

2023 WORLD CHAMPIONSHIP

APRIL 26, 2023 ■ ROUND 12

BY **JJ LANG** ■ ANNOTATIONS BY **FM ALICE LEE**



Ding Liren

Round Score

1 - 0

Match Score

6 - 6



Ian Nepomniachtchi

Match Recap

2023 WORLD CHESS CHAMPIONSHIP

	White	Result	Moves	ECO	Summary
1	Nepomniachtchi - Ding	½-½	49	C85	Ding defends well after opening surprise.
2	Ding - Nepomniachtchi	0-1	29	E10	Nepo wins without much resistance.
3	Nepomniachtchi - Ding	½-½	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	½-½	45	E28	A trendy Nimzo gives Ding real chances, but Nepo holds the draw.
9	Nepomniachtchi - Ding	½-½	82	C65	Ding employs the Berlin, holds the draw, but Nepo didn't make it easy.
10	Ding - Nepomniachtchi	½-½	45	A28	Resilient defense gives Nepo an easy draw.
11	Nepomniachtchi - Ding	½-½	39	C84	After a critical moment on move 19, the game fizzles out to a draw.
12	Ding - Nepomniachtchi	1-0	38	D04	Nepo's flawless game crumbles in complications, Ding levels match!

Around halfway through the 2023 FIDE World Chess Championship, a funny thing started to happen. Both in discussions online, and even in several drafts I edited for these bulletins, chess fans and commentators alike were

referring to the sixth game as the halfway mark, even though the match was scheduled to go for 14 rounds rather than 12.

Indeed, every championship match since the unification match in 2006 between GM

Vladimir Kramnik and GM Veselin Topalov has been a best-of-12. That is, until the 2021 match between GM Magnus Carlsen and GM Ian Nepomniachtchi, which Carlsen won 7½-3½ in just 11 games. The chess masses



could be forgiven, then, for forgetting that the World Championship is now a best-of-14.

Until now. In a complicated, nervy, and downright chaotic twelfth game, Ding evened the score 6-6 against Nepomniachtchi, marking the first time since the 2004 Classical World Chess Championship between Kramnik and GM Peter Leko that more than 12 classical games will be needed to determine a champion.

In an earlier press conference, Ding suggested the match could benefit from being even longer given how interesting the games were, which drew laughter from his opponent. But, today, both players began showing signs of fatigue and wear in what, unfortu-

nately at times for both, was perhaps the most complex position of any game to occur in the match so far.

Out of the gate, Ding employed a familiar strategy of eschewing more popular openings in order to get an original game, this time in the Colle System beginning with 1. d4 and followed by pushing c2-c3 and placing his knights on the f3- and d2-squares. The strategy worked in the sense of preventing Nepomniachtchi from drying out the game, and in the sense of allowing Ding to take risks and play creatively.

Nepomniachtchi was up to the task, astutely maneuvering his pieces to make the most of Ding's growing kingside weaknesses. After one inaccuracy on move 19, Nepomniachtchi's pieces roared to life. By the time American viewers were waking up, Ding was in dire straits, creating complications and holding on by a thread in opening up the position on move 26. A loss would virtually guarantee a match victory for Nepo, who would then need to only draw one of the final two games to clinch the match.

What happened over the course of the ensuing six moves was about as tense of a fifteen minutes as a chess fan (or player) could ask for. The problems started with the fact that the 12 total moves took a total of only fifteen minutes, despite Ding still having 30 minutes and Nepomniachtchi still with 42 minutes to reach move 40. Perhaps memories of Ding's time trouble were still fresh in both player's minds, as Nepomniachtchi felt an urge to push Ding on the clock and Ding, in turn, felt like he had less time to calculate.

Or perhaps neither player realized at the time just how critical this position was. With Nepomniachtchi voluntarily sacrificing an Exchange, but neither king particularly

safe, every move contained numerous transformations and variations with ridiculous subtlety. Nepomniachtchi let things slip away by pushing his b-pawn, but Ding gave him more chances to attack, which Nepomniachtchi then giving Ding a close-to-winning sequence. Not only did Ding miss this, but he missed a deep combination that would have given Nepomniachtchi a winning endgame after mass simplifications. Again, this all unfolded over 15 minutes.

