

**Eight Good Men: The 2020-2021  
Candidates Tournament**

Dorian Rogozenco

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## About the Author



Dorian Rogozenco is a German-Romanian Grandmaster originally from Chisinau, Moldova, born in 1973. He graduated from the Sports Faculty of the State Pedagogical University in Chisinau in 1994 and gained the Grandmaster title in 1996. He was coached by Vyacheslav Chebanenko.

Dorian has played in four Chess Olympiads. He was Moldovan Champion in 1994 and a winner of the following major tournaments as well as many others: Moscow GM 1992, Lvov 1995 (co-winner), Chemnitz 1997, Bucharest GM 1998, and International Hamburg Championship 2004. He has winner's medals from the national team championships of the Czech Republic (2019) and Romania (2008, 2014, 2015, 2017 and 2020). Dorian achieved a career-high Elo rating of 2577 in 1999. He qualified for the FIDE World Championship knockout stage in 2001 in Moscow and was a member of Ruslan Ponomarev's coaching team preparing for the planned world championship reunification cycle in 2003.

He became a FIDE Trainer in 2011 and a FIDE Senior Trainer in 2019. He was national trainer of Germany in 2014-2020.

Dorian is the author of two books: *Anti-Sicilians – a Guide for Black* in 2003 and *The Sveshnikov Reloaded* in 2005, as well as the author or co-author of many chess DVDs. He was also Chief Editor of the Romanian chess magazine *Gambit* in 2003-2013.

Dorian has lived in Hamburg, Germany, since 2007.

## Introduction

*“We use words like honor, code, loyalty. We use these words as the backbone of a life spent defending something, you use them as a punch line.”*

Colonel Nathan R. Jessep, *A Few Good Men*

Chess is changing. This is a natural process, reflecting similar developments in other facets of our existence. Computers and media influence our way of thinking, and our brains fill with a constantly increasing volume of information. People adapt to all kinds of change, and many things hardly imaginable even a short time ago become a normal part of everyday life. But essentially humans are the same, and there have always been values that don't change, even if pretty often they are hidden or distorted. One such value, if and when we can handle it, is the truth. Sadly, the truth in life can often remain undiscovered for a long time, or even be hidden forever. But not so in chess. “On the chessboard, lies and hypocrisy do not survive long,” wrote the second World Champion Emanuel Lasker nearly a hundred years ago. And this has not changed the slightest bit even today.

The goal of a World Championship cycle is finding out an important truth – who is the strongest player on the planet? Nowadays, the established procedure for determining the opponent for the reigning World Champion is an eight-player double round-robin contest, named the Candidates Tournament. Leaving aside any in-depth discussion about what is “right” or “wrong” in the qualifying system, the Candidates Tournament is a tough fight of eight exceptionally strong professionals, who are trying to prove to be the best challenger to the World Champion.

The fifth Candidates Tournament of modern times had the same procedure as the four previous ones, which were held in London 2013, Khanty-Mansiysk 2014, Moscow 2016 and Berlin 2018. However, the tournament in Ekaterinburg, Russia, turned out to be hugely different. Originally announced by FIDE to take place in the period 15 March – 5 April 2020, the unprecedented circumstances made this Candidates Tournament last more than a year and become the longest over-the-board tournament in chess history.

A brief overview of the facts: on 30 January 2020, the World Health Organization declared a Public Health Emergency of International Concern due to the outbreak of a new coronavirus and advised that “all countries should be prepared for containment”. The new disease was named COVID-19 and the number of confirmed cases was growing worldwide. Global air travel was restricted, and public events of all kinds were cancelled, one after another.

At the beginning of March 2020, one of the participants of the Candidates Tournament, the Azerbaijani Grandmaster Teimour Radjabov, who had qualified by winning the 2019 World Cup, asked FIDE to postpone the Candidates Tournament due to many uncertainties about the virus. However, by that point all arrangements in Ekaterinburg had already been made and there was no consensus on whether the situation in Russia was critical. FIDE turned down Teimour's proposal and on 6 March 2020 Radjabov officially declared his withdrawal from the Candidates Tournament. In accordance with the tournament regulations, FIDE announced the French player Maxime Vachier-Lagrave as the replacement for Radjabov (shortly before this book went to type-setting, in May 2021, it was announced that Radjabov would receive a reserved place in the 2022 Candidates Tournament).

Indeed, by the beginning of March 2020 the pandemic situation in the world was getting worse and Russia had introduced a two-week quarantine for people arriving from certain countries, including China. Ding Liren therefore had to travel two weeks prior to the start of the tournament. Wang Hao avoided the quarantine by flying from Japan. The other foreign participants also arrived in Russia from countries that were not on the quarantine list.

The Candidates Tournament started as scheduled, but the general atmosphere in the Hyatt Regency hotel in Ekaterinburg, where the participants lived and played, was tense. Spectators were not allowed to enter the hotel to visit the playing venue. On the very first day, Wang Hao expressed disappointment about being required to play under such conditions, with Grischuk being more direct later: "The tournament should be stopped. I don't want to play. I don't want to be here," the Russian Grandmaster said after his game from round 5. However, the participants continued to do their jobs, trying to show the best they could on the chessboard under the circumstances.

On 26 March, the day when round 8 was scheduled, FIDE President Arkady Dvorkovich suspended the tournament at the halfway stage. The reason given was that the Russian government had announced it was banning air travel with other countries from 27 March, and that FIDE could not therefore guarantee the safe and timely return of all participants were the tournament to continue. All results of the first 7 rounds remained valid and the tournament would resume from round 8 at a date to be announced by FIDE later. At that moment, two players were leading the tournament with 4.5 points out of 7: Maxime Vachier-Lagrave and Ian Nepomniachtchi. However, MVL had actually defeated Ian in round 7, suggesting he had some momentum going for him.

