

PRESS RELEASE

London Chess Classic, Round 9

FABIANO TAKES THE TOURNAMENT AND MAGNUS WINS THE TOUR

John Saunders reports: The ninth and final round of the 9th London Chess Classic, played on Monday 11 December 2017 at the Olympia Conference Centre, concluded with two of the players lifting trophies. Fabiano Caruana needed a tie-breaker against Ian Nepomniachtchi to win the first prize in the tournament itself, while Magnus Carlsen clinched the first prize in the overall Grand Chess Tour. A pulsating final day's play saw three decisive games as the gruelling event took its toll in errors but the fans were also treated to a display of top-notch technique.



Malcolm Pein presents Fabiano Caruana with the Classic trophy, while Magnus Carlsen holds the Grand Chess Tour trophy (photos Lennart Ootes)

As things stood overnight, Ian Nepomniachtchi was half a point clear of Fabiano Caruana in the running for the first prize in the tournament. Maxime Vachier-Lagrave, a further half point back, also had an interest in the trophy but would have to win with Black against the leader to finish level with him and hope that Caruana would do no better than draw for a three-way tie. The Grand Prix leader board was more complicated with Carlsen leading and Vachier-Lagrave and various permutations of their results and those of others determining the destination of the year's big-money prizes.

The first issue to be resolved (or at least partially resolved) came with a quick-ish draw between Nepo and MVL. It lasted just 17 moves and resulted in a repetition but still had

an element of interest when Nepo played 9.Ndb5 followed by a pawn sacrifice. It was probably all planned in advance by White as it occurred in a pet line of MVL's. The basis of the plan was to open up the d-file against the black queen, and also exploit a pin on a knight, and it was hard to see how Black was expected to continue without running the risk of having a much worse position.



Nepomniachtchi and Vachier-Lagrave: almost as many letters in their surnames as moves in their game (photo John Saunders)

No better exploitation of his positional advantages was available to White than the repetition, which had probably been his game plan ("I'm not really happy with what I did today... and I think no-one really liked it, me neither" said Nepo with a rueful smile at the post-game interview). So the game was over in just 35 minutes. That cut MVL out of the running for first prize in the tournament and meant that Nepo would have to wait to see how Caruana fared with White against Adams.



Mickey Adams was doing well against Fabiano Caruana but finally lost (photo John Saunders)

In fact, Nepo had to wait another 5+ hours to see whether he would have to play a tie-breaker as Caruana-Adams went the distance. It was, as soccer commentators like to say, “a game of two halves”. An imbalanced middlegame seemed to favour Adams around move 30-33, with Caruana admitting later that he had been prepared to repeat position in lieu of anything better to do. But some inaccuracies from the Englishman (Adams himself thought 33...Ra5 could have been a key mistake) saw his position disintegrate markedly and by the time control it had resolved itself into a queen and rook endgame with Caruana having an extra pawn. Mickey may have been able to do better in the endgame but in practice the defence was tough and Fabi relentless. Beating Mickey Adams is never easy and this was a fine way for the US player to conclude his tournament. England’s number one said of his own performance, “I gave away too many early Christmas presents.”



Carlsen was back to his resourceful best against Aronian (photo John Saunders)

The other major issue was the outcome of the Grand Chess Tour and here much depended on the outcome of Aronian versus Carlsen. They say that a common military mistake made by generals is to fight a war based on their experiences of a previous campaign. There was an element of this about Aronian’s play against Carlsen. After a cagy start, in which neither of them was willing to commit to mainstream theory, the Armenian super-GM gained a small positional edge but pushed his luck a little too far, perhaps too conscious of Carlsen’s dismal showing in round eight effort and too trusting

in Carlsen's comment after that game about having 'zero interest' in their current encounter. Unluckily for Aronian, the Monday Carlsen, cold or no cold, was a very different proposition from that of the day before. He may still have been suffering from the head cold but, as opening morphed into middlegame, it became clear that he was back at full functionality on the chessboard. Aronian gave up a piece for pawns and an attack but he was thwarted at every turn by some relentlessly accurate, active defence from the world champion.

