



2020 Candidates Tournament Round 3

Ding Liren – Fabiano Caruana
Annotations by GM Jacob Aagaard

Slav Defense [D17]

Ding Liren (2805)

Fabiano Caruana (2842)

FIDE Candidates Tournament (3.1),
19.03.2020

The big game of the third round was obviously the first clash between the two pre-tournament favourites. After Ding Liren had lost yesterday, the Chinese rumour mill was that Ding had withdrawn from the tournament. But Ding was at the board for the start of the third round. If he managed to win the game, he would overtake Caruana on tie-break substantially and only be half a point behind him.

For this reason the opening choice was quite surprising from Caruana. He chose to come with a brand new idea on move nine, forcing his opponent to think, while feeling the pressure of not knowing when the computer he was obviously playing with, would find his choices wanting. To me it just seems overly risky. My best guess (and by no means the only scenario I can think of) is that Caruana had decided on this risky decision before the tournament and felt it was easier to go with his preparation than to change course on this very surprising scenario for round 3...

1.d4 d5 2.c4 c6 3.Nf3 Nf6 4.Nc3

Ding Liren said that he considered playing 4.cxd5 and make a quick draw, but he decided that it was not his style. He cited the encouragement of family and his coach as inspiration to go on.

4...dxc4 5.a4 Bf5 6.Ne5 e6 7.f3 Bb4 8.Nxc4

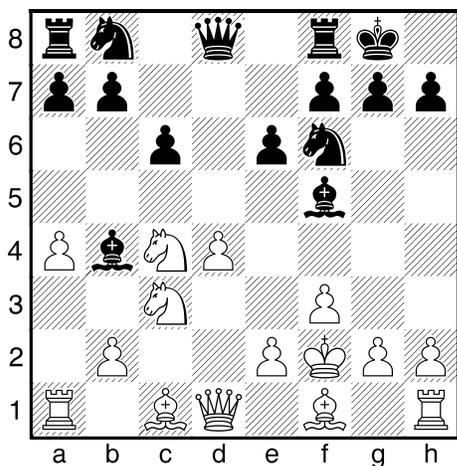
8.e4 Bxe4 9.fxe4 Nxe4 was the mainline from the 1980s onwards, but nowadays this is what they do. Another idea is 8.Kf2 Nbd7 9.Nxc4 0-0 10.e4 ½-½ (28) Zhao,Z (2537)-Smirnov,A (2194) Canberra 2013

8...0-0 9.Kf2!

This move looks inherently weird. But when you see the options White has for e4 and g4 once he is out of the in, you can understand it easily.

9.e4 Nxe4 10.fxe4 Qh4+ 11.Kd2 Qxe4 12.Qf3 Qxd4+ 13.Ke1 has been played in some games at a lower level. Here Black has a serious improvement with: 13...b5!N and it is clear that Black has the initiative. The following computer line has little to do with what would actually be played in a game. 14.axb5 cxb5 15.Na5 Rc8 Black has the initiative. This was a rather entertaining line with some forced properties: 16.Bd2 Nd7 17.Nc6 Rxc6 18.Qxc6 Rd8 19.Qf3 Nc5

20.Qf4 Nb3 21.Qxd4 Rxd4 22.Be3 (22.Rd1 Bc2) 22...Nxa1 23.Bxd4 Nc2+ 24.Kf2 Nxd4 25.Nxb5 Bc5 26.b4 Bxb4 27.Nxd4 Bc5 28.Kf3 Bxd4 29.Bd3 Bxd3 30.Rd1 e5 31.Rxd3 f5 32.Rb3 e4+ 33.Kf4 g6 34.g4 and White will make a draw eventually. But yes, Black could have tried a lot of different things on the way.



Ding was certainly wondering what was coming for him here, as White is considered to be better in these lines. Caruana did not disappoint.

9...e5!?N

This is Caruana's idea. A pawn sacrifice.

