

PRESS RELEASE

London Chess Classic, Round 2

WINTER DRAWS ON

John Saunders reports: The second round of the 9th London Chess Classic saw the tournament migrate back to its familiar home at the Olympia Conference Centre, West London, after the brief dalliance with Google's London HQ in Pancras Square. Round three takes place on Monday 4 December, but at the changed time of 16.00 London time.



"We meet again, Mr Karjakin!" The 2016 world championship opponents renew their rivalry. (Photo John Saunders)

As Maurice Ashley put it, quoting an earlier US sports commentator, "it was déjà vu all over again." First to finish were Magnus Carlsen and Sergey Karjakin who concluded hostilities on move 30. The first movement of the oeuvre was Giuoco Piano, the second *pianissimo*, the third *molto doloroso* and the fourth whatever the Italian is for non-existent. The score of this game may be examined on our website but is one for devoted chessologists only. I don't propose to do much more than hum the main theme. Contradicting what Emperor Joseph said in the film *Amadeus*, I felt there were not enough notes. Understandable, perhaps, that Carlsen and Karjakin should be sick of

staring across the board at their opponent's coat of many sponsors' colours. I'll confine myself to one second-hand comment: super-GM emeritus Jon Speelman, watching from the VIP Room, thought 21.f4 might have given White a little something. He was speaking without benefit of silicon, as he always does, but the engines agreed with him. The idea was to open up the e-file for White's rooks. It's still unlikely to have done too much damage to the Carlsen camp but it was a tad more enterprising than the line Karjakin played. Carlsen's comments at the end suggested he was toying with the idea of a grind but he decided it wasn't worth it and bailed out.



Levon Aronian has got two Blacks out of the way in the first two rounds (photo John Saunders)

Actually, now I come to think of it, Maurice's 'déjà vu' comment was made to Levon Aronian, and with rather more relevance. Aronian has had black in his first two games and he went down the very same line at Olympia against Fabiano Caruana as he had done at Google two days previously against Nepomniachtchi. He really should be more careful with his diet as this double helping of stodge could lead to him becoming overweight. However, Aronian has gained more than his rivals from the pacific start to the tournament since both his draws have been with Black and were relatively pain-free. He started the tournament as one of the players disadvantaged by having an extra Black but he can now tell himself that the tournament starts afresh from round three and he's become one of the lucky ones who can look forward to an extra White.



So-Nepomniachtchi was not so boring (photo John Saunders)

So-Nepomniachtchi lasted fewer moves (27) but provided a little more entertainment. An offbeat but vaguely thematic line of the King's Indian was played with the US player hurling his kingside pawns down the board like he had been feasting on GingerGM videos (they're kingside-licking good). The super-GMs in the VIP Room didn't think much of his 15...Nb6, where the horse had rather a restricted circuit to canter round, preferring to throw in 15...b5 first and engineer a bit of room to manoeuvre. Again the silicon concurred. Maurice Ashley told us he'd sneaked a look at a computer and it much preferred So's position. That may have been because engines tend to overrate the power of bishops against knights. But whatever edge White may or may not have enjoyed never materialised. Wesley So may also have been concerned about his somewhat denuded king position, leading him to favour a convenient repetition idea which presented itself. He's in the opposite camp to Aronian, starting with two draws with White, he now has to look forward to a majority of games with Black.

The final two games of the round both lasted more than 40 moves but the pundits were predicting draws for them well before the end, some perhaps as early as move 3 in Anand-Adams when the English player a Berlin Defence to the Lopez. Anand chose the 4.d3 line which had a regular work-out during November's Saint Louis Champions rapid games involving Caruana and Grischuk, as well as a couple where Wesley So played White. Black's 12th move was the first not previously played. Material was gradually

exchanged, the pawn structures remained balanced and the game moved serenely to its close. Nothing to see here, move along now.



World champions enjoy the privilege of having their country's High Commissioner to move the pieces for them (photo John Saunders)

Vachier-Lagrave versus Nakamura was my game of the day, although it too was drawn. Anyone who plays the Dragon deserves some sort of medal, if only for memorising the shed-loads of theory you need to avert an early catastrophe for Black. And perhaps White. What would I know? I write this rather glibly as someone who knows nothing of the theory for either colour as I was always too craven to risk such a bloodthirsty opening. Consequently you may sense me stumbling blindly through the following annotations, but at least I have my cyber-Labrador to guide me.



Here be dragons: Hikaru and MVL put on an impressive show of aggression (photo John Saunders)

It all looks very impressive. Nakