

2023 WORLD CHAMPIONSHIP

APRIL 20, 2023 ■ ROUND 08

BY **JJ LANG** ■ ANNOTATIONS BY **GM AWONDER LIANG**



Ding Liren

Round Score

1/2 - 1/2

Match Score

3 1/2 - 4 1/2



Ian Nepomniachtchi

Match Recap

2023 WORLD CHESS CHAMPIONSHIP

	White	Result	Moves	ECO	Summary
1	Nepomniachtchi - Ding	1/2-1/2	49	C85	Ding defends well after opening surprise.
2	Ding - Nepomniachtchi	0-1	29	E10	Nepo wins without much resistance.
3	Nepomniachtchi - Ding	1/2-1/2	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	1/2-1/2	45	E28	A trendy Nimzo gives Ding real chances, but Nepo holds the draw.



AWONDER LIANG

GM Awonder Liang is a 20-year-old undergraduate at the University of Chicago. Born and raised in Madison, Wisconsin, Liang is the third-youngest American to earn the grandmaster title. He has won two World Youth championships and competed in four U.S. Championships, including a tie for third in the 2022 edition.

In some competitions, the outcome of a previous event will affect the probability of a certain outcome occurring in a later event. For instance, believers in the power of “Big Mo” (momentum) might argue that a basketball player who has made several baskets in a row is “heating up” and has a higher probability of making future baskets than their overall shooting percentage would suggest.

Early in the 2023 FIDE World Championship, there were concerns that GM Ian Nepomniachtchi would hit his stride and become even harder to beat. Or, a few days later, that he would not be able to recover after a couple sub-par games against GM Ding Liren. Instead, we were given a series of games that functioned as relatively independent events, with each player sticking

to their guns. Ding was careful, slow, but dangerously precise. Nepomniachtchi, in contrast, would live or die by his intuition, and the two would continue to produce marvelous games.

Entering the second half of the match, the narrative has once again shifted. The outcome of game eight would be, for better and for worse, highly dependent on both the result and trajectory of game seven.

From the jump, Ding had a “cannonball” of an opening surprise with 9. Ra2!?, putting Nepomniachtchi on the defense in the first Nimzo-Indian of the match. Nepo defended well, and it was probably the sharpest – not to mention riskiest – opening experiment Ding had tried this match. By move 16 he was objectively in trouble, but at the same time was in a position that would be much easier to play than defend against. After letting a promising position turn into a loss the previous round, he clearly was ready to keep White’s winning streak alive, even if meant adopting an uncharacteristically uncompromising strategy.

Then, one error from Nepomniachtchi (even though he spent ten minutes on the move) on move 22 allowed Ding to seize a concrete advantage beginning with his accurate 24. Rd2!. After another careful eight-minute thing, Nepomniachtchi blundered! Ding thought for ten minutes, and played the best move. After Nepo’s forced recapture, the engines were screaming that Ding had an absolutely crushing “quiet move” with 26. Rd3!!.

But, two seconds later, Ding plays the second-best move, pushing the d-pawn to the seventh rank. I won’t get into every subsequent miscalculation, but suffice it to say the pattern repeated itself from here. One highlight came with Nepomniachtchi’s “brilliant” 31. ... Qh4?!?, which actually blundered a rook, but required the calculation of a deeply counterintuitive king walk to realize that White would not be allowing a perpetual check. Ding took only three minutes to decline the “gift,” giving up his advantage in the process.

Would Ding have played differently with more time on the clock? Sure! But it’s not so much that he was in dire time pressure as early as move 24, but rather that his previous, cautious approach of double-checking and spending several minutes evaluating the consequences of moves he knows he wants to play had let him down. It’s hard to imagine him making several of the same quick decisions before yesterday’s game.

Nepomniachtchi, on the other hand, is



still exactly the player he has been his whole match (and career). When forced to make difficult decisions on the defensive, he often relies too much on “feel” and can be exposed by a concrete calculator. But calculation takes time, and when it comes to practical decisions, Nepomniachtchi’s intuition is unparalleled.

Off the board, another dramatic storyline was brewing, as one Reddit user realized that an anonymous “1500” account on *Lichess.org* had played the same 9. Ra2 variation against another anonymous “1500”. But *that* 1500 had blitz and bullet ratings over 2700. And each of their accounts were created on the same day, a little under two months before the start of the match.