London Classic, Round 9, 11.12.2017

White: Levon Aronian

Black: Magnus Carlsen

QP Opening A40

1.d4 e6 2.Nf3 c5 3.g3 cxd4 4.Nxd4 Qb6 Both players are complicit in avoiding mainstream theory here and it would be hard to put a name to this unsystematic system. Let's call it the 'Opening with No Name'. That said, quite a few other theory-dodgers have been this way before. **5.Bg2 Bc5 6.e3** I notice that English IM Richard Bates has three games on the white side in this position on the database, while GM Nigel Short has three times had the black side, including one against each other. How about the Bates-Short opening? **6...d5 7.Qg4 Bf8 8.0-0 Nf6 9.Qe2 e5** New territory. 9...Bd7 was played in a game in 2013. **10.Qb5+ Bd7** Black is relatively happy to have doubled pawns



on the b-file than tolerate a white knight causing trouble on b5 after a queen exchange. **11.Qxb6 axb6 12.Nb3 Nc6 13.Bd2 Bd6 14.Nc3 Ne7 15.a4 0-0 16.Nb5 Bxb5 17.axb5 (diagram)** Quite a few engines started to prefer White hereabouts but perhaps that was because they usually prefer bishops to knights. **17...Rac8 18.Bc3 h5 19.Rfd1** Perhaps the engines were right up to a point, since White has some pressure against the black centre, and scope to

invade via a7. But it doesn't look like enough to worry Carlsen on a good day. **19...Rfd8 20.Nd2 h4 21.Nf3** 21.gxh4 would give White an inconsequential extra pawn on the side of the board, and also invite the possibility of 21...d4!? **22.exd4 exd4 23.Bxd4 Bxh2+ 24.Kxh2 Rxd4** which looks unclear. **21...hxg3 22.hxg3 e4 23.Ng5** 23.Nd4 looks a more patient option, though it is still hard to see how White could seek to exploit his slight positional edge. **23...Ng6 24.Ra7 Rb8 25.Bd4 Bc5 26.Bxc5** 26.c4 immediately looks like

a useful option, when Black can try to stay active with 26...Bxd4 27.Rxd4 Rdc8!? allowing 28.cxd5 Rc1+ 29.Bf1 Ne5 which looks quite tricky. It would be hard to predict how two such inventive players would handle such a line. **26...bxc5 27.c4 Ne7 (diagram)** It's clear that Black's big pawn centre is being undermined by the c-pawn and subsequent attacks on the e4-pawn should the d5-pawn move or disappear. Lesser Black players would be



in danger of crumbling but Carlsen comes up with an active plan and doesn't become too worried about maintaining a material balance. **28.cxd5 Nc8 29.Ra4 Nb6 30.Ra3 Nc4 31.Rc3 Nd6** Setting up a classic Nimzowitschian blockade but it is only a temporary solution and needs to be followed up with great accuracy. **32.Rxc5** I suspect most players foreseeing this position a few moves before would have concluded that they would be two pawns down with only sketchy

counterplay on the horizon, but Carlsen calculates that it is a bit better than that.

32...Ra8 33.Bh3 Chatting in the VIP room, Jon Speelman quickly identified the slight flaw in this plan as exemplified by Carlsen's accurate reply. **33...Re8** This threatens Re5 and the knight on g5 has had its retreat square on h3 taken away by the bishop. **34.Rc7** White continues with the aggression. 34.Bf1 is also logical, though it involves moving the



same piece twice in succession in different directions.

34...Kf8 (diagram) 35.b6? Perhaps 35.Bf1 was obligatory now, since White's coming sacrificial attack proves too speculative and meets with some vintage Carlsen defence. **35...Re5** Now White has to sacrifice his knight one way or another since it cannot be defended. **36.Ne6+** 36.f4? avoids losing the knight but after 36...exf3 37.Nxf3 Rxe3 leaves White's position severely weakened. 36.Nxf7 Nxf7 37.Rxb7 Nd8 38.Rc7

Rxd5 39.Rxd5 Nxd5 40.Rc4 Nxb6 41.Rxe4 and Black has a piece for three pawns, and probably the better chances of winning. **36...fxe6 37.dxe6 Nfe8** Black's position is precarious but it hangs together. As is often the problem with sacrificing material, you have to hit hard and early to exploit a sacrifice and now White's plan keeps running into snags. Consequently Black gradually takes the upper hand. **38.Rd7 Raa5 39.b4?!** A waste of tempo in an increasingly problematic position. 39.R1xd6 Nxd6 40.Rxd6 Rad5 exchanges off White's remaining rook and probably favours Black in the endgame.

39...Rad5 40.Ra1 Rb5! A simple move to mop up the weak white pawns. White can't generate enough counterplay to counter this plan and his position starts crumbling.

41.Ra8 Rxb6 42.Bg4 Rd5 An accurate move, preparing the ground for Rxb4 and then a possible double rook assault on the white king. **43.Kg2** White could defend the b4-pawn with 43.Ra4 but then 43...Rc6 and Black proceeds with his counterattack against the king, having first lured the white rook to a passive post. **43...Rxb4 44.Ra1 Rbb5 44...Rb2** seems to work well but the text is an equally good counter to White swinging his a1 rook over to the kingside. After 44...Rb2 45.Rh1 Kg8 46.Bh5 Rf5! wins as it defends an invasion on f7 as well as setting up an unstoppable attack on the f2-pawn. **45.Be2 45.Rh1** would force 45...Kg8 but the king move would stop White's plans in their tracks as 44...Rbb5 had prevented the possibility of bringing the bishop into the attack via h5.

