



2020 Candidates Tournament Round 1

Anish Giri vs. Ian Nepomniachtchi
Annotations by GM Jacob Aagaard

(1) Giri, Anish (2763) - Nepomniachtchi, Ian (2774) A33
FIDE Candidates Tournament chess24.com
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Aagaard, Jacob

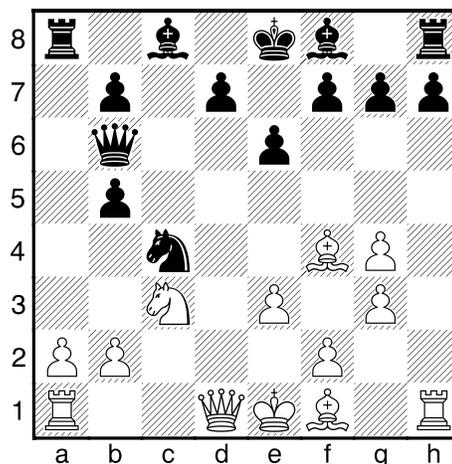
The game of the day is one of the two decisive games from the first round. In both games we saw White trying hard and taking too many chances, way beyond the point where he had serious winning chances. This is one of the things that distinguishes this tournament from other top tournaments (besides the absence of rapid games), all the players want to win. There is only one real prize and the rating gain or position in the overall season and all of these things fall away. This is what FIDE tried to achieve with the Grand Prix in 2019, but the knock-out format only pushed the risk taking into the rapid stages of the tournament.

Obviously there are a lot of Giri jokes floating around. I am maybe more guilty than most. But I want to be serious and say that Giri is one of the most interesting players of our age. He has great openings with really deep ideas. His positional feel is worse than none. His technique is excellent. He has problems winning won positions, but on the other side he is hard to take down, fighting like a tigress defending her cubs.

This game can be divided into four phases. In

the first phase, Giri delivered a novelty and Nepomniachtchi had to find his path. In the second we had a sharp middlegame where both players could make mistakes, as many options appeared and none of them were too clear. Eventually Giri got into trouble and decided to give up the queen. Then there was a third phase, where the fortress should have held, but where Giri made a number of poor decisions before the time control. After the time control the endgame was lost for White, but it was still difficult for Black to convert the advantage.

1.Nf3 Nf6 2.c4 c5 3.Nc3 Nc6 4.d4 cxd4
5.Nxd4 e6 6.g3 Qb6 7.Ndb5 Ne5 8.Bf4
Nfg4 9.e3 a6 10.h3 axb5 11.hxg4 Nxc4



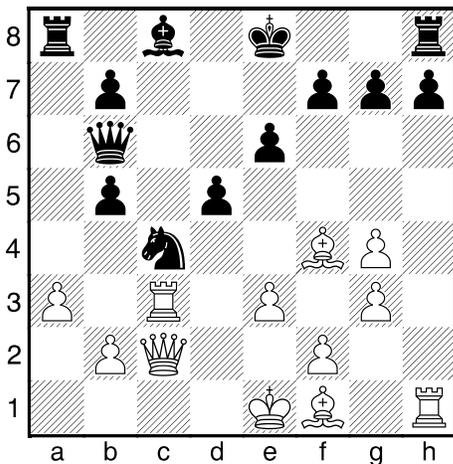
12.Rc1!?N

An entirely new concept, impossible to predict by the engines, but only valid for one game. I have to admit that I am giving Giri a lot of benefit of the doubt, as I am not really sure where he had imagined this idea would be successful. But my admiration for Giri is so high that I want to believe that I am not fully understanding his opening concept.

The previous games in this line have all continued with 12.Qb3, but after 12...d5 13.Bxc4 dxc4 14.Qxb5+ Qxb5 15.Nxb5 Ra5 Black has no problems whatsoever and have never lost a game.

12...d5!?

Black could also have played 12...Bb4 13.a3 Bxc3+ 14.Rxc3 d5, which seems very solid, but is not without difficulties for Black. After 15.Qc2



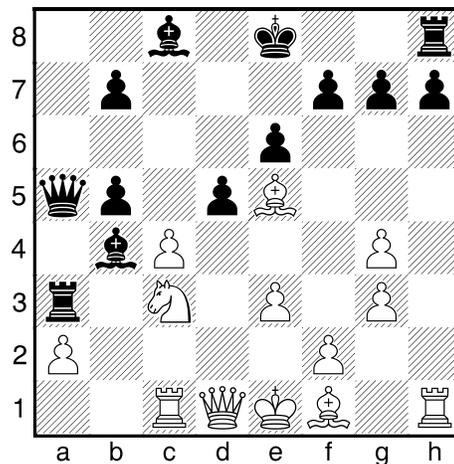
15...b4? 16.Rb3 e5 looks tempting at first glance, but if you go deep, you can find 17.Rxb4 Qd6 18.Bxc4 dxc4 19.Rxc4 Be6 and White has a huge advantage on account of 20.Rd4!, where Black does win a piece in two different ways, but cannot keep the balance:

20...Qa6 (20...Qb8 21.Rxb7 Rxb7 22.Qxb7 exf4 23.gxf4 is hopeless.) 21.Bxe5 Qa5+ 22.Qc3 with a big advantage, because of 22...Qxe5 23.Rd8+! winning the queen.

So for this reason Black should find 15...Bd7! 16.Rxb7 Rg8 where Black is not worse at all.

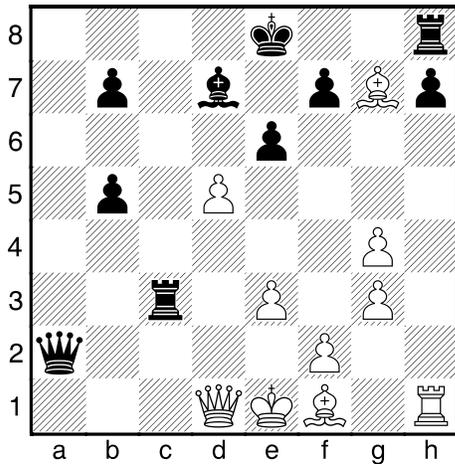
13.b3! Bb4 14.bxc4! Ra3 15.Be5 f6

Black had an alternative in: 15...Qa5!?



16.Be2 would be more in spirit of the game. 16...Bxc3+ (16...bxc4!? 17.Bxg7 Rg8 18.Bd4 Bxc3+ 19.Kf1 Bxd4 20.Qxd4 Rxa2 is very hard to evaluate.) 17.Rxc3 Rxc3 18.Kf1 has some similarity to the game, but probably having included ...f6 for free would be in Black's favour.) 16...Bxc3 (16...bxc4 17.Nb1 Rxa2+ 18.Kf3 0-0 with a totally random position is also possible of course. But the white king is far less in danger than it looks at the first sight.

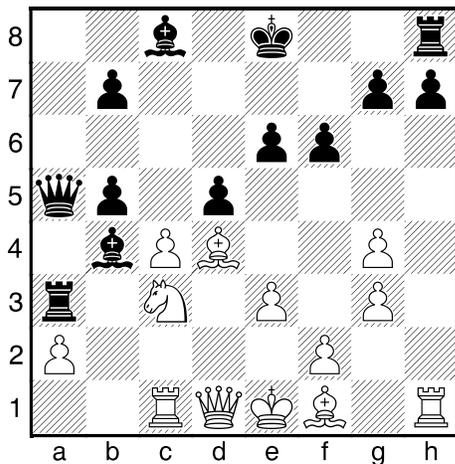
16.Ke2! is another bonkers idea, fully in line with the spirit of Giri's preparation. 17.cxd5! Bd7 18.Rxc3 Rxc3 19.Bxc3 (19.Bxg7? loses in a beautiful way. 19...Qxa2+ 20.Ke1 (20.Kf3? Rc2! would be horrible.)



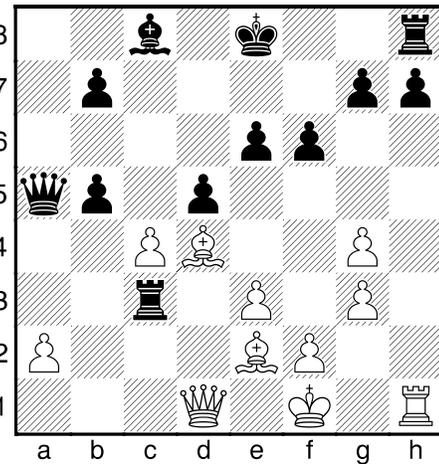
20...b4!! A nice piece sacrifice. For example:
 21.Bxh8 Ba4 22.Bb5+ Bxb5 23.Bxc3 bxc3
 24.dxe6 c2! 25.exf7+ Kxf7 26.Rxh7+ Kg6
 27.Qd6+ Kxh7 28.Qe7+ Kg8 and the black
 king is dancing to safety eventually.)
 19...Qxc3 20.Qb3 Qxb3 21.axb3 exd5 22.g5
 with a likely draw.

16.Bd4 Qa5

White's position looks critical, but a planned
 exchange sacrifice keeps him out of trouble.



17.Be2! Bxc3+ 18.Rxc3 Rxc3 19.Kf1!



19...b4!

I think that around here we reached the end
 of Giri's preparation. Not in the sense that
 there was nothing more in his files, but rather
 that there were so many options and the lines
 Giri remembered were probably to some
 extent coming to an end outside the main line
 of the computer. Giri said after the game that
 he had seen this move in his preparation, but
 had not considered that anyone would play it,
 when taking on c4 with both the pawn and
 the rook was quite respectable.

The computers give 19...bxc4 20.g5 as the
 main line. After 20...0-0 21.gxf6! (21.Qb1 is
 not great. Black has 21...Rd3! 22.Bxd3 cxd3
 23.Qxd3 Qa6! and White would have to
 defend an inferior endgame.) 21...Rxf6
 22.Bxf6 gxf6 23.Kg2 Both sides have their
 chances and challenges.

Giri started to think here, spending 18
 minutes on deciding how to continue the
 game going forward.

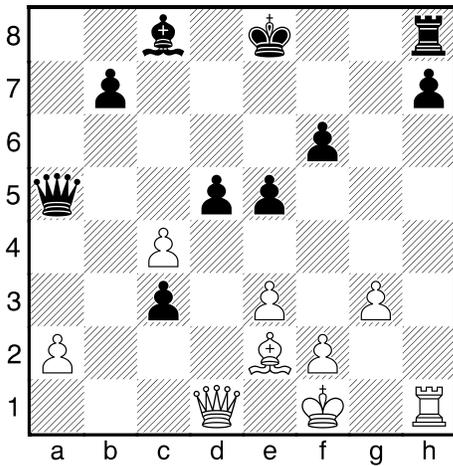
20.g5

I think he quickly decided to play this, but I am thinking he was hoping to find real chances somewhere, but was unable to do so.

20...e5

20...Qxa2!? would be quite sharp and not very practical, although objectively entirely playable.

21.Bxc3 bxc3 22.gxf6 gxf6



Again Giri thought for a long time, but this is also where he started to lose his way.

23.Qb1?!

White should have played the natural 23.cxd5 Qc5 24.Bd3, although Black is OK after 24...Ke7! 25.Qb3 h5 where both chances have their chances.

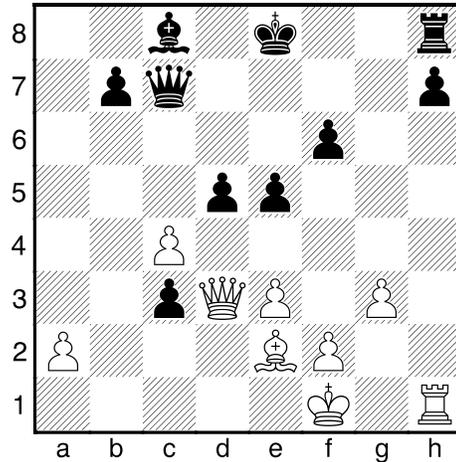
23...Qc7

23...d4!? was sharper. I am wondering if Nepomniachtchi was worried about 24.exd4 exd4 25.Rh5! (25.Rxb7? would be a losing mistake. After 25...Rxb7 26.Qxb7 Qf5! Black takes control of the crucial d3-square. The

checks will run out.) 25...f5 26.Bd3 where White has enough counterplay, although there will be plenty of challenges ahead for him.

24.Qd3?!

24.Rh4! was a strong move, taking control of a lot of key squares.



24...b5!

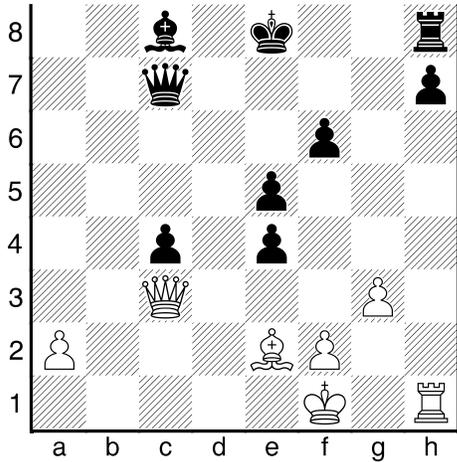
This is the time where Black decisively takes over the initiative.

24...Qxc4 25.Rxh7 Rg8 26.Qxc4 dxc4 27.Ke1! White keeps the balance. For example: 27...b5 28.a4! bxa4 29.Bxc4 Rg5 30.Bb5+ Kd8 31.Bxa4 and a after a few additional defensive moves White will make a draw.

25.Qxc3 bxc4 26.e4!

White has to keep fighting. As a start he has to break up the black pawns.

26...dxc4



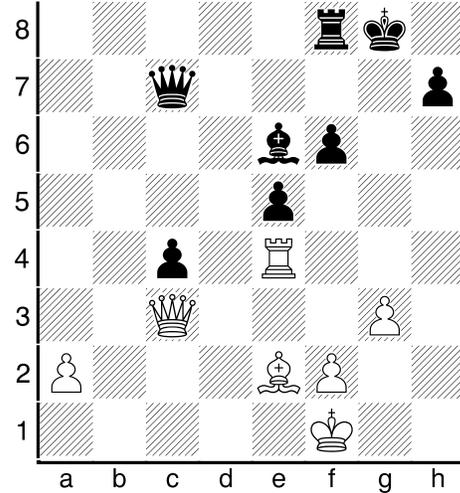
27.Rh4?!

It is understandable that White is hoping to exploit the weakness of the black king by keeping the queens on the board. However, soon we shall see how failed this strategy was in practice.

27.Qxc4 Qxc4 28.Bxc4 Bf5 looks unpleasant. But after 29.Bd5! White is threatening Rh4. And after 29...Bg6 30.Kg2 Ke7 31.Re1 f5 32.g4! White manages to neutralise the pressure. This was not an obvious line at all, but had Giri found it, he would have made a draw.

27...Be6 28.Rxe4 0-0?!

