

PRESS RELEASE

London Chess Classic, Round 6

MAGNUS ESCAPES BY THE SKIN OF HIS TEETH

John Saunders reports: The sixth round of the 9th London Chess Classic followed the rest day and was played on Friday 8 December 2017 at the Olympia Conference Centre. There was just one decisive game but this was by some way the most exciting round of the competition so far. US number one Fabiano Caruana retained his lead with a draw against Maxime Vachier-Lagrave but it was reduced to just half a point when Ian Nepomniachtchi prevailed against the home player Mickey Adams in a rook and pawn endgame to move into the second spot. The star game of the day was Hikaru Nakamura versus Magnus Carlsen which ended in a draw after the American squandered a golden opportunity to defeat the world champion. The other two games also had considerable merit.



Carlsen, suffering from a cold, goes head to head with his old rival Nakamura (photo John Saunders)

There was a salutary reminder here for everyone who has been lamenting all the draws in this competition. Nakamura-Carlsen was another draw - but what a game it was! I remember a year or two ago comparing one of Carlsen's games to a whodunit, except

that his long grinds would be better entitled 'howdunits'. You know the scenario – one of those seemingly lifeless positions where you couldn't imagine him having the remotest chance of beating anyone rated over 2700 but which he would nurse patiently until eventually forcing an error which he would pounce on and exploit. The joy is in trying to guess how he is going to do it. It happens less often these days, either because his rivals have got fed up with being a sort of Agatha Christie victim that gets brained with the lead piping in the conservatory and have become resistant to his murderous technique, or else (whisper it softly) he's not quite as sharp as he was now he has reached the grand old age of 27.



"Excuse me, Mr Arbiter?" A relieved Carlsen summons the arbiter to ratify his threefold repetition (photo John Saunders)

But, anyway, this game was very different because here Carlsen was very much on the receiving end and it was his opponent administering the torture. However, it was every bit as entertaining as games where Carlsen is in the driving seat as he tried to wriggle out from under.

It didn't start too badly for Carlsen. Indeed, quite early in the game there had arisen a position where he could simply have opted for a repetition, unless Nakamura had taken a big risk and tried to diverge. Spectators, now well used to early truces here, rather assumed Carlsen would bale out, especially since it had become apparent that he was

suffering from a cold. But he didn't and decided to press for a counterattack, probably because he was fed up with all those draws and felt obliged to win a game. In the end he would have been glad of a half-point.

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White: Hikaru Nakamura

Black: Magnus Carlsen

Scotch C45

1.e4 e5 2.Nf3 Nc6 3.d4 exd4 4.Nxd4 Nf6 5.Nxc6 bxc6 6.e5 Qe7 7.Qe2 Nd5 8.h4

Nepomniachtchi and Morozevic are devotees of this kingside thrust. 8.c4 Ba6 9.b3 g6 happened in Svidler-Carlsen, Sinquefield Cup, last August and was drawn. **8...Bb7** 8...d6



or 8...f6 are more usual here. Kramnik tried 8...Qe6 against

Nepomniachtchi in a blitz game in July but lost. **9.c4 Nb6**

10.Rh3 This is new ground. **10...Qe6 11.f4 0-0-0 12.a4**

White threatens 13.a5, forcing the knight back to a8, and then 14.a6, trapping the bishop. Black finds a tricky reply.

12...d5!? 13.a5 Nxc4 14.b3 White has now trapped the knight but his development is shaky and his dark squares

vulnerable. **14...Bb4+ 15.Kf2 (diagram) 15...Nxa5!?** Previous

to this appearing on the board, there had been a multitude of groans as spectators assumed that Black would take a draw with 15...Bc5+ 16.Ke1 (The GMs in the VIP Room also looked at 16.Kg3 which also leads to a draw, except in a more unusual way:

16...Bg1!? 17.bxc4 h5 18.Rh1 Qg6+ 19.Kh3 Qf5+ 20.Kg3 Qg6+ draw) 16...Bb4+ repeats

the position. But Carlsen, despite suffering from a cold, decided to be bold and play for a win. Rashly, as it turned out, but a great boon to the watching spectators who were

able to witness a classic battle between two deadly and resourceful rivals. **16.Bd2 c5**

Another way to give up some material would have been 16...Bc5+ 17.Ke1 Nxb3!? 18.Rxb3

Bb6 which gives three pawns for a piece. **17.Rxa5** Not

17.Bxb4? cxb4 18.Rxa5?? Qb6+ winning for Black. **17...Bxa5**

18.Bxa5 Qf5 19.Nc3 Qxf4+ 20.Kg1 Rhe8 21.Nb5!

