

2020 Candidates Tournament Round 6

Ian Nepomniachtchi – Ding Liren
Annotations by GM Jacob Aagaard

d3 Ruy Lopez [C77] Ian Nepomniachtchi (2774) Ding Liren (2805)

FIDE Candidates Tournament (6.3),
23.03.2020

The results of the sixth round of the Candidates was as shocking as those of the previous rounds. Caruana blew a serious advantage against Grischuk and Wang Hao once again failed to convert a pawn up, this time against MVL. What is becoming more and more apparent is that a number of the players are not enjoying being there, even though they are playing decent chess. Wang Hao, Grischuk and Nepomniachtchi all seem as interested in playing the tournament as Radjabov. But the show is marching on.

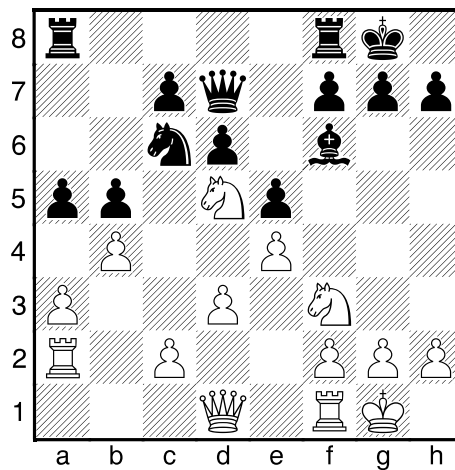
Ding Liren is of course disappointed, MVL appears entirely absent minded, Caruana cool, collected and out of shape.

Finally, Alekseenko is arguing for the absence of wild cards with his play, as Giri is doing to the rating spot.

The game of the day is not that great a game, but it had a really great moment we shall not ignore.

1.e4 e5 2.Nf3 Nc6 3.Bb5 a6 4.Ba4 Nf6

5.0–0 Be7 6.d3 b5 7.Bb3 d6 8.a3 0–0 9.Nc3 Na5 10.Ba2 Be6 11.b4 Bxa2 12.Rxa2 Nc6 13.Bg5 Qd7 14.Bxf6 Bxf6 15.Nd5 a5



16.Rb2!N

An unimpressive novelty from Nepomniachtchi's team. This could mean GM Potkin, who has seconded Ian since his junior days, but is a strong player in his own right, having won the European Championship about a decade ago. The same did his previous neighbours and close friends Motylev and Najer, as well as Nepomniachtchi himself. The move is not achieving much, but it does create some new problems for Black and does not offer the Chinese player a direct way to kill off the game, despite having played this line

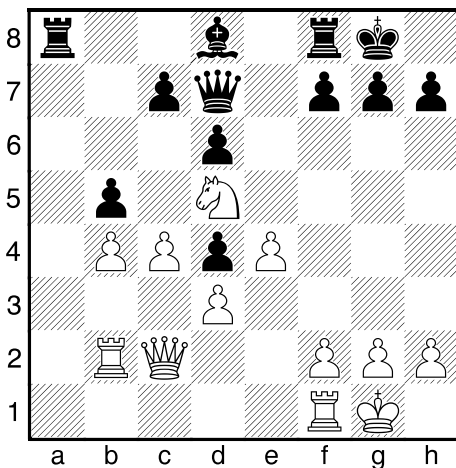
endlessly.

16...axb4 17.axb4 Bd8 18.c4 Nd4!?

It is easy to criticise this move, as the black bishop is poor in what follows. But we should also recommend that it is the advice from the engine.

18...Ne7 is the alternative. But after 19.Ne3!? White is a bit better. Black may play And if Black plays 19...h6 , White can play (The idea behind of this move is shown in the following line: 19...f5 20.cxb5 Qxb5 21.Qb3+ Kh8 22.Ng5 f4 23.Ne6 Rf6 24.Nf5! (24.Ng4? Rxe6! 25.Qxe6 h5 would leave the knight trapped, making 26.Nf6 necessary. White only has perpetual here.) 24...Nxf5 25.exf5 Rxf5 26.Ra2! Rxa2 27.Qxa2 Qe8 28.Rc1 and White has a slight pressure.) 20.Qb3 c6 21.cxb5 cxb5 22.d4± and at least push a little bit.

