



GIBRALTAR

INTERNATIONAL CHESS FESTIVAL

Monday 20 January - Thursday 30 January 2020

2020 Gibraltar Masters: Round 9 - 29 January 2020

John Saunders reports: Round nine, the penultimate round of the 2020 Gibraltar Masters, took place on Wednesday 29 January at the Caleta Hotel. If round eight was a little dull, this was a major contrast with a whole host of decisive results among the leading pairings, and some of the draws were highly entertaining.



Wang Hao versus David Paravyan was a draw but not a dull one

The pairings between the four leaders were draws, but anything but dull. Wang Hao versus David Paravyan opened with a Sicilian, Moscow variation, and started to get lively when Wang Hao went into a line which allowed his opponent to take a pawn on f2 with a knight. The problem was that the knight had a problematic escape. Nevertheless, Paravyan found a way to emerge with two minor pieces for a rook. Only then did the game calm down and eventually a draw was agreed.



Maghsoodloo-Esipenko was a draw but also arguably the game of the round

The other game between the leaders, Parham Maghsoodloo versus Andrey Esipenko was a humdinger, and for much of the game a draw was the least likely outcome. The opening was a sort of Giuoco Piano / Two Knights' Defence hybrid. In this teenage brawl, the 19-year-old Iranian was the more enterprising of the two, punting a

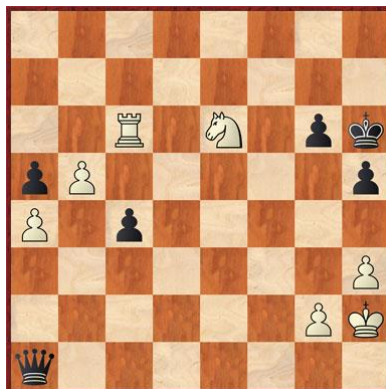
pawn sac which had been played by Vajda against Sutovsky a few years ago, with Black diverging with 11...Bd6. But the real craziness started on move 19.



Here Maghsoodloo played **19.exd6!**? sacrificing his queen for two minor pieces and the opportunity to drive Black back to the edge of the board. Parham has some nerve, I'll say that for him. It was by no means easy for Black to defend, and there were plenty of tricks and traps along the way but, eventually, Black's heavy material advantage began to tell. Esipenko gave back an exchange to simplify the position but, with queen for rook and knight, and the likelihood of mopping up some pawns, the position still greatly favoured Black. However, the way to victory wasn't easy and the young Russian slipped up, allowing Maghsoodloo to concoct a drawing pattern based round a far advanced pawn which the queen could not stop from queening. So Black had to take a perpetual. The final phase of the game is worth a more detailed look.

Round 9

P.Maghsoodloo (2674) - A.Esipenko (2654)



50...Qxa4? After this, White finds an incredible way to draw. Instead Black had an equally incredible way to win. **50...Qe5+!** **51.Kh1 c3** **52.b6 Qe4** **53.b7** (There is nothing better) **53...Qb1+!** **54.Kh2 Qxb7** **55.Rxc3 Qe4** when Black threatens the knight and also a deadly fork with **56...Qe5+**. The best White has now is **56.Rc5** when **56...Qxa4** is an easier win than taking the knight. **51.Rc8** Now Black is obliged to address the mate threat. **51...g5** **52.b6 Qb4** White would so like to play **52...Qd7** but of course it loses to a tactic: **53.Rh8+ Kg6** **54.Nf8+** and White wins. **53.Nd8!** This doesn't look a great square for the knight but it's the only move to hold. Black cannot play **53...Qxb6** because of **54.Rc6** winning the queen, when the knight can stop both the black passed pawns. **53...c3** **54.b7** Looking at the position, you feel there ought to be some way the queen and two menacing passed pawns can get the better of rook, knight and pawn, but it's simply not there. **54...c2** **55.Rxc2!** Now Black's queen can win either rook or knight but neither does him any good. **55...Qd6+** **56.Kh1 Qd1+** **57.Kh2 Qxd8** **58.Rc8 Qd6+** **59.Kh1 Qd1+** **60.Kh2 Qd6+** **61.Kh1 Qd1+** **62.Kh2 ½-½**

An excellent fight, and Maghsoodloo earned his slice of luck with his enterprising / bonkers* play in the middlegame. (* delete the adjective you consider least appropriate to describe White's queen sac).

