



2020 Candidates Tournament Round 7
Maxime Vachier-Lagrave - Ian Nepomniachtchi
Annotations by Aagaard / Castellanos

French Winawer C18
Maxime Vachier-Lagrave (2767)
Ian Nepomniachtchi (2774)
FIDE Candidates Tournament (7.2),
25.03.2020

MVL shares the lead with Nepomniachtchi after the first half. Having more decisive games is the first tiebreak, which falls to Nepomniachtchi, while MVL would take it on the second tiebreak, having defeated his competitor.

I have to say I still find it hard to see MVL winning the tournament. He won this game against feeble play and against Ding Liren who blundered badly in the opening. He needs to show more before the end, I would expect. Any of the players on 50% would catch up with him by beating him. I still think the final winning score will be +3.

1.e4 e6

Nepomniachtchi has not really played the French for the last half decade, and clearly prepared it for this tournament. As he had no doubt not planned to be in a big lead by the end of the first half of the tournament, there seems to have been no solid alternative available to him. We should mention that Nepomniachtchi's main weapon against 1.e4 is the Najdorf, where MVL is probably the

biggest expert in the World.

2.d4 d5 3.Nc3 Bb4 4.e5 c5 5.a3 Bxc3+ 6.bxc3 Ne7 7.h4

7.Qg4 is still the main line of course.

7...Qc7 8.h5 h6

Many games have been played in the sharp line arising after 8...cxd4 9.cxd4 Qc3+ 10.Bd2 Qxd4 11.Nf3 Qe4+ 12.Be2 Nf5 13.Kf1 , where the black queen can be in quite a lot of danger.

9.Rb1 b6 10.Qg4 Rg8

As the rook later has to return to h8 to defend the h7-square, I thought it made more sense to play 10...Kf8 immediately. However, after 11.Rh3 Ba6 , played in a blitz game between So and Dominguez in St Louis 2017, White would have a big improvement at his disposal. 12.Rf3!N Threatening Qxe6. 12...Nf5 (12...Qd7 defends e6, but after 13.dxc5! Bxf1 14.Kxf1 bxc5 15.Be3 Black is destroyed on the dark squares.) 13.Bxa6 Nxa6 14.Ne2 Kg8 (The following variation is quite impressive. 14...cxd4 15.cxd4 Qxc2 16.Rbb3! Qe4 17.Rf4 Qc2 18.Rc3 Qb1 19.Ng3 and Black is busted.) 15.Qf4 Rf8 16.a4 White's advantage is immense.

11.Bb5+ Kf8N

The preparation. I have to say I am not impressed.

11...Bd7 12.Bd3 with the threat Bh7 is good for White. After 12...Nf5 Bartel – Jaroch, Zgierz 2017, White should play 13.Bxf5!N exf5 14.Qg3 with the treat of Bxh6. After 14...Kf8 15.Ne2 cxd4 16.0–0 Black is about to be ripped apart.

12.Bd3

12.dxc5?! Nd7!♞ would make sense of Black's play.

12...Ba6 13.dxc5 Bxd3 14.cxd3 Nd7?!

This was played immediately. I suspect that it would be better for Black to play 14...Qxe5+ 15.Ne2 Nd7 16.cxb6 axb6 , although White is a bit better after 17.Qb4 .

15.d4 bxc5 16.Qd1!

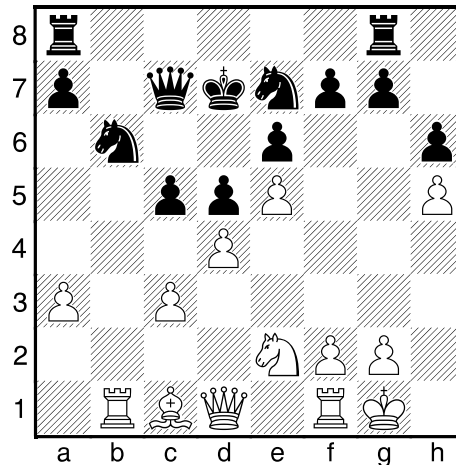
Somehow this was not in Nepomniachtchi's preparation. Here he spent a long time deciding how to meet his opponent's preparation.

16...Qa5

Nepomniachtchi did not manage to create counterplay in the game and was defeated very easily. For a game that may decide who will face the World Champion in a match, this one is a bit of a disappointment.