These two accounts, it turns out, have played almost 200 games against each other, and have not played anyone else. Could it be? Ding’s only response was to say that he had no idea what the reporter was talking about, and Rapport refused to even say “no comment” when asked. Perhaps this will decrease the odds of the next six games playing out independently of what preceded.

NIMZO-INDIAN DEFENSE, SÄMISCH VARIATION (E28)

GM Ding Liren (2788)

GM Ian Nepomniachtchi (2795)

FIDE World Championship (8), Astana, 07. 04. 2023

Annotations by GM Awonder Liang

If there is one game to summarize this match thus far, it must be this one. The mighty struggle of titans continues, exposing all their strengths and weaknesses. From Ding’s preparation to Nepo’s incredible practical

decisions, I see this game as the pinnacle of what both players are able to bring to the table, for both good and for bad. It is true the moves are far from perfect, but then, humans rarely are.

1. d4 Nf6 2. c4 e6 3. Nc3 Bb4 4. e3 0-0 5. a3 Bxc3+ 6. bxc3 d6 7. Ne2 c5 8. Ng3 Nc6 9. Ra2!?



An invention of the tricky GM Aram Hakobyan. I first saw this idea live at the 2022 SPICE Cup, where he used it to tragic effect against my friend and fellow GM, Praveen Balakrishnan. It is definitely a poisonous line, but prior to this game, not one that I thought merited a serious try at the top level. Clearly I was wrong!

With this move, White tries to delay both e3-e4 and Bf1-d3, instead playing a useful move to prepare e3-e4. In many lines the rook can swing to either d2 or (as in the game) even h2.

A new idea was needed in this position, as I think Black is already better after both 9. e4 d5! 10. e5 Ne4 and 9. Bd3 b6 10. e4? cxd4.

9. ... b6

The alternative 9. ... Na5 10. e4 Nd7? Is miss-

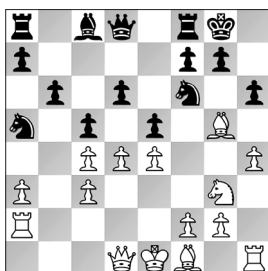
ing the point somewhat — Black loses too many tempi grabbing the c4-pawn, and loses another defender on the kingside. After 11. Bd3 Nb6 12. 0-0 Nbxç4 13. Qe2 d5 14. Nh5 (better is 14. exd5! exd5 15. Qh5 f5 16. Nxf5) 14. ... f5 15. exf5 exf5 16. dxc5 we reach a position that is attributed to Burke – Nyzhnyk in MegaBase, but I can assure our readers that this is in fact Hakobyan – Balakrishnan! (Note: TWIC has the correct attribution. ~ed.) After a much closer game than it should have been, Aram took home the full point.

10. e4 Ba6!?

A bit early, in my opinion. The move is objectively fine, but there was an easier way to shut down White’s main idea.

I’m not saying that 10. ... Na5! solves all of Black’s problems (as surely there are more lines than I give below) but it would have simplified the defensive task. Here’s a sample of what might have happened:

(a) 11. Bg5 h6 12. h4 e5!



POSITION AFTER 12. ... e5

This is the key idea — Black now threatens ... h6xg5 and ... Nf6-g4, picking up the whole piece. In general, the c8-bishop finds good work on this diagonal, keeping an eye on the h3-square as well.

Here 13. dxe5! is a major concession, and it’s a bad sign if this is White’s best move. (Alternatives are 13. Rd2?? hxg5 14. hxg5 Ng4 when Black is winning, and 13. Bd2 exd4 14. cxd4 Qe7 15. f3 cxd4 16. Bxa5 Qe5 17. Kf2 bxa5 with an edge to Black) 13. ... dxe5 14. Rd2 Qe7 15. Qf3 Be6 (we see White’s point after 15. ... hxg5? 16. hxg5 Ng4 17. Nf5 Qxg5 18. Qxg4) and here White doesn’t really have all that much; in fact, he’s a bit lucky not to be worse after 16. Bxf6 (or 16. Nf5 Bxf5 17. Qxf5 Rfd8 18. Rd5 Qe6 with equality, while Black is winning after 16. Nh5? hxg5 17. hxg5 Nh7) 16. ... Qxf6 17. Qxf6 gxf6 18. Nh5 f5 with equality.

