

# Chess *Moves*

GM Peter Wells writes ---



## The FIDE World Championship and the prospects for Ian Nepomniachtchi

Starting on 26th November and lasting almost three weeks,

the chess world can look forward to the enticing prospect of Magnus Carlsen - already generally regarded at the tender age of 31 as one of the great World Champions -- defending for the 4th time the title he first won in 2013. Dubai will be the venue for an event which remains the chess world's showpiece, almost necessarily becoming the occasion for unparalleled attention and intense speculation. In the present instance I think there are reasons for finding the upcoming prospect of the challenge from Magnus's childhood rival Ian Nepomniachtchi (definitely pronounced Jan rather than Ian!) not just fascinating but also hugely significant.

For chess is enjoying an extraordinary surge in popularity, even as some within the game publicly express concerns about the impact of ever deepening silicon-assisted opening preparation upon the continued viability of classical time controls. I have tended to be one of those who sees positives as well as negatives in the game's evolution. Still, there is no denying that the dearth of decisive classical games in the matches in which Magnus has faced other players from his generation - only two from the 2016 match against Sergey Karjakin and, and none at all three years ago against Fabiano Caruana - has raised some difficult questions. I will not be alone in desperately hoping this is not repeated. For however much we know that draws can be full

of fascinating content, and however exciting the ensuing tie-breaks have been in the aforementioned encounters, a lengthy series of split points is never an easy sell. This matters, for the wider world is likely to be paying attention, perhaps on a scale not seen since 1972, or at least since the politically charged rivalry between Karpov and Kortchnoi, now almost 40 years ago.

For many observers, the hopes for breaking this pattern rest heavily with the combative, dynamic style of the challenger, whilst it is also possible to find pundits for whom these qualities - together with the often unsettling speed of Nepomniachtchi's play - render him an unusually dangerous opponent for Magnus. Furthermore, it is striking that Nepo - an abbreviation which makes obvious sense, even when writing without a strict character limit - is the first challenger since 2008 to approach the contest with a plus score against the champion in classical play. A record of + 4 = 6 - 1 against Magnus sounds very impressive (and it is - few others can make a similar claim). However, I think the widespread view that the salience of this factor is limited by how long ago some of these games took place is correct. For, as I mentioned above, these two were childhood rivals and at the time of his first victory in 2002, Nepo candidly admits that this was "just another game for me - you know, some guy from Norway!" Although his opponent played well and, one year later when they met again it had already become very clear that Magnus was anything but 'just some guy from Norway,' the whole experience seems far removed from what is to come this month.

If anything, it seems to me that their most recent decisive classical game, Magnus's extraordinary win from 2019 in Croatia superbly covered in an entertaining and

instructive video from Daniel King - see 50-50 | Ian Nepomniachtchi vs Magnus Carlsen | GCT Zagreb 2019 -

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=o3G5J80JE80> - might present rather more of a concern for Nepo. It also provides grist to the mill for anyone (myself included) who wants to caution against stereotyping the players' respective styles. From a neutral standpoint this game was an intriguing example of the extent to which static and dynamic factors tend to be intertwined, but it was very much a case of Nepo focusing highly plausibly upon his positional assets, to be hit by a series of dynamic counterblows from Magnus which muddied the waters enough for him to lose his way. This doesn't really fit the prevailing narrative! Yet, as I suggested in my column last month Magnus can look equally at home mixing it in sharp positions. His exceptional capacity for maintaining the pressure in positions which appear to be tending towards sterile equality may be his hallmark, but this is just one facet of his appreciation of the vulnerability of his opponents. He excels at piling on pressure of all kinds. For all this, Fabiano Caruana is almost certainly right to say that stylistically "differences between top players are going to be in the details". If your weaknesses are too glaring in any particular area of the game, you probably will not find yourself amongst their number, an insight which could temper many an extravagant narrative on the likely course of the match.