It is very deep and not something I would expect a human to find without being hinted that something extraordinary exists. The key point is that after 28...Kf7! 29.Rh4 Kg7 30.Qe3 h5! Black has a serious advantage.



29.Bxc4?

But this was poor. A beautiful coordination of the pieces happens after

29.Rh4!, with the key idea being 29...Kg7 30.Qe3 Kg8 31.Bd1! and with the bishop on c2 White has no problems at all. A small point is that 31...Bf5 is just a transposition after 32.Be2! Be6 33.Bd1 .

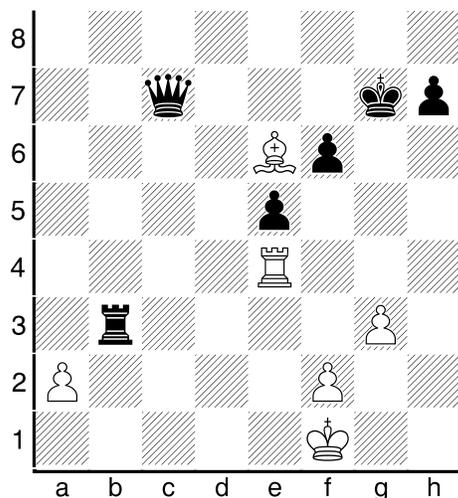
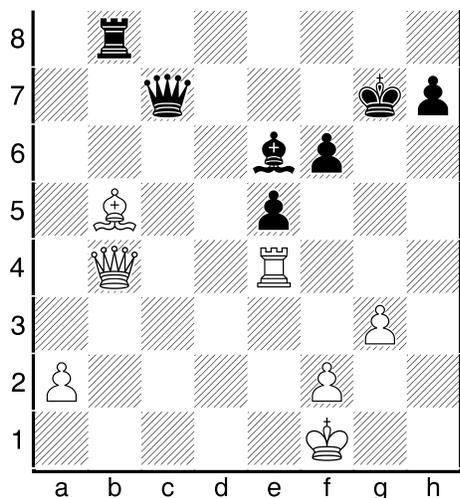
29...Kg7!

The pin is harder to get out of than you would imagine at first glance. The key problem is that 30.Qd3 is met with 30...Bf5!.

30.Qb3!?

Giri decides to sacrifice the queen. A very long variation arises after

30.Qb4 Rb8 31.Bb5 also looks very unpleasant.



Black would here have a choice between the practical (a) 31...Bxa2!? and the more principled (b) 31...Bd5 32.Re2 Qb7 , where White has to give up a piece on account of the threat ...Bc4!.

The line is now rather forced, but hard to calculate: 33.Qg4+ Kh8 34.Qf5 Qxb5 35.Qxf6+ Kg8 36.Qg5+ Kf8 37.Qf6+ Ke8 This seems scary, but no one at this level are guided by illusions anymore. 38.Qxe5+ Kd7 39.Qe7+ Kc6 40.Qf6+ Kb7 41.Qe7+ Ka6 The king has escaped the checks and White has nothing left to do but exchange the queens and hope for a chance in the endgame. 42.Qa3+ Qa5 43.Qxa5+ Kxa5 44.Re7 h6 45.Ke2 White should hold a draw here, but everything is up in the air. An advantage just means that the opponent has to make a lot of good moves before he will make a draw, nothing else.

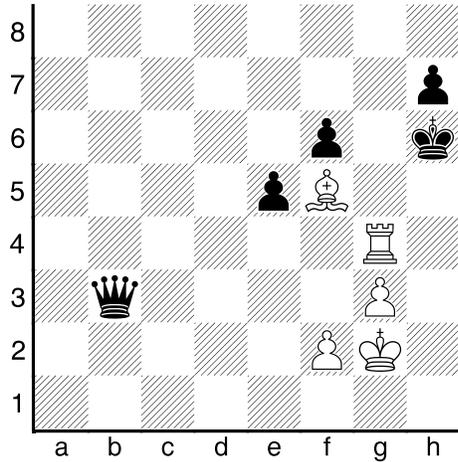
30...Rb8 31.Bxc6 Rxb3

We have reached the third phase of the game. Giri has given up the queen and should now find the right strategy. Had he chosen to play for a fortress immediately, I think he would have been successful. Instead he tried to force matters, looking for counterplay, only to find that the queen was quite effective at generating threats on her own. As so often on the highest level, the games are not lost by one big mistakes, but a lot of small ones, played under immense and increasing pressure.

32.Rg4+?

It turns out giving this check is a small blunder.