Together with a friend I investigated other ideas at this point. We thought it may be possible to fight against putting the bishop on

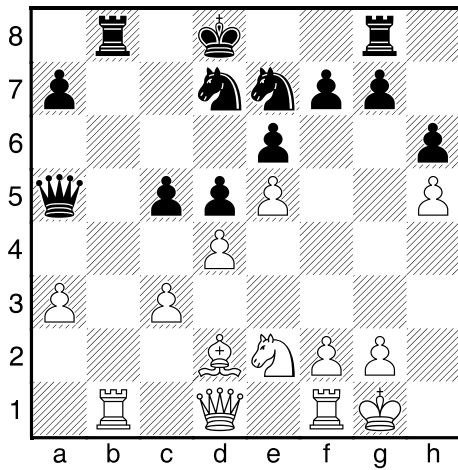
a3 by rerouting the bishop to c4. But White has a very direct way to deal with this plan: 16...Nb6 17.Ne2 Ke8 18.0–0 Kd7



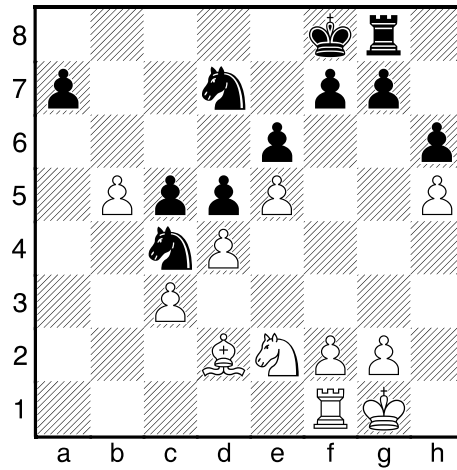
19.dxc5! Qxc5 20.Nd4 Rab8 (20...Rg8 21.Qg4 is painful as well.) 21.Qf3 Rg8 22.a4 White is totally winning. The bishop will arrive on a3 and Black's position is nothing but weaknesses.

17.Bd2 Rb8 18.Ne2 c4

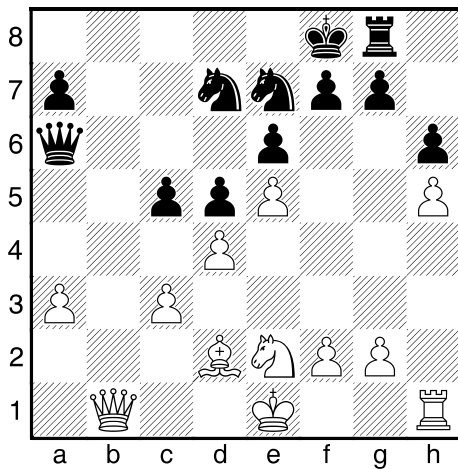
MVL had considered if Black could try 18...Ke8 19.0–0 Kd8 , but as suspected White can blow the centre apart.



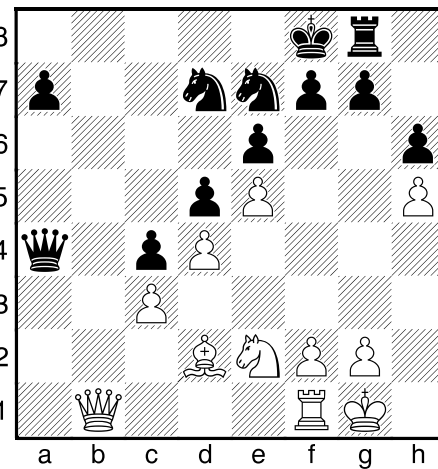
20.c4! Qxa3 21.Rxb8+ Nxb8 22.Qb1 Nbc6 23.cxd5 Nxd5 24.Qb7 Nde7 25.Rb1 with mate.; A more realistic try was 18...Rxb1 19.Qxb1 Qa6 , where White has a really fantastic refutation.



(23...Nb3 24.Be3 c4 is an attempt to keep the rook out of the a-line. But White is positionally winning with normal moves. 25.f4 Ke7 26.f5 Rb8 27.Nf4 and Black is lost.) 24.Ra1!! Nxd2 25.Rxa7 Ke7 26.dxc5 and White wins.) 21.0-0 c4



20.a4! A thematic pawn sacrifice. Here to make it possible to castle. 20...Qxa4 (20...Nc6 goes down in the standard way. 21.Qb5 Qxb5 22.axb5 Na5 23.0-0 Nc4



White has a fantastic plan here, illustrating clearly the lack of urgency White is facing. 22.f3!! After something like 22...Nc6 23.Be1, White is ready for Bh4 and only then advance on the queenside. The key point to understand is that (22.f4? f5! and Black would

suddenly be better.) 22...f5 does not work for Black after 23.exf6 Nxf6 24.Nf4 Kf7 25.Re1 with an overwhelming advantage.

19.0-0 Rb6 20.Qc2 Rh8

Played to be able to bring the king to the queenside without being hit hard with Qh7.

If Black takes the pawn, White will use the time gained to bring the bishop to a3. 20...Qxa3 21.Bc1 Qa6 22.Rb2! White comes to the a-line and gets the bishop to a3. Black just suffers.

