

## The World Championship 2021: Carlsen – Nepomniachtchi: Reflections by Peter Wells



On December 11th 2021, the third in a series of increasingly perplexing blunders put an end to Ian Nepomniachtchi's (Nepo's) World Championship challenge and saw his opponent, Magnus Carlsen crowned as Champion for an extraordinary fifth time. As someone who had suggested before the match (in the November edition of *Chess Moves*) that the pundits may be dismissing Nepo a little too lightly, I guess this is the moment to eat some humble pie. The emphatic score line of 7.5 – 3.5 meant

that the match even wound up three games before its scheduled finish. In the old system, where draws 'didn't count' it would have sounded even worse as a simple 4-0, so in one sense it is difficult to object to Malcolm Pein's reference in *Chess* magazine to Nepo being 'swept aside'.

However, particularly since Covid prevented me from submitting my intended 'interim report' for the December issue, it feels incumbent on me to recall quite how different the match felt at that stage. For, in a way perhaps not seen since Kasparov's 'officially' thwarted comeback against Karpov in 1984, this was a 'match of two halves'. It is in no way seeking to diminish the portion of pie which I ought to ingest, to claim that a huge part of the tension generated by the most viewed chess match in history, would fail to be captured by overly focusing on Nepo's collapse following the historic sixth game. After five games and for much of the sixth the match was delicately poised, and the general sense was that Nepo could feel quite content with the way he had settled in. Taken as a whole, having followed much of the commentary including that on social media, the match also forms a fascinating study of quite how transient both our narratives and the issues they apparently throw up can prove. It also offered considerable vindication of those who have talked up the importance of psychology in the game. More than any title match I can remember, it felt as if Nepo's demise following Game 6 was, at the risk of brazen self-promotion, *All in the Mindset*.

World Championship games are customarily examined in minute detail both during and after the event and this was truer than ever. The reason was, in part, the very highly qualified teams of commentators and even streamers on hand – I gather the legendary Vasyl Ivanchuk's Twitch stream came as a surprise to many, it certainly did to me! One new addition was the innovation of having top quality engines playing matches from key positions reached in the match, offering an insight into how their numerical assessments were likely to pan out in terms of results – kind of putting some flesh onto the over-used phrase 'with best play'. In any case, despite the lopsided final result, I would contend that the early games offered quite sufficient content to justify such scrutiny.

In particular there were rich pickings for students of contemporary opening preparation and ample evidence not only of very hard graft but also considerable creative thinking on the part of both teams. Indeed, the very first two games vividly

illustrated how advances in opening theory can occur rapidly at the point where assumptions which have long been held sacred begin to be questioned.

Take for example the 8 h3 anti-Marshall position of Round 1.



I wonder how many times players have begun their analysis of this position by inserting the moves 8...Bb7 9 d3 and only then begun to consider whether Black needs to 'be solid' with 9...d6, or can still seek Marshall-style counterplay with 9...d5? I'm pretty sure I have and that I am definitely not alone in this. Megabase 2021 features more than 5,500 games from this position, yet only a handful have featured the 8...Na5!? move which Magnus and his team came up with. Once the e5-pawn is securely defended, of course, there has been a consensus that ...Na5 is a 'positional threat', but surely the e-pawn cannot just be abandoned? The upshot was that Black obtained counterplay for his pawn after 9 Nxe5 Nxb3 10 axb3 Bb7 11 d3 d5 12 exd5 Qxd5 13 Qf3 Bd6, sufficient that it is not hard to believe this will prove attractive to those keen to venture the Marshall Gambit in the first place. This will doubtless be debated further in future, but it was enough to ensure that Nepo didn't repeat 8 h3. Perhaps most impressive of all was that the speed with which Nepo played 14 Kf1 left little doubt that his team had considered this too.

Game 2 also brought home quite how swiftly an opening can evolve once fresh possibilities come into view. The Catalan with 7 Qc2 a6 has been popular for decades, with 7...b5, intending to meet 8 a4 with 8...b4, more recently establishing itself as a more or less respectable alternative.