19.Nxd4 exd4 20.Qc2



20...Re8

Here we exit Nepomniachtchi's preparation.

Against 20...c6 Nepomniachtchi wanted to play something like 21.Nf4 Rb8 22.g3± , when he felt that White's position was pleasant, although not very much. I think this is quite accurate.

21.g3!

Again establishing white presence on the dark squares. All White has achieved is to prevent an immediate draw and have a game with a nice position. We are back in plus equal mode, as yesterday. In the following Nepomniachtchi does very little, while Ding shows that he is not in shape at all.

21...bxc4

21...c6 22.Nf4 g5 23.Ne2 Bf6 is how the engine suggests Black should play. I find it hard to believe that this is the path to equality.

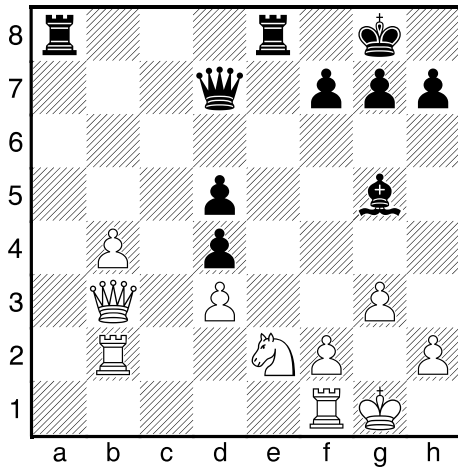
22.Qxc4 c6 23.Nf4 Bg5 24.Ne2±

Black has real problems with the d4–pawn.

24...d5

Black cannot avoid this move, but now his position is unpleasant.

25.exd5 cxd5 26.Qb3



26...h5!

Ding reacts in the only way he can given that he has a poor structure, by creating active counterplay.

Nepomniachtchi mentioned 26...Ra6 27.b5 (27.Kg2 h5!; 27.Nxd4 Bf6 28.b5 Rb6 29.Qb4 Reb8=) 27...Rb6, but after 28.Ra1 White is definitely better.

27.b5

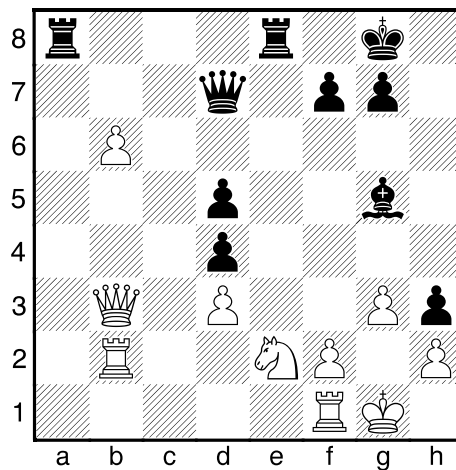
The creative way for White to play for an advantage was 27.Kg2! h4 28.Ng1! to keep the counterplay at bay and then focus on the queenside. White is better, but very little. The main thing is that the bishop is close to useless.

27...h4 28.b6 h3?

This is too basic. Amusingly the main problem with this move is that the pawn becomes a weakness. We have talked about the AlphaZero h6/h3 pawn in several games, but in this case, the pawn is just a target,

without dominating the white king at all...

Black should have balanced his play. 28...Rab8 29.b7 Re7 30.Rfb1 Qg4 31.Qd1!? (31.Qxd5 Rxe2 32.Rxe2 Qxe2 33.Qxg5 Qxd3 34.Rc1 Qa6 leads to a draw. White will have an extra pawn, but as it is the h-pawn and not the f-pawn, the winning chances are close to none.) 31...h3 32.Qf1 Bh6 33.f4 Rxb7! 34.Rxb7 Rxe2 35.R7b2 Re3 Black has full compensation for the exchange. White is too passive to do anything.



