

2023 WORLD CHAMPIONSHIP

APRIL 18, 2023 ■ ROUND 07

BY JJ LANG ■ ANNOTATIONS BY GM CHRISTOPHER YOO



Ian Nepomniachtchi

Round Score

1 - 0

Match Score

4 - 3



Ding Liren

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.



CHRISTOPHER YOO

GM Christopher Woojin Yoo is the sixth-highest rated player under the age of 18 in the world, as of FIDE's April 2023 rating list. The 16-year-old Yoo was once the youngest American to earn the International Master title, and has just won the Mechanic's Institute Chess Library's prestigious Falconer Award for the top Northern California junior. Some of Yoo's many accomplishments include winning the

2022 U.S. Junior Championships and the 2022 U.S. Masters.

How long can these two guys keep up this level of high drama? The fourth consecutive decisive result in the 2023 World Championship might have been the most thrilling one yet, as GM Ian Nepomniachtchi takes a 4-3 lead over GM Ding Liren into the rest day marking the halfway point of the match.

After struggling in both Ruy Lopez games, Ding decided to open with 1. ... e6 in game seven, entering the French Defense. This misunderstood opening is sometimes considered dull (although Ding's sixth round win with the London System suggested that is not such a bad thing), but there are many opportunities for White to lure Black into maddening complications. Interestingly enough, Nepomniachtchi is something of an expert in the French himself, having played it in several games in the 2020 Candidates.



Nepo denied his opponent an opportunity to enter the dangerous Winawer Variation with 3. Nc3 Bb4, instead choosing a simpler line with 3. Nd2 known as the Tarrasch Variation. After the game, Nepomniachtchi said he was happy with the very small advantage in a relatively easy-to-play position that he got from this variation, which was his goal.

The strategy paid off, as even though White never created a successful attack, his nagging initiative made for a relatively intuitive middlegame strategy that in turn forced Ding to burn lots of time on his clock. Ding correctly determined that sacrificing an Exchange was the best course of action, and he even had an arguably better position as the game approached move 30.

Unfortunately, with no increment before the first time control on move 40, Ding was in severe pressure and unable to navigate the position. Spending four of his remaining five minutes on move 32, he made one fatal miscalculation and resigned shortly thereafter.

This fascinating game was a microcosm of the match, and a perfect encapsulation of each player's strengths and weaknesses. Nepomniachtchi has excelled pressing his initiative in attacking positions, while Ding has landed several blows by out-calculating his opponent. Until the final moments, this was the first game where both players were simultaneously in their element, and it was genuinely unclear who would come out on top.

But pressing an initiative only works inasmuch as there is actually an advantage to press, and Nepomniachtchi perhaps overes-

timated his position in making several key decisions too quickly. On the other hand, calculation takes time, which Ding was running out of. In the end, the clock proved decisive this time, but the players will likely keep trading blows if they keep playing to their strengths like this.

FRENCH DEFENSE, TARRASCH VARIATION (C07)

GM Ian Nepomniachtchi (2795)

GM Ding Liren (2788)

FIDE World Championship (7), Astana, 04.18.2023

Annotations by GM Christopher Yoo

Coming into this game, Nepo and Ding have been trading blows, with four out of the six games being decisive. Ding had beat Nepo in round six convincingly, but it seems as White has had all the luck so far, so Nepo was hungry to bounce back with the white pieces.

1. e4 e6

A surprise from Ding on move one! He is generally a 1. ... e5 player, but was having some troubles in it, so I do not think this was a bad decision.

2. d4 d5 3. Nd2 c5 4. Ngf3

This variation keeps more tension in the position than 4. exd5, and maybe is more theoretically demanding.

The other main line is 4. exd5, which could occur if Ding repeats this line as Black. After 4. ... Qxd5 5. Ngf3 cxd4 6. Bc4 Qd6 7. 0-0 Nf6

8. Nb3 Nc6 9. Nbx d4 Nxd4 10. Nxd4 Be7!? Black's idea is to go for quick development while claiming that Nd4-b5 is not a worry. It might be interesting to see if Nepo goes for this if Ding repeats this line.