The main line seems to revolve around the following, although it appears to be entirely unappealing to me. 9...c5 10.e4 Bg6 (10...Bxc3 11.bxc3 Bxe4 12.fxe4 Nxe4+ 13.Kg1 Nxc3 14.Qe1 cxd4 Black has four pawns for the piece. But this is not a position that suggests to me that an endgame will

happen. Best play may very well go like this: 15.h4 Nc6 16.Rh3 (16.h5!?±) 16...Qd5 17.Bb2 Ne4 18.Ba3 Rfe8 19.Rb1 Nc3 1-0 (40) Olivares,F (2329)-Hernandez,C (2258) Bogota 2015 20.Rxb7 Rab8 21.Rc7±) 11.Na2 (11.Be3? cxd4 12.Qxd4 was played in Georgiadis – Shankland, Biel 2019. Here Black could have improved a lot on the game with: 12...Qe7!N 13.Ne5 Rd8 14.Qc4 Nbd7 15.Nxd7 Nxd7) 11...Nc6 12.Nxb4 Nxb4 has been played a number of times.

But here I think we are talking about a refutation. 13.Bd2!! Qxd4+ (13...Bxe4 14.fxe4 Nxe4+ 15.Kg1 Qxd4+ 16.Be3 Qd5 17.h4±; 13...Qc7 14.Bxb4 cxb4 15.g3±) 14.Be3 Qxd1 (14...Nxe4+ 15.fxe4 Qxe4 16.Qf3 Qc2+ 17.Kg3 Be4 18.Qe2 Rad8 19.Qxc2 Nxc2 20.Rc1 Nxe3 21.Nxe3 f5 22.Nc4±) 15.Rxd1 b6 Black has an extra pawn, but beyond this there is nothing appealing about his position. 16.a5 (16.b4!?N b5 17.Ne5 Bh7 18.Bb5±) 16...Rfb8 17.Bf4 Rb7 Kuljasevic – Vocaturu, Le Castella 2018. 18.h4N h5 19.a6 Rd7 20.Be2 White is close to winning.

9...Bg6 10.e4 Nbd7 11.Be3± has been played in about a dozen games, but it just inherently sad for Black. Still it could be the objectively best choice: 11...c5 12.dxc5 Bxc5 13.Bxc5 Nxc5 was Zhao – Smirnov, Canberra 2013. The obvious improvement is 14.Qxd8!N Rfxd8 15.Be2 Nb3 16.Rad1± The bishop on g6 looks very sad.

10.Nxe5!

Ding decided to call Caruana's bluff. You can understand his mindset easily. With 0/2 he has to go for it and he knows that White is probably better, as he has analysed this

position with an engine at some point. But of course the engine is short sighted and at times wrong. Especially know when we have three strong engines that disagree all the time!

10.dxe5 Nfd7 11.Bf4 Qh4+ 12.g3 Qe7 13.Kg2 Be6 14.e4 Bxc4 15.Bxc4 Nxe5 Black is very close to equalising.

10...Bc2 11.Qd2 c5 12.d5!

Ding plays very principled chess.

Safer was 12.e3 Bg6 13.d5 , where Black has a slightly worse, but overall reasonable position after 13...Nbd7 14.Nc4 Nb6 White is still struggling to get fully developed. Still I would prefer to have the extra pawn here. Black is lacking in pawn breaks.

12...Bb3

12...Be4 is refuted by a few outlandish moves. 13.g4 Re8 14.Nxf7 Kxf7 15.g5 Ng4+ 16.Kg3! Bxf3 17.Qf4+ Kg8 18.exf3 Ne5 19.Bb5 and Black does not have any compensation for the pawn.

13.e4 Re8

13...Nbd7 14.Nxd7 Nxd7 15.Qf4 looks easily better for White. Black needs counterplay.

14.Qf4 c4! Opening up the position.

15.Nxc4!

We can certainly think that Caruana were hoping for something like 15.Bxc4 Bd6 16.Qe3 Nbd7 17.Nxd7 (17.Bxb3?! Bc5 18.Nc4 is adventurous, but after 18...Rc8! Black is going to be better.) 17...Nxd7

18.Qe2 Bxc4 19.Qxc4 Qh4+ 20.Kf1 Rac8 , where White is perhaps not really worse, but has to defend with about an hour less on the clock.

15...Nbd7 16.Be3 Nf8!?

