

PRESS RELEASE

London Chess Classic, Round 7

THE NEPO MAN CATCHES UP WITH FABI

John Saunders reports: The seventh round of the 9th London Chess Classic was played on Saturday 9 December 2017 at the Olympia Conference Centre. It featured as many decisive games as rounds one to six put together – three – as some players stirred themselves from their earlier torpor, while others started to tire as a result of the relentless attrition typical of elite chess. By the end of the round the leadership had doubled, with Ian Nepomniachtchi winning to level with Fabiano Caruana on $4\frac{1}{2}/7$, and Maxime Vachier-Lagrave and Magnus Carlsen both won to reach 4 and stay in touch with the leaders. At the other end of the table, Mickey Adams, Vishy Anand and Sergey Karjakin are now cut adrift on $2\frac{1}{2}$, a whole point behind the middle markers Levon Aronian, Wesley So and Hikaru Nakamura who have $3\frac{1}{2}$.



In the end it looked like tiredness got the better of Vishy Anand vs Ian Nepomniachtchi (photo John Saunders)

Points in this tournament are rather like London buses. You wait all day for one to come along and suddenly three come along at once. A round or two back we were starting to get slightly worried that the 2017 London Classic might be about to break a record that nobody wants: the fewest decisive games in a ten-player tournament. That said, we

weren't quite sure who held the record, as chess records tend to be fairly scanty and uncorroborated, but, with six decisive games now played, we can be sure it won't be this tournament as there is a record of at least one tournament which had a miserly three decisive results out of 45. That was a 1999 tournament in Moscow. It had a terrific list of competitors, all big name players, including Spassky, Smyslov and Larsen, but ones whose heyday had been the 1950s and 1960s rather than the last decade of the 20th century. There was a certain irony in the fact that it was held in honour of Tigran Petrosian, given that he wasn't averse to a handshake or nine himself.



Caruana-So was the least lively of the round 7 games (photo John Saunders)

Returning to 2017, there were signs that the older players were starting to struggle. Vishy Anand came up against a forceful g2-g4 thrust in the opening from Nepomniachtchi which made him work almost from the beginning of the game rather than draw upon the riches of his prodigious memory banks. The game was only really lost right at the end, with one signally bad move played. Without that, one could imagine one of the younger super-GMs, particularly Carlsen, digging in and maybe getting away with a draw. Nepo was self-deprecatory, positively Svidleresque, in the Ashley interview, but it sounded like he was being forceful and trying to win, whereas Vishy seemed pessimistic and unsure about the specifics of this game. Is he getting worn down by the constant round of super-GM competitions? He didn't say so but he must

be getting tired after more than a quarter of a century of facing the world's elite on a regular basis.

London Classic, Round 7, 09.12.2017

White: Ian Nepomniachtchi

Black: Viswanathan Anand

English A17

1.c4 Nf6 2.Nc3 e6 3.Nf3 d5 4.e3 a6 5.b3 Bd6 6.Bb2 0-0 7.g4!? A new move, according to databases. But one of my colleagues in the press room laughed at this as he thinks it features in the repertoire of the Dutch IM and openings iconoclast Manuel Bosboom. The idea is familiar from the Anti-Slav where White also gambits a g-pawn to open a file against the castled kingside and maybe gain a tempo or two. **7...Nxb3 8.Rg1 f5 9.cxd5 e5 10.h3 Nf6 11.Ng5 Qe7 12.Qf3 Kh8 13.Ne6** "After Kh8, I just blundered like a complete moron and went Ne6" (Nepomniachtchi). But engines recommend the same move. **13...Bxe6 14.dxe6 Qxe6 15.Qxb7** After 15.Bc4 Nepo originally thought Black had to play 15...Qc8 when 16.Qg2 was his intention, but in fact Black would play 15...Qd7 when Black is fine and if 16.Qxb7? Nc6! wins for Black. **15...Nbd7 16.Bc4** Nepo regretted the text - "basically this loses a tempo" and thought he should have played 16.Qg2 **16...Qe7 17.Qg2 Nb6 18.Be2 a5 19.Bb5** Here Nepo wanted to play 19.Qg5 but Black simply reply 19...a4 without worrying about the f5-pawn since 20.Qxf5 a3 21.Bc1 e4 forces White back on the defensive. **19...Rad8** "With hindsight this move turns out not to be too great. I think I should have played 19...e4 and 20...Be5" (Anand) **20.Qg5 g6 21.Qh6 Ng8 22.Qg5 Nf6** Vishy wondered later whether he should have played 22...Qxg5 23.Rxg5 and then simply 23...Nf6 rather than over-finessing. However, Nepo demurred and thought going into an endgame was "so much worse for Black." **23.Rd1** Nepo could