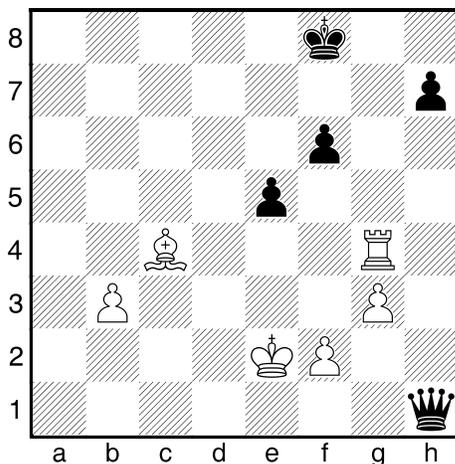
32.axb3! is what White should do intuitively, but with the check included, it does not work. Here, after the direct 32...Qc6 (For this reason, Black should try 32...Qc1+ 33.Kg2 Qc6 34.Bf5 h5 , but the chances of him actually winning here are slim.) 33.Bf5 Qb5+ 34.Kg2 Qxb3 35.Rg4+ Kh6



36.Be4! it is very hard for Black to make progress. A key idea is that 36...Qe6 is met with 37.Rh4+ Kg5 38.f4+! exf4 39.Rxf4 and the position is a definite fortress. The bishop will be on f3 and the rook oscillate between f4 and h4.

32...Kf8 33.Bxb3

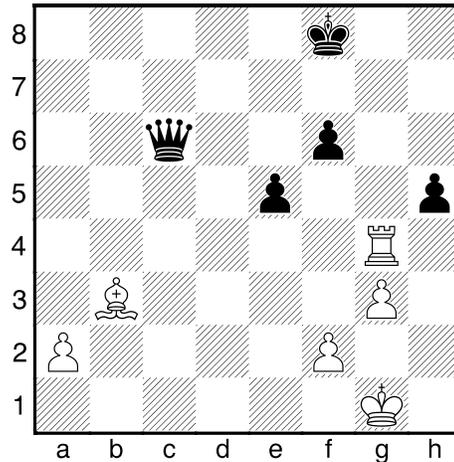
33.axb3? does not work now. Black wins after 33...Qc6! 34.Bc4 Qh1+ 35.Ke2



35...Qh5! and White is forced to play 36.f3, when the king is exposed and there will eventually be material losses on the kingside.

33...Qc1+ 34.Kg2 Qc6+ 35.Kg1 h5

The engines suggest that the pawn was better placed on h6. This is a bit too subtle for time trouble...



36.Rg8+??

This is the worst mistake of the game. The rook goes into the breach, but how shall it ever return? Only at great costs, as we shall see.

Giri would still have made a draw, I think, had he played 36.Rh4! Qf3 37.Bc4! f5 38.Bf1. It is easy to understand why he may have felt uncomfortable going into such a passive position, but this is the nature of fortresses. A key point is that the a-pawn is providing real counterplay. After 38...Kg7 39.a4! Kg6 40.a5 Kg5 41.a6 White makes the draw. 41...f4 42.Rh3 for example. It is not pretty, but it is all right.

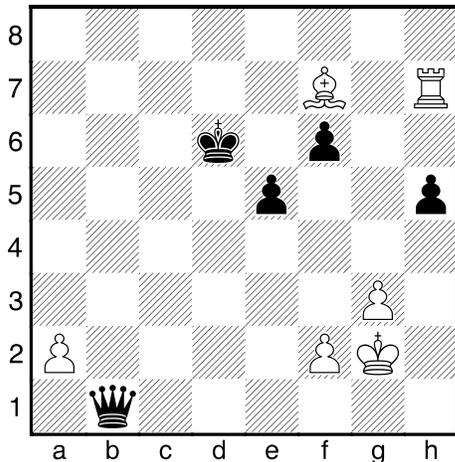
36...Ke7 37.Rg7+ Kd6 38.Rh7 Qf3!

It is hard to understand exactly what Giri thought was going to happen around here, so I shall speculate less and focus on the

deadline.

39.Rh8

39.Bf7 is however one possible guess. Black here wins in a direct line that you could quite reasonably think Giri had missed: 39...Qd1+ 40.Kg2 Qb1!



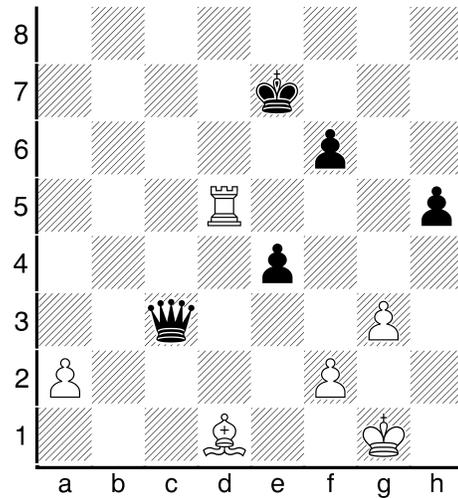
The queen is hitting the rook and coming to b7 quickly. 41.Rg7 (41.Bg8 Qg6! 42.Rh8 Qg7 is more pretty than relevant.) 41...Qb7+ 42.Kh2 e4! White is entirely tied up. Soon comes the ...e3 push with deadly effect. But first the queen has to be perfectly placed. 43.a4 Qb2 44.Kg1 Qc1+ 45.Kg2 Qc2 46.Kg1 Qd1+ 47.Kg2 Qe2 48.Kg1 f5 The most human. Black plays ...h4 and then ...f5-f4-f3. White can do nothing.

39...e4 40.Rd8+ Ke7 41.Bd1

The only move.