By move 32, the dust had settled. Ding was up a pawn, and although computers were claiming Nepomniachtchi had compensation, his position was not easy to play. His time advantage began to evaporate, and by move 32 he only had 23 minutes to Ding's 19. The players continued to slow down, taking stock of the position, as it looked like they would comfortably reach time control.

Then, Nepomniachtchi took three minutes on move 34, finally pushing his f-pawn to a threatening square that commentators had been suggesting for the past dozen turns. Ding paused for a second, captured the e-pawn that was now hanging, and Nepomniachtchi threw his hands in the air. Did he miss the hanging pawn? Did he miss that, without an e-pawn, he could not block Ding's incoming checks?

Whatever the case, it was clear to Nepomniachtchi that his position was now completely hopeless. He sat in his chair, turned away from the board, talking to himself, in utter shock. He spent 17 of his remaining 19 minutes here, occasionally double-checking his position to see if a resource would materialize. Then he made a couple quick moves, extended his hand, and accepted that, less than two hours after being on the brink of gaining a two-game lead, Ding had officially leveled the match with only two games to play.

It is perhaps an unfair stereotype to say that young players are always more tactically alert. Nevertheless, it is good fortune that our youngest commentator of the match is providing annotations on the sharpest game we've seen. Without further ado, here is FM/WIM Alice Lee.

QUEEN'S PAWN GAME: COLLE SYSTEM (D04)

GM Ding Liren (2788)

GM Ian Nepomniachtchi (2792)

FIDE World Championship 2023 (12),
Astana, 04.26.2023

Annotations by FM Alice Lee



ALICE LEE

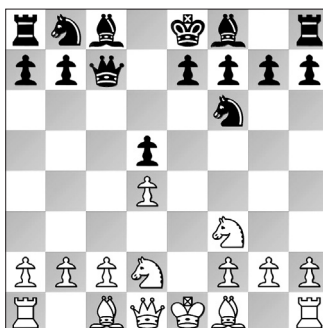
FM Alice Lee is the fifth-highest rated woman in the country and the second-highest rated 13-year-old. Born in Minneapolis, Lee earned the WIM title in 2021 and crossed the rating threshold

for FM the next year. She currently has two IM norms and is just nine points shy of the rating threshold for the IM title. Her achievements include earning the Samford fellowship in 2022 and qualifying for the 2022 U.S. Women's Chess Championship. She has also finished second in both the 2022 and 2023 editions of the American Cup, losing only to GM Irina Krush in the finals each year.



With only three games remaining in the match (and Ding due the white pieces twice), and Nepo up 6-5, this was almost a must-win situation for Ding. Because of the pressure on this game, there were a lot of psychological factors involved. In addition, this was perhaps one of the most chaotic and interesting games of the match.

1. d4 Nf6 2. Nf3 d5 3. e3 c5 4. Nbd2 cxd4 5. exd4 Qc7!?



This is an interesting move. Although it has gained popularity in the past few years, it is still not the main line. The most popular move of 5. ... Nc6 gives White the option of 6. Bb5 (with the idea of c2-c4), so playing 5. ... Qc7 allows black to meet Bf1-b5 with ... Bc8-d7. This also forces White to make a move, and any of the options will weaken White's idea of Bf1-b5 and c2-c4.

After the main move 5. ... Nc6 6. Bb5, Black has a number of possibilities.

a) The best choice is probably for Black to play 6. ... Bg4, when White has two main replies:

a1) The simplest is fighting for a small edge with 7. 0-0 e6 8. h3 Bh5 9. c4.

a2) More combative would be 7. c4 dxc4 8. 0-0 (Not 8. Qa4? Bd7 9. Ne5 Nxe5 10. dxe5 Bxb5 11. Qxb5+ Qd7 and White eventually won in Carlsen — So, Chess.com, 2017) 8. ... Rc8 9. Nxc4 Qd5 10. Bxc6+ Qxc6 11. Nce5 Bxf3 12. Nxf3 e6 13. Bg5, where things remain unclear.