When the tournament paused after the first half, optimists in the chess community didn't think it would take longer than an entire year before the players would meet again to start the second half, though frankly when it would resume



was really anybody's guess. The global coronavirus pandemic made it impossible to resume the tournament earlier, despite FIDE's attempts to organize it in the autumn of 2020. Finally, the second part of the tournament was announced to start on 19 April 2021 in the same playing venue as the first part.

Certainly, due to the long period between the tournament halves, the logic and natural course of an ordinary Candidates Tournament, played over its usual three-week time period, was broken. The players could rest and prepare for the upcoming games much longer than they ever had before. On the other hand, the whole situation in the world was exceptional and only a handful of strong over-the-board chess events were staged between March 2020 and April 2021. Four participants (Grischuk, Alekseenko and both Chinese Grandmasters) didn't play a single tournament game with classical time control in the over one year break. Though to some fans, fed in the interim by an endless diet of online rapid and blitz, the boom in chess streaming and the award winning Netflix series *The Queen's Gambit*, the pause between the tournament halves perhaps felt shorter chess-wise than it was. *Time flies, doesn't seem a minute* as the famous Murray Head song goes...

When the tournament eventually resumed on 19 April 2021, the players were ready for an uncompromising fight. The effectiveness of their lengthy preparation should not be overestimated, though: the uncertainty about the starting date of the second half due to the coronavirus situation was psychologically trying for the participants. Before the start of the 8th round four players trailed the leaders by one point, and any direct encounter with the leaders threatened to bring important changes to the tournament standings. This happened on the very first day of the second half, when Caruana revealed a spectacular novelty and won his game against Vachier-Lagrave. The fight became very tense: six of the players still had realistic hopes for gold at the start of the second half, and the tension was visible at the board. With every round the participants took increasing risks and the number of decisive games rose dramatically after a few playing days, culminating in round 12 with decisive results in all four games. In this highly tense and stressful battle some players could resist the constantly mounting pressure better than others, and this was reflected in the results of the final days.

On 27 April 2021 the tournament finished with Ian Nepomniachtchi the winner. In fact, the Russian had secured his qualification for the World Championship match with one round to spare, and even after his loss on the last day he came in clear first. "Nepo" was the most stable player throughout the tournament, leading or at least sharing the lead from the very first round. Ian (pronounced "Yan") followed a mature and pragmatic tournament strategy, punishing his opponents for their mistakes and not taking unnecessary risks

himself. His first round victory against Giri and both wins against Wang were particularly impressive, showing Nepo's determined style when fighting for the initiative. Ian also has an excellent feel for his opponents' state of mind. He cleverly finds ways to increase the pressure when his opponents manifest even the slightest sign of nerves.

The fight for second place was tense until the very last game. In the end, it was Maxime Vachier-Lagrave who won silver. Second place is not a bad result, but Maxime was certainly hoping for more after the first half of the tournament. The Frenchman's fearless style reminds me of a street fighter. He was relying on his standard opening repertoire without caring too much that his opponents might have prepared some dangerous ideas (a good example is his game versus Caruana in round 8). Maxime's great ability to calculate variations quickly usually helped him find the right solutions in sharp positions, but his tendency to react quickly in many situations also had a negative impact in some of his games in Ekaterinburg. Especially painful for MVL were his missed chances in both games against Grischuk, when the Frenchman rushed to make a move in his opponent's time trouble, instead of thinking it over more carefully. The puzzling decision to simplify in a complicated position during his 13th round game versus the leader handed Nepo the gold medal with a round to spare and thereby dashed his own hopes of staying in the race.

For Anish Giri, the tournament in Ekaterinburg was his second participation in the Candidates. In Moscow 2016 the Dutch Grandmaster drew all his 14 games and, after his win in round 6 against Alekseenko in Ekaterinburg, Anish described his feelings toward the end of that game: "I almost had a heart attack, because I realized that it's going to be my first ever win at the Candidates. And I think I never had such a heartbeat." That game must have been really inspiring for the Dutchman, whose level of play in the second half was impressive. In rounds 9, 11 and 12, Giri scored convincing victories and before the 13th round he was solely chasing the leader by only half a point. Unfortunately for the Dutchman, he seemed to collapse under pressure, and his level of play in the last two games was clearly below his earlier standard. In the end, Anish's good third place must have felt rather like a disappointment for him.

Fourth place was occupied by the pre-tournament favorite Fabiano Caruana. Possibly the whole atmosphere with the pandemic situation around the tournament prevented the American from demonstrating his best chess in Ekaterinburg. Fabiano's games against Alekseenko and Ding from the first half and the game versus MVL from the second half showed that Caruana had carried out a great deal of prep for the tournament, but his ease of play was just missing in most of his games in Ekaterinburg. After Caruana's perfect start in the second half of the tournament, winning against MVL in round 8, things

never really went his way again. The pale draw against the tournament leader in round 11, followed by the loss with white against Giri, meant the end of all hopes for Fabiano to qualify for the match against Magnus.

With his 8 decisive games, Ding Liren was the most combative participant in Ekaterinburg. Only half of them were victories, though. The first half of the tournament could hardly have gone worse for the Chinese number one, which he finished sharing last place after losing as many as 3 games out of 7. Everyone was trying to figure out what had gone wrong for Ding, who previously never lost so often. Perhaps he also had serious difficulties in adjusting to the stressful situation with coronavirus, especially considering his two-week quarantine near Moscow right before the tournament. Ding started the second half with a quick draw as black against his compatriot, then he missed converting a large advantage against MVL and it looked like his sad story from the first part would continue. But Ding's three victories at the end of the tournament, two of which were played perfectly by him (against Grischuk and Nepo) reminded everyone of his ultra high class. Nevertheless, Ding's fifth place was much lower than the expectations of him before the tournament.

Ekaterinburg was Alexander Grischuk's third participation in a Candidates Tournament (or fifth if you include the old-style cycles of 2007 and 2011), and just like in his two previous tournaments Alexander finished sixth. However, unlike in London 2013 and Berlin 2018, this time Grischuk, the oldest player in the tournament at 37 when it ended, scored victories against players from the top half of the tournament table. It was Grischuk who, in rounds 11 and 13, won against two of Nepo's closest rivals at that moment, MVL and Anish Giri, considerably reducing or even destroying their hopes for gold. His permanent time trouble prevented Alexander from having a real chance of first place himself, but he always remained a dangerous opponent for any participant.