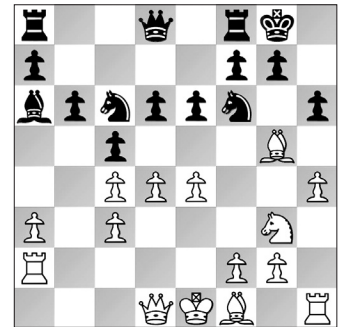
(b) 11. Bd3 is ok, but now the idea connected with 9. Ra2 seems a little less effective: 11. ... cxd4 12. cxd4 Ba6 13. Bg5 (13. Rc2 Rc8 14. Qe2 Nb3 15. Bb2 e5 and Black is quite comfortable here, for instance: 16. Nf5 Nxd4 17. Nxd4 exd4 18. Bxd4 Nd7 19. 0-0 Ne5 20. f4 Nxd3 21. Qxd3 f6) 13. ... h6 14. h4 Bxc4 and here White should already bail out with a draw: 15. Nh5 (15. Rd2 Bb3 16. Bc2 Bxc2 17. Rxc2 hxg5 18. hxg5 Rc8 19. Rxc8 Qxc8 20. gxf6 Qc3+ 21. Kf1 Rc8 and Black has a pleasant endgame ahead) 15. ... hxg5 16. hxg5 Nh7 17. Nf6+ Nxf6 18. gxf6 Qxf6 19. e5 Qg5 20. Bh7+ Kh8 is equal.

Another idea is 10. ... Qe7 11. Bg5 h6 12. h4 cxd4 13. cxd4 e5 14. d5 Na5 15. Bd2.

11. Bg5 h6

Not 11. ... cxd4 12. Nh5!

12. h4



Now the position becomes really unclear. Black has an abundance of choices, but none of them simplify the position.

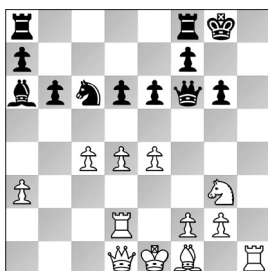
12. ... hxg5

The most natural moves were this, or ... c5xd4 and then ... h6xg5, although Black did have some choice. With the text, Black removes all threats of Ng3-h5/e5, but White gets an open h-file to work with.

(a) The alternative 12. ... cxd4 was preferred in many post-mortems, but I think it’s still unclear. After 13. cxd4 hxg5 14. hxg5 g6 15. gxf6 Qxf6 16. Rd2 (see diagram next page)



PHOTO: FIDE / DAVID LLADA



POSITION AFTER 16. Rd2

The main difference is that Black has a more



open position to work with, while White still maintains ideas of Rd2-d3, Rh1-h3, or Ng3-h5 to attack the black king. I think Black's best is 16. ... Qg5! (or 16. ... e5 17. Rd3 exd4 [17. ... Nxd4 18. Nh5] 18. Nh5 Qe5 19. f4 Qxe4+ 20. Kf2 f5 21. Rg3 Qe6 22. Bd3 with a massive mess) 17. Rh3 (17. Nh5 gxh5 18. Rxh5 Qf4 19. Rd3 17. ... e5 18. Nf5 and the board is aflame.

(b) 12. ... Rc8? was played (via transposition) in Ilyasli – Samani, *Chess.com*, 2021, but now 13. e5 dxe5 14. Ne4! and Black should give up the queen, albeit with decent compensation.

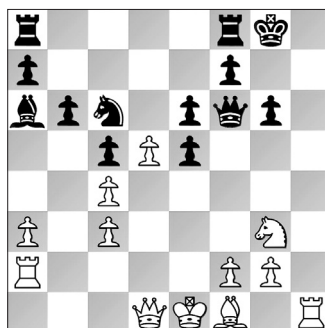
(c) If Black wants to play a bit more ambitiously, somewhat interesting, if not very realistic, was 12. ... Re8!?. Here let me cite the now famous game between “FVitelli” and “opqrstuv” from earlier this year: 13. Rd2 (13. e5? dxe5 14. Ne4 hxg5 and Black wins) 13. ... Qe7 (13. ... cxd4 14. cxd4 e5 15. dxe5 hxg5 16. exf6 Qxf6 17. hxg5 Qxg5) 14. e5 dxe5 15. Ne4 Nxe4 16. Bxe7 Nxd2? 17. Bf6! Nxf1? 18. Qg4 g6 19. dxe5 Rad8 20. Qf4 and Black resigned in FVitelli – opqrstuv, *lichess.org*, 2023.