45...Rb2 46.Bg4 46.Rh1 Kg8 47.Bh5 Rf5 wins for Black as in the note after Black's 44th move. **46...Rdd2 47.Kh3** If White goes passive with 47.Rf1 the win becomes quite simple with 47...Nf6, etc. **47...Rxf2 48.Kh4 Rh2+ 49.Bh3 g5+ 50.Kh5 50.Kg4 Nf6+ 51.Kxg5 Nxd7** and the rook is perfectly edible since 52.exd7 Nf7+ and the d7-pawn is not dangerous.

50...Rxb3+ 51.Kg6 Rf2 This involves giving back some material but Black already has a sufficiency to win. **52.e7+ Kg8 53.Rxd6 Rh7 0-1** The previous day had seen a glut of Carlsen blunders but it would have had to be a very bad day indeed for him to fall for 53...Nxd6?? 54.Ra8+ with mate to follow in two moves. After seeing Carlsen's accurate reply, Aronian could find no further cheapo chances and resigned.



Vishy Anand's birthday coincided with Wesley So's return to form (photo John Saunders)

Round nine coincided with Vishy Anand's 48th birthday but it proved an unlucky one at the chessboard. Perhaps a birthday becomes something of a burden to an active

professional chess player in their 40s as it provides an unwelcome excuse for writers, pundits and wiseacres in general to hint that maybe it's time for the old boy to retire. Losing a game on the same day can make the chorus of unsolicited retirement advice all the louder. So I'll try to buck the trend by expressing the hope that Vishy carries on playing indefinitely and wishing that we see him at the Classic again next year. However, though not Vishy's finest hour, the game itself is worth seeing as it showcased Wesley So at his best. Good to see him back on song.

London Classic, Round 9, 11.12.2017

White: Viswanathan Anand

Black: Wesley So

Giuoco Piano C50

1.e4 e5 2.Nf3 Nc6 3.Bc4 Bc5 4.0-0 Nf6 5.d3 0-0 6.a4 h6 7.c3 a5 8.Nbd2 d6 9.h3 Be6 10.Re1 Bxc4 11.Nxc4 Re8 12.Be3 Bxe3 13.Nxe3 Qd7 14.Qb3 Ne7 Black has equalised with some ease. The b7-pawn is taboo and Black intends to gain space with d5. **15.Nc4 Ng6 16.Rad1 b6 17.Qc2** Getting ready to advance d4 but Black gets in first. **17...d5!**



18.exd5 Maybe 18.d4!? anyway, as 18...dxc4 19.dxe5 Qe6 20.exf6 Qxf6 should be equal.

18...Qxd5 Now White has to deal with the weakness of his d3-pawn. **19.b3 Rad8**

20.d4 This looks OK at first sight but White is slightly on the defensive after the exchanges. **20...exd4 21.Rxd4 Rxe1+**

22.Nxe1 Qa8 23.Rxd8+ Qxd8 24.Qd3 Qe7 25.Nc2 Nf4 Black has a clear initiative and White must reply carefully. **26.Qd2 N6d5**

(diagram) 27.Kf1? There is a tactical response to this move. 27.Kh2 Qg5 28.g3

Ne6 29.N2e3 Nxe3 30.Nxe3 Qf6 is still a bit tricky for White but he should hold with best play. **27...Nxc3! 28.N4e3?** A second successive blunder. 28.Qxc3 Qe2+ 29.Kg1 Qd1+ 30.Kh2 (30.Qe1 Qxc2 gives Black a solid advantage) 30...Ne2 31.Qe1 Qxc2 is a bit depressing for White. However, 28.Nxb6!? cxb6 29.Qxc3 Qe2+ 30.Kg1 may be better, one of the differences being that now White has the possibility in some lines of Qc8+ and Qf5+ with perpetual check. But Wesley had alternatives to 28...cxb6 in mind as well, so it could have got quite complicated. **28...Ne4!**

27...Nxc3! 28.N4e3? A second successive blunder. 28.Qxc3 Qe2+ 29.Kg1 Qd1+ 30.Kh2 (30.Qe1 Qxc2 gives Black a solid advantage) 30...Ne2 31.Qe1 Qxc2 is a bit depressing for White. However, 28.Nxb6!? cxb6 29.Qxc3 Qe2+ 30.Kg1 may be better, one of the differences being that now White has the possibility in some lines of Qc8+ and Qf5+ with perpetual check. But Wesley had alternatives to 28...cxb6 in mind as well, so it could have got quite complicated. **28...Ne4!**