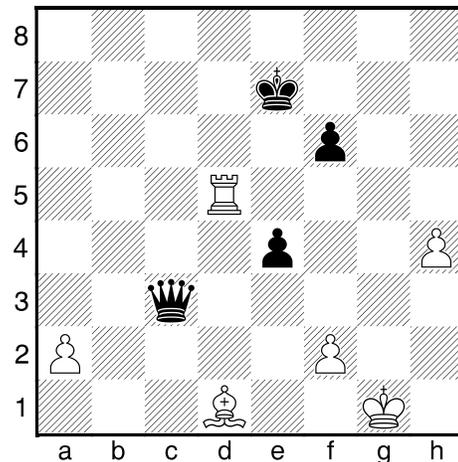
41.Rg8 f5 42.Rg6 h4 43.gxh4 f4 is hopeless.

41...Qc3 42.Rd5



We have reached the fourth phase. Giri's adventure with the rook has entirely backfired and his pieces are entirely uncoordinated, giving Black the chance to break through on the kingside.

42...h4! 43.gxh4



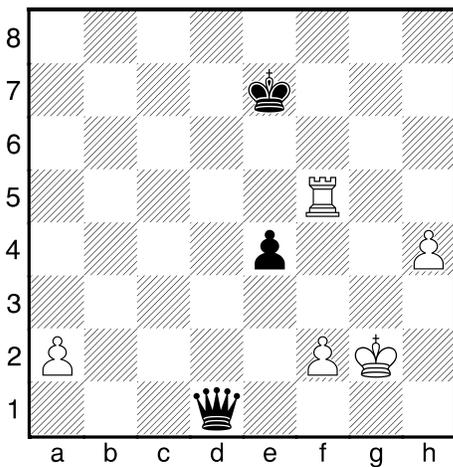
43...f5!?

This is the move of a player with incredible confidence in his position and thus his technical knowledge. Add to this that Nepomniachtchi spent only two minutes making this decision.

43...Qc8! to advantage the pawn without tactics was a different path to the win. Only a high degree of certain that the fortress could be broken justified "winning" the bishop.

However, there is another possible explanation. Nepomniachtchi is potentially the most confident of the players in the world elite. And we are talking about a lot of confident guys! Sometimes too much confidence translates into banking on luck. And luck paid the dividends today! If you look at the post game interview you will know that Nepomniachtchi had more certainty in his decisions than the objective evaluation of the position.

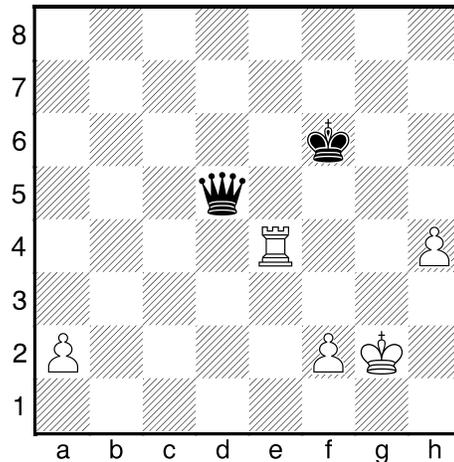
44.Rxf5 Qe1+ 45.Kg2 Qxd1



46.Rg5?

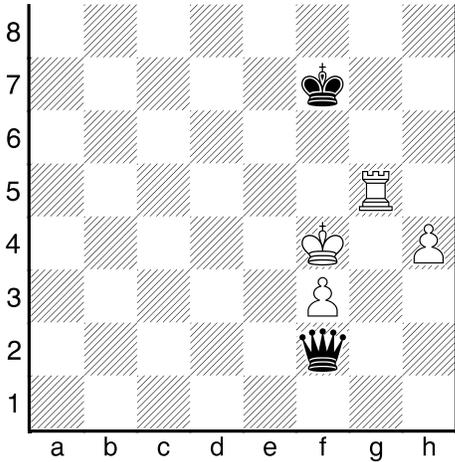
This is the final mistake of the game. I was watching the live commentary on Chess24 and the panelists there were convinced that White was making a draw for a very long time.

The first lack of confidence arose when they saw that after 46.Re5+ Kf6 47.Rxe4 Black is able to force a weakening in the white position with 47...Qd5! .



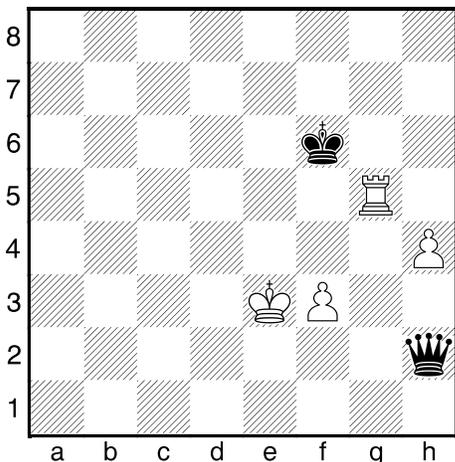
It is well-known that White would make a draw with the rook on e3 and pawn on f2. Black is even allowed not only one, but two h-pawns, and the fortress still cannot be challenged. However, once the pawn is forced to leave the second rank, a series of zugzwangs should decide the matter.