have gone for a repetition but was conscious of having made too many draws already. **23.Qh6 23...e4** Now Black is vulnerable along the long diagonal and to tactics based on it. **24.Qh6 Rg8** If 24...Be5 Nepo pointed out that White can play 25.Rxg6 since 25...Ng8? runs into 26.Re6! which wins quite attractively: 26...Qf7 27.Qxf8! Rxf8 28.Rxe5 when White's powerful pressure along the long diagonal is decisive. **25.Ne2 Be5 26.Bxe5 Qxe5 (diagram) 27.Nf4! g5** Vishy didn't fancy taking the bait with

27...Qxb5 28.Nxg6+ Rxc6 29.Rxc6 Rg8 30.Rxc8+ Nxc8 and now he thought 31.Qe6 would be unpleasant for him. So now he will be a pawn down. **28.Rxc6 Rxc6 29.Qxc6 Rg8 30.Qh6 Rg7?! "30...Rg7 is a bit sad but I realised that I don't have a move here."** (Vishy). After 30...Nbd5 White has 31.Bc4 wins. After 30...Nfd5 Vishy thought 31.Rc1 was good but also 31.Qe6 (which engines prefer). But Nepo thought Vishy should have played 30...Rg1+ to make the white bishop passive after 31.Bf1 Nbd7 "and I believe it should be equal." (Nepo) **31.Bc4 Nxc4 32.bxc4 Qb2 33.Ke2 a4 34.Ne6 Rf7 35.Nf4 Rg7 36.a3 Ne8?** The game is still not over after 36...Qb6, though White has forceful tries such as 37.Rb1!? Qxb1 38.Qxf6 h6 39.Qxh6+ Kg8 40.Qe6+ Rf7 41.Qe8+ Rf8 42.Qg6+ Kh8 and there is still work to do. **37.Qc6 1-0** Simply winning a second pawn after 37...Nd6 38.Qxa4 and Black has no viable counterplay.



Vishy wasn't the only player looking worn down in round 7. Mickey Adams had also lost on the previous day and in round 7 he faced Magnus Carlsen with Black. Adams' head-to-head against the world champion is not favourable, and he might have expected the worst. He might not have expected 1.f4, however. Bird's opening; as it is called, doesn't enjoy a great reputation at this level and seemed an odd choice. Hikaru Nakamura pulled a face when he looked across at Carlsen's board and saw 1.f4 played (*see photo*). Carlsen was once again wearing a sort of dark cravat/scarf round his neck, perhaps to combat the cold he was suffering, and his play was that of someone distinctly under the weather for the early part of the game when Adams grabbed the initiative.

It was a flawed game, with both players missing chances to gain a big advantage, if not win almost immediately, but eventually Adams wobbled a bit and allowed Carlsen to gain control of the position, after which the world champion did what he does best, namely outplay an opponent over the long distance. Like Vishy, he might have had chances of saving himself until near the end but became despondent and caved in.