However, by the time this position arose on the board in Game 2, it was apparently clear to both teams that Black can meet 8 a4 with the surprising 8...Bb7 9 axb5 a6 – a pawn

sacrifice which may in time even prove a stiff challenge to one of the most highly regarded white openings. In the event Magnus elected to take quite a substantial risk - 8 Ne5!? - to shy away from this. In one sense this fitted with the approach which typified his openings – a preference for ensuring that he was the first to deviate from established lines, probably indicating (as I believe Anish Giri suggested) a willingness to venture onto slightly less optimal paths against a human opponent, rather than test the most critical choices which come with increased danger of an engine-generated surprise.

However, whilst this elegantly encapsulates his approach with Black – especially his 8...Rb8 move of Games 5 and 7 – there was surely something more at work here. For a player who later attributed his success to making “very few mistakes in simple positions”, the decision to be the prime mover in reaching the following random mess



was a fascinating and very brave one. Peter Heine Nielsen - the hugely successful leader of Magnus's team - suggested in a superb interview with Chess India's indefatigable Sagar Shah, that this was partly about wanting to have the Catalan available and needing to find an alternative path in order to make it 'playable'. However, in conjunction with the first game it looks very much like an attempt to unsettle Nepo before he could even get any rhythm going and it should be said that – at least prior to Game 6 – it appeared not to have really succeeded on this level.

Given this incredibly lively start to the match, I was quite dismayed at how quickly the narrative about the inevitability of draws in classical chess got going. Of course, given the total absence of decisive games in the Caruana match three years ago and their scarcity against Karjakin in 2016 too, this was always a background concern – and one to which I alluded back in November. However, it took only a couple of less scintillating draws in Games 3 and 4 for this to gain considerable momentum. Game 4 in fact struck me as a considerable achievement by Nepo, whose stunning preparation deftly removed the sting from a creative novelty, a tribute not only to his team's thoroughness, but indeed a reminder of how all this involves extraordinary feats of memory.

There are, I would suggest, two versions of this narrative. The more radical is that classical chess itself is in crisis – that the ever deeper penetration by engines in the opening phase (and beyond) has gradually squeezed the ability of White not just to obtain an advantage, but even to reach a sufficiently interesting position that playing for a win is realistic in the absence of blunders. If I understood him correctly, I think I am with Peter Heine Nielsen on this: we may be headed in this direction, but we are not

there yet. Moreover, when this does become a more urgent worry, my sympathies will almost certainly lie with those who wish to mix things up through modifying the time control etc. rather than by moving to Chess 360 or otherwise messing significantly with the rules. The less drastic version of the argument is that it is the structure of World Championship matches specifically which render this crisis far more acute – the lengthy preparation over several months directed at one specific individual which enables it to reach far more threatening proportions than in other events. Add to this the fact that coming back from a defeat in a match of just 12 or 14 games is notoriously difficult – thus tipping the players in the direction of a ‘safety first’ mentality – and I am inclined to agree that this adds up to a significant issue. Once again, though, I think reform should be approached with caution. Unprecedented viewing figures for this match suggest once again that a head-to-head World Championship contest has a special appeal and that the chess world should be especially judicious in how it seeks to improve the format. It bears repeating that it is our rich history which does so much to ensure that chess is not perceived as ‘just another board game’. It should also be mentioned that some attempts at reform were implemented this time: the slightly longer match – scheduled at 14 games, alongside a less generous time control (30 second increment only after move 60) and fewer rest days. With regard to the latter in particular, it is arguable that what is an advantage in terms of trying to break a deadlock might prove detrimental once the situation changes into one of a player seeking to come back from behind. We can only speculate whether a bit more time to rest might have offered Nepo the chance to recover some of his composure.

My first worry that we might not see a decisive game – or more specifically that Nepo might be proceeding too gingerly to be a player able to deliver one – occurred in Game 5. This moment has been widely discussed, but I think it is significant enough to bear repeating. From the diagram, having secured just the kind of pleasant edge which appeared to be the goal of his opening strategy, Nepo failed to seize the moment, eschewing a move which seemed obvious enough to most observers.