For Kirill Alekseenko, the youngest player in the table at just 23 when the tournament ended, Ekaterinburg was above all a valuable experience. His fighting spirit was impressive (avoiding repetitions in his second games versus Grischuk and Ding) and the level of his play was often excellent, too. Kirill could have won by force in his first game versus Nepo, and in the second one versus Ding, but his lack of experience at such a high level was clearly visible as well, the Russian being the only participant who lost a few games due to bad handling of the opening (his second games versus Nepo and MVL). All in all, seventh place in Ekaterinburg was by no means a bad result for the Russian.

The most unfortunate participant of the Candidates Tournament turned out to be Wang Hao, who from the very beginning wasn't happy about playing in these pandemic times. Nevertheless, he showed good opening preparation and, at times, high-quality play. In the first part of the tournament, he missed

converting winning endgames versus Giri and MVL into full points but still finished sharing third place after the first seven rounds. Wang Hao's problems started in the second half, however. He confessed later that he had even considered quitting the tournament after his 10th round game due to serious health issues. Hao played the tournament until the end, though, making a draw in round 11 and then losing his last three games. At the end of the tournament, Wang Hao declared in an interview that he was retiring from professional chess.

Without doubt, the chess games of the Candidates Tournament represent its biggest legacy, and the goal of this book is to analyze them thoroughly. Besides containing lots of deep strategic ideas, nice combinations and various interesting endgames, the games of leading Grandmasters in a top event like the Candidates Tournament reflect the current state of opening theory. Therefore, when annotating the games, I also tried to explain the opening phase, making a connection between existing theory, the players' experience in the given variation, and potential new ideas from the game.

Also, top-level endgames are often incomprehensible for chess amateurs, even when using a chess engine and knowing its precise evaluation. This can happen in both theoretical endgames (e.g. Giri – Nepomniachtchi) and in complicated practical endgames (e.g. Wang Hao – Vachier-Lagrave). In fact, knowing the engine's evaluation won't help to understand exactly what is happening on the board in certain endgames. Therefore, most endgames in the book are explained in detail not only by giving the variations and evaluations, but also by indicating the plans of the players. Generally, I would advise the readers to forget about the engine and instead analyze the games on the board. Especially in endgames, it is important to understand the purpose of each move by making moves on the board and reading the explanations, instead of looking at often confusing engine evaluations.

When contemplating the structure of the book and how to make it most informative, instructive, but at the same time entertaining for readers, I came to the conclusion that it would be useful to diversify the style of annotating the games. When 56 games of a tournament are annotated by the same person, there is some risk of monotony and thus the idea of inviting one top-class guest annotator per round was born. So I contacted some very special people and extremely strong players, most of whom I have known for many years. Among the guest annotators you can find several ex-World and European Champions, the coaches of Carlsen and Caruana, leading players of their countries and extremely talented youngsters, who are already very strong Grandmasters as well. I would like to thank all members of this Dream Team for their great work and I express the hope that the readers will enjoy their in places very different styles of annotation.

*Some technical information:*

The time control in Ekaterinburg was 100 minutes for the first 40 moves, followed by 50 minutes for the next 20 moves and then 15 minutes for the rest of the game with an increment of 30 seconds per move starting from move 1.

The players could not draw a game by agreement before black's 40th move. A claim for a draw before black's 40th move was permitted only through the arbiter.

The tie-break rules were as follows: a) The results of the games between the players involved in the tie. b) Each tied player's total number of wins in the tournament. c) The Sonneborn-Berger System (summing the score of each defeated opponent and half the score of each drawn opponent).

For analysis of the games in this book I was helped by Stockfish 13 on powerful multiprocessor systems in Cloud. Additionally, Fat Fritz 2 was always running on my desktop (Intel Core i7-4930K, 64GB, configured specially for the use of Fat Fritz).

**Grandmaster Dorian Rogozenco,**  
Hamburg, 25 May 2021

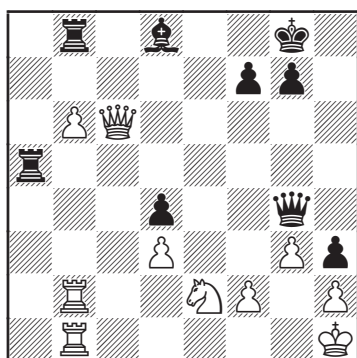
44. ♖h1 ♜e2=) 43... ♞xe4 44. ♞b5 g6.  
I don't really see how white can get  
the h3-pawn, so I think this should be  
a draw.

**32. ♜xd5?!**

Since black has doubled pawns on  
the d-file this one is not so important.  
Why not play 32. ♜e8+ ♔h7 33. ♜xf7  
♞xb6 34. ♞xb6 ♙xb6 35. f3 (or  
35. ♘g1) 35... ♜g5 36. ♘f4+- ? Soon  
white will collect the pawn on h3 as  
well and the rest is simple.

**32... ♞a5 33. ♜c6?**

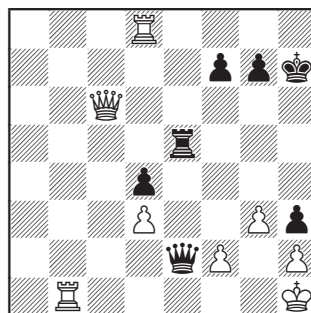
The comedy of errors continues.  
However, it was not so easy to see  
black's idea. 33.f3! was required:  
33... ♞xd5 34. fxg4 ♞b7 35. ♘g1 ♞d6  
(35... ♞g5 36. ♞b5 ♞xg4 37. ♞d5+-)  
36. ♘h3 ♞bxb6 37. ♞xb6 ♙xb6  
38. ♖g2 and white still should win  
without much difficulty. Not only  
because of his extra pawn, but also  
because the knight here is stronger  
than black's bishop.