Caruana was still in preparation here. An alternative existed and was probably very hard to refute. 16...Bxc4 17.Bxc4 Ne5 18.Be2 (18.Bb5 a6 gives Black a useful tempo.) 18...Ng6 19.Qf5 Rc8 20.Rac1 and now 20...Ba5. This is the difficult move to refute and maybe what Caruana would have tried in practice. There are a lot of things for White to be dubious about. 21.Nb5 Rxc1 22.Rxc1 Ne7 23.Qf4 Nexd5 24.exd5 Nxd5 25.Rd1! Rxe3 26.Qc4 Re5 27.f4 Rf5 28.Bf3 Qb6+ 29.Rd4! Ne7 30.b4+- Rxb5 31.axb5 Bxb4 32.Kf1 Nf5 33.Qc8+ Bf8 34.Rd8 Qxb5+ 35.Be2 Qb1+ 36.Bd1 Qb5+ 37.Kg1 Qb6+ 38.Kh1 Qb4 39.Rxf8+ Qxf8 40.Qxf5 and White has a technical win.

The endgame with two rooks for the queen after 20...Bc5 21.Bxc5 Rxc5 22.Nb5 Re5 23.Rxc5 Rxf5 24.exf5 Nf8 25.Rd1 , looks very promising for White and entirely risk free. 25...a6 26.Nc7 (26.Nc3?! I am less happy with. After 26...Qb6 27.b4 N8d7 28.a5 Qa7 29.Na4 Nxc5 30.bxc5 Qb8 31.d6 , which seems to happen almost by force, Black can give up the knight with: 31...Qc8 32.Kf1 h5 33.Nb6 Qxc5 34.d7 Nxd7 35.Rxd7 Qxa5 36.Nc4 Qb5 . This endgame is of course better for White, but it is also a draw.) 26...Qd6 27.Rc4 White is better, but a lot of play remains.

17.Bd4 Ng6?

This looks like a basic mistake. Caruana

played all the previous moves after move 8 on less than 40 seconds. I honestly think that he messed up his preparation here. It happens frequently for top players. In the last candidates, Karjakin mixed up two lines in his white game against Aronian and lost more or less right out of the opening, even if the game dragged on for a bit. And in the 2018 match in New York, Carlsen forgot to insert an intermediate move in a game, leaving him quickly in a lost position, as he continued playing his "analysis".

At this point I believe that Caruana had planned to play 17...Rc8 18.Ne3 (18.Bxf6 gxf6 19.Ne3 Ng6 20.Qh6 Bf8 21.Qh3 Bc5 22.Re1 Qb6 is objectively equal, but who would want to be White in such a position?) 18...Ng6 (After the inclusion, this makes a lot of sense) 19.Qg3 Bxc3 20.bxc3 Rxe4!, when White seems to be better, but not that much and with plenty of difficulties available for White.

Play could continue 21.Kg1! (21.Rb1 leads to very double edged play. 21...Rxe3 (21...Rxd4 22.cxd4 Rc3 23.Re1 Nh5 24.Qg4 Nf6) 22.Bxe3 Rxc3 23.Re1 Nxd5 24.Bxa7 b6 with very sharp play.) 21...Rh4 22.d6!? (22.h3 Nxd5 should be about equal.) 22...Rf4! 23.Rb1 Be6 Is White better? Stockfish thinks so, but the other engines do not really. And he still has to get here and make a lot of moves on the way.

18.Qf5?

Ding rewards Caruana for his enterprise – by not punishing him for his mistake.

18.Qc1! would have refuted Black's play. We can easily see why the knight should not be

allowed to stay at c4. 18...Bxc4 (18...Rc8 19.Nd2 wins a piece. After something like 19...Bxd5 20.exd5 Nxd5 21.Nb3! there is no meaningful compensation.) 19.Bxc4 Rc8 White has a wide choice here. The simplest is not the critical looking 20.Bb5, which does win with accurate play, but 20.Ba2, when Black has nothing meaningful besides sacrificing all the pieces: 20...Nxe4+ 21.fxe4 Rxe4 22.Nxe4 Rxc1 23.Raxc1 Qh4+ 24.Ke3 Qh6+ 25.Ke2! The most accurate. 25...Qh5+ 26.Kd3 Nf4+ 27.Kc4 a5 28.Nc3 White is completely winning.

18...Bxc4

Caruana played this so quickly (6 minutes) you could be confused and believe he was still in preparation. As said, I don't think he was.

19.Bxc4 Qc7 20.Be2

Another important line goes: 20.b3 Bc5 21.Rhd1 Re5! 22.Qh3 Nf4 23.Qg3 N4h5 with a repetition of moves after 24.Qh4 g5 25.Qh3 Nf4 26.Qg3 N4h5 with a draw.