b) Likely worse for Black is 6. ... Qb6 7. c4 dxc4 when 8. a4 is a nice example of what White has in mind, recapturing the c4-pawn with the knight rather than the bishop. White has a nice position after 8. ... a6 9. Nxc4 Qc7 10. Bxc6+ Qxc6 11. Nce5.

c) Also suspect is 6. ... a6, but it only forces matters, since now c2-c4 is even more effective without the light-squared bishop around, so White happily plays 7. Bxc6+ bxc6 8. c4 and continues development.

d) Now, 6. ... Bd7 is not bad here, but,

unlike in the variation after 5. ... Qc7, it does not stop White's plan of playing 7. c4 after 6. Bb5+.

6. c3

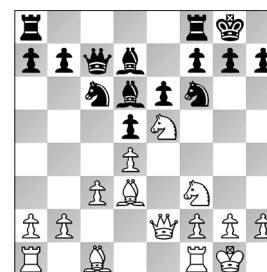
The alternative 6. Bb5+ Bd7 7. Bd3 Bg4 8. c3 Nc6 9. 0-0 is similar to the game, except Black is a tempo up.

6. ... Bd7?!

The alternative 6. ... Nc6 is good now. Note that White's c2-c3 push weakens the idea of Bf1-b5 followed by c2-c4 as it now wastes a tempo for White. After 7. Bb5 (or 7. Bd3 Bg4 8. 0-0 e6 equalizing) 7. ... a6 8. Bxc6+ bxc6 9. c4 g6, Black is fine.

7. Bd3

A worthwhile alternative would be 7. Ne5! Nc6 8. Ndf3 e6 9. Bd3 Bd6 10. Qe2 0-0 11. 0-0.



POSITION AFTER 11. 0-0

This position is very good for White. It's the ideal Carlsbad structure, with White having a very good knight on e5, while Black's bishop on b7 is stuck inside the pawn chain.

7. ... Nc6 8. 0-0

In order to continue developing, Black has to play ... e7-e6 and ... Bf8-d6. However, if Black were to play ... e7-e6 in this position, the bishop on d7 would be very unhappy, stuck inside the pawn-chain. Although it wastes a tempo here, ... Bd7-g4 is necessary for Black.

8. ... Bg4

Of course this is worse than if Black had played ...Bc8-g4 immediately instead of ... Bc8-d7-g4. However, although Black lost a tempo, this position is rather slow, so Black still has a fine position.

9. Re1 e6 10. Nf1 Bd6 11. Bg5 0-0

In this position, Ding spent 28 minutes. There are certainly a lot of options, although the two main moves in this position are 12. Bxf6 and 12. Ng3.

12. Bxf6!?



The main alternative 12. Ng3 would likely force 12. ... Nh5 as h2-h3 was threatened. 13. h3



POSITION AFTER 13. h3

Ding mentioned the pawn sacrifice beginning with 13. ... Bxf3 14. Qxf3 Nxf3 15. fxf3 Bxf3 16. Re3 Bd6 in his post-game interview. However, it does not seem as though White has adequate compensation for the pawn. 17. Qh5 g6 18. Qf3 e5 19. Qxd5 exd4 20. cxd4 Bf4 21. Bxf4 Qxf4 should give Black an edge.

But the alternative 13. Nxh5 Bxh5 14. h3 f6 15. Be3 Rae8 does not promise equality. So, Ding likely made the right decision.

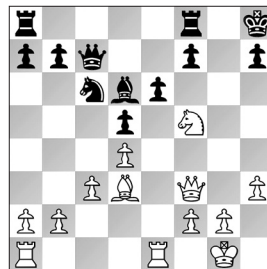
12. ... gxf6

Interestingly enough, Nepo also played 12. ... gxf6 in a different critical position in game two of the match, which he went on to win.

13. Ng3 f5 14. h3 Bxf3 15. Qxf3 Ne7

Black also prevents Ng3xf5 threats.