**33... ♞c5?**

Ding Liren was in bad shape  
during the whole tournament and in  
such circumstances it's hard to expect

him to find the far from obvious 33...  
♞xb6 34. ♞xb6 ♜xe2!! (not 34... ♙xb6  
35. ♘g1) 35. ♞b8 (35. ♞b2 ♜xb2)  
35... ♞e5! 36. ♞xd8+ ♔h7



White has an extra rook, but needs  
to return it in order to save his king.  
37. ♞h8+ (37. ♞g1 ♜xf2) 37... ♔xh8  
38. ♜c8+ ♔h7 39. ♜xh3+ ♔g6=

**34. ♜e8+ ♔h7 35. ♘g1**

Now it's over: the knight is a  
very good defender versus all black's  
threats.

35... ♞xb6 36. ♜xd8 ♞xb2  
37. ♞xb2 ♞c1 38. ♜h4+ ♜xh4  
39. gxh4 ♞d1 40. f3

Soon white will win the h3-pawn  
and later the one on d4. Black decided  
not to continue and resigned here.

**1-0**

**(22) Alekseenko – Giri**

Round 6, 23.03.2020

*Giuoco Piano*

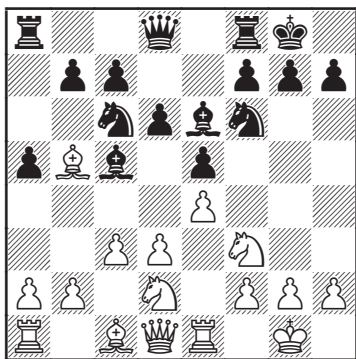
1. e4 e5 2. ♘f3 ♘c6 3. ♙c4 ♙c5  
4. 0-0 ♘f6 5. d3 d6 6. c3 0-0 7. ♞e1 a5

Computers have changed the way  
we treat openings a lot, proving that  
there are often more than one or two

historically established possibilities in many opening positions. Black's last move would have looked quite strange a decade ago, but according to modern theory of the Giuoco Piano the space on the queenside is of big importance and black doesn't mind weakening the b5 square.

However, the standard 7...a6 still remains the main option for black, after which nowadays white usually fights for an advantage with 8.a4.

8. ♖bd2 ♙e6 9. ♙b5



In the semifinal match of the 2017 World Cup, Ding against Wesley So continued here 9...♙b8 10.♖f1 ♙a7 (black prevents the advance d3-d4 this way) 11.♙e3 ♙xe3 12.♖xe3 ♖e7 and since then, the queen maneuver to a7 has become the established way to equalize with black in the diagram position. Perhaps after 9...♙b8 white should act quickly and occupy the center by continuing 10.♙xc6 bxc6 11.d4, which leads to complicated strategic play.

After 8 minutes of thinking the Dutch GM chose a rare option.

9...♙a7

A useful retreat of the exposed bishop, which most likely will gain more popularity in the future. Generally, in the Giuoco Piano lots of transpositions are possible and there is a similar theoretical position with the inclusion of the moves h3 and ...h6. In the present game, the Dutch Grandmaster will take advantage of the fact that these moves haven't yet been played.

10.♖f1

10.d4?! exd4 11.♙xc6 dxc3! leads to an advantage for black.

10...♖e7 11.♖g3

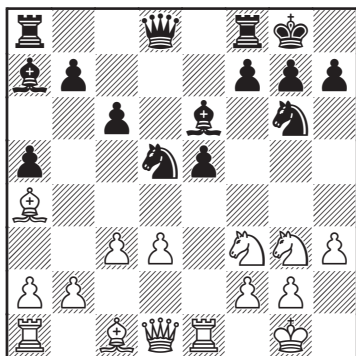
11.d4 is an important alternative. Then white can consider keeping the bishop on the f1-a6 diagonal, for instance after 11...♖g6 (11...c6 12.♙d3!?) 12.♖g3 c6 13.♙f1, although it is not entirely clear yet why the bishop would be better placed on f1 than on c2 (apart from gaining a tempo). Black can continue 13...exd4!? 14.cxd4 d5 15.e5 ♖e4 with approximate equality. Grabbing the pawn with 16.♖xe4?! dxe4 17.♖xe4 offers black good play after 17...♙d5.

11...c6 12.♙a4 ♖g6 13.h3

This looks too slow, allowing black to starting activity in the center. At the same time, black is well developed and so the more active 13.d4 should not be problematic for him either. In that case, after 13...♙g4 white can consider an interesting pawn sac 14.h3!? (after both 14.♙e3 and 14.♙c2 black equalizes with 14...d5) 14...♙xf3 15.♙xf3 exd4 16.♙g5 dxc3

17.bxc3. For a precise evaluation all this needs to be tested in practice.

13...d5! 14.exd5 ♖xd5



Giri has achieved a comfortable position after the opening. His plan is ...♖c7, ...♗ad8, ...♗fe8, which will secure black better chances thanks to the space and pressure on the d-file. In order to avoid such a scenario, white must play d3–d4 at some point and exchange central pawns. Notice that in the diagram position the pawn on e5 cannot be taken in view of the standard tactical trick 15.♘xe5? ♘xe5 16.♗xe5 ♙xf2+ 17.♚xf2 ♖f6+ and black wins thanks to the double attack.

15.♙c2

After the alternative 15.d4 exd4 16.♘xd4 ♖c7 white has little better than transposing to the game with 17.♙c2, because 17.♘xe6? runs into 17...♙xf2+! 18.♚xf2 fxe6+ 19.♚g1 ♖xg3 creating decisive threats against the white king, while Duda's recent attempt to improve for white with 17.♖f3 offered black great prospects after 17...♙xd4 18.cxd4 ♖b6, Duda – Carlsen, Wijk aan Zee 2021.