The change from this conventional endgame knowledge is the presence of the pawn on h4. Without it Black wins trivially, even if it will take a long time. With it, matters are quite complicated indeed and I would personally have enjoyed watching the Russian trying to put White into a decisive zugzwang. It can be done, but it is incredibly difficult. I have here given the line that is best play from a human standpoint, not a standard tablebase line. Black's win is long and non-obvious. 48.f3 Qxa2+ 49.Kg1 Qd2 50.Kf1 Qh2 51.Rg4 Qe5 52.Kf2 Kf7 53.Kf1 Qe3 54.Kg2 Qe2+ 55.Kg3 Qf1 56.Rg5 Qg1+ 57.Kf4 Qf2



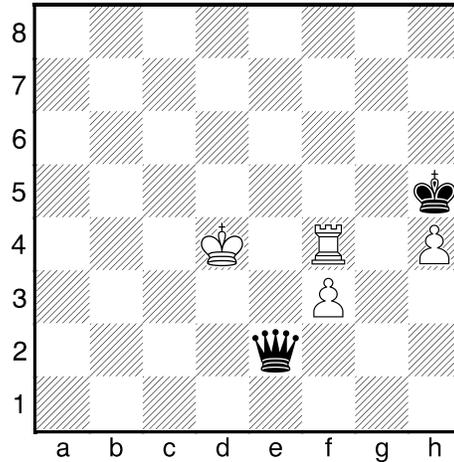
Achieving the first goal was rather straight forward. The white king is pushed away and the black queen has taken her strong position, looking for a way to squeeze White even further.

From here White's position is surprisingly resilient. 58.Kg4 Ke6 59.Rh5 Qg2+ 60.Kf4 Qh3 61.Ke4 Qg3 62.Ke3 Kd6 A waiting move. 63.Ke2 Qg2+ 64.Ke3 Qh2 65.Rh6+ Ke5 66.Rh5+ Ke6 67.Rh6+ Kf5 68.Rh5+ Kg6 69.Rg5+ Kf6



70.Rg4 The rook has been forced down to the 4th rank. 70...Qb2 71.Re4 Kg6 72.Rg4+ Kh5

73.Re4 Qg2 74.Rg4 Qf1 75.Re4 This is where Black was always headed. 75...Qe1+ 76.Kd3 Qf2 77.Rf4 Kg6! Zugzwang! 78.Ke4 Qe2+ 79.Kd4 Kh5!

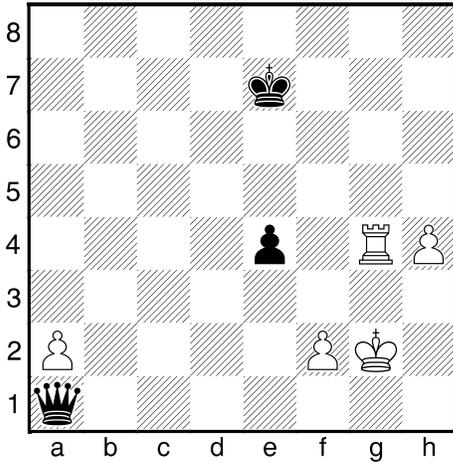


And the final zugzwang. Black wins one of the white pawns and mates in 37 additional moves. Would Nepomniachtchi have found all of this? I will put it at about 80%, thus giving Giri better odds than in the game, where we know with 100% certainty that he found it. (Yes, I do know it does not work like that...)

46...Qa1

This was Nepomniachtchi's second last big think of the game. Here he seemingly worked out the winning plan and then executed it without ever taking more than two minutes before move 58.

47.Rg4

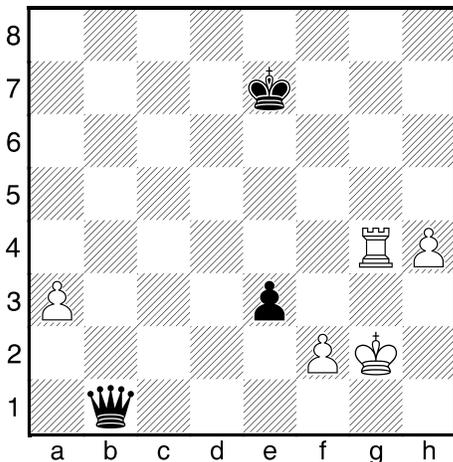


47...Qb1!

47...Qxa2? 48.Rxe4+ and Re3 would just draw, as already discussed.

48.Rg3

Another key point is that White is not in time to play 48.a3 and 49.Rg3, which would also make a draw, as we shall discuss later. Black has 48...e3!, when White will lose his pawns one by one. We could give a long variation here, but as this is the weakest of all the fortresses discussed here, we shall skip it.



48...Qxa2

The white h-pawn is doomed, but how it is won is very important. If White was to succeed to get his king to e1 or e2, he would make a draw. Black has to disallow this.

49.Rh3

49.Kf1 is for that reason met with 49...Qd2! as the only winning move. This is too simple for Giri to try for it.