Nakamura plays the middlegame very forcefully. **21...a6**

22.Rf3 Qxe5 Allowing the queens to come off doesn't help

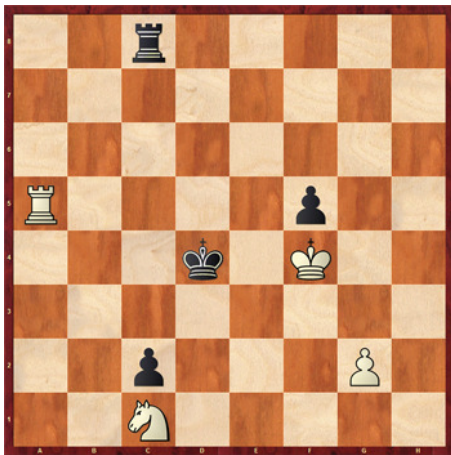
Black. **23.Qxe5 Rxe5 24.Bxc7 Ree8 25.Bxd8 Rxd8 26.Na3**

Rd7 (diagram) 27.Bd3! "From afar I missed his move

27.Bd3," admitted Magnus Carlsen. "Then it was awful, of



course." **27...Kd8** After 27...g6 28.Rf6 and the threat to the a6-pawn is troublesome. **28.Bxh7** Not so much to win a pawn but break up the kingside. **28...g6** **29.h5 gxh5** **30.Rf6** Black has three pawns for the knight but he has no real prospect of forcing a pawn through to promotion as they can so easily be blockaded by White's minor pieces. **30...Ke7** **31.Rb6 Rc7** **32.Nc2 a5** **33.Ne3 c4** **34.Bc2 Bc6** **35.bxc4 dxc4** **36.Ra6** 36.Nxc4? Bxg2 eliminates White's last pawn and makes the win problematic. **36...a4** **37.Bxa4** At his interview with Maurice Ashley, Hikaru Nakamura criticised this move, suggesting that he should have played 37.Nf5+ and then 38.Nd4 with what he thought was an easier way to win. After the text, though there was still a technical win, he felt it was harder. "I started seeing ghosts." **37...Be4** **38.Ra5 Ke6** **39.Rxh5 c3** **40.Bb3+ Kd6** **41.Bc2 Bxc2** **42.Nxc2 Ke6** **43.Kf2 f5** **44.Rh3** With his compensation whittled down to just one pawn for the knight, I'm not sure anyone gave much for Carlsen's chances of saving the game. **44...Ke5** **45.Rd3 Kf4** **46.Rd4+ Kg5** **47.Kf3 Rc8** **48.Ra4 Rc7** **49.Ra8 Kf6**



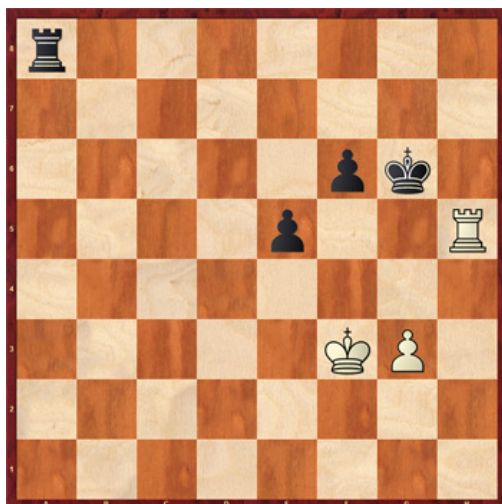
50.Ra6+ Kg5 **51.Nd4 Rc4** **52.Ne6+ Kf6** **53.Nf4+ Ke5** **54.Nd3+ Kd5** **55.Ra2 Kd4** **56.Nc1 c2** **57.Ra5 Rc3+** **58.Kf4 Rc8 (diagram)** **59.Rxf5?** The only winning move for White here is 59.Ra3 but it might not be too hard to find, even for lesser mortals, given its logic in keeping the black king cut off from the defence. **59...Re8!** Carlsen realised when he had this position on the board that he was moving towards the draw. His assessment was backed up by the online Norwegian super-computer that provides