15...♖c7 16.d4 exd4 17.♘xd4 ♗ae8

17...♘df4 is best answered with 18.♘ge2=, while in case of 17...♗fe8 18.♘xe6 ♖xg3 19.♘d4 ♖h4 white can drive away his opponent's active queen with 20.♗xe8+ ♗xe8 21.g3! although here black still keeps some initiative with 21...♖f6 (21...♖xh3?? 22.♙f5+-)

18.♙g5 ♘df4

18...h6 19.♙d2 ♙xd4 20.cxd4 ♘df4 is also worth considering, hoping to exploit the better pawn structure.

19.♖d2 ♙d5

19...h6 20.♙xf4 ♘xf4 21.♗e4=

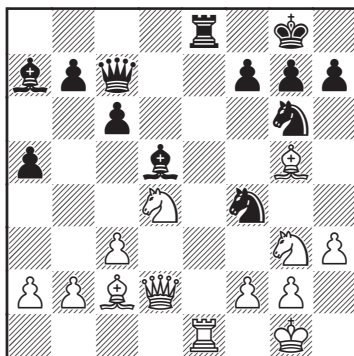
The position is close to equal, but black has some pressure on g2.

20.♗e8

The most accurate path to equality is 20.♙xg6! ♘xg6 (20...♗xe1+ 21.♗xe1 fxg6 allows 22.♗e7 with counterplay) 21.♘df5 f6 22.♙e3 ♙xe3 (22...♙b8 23.♙c5!) 23.♘xe3=

20...♗xe8 21.♗e1

A logical follow-up of the previous move, even if 21.♙xg6 ♘xg6 22.♘df5 was still a good possibility for white.





Curiously, this position was reached one year earlier in another Grandmaster game, which had a different move order in the opening until move 13. That game continued 21...♖xe1+ 22.♚xe1 ♘e6 (22...♘g2?? loses in view of 23.♚e8+ ♘f8 24.♘gf5+-, but 22...♔f8! keeping both g2 and a2 under attack was the best try to create more problems for white) 23.♙e3 (black's point is that 23.♘xe6 loses on the spot in view of 23...♚xg3. 23.♘gf5! is correct and close to equality) 23...♙xd4 24.cxd4 ♘h4 25.♘e4 f5 26.f3 ♚e7 27.♙f2 ♘xf3+! 28.gxf3 fx4♣ and black went on to win in Grandelius – Hovhannisyan, Reykjavik 2019.

### 21...♖e5

Allows white to equalize quickly.

### 22.♙xf4 ♖xe1+

It turns out that after 22...♘xf4 the unexpected answer 23.♙e4! with the idea 23...♙xe4? 24.♚xf4+- winning the bishop due to the pin on the e-file changes the situation in white's favor. Instead of taking on e4 black has to choose between 23...♖e7 24.♘df5 ♖e6 25.c4! ♙xe4 (25...♙xc4? 26.♚c3+-) 26.♘xe4, or 23...♘g6 24.♙xd5 cxd5 25.♘b5 ♖xe1+ 26.♚xe1 ♚xg3 27.♚e8+ ♘f8 28.♘xa7, but in both cases black is left fighting for equality.

### 23.♚xe1 ♚xf4 24.♚e8+?!

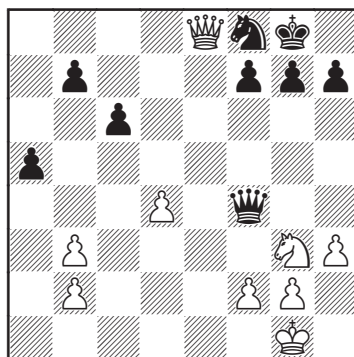
Making life harder again. The queen should have been kept back for defense. After 24.♘gf5 ♙c5 (24...♙f8 25.c4! allows white to activate the

queen on the a5–e1 diagonal) 25.a3 h5 (25...♚g5 26.g3=) 26.b4 axb4 27.axb4 ♙f8 28.♘e3 the position is equal.

### 24...♘f8 25.♙b3

First 25.♘gf5 and only after 25...♙c5 continuing 26.♙b3 is more precise. The point is that the endgame arising after 26...♙xb3 (26...♚c1+ 27.♔h2 ♚xb2? 28.♙xd5 cxd5 29.♚e5+-) 27.axb3 g6 28.♚e3! ♚xe3 29.♘xe3 ♙xd4 30.cxd4 ♘e6 31.d5 is objectively a draw, even if due to his weak doubled pawns white still has a long fight ahead in order to achieve it. A possible continuation is: 31...♘d4 32.dxc6 bxc6 33.♔f1 ♔f8 34.♘c4 ♘xb3 35.♔e2 f6 (if 35...♔e7 36.♔d3 ♘c5+ 37.♔d4 ♘b7 38.♘e5 black must either repeat the position or give back the extra pawn) 36.♔d3 ♘c5+ 37.♔d4 ♘b7 38.b3 ♔e7 39.f4 ♔e6 40.♘d2 ♔f5 41.g3. Black cannot convert the extra pawn due to the passivity of his knight.

### 25...♙xd4 26.cxd4 ♙xb3 27.axb3



Due to white's broken pawn structure on the queenside black is

obviously better, but his advantage should not be overestimated. First of all, if white succeeds in protecting his weaknesses with his queen and knight it is not always possible for black to make progress. Secondly, black's pawns on the queenside can also be attacked by the white queen. And finally, white always has the idea of reducing material with the advance d4-d5.

These general considerations show that black's task to convert the advantage is far from easy. The activity of white's queen also keeps things complicated and, for instance, trying to win material quickly backfires for black: 27... ♖xd4? 28. ♗f5+- or 27... ♖c1+ 28. ♔h2 ♖xb2? 29. ♗f5+-. These variations show that the inclusion of the knight in the attack can be deadly for black.

