

2023 WORLD CHAMPIONSHIP

APRIL 21, 2023 ■ ROUND 09

BY JJ LANG ■ ANNOTATIONS BY CARSTEN HANSEN



Ian Nepomniachtchi

Round Score

$\frac{1}{2} - \frac{1}{2}$

Match Score

5 - 4



Ding Liren

Match Recap

2023 WORLD CHESS CHAMPIONSHIP

	White	Result	Moves	ECO	Summary
1	Nepomniachtchi - Ding	$\frac{1}{2} - \frac{1}{2}$	49	C85	Ding defends well after opening surprise.
2	Ding - Nepomniachtchi	0-1	29	E10	Nepo wins without much resistance.
3	Nepomniachtchi - Ding	$\frac{1}{2} - \frac{1}{2}$	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	$\frac{1}{2} - \frac{1}{2}$	45	E28	A trendy Nimzo gives Ding real chances, but Nepo holds the draw.
9	Nepomniachtchi - Ding	$\frac{1}{2} - \frac{1}{2}$	82	C65	Ding employs the Berlin, holds the draw, but Nepo didn't make it easy.

In any other recent World Championship match, round nine would be business as usual. The game featured a Berlin Defense which led to an endgame where Black held the draw despite being down a pawn. What could be more ordinary?

But in the 2023 FIDE World Championship, even a "Berlin Draw" would be more interesting than the above description would suggest. GM Ding Liren switched back to

1. ... e5, this time playing a Berlin Defense against GM Ian Nepomniachtchi's Ruy Lopez. Once again, Ding was unable to equalize out of the opening, allowing Nepomniachtchi to press a small advantage.

Compared to some of the earlier Ruy Lopez games in this match, Ding seemed better prepared to meet Nepomniachtchi's more aggressive tendencies. But Nepomniachtchi can be praised for pressing without

overpressing, and he was never in danger. That said, perhaps he was a little too cautious, declining Ding's necessary Exchange sacrifice rather than making him prove he had enough.

The resulting endgame — the first lengthy one of the match — gave Ding a chance to show his resiliency as well. He voluntarily made trades that suggested he was absolutely certain about which simplifications would

hold the draw, and never appeared to be in danger. Nepomniachtchi can also be praised for not making things easy on his adversary. Ding only has five more games to even the score, but three of these games are with the white pieces. Nepomniachtchi missed a few chances to add to his lead here, but nothing as concrete as we've seen in the other games.

RUY LOPEZ, BERLIN DEFENSE (C65)

GM Ian Nepomniachtchi (2795)

GM Ding Liren (2788)

2023 FIDE World Championship (9),

Astana, 04.21.2023

Annotations by FM Carsten Hansen

1. e4 e5

At least for now, Ding's experiment with the French Defense, as he played in the previous game, is over.

2. Nf3 Nc6 3. Bb5 Nf6

The Berlin Defense. This choice was widely applauded by the live commentators, including Fabiano Caruana. Of course, the Berlin has been played before, including by Ding against Nepo, and it was also the choice in one of the games in the alleged data leak of "Ding's preparation" that rocked the internet during the previous game.

4. d3 Bc5 5. c3

In their previous encounters in the Berlin,

Nepomniachtchi in this position chose 5. Bxc6 dxc6 6. Nbd2 0-0 7. Nc4 Re8 8. a4 a5 9. Bd2 b6 10. Bc3 Ng4 11. 0-0 f6 12. Bd2



POSITION AFTER 12. Bd2

12. ... g5? (At this point, Ding errs; after 12. ... f5 the chances would have been about balanced) 13. h3 Nh6 14. h4?! (14. Nh2!) 14. ... Nf7 15. hxg5 fxg5 16. Nh2 Re6 17. Ne3 Rg6 18. Nf5 Bxf5?! 19. exf5 Rf6 20. Qg4 h6?! 21. Qh3 Qd7?! 22. Ng4 Rxf5? 23. Nf6+ and, losing the queen, Ding resigned in Nepomniachtchi – Ding, *Chess24.com*, 2020.

Another game featured 7. Qe2 Re8 8. Nc4 Nd7 9. Bd2 Bf8 10. h4 b5 11. Ne3 Nc5 12. h5 a5 and Black had a comfortable position in Nepomniachtchi – Ding, *Chess24.com*, 2020.

5. ... 0-0 6. 0-0 d5

An interesting choice. The "main" main line is 6. ... d6 which has been used by countless top grandmasters, including Caruana, So, and some Norwegian called Carlsen.

7. Nbd2 dxe4 8. dxe4 a5

This is the critical line that has seen a lot of interest at top level in recent years, as any critical line in the Berlin Defense would. However, also 8. ... Qe7 has been tested by Ding, albeit only in an online blitz game: 9. b4 Bd6 10. Bb2 a5 11. a3 Be6 12. Qc2 h6 13. Rac1 Rfd8 and Black had just about equalized in Nakamura – Ding, *Chess.com*, 2021.