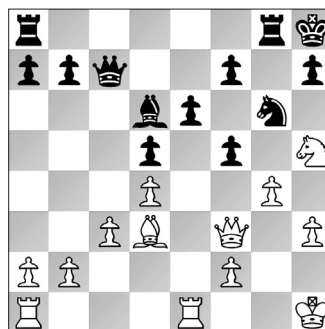
Another engine recommendation is 15. ... Kh8, however, there is a very interesting variation here for White with 16. Nxf5!



POSITION AFTER 16. Nxf5!

After 16. ... exf5 17. Qxf5 f6 18. Re6 (or 18. Qxd5 Ne7 19. Qf3 with a mess) 18. ... Rad8 19. Rxf6 Rxf6 20. Qxf6+ Qg7 21. Qe6, the position is unclear.

16. Nh5 Kh8 17. g4 Rg8 18. Kh1 Ng6!



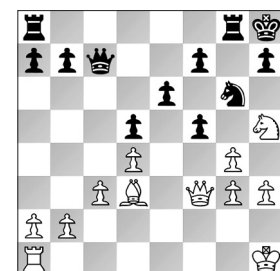
This is a very good move. White was threatening previously to play g4xf5, and the knight on g6 here prevents g4xf5 due to ... Ng6-h4 ideas. In addition, this move is an idea in almost any position. This starts Black's kingside attack.

19. Bc2?!

The proper response was 19. Rg1!, as Black's plan is to play ... Ng6-h4 followed by ... Rg8-g6 andRa8-g8. With this move, White prevents any ideas of Black infiltrating the g-file after White plays g4xf5. This enables g4xf5 to be a possibility for White in the future, unlike in the game.

a) For instance, after 19. Rg1

a1) Black can play 19. ... Bh2 20. Rg3! (Or 20. Rgf1 Bd6 with equality) 20. ... Bxg3 21. fxf3.



POSITION AFTER 21. fxf3

Here, there is no stopping White from playing g4xf5 next. Although Black has won an exchange, White has very good compensation: 21. ... Ne7 22. gxf5 e5 23. dxe5 Qxe5 24. Qf2 Nc6 25. g4 is roughly level.

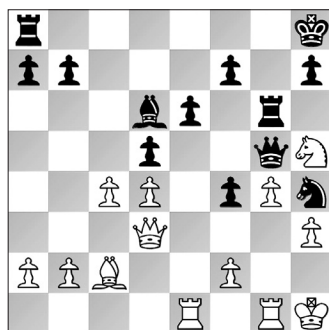
a2) Equally unclear is 19. ... Nh4 20. Qe2 Rg6 21. Rae1 Rg8 22. gxf5 exf5 23. Rxf6 Rxf6 24. Qe8+ Rg8 25. Qe2, and the game goes on.

b) White should be careful not to play 19. gxf5? as it reveals 19. ... Nh4! as the point of ... Ne7-g6. Now, 20. Qe3 exf5 21. f4 Ng2 22. Qf2 Nxe1 23. Rxe1 Qd8 is good for Black.

PHOTO: FIDE / STEV BONHAGE (WCC)



19. ... Nh4 20. Qe3 Rg6 21. Rg1 f4 22. Qd3 Qe7 23. Rae1 Qg5 24. c4?!



Objectively, this is a mistake. However, this is a very good practical try for White, and better than passive defense where Black would almost certainly win without counterplay.

24. ... dxc4 25. Qc3
White could lose instantly after 25. Qxc4? Nf3.

25. ... b5!



Defending the c-pawn with a winning position. Note that Bc2xg6 is not possible here.

26. a4

The greedy 26. Bxg6?! hxg6 is refuted because White's knight on h5 is trapped and 27. d5+ e5 goes nowhere.

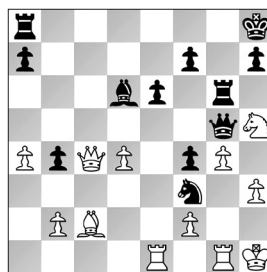
26. ... b4?!

Arguably, Nepomniachtchi's first error of the day. Here, 26. ... a6! was a very good move. Black prevents White from breaking the pawn chain, and White has no counterplay. After 27. axb5 axb5 28. Be4 Rag8 29. f3 f5! 30. Bc6 fxg4 31. hxg4 Rh6, White can resign.