Yilmaz-Cheparinov was a highly imbalanced and difficult struggle, and not just for the players. I've tried to understand it and not entirely succeeded. From the moment that Cheparinov sacrificed a pawn on move 11,

there was a flurry of tactics that is hard to understand in the limited time available to your humble scribe between the end of the round and tomorrow's criminally early start, so I'm going to abdicate and allow the reader to look it out for themselves. The one thing I can say about it is that it was entertaining, for which great credit to both players. One cannot help feeling a bit sorry for Ivan Cheparinov, who was the pacesetter from the beginning of the tournament, but he now misses out on the fight for first. But for the Turkish GM it was a great achievement to go toe to toe with the former Gibraltar Masters winner.



Yilmaz-Cheparinov: the chess equivalent of the gunfight at the OK Corral

Praggnanandhaa-Kobalia wasn't quite as entertaining a draw as board two, but that's an impossible standard to live up to and it was well contested. Kobalia gave up a pawn for an initiative and to push Pragg's knight to the edge of the board out of play. But Pragg stood firm and Black couldn't find a way to capitalise, so he opted for a rook sacrifice leading to perpetual check. It leaves both players still in the hunt for the first prize. What a story it would be if the 14-year-old were to pull it off – but we must not get ahead of ourselves or jinx the youngster's chances.

We'd best skip over the all-Russian (lack of a) clash between Yuffa and Alekseenko as they perpetrated a known perpetual check line for a draw in 14 moves. But two of the tournament's biggest names roused themselves for some action this round. Despite an early exchange of queens, Maxime Vachier-Lagrave poked and prodded at Emre Can's position until it began to crumble, and Black couldn't cover with all his positional weaknesses. Once the Frenchman had annexed a pawn and swapped off the rooks, he didn't need as many as 400 blows to dispel his opponent's grand illusion of a draw, and White was soon living la vie en rose in the hotel bar.



Veselin Topalov is still in contention for a major prize if results go his way

Veselin Topalov was also at his best, starting slowly with a modest Giuoco Piano against Italian GM Pier Luigi Basso but getting into top gear when his opponent allowed him to open up the h-file, though it cost him a couple of pawns to do so. Analysis engines aren't entirely convinced of the potency of White's attack but in practice it looked scary and hard to defend against. Before Topalov had three pawns for an exchange sacrifice, thus giving him a material advantage. Perhaps the decisive factor was that Black's king was the more vulnerable, and White soon added to his pawn superiority to make it a relatively easy win.



David Navara told Tania Sachdev he thought his round nine game was his best ever in Gibraltar

David Navara came into the interview room declaring that his win against Argentinian GM Alan Pichot had been his best ever at Gibraltar (and this is his fifth visit). It involved a piece sacrifice for pawns and initiative, featuring a long king hunt.

Round 9

A.Pichot (2606) - D.Navara (2717)

1.e4 c5 2.Nf3 d6 3.d4 cxd4 4.Nxd4 Nf6 5.Nc3 a6 6.h3 e6 7.g4 Be7 8.g5 Nfd7 9.h4 b5 10.a3 Bb7 11.Be3 Nc6 12.Qd2 Rc8 13.Rh3 b4 14.axb4 Nxb4 15.Nb1 15...Nce2 was played in Demchenko-Gelfand, Moscow Aeroflot 2016, which Black won. 'Undeveloping' the knight has repercussions later when the time comes for Black's sacrifice. 15...a5 16.c3 Nc6 17.Nb5 d5 18.exd5 exd5 19.Qxd5 0-0 20.Na7 20.N1a3 looks reasonable for White, and he would remain a pawn up. 20...Nxa7 21.Qxb7 Bc5!? 22.Bxc5 White decides to be greedy and accept Black's ambitious piece sacrifice, but Stockfish prefers to decline and continue with a move such as 22.Nd2 though that would rely on some tricky computer tactics after 22...Nc6 when White has to be very sure of finding an escape route for his queen. 22...Nxc5 23.Qxa7 Re8+ 24.Re3 Rxe3+ 25.fxe3 Qe8 26.Kf2 Ne4+



