

go to a single game of G/3+2. And if that's drawn, they switch colors and play again, over and over until there's a decisive game.

No draws by agreement are allowed before Black's 40th move.

The first game is set for Nov. 25; tiebreaks, if they're needed, are scheduled for Dec. 13.

### HEAD-TO-HEAD

Historically, world championship contenders are veterans of the tournament scene, and thus have played each other many times. That's not the case here, for a few reasons — Gukesh's youth, Ding's layoff, and post-COVID travel complications are the three big ones.

The two have played six serious games according to the databases, including three at classical time controls. Of these three, Ding has won twice with Black at the Tata Steel supertournament last year and again this year, and they drew with Gukesh having Black at the Sinquefeld Cup, in St. Louis, this summer. They knew by then that they'd be facing off for the title, so they may not have pulled out all the stops.

### QUEEN'S INDIAN DEFENSE (E15)

GM Gukesh Dommaraju (2725)

GM Ding Liren (2811)

85th Tata Steel Masters (1), Wijk aan Zee, 01.14.2023

1. d4 Nf6 2. c4 e6 3. Nf3 b6 4. g3 Ba6 5. b3 Bb4+ 6. Bd2 Be7 7. Bg2 0-0 8. 0-0 d5 9. Nc3 c6 10. Bf4 Nbd7 11. cxd5 exd5 12. Ne1 Re8 13. Nd3 Nf8 14. Bg5 Ne6 15. Bxf6 Bxf6 16. e3 Nc5 17. dxc5 Bxc3 18. Rc1 Qf6 19. Qc2 d4 20. cxb6 axb6 21. Rfd1 Rad8 22. exd4 Bxd4 23. Nf4 g5 24. Nh5 Qh6 25. Bf3 c5 26. g4 f5 27. Ng3 fxg4 28. Nf5 Qf6 29. Be4 h5 30. b4 Kf8 31. a3 h4 32. Re1 Rxe4 33. Qxe4 Bd3 34. Qe6 Qxe6 35. Rxe6 Bxf5 36. Rxb6 g3 37. hxg3 hxg3 38. bxc5 Bh3, White resigned.

### GIUOCO PIANO (C50)

GM Gukesh Dommaraju (2725)

GM Ding Liren (2780)

86th Tata Steel Masters (3), Wijk aan Zee, 01.15.2024

1. e4 e5 2. Nf3 Nc6 3. Bc4 Nf6 4. d3 Bc5  
 5. c3 d6 6. a4 a5 7. Bg5 h6 8. Bh4 Ba7 9.  
 Na3 Qe7 10. Nb5 Bb6 11. Qb3 g5 12. Bg3  
 0-0 13. 0-0-0 Nh5 14. d4 exd4 15. Nbx d4  
 g4 16. Nh4 Bxd4 17. cxd4 Qxe4 18. Rhe1  
 Qh7 19. Rd2 Bd7 20. Bd3 Qg7 21. Bf5 Bxf5  
 22. Nxf5 Qg5 23. Qb5 Rfe8 24. Re3 Ng7  
 25. Nxg7 Kxg7 26. d5 Rxe3 27. fxe3 Nb4  
 28. Qxb7 Re8 29. Bf4 Qf5 30. Qb5 Na2+  
 31. Kd1 Qb1+ 32. Ke2 Qg1 33. Kd3 Nb4+  
 34. Kd4 Qe1 35. Rd3 Qe2 36. Rc3 Qd2+ 37.  
 Kc4 Re4+, White resigned.

### GIUOCO PIANO (C50)

GM Ding Liren (2745)  
 GM Gukesh Dommaraju (2766)  
 Sinquefield Cup (1), St. Louis,  
 08.19.2024

1. e4 e5 2. Nf3 Nc6 3. Bc4 Bc5 4. 0-0 Nf6 5.  
 d3 d6 6. c3 a5 7. Re1 0-0 8. h3 Be6 9. Bb5  
 Ba7 10. Be3 Bxe3 11. Rxe3 Ne7 12. d4 Ng6  
 13. Bf1 d5 14. Nbd2 Nxe4 15. Nxe5 Nxe5  
 16. dxe5 Nxd2 17. Qxd2 c5 18. Rg3 d4 19.  
 Qh6 g6 20. Bd3 c4 21. Be4 d3 22. Bxg6  
 fxg6 23. Rxg6+ hxg6 24. Qxg6+ Kh8 25.  
 Qh6+ Kg8 26. Qg6+ Kh8 27. Qh6+ Kg8 28.  
 Qg6+, draw.

### WHAT'S AT STAKE

In addition to the title, the prize fund totals \$2.5 million. Each player will get \$200,000 for each game they win, and the rest of the prize fund will be divided equally. If the match ends 7½-6½ with 13 decisive games or 8-6 with all decisive games, or if the match

goes to tiebreakers, the winner will get \$1.3 million and the loser \$1.2 million.

### US CHESS COVERAGE

US Chess will cover the 2024 World Championship at *Chess Life Online*. Keep up with annotated games and photos at [new.uschess.org/news](http://new.uschess.org/news) and [new.uschess.org/2024-fide-world-championship](http://new.uschess.org/2024-fide-world-championship). We will also have a complete wrap-up in a future issue of *Chess Life*. ↗

For up-to-date chess news and information, check out **Chess Life Online** at [uschess.org/clo](http://uschess.org/clo) on a regular basis.

# 2024 WORLD CHAMPS

DING

# LIREN

THE CHAMPION

#15

CURRENT\*  
WORLD  
RANKING:

CURRENT\*  
FIDE RATING: 2736

PEAK FIDE RATING  
(NOVEMBER 2018): 2816

PEAK WORLD RANKING  
(NOVEMBER 2021): #2

AWARDED GRANDMASTER  
TITLE: 2009 (AGE 17)

BECAME WORLD CHAMPION  
IN 2023



THE CHALLENGER

# DOMMARAJU

GUKESH



#7

CURRENT\*  
WORLD  
RANKING:

CURRENT\*  
FIDE RATING:  
2764

PEAK FIDE RATING  
(AUGUST 2024):  
2766

PEAK WORLD RANKING  
(MAY 2024): #6

AWARDED  
GRANDMASTER  
TITLE: 2019 (AGE 12)

YOUNGEST  
CHALLENGER IN  
HISTORY

PHOTOS: FIDE / TWITTER (DING), COURTESY SLCC / C. FULLER (GUKESH)

\*NUMBERS CURRENT AS OF SEPT. 2024 FIDE RATINGS