13. hxg5 g6 14. gxf6 Qxf6 15. e5!?

Ding spent a good amount of time on this move, so I'm not sure if this was still preparation or not. I believe that Aram was still in prep here, so I would be surprised if Ding was completely out of ideas. Even so, he began to spend a large amount of time on the following moves, which came back to haunt him later.

With 15. Rd2 we would likely transpose back to the ... c5xd4 line, while after 15. Qg4 Qg7 it's not super clear where the attack is.

15. ... dxe5 16. d5!



Stronger than 16. Ne4 Qf5 17. Nd6 Qf6, which is equal.

16. ... Ne7

A critical position. Black had perhaps five decent options, but Nepo chooses a very natural one, bringing the knight closer to

the kingside. White's compensation is mainly connected with the powerful d-pawn as well as the nice e4-square for the knight. Here's a sketch of the other moves:

(a) 16. ... Rfd8 17. Rd2 Na5 18. dxe6 Rxd2 19. exf7+ Kg7 20. Qxd2 Qf4 with compensation.

(b) 16. ... Rad8 17. Rd2 exd5 18. cxd5 Bxf1 19. Kxf1 Ne7 20. Rh3 with compensation.

(c) 16. ... exd5 17. cxd5 Bxf1 18. Kxf1 Na5 19. Kg1 with compensation.

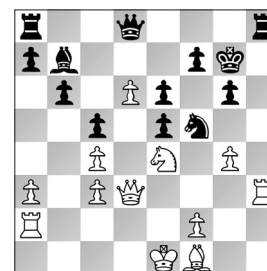
(d) 16. ... Na5 17. Ne4 Qf5 18. f3 Kg7 19. g3 Rh8 20. Rah2 Rxh2 21. Rxh2 and again, White has good compensation, but not more.

17. d6 Nf5 18. Ne4 Qd8!

Another option was 18. ... Qg7 19. g4 Bb7 20. Bg2 Rad8, but Nepo's choice was stronger.

19. Qd3 Kg7 20. g4 Bb7! 21. Rh3 Nh4

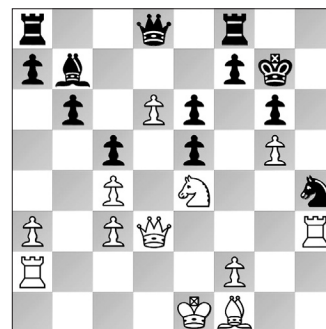
Here 21. ... Rh8! was a nice way to get out of danger.



POSITION AFTER 21. ... Rh8

Probably Nepo still thought his position was fine, and was not really considering bailouts here. Play continues 22. Rxh8 Qxh8 23. gxf5 exf5 24. Ng5 Qh4 and White will probably need to trade queens with 25. Qg3 Qxg3 26. fxxg3 Rd8. With White's damaged pawn structure, Black is not really as risk here, and will soon be picking up the d6-pawn.

22. g5

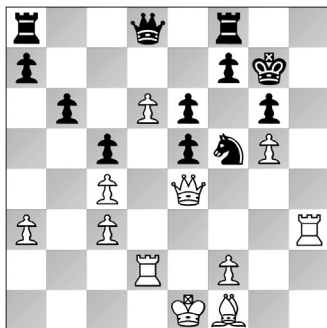


22. ... Bxe4?

A potentially decisive mistake, but one that went unpunished.

Black's only try was 22. ... Rh8! was Black's only try, and here White has a few dangerous options: 23. f4 (or the unclear 23. Qg3 Bxe4 24. Qxe5+ f6 25. Qxe4 fxe5 26. Rd3 Qf6 27. Re2) 23. ... Bxe4 (23. ... exf4 24. Nf6 Nf3+ 25. Rxf3 Bxf3 26. d7 Bh5 27. Bg2 Qb8 28. Bxa8 Qxa8 29. Rh2 Rd8) 24. Qxe4 Qxd6 25. fxe5 Qc7 26. Rxh4 Rxh4 27. Qxh4 Qxe5+ with enough compensation for equality.