analysis of his games in real-time (<http://analysis.sesse.net/>). **60.Rf7 Re1** **61.Rd7+ Kc3** **62.Rc7+ Kd2** **63.Nb3+ Kd3** **64.Nc5+ Kd4** **65.Nb3+ Kd3** **66.Nc5+ Kd4** **67.Nb3+ Kd3** Around here Carlsen had the first check of his scoresheet to see if it might have been a threefold repetition, or perhaps more likely how close the repetition was. Nakamura nodded his head up and down like the toy dog in the back of a car window, acknowledging his miss of the win. **68.g4 Rf1+** **69.Kg5 Rb1** **70.Nc5+ Ke3** **71.Nb3 Kd3** Obviously not 71...Rxb3?? 72.Rxc2 with a won endgame for White. **72.Nc5+ Ke3** **73.Nb3 ½-½** Here Carlsen called over the arbiter to say that he intended to play 73...Kd3, bringing about a threefold repetition (see position's after Black's 69th and 71st moves). White did not demur but agreed the draw.



Mickey Adams was ground down in a rook and pawn endgame by Ian Nepomniachtchi (photo John Saunders)

Adams-Nepomniachtchi was decisive but somewhat less exciting than the Nakamura-Carlsen roller-coaster. Adams was doing OK until his 36th move which cost him a pawn. Even so he reached an endgame a pawn down but with the pawns all on the same side of the board, which tends towards a draw. Super-GMs in this event have been defending pawn deficit endgames so regularly that we are getting blasé about them, but Nepo redressed the balance with a cannily played endgame perhaps more akin to those former Carlsen grinds where he would make something out of nothing. His finish was crisp.



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White: Mickey Adams

Black: Ian Nepomniachtchi

70.Rh4? Instead 70.g4 keeps the black king at bay rather better. **70...f5 71.Rb4 Kg5** I don't have access to a seven-man Lomonosov tablebase but I suspect White may be gone whatever he does here. But it requires good technique from Black. **72.Rb7 e4+ 73.Ke3 Ra3+!**

74.Kf2 Ra2+ 75.Ke3 Kg4! 76.Rg7+ Kh3 77.Rg5 77.g4 Ra3+! 78.Kf4 Rf3+ 79.Ke5 e3 wins. 77...Ra3+ 78.Kf2 Rf3+! 79.Ke1 Kg2 80.Ke2 Rf2+ 81.Ke3 Kf1 82.g4 Rf3+ 83.Kd4 e3 It's all rather easy now. **84.Rxf5 Rxf5 85.Kxe3 Rf8 0-1**



Maxime Vachier-Lagrave and Fabiano Caruana shake hands before the game (photo John Saunders)

MVL versus tournament leader Fabiano Caruana had its moments, starting from a Petroff. Caruana told he was booked up to move 23. "I was optimistic and I thought I might be able to get better but it turned out to be nothing." With a full point lead he didn't have to press too hard, of course, but now has Nepo breathing down his neck.



Levon Aronian was at his most creative against Wesley So (photo John Saunders)

So-Aronian was entertaining and threatened to be game of the day with its radically imbalanced material. Aronian played on instinct, taking on f2 with a bishop in a way that

normally happens in beginners' games, but with a super-grandmasterly twist.

Another crunching combination won him Wesley So's queen but at a high material price. Even so, the queen had good control of the board and might have netted him a more tangible advantage had he found a more precise continuation. As things turned out, the two players fought each other to a standstill so another draw resulted.

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White: Wesley So

Black: Levon Aronian

Ruy Lopez C88

1.e4 e5 2.Nf3 Nc6 3.Bb5 a6 4.Ba4 Nf6 5.0-0 Be7 6.Re1 b5 7.Bb3 0-0 8.a4 The standard Anti-Marshall, though some Black players find a way to play ...d7-d5 anyway.