29.Kh1!!

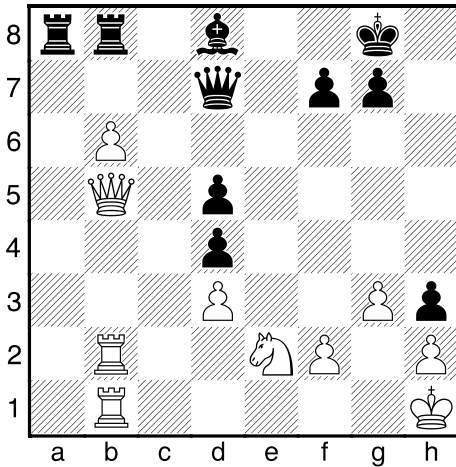
Preparing Ng1, putting pressure on h3 and defending the f3-square. To me this is really the move of the tournament so far.

29...Reb8 30.Rfb1±

White has a serious advantage. We could look at the different ways Black could play and how he would suffer no matter what.

30...Bd8 31.Qb5?

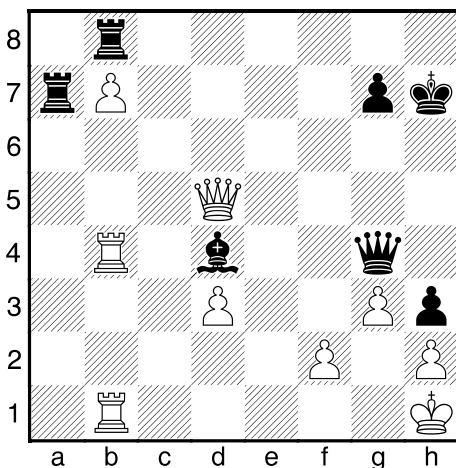
31.b7 Ra7 32.Nf4 was much stronger. The move in the game allows Ding his first chance to escape with active counterplay.



31...Qg4?

This is a really bad move. Not so much because there was an escape, more because it loses to badly.

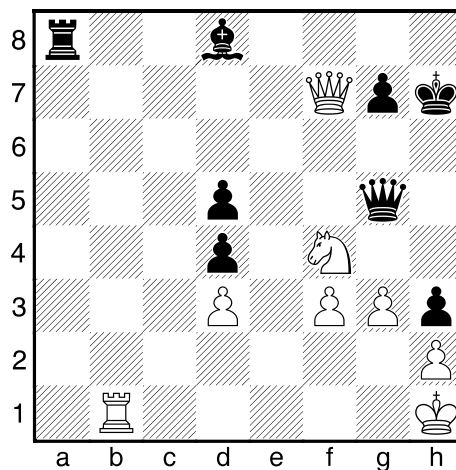
31...Qf5! 32.Nxd4 Qg4 holds in the most amazing way: 33.b7 Clearly the most critical move. (33.Qxd5 Bf6 holds easily.) 33...Ra7 34.Qe8+ Kh7 35.Qxf7 Bf6 36.Rb4 Bxd4 37.Qxd5



White looks winning, but as in the game. Black has an amazing resource. 37...Ra5! 38.Rxd4! Rxb7!! 39.Qxb7 Qxd4 40.Qe4+ (40.Qf3 Ra1) 40...Qxe4+ 41.dxe4 Ra2 42.Kg1 Re2 Black manages to get into an endgame with a pawn less. White can do nothing to with the h3-pawn, so the advantage is an illusion.

32.Qxd5?

