

Nimzo-Indian 4.f3 variation [E20]

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FIDE Candidates Tournament (2.1),

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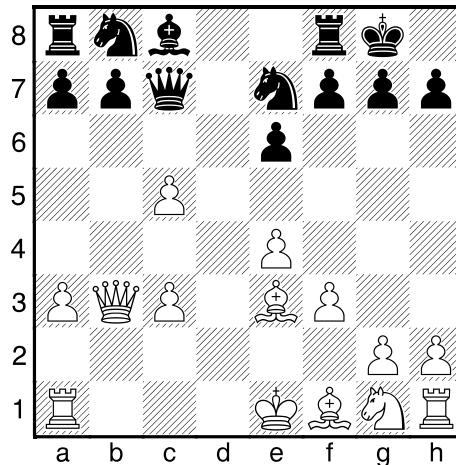
[*Jacob Aagaard*]

1.d4 Nf6 2.c4 e6 3.Nc3 Bb4 4.f3

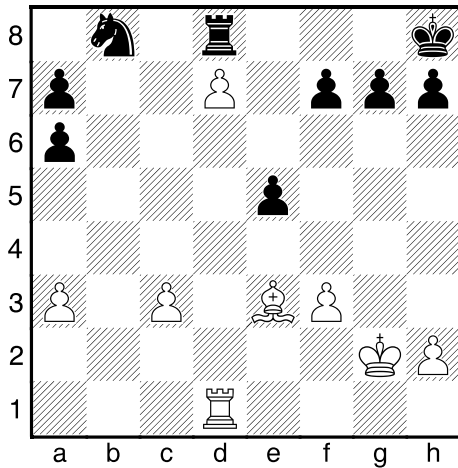
This is one of the most ambitious lines for White. The upside is that it leads to active play and for once the dark squared bishop is likely to be a strong piece, which is not always the case in the Nimzo. The downsides are the many different lines Black can play here, according to Carlsen's chief second GM Peter Heine Nielsen, who helped Anand prepare this for one game in the 2008 World Championship match in Bonn against Vladimir Kramnik. In that game Kramnik managed to surprise Anand with a novelty on move nine and got a good position.

4...d5 5.a3 Be7

A very interesting game in this line was played recently. 5...Bxc3+ 6.bxc3 c5 7.cxd5 Nxd5 8.dxc5 Qa5 9.e4 Ne7 10.Be3 0-0 11.Qb3 Qc7



This position is one of the main tabiyas of the Nimzo and probably THE main tabiya of the 4.f3 Nimzo-Indian. The Indian number two won in very impressive style, suggesting that things are maybe not as easy for Black here as used to be the opinion. 12.Bb5 Nec6 13.Ne2 Na5 14.Qb4 e5 15.0-0 Na6 16.Bxa6 bxa6 17.Rad1 Be6 18.Rd5 Rab8 19.Qa4 Bxd5 20.exd5 Rb5 21.d6 Qc6 22.Ng3 Rxc5 23.Qg4! Rc4 24.Nf5! Rxc4 25.Ne7+ Kh8 26.Nxc6 Rxc2+ (26...Ra4 27.Nxa5 Rxa5 28.c4 Rxa3 29.Bxa7 Kg8 (29...Rd3 30.c5) 30.Rd1) 27.Kxg2 Nxc6 28.Rd1 Rd8 29.d7 Nb8



30.Rb1!! Kg8 (30...Nxd7 31.Rd1 Kg8 32.Bc5! and White wins.) 31.Bc5 1-0 (31) Vidit,S (2707)-Vaibhav,S (2599) Xingtai 2019]

6.e4 dxe4

Black has also tried 6...c5 immediately, but it seems that it is not a good line on account of 7.cxd5 exd5 8.e5 Nfd7 9.Nxd5 cxd4 10.Nxe7 Qxe7 11.f4 f6 12.Nf3 fxe5 13.Bc4! Nc6 14.0-0± with an advantage for White, which has been known all the way back from Beliavsky – Spassky, Linares 1990.

7.fxe4 c5

7...e5 is another main line, but it used to have a poor reputation, despite some impressive games back in the 1980s.

8.d5 exd5 9.exd5 0-0 10.Be2

A typical small finesse. It is possible that Black has nothing better than ...Re8 after 10.Nf3 Bg4 11.Be2, but why would you want to offer him the flexibility.

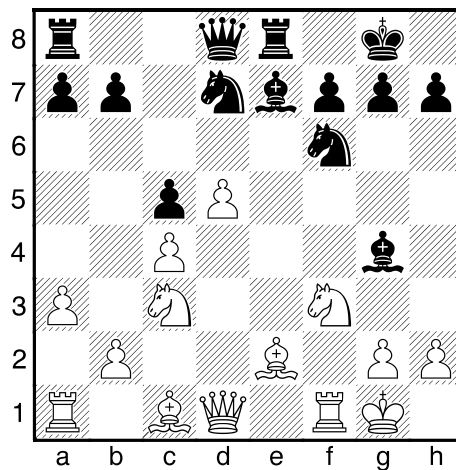
10...Re8

10...Bd6 11.Nb5 a6 12.Nxd6 Qxd6 13.Nf3 Bg4 14.0-0 Nbd7 was played in Matlakov - Predke, Izhevsk 2019. White can improve upon 15.Nh4 with the inclusion of 15.h3! N Bh5 16.Nh4 Bxe2 17.Qxe2 and White has the advantage. If it is just a small edge or something serious would require a lot of work and/or some practical examples. However, I cannot see anyone entering into this position on purpose.