29.Qd4 c5! 30.Qd1 30.Nf5? loses to 30...Ng3+! 31.fxg3 Qe2+ and mates; 30.Nd5 and again 30...Ng3+! is lethal **30...Qf6** 30...Qh4 is still stronger: 31.g3 Qxh3+ 32.Kg1 Nc3! is the end. But the text is also very strong and demands accuracy from White. **31.Ng4** 31.Qd7, threatening Qe8+ and Qxe4, keeps up a fighting defence but the text quickly succumbs. **31...Qc3 32.Nce3 h5 33.Nh2 Qb2 0-1** To prevent mate, White must lose at least a second pawn.



Sergey Karjakin pressed Hikaru Nakamura but the US player made his ninth draw out of nine (photo John Saunders)

Nakamura completed a sweep of nine draws in the tournament with his game against Sergey Karjakin and commentator Maurice Ashley suggested he should expect some Twitter banter from Anish Giri who has been known to tease rivals who emulate his own pacific tendencies. Hikaru took this with a smile and expressed positive thoughts about his play in London. He thought his game with Sergey was the only one where he was in some trouble during the course of the tournament though it didn't prove terminal. Sergey had welcomed Hikaru's 15...g5 after which he had gained an edge but he had not ultimately seen a good way to exploit it. "I was worse but I don't think I was ever losing," commented Hikaru.

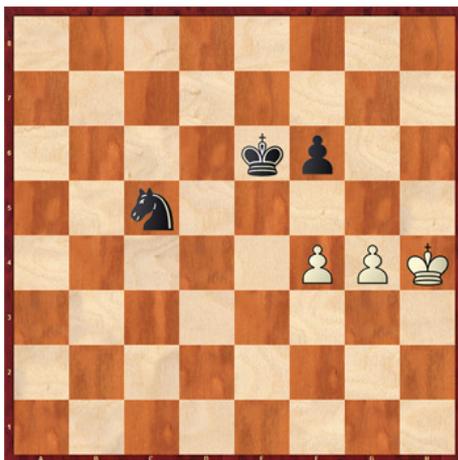
THE PLAY-OFF

"After six hours of playing against Mickey, I was too tired to feel any pressure," was Fabiano Caruana's insightful comment after winning a four-game blitz play-off against Ian Nepomniachtchi. He had had only 30 minutes' respite after a long endgame before

returning to the board for two 10m+5s rapid/blitzes, and then two more games at 5m+3s, compared to Nepomniachtchi's luxurious 5+ hours' rest after the briefest of classical games but it underlines the paradoxical psychology that often plays out in such situations. It is not always the tired, harassed competitor who succumbs, and there is such a thing as being too relaxed for a key encounter. Remember Fabi's comment, readers, the next time you play off for the London Chess Classic title, or perhaps, more realistically, your local club championship.



Fabiano Caruana and Ian Nepomniachtchi shake hands before the tie-break (photo John Saunders)



Nepomniachtchi - Caruana, 3rd play-off game

As always with play in rapids and blitzes, it was a roller coaster ride, with the clock situations being as important as the positions on the board. The two rapid mode games were drawn after a particularly seesaw struggle in the first game and less so the second. That was followed by blitz games, with both going beyond 60 moves. Nepomniachtchi lost a piece inside 14 moves in the 1st of the blitz games but somehow drew when Caruana (Black) slipped up right at the end. **64...Nd3? 64...Kd5** would win here. **65.f5+! Ke5 66.g5 fxc5+ 67.Kxg5 Nf4 ½-½**

Missing that win might have proved a psychological hammer blow for Caruana but he took it in his stride and came back to win the next game and with it the London Classic title. Congratulations to him!



Caruana - Nepomniachtchi, 4th Play-Off Game

Here are the final few moves of the last game. Both players were close to playing on the three-second increment now so it was very tense.

60...e3!? A good try for complications. **61.Qe7+ Kb5 62.Qb7+ Rb6 63.Rxd5+ 63.Qxd5+??** would have been a costly error after **63...Qxd5 64.Rxd5+ Kc4!** when **65.Rd1 e2 66.Re1 Kd3** would have drawn, and maybe not even that in some lines.

63...Kc4 This position also looks hair-raising but Caruana found the only winning move in the position... **64.Qf7!! exf2+ 64...e2 65.Rd6+ Kc3 66.Qf3+ wins. 65.Kxf2 Qb2+ 66.Rd2+ 1-0**

Answering check with check – and winning a very big cheque.

That's it for this year, folks. Hope you've enjoyed the tournament and will be back with us for the new-look 2018 London Chess Classic.

ENDS

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