9. a4 Qe7 10. Qc2 Nb8!

In last year's Candidates tournament, Nakamura instead went for 10. ... Na7?! 11. Be2 Nc6 12. Nb3 Ba7 13. Bb5 Bg4 14. Bxc6! Bxf3 15. gxf3 bxc6 16. Nxa5 Qe6 17. Qe2 and White had a clear advantage in Radjabov – Nakamura, Madrid, 2022.

11. Re1

White has several alternatives in this position:

a) 11. Bd3 h6 12. Nc4 Nc6 13. h3 Rd8 14. Re1 Nh5 15. Bf1 Qf6 16. Be3 with a tiny edge for White, as in Carlsen – Kramnik, Leuven, 2017.

b) 11. Be2 Nbd7 12. Nc4 b6 13. h3 Bb7 14. Bd3 Rfd8 15. Re1 h6 16. b3 Qe8 17. Be3 Bxe3 18. Rxe3 Qe6 and Black had a comfortable position in So – Nakamura, *Chess.com*, 2022.

11. ... Rd8

Or 11. ... h6 12. h3 Be6 13. Bf1 Nbd7 14. Nc4 Rfd8 15. Nxe5 Nxe5 16. Nxe5 Bxh3 17. Nd3 Be6 18. Nxc5 Qxc5 19. Be3 with a slight advantage for White in Villarreal – Barkov, ICCF, 2015.

12. h3 h6 13. Nf1 c6 14. Bc4 Na6 15. Ng3 Qc7 16. Ba2



This is the first truly new move, and it was only played after a long time in the tank by White, thus it wasn't part of Nepo's preparation. Previously, 16. Qe2 had been tried in a correspondence game, although Black in this line too does not have any problems: 16. ... Bf8 17. Be3 Nc5 18. b4 Nxe4 19. Nxe4 Nxe4 20. Bb6 Qxb6 21. Qxe4 Re8 22. Nxe5 Be6 23. Bd3 f5 with equal chances in De la Rosa Solorzano – Genga, ICCF, 2021.

16. ... b5 17. Qe2 Rb8?!

These positions can look rather uneventful – even somewhat boring – but they contain a lot of stingers that become activated once inaccuracies are committed by either side. The text move is at the very least an inaccuracy but possibly it is more severe than that, leading Black into more than a bit of trouble.

Instead, 17. ... Bf8! 18. Be3 (If White grabs the pawn with 18. axb5 cxb5 19. Qxb5, Black gains more than sufficient compensation after 19. ... Nc5 when all of Black's pieces have come to life) 18. ... bxa4 (or 18. ... Rb8!?, now that White's dark-squared bishop is no longer guarding the b2-pawn/square) 19. Bc4 (or 19. Qc4 c5 20. Nd2 [but not 20. Qxa4? Bd7 21. Qc4 Be6 22. Qe2 c4 and Black has taken command of the game] 20. ... a3 21. bxa3 Be6 and Black has equalized) 19. ... a3 20. bxa3 Nc5, and Black has comfortable equality.



CARSTEN HANSEN

FM Carsten Hansen is a Danish-born author and FIDE Trainer based in the New York City area. Hansen is the author of over 40 chess books, with several more due

to come out this year. In addition to his work authoring full books, Hansen also contributes a monthly tactics column to *Chess Life*. Much of his work focuses on openings, ranging from more orthodox choices like the English to the more innovative "Orangutan" opening (1. b4!), but some of his more general-interest works include *Back to Basics: Chess Openings and Improve Your Positional Chess*.

18. Nh4!

This strong knight leap is the first step in the attack on the kingside; an attack that White has been hoping for ever since the queen was put on e2 and the bishop was parked on a2. White's knights are dreaming of jumping to f5 and g6.

18. ... Bf8

There is an argument for 18. ... Be6 19. Bxe6 fxe6, killing off White's bishop and taking the f5-square away from White's knights, but the long-term consequences for Black, having messed up his pawn structure, are difficult to assess. Worse, the advantage is both fun and decidedly on White's side.

19. Qf3!?

White could already consider 19. Ng6!? possibly threatening to eliminate Black's darks-squared bishop but, more importantly, threatening to open up the box of tricks with a threat like f2-f4 as illustrated by 19. ... Bd6 20. f4! exf4? 21. e5 Bc5+ 22. Kh1 Nd5 23. Nxf4 and Black will probably not survive.

19. ... bxa4!

An ugly move that Black would rather not have played, but Black needs counterplay and he needs it pronto! Therefore, the a-file had to be opened.

By contrast, Black does not have time for 19. ... Qe7?, e.g., 20. Ngf5 followed by Nf5xh6+ and White is already completely winning.