Now what to do? It's hard knowing the right way to go for the white king which is clearly under heavy pressure. 27.Kf3? Stockfish thinks White should content himself with 27.Kg1 Qe5 28.Bg2 Qg3 29.Na3 when Black is obliged to take the perpetual check on offer. 27...f5 28.gxf6 Qh5+! The king hunt begins. 29.Kxe4 Qg4+ 30.Ke5 30.Kd3 is better, but 30...Rd8+ 31.Qd4 Qd1+ 32.Kc4 Rxd4+ 33.exd4 Qxf1+ 34.Kb3 a4+ should still win for Black, much in the same way as the game. 30...Re8+ 31.Qe7 gxf6+ 32.Kd6 Qd1+ 33.Ke6 Rxe7+ 34.Kxe7 Qxf1 35.b4 axb4 36.cxb4 Qd3 37.Ra8+ Kg7 0-1

The next seven pairings in order all finished with a white win in what was a particularly bloodthirsty round. Adams-Antipov was a see-saw struggle and very un-Adams-like in its wildness. Adams admitted to interviewer Tania Sachdev that he had been “incredibly lucky to win” but felt it was a sort of evening up process for those games where he had nursed an advantage but not quite found a win.



Mickey Adams admitted he was “incredibly lucky” against Mikhail Antipov

Mickey found himself facing the inevitable loss of a piece but in turn he received a couple of pawns which could be used to construct a wall to keep his Russian opponent at bay. That plan probably wouldn't have worked but for an injudicious 35...Ng6 move which increased Mickey's material compensation to three pawns, with two of them being passed and connected. Just as the time control was reached, Antipov's mishandling of the position under time pressure had converted Adams's material compensation into a won position.

Gawain Jones' win over Li Di of China ensured that they will be two English GMs in with a shout of the first prize come tomorrow. A Petroff led to an even middlegame position which was later spiced up with a pawn sacrifice by the Englishman, playing White. Under pressure from a kingside attack, Black was obliged to give up the exchange for a pawn. It started to look difficult for the Chinese player anyway, but a further tactical slip saw Gawain's pieces swarm in for the kill.



Lei Tingjie is one of four players half a point behind Tan Zhongyi in the race for the top women's prize

Tan Zhongyi now heads the race for the top women's prize after drawing with Black against Daniele Vocaturo of Italy and seeing her overnight rival Zhansaya Abdumalik lose to Murali Karthikeyan in a 74-move rook and pawn endgame. Three players join the Kazakh player on the same score. Lei Tingjie drew with Maxime Lagarde, Nino Batsiashvili beat the Canadian FM Victor Plotkin, and Lela Javakishvili beat Iozefine Werle.

Leaders after round nine: 1-5 Andrey Esipenko, David Paravyan (both Russia), Wang Hao (China), Parham Maghsoodloo (Iran), Mustafa Yilmaz (Turkey) 7/9; on 6½ are a further 16 players, including Maxime Vachier-Lagrave (France), Veselin Topalov (Bulgaria), Mickey Adams (England), David Navara (Czech Republic), Le Quang Liem (Vietnam), Daniil Yuffa, Mikhail Kobalia (both Russia), Rameshbabu Pragganandhaa (India), etc. So that's 21 players who still have an interest in the first prize. The female players with the best scores are now Tan Zhongyi (China) on 6, followed by Zhansaya Abdumalik (Kazakhstan), Nino Batsiashvili, Lela Javakhishvili (both Georgia) and Lei Tingjie (China) on 5½.

NOTE: the final round takes place on Thursday 29 January at **11am** Central European Time (GMT+1) in the Caleta Hotel. That's **four hours earlier** than the usual start time (to allow for possible play-offs in the event of a tie for the first prize). Please do tune in for the live broadcast conducted by GM David Howell and WIM Fiona Steil-Antoni at <https://www.gibchess.com/live-commentary>

Report Ends

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