London Classic, Round 7, 09.12.2017

White: Magnus Carlsen

Black: Mickey Adams

Bird's Opening A03

1.f4 d5 2.Nf3 Nf6 3.g3 g6 4.Bg2 Bg7 5.0-0 0-0 6.d3 c5 7.c3 Nc6 8.Na3 Re8 9.Nh4 b6

10.e4 dxe4 11.Qa4 There is a game on the database which continues 11.dxe4 Qxd1

12.Rxd1 e5 13.Nb5 Bg4 14.Rd6 but it can't have been part of Carlsen's game plan to



allow a queen exchange so early in proceedings. **11...Qxd3!**

Adams felt he had no option other than to be bold here.

12.Qxc6 Bd7 13.Qc7 (diagram) 13...Ng4 Quite good but here

computers advocate 13...Rec8 14.Qe5 and now the quiet move

14...Bc6! when White's queen is going to be trapped in the

middle of the board. If 15.Re1 (15.Qxe7 Re8 16.Qc7 Rac8

17.Qxa7 Nd5! rounds up the queen) 15...Qd7 and engines feel

obliged to save the queen by throwing in 16.Nxg6 hxg6, giving the piece back, and then

17.Qg5 but the queen is still locked out of the game and Black close to winning. **14.Re1**

Bd4+ 14...Rac8 15.Qxa7 and now 15...Bd4+ 16.cxd4 Qxd4+ 17.Be3 Nxe3 18.Kh1 Ng4

19.h3 Nf2+ 20.Kh2 e5 could be good for Black. **15.cxd4 Qxd4+ 16.Be3 Nxe3 17.Qe5 f5?**

18.Bh3? Adams missed it on his previous move but then noticed 18.Nf3! exf3 19.Bxf3

Qxe5 20.fxe5 and White has a material advantage: a piece for two pawns. **18...Nc2+**

19.Qxd4 Nxd4 20.Rxe4 A bold, almost desperate, stroke from Carlsen but it doesn't

change the assessment of the position unduly. Black is a shade better. **20...fxe4 21.Bxd7**

Red8 22.Ba4 e5 23.Re1 exf4 24.gxf4 a6 25.Bd1 25.Rxe4 b5 26.Bd1 Re8 favours Black.

25...b5 26.Nb1 Nf5?! Black's play becomes too static after fixing his pawn structure and

White gradually gets on top. Instead 26...e3!? maintains active play. If 27.Rxe3?? Nf5! and

White can't handle all the threats. **27.Nxf5 gxf5 28.Kf2 Kf7 29.Be2 Rd6 30.h4 c4 31.a4**

Rc8 32.axb5 axb5 33.Na3 Rd5 34.Rc1 Rdc5 35.Nc2 Ra8

36.Ne3 Rac8 37.h5 Ke6 38.h6 Kf6 39.Ra1 b4 40.Ra6+ Ke7

41.Ra7+ Kf6 42.Ke1 b3 42...c3 may be better. The position is

probably about equal here. **43.Rb7 Ke6 44.Rb6+ Ke7 45.Rb4**

R8c6 46.Bxc4 Rxh6 47.Rxb3 Kd8 48.Rb8+ Kc7 49.Rf8 Rh3

50.Nd5+ Kb7 51.Rf7+ (diagram) 51...Kb8? After 51...Kc6

Black should probably survive but the long attritional process

finally got to the English GM. **52.b3 Rh2 52...Rh5 53.Nb4!** much as in the game. **53.Nb4!**

Kc8 Rooks move lose to a knight fork, while 53...Rc8 is even worse after 54.Na6+ Ka8



55.Bd5+ and mate next move. **54.Na6! Rc6** If 54...Ra5 the black king is whisked along the back rank conveyor belt to his doom: 55.Be6+ Kd8 56.Rd7+ Ke8 57.Nc7+ Kf8 58.Rf7+ Kg8 59.Rxf5+ winning a rook. **55.Rf8+ Kb7** 55...Kd7 56.Nb8+ wins (but not 56.Bb5? Ke7!)=) **56.Bd5 Kxa6 57.Bxc6 Kb6 58.Bd7 1-0**



Carlsen is still under the weather but he had the stamina to outplay Adams (photo John Saunders)

"I'm not pleased with my level of play in this tournament – it's been awful – but I think I have been fighting quite well and that's what got me the full point today" was Carlsen's comment after the game. He was particularly annoyed with his calculation – he characterised not properly analysing the move 18.Nf3 as "insane" but was at least pleased with his fighting qualities, which had of course been strongly in evidence in his rearguard action the day before against Nakamura.



