

PRESS RELEASE

London Chess Classic, Round 3

FIFTEEN DRAWS AND WHAT DO YOU GET?

John Saunders reports: The third round of the 9th London Chess Classic was played on Monday 4 December 2017 at the Olympia Conference Centre, West London, and ended with the same five results as the previous two rounds – five draws. They were hard fought, with several players going out on a limb with pawn sacrifices, but the defence held in every case. The final game to finish was tantalisingly close to a decisive result, had the player in question fathomed out a difficult computer idea.



Nakamura-So: the two US players set the tone for the day - hard chess but resolute defence (photos John Saunders)

Nakamura-So was the first game to finish, just short of two hours into the round. The opening was a Symmetrical English in which Black played the bold but unusual 10...d5 in lieu of the risk-averse but popular 10...d6. A lot of exchanges ensued, coming down to heavy pieces, opposite-coloured bishops and pawns, but with Nakamura having one extra pawn. Perhaps he had played for this advantage – his approach to all his games has been typically positive and enterprising – but there turned out to be no obvious way to exploit it as Black could blockade the extra pawn and even secure more scope for his pieces. Before long Wesley So was able to reach material equality and the game ended in a draw.

Nepomniachtchi vs Caruana was the next game to finish. It started life as a Reversed King's Indian, or King's Indian Attack, if you prefer. The Russian's pawn structure looked a bit fishy, leaving Black to control the d4-square but it didn't seem to affect the outcome

of the game. In return White had the two bishops. As with so many games in this tournament, there was a show of expert swordsmanship but it was evident that they were too good a match for each other's skill. On move 31 the draw was agreed.



Carlsen-Anand: a pawn sacrificed but again the defence held (photo John Saunders)

Carlsen-Anand was a Catalan, with the world champion ceding a pawn to his great predecessor in a known line where White endeavours to secure more space and development in return for the material. It is curious and paradoxical how often in the stratospheric encounters of super-tournaments that the tangible advantage of an extra pawn can count for so little when a seemingly trivial difference between the players, e.g. a slight misplacement of a piece, can count for so much. Top players have learnt much from the rugged defence often put up by computers when facing a material disadvantage. In the same way Carlsen seemed quite blasé about his material deficit but concentrated his energies on improving his position in other ways. Anand was still a pawn up at the moment when they agreed a draw but by then it was obvious that the extra pawn conferred no winning chances since it was doubled, isolated and kept firmly under surveillance by the Norwegian army. Another draw in 31 moves (which seems to be the favourite quantity of moves for the cessation of hostilities in this tournament).

Adams-Vachier-Lagrave was much longer in terms of moves played (58) but actually shorter in duration than the last game to finish (which we will come to presently). That tells us that they played at some speed, but that was because the last phase of the game was fairly routine fare. Adams was a pawn down but it was a fairly standard rook

and (not many) pawns endgame with the pawns all on the same side of the board. Even we lesser mortals readily understand why these endgames are usually drawn by GMs, even if we cannot always replicate their technique when called upon to do the same ourselves. The opening was a Bb5 Sicilian and followed quite an interesting course without ever catching fire.



Adams-Vachier-Lagrave: 58 moves before entente cordiale reached (photo John Saunders)

Clear winner for best game of the day was Aronian-Karjakin. In one sense it was probably also the worst game of the day if only because it featured a blunder on the final move. However, the blunder was accompanied by a master stroke – a draw offer – which was accepted.



Sergey Karjakin and Levon Aronian enjoyed an animated post-mortem on the stage (photo John Saunders)

London Classic, Round 3, 04.12.2017

White: Levon Aronian

Black: Sergey Karjakin

Bogo-Indian/Catalan A40

1.d4 Nf6 2.c4 e6 3.g3 Bb4+ 4.Bd2 A Bogo-Indian - in my view the most infelicitous of all the names of chess openings, but that is no criticism of its soundness. Or is it a Catalan? **4...Be7 5.Bg2 d5 6.Nf3 0-0 7.0-0 Nbd7 8.Na3** This lurch to the edge of the board would, I'm feel sure, bring down the condemnation of all right-thinking players were it played by anyone other than Aronian, or perhaps Carlsen. But when Levon (I'm tempted to dub him 'the wily Armenian' but that cliché belongs in perpetuity to Tigran Petrosian) plays it, we have to take it seriously. Maybe not too seriously, as Aronian was in puckish mood when talking to Maurice Ashley after the game, hinting that he was chancing his arm or being generally provocative. **8...c6 9.Rc1 Ne4 10.Be3 f5** Actually, I was being a little puckish myself in the previous note since Aronian had played all this before in a notable win against Anish Giri at Wijk aan Zee earlier this year. That game had continued **10...Bxa3 11.bxa3 Nd6 12.c5 Nc4 13.Rxc4 dxc4 14.Qc2 h6** and White soon gave up the exchange for some attacking play which was good enough to sink the peace-loving Dutchman. Incidentally, this reminds me that Anish Giri was moved to make a laconic comment about this tournament on Twitter today. It read "LOL @london_chess". I imagine he is happy because he is witnessing tangible progress towards his goal of eliminating the decisive result from competition chess. **11.Rc2 a5**