8...b4 9.d4 d6 10.dxe5 dxe5 11.Nbd2 Bc5 12.a5 Be6 13.Bxe6 13.Qe2 Qe7 14.Bc4 Nd4

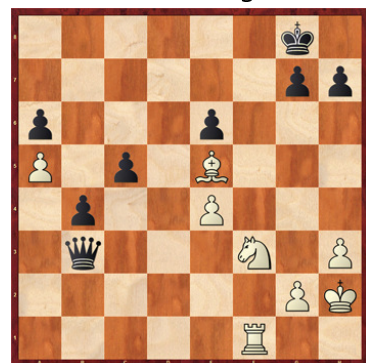


15.Nxd4 Bxd4 16.Nb3 Rfd8 was Dominguez-Aronian, from a Saint Louis blitz game last August, which Black won. The text is a new move. **13...fxe6 14.Qe2 Ng4 15.Rf1 (diagram)**

15...Bxf2+!? So admitted he was by this and underestimated it. Aronian concocted the idea over the board. **16.Rxf2 Nd4 17.Qc4?!** So said that the text move was made on gut instinct but that he should have preferred 17.Qd3 here. Then 17...Nxf2 18.Kxf2 and Aronian was thinking about 18...b3!?

17...Nxf2 18.Kxf2 Qh4+ 19.Kg1 Qg4 Around here So started to realise that the position was not so easy to untangle. **20.h3 Qg3 21.Qd3** The only move. White's defences are quite stretched. **21...Rxf3!?** **22.Nxf3 Rf8 23.Nxd4 Qe1+ 24.Kh2 Rf1 25.Qxf1** Another forced move. **25...Qxf1 26.Nf3** Black has a queen and pawn for rook, bishop and knight, but the evaluation is far from clear. Wesley later wondered whether 26.Nb3 might have been a better bet, but didn't sound sure. The VIP GMs also agonised over this difficult choice. **26...c5 27.b3?! Qd1!**

Black wins the c-pawn. Things are becoming problematic for White. **28.Bb2 Qxc2 29.Bxe5 Qxb3 30.Rf1 (diagram)** **30...h6?** 30...Qc2! is more to the point, targeting the e4-pawn and also getting ready to trundle the b-pawn towards the queening square. Perhaps more importantly it prevents White's plan of playing Rf2 and Rd2, as happened in the game. Aronian admitted he didn't see 30...Qc2 but at the interview with Maurice



Ashley came up with a line for his opponent, thus: 31.Kg3 c4 32.Rf2 Qxe4 33.Rd2 Qg6+ 34.Kh2 Qe8 35.Rd4 which he thought "should be a draw, somehow. White is too active". **31.Rf2!** An important move to co-ordinate the defences and stop Qc2 happening. **31...c4 32.Rd2** Another reason for 31.Rf2 was to relocate the rook safely to the d-file, from where it can counterattack against the enemy king. **32...c3 33.Rd8+ Kf7 34.Rc8 Qb1 35.Rc7+ Ke8 36.Rc8+ Kf7 37.Rc7+ Ke8 38.Rc8+ ½-½** The position was still very unclear. Discretion was the better part of value.



Vishy Anand was surprised in the opening by Sergey Karjakin (photo John Saunders)

Anand-Karjakin had its moments, despite being only 20 moves long. "I must admit he caught me with 12...Qa6," admitted Vishy Anand after the game about the line of the English which they played down. Karjakin followed up with another queen moved that surprised Vishy, 15...Qd6, which he found he could not exploit. Having run out of ideas to make progress, he and Karjakin found a repetition to end the game.

Classic scores: Caruana 4/6, Nepomniachtchi 3½, Aronian, Vachier-Lagrave, Carlsen, So, Nakamura 3, Karjakin, Anand, Adams 2½.

David Howell won the fourth and final classical game of the British Knock-Out Chess Championship against Luke McShane to lead the match by 5 points to 3 (note that the scoring system for this first part of the match was 2 points for a win and 1 for a draw). The game swayed back and forth, with Luke close to win for some of its course but

losing the thread and blundering first the win and then the draw in time trouble.
the two players contest a rapidplay series of four games on Saturday, with the normal scoring system of 1-½-0.



Luke McShane was doing well but blundered against David Howell in Game 4 (photo John Saunders)



In the London Open, Hrant Melkumyan of Armenia leads on his own with 7/8 going into the ninth and final round on Saturday, where he is paired with top seed Alexander Motylev (Russia) who is one of seven players on 6½. The other three pairings of players on 6½ are Gabriel Sargissian (Armenia) v Jonathan Hawkins (England), Alexander Donchenko (Germany) v Tamir Nabaty (Israel) and Thi Kim Phung Vo (***pictured left***) is a WGM, rated only 2380, with a current TPR for the tournament of 2606.

Round 7 of the London Classic is on Saturday 9 December but note that the start time is **14.00 UK time.**

ENDS

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