23. Qxe4 Nf5 24. Rd2!



Here Black suffers from lack of coordination – the a8-rook, the e5-pawn, and the white d-pawn are all a bit too much for Black to handle.

Note that 24. Qxe5+ fizzles out to a draw after 24. ... f6 25. Qh2 Qxd6 26. Rh7+ Kg8 27. Rh8+ Kf7.

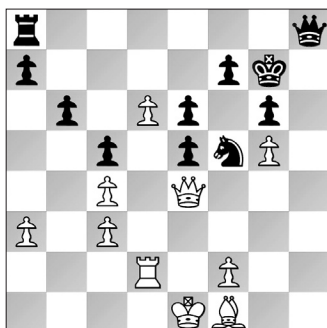
24. ... Rh8

This is best, forcing White to find the win. The alternatives are also grim: (a) 24. ... f6 25. Qb7+ Rf7 26. Rh7+; (b) 24. ... Qxg5 25. Qxe5+ f6 26. Qh2 Rh8 27. Rxh8 Rxh8 28. Qxh8+! Kxh8 29. d7; (c) the top engine choice is 24. ... a5, not inspiring too much confidence!

25. Rxh8

The inhuman way to win was 25. d7!? Qc7 26. Qh1!! Nd4 (26. ... Rxh3 27. Qxa8) 27. Rh6! Qxd7 28. cxd4 exd4 29. Rd3.

25. ... Qxh8

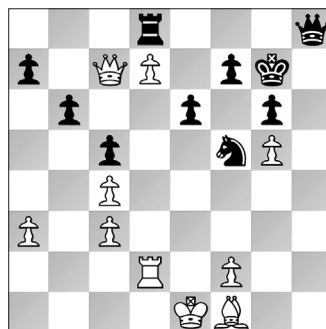


26. d7?

The correct 26. Rd3! is not an easy move to find, but once you see it, the game is over. Black has no way to stop Rd3-h3. The big idea is 26. ... Rd8 27. Rh3 Qf8 28. Qxe5+ f6 29. gxh6+ Kf7 30. Rh7+ Kg8 31. Re7 and Black will lose everything, and then some more.

I believe that Ding has been calculating at a slightly subpar level during this match, at least compared to his best days. In any case, this miss will surely haunt him if the match doesn't go his way.

26. ... Rd8 27. Qxe5+ Kh7 28. Qh2+ Kg7 29. Qe5+ Kh7 30. Qh2+ Kg7 31. Qc7



31. ... Qh4!!

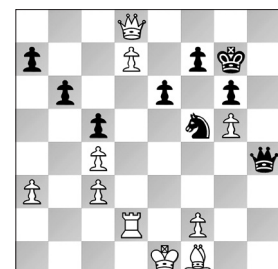
An astonishing bluff, or a stroke of genius? In either case, Nepo's strength as an incredible

practical player comes into full force as he brings about a fantastic save.

The normal way to play was 31. ... Qf8, but White is basically getting the game with an extra tempo: 32. Kd1 Qe7 33. Kc2 Qxg5 (other tries: 33. ... e5 34. Rd5 e4 35. Bh3; 33. ... Nh4 34. f4 e5 35. Bh3 exf4 36. Qxf4) 34. Qxa7 Qe7 35. Qc7 and White stops ... Nf5-d6, while Black is running short on ideas.

32. Kd1

In the post-game interviews, Nepo revealed he didn't see 32. Qxd8!

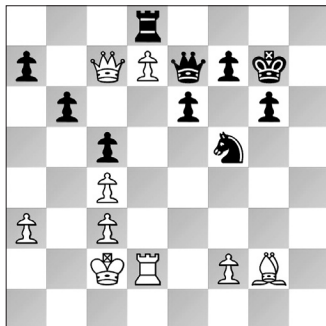


POSITION AFTER 32. Qxd8

when playing his 31st move, so he definitely rode his luck in this game! As everyone knows by now, this wins for White, and the lines are not particularly difficult to calculate. If Ding had spent a minute to work it out, I'm sure he would have seen the way.