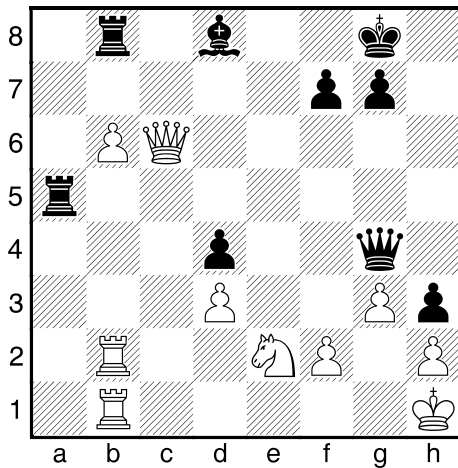
The real tactical mistake is this. After 32.Qe8+ Kh7 33.Qxf7! White is able to eliminate all counter-chances. If Black does nothing, he will take on d5 next. So let's try: 33...Rxb6!? 34.Rxb6 Bxb6, where White can win with both 35.Ng1 and 35.f3 Qg5 36.Nf4 Bd8



37.Qe6 and we are getting close to the end. What we have to understand is that Nepomniachtchi did not see the dangers in the way he played. To speculate that he had to predict them would be illogical. They might as well hide in the line where he did not win a piece.

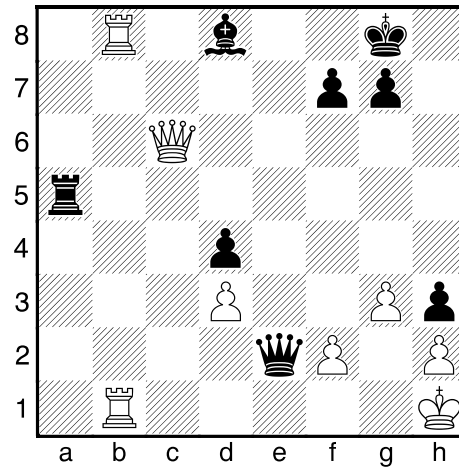
32...Ra5 33.Qc6

The path towards the end has narrowed significantly for White. Only 33.f3! was still winning. After 33...Rxd5 34.fxg4 Rb7 35.Ng1 Rd6 36.Nxh3 White would have a technically winning endgame.



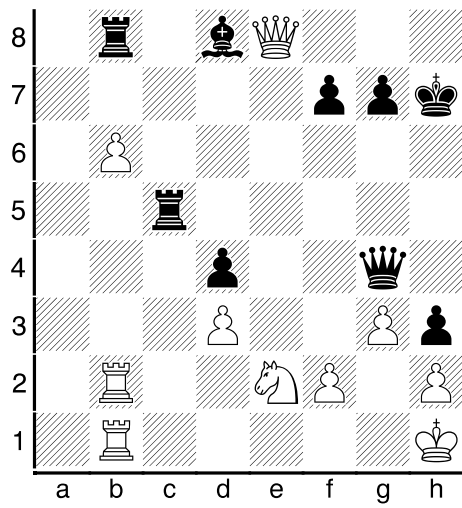
33...Rc5? Ding misses the second chance to escape. This time with glory beyond measure.

Nepomniachtchi found it incredibly hard to believe that Black had an escape route here, although he knew that the journalists had checked it with an engine. Still his eyes would not agree to what his head knew. The escape starts with an exchange sacrifice: 33...Rxb6!! 34.Rxb6 Qxe2 35.Rb8 (35.R6b2? Qxb2!)



But the truly unbelievable move was: 35...Re5!! After 36.Rxd8+ Kh7 the mating threat on e1 is obvious. After 37.Rg1 Qxf2 it is very difficult for White to improve his position. Sooner or later he will have to play 38.Rh8+ to deliver a perpetual. Nepomniachtchi joked that if his opponent had found this, he would have been disqualified for computer cheating. But is it really so outlandish? Black is entirely lost as the game went. If Ding had not left his heart and his mind in China and was fighting for something, he would have had a real chance to find it. As it was, it is hard to imagine that he cared too much one way or the other. The chance to qualify was gone already after two rounds and in a time like this, who can fully concentrate on surmounting the greatest comeback in chess history since Karjakin was lost in the third match game of the 2015 World Cup?

34.Qe8+ Kh7



35.Ng1

White wins.

35...Rxb6 36.Qxd8 Rxb2 37.Rxb2 Rc1
38.Qh4+ Qxh4 39.gxh4 Rd1 40.f3 1-0