4. ... cxd4 5. Nxd4 Nf6 6. exd5

An illustrative point is that while 6. e5 is a natural move, the pawn can be a bit weak on e5, so I do not think it is necessary. White can get into a little trouble after 6. ... Nfd7 7. N2f3 Nc6 8. Bf4 Be7!?

I like this move, going for ... g7-g5 after 9. c3 g5!?:



POSITION AFTER 9. ... g5!?

Now, after 10. Nxd5 Nxd4 11. Nxf7 Nc2+ 12. Kd2 Kxf7 13. Qh5+ Kg8 14. Qg4+ Kf7 15. Qh5+ Kg8 16. Qg4, Nepo probably checked these lines and was not convinced, thus deciding on 6. exd5.

6. ... Nxd5 7. N2f3 Be7

An alternative is 7. ... Bb4+, which is also playable, but Ding decided to keep more complications by developing the bishop flexibly to e7. For instance, if play continues



8. Bd2 0-0 9. Bxb4 Nxb4 10. c3 Nd5 11. Bc4 a6 12. 0-0 b5 then Black is near equalizing, but White's position is very safe.

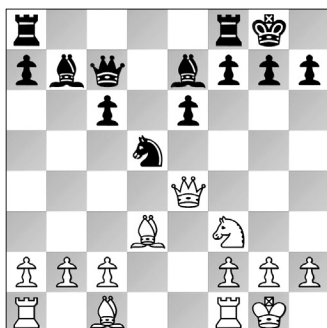
8. Bc4

A natural enough move, but already there are not many games in this position, so it is a bit of new territory.

8. ... Nc6 9. Nxc6 bxc6 10. 0-0 0-0 11. Qe2 Bb7 12. Bd3

A decent opening for Ding, and maybe not quite what Nepo wanted, but there are still plenty of interesting ideas for White. White will play on the kingside, trying to attack, but if Black can counter on the queenside, it's anybody's game.

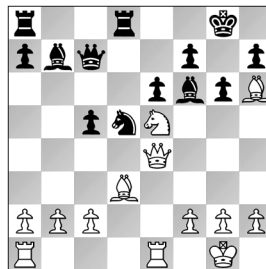
12. ... Qc7 13. Qe4!?



I think this is a good move, starting a potential attack.

13. ... Nf6?!

This is a moment where many commentators were critical of Ding's choice. Even though 13. ... g6!? looks weakening, it is hard for White to capitalize. For instance, after the intuitive 14. Bh6 Rfd8 15. Rfe1 Bf6 16. Ne5 c5



POSITION AFTER 16. ... c5

Black seems to be relatively safe, as it is hard to find an attacking plan for White.

14. Qh4 c5 15. Bf4 Qb6?!

Another key moment. Black had an intriguing option with the counterintuitive 15. ... Qd8!?. Now, after 16. Ne5 h6, taking prophylactic measures against Ne5-g4, Black equalizes with 17. Rad1 Nd5 18. Qg4 f5 19. Qg3 Nxf4 20. Qxf4 Qd5. This is a rather difficult set of moves to find for Black, but one wonders what would have transpired after 15. ... Qd8 instead of the game move.

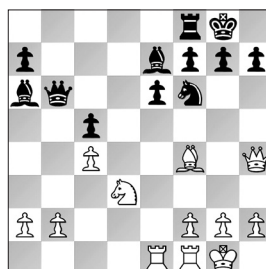
16. Ne5 Rad8 17. Rae1

White is threatening Ne5-g4 as well as Re1-e3-h3 ideas, but Black has a nice way to neutralize White's attack that could have been played.

17. ... g6

Instead, Black had a remarkable resource with 17. ... Ba6! trying to get rid of the d3-bishop.

Now, the response to 18. c4 is the fantastic Exchange sacrifice 18. ... Rxd3! 19. Nxd3



POSITION AFTER 19. Nxd3

The key point is that now Black has the fantastic 19. ... Nd5!. After 20. Qg4 h5 21. Qf3 Bxc4 equalizes. This is very difficult to find, but a great way for Black to play, had he found it.