27. Qxc4 Rag8?

Nepo played this move in less than a minute. This was a mistake as there was a winning variation for Black. However, it was not easy to see from far in advance, and Black is still slightly better here (although it does allow White a chance).

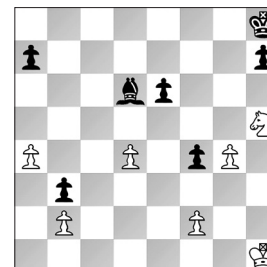
The winning line began with the critical 27. ... Nf3!



POSITION AFTER 27. ... Nf3!

This is necessary for Black to gain an advan-

tage. Nepo was probably worried about 28. Qc6, forcing mass simplifications after 28. ... Nxe1 29. Qxa8+ Rg8 30. Qe4 Nxc2 31. Qxc2 Qh4 32. Qd3 f5! 33. Qf3 fxg4 34. Rxg4 Rxg4 35. Qxg4 Qxg4 36. hxg4 b3!



POSITION AFTER 36. ... b3!

This is the only winning variation for Black, and not easy to calculate from ten moves in advance. Here, Black should be winning with ... Bd6-a3 to come next. In other words, Nepo had to calculate through all the trades and find a clever endgame tactic at the end of the sequence.

28. Qc6?

Interestingly, it turns out that 28. Bxg6! works now, even though the h5-knight is still trapped.

After 28. Bxg6! hxg6 29. Qc6

a) The right response would be 29. ... gxh5 30. Qxd6 Nf3 31. Qc5 hxg4 32. Qxg5 Rxg5 33. hxg4 Nxg1 34. Rxg1 when Black might be slightly better, but White should hold.

b) The trick here is that the most intuitive move for Black, 29. ... Bb8?, gives White a very nice win after 30. d5!:

b1) The queen recapture 30. ... Qxd5+ fails

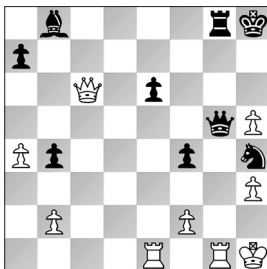


PHOTOS: FIDE / STEV BONHAGE (WCC)

to a trap with 31. Qxd5 exd5 32. Nf6.

b2) The pawn recapture fails no better 30. ... exd5 31. Nf6 Rd8 32. Re8+ Rxe8 33. Qxe8+ Kg7 34. Qg8+ Kxf6 35. Qd8+ and Black can resign.

b3) The critical continuation begins after Black captures the knight with 30. ... gxh5 31. dxe6 fxe6 32. gxh5.



POSITION AFTER 32. ... gxh5

Here, the open g-file is worth the knight! After 32. ... Qxh5 33. Rxc8+ Kxc8 34. Qxe6+ Kh8 35. Qf6+ Kg8 36. Rg1+, White is winning.

28. ... Bb8??

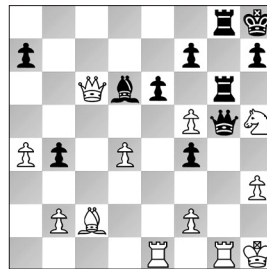
Black had a win here, but it was not an obvious move to see: 28. ... Nf5! The key idea involves a queen sacrifice for a mating net!

a) White can take, with 29. gxf5, but will lose.

(see diagram top of next column)

After the fantastic 29. ... Qxg1+ 30. Rxc1 Rxc1+ 31. Kh2 f3+ 32. Ng3 (Not 32. Qxd6?? R8g2 mate) 32. ... Rg2+ 33. Kh1 Bxc3 34. fxc3 R8xc3, White can resign.

b) Black is also better after 29. Rd1 Qh4 30. Qf3 b3 31. Be4 Ng3+ 32. Rxc3 fxc3 33. Bxc6 Qxc3+ 34. Kg1 Rxc6 35. fxc3 Qxc4, with a great position.