Magnus Carlsen & Ian Nepomniachtchi  
(pictures by Lennart Ootes and Etery Kublashvili, Wikipedia)

If the past record of their head-to-head encounters should not be afforded too much weight – neither, I think, should the fact that the two of them have previously worked together. My impression of games between players in this potentially awkward situation is that their work often leaves a small number of openings which they have analysed together which - more out of prudence than any (even unspoken) agreement - the two players decide should not be the focus of their future contests. However, in this case their work dates from almost a decade ago and I don't think that either this, or their apparently cordial personal relations, will have a substantial impact on the match.

There are two areas where I think that those supporting Nepo should place their hopes. The first is simply the tight margins involved in Magnus's most recent World Championship victories. It is natural enough to be influenced by the aura which has grown up around Magnus. This derives not just from the longevity of his grip on the title, but also his impressive series of tournament victories and the often comfortable margin at the top of the rating list which has underpinned his status as the long-time No. 1 player in the world. The temptation arises from all this to look back on his last two World Championship matches with the feeling that the outcomes were somehow inevitable, whereas in fact they were both extremely close.

Yes, his experience of these matches now gives Magnus an added advantage. Despite years of tense tournament play, I can merely guess at the pressure which a player feels in these extreme pressure situations in which, game after game, a single win can have such a seismic impact, with so much at stake. Listening directly to those who have been grappled with this 'stress' gives a better idea of it and I would heartily recommend the Chess.com interview with Fabiano Caruana to try to get a handle on this -

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mjcTKOfi1dg>. For sure, the Candidates tournament is tough and the year-long Covid-induced pause

between the beginning of the event and the end presented unique challenges which Nepo navigated superbly. Nonetheless, I suspect that nothing quite prepares a player for the stresses of the match to come.

Having said that, similar arguments could also have been advanced in 2016 and 2018 and Magnus's two adversaries gave an excellent account of themselves. Having cautioned against assessments too infused with hindsight, we should of course avoid falling into an alternative version of the trap. The Caruana match may have featured 12 classical draws, but Fabiano was actually in a lost position with little time on the clock in the very first game. Had this game gone Magnus's way the story, as Caruana freely admits, might have been very different. Still, overall it is fair to say that Magnus has been notably less dominant in the classical phase of his World Championship matches than elsewhere.

By far the greatest reason for expecting a serious bid from the challenger this time, though, is Nepo's own impressive evolution as a player. There has never been much doubt about his abilities – I remember first noticing his strength right back in 2004 when I did some work with David Howell in preparation for David's appearance at the World Stars series of junior tournaments. As I recall, at that time I was deeply impressed by the mixture of obvious aggression and very secure positional foundations in Nepo's play and my feeling was that he was probably up there with Magnus at the pinnacle of what turns out to have been an astonishingly accomplished cohort. However, there is something of a consensus that for a long time his chess was not reaching the levels it could be. If his style evoked compliments such as 'dynamic', 'aggressive' or 'intuitive', it was also dogged by the flipside of some of these – 'careless' 'impulsive' and so on. There was even a sense – perhaps, retrospectively backed up by Nepo's own admission that it is really only some time in his early twenties that he has shifted his chess work up a gear – that he didn't quite have the seriousness to compete for the game's highest honours. There was even

a quirkiness about parts of his opening repertoire which went beyond the customary 'searching for fresh pastures' and rather tended to support this view. If I were to call the Centre Game – 1 e4 e5 2 d4 exd4 3 Qxd4 – 'semi-frivolous', the truth is that I probably only attach the 'semi' as a mark of respect to Nepo. To my mind, giving tempi for White's queen to settle on e3 just feels wrong and it seemed very strange that he employed this for more than a single 'shock' outing at this level.