Maxime Vachier-Lagrave gradually outplayed Sergey Karjakin (photo John Saunders)

Third in the unaccustomed cluster of decisive encounters was Karjakin versus Vachier-Lagrave. The two are both contemporaries but whereas MVL fights as hard as Carlsen, Karjakin looked rather limp in this game, being gradually outplayed and ground down by Vachier-Lagrave in a Poisoned Pawn variation of the Najdorf, and resigned as soon as a lost endgame appeared on the board. From the Frenchman's standpoint this was a fine win showing impeccable Sicilian middlegame technique. Karjakin seemed curiously low-key and accepting of his defeat at the post-game interview, not showing the almost palpable pain that players such as Nakamura and Carlsen sometimes display on such occasions. Karjakin, Adams and Anand suddenly find themselves adrift at -2 and must demonstrate some stamina and resourcefulness soon or else expect to be made to suffer in the last two rounds by opponents sensing they are on a down swing or out of shape.

Leader Fabiano Caruana's game against Wesley So was the only game of the round which resembled the games of the early rounds in its shortness and result. It was a Ruy Lopez, not a Berlin and more resembling a Marshall but without a pawn sac. Pieces and pawns gradually disappeared from the board and neither player succeeded in making an impression on the other.



Levon Aronian did his best to spoil Hikaru Nakamura's 30th birthday but it was drawn (photo John Saunders)

Aronian and Nakamura celebrated the latter's birthday by resorting to a line which is nearly ten years older than the US star, as played by Korchnoi and Karpov in Baguio City

in 1978. It was a QGD in which Black plays the temporary sacrifice 12...Nd4 to put the cat amongst the pigeons. Its surprise value has long since dissipated and it has been subsumed into a large wedge of theory. Nakamura diverged from book with the retreat 17...Qd8, rather than 17...Qa6 with which Inarkiev lost to Aronian at the Palma FIDE Grand Prix only last month. Aronian pressed for the initiative for some while but it gradually fizzled out.



The final tie-break game between Luke McShane and David Howell (photo John Saunders)

The British Knock-Out Championship came to an exciting conclusion on Saturday. After the classical games, David Howell had led with two wins to one, with one draw, which was scored as 5 points to McShane's 3. That made things just that little bit harder for McShane as the four rapid games on the Saturday reverted to the conventional 1-½-0 scoring, so that he would have to win two games just to get level in the match. He won the 5th game, so was halfway there, and the 6th game ended in a draw. He levelled the overall match score in game 7 and the 8th was drawn.

This meant that Howell and McShane went to a mini-tie-break of two 10 minutes plus two-second increment games. In the first there was an unusual mishap in the opening as David Howell spilt water on the board. But there was no crying over spilt water as arbiter Lara Barnes stepped in to stop the clock and mop up the liquid. No penalty was imposed and the game continued. Luke McShane went on to win this and the final 10m+2s game, thus becoming the British Knock-Out Champion, and with it a cheque for



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£19,500, while David Howell had to settle for £10,500. A great result for McShane, whose opportunities to play chess are limited by his professional work commitments, but a disappointment for David Howell who had to be satisfied with the runner-up prize for the second successive year.

The London Open reached its conclusion on Saturday, being a triumph for Armenia with Hrant Melkumyan and Gabriel Sargissian (who beat Jonathan Hawkins), sharing first place with Frenchman Sebastian Mazé. The three of them all scored 7½/9. Six players scored 7 while four English GMs, Hawkins, Jones, Gormally and Wells were amongst those on 6½.

Round 8 of the London Classic is on Sunday 10 December, starting at **14.00 UK time**.

ENDS

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