21.a4 Ke8 22.Rb4! Nc6

It is hard to find anything worth playing for Black. For example: 22...Nb8 23.f4 Nbc6 24.Rxb6 Qxb6 25.Rb1 Qc7 26.Bc1 with a big advantage.

23.f4 Ne7

It makes no sense to accept the exchange sacrifice. After 23...Nxb4 24.cxb4 Qa6 25.b5 Qb7 26.Bb4 with f5 and Nf4 coming, White is entirely winning.

24.Rfb1 f5 24...Rg8 is more sensibly met with 25.Ng3 f5 26.Bc1, but White also has 25.f5!? Nxf5 26.Nf4 Ne7 27.Bc1 where he has won a bit time in return for a pawn. It is not something anyone would actually play. But it is fun to mention it.

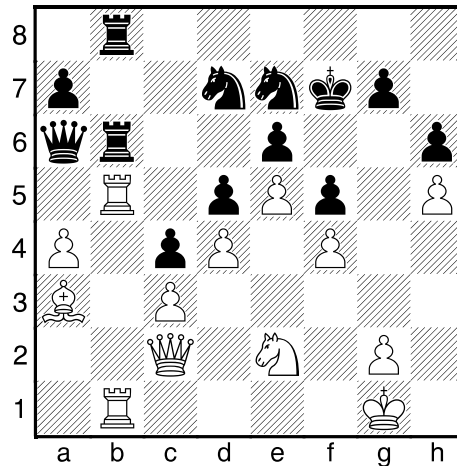
25.Rb5

25.Bc1!? was very natural as well.

25...Qa6

25...Rxb5 26.Rxb5 Qa6 was a bit more resilient, but after 27.Bc1 White's advantage is overwhelming. 26...Qc7 27.Qb1 is even worse.

26.Bc1 Kf7 27.Ba3 Rhb8



White wins with an elementary breakthrough on the kingside.

28.Bxe7 Kxe7 29.g4! Rxb5 30.axb5 Rxb5 31.gxf5 Rxb1+ 32.Qxb1 exf5

32...Qb6 33.Qa1 Nf8 could be tried, but White is winning. 34.Kf2 exf5 35.Ng3 g6 36.hxg6 Nxf6 37.Nxf5+ Ke6 38.Nxh6 Nxf4 39.Kg3 Ng6 40.Qh1 with a winning attack. There are many lines like this, they are not especially instructive and are here only because it would be worse if they were not.

33.Ng3 Qb6

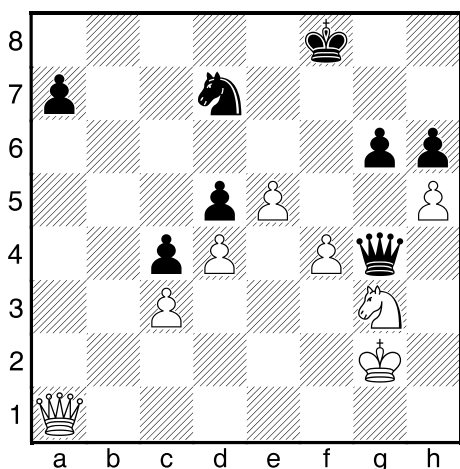
33...Qa3 34.Nxf5+ Kd8 35.Qe1 Qf8 36.Qh4+ and White wins.; 33...g6 34.hxg6 Qxg6 35.Kf2 Qg4 36.Qxf5 and the endgame is winning.

34.Nxf5+ Kf8 35.Qa1! Qe6

35...Qb3 36.Ne3 is winning for White. The knight is very strong on e3. If 35...a5 36.Ne3 is also hopeless.

36.Ng3 Qg4 37.Kg2 Qxf4

MVL believed that his opponent had planned to play 37...g6, but decided in the end that it did not work.



He showed the following long variations at the press conference. 38.Qa3+ Ke8 (38...Kg8 39.hxg6 h5 40.Qe7 and White is winning.) 39.Qd6 gxh5 40.e6 Black is lost in all lines. 40...Nf8 (40...Nb6 41.f5 h4 42.Qb8+ Ke7 43.Qc7+ Ke8 44.Qf7+ Kd8 45.e7+ and mate.; 40...Nf6 41.Qb8+ Ke7 42.Qc7+ Kxe6 43.f5+ winning the queen.) 41.f5 h4 42.Qb8+ Ke7 43.f6+ Kxe6 44.Qe8+ Kxf6 45.Qxf8+ Kg5 46.Qg7+ Kf4 47.Qe5# However, it is likely Nepomniachtchi was more afraid of 38.Qa5!, which wins on the spot.

38.Qxa7 Ke7 39.Qa3+ Kd8 40.Qd6 g5 41.hxg6 h5 42.g7 1-0