The strongest continuation for black is 27...h5! (the calm 27...h6 is also good) keeping the active queen on f4 for the moment. The variations below show that everywhere white faces certain problems, for instance 28.h4 ♖c1+ 29. ♔h2 ♖d2! 30. ♔g1 ♖d1+ 31. ♔h2 ♖xd4 threatening to take on h4 with check is just bad for white. 28. ♗xh5 ♖xd4 29. ♖e2 ♖d5 will soon leave black with an extra pawn and a positional advantage. In case of 28. ♖e3 ♗e6 29. ♖xf4 ♗xf4 30. ♔f1 ♔f8 31.h4 g6 the knight endgame is difficult for white due to the differences in the pawn structure and the position of the knights. After

27...h5 the best chances to survive are offered by the moves 28. ♗e4 and 28. ♖e5, but in both cases white must be ready at some point to defend different kinds of positions a pawn down, which is a difficult task in practice.

In the game, Giri retreated his active queen, allowing white to consolidate.

**27... ♖f6 28. ♖e4! g6**

In case of 28... ♗e6 white can choose between 29. ♗e2, which is similar to the game, or 29.d5 cxd5 30. ♖xd5 b6 31. ♖d2 ♖d4 32. ♖c2

**29. ♗e2 ♗e6**

His better pawn structure still secures black a slight advantage, but he cannot convert it into something real due to the fact that white does not have particular difficulties in protecting the weak pawns.

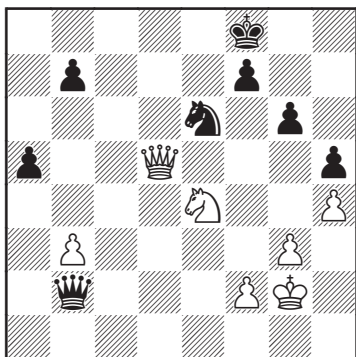
**30.h4 h5**

As indicated by Giri, with the maneuver 30... ♖d8! 31.g3 ♖d6 he could have put more pressure on his opponent. In this variation black prevents white from comfortably placing the queen on e5, as happened in the game.

**31.g3 ♖d8 32. ♖e5! ♖b6?! 33.d5! cxd5 34. ♖xd5**

White has succeeded in getting rid of his weakness on d4 and has equalized completely. The weakness of doubled pawns is compensated by the strong centralized queen on d5.

**34... ♔f8 35. ♗c3 ♖c7 36. ♗e4 ♖c1+ 37. ♔g2 ♖xb2**



38. ♖d7?

With little time on the clock Alekseenko suddenly decides to create threats against the black king. An impulsive decision, which he will regret very soon. 38. ♖xb7 is an easy draw.

38...b6!

Possibly Kirill was counting on 38... ♖xb3?! 39. ♗d6, although even this does not justify his decision on the previous move, because white's initiative is not particularly dangerous for black anyway. For instance, he can continue 39... ♖d5+ 40.f3 (king moves allow black to defend f7 with 40... ♖f3) 40... ♖a2+ 41. ♕h3 ♗d4 42. ♖d8+ ♔g7 43. ♗e8+ ♕h7 and white has nothing better than a draw with 44. ♗f6+ (44. ♖xd4? ♖e6+ 45. ♕g2 ♖xe8+).

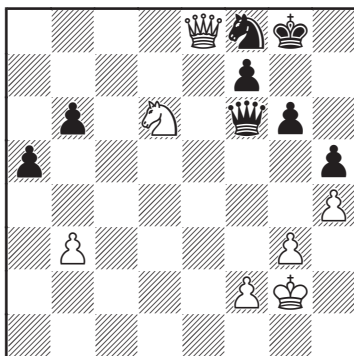
After 38...b6! it turns out that white can no longer win back the pawn and will have to struggle to save the game.

39. ♗d6 ♖f6 40. ♖e8+ ♔g7  
41. ♖d7

“Accompanied by a draw offer, to which I by accident instantly replied ‘yes, I can see that.’ Embarrassing stuff

and my only excuse is that the draw offer came as a shock.” – Anish Giri.

41... ♕g8 42. ♖e8+ ♗f8



The Dutch GM has protected everything and remains with an extra pawn. White is very active, though, and still can make a draw with accurate play. Alekseenko defends well for a long time.

43. ♖c6 ♖d8

43...b5 44. ♖d5! a4 45. ♗xb5=;  
43... ♖d4 44. ♗b5 (44. ♗c4? ♗d7)  
44... ♖c5 (44... ♖d8 45. ♗c7=)  
45. ♖xc5 bxc5 46. ♕f3=

44. ♗c4

A more direct defense is 44. ♗b7 ♖d4 45. ♗d6! ♖b4 (what else?)  
46. ♖d5 ♗e6 47. ♖a8+ ♕g7 48. ♗e8+ ♕h6 49. ♗d6! =

44... ♗e6

44... ♖d7!? was a good try, leaving white with an unpleasant practical choice after 45. ♖xb6 ♖d5+ 46. ♕g1 a4. However, both 47. ♖b4 ♖d1+ 48. ♕g2 ♖xb3 49. ♖xb3! axb3 50. ♕f3 and 47.bxa4 ♖xc4 48.a5 ♖c1+ 49. ♕h2! (49. ♕g2 ♖c8 50.a6 ♗d7 51. ♖a5 ♖a8+ 52. ♕g1 ♖a7+)

♔c8 50.a6 ♘d7 51.♙a5 ♙a8 52.a7  
♙f8 53.♙b4+ ♔e8 54.♙a5 should  
be enough to achieve a draw.

45.♘xb6

45.♙xb6? ♙xb6 46.♘xb6 ♘d4+–

45...♘d4 46.♙c5 ♘xb3 47.♙b5  
♘d2

47...♙d1 48.♙e8+ ♔g7 49.♙e5+  
♙h7 50.♙e8=

48.♙xa5 ♙d3

Giri succeeds in creating an attack  
with his only two pieces, threatening  
mate in two. White's pieces are far  
away and in order to defend white is  
forced to give up a pawn.