Here are the main ideas: 32. ... Qe4+ 33. Re2 Qb1+ 34. Kd2 Qb2+ 35. Kd3 Qb1+ 36. Rc2 Qd1+ (36. ... Qxf1+ 37. Kd2 Nd6 38. Qh8+ Kxh8 39. d8=Q+) 37. Ke4 Qxc2+ (37. ... Nd6+ 38. Ke5 Nb7 39. Qc7) 38. Bd3 Nd6+ 39. Ke3 Qc1+ (39. ... Nxc4+ 40. Bxc4 Qxc3+ 41. Bd3 Qd4+ 42. Ke2 Qe5+ 43. Kf1 Qa1+ 44. Kg2) 40. Ke2 Qb2+ 41. Kf3 and White wins.

32. ... Qxg5 33. Kc2 Qe7 34. Bg2



White prepares Bg2-c6 before taking on a7; otherwise, Black has ... Nf5-d6.

Two other lines of note: (a) 34. Kb3 e5 35. Rd5 f6 36. Bg2 Nh6 37. Qxa7 Qe6 38. Be4 Nf7 39. Qc7 Qg4 40. f3 Qe6; (b) 34. Qxa7 Nd6! 35. Qxb6 Ne4! and Black wins the d7-pawn and a bit more.

34. ... e5

Here 34. ... Nd4+! was fine, although with mutual time pressure, it's understandable that Nepo didn't want to take such decisions. After 35. cxd4 Rxd7 36. Qe5+ f6 37. Qg3 Rxd4 Black is alright, with three pawns for the piece.

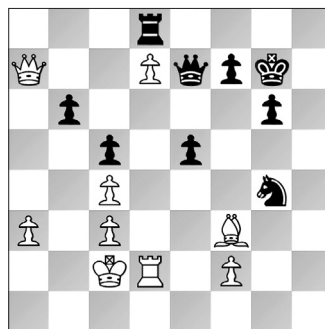
35. Be4!

Precise, kicking away black's knight before mopping up the queenside.

35. ... Nh6 36. Qxa7 Ng4!

Straining to find counterplay. Other ideas are no better, i.e., 36. ... Qe6 37. Qc7 Qe7 38. Bc6; and 36. ... f6 37. Qxb6 Nf7 38. Bc6.

37. Bf3??



A moment of carelessness, and an inexplicable blunder. Was it nerves or all the pressure? In contrast to the previous wins we've analyzed, here Ding needed to just check carefully for Black's ideas.

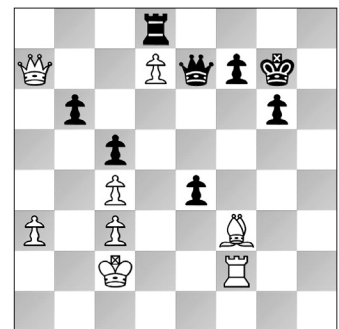
Of course conversion wouldn't have been easy, especially against a defender like Nepo, but with Bf3-c6, the game would have been all but over. To wit: 37. Bc6 e4 38. Qxb6 Ne5 39. Bb5 Nd3 40. Qc7 Qg5 (or 40. ... f5 41. a4) 41. Qg3 Qh5 42. a4 Qh1 43. Rd1 and wins.

Note that White also wins after 37. Qxb6 Rxd7 38. Rxd7 Qxd7 39. Qxc5 Qa4+ 40. Kd2! Qb3 41. f3.

37. ... Nxf2!

You don't need to ask Ian twice!

38. Rxf2 e4!



The point — if White had managed to secure the bishop on d5, the game would soon be over, but now the bishop is locked behind Black's phalanx of pawns.

39. Re2

Not 39. Bg4 e3 and Black wins.

39. ... f5 40. Qxb6 Rxd7 41. Qb8 Qd6 42. Qxd6 Rxd6 43. Bxe4 fxe4 44. Rxe4 Kf6 45. Re8, draw.

In the end, this was a clear miss for Ding, and a game he'd like to have back. Still, from a spectator's point of view, it was a fantastic battle, and worthy of a world championship match. If Ding had come back for the third game in a row, the online pundits would have had an absolute field day. Instead, Nepo keeps his slight buffer, but the way this match is going, it's not clear if it'll last.

For more on this match, check out our event page: [new.uschess.org/2023-FIDE-World-Championship](https://www.uschess.org/2023-FIDE-World-Championship) on a regular basis.



PHOTO: FIDE / STEV BONHAGE