11.Nf3 Bg4 12.0-0 Nbd7!N

The first really new move of the game.

12...Bd6 has been played a few times, but here too White should be better after 13.Nb5 a6 14.Nxd6 Qxd6 , where the strong dark squared bishop should give White real chances for a long term advantage.

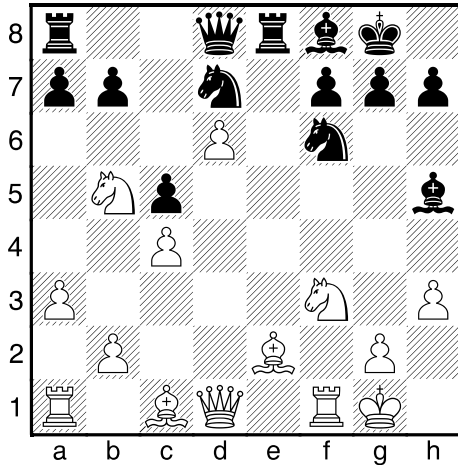


13.d6!?

Caruana decided to enter a critical continuation. The key point is that Black is ready to play ...Bd6-b8. White no longer has

the Nb5 resource.

13...Bf8 14.h3 Bh5 15.Nb5



15...Re6?

"Very sharp and concrete, but even unusual moves are not necessarily bad," was Caruana's diplomatic evaluation of this move. Actually, it is just bad. The rook is not seriously threatening the d-pawn, but the rook is just not well placed here or on e4.

The prophylactic move 15...Rb8! was best. It is not easy for White to press for an advantage here. The critical move is: 16.Nc7!

a) 16.Nxa7? would be a blunder because of 16...Bxd6! and Black is taking over the initiative.;

b) The engine also considers 16.Bf4 a serious move, when after 16...a6 17.Nc7 Re4 we almost have the position from the game. The only exception is that the rook is not hanging on a8, meaning that Black is entirely equal. 18.Bg3 Bxf3 19.Bxf3 Rd4 20.Qe1 Nb6 21.d7 Qxd7 (21...Nbxtd7? 22.Nd5 Rc8 23.Nxf6+

Nxf6 24.Bxb7 would heavily favour White.) 22.Nd5 Re8 23.Nxb6 Rxe1 24.Nxd7 Rxf1+ 25.Kxf1 Rxd7 The position is objectively equal. White has nice active pieces, but Black has an extra pawn. The two will cancel each other out.;

Back to 16.Nc7! – Play should continue 16...Re4! 17.Bd3 Bxd6 (17...Rd4? fails on account of 18.Nb5!) 18.Bxe4 Qxc7, when Black has a lot of compensation for the exchange. A possible space bar monkey line is the following: 19.Bf5 White is probably going to be better after slow play: 19...Ne5 (19...b5!? An interesting Stockfish idea. 20.cxb5 c4 21.Bxd7 Rd8! 22.Be3! Rxd7 23.Qc1 White has an extra exchange, but Black is very active as well. Only White can be better, which should probably be the evaluation of decent preparation from both players...) 20.g4 Bg6 21.Nxe5 Bxf5 22.gxf5 Bxe5 23.Qf3 Rd8 24.Bf4 where we are likely to enter into a technical phase, where Black could be OK if the knight was on d4, but here where it is far from there, he will have to find a number of decent moves to avoid ending up in a worse ending.

16.Bf4 a6 17.Nc7 Re4 18.Bh2?!

18.Qd2! Rb8 (18...Bxf3 19.Bxf3 Rd4 20.Qe3 Rb8 21.Rfd1) 19.Rad1 Nb6 20.b3 Bxf3 21.Rxf3 Nbd7 22.b4+–

18...Rc8?!

18...Rb8!?

19.g4!

19.Qc2 Ne5 20.Rad1 Bg6 21.Nxe5 Rxe5 22.Qd2 Re4 23.Qe1 Bh5∞

19...Bxg4

19...Nxb4 20.hxg4 Rxb4+ 21.Kh1 Rg6
22.Rf2

20.hxg4 Nxb4 21.Bd3! Nxb2 22.Bxe4 Nxf1 23.Qxf1

Fabiano correctly evaluated his position as better at this point, mainly due to the control of the d5-square, while after his opponent's next move, he dialed his expectations up to "winning."

23...Bxd6?