20. Bxh6 Nc5

A move that serves several functions. In some lines it protects a rook going to d3, in others it supports a potential ... Bc8-e6, putting a cork in the scope of White's strong bishop on a2, or can possibly continue its journey to b3, also to the detriment of the a2-bishop.

Obviously, 20. ... gxh6? 21. Qxf6 is completely out of the question for Black.

Also, 20. ... Rxb2? 21. Bg5 is a nightmare for Black.

**21. Ng6?!**

White has an alternative in 21. Bg5!? after which Black must play 21. ... Rd3 but after 22. Qe2 Nh7 23. Be3, it is clear that Black's sufferings are far from over.

21. ... Rxb2

Or 21. ... Rd3 22. Re3 Rxe3 23. Qxe3 Qd6 24. Nxe5! Be6 (24. ... gxh6? 25. Nxf7 is massively better for White) 25. Bf4 and White has an edge.

22. Nxf8 Rxf8

Considering that the knight has no direct route home, Black could be tempted to do something else before recapturing it, but there is nothing.

After 22. ... Rd3?! 23. Be3 Nb3 24. Nh5! White is fine.

But no better is 22. ... Nb3? 23. Bg5, when Black's problems only seem to have gotten bigger.

23. Bg5?!

If White attempts to checkmate Black after 23. Bxg7? Kxg7 24. Qe3, it promptly backfires after 24. ... Ne6 25. Nf5+ Kh8 26. Qh6+ Nh7 27. Bxe6 fxe6 and White is a piece down with nothing to show for it.

Instead, White could consider 23. Bc4!? Be6 24. Nf5 Bxf5 25. Qxf5 Qe7 26. Qg6 Ne8 27. Bc1 and White has a reasonable advantage with bishop pair against knight pair plus the initiative in hand.

23. ... Nh7! 24. Bc1 Rb5?!

A logical somewhat retreat, protecting the

knight on c5, but also not Black's best move.

After 24. ... Rc2 25. Bc4!? (but not 25. Ba3? Nb3! and Black is clearly better) 25. ... Nb3!



POSITION AFTER 25. ... Nb3!

and after 26. Rxa4 Nxc1 27. Qe3 Be6 28. Rxc1 Rxc1+ 29. Qxc1 Bxc4 30. Rxc4 Ra8, Black has solved his problems.

Note that White cannot play 28. Bxe6 fxe6 29. Rxc1 Rxf2! and Black is better because White cannot capture on f2 with the queen: 30. Qxf2 Rxf2 31. Kxf2 Qb6+ 32. Ke1 Qe3+ 33. Ne2 Ng5 and Black is winning.

25. Ba3 Re8 26. Bc4 Be6!

Ding was forced to sacrifice the Exchange; fortunately, it is rather good.

27. Bxe6

This committal and surprising decision was played rather fast by Nepo.

The obvious question is why White didn't capture the offered Exchange as after 27. Bxb5 cxb5 28. Qe3 Nd7, Black seems to have reasonable compensation, but his troubles are far from over.

Best of all, however, was 27. Qe2! Bxc4 28. Qxc4 which leaves Black with a long-term positional nightmare.

27. ... Nxe6 28. Nf5 c5

Black has an extra pawn, but the a4-pawn is bound to drop as soon as White is interested in capturing it. During the game, I thought White was still comfortably better thanks to his strong knight on f5 (which may leap via e3 to d5) and Black's light-squared weaknesses and loose queenside pawns. However, the engines are less convinced, only granting White a minimal edge.

29. Qe2?!



White could have kept the burn pit on Black's kingside open by instead continuing with 29. Qg3 Nf6 30. Bc1 g6 31. Qh4 Qd8 32. Ne3 which looks unpleasant for Black, but, once more, Stockfish and its friends remain unimpressed, claiming Black to be more or less okay.

29. ... Rb3 30. Qc4 Qc6?!

Now, the engines call for 30. ... Reb8, proclaiming all of Black's problems to be over. Still, to my eye, White's position still looks easier to play.

31. Bc1 Nf6

This is the starting position of the annual Berlin woodchopping festival.

32. Qxa4 Qxa4 33. Rxa4 Rxc3 34. Bb2 Rb3

35. Bxe5 Rb4 36. Rxa5 Rxe4 37. Rxe4 Nxe4 38. Ra4 Nd4!



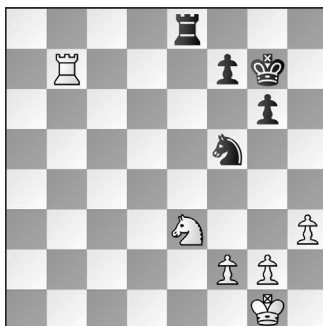
A good practical choice, losing a pawn by taking the endgame into something that Black should not lose, especially for someone as strong as Ding.