I think Ding calculated 19. ... Bxc4 and decided to not go for it, after seeing White's resource here: 20. Bd6! (a nice double attack) 20. ... Bxd3 21. Bxe7 Bxf1 22. Bxf8 and White is winning.

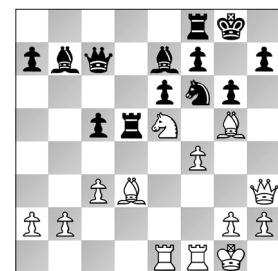
18. Bg5

A tempting alternative was 18. Bh6!?, getting a bind on Black's kingside. After 18. ... Rfe8 19. Qh3 it is not so easy to find a good plan for Black, and White's position is easier to play.

18. ... Rd4 19. Qh3 Qc7 20. b3

Preventing ... c5-c4 ideas.

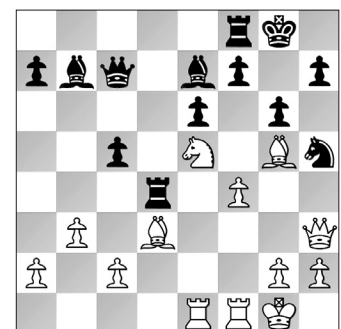
A natural try was 20. c3, kicking out the rook on d4, but it will get White into trouble after 20. ... Rd5 21. f4



POSITION AFTER 21. f4

21. ... c4! 22. Bxc4?? Rd2 and White is now in serious trouble!

20. ... Nh5 21. f4

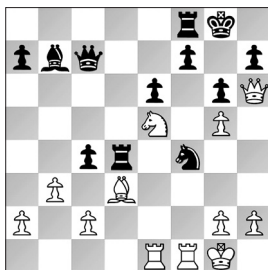


Nepo continues to be aggressive. Even though Black is fine, it is not easy to handle the tactical pressure.

21. ... Bd6!?

Threatening ... Nh5xf4, and there is not much White can do about it. I liked this idea to sacrifice the Exchange from Ding.

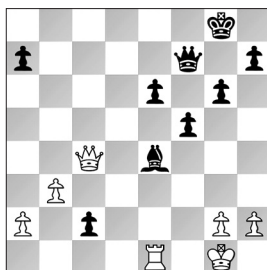
Another intriguing choice was 21. ... Bxg5! going for ... Nh5-Nf4. The point is after 22. fxg5 Nf4 23. Qh6 c4!



POSITION AFTER 23. ... c4

Black has great opportunities to counter-attack! 24. Ng4 (and not 24. bxc4?? When Black now has a decisive attack with 24. ... Qc5! 25. Rf2 Bxg2 when White's king is too weak) 24. ... f5! 25. Nf6+ Rxf6 26. gxf6

cxd3 27. f7+ Qxf7 28. Rxf4 Rxf4 29. Qxf4 dxc2 30. Qc4 Be4



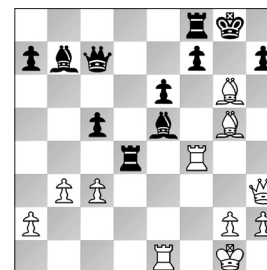
POSITION AFTER 30. ... Be4

After this spectacular sequence from Black, White is actually the one who has to defend.

22. c3 Nxf4 23. Bxf4?!

Now I prefer Ding's position.

White missed a dazzling idea with 23. Rxf4! Bxe5 24. Bxg6!



POSITION AFTER 24. Bxg6!

Nepo and Ding might have overlooked this move. White opens up the h-file and after 24. ... hxg6 25. cxd4 cxd4 26. Rf2 we reach a messy situation, but I think it's a bit better than the game for White due to Black's weak dark squares.



PHOTO: FIDE / STEV BONHAGE

23. ... Rxf4 24. Rxf4 Bxe5 25. Rh4 Rd8 26. Be4



Black now has two possibilities: trade off the bishops or keep the strong bishop pair. Ding decided to trade the bishops to not lose the h7-pawn, but it was actually worth giving up the pawn to keep the bishop pair.