23...Nf6 24.Re1 (24.Ng5!? Qxd6 25.Nd5 Qg3+ 26.Qg2 Nxe4 27.Nxe4 Qh4 28.Qh1 Qxh1+ 29.Kxb1 Rc6; 24.Bf5 Rb8) 24...Nxe4 25.Rxe4 Qxd6 26.Nd5 Qg6+?! (26...b5 27.b3 bxc4 28.bxc4 Rb8 is probably a better fighting chance for Black, but his position is still very unpleasant. For example: 29.Kf2!±, when the king is safe from all counterplay.) 27.Qg2 Qxg2+ 28.Kxg2± Caruana evaluated this as better for White, as three pawns for the pieces is not enough compensation for the strong knight on d5, as it is hard/impossible for him to advance the pawns at all.

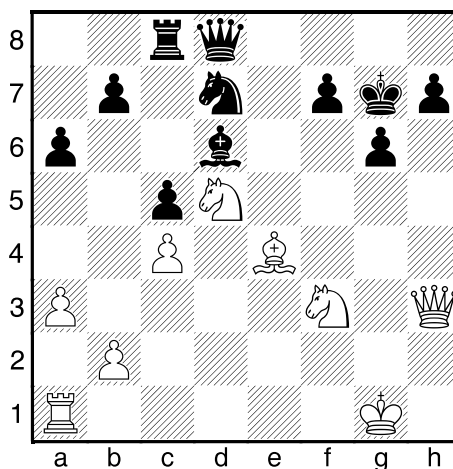
24.Nd5 g6

Caruana gave the following beautiful variation in his post-game commentary: 24...Ne5 25.Nxe5 Qg5+ 26.Qg2 Qxe5 (26...Qxg2+ 27.Kxg2 Bxe5 28.Ne7+ is not an option.) 27.Qh3! Qd4+ 28.Kf1 f5!? (28...Qxc4+ 29.Bd3!) 29.Bxf5 Qxc4+ 30.Kg1 Qd4+ 31.Ne3 and there are no more useful checks, making the double attack the most important thing in the position.

25.Qh3 Kg7

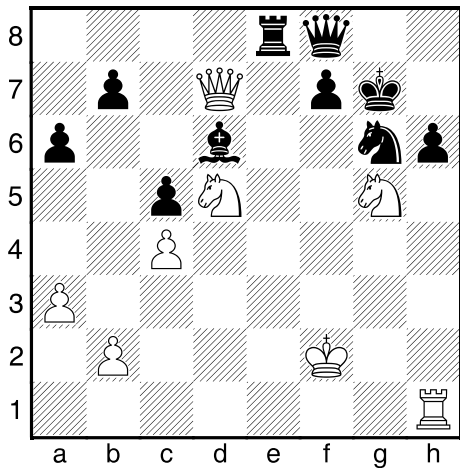
Caruana said that he saw no defence for his opponent. I doubt there is one.

25...Rc6!? was a small trap that would not have worked on this level. Obviously Caruana would not fall for 26.Qxd7?? Bh2+! when Black wins. Instead after 26.Rd1 White would keep a strong attack going.; 25...Ne5 26.Nxe5 Bxe5 would bring a lot of relief, if it was not for 27.Qxc8!.



26.Kh1!

Stockfish gives a feverish and wholly unnatural move at this point: 26.Bf5?! However, it is definitely flashy! The tactics are very bizarre and not all trustworthy when you are sitting at the board. 26...gxf5 27.Kf2 Nf8! 28.Rg1+ Ng6 29.Ng5 Qh8 30.Qxf5 Qf8 White has a win here, but it is ridiculous. 31.Qd7 Re8 32.Rh1! h6



33.Nh7!! Kxh7 34.Nf6+ Kh8 35.Qxe8 and the endgame should win, but only if you get here. The key point to understand is that there are a lot of possibilities for something you could have missed on the way. When this is the only path, you accept it. When there are many options, you go for something that is easily controllable.

26...Ne5 27.Nh4!

The exchange of knights would reduce the pressure against the black king.

27...h5?!

Objectively this is the losing move, but in practice I consider the black position entirely unplayable.

27...Rc6 was potentially more resilient, but we are near the end all the same. After 28.Rg1 Bf8 29.Nf4 Rb6 30.Bd5± White is dominating. A key thing to understand is that 30...Rxb2?! 31.Nf5+ Kg8 32.Qc3! wins the exchange as a minimum and that is after 32...Qf6 33.Qxb2 Qxf5 34.Rf1.

28.Rg1 Bf8

Caruana was no doubt enjoying himself at this point. While his opponent is desperately looking for anything, just anything, that can give him a glimmer of hope, Caruana was enjoying himself looking at variations like this: 28...Ng4 29.Nf5+! Kg8 (29...gxf5 30.Bxf5 and wins.) 30.Rxg4! hxg4 31.Qh6 Bf8 32.Nde7+ Qxe7 33.Nxe7+ Bxe7 34.Bxg6 . Yes, the final move is not necessary, but when you are there, you may as well enjoy yourself.

29.Nf4

29.Nxg6!? and 30.Nf4 also wins quickly. White only needs one way to win.

29...Ng4 30.Nxh5+ gxh5 31.Bf5 Be7 32.Bxg4 hxg4 33.Qxg4+ Bg5 34.Qh5 1-0

Black resigned. Mate or a fate worse than mate is coming.