An alternative was 38. ... Nd2!? 39. Rg4 (or 39. Bc3 Nb3 40. Rg4 Nbd4 and Black is okay) when Black had to find 39. ... Nf4!! (39. ... g6 40. Bc3 is still unpleasant for Black) 40. Rxc7+ (or 40. Nh6+ Kh7 41. Nxf7 Ng6 42. Bc3 Re1+ 43. Kh2 Nf1+ 44. Kg1 Nd2+) 40. ... Kf8 41. Bxf4 Re1+ 42. Kh2 Nf1+ 43. Kg1 Nd2+ with a draw by perpetual check.

39. Bxd4 cxd4 40. Rxd4

White is a pawn up. It should end in a draw, but Nepo isn't just going to hand Ding a draw in this position. If he could convert this into a win, it could decide the match, breaking Ding once and for all.

40. ... g6 41. Ne3 Kg7 42. Rb4 Ng3!? 43. Rb7 Nf5!



This is a gutsy move, but Ding knows his endgames and therefore knows this rook ending to be drawn. Obviously, you don't offer such a trade unless you are 100% sure that it is a sound decision.

44. Ng4

Nepo played this almost instantaneously; he too knows his endgames.



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44. ... Re7

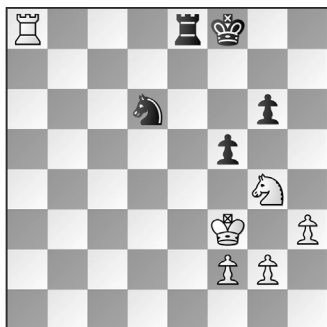
All exchanges lighten Black's defensive burden.

45. Rb5

Nope, still not interested!

45. ... Re1+ 46. Kh2 Re2 47. Rb7 Nd6 48. Ra7 Kf8 49. Kg3 f5!?

This is not the most logical choice as it makes Black's pawn a lot more vulnerable. However, Ding seemed relatively confident that it would work and possibly speed up the path toward the draw result he was angling for.

50. Kf3 Re7 51. Ra8+ Re8

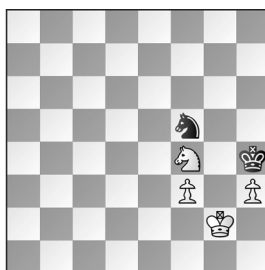
Another apparently confident decision by Ding, but 51. ... Kg7 52. Ne3 Ne4 was also entirely possible.

52. Rxe8+ Kxe8 53. Ne5 g5 54. h4 gxh4 55. Kf4 h3!?

An interesting decision. Clearly Ding thought this endgame to be an easier draw than those arising after 55. ... Ke7 and he may be right, for instance: 56. Ng6+ Kf6 57. Nxh4 Ne4 58. f3 (or 58. Ke3 Ng5) 58. ... Nd6 should end in a draw, but White can carry on for a lot longer.

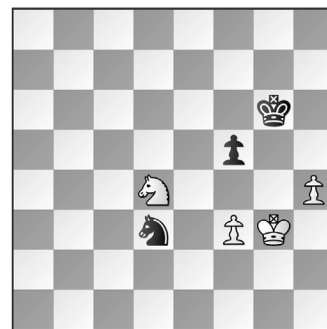
56. gxh3 Ke7 57. Nc6+ Kf6 58. Nd4 Ne4 59. f3

Or 59. Ke3 Kg5 60. f3 Nd6 61. Kf2 Kh4 62. Kg2 f4! 63. Ne6 Nf5 64. Nxf4



POSITION AFTER 64. Nxf4

Now White wins a second pawn, but, unfortunately for him, they are of no use. 64. ... Ne3+ 65. Kf2 (65. Kh2 Nf1+ 66. Kg1 Ne3 is a draw) 65. ... Nf5 and White cannot make progress.

59. ... Nf2 60. h4 Nd3+ 61. Kg3 Kg6

It is obvious that this endgame is drawn as White cannot make any worthwhile progress. Of course, that didn't stop Nepo from trying a bit longer.

62. Ne6 Kf6 63. Nf4 Nb4 64. Kf2 Ke5 65. Ke3 Nc2+ 66. Kd2 Nd4 67. Nd3+ Kf6 68. Ke3 Nc2+ 69. Kf4 Nd4 70. Kg3 Ne2+ 71. Kf2 Nd4 72. Nf4 Ke5 73. Ne2 Ne6 74. Kg3 Kf6 75. Kg2 Kg7 76. Kf2 f4 77. Kg1 Kg6 78. Kg2 Kh6 79. Nc1 Kh5 80. Kh3 Nd4 81. Nd3 Nxf3 82. Nxf4+, draw.

The longest game of the match so far and one filled with interesting ideas from both sides.

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



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