26. ... Bxe4

A reasonable move, and I still like Black's compensation here.

The other option with 26. ... Ba6!? 27. Rxh7 Bg7! Is nice because White's position is pretty difficult as there is no attack and Black's bishops are strong.

27. Rhxe4 Rd5 28. Rh4?!

This move does not improve White's position, as Rh4xh7 is not a serious threat.

Slightly better was 28. Rf1, putting the rook on a relatively open file. Play could continue 28. ... Qd6 29. Kh1!? with a waiting move dodging ... Be5xh2+ and therefore allowing the queen to move. The position is rather unclear, and it's anybody's game.

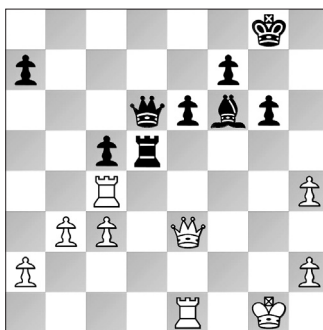
28. ... Qd6 29. Qe3 h5 30. g3 Bf6

Ding has seemingly consolidated, but he was getting low on time, and there is no increment until move 40. Due to the complexity of the position, he had burnt a lot of important time, and now had about five or six minutes for ten moves.

31. Rc4 h4

[Immediately after the game, Nepo pointed out 31. ... Kg7 to Ding. His point was that Black had no need to change the structure, inducing even more complications, before the time control. I mention this to point out that certain brave players, such as GM Yoo, seem to have no problem with Ding's choice, provided he finds the proper continuation, while others thought the h-pawn push was already a practical error. ~JLL]

32. gxh4?!

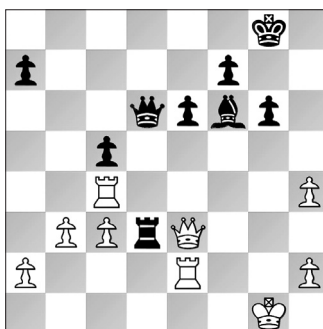


In this critical moment, Ding only had five minutes left and decided to use up four of them, leaving himself 50 seconds to play eight moves! This was very problematic, and partially led to his position collapsing. The right continuation is difficult, but I think he should have moved faster here.

32. ... Rd2

The key continuation was 32. ... Be5! when White has a bit of trouble defending the kingside and the h2-pawn in the long term. After 33. Qf2 Rd2 34. Re2 Rd1+ 35. Re1 Rd2 36. Re2, the worst case was Ding could have repeated moves with Rd1-d2, but he can even play for the win with 36. ... Rd3! 37. Re3 Bxh2+ 38. Kh1 Rd5. I doubt you can find all these moves as Black with low time, but if Ding had 15 or more minutes, it is possible to press the position.

33. Re2 Rd3??



A panicked blunder under time pressure.

It is necessary to admit the inaccuracy and move back with 33. ...Rd5. This is quite difficult to do in practice, as we do not like to admit our inaccuracies or mistakes. Ding tried to justify his last move, but simply blundered as there was no time to calculate.

34. Qxc5 Rd1+ 35. Kg2 Qd3

Ding might have thought there was an attack, but it does not exist as there are not enough pieces to checkmate.



36. Rf2

Despite Nepo's attack not being completely sound, it put a lot of pressure on Ding, and eventually led to time pressure and a decisive blunder. The risky, but innovative, approach paid off.

36. ... Kg7 37. Rcf4

With the rooks eyeing the f6-bishop and the f7-pawn, there is nothing for Black to do. The game is over.

37. ... Qxc3, Black resigned.

Ding played this move with seconds on his clock but resigned without waiting for White's reply of trading queens and capturing the f7-pawn with the rook battery.

This was a thriller of a game, starting with a unique opening, and a very aggressive middlegame from Nepo. White was held off with great defense from Ding, but it paid off for the Russian, as the time pressure made Ding collapse in the end. I hope for more interesting games, such as this one, to come!