

PRESS RELEASE

## London Chess Classic, Round 8

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### CARLSEN CAR CRASH AT THE CLASSIC

**John Saunders reports:** The eighth round of the 9th London Chess Classic was played on Sunday 10 December 2017 at the Olympia Conference Centre. The round featured just the one decisive game, which was a disastrous loss for Carlsen, as the result of two terrible blunders. This gifted the sole leadership and a third consecutive win to Ian Nepomniachtchi of Russia. Going into Monday's last round Nepomniachtchi leads with 5½, followed by Caruana on 5, Vachier-Lagrave 4½, Carlsen, Nakamura, Aronian, So 4, Karjakin, Anand, Adams 3.



*The fateful game of the round which ruined Carlsen's chances and catapulted Nepomniachtchi into the sole lead (photo John Saunders)*

Carlsen arrived a tad late for his game but, other than the fact that he was still suffering from the cold that has afflicted him for much of the tournament, there were no other clues that he was about to hit the buffers. His opening was insipid but there's no news there as he often settles for innocuous looking variations which avoid complex theory and allow him to test an opponent over the long distance.

By move 29 things started to look very promising for Carlsen as Nepomniachtchi had rather underestimated White's plan, and the champion might have gained an advantage had he found a couple of computer suggestions that shouldn't have been beyond him. Instead he homed in on his opponent's a-pawn, a plan which was only good enough for equality. Then, unaccountably, he pushed his c-pawn forward to c5 only to see his opponent snap it off, revealing that Carlsen had missed a fairly trivial queen attack on a rook on a1 along the long diagonal which meant that the pawn's defender was pinned. Suddenly Carlsen was a bit worse but he failed to refocus and made an infinitely worse blunder, 36.Qc6, an intended intermezzo trick that failed to a trivial refutation, and a move that a much lesser player would have been embarrassed to have played.



"Please God, make Magnus blunder!"  
Nepomniachtchi's miracle was duly  
granted (photo Lennart Ootes)

The watching audience was dumbfounded. Carlsen stumbled on for a handful of moves, but his compensation for the lost piece was zip and he had to resign. How to explain, not one, but two, if not three, clear tactical oversights in the same game by one of the greatest players of all time? I suppose the head cold was part of the explanation but that's surely not the whole of it. [Carlsen's own comments](#) after the game to Maurice Ashley were roundly self-critical but otherwise unrevealing: "I missed everything – there's not much else to say. I failed to predict a single one of his moves... (*dismissively*) you saw what happened." Maurice Ashley

asked him about the first blunder, 33.c5 – "just a mistake?" "Yeah. I just put the pawn *en prise*, I didn't see that he could take it until after I played it." Maurice asked

him about the next game: "I don't care at all... yeah... I have zero thoughts about the next game."

Nepomniachtchi, [asked about the game](#), generously alluded to Carlsen's state of health. He hadn't expected to be able to play for a win having had little experience of the Exchange Slav, and he admitted he had underestimated Carlsen's play between moves 24 and 29 when White had briefly taken control. If we are to take his comments at face value, he too seems not to have realised the seriousness of Carlsen's errors in the game

immediately, hard though this might be to believe. Perhaps both were tired after a gruelling event, though eight rounds hardly compares with the length of tournament that their great predecessors of yesteryear had to slog through. The poor play of both players remains an enigma but it will be the sheer magnitude of Magnus's blunders that will be debated and remembered.

*London Classic, Round 8, 10.12.2017*

**White: Magnus Carlsen**

**Black: Ian Nepomniachtchi**

**Exchange Slav D13**

The world champion wasn't present in the room as the tournament director made his introductions to the stage and only arrived as the arbiter was about to start play. **1.Nf3 c5 2.c3** "Magnus Carlsen is likely to be the first world champion to play 1.Nf3 c5 2.c3 with White." (GM Mikhail Golubev's comment on Carlsen's insipid opening choice) **2...d5 3.d4 cxd4 4.cxd4 Nc6 5.Nc3 Nf6 6.Bf4 Nh5 7.Bd2 Nf6 8.e3 e6 9.Bd3 Bd6 10.e4 dxe4 11.Nxe4 Be7 12.0-0 0-0** Unsurprisingly the game has transposed into a line of the



Exchange Slav which has been played before.. **13.Qc2 h6 14.Rad1 Bd7 15.a3 Rc8 16.Nc3** 16.Qb1 was played in a game in 2012 and ended in a draw. **16...a6 17.Qc1 Re8 18.Rfe1 Bf8 19.Bf4 b5 20.Qd2 b4 21.axb4 Nxb4 22.Ne5 Nxd3 23.Qxd3 (diagram) 23...a5?** "Of course, this was a mistake. It just gives away a tempo." (Nepomniachtchi) **23...Bc6!?** is an interesting alternative: if **24.Qxa6 Ba8** and Black has some positional compensation for the pawn. **24.Qf3** "Of course, I saw Qf3 but I couldn't have expected it to be so devastating." (Nepomniachtchi) **24...Bb4 25.Re3** Nepomniachtchi thought **25.Bg3** would be "very unpleasant for me... and here I might be ready to play **25...g5** at some point," though not immediately as **26.Ne4!!** would win instantly. **25...Bxc3 26.bxc3 Ba4 27.Ra1 27.Rc1**, to stop Black redeploying his light-squared bishop on the b1-h7 diagonal, would have been better. **27...Bc2 28.h3 Bf5 29.g4** Nepomniachtchi acknowledged in his interview that he "got into trouble" around here. **29...Bh7 30.c4 30.g5!** would have given Black something to think about. If **30...Nd5?! 31.Nxf7!** is hard to meet. **30...Nd7** Black decides not to risk **30...Qxd4 31.Rd1 Qb2 32.Bxh6!?**, which probably favours White. **31.Nc6?!** As Nepomniachtchi came to realise, **31.c5!** might be good now as **31...Nxe5** (instead Black intended **31...Nf6** with the