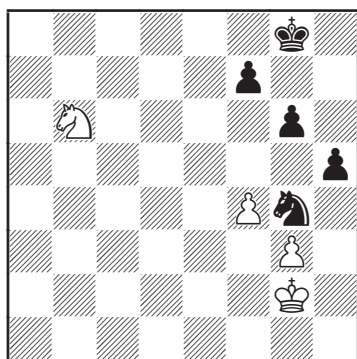
49.♙a1

Other moves won't keep material  
equality either.

49...♙e4+ 50.♔g1 ♘f3+ 51.♔f1  
♘xh4 52.♙a8+

Of course not 52.gxh4?? ♙h1+  
and black wins the queen.

52...♙xa8 53.♘xa8 ♘f3 54.♔g2  
♘e5 55.f4 ♘g4 56.♘b6



This endgame should be a draw,  
of course, but black keeps some  
practical chances and can play on for  
a long time.

56...♔f8 57.♘d5 ♔e8 58.♘c3  
♔e7 59.♘e4 ♘e3+ 60.♔f3 ♘c4  
61.♘g5 ♙f6 62.♘e4+ ♙f5 63.♘f2

Alekseenko decides to keep his  
knight on the kingside and basically  
uses only the f2, h3 and g1 squares  
for it. Both 63.♘c5 and 63.♘c3 were  
safer alternatives.

63...♘d2+ 64.♔e3 ♘f1+ 65.♔f3  
♘h2+ 66.♔g2 ♘g4 67.♘h3  
67.♘d3!?

67...f6 68.♔f3 ♔e6 69.♔e4 ♔d6  
70.♘g1 ♔c5 71.♔d3 ♘h6 72.♔e3

Kirill sticks to his plan to defend  
passively, although there are clearer  
ways for white to achieve the draw.  
The most convincing is 72.♘f3 ♘f5  
73.♘h4! immediately clarifying the  
situation. The point is that after 73...  
♘xh4 74.gxh4 the pawn endgame  
is a draw despite black's extra pawn,  
while after 73...♘xg3 74.♘xg6 ♘f5  
75.♔e4 h4 (or 75...♘d6+ 76.♔f3  
♔d4 77.♘e7 followed by ♔g3–h4)  
76.♔f3 followed by 77.♔g4 the draw  
in the knight endgame is obvious.

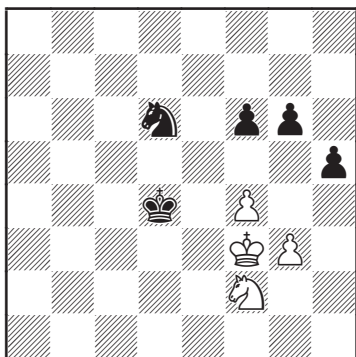
Of course, due to fatigue and the  
time factor in an actual game you  
might consider avoiding the risk of  
calculating a pawn endgame, but in  
that case it is still unclear why white  
would not play 72.♘e2, preventing  
further activity of the black king.  
For instance, 72...♘f5 73.♔c3 ♔d5  
74.♔d3 ♘d6 75.♘c3+ ♔e6 76.♔e3  
♔f5 77.♔f3 ♘c4 78.♘d5=. With his  
knight on d5 white's defense is much  
easier than in the game.

The move played by the Russian  
GM does not change the evaluation

of the position as it remains drawn, but it unnecessarily allows black to make further progress. In that respect, I would point out an important concept. In chess, many mistakes can be avoided by trying to prevent your opponent from improving his or her position at the earlier stages, even if strictly speaking such improvements don't change the evaluation of the position. Each bit of progress made by one side pushes the other side closer to the edge and the price of an inaccuracy becomes higher. As a consequence, more precision is required and the opponent's path to their goal becomes increasingly narrower. This is when mistakes are often made. For a computer, it makes no difference if it has to produce only moves for a long time, but for a human the goal must be to avoid this kind of situation.

Back to the game.

72...♖f5+ 73.♔f3 ♔c4 74.♘h3  
♜d4+ 75.♕e3 ♝f5+ 76.♔f3 ♔d4  
77.♘f2 ♜d6



78.♘h3?

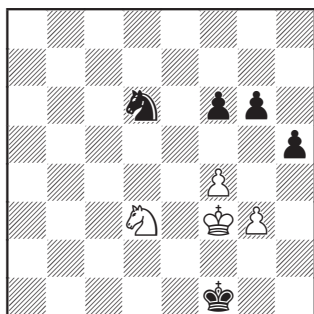
Both 78.♘d1 ♜c4 79.♘f2 and 78.♕g2 ♕e3 79.♘d1+ ♔d2 80.♘b2 would have kept the position drawn.

**78...♘e4?**

Alekseenko's dangerous defensive strategy of keeping the knight on h3 could now have been punished. After either 78...♕d3 or 78...♘b5 black is objectively winning. He must combine two plans: to place the knight on d4 and then bring the king to e4, followed at the proper moment by ...h5–h4, or try to send the king behind the white pawns. At the same time, black should try to prevent white from activating his knight.

Let's see a few example variations after 78...♕d3: 79.♘f2+ (79.♕f2 ♜f5 80.♕f3 ♜d4+ 81.♕f2 ♕e4 leads to the same position) 79...♕d2 80.♘h3 ♜f5 81.♕f2 (81.♘g1 ♜d4+ 82.♕e4 ♕e1! 83.♕xd4 ♕f2 84.♘h3+ ♕xg3 85.♘g1 ♕xf4–+) 81...♘d4 82.♘g1 ♕d3 83.♘h3 ♕e4. This is the winning arrangement of the pieces for black: the king on e4 with the knight on d4. White loses because of the passivity of his knight. 84.♕g2 (84.♘g1 h4–+) 84...♕e3 (84...h4? 85.♘f2+ ♕f5 86.gxh4 ♕xf4 87.♕h3 is a draw, also because white has ideas connected with h4–h5 followed by ♕h4) 85.♘f2 ♜f5 86.♘d1+ ♕d2 87.♘f2 (87.♘b2 ♕e2–+ followed by ...♘e3+ and the black king moves to f3 or f2, winning) 87...♘d6 (87...♕e2? 88.♘e4=) 88.♕f3 ♕e1 89.♘d3+ (89.♕g2 ♕e2 90.♘h3 ♜f5 91.♘g1+ ♕e3 and after either 92.♘h3 or 92.♘f3