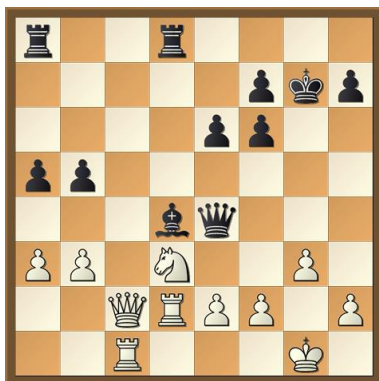


the approach he opted for to work, it was essential that he should seize any chances that came along. Magnus had placed his pieces slightly strangely here and White's obvious plan of seizing space by pushing the c-pawn with 20 c4! (looking to push further) would have likely placed Black under some tangible pressure. In the press conference, Nepo seemed keen to suggest that his preference for 20 Red1 was merely a stylistic choice, motivated by a keenness to keep the c4 square for a piece. Deep down, though, I suspect he knew. Matthew Sadler informs us that Black tended to hold the position after 20 c4! in games between the top engines, but did so with 20...Qe6! This makes sense in that it pins the pawn against the b3 bishop, but nonetheless looks very awkward to the human eye. In any case, the point is that White's goal in such positions is to put pressure and make the defender uncomfortable and Nepo here missed his single best chance to do this in a risk-free setting.

It is way beyond the scope of this article to attempt a comprehensive analysis of Magnus's historic victory in Game 6. Interested readers can find myriad sources discussing the play in detail. I will limit myself here to a couple of brief comments.

Firstly, there is no real debate that this was *the* turning point of the match. Not only was it the game which broke the deadlock, but from the point where the queenside pawns were cleared away, Magnus's extraordinary, remorseless technique throughout the different phases, never mind the record number of moves for any World championship (an impressive 136!) must have been utterly exhausting for the defender. For Magnus too, but it is much easier to take this gruelling schedule (the game ended after midnight!) when victorious. This grinding is prime Magnus territory anyhow and combining relief with deep satisfaction he was clearly ecstatic at the end.

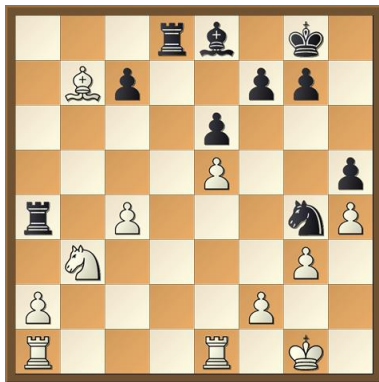
Somehow, this mammoth achievement did a great deal to dampen the narrative that classical chess is in crisis. Curious, in a way, since if the only way to break the deadlock were to put the two players through an ordeal on that scale then it might be rational to start having more serious misgivings! Moreover, whilst I have seen varying descriptions of this extraordinary game, I feel strongly that credit has to go to Nepo for the intensity of the fight, and even the pessimists have never doubted that classical chess can produce great fights if both sides are intent on playing for the win. Several of Nepo's decisions – keeping queens on the board with ...gxf6 and the much criticised decision to go for the imbalance of queen v two rooks with the infamous 25...Rac8 from the diagram below, only really make sense if he had half an eye on fighting for the full point.





I liked Jan Timman's insightful observation that "It's hard to see how Black could realistically play for a win with his weakened king's position," but at the same time the whole picture was blurred by Magnus's rare time pressure and - as a matter of record - there is no denying that Black's best chances to emerge victorious came later, with his curious failure to play ...Bxb4 on either moves 35 or 36.

If this has an impact on the relevance of this game to the classical chess debate, it pales in comparison with the effect it probably had on Nepo. Losing an exhausting game after a heroic defence is one thing, but where it is possible to look back on moments which make it feel like a full-point swing, the pain is increased considerably. None of this fully explains the subsequent collapse, but I had the feeling that people underestimated the extent to which Nepo should take time out for recovery and not try to force the pace. In fact, he did this - very sensibly - for one round, but in Game 8 he looked (actually for the first time in the match) totally out of shape. He seemed to invest time at the wrong moments, be unsure as to his aims in the game - for all that the use of the Petroff Defence should have offered a clue - and then blundered to render his overall task in the match essentially insurmountable. I don't want to dwell on the sad demise - I am worried that this is the part of the match which will, thanks to the headlines, be all too easily remembered. However, one further moment is worth recalling.



The first thing to say here is that, until the blunder, Nepo had somewhat resembled his old self. Black is fine in this position, but by playing 27 f3!? Nh6 28 Be4, Nepo could have perhaps ensured that it was Magnus who would have to make good decisions to secure full equality - 28...Rxc4 29 Rec1, for example, could lead to trouble. Instead Nepo played the catastrophic blunder 27 c5?? allowing his bishop to be trapped with 27...c6.