POSITION AFTER 29. ... gxh5

29. Qb7??

White could transpose to variations we looked at earlier with 29. Bxc6!, see lines after note to White's move 28. This is still winning for White after 29. ... hxg6 30. d5 exd5 (Alternatives: 30. ... Qxd5+ 31. Qxd5 exd5 32. Nf6 winning; 30. ... gxh5 31. dxe6 Qf6 32. Qd7 winning) 31. Nf6 with an advantage.

29. ... Rh6?!

Again, the very nice idea of 29. ... Nf5! works here, and Black should keep an edge after 30. Rd1 Qh4 31. Qf3 Ng3+ 32. Rxc3 fxc3 33. Bxc6 Qxc3+ 34. Kg1 gxf2+ 35. Kxf2 Qxf3+ 36. Kxf3 hxg6.

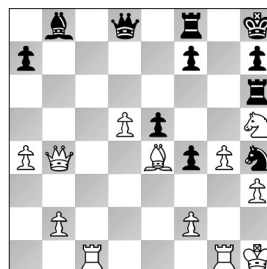
30. Be4 Rf8?!

An easier way to equality was to play 30. ... f3 31. Qxf7 Ng2 32. Qxf3 Nxe1 33. Rxe1 Qh4 34. Rg1 Qg5 35. Rf1 Qh4 36. Rg1.

31. Qxb4 Qd8 32. Qc3

White has successfully managed to mediate Black's attack, and is up a pawn in a slightly more pleasant position.

A more ambitious move would be 32. d5!?, when after 32. ... e5, Black threatens the dangerous ... f7-f5 with a continued attack. White wants to be able to meet this thrust with Qb4-b7, threatening mate on g7. To do this, a prophylactic move is required. 33. Rc1!



POSITION AFTER 33. Rc1!

This is the only way to keep an advantage. If play continues with 33. ... a5 34. Qb7 it happens that now that the c7-square is under White's

control, the threat of ... f7-f5 has been met.

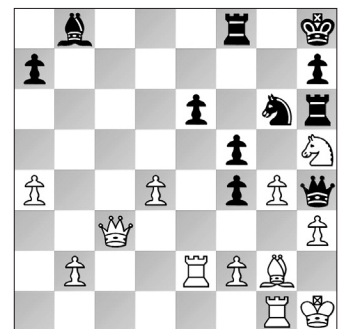
32. ... Ng6 33. Bg2

No different is 33. Re2 Qh4, transposing to the game.

33. ... Qh4

Black gains nothing with 33. ... Bd6 34. Re4 Qg5 35. d5+ e5 36. Rc4 f5 37. Bf3 fxc4 38. hxg4 Nh4 39. Rc8 Nxf3 40. Rxf8+ Bxf8 41. Qxf3 e4 42. Qc3+ Kg8 43. Qc4 when the computer insists the game is drawn, showing how any attempts from White to push will be met by a perpetual check: 43. ... Kf7 44. d6+ Re6 45. Qc7+ Be7 46. dxe7 Qh4+ with White's king unable to escape..

34. Re2 f5??



Perhaps Nepo saw this idea in advance and decided to play it here. However, this just hangs the e6 pawn.

A safer, but by no means equal, try would be to play 34. ... Rg8, allowing White to begin pushing the extra pawn with 35. b4 Qg5 36. Qc5 Qd8 37. Qc3 Qg5 38. d5+ e5. Now, a key difference with Black's bishop being on b8 instead of d6 is that White can return the pawn to open the central file with 39. d6!? Bxd6 40. Rd1 f3 41. Qxf3 Bxb4 42. Re4 Bc5 when White should have a small, but enduring, edge.

35. Rxe6

With d4-d5 and checkmate threatened next, there is no defense for Black now that there is no e-pawn ready to block with ... e6-e5.

35. ... Rxb5

Played after seventeen minutes, most of which Nepo spent not looking at the board.

36. gxh5 Qxh5 37. d5+ Kg8 38. d6, Black resigned.

An unfortunate result for Nepo, and an excellent result for Ding. Now, the match is tied at 6-6 with the two games remaining sure to be good fights.