black wins with 92...h4, remaining with two extra pawns) 89...♔f1



The plan to send their king behind their opponent's pawns is used in different types of endgames by the stronger side to make progress. White loses because of the weakness of his g-pawn: 90.♖c5 (90.g4 is answered by 90...h4, planning ...♔g1 followed by the further advance of the h-pawn) 90...f5 91.♗e6 ♖e4 92.♗f8 ♔g1 93.♗xg6 ♔h2 94.♗h4 ♗xg3 95.♗g6 ♔h3 96.♗e7 h4 97.♗g6 ♗e4 98.♗e7 ♗d2+ 99.♔e2 ♔g4 100.♔xd2 h3 and the h-pawn queens.

After the move in the game black won't be able to bring the knight to d4 without allowing white to activate his own knight.

**79.♗g1**

Now the position is a draw again up to the final mistake from Alekseenko.

**79...♔d3 80.♔g2 ♗d2**

**80...♔e3 81.♗f3=**

**81.♔f2 ♔e4**

As mentioned above, the king on e4 together with the black knight on d4 and the white knight on g1 would lead to a decisive advantage for black

thanks to the resource ...h5-h4. Here black is too late in bringing the knight to d4, since 81...♗b3 allows 82.♗f3 ♗d4 83.♗h4! and white reduces material without himself creating a weak pawn.

**82.♗e2 ♗b1**

More or less forced, otherwise white chases away his opponent's king from e4 and activates the knight via c3.

**83.♗g1**

83.♗c1? h4 84.gxh4 ♔xf4 loses, but 83.♔g2 ♔e3 84.♗c1 h4 85.gxh4 ♔xf4 86.♔h3 is also a draw.

**83...h4**

Finally, Giri decides to take specific action.

**84.♗h3!**

The game has become very concrete and white needs to play precisely. Both 84.gxh4 ♔xf4 followed by ...♔g4, and 84.♗e2 h3 (or even 84...hxg3+ 85.♔xg3 ♔e3 86.♗g1 ♗c3++) are bad for white.

**84...♔f5**

84...hxg3+ 85.♔xg3 with the intention to improve the position of the knight via f2 is also insufficient for black to create serious problems. For instance, after 85...♔e3 86.♔g4 white threatens to advance the f-pawn and then sac the knight on g5. Notice that with the black knight on d4 none of this would have saved white, because in the end black plays 86...♗f5 and the king will soon come to f3, winning the remaining pawn due to zugzwang.

**85.gxh4 ♔g4 86.f5!?**

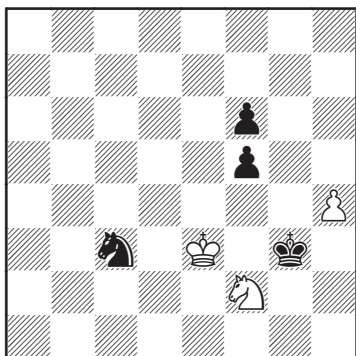
A nice way to continue, although 86. ♖g2 f5 (86... ♖xh4 87. ♗f2=) 87. ♗f2+ ♖xf4 88. ♖h3 is also enough to save half a point.

### 86...gxf5

86... ♖xf5 87. ♖f3 ♗d2+ 88. ♖g3=  
87. ♖e3!

The idea of the previous move. White is ready to give up the knight in exchange for his opponent's pawns.

87... ♗c3 88. ♗f2+ ♖g3



### 89. ♗d3??

After 7 hours of play fatigue finally plays its role: Alekseenko blunders in a relatively simple position, where white has two ways to achieve a draw. 89. ♗h1+ forces an elementary draw: 89... ♖xh4 (89... ♖g4 90. ♗f2+ or 89... ♖g2 90. ♖f4 change nothing) 90. ♖f4=. However, the check from h1 can be easily missed by a human, since placing the knight voluntarily in the corner is somewhat counterintuitive. The second way is slightly more complicated and requires some calculation: 89. h5 ♗d5+ 90. ♖d4, for instance 90... ♗e7 91. h6 (now this is just one of many ways to make it) 91...

♖xf2 92. h7 ♗g6 93. ♖d5 f4 (or 93... ♖g3 94. ♖e6 ♗f8+ 95. ♖xf6 ♗xh7+ 96. ♖xf5) 94. ♖e4 ♖g3 95. ♖f5 ♗h8 96. ♖xf6 f3 97. ♖g7 f2 98. ♖xh8 f1= ♗ 99. ♖g7. The lonely queen cannot win against the outside pawn on the seventh rank supported by the king.

89... ♗d5+ 90. ♖d4 ♗f4!-+

The move missed by the Russian GM. Suddenly it's all over: white loses the h-pawn and can't bring the king back to the f-file.

Chess can be a very cruel game.

91. ♗c5 ♖xh4 92. ♖e3 ♖g3 93. ♗b3 ♗e6 94. ♗d2 f4+ 95. ♖e2 ♗g5 96. ♖f1 f3 97. ♖g1 f2+ 98. ♖f1 f5

0-1

## (23) Wang Hao – Vachier-Lagrave

Round 6, 23.03.2020

*Grunfeld Defense*

1. d4 ♗f6 2. c4 g6 3. ♗c3 d5

As usual, Maxime Vachier-Lagrave remains loyal to the Grunfeld. Such a principled approach requires extremely good preparation and memory.

4. cxd5 ♗xd5 5. e4 ♗xc3 6. bxc3 ♗g7 7. ♗c4 c5 8. ♗e2 0-0 9. 0-0 ♗c6 10. ♗e3

The main line, where black has lots of options.

10...b6

This move was in the shadows until Anand deployed it in the World Championship match versus Topalov in 2010. After that, it became increasingly popular and nowadays