(diagram) It is fair to say that the grandmaster VIPs in the VIP Room were dumbfounded by Aronian's strategy in this game. More than that, they were scathing. Commentator Julian Hodgson's voice goes falsetto when he is unconvinced by someone's play and I think he was close to hitting top C when disparaging White's ramshackle arrangement on the queenside. One lone voice in the auditorium, arbiter (but, I hope he will forgive me for emphasising this, not a grandmaster) David Sedgwick thought Aronian might be preparing

to deploy the queen along the first rank, plumping for c1. "c1?" said an incredulous Julian Hodgson to the assembled audience in the room, and the debate continued... time

passes... **12.Qc1** At this point I bore witness to one of the most remarkable things I have ever seen at a chess congress - the sight of the sedate, gentlemanly, almost Churchillian, figure of David Sedgwick punching the air in triumph several times like a gladiator and displaying more physical vigour packed into a few seconds than I have seen from him in total over the course of the 45 years that I have known him. Can the fact that David recently became chess champion of the Gambia have changed his personality? **12...Bf6 13.Rd1 g5** At this point we should break off and acknowledge that both players were genuinely going for it in this game and must be exonerated of the blanket criticism that tends to be levelled at players involved in tournament that feature rather too many draws. This is a genuine struggle. **14.Nb1 Rf7 15.Nc3** I'm quite sure that if I'd played this Na3-b1-c3 stuff during my team chess career, I would have been mercilessly ragged by my team-mates for years afterwards. But I suppose the argument is that the position is closed, therefore this kind of Fabian strategy is feasible. But don't try it at home, children. **15...Rg7 16.Ne1 Nd6 17.b3 dxc4 18.Na4!?** Here we go again - a super-GM casts away a pawn for no reason that is immediately apparent to anyone rated below 2700. It was actually quite a remarkable round for pawn sacrifices, and just a bit unfortunate that none of them was good enough to net a full point. **18...cxb3 19.axb3** Straining one's grey matter more than is comfortable, the idea seems to be that the pressure along the c-file and the h1-a8 diagonal is such that Black is unlikely to be able to advance his b-pawn. The whole queenside is thus stymied so White has considerable positional pressure for the pawn. **19...Nb5 20.Nd3!?** Aronian offers a second pawn to an opponent who is renowned for his defensive abilities. **20...Qe8** If Black is tempted to take on d4, he has to reckon on considerable pressure down the d-file and associated tactical tricks after, say, **20...Bxd4 21.Ndc5**, etc. It's all a bit nebulous but Aronian thrives on this sort of messiness. **21.Ne5 f4!** Black wants to open the g-file to secure counterplay. **21...Nxe5 22.dxe5 Bxe5 23.Bxg5** gives White too much play, while; **21...Bxe5 22.dxe5 Nxe5 23.Rcd2!?** could be even worse. **22.gxf4 gxf4 23.Bxf4 Nxd4! 24.Rxd4 Nxe5** Black threatens **25...Nf3+** winning the exchange so White must lose a tempo with the d4-rook. **25.Rd1 Qg6 26.Bg3 h5 27.Nb6 Rb8 28.Rcd2 Nf7!** The b8-rook is safe from capture as Black has the threat of **...Qxg2** mate. **28...h4 29.Rd8+ Bxd8 30.Rxd8+ Kh7 31.Nxc8** is a brief flurry of excitement but which boils down to equality. **29.Qc5** This is incredibly risky. Better to play **29.Qb1** or **29.Qc2** to get the queens off and relieve the pressure along the g-file. **29...e5** After **29...h4** it looks as though White is obliged to play **30.Qxa5 hxg3 31.hxg3** and rely on rounding up the stranded b8-rook. Or else simply keep the rook and bishop tied up in perpetuity. **30.Qc4 Kh8 30...h4? 31.Rd8+**

Bxd8 (if 31...Kh7 32.Rxc8 Rxc8 and now 33.Be4! is the very sharp point) 32.Rxd8+ Kh7 33.Qxh4+ extinguishing Black's kingside play and getting ready to snaffle the c8-bishop. **31.h4 Bf5 32.Nd7 Rbg8 33.Kh1?? (diagram) ½-½** The watching world suddenly



became excited when their computers registered a big blunder by White, with 33...Be7! being the computer's killer move. That said, this response is not at all obvious to humans, and neither player saw it over the board. What the watching audience didn't know immediately was that the king move was accompanied by a draw offer, which Karjakin, in time trouble, accepted. White had to try 33.Nxf6 Qxf6 34.Qc5 though he's still under some pressure.

The fact that the first three rounds have produced fifteen draws and no decisive results has of course become the chief talking point of the tournament, and led to wild talk of the death of chess, introduction of 'Fischerrandom' chess, etc, but this could simply be a phase that chess happens to be going through at the moment. Chess has been in these troughs during several earlier eras of the game when draws started to proliferate but the advent of exciting young players such as Tal, Fischer, Kasparov, Carlsen, etc, has usually swept away the cobwebs. Before long the same transition is likely to happen again when the new generation of young Chinese and Indian players comes to maturity. I attended this year's Gibraltar and Isle of Man tournaments and didn't hear anything about draws killing the game. I discussed this with a much-respected chess journalist the other day and he put the problem down to the innate conservatism of chess players, and not just amongst the elite. As a group we're not good at accepting change, but some sort of shake-up in the format of tournaments may be necessary as elite chess is getting a little bit too cosy and too much of a closed shop.

The first game of the British KO Chess Championship final between David Howell and Luke McShane ended in a draw. Meanwhile the London FIDE Open now has three leaders on a maximum 4/4: GM Hrant Melkumyan (Armenia), GM Jahongir Vakhidov (Uzbekistan) and the remarkable 13-year-old IM from India, Nihal Sarin. He will surely be one of the next generation of players who will help inject a bit of life into chess at top.



Nihal Sarin: star of India's chess future (photo John Saunders)

Round four of the London Classic takes place on Tuesday 5 December at 16.00 UK time.

ENDS

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