49...Qd5 50.Kf1

But here he does!

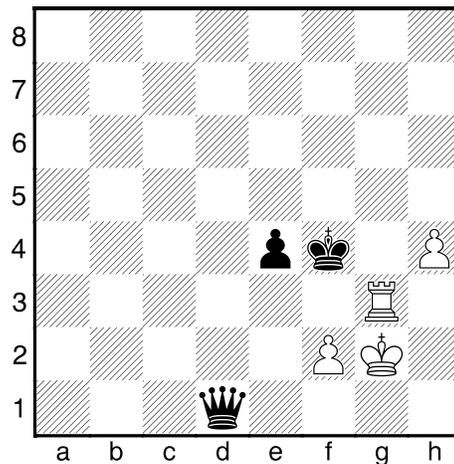
50...Qd1+

Go back in your cage!

51.Kg2 Qg4+ 52.Rg3 Qh5

52...Qxh4?? 53.Kf1! would again make the draw.

53.Ra3 Qd5 54.Kg1 Kf6 55.Rg3 Qd1+ 56.Kg2 Kf5 57.Rg5+ Kf4 58.Rg3

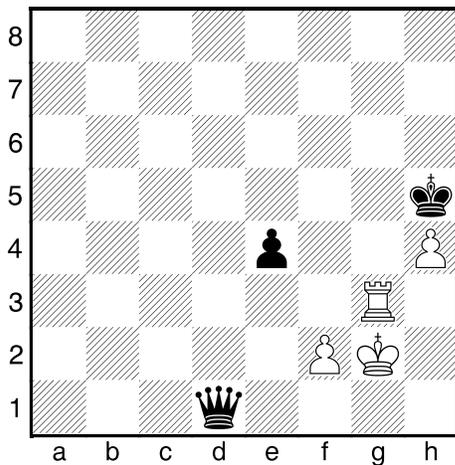
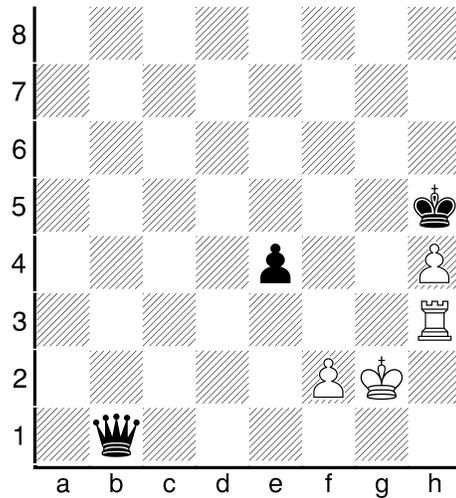


The position has been consolidated and Black has all the time he wants. At this point he thought for nine minutes and worked out how to win the h-pawn with the king in a final zugzwang.

58...Qd5 59.Kf1 Qd2! 60.Kg2 Qd1!

Triangulation and zugzwang achieved. Next comes the manoeuvring of the king to h5.

61.Re3 Kf5 62.Rg3 Kf6 63.Rh3 Kg6 64.Rg3+ Kh5



65.Rh3

Giri was unhappy that he played this move, having seen already that he had to avoid the position arising after his opponent's next move.

However, I do not think it would have been that difficult to find 65.Re3 Qd4 66.Rh3 Qc4! , where White is in mortal zugzwang again.

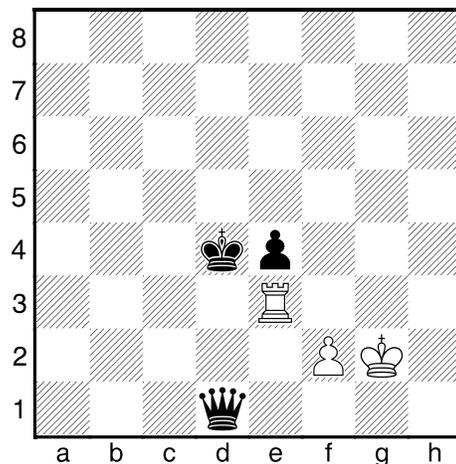
65...Qb1!

Another zugzwang. Defending e4 and preventing Kf1 at the same time.

66.Re3 Kxh4

We now have a theoretical position. Black wins by bringing the king to d2. This can only be done in one way.

67.Rg3 Kh5 68.Rh3+ Kg4 69.Rg3+ Kf4 70.Re3 Qd1 71.Ra3 Ke5 72.Rg3 Kd4 73.Re3



73...Qd3! 0-1

Giri resigned. We can also see now why White would have made a draw, had he retained the pawn on a3. Once when Black takes twice on e3, the little piece of wood would run for the deep blue sea and achieve the greatness of saviour.

Thanks to US Chess for employing me as commentator for this event. It is my favourite sporting event of all time and sadly only happens every two years. I hope you have enjoyed the annotations to this game and will enjoy what we have coming for you in the days to come. I will try to offer a different perspective than you will find in the various online commentaries, which hopefully will satisfy you to forgive me my Emperial spelling, which I have informed the editor is a non-negotiable condition on my part.