20...Bc5 21.Bxc5 Qxc5+

The accurate and most natural way to play. The point being that after 21...Re5 22.Qh3 Nf4 23.Qh4 g5 White has the extra option 24.Qxf4! gxf4 25.Bd4 Rg5 (25...a6!? 26.Rhd1) 26.Rhd1 With great compensation for the queen. 26...Qe7 27.Kg1 Nd7 28.Bf1± is probably quite a bit better for White. Black will struggle to create active play, while White will have no such difficulties.

22.Kf1 h6?!

As losers do not seem to have to attend the

press conferences at the Candidates (a big loss), we have no explanation for why Caruana did not play 22...Re5 23.Qh3 Qb4! , when he would have plenty of counterplay. The main reasons I can come up with is a) he missed it, and b) he thought he was OK in the game. The most likely explanation is a combination of the two.

Play should continue: 24.Rb1 Nf4 25.Qg3 N6h5 26.Qf2 f5! 27.Rd1! (27.g3 fxe4! 28.gxf4 Nxf4 29.Rd1 exf3 is very dangerous for White. After 30.Bb5 Ng2 31.Qd4 Re1+ 32.Kf2 Qxd4+ 33.Rxd4 Rxb1 34.d6 White has enough counterplay, but this is not the way you would want to go.) 27...Qxb2 28.Qd4 Nxe2 29.Nxe2 Qxd4 30.Rxd4 Nf6 31.exf5 Rae8 32.Rd2 Rxf5 33.d6 Rd8 The draw is on the horizon.

23.Rd1 Qb6

23...Re5 24.Qh3 Nf4 25.Qg3 leads nowhere now.

24.Rd2 Qe3 25.Rc2 a6 26.Qh3 b5!

Black has to create counterplay. If White is able to consolidate, it will be a matter of technique.

27.Qg3 b4??

The third horrific move of the game.

27...Rec8! would have kept the tension. It is not obvious that Ding would have chosen the best continuation here, as it would give up a piece: 28.Qf2! (28.Qe1 b4 29.Nd1 Qb3 30.Rd2 Rc1 would give Black some real counterplay. White may be better, but he would have real practical problems to solve.)

28...Qxf2+ 29.Kxf2 b4 30.Ke3 Nd7 31.Rhc1± White has a big advantage with a bishop against two knights and the powerful passed pawns.

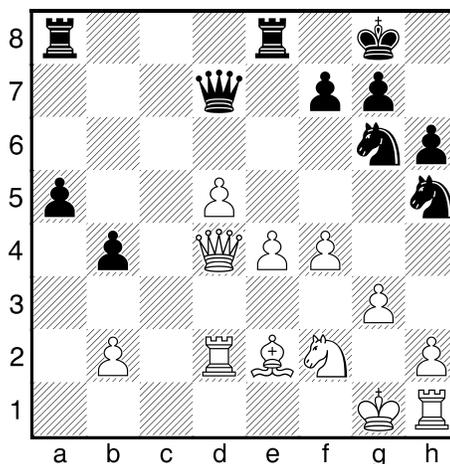
28.Nd1 Qb3 29.Rd2 Qxa4 30.Qf2!

White is on the verge of being coordinated. Black has no chances from here on and could have resigned, if he had not seen miracles happen from time to time.

30...Qd7

30...Rac8 is too late now. After 31.Qd4 Rc1 32.Kf2 Nf4 33.Re1 White is fully coordinated.

31.g3 Qh3+ 32.Kg1 a5 33.Qd4 Nh5 34.Nf2 Qd7 35.f4



35...Nhxf4

Caruana tried to muddle things up, but with no success.

36.gxf4 Nxf4 37.Kf1 Qd6 38.Rg1 f6 39.Bb5 Re7 40.b3 Rf8 41.Rc2 Ne6 42.Qe3 Ng5

43.h4 Nf7 44.Rc6 Qb8 45.Qc5 Qd8 46.Rxf6
Kh8 47.Rf5 Rc7 48.Bc6 a4 49.bxa4 b3
50.Rg3 b2 51.Rb3 Nd6 52.Rxf8+ Qxf8

53.Rxb2 Qf4 54.Rb8+ Kh7 55.Qc2 Re7
56.e5+ Nf5 57.Qe4 Qc1+ 58.Kg2 g6 59.Rb3
1-0