At this point I can't resist reference to my own experience playing against the challenger (OK, maybe I didn't try very hard to resist!). I did lose our first encounter in 2009, but even here I got a very promising position with black – almost as soon as we had left the theory – before going astray. In both our remaining two encounters – in 2011 and 2013 – I had the feeling that the sheer speed of my opponent's moves played the decisive role. In the first, I had a large advantage which I turned into a lost position in time trouble, but Nepo then made the decision to sacrifice a piece at great speed, miscalculated and thereby quite unnecessarily jettisoned half a point. In our second draw two years later, a serious slip in the opening – again played at considerable speed – left me with a fantastic position from which he should have never recovered. At some stage I became nervous at the prospect of playing the remainder of the game on increment and permitted a repetition. So yes, I felt the pressure which Nepo's speed can exert upon an opponent, but also benefitted from moments of both impetuosity and carelessness. To be honest, it felt a bit like playing a Super-GM version of Jack Rudd.

What seems to have changed above all is that a more serious Nepo has largely eliminated these moments of recklessness. Interestingly, when asked recently whether he has done any psychological preparation for the match, he responded that if by this is meant "needing to have the correct attitude within yourself, then I've been preparing since childhood". Well maybe, but to the outside observer there has been a palpable change in recent years. We

seem to be witnessing a harder-working, more self-controlled and self-disciplined Nepomniachtchi than ever before. I also liked the admirable restraint he employed when asked whether he had a message for Magnus. My qualification is “already a message to Magnus” he replied! It certainly was. So many players would have been profoundly affected by playing the two halves of the Candidates tournament one year apart, but Nepo handled this consummately. He was dangerous as ever, but more solid, playing at a healthy tempo for sure, but calmer and more patient, as witnessed already in round 1 (right back in March 2020!) with his superb technical conversion against Anish Giri. Intriguingly, Nepo suggested in an excellent interview with the Russian Chess Federation’s Eteri Kublashvili (see Ian Nepomniachtchi: “The strategy was not to lose” (fide.com)) that he benefitted greatly from commentating on the 2018 Candidates, watching players failing to deal adequately with the pressure and “going completely crazy”.

Such composure is the quality he needs above all against Magnus. As Caruana says, the greatest danger for Nepo lies in reacting impatiently to any long string of draws by trying to force the issue. Aggression is good, but this is just the context where he will need his greater patience. I believe we shall also witness the fruits of his hard work and that of his team of seconds – ranging from contemporaries such as Ildar Khairullin of whose chess understanding he speaks so warmly – to, more recently Peter Leko whom Nepo simply describes as ‘a legend’ who has contributed greatly to his ‘chess culture’, which in the challenger’s modest estimation had previously been somewhat deficient. The candidates saw a broader range of openings than we have seen from Nepo before and I anticipate more of the same in Dubai.

A prediction? Well, I saw on Twitter this week complaints that all too many ‘pundits’ were declaring Magnus the favourite, but asserting at the same time that a Nepo victory cannot be ruled out! In other words, they are covering all

bases. I take the point, but this ‘cop-out’ seems almost unavoidable. I have concentrated on Nepomniachtchi here in part because I discussed Magnus last month, but also because I believe the challenger is much the lesser known of the two combatants. It is difficult to avoid the view that Magnus is the favourite, but I am inclined to believe that on average the danger posed by Nepo’s challenge is probably being slightly underestimated. Just this weekend Nigel Short – also on Twitter – expressed a similar view, assessing Magnus’s advantage at 60-40, which sounds about right to me. I am pleased that the length of the match has been extended – 14 classical games this time around – and optimistic that we will see some blood on both sides.

As befits the booming commentary ‘industry’ in chess at present, there are tremendous opportunities to watch the match with knowledgeable, erudite company this year. The English dominated Meltwater team featuring David Howell and Jovanka Houska remains one excellent option. I am also excited at the choice between Anish Giri and Judit Polgar – also on Chess 24, Fabiano Caruana on chess.com or – perhaps most exciting for a player of my generation – Vishy Anand on FIDE’s own coverage. Do tune in - this promises to be a feast.