idea of Nd5, but admitted it might be “double-edged”) 32.Bxe5 leaves Black under pressure. **31...Qf6 32.Nxa5 Nb6 (diagram)** Now the calamity starts to unfold, like a car crash in slow motion. It may be that Carlsen had not come to terms with the fact that there is nothing in the position for him and that it is simply level. **33.c5? Rxc5 34.dxc5?** Nepomniachtchi didn't think of 33.c5 as an outright blunder during the game, when he



was more focused on survival, thinking that White could play 34.Qb7 Rc2 35.Bg3 but, even as he looked at it on Maurice Ashley's demo screen, seemed to come round to the view that it was actually tricky for White. But recapturing on c5 surely makes it worse.

**34...Qxa1 + 35.Kh2 Qxa5 36.Qc6??** Of course White has to recapture with 36.cxb6 Qxb6 when White is a pawn down, but with reasonable chances of holding, given that the pawns are all on the one side and the bishops

of opposite colour. Just as previously Carlsen has not come to terms with the decline in his position, leading to this ghastly blunder. Nepomniachtchi said he did not see the refutation of Qc6 immediately, but when it occurred to him, “I was not disappointed.”

**36...Qa4!** The looseness of White's bishop on f4 is Black's trump card here, with the result that White has no time to complete the recapture of the knight. **37.Qxa4 Nxa4 38.c6 Nb6 39.c7 f6 40.Rb3 Nc8 0-1**



Caruana and Nakamura start their game (photo John Saunders)

Draws have predominated amongst Nakamura-Caruana games and that was the result of this encounter, after a weighty slab of Nimzo-Indian theory was trotted out. 21...Ba6 was the first new move. It required some careful calculation as it allowed White to create an advanced passed c-pawn

but one imagines that the whole line have been sifted and refined in the Caruana laboratory. After exchanges, it came down to a drawn rook and pawn endgame.

Vachier-Lagrave opened with a Giuoco Piano against Vishy Anand. At least it wasn't *pianissimo* though one might be tempted to dub it a trifle *sonno lento*. It flickered briefly

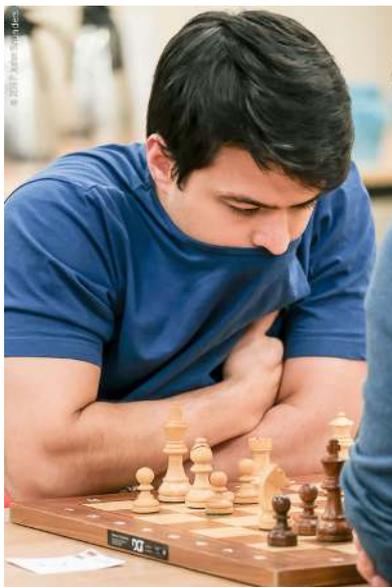
into life when MVL traded his bishop for a knight but then a repetition occurred and it was over.



MVL-Vishy: piano ma non troppo (photo John Saunders)

So-Karjakin was the last game to finish, a Bogo-Indian/Catalan lasting 56 moves, but never quite caught fire. It followed Giri-Karjakin, Bilbao Masters 2016, for 21 moves until So varied from Giri's play with 22.axb6. So gained a pawn on move 44 but Black's compensation was in the shape of a passed pawn of his own and that he used as a lever to regain the pawn, leading to a fairly lifeless minor piece endgame.

Adams-Aronian was done and dusted within an hour. The opening was a Berlin, the first move new to the database was 17.Ne5 (other options have scored 100% draws on the database) and a repetition occurred at move 27. Nothing much else to say about it.



Masked avenger: Eduardo Iturrizaga, Super Blitz champion (photo John Saunders)

With the British Knock-Out Championship and London FIDE Open finishing the day before, the main hall was given over to the Super Blitz Open, a vast, bewildering extravaganza of fast chess involving all levels of players from super-GMs down to tyros. It was composed of 27 preliminary groups of up to 16 players, from which 54 winners and runners-up emerged to go forward to a knock-out phase. The eventual winner was the Venezuelan GM Eduardo Iturrizaga who beat England's David Howell in the final. The latter thus had the melancholy distinction of becoming a beaten knock-out finalist for the second time in two days, though it wasn't all bad luck for him as he did ruefully

admit to the press room that he had struggled to draw one of his games in his preliminary group against a player rated 1608 (take a bow, Cem Ozturan of Turkey). Semi-finalists were GMs Jon Speelman (England) and Alexander Motylev (Russia), and quarter-finalists Daniel Fridman (Germany), Jean-Pierre Le Roux, Jean-Noel Riff (both France) and Gawain Jones (England).



*Daniel Fridman and Jon Speelman contest a Super Blitz quarter-final (photo John Saunders)*

What impressed me most about the Super Blitz tournament was the industry and energy of the team of arbiters who controlled it, and I take this opportunity of saluting this splendid, unsung group of men and women for their unstinting work on behalf of the congress as a whole.

The ninth and last round of the London Classic is on Monday 11 December 2017, starting **at the earlier time of 12.00 UK time.**

## **ENDS**

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