



GIBRALTAR

INTERNATIONAL CHESS FESTIVAL

Monday 21 January - Thursday 31 January 2019

2019 Gibraltar Masters: Round 1 - 22 January 2019

John Saunders reports: The 2019 Gibraltar Masters, the 17th in the series, got underway on Tuesday 22 January 2019 at its usual venue of the Caleta Hotel as another spectacular line-up of chess stars started their quest for the first prize of £25,000. The entrants include no fewer than 14 players rated 2700+, and a further 24 of 2600 or more.

As is now the custom at this tournament, there had been a lottery at the previous evening's gala opening to decide the opponents of the top seeds and this had turned up some fascinating pairings on the top boards, though the rating differential on each board remained a hefty 300+ on most of the higher boards. As usual in first rounds, something of a slaughter is to be expected, though it is also true that, when outrated opponents are themselves respectably rated in the vicinity of 2400 and holding IM and even GM titles, the defensive wall they are capable of erecting to keep elite opponents at bay is of a strength and resilience of which American presidents can only dream.

This was true to a limited degree of the top board, where top seed Maxime Vachier-Lagrave was kept hard at work way beyond his desired dinner time by Estonian IM Kalle Kiik. To be honest, the Frenchman outplayed his opponent and in cruise control from about move 30 but it took a bit of work and his opponent could legitimately play on to move 60. Levon Aronian breezed through his first game with Indonesian IM Irine Kharisma Sukandar, making him comment later whether it might have been more propitious to have struggled in the first round as he did last year when he drew with Anita Gara but still came out tournament winner.

UK chess fans, particularly those of an older vintage, would have been intrigued to see how English IM John Pigott got on against Wesley So. John Pigott has just turned 60 and now plays more regularly and in more significant events than he has for some decades. But, as he put it himself in an interview with Fiona Steil-Antoni at the 2017 Reykjavik tournament, "I was pretty good in the 1970s". He had good reason to be proud of himself at that event as he scored recorded his final IM norm, more than 20 years after achieving his first, and raised his rating above 2400 to clinch his IM title aged 59, crowning the achievement by beating none other than Alexei Shirov in just 26 moves. But Wesley So proved a super-GM too far for the Englishman as the US player soon established an iron grip on the position and never let go. This is Wesley's first visit to the Rock and, after conducting his tandem simul with Kateryna Lagno and winning his first round in style, he looks to have acclimatised well.



Yu Yangyi (left) had a tough battle with Ariel Erenberg

The fourth and fifth seeds, however, met sterner resistance. In fact, Yu Yangyi was distinctly fortunate to escape with a half-point against the 17-year-old Israeli IM Ariel Erenberg. In the following position, after Black's 23rd move, White probably thought the position would be too sterile after capturing on e4 so he pushed his luck with a very risky move...

Yu Yangyi - Erenberg



Position after 23...Bxf6

24.g4? White pushes his luck rather too far in striving to avoid 24.Rxe4 Rxe4 25.Rxe4 Qxf5, which would leave little prospect of a decisive result. **24...e3!** Only a temporary pawn sacrifice, and it gives Black tremendous possibilities against White's weak dark squares. **25.fxe3** 25.Rxe3 is better, according to analysis engines, though after 25...Rxe3 26.fxe3 a calm move such as 26...h6! leaves White struggling to solve his dark squares problems. **25...Qe5** Looks good, and Black was still a lot better after this but Stockfish finds the delightful 25...Qb6! when Black will soon concentrate his whole arsenal of pieces against e3 and White won't be able to assemble enough defenders. In truth, it's a computer move, predicated on Black having an answer to White's counterplay on the light squares: 26.Qd3 Rd8 27.Qc4 and now the hard to find 27...Qb8! Even a 2800+ rated player would be pleased to find that. **26.Rf4 Qxb2 27.Qc2 Qe5 28.Kg2 c5 29.Re2 Re7 30.Qc4 Rd8 31.Rf3 h6 32.Qf4?** Until here Black still had good prospects of a win but with queens off the super-GM has enough wriggle room to survive. **32...Qxf4 33.Rxf4 Rd3 34.Ba2 Rdx3 35.Rxe3 Rxe3 36.Ra4 Kf8 37.Ra7 Re7 38.Ra8+ Re8 39.Rxe8+ Kxe8 40.Kf3 Ke7 41.Ke4 ½-½**

Four-times Gibraltar winner Hikaru Nakamura also couldn't make an impression on 35-year-old Serbian FM Vaso Blesic. This was the first time the American had failed to win his first-round game here since 2007 when he lost to Ketevan Arakhamia-Grant, but of course first-round draws don't matter much and he will doubtless soon be back to his irresistible self.

Further down the pairings may be found a sprinkling of surprising results. For example, Anand drew and Yifan won. No, not the famous Anand (who's currently sharing the lead at Wijk aan Zee) nor the equally famous Yifan (currently studying at Oxford University in England), these were 17-year-old Indian Anand Nadar, who managed a draw with 2700-rated Russian GM Maxim Matlakov, and 13-year-old Zuo Yifan, a male player from China, who beat Spanish GM Jaime Santos Latasa, who messed up a much superior position and then blundered horribly. 19-year-old Austrian GM Valentin Dragnev was another GM casualty, succumbing to the 40-year-old Nigerian player Kolade Onabogun. I've not seen the score of that game yet, so don't know how it came about.

Other surprises were on the cards, for example IM Gary Lane of Australia looked odds on to beat Pavel Eljanov of Ukraine at one point, blundering when on the brink of success, but nothing much else materialised by way of giant-killing. Last year Gary Quillan was the round one hero after beating Daniil Dubov, who has subsequently gone on to win the world rapidplay championship, but at the same stage this year Gary was tamed by Swedish GM Nils Grandelius.

Women's world champion Ju Wenjun got off to a winning start but one of her main rivals Anna Muzychuk was held to a draw by 15-year-old Russian woman IM Elizaveta Solozhenkina. There were more draws for some of the top women players who were drawn down, including former women's world champion Tan Zhongyi against Malaysian FM Ren Lim Zhuo, Natalia Pogonina against Indian WFM Sahajasri Cholleti, and GM Nino Batsiashvili who drew with regular Spanish visitor Enrique Osuna Vega.

Report Ends

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