We are all accustomed now to chess spectators playing the instant expert thanks to the proximity of an engine, but this time when there was a chorus of discontent at the primitive nature of the blunder, it was hard to disagree. Yes, most amateur players would indeed spot the problem with 27 c5. I couldn't help recalling one of Capablanca's outrageously immodest annotations which, from memory, ran something like "My opponent should have realised that a player of my skill and experience would never have allowed such a move, if it were good!" Probably some such thought from Nepo would have sufficed to realise that such an 'ideal' move must have a flaw if Magnus had permitted it. I also had nagging away at me a Twitter exchange from a couple of days before where I had replied to an excellent general point from @Duffman, by indicating

that it was a bit far-fetched to imagine that a piece blunder might decide a game at this level. More humble pie.

This blunder seemed to cause genuine sadness in the chess community. Niclas Huschenbeth tweeted with more than a hint of bitterness: "I hope everybody who complained about the first five draws is happy now" and honestly, I couldn't help sympathising. My own tweet, pointing out that even Magnus looked "conflicted" – his relief and obvious sporting gain seemingly balanced by some regret at the manner of his opponent's collapse – was positively received. As Vishy Anand said poignantly, after a move like 27 c5?? "You don't even know what to tell yourself anymore."

Nepo's final blunder two days later was again best summed up by a tweet, this time David Smerdon who lamented "Oh Nepo, no, not like this." That too echoed my feelings watching live, but there was no getting away from the fact that the end no doubt came by now as a great relief.

### Afterword

So where did the match leave us? First and foremost, in great admiration of Magnus. Yes, he only prevailed by a single win in the phase of the match in which his opponent played at the level of which we know he is capable. Yet the fact that Nepo collapsed in the way he did is itself down to Magnus. As Jonathan Rowson wrote in *The Moves that Matter* "At some point you have to accept the brutality of competition. The strength of really strong players lies in their ability to make other strong players play below their strength...The strong weaken the weaker because strength is ultimately a function of the will, and in a context where there is no escape, one side's will ultimately yield to the other." Yes, Magnus is unmatchable in simple positions in particular, but it is probably his astonishing will to win which ultimately gives him the edge. It is hard to imagine any other player who could have triumphed in the crucial sixth game, and it was this essentially which won him the contest.

Magnus didn't wait long after his celebrations to drop a bombshell. Despite having appeared unusually content through much of the match, his reservations about the World Championship match system, together perhaps with the limited satisfaction which he derived from Nepo's psychological collapse, led him to suggest that he may elect not to defend his title next time. This was not, he hastened to add, an announcement of retirement but rather a refocussing on a new goal – to be the first player to reach 2900.

This may, of course, help to foster a fruitful discussion regarding the future of the World Championship and perhaps some moves towards reform. Or, regrettably, it could lead to a World Championship without the player generally acknowledged to be the best in the world.

Intriguingly, but in my view a little disturbingly, Magnus did suggest that the qualification of Alireza Firouzja for the next match could motivate him to play. This struck me as a little odd on two levels. First, the days in which the World Champion could seek to influence who would be his challenger appeared to be gone and unlamented. There is nothing wrong *per se* with what Magnus has said – he has a perfect

right to try or not to defend his title – but the situation which has pertained under his reign in which we could be confident that he would compete with whichever player was thrown up by the system had a very healthy feel to it. Even more than this, I couldn't help wondering whether Magnus had fallen victim to the phenomenon of being swept up by possibly transitory narratives which I discussed earlier. Alireza is a fantastic player, obviously with tremendous potential, and at the time of Magnus's statement he had just enjoyed a magnificent result in the European team championship which had propelled him to the No 2 spot in the World. Perhaps Magnus is simply right and a match with him would be a uniquely compelling prospect. But possibly we might ask, what of Ding Liren, whom Magnus has yet to play in a match and who would have great significance as the first Chinese player to compete in an Open World Championship. Or Nodirbek Abdusattorov who by sensationally winning the World Rapid Championship (in which, incidentally or perhaps not so incidentally, Nepo gave notice that his recovery may not be the slow process that I had feared) perhaps offered a reminder that there may be other major talents in the coming generation. Whatever the future holds, let us hope that our extraordinary World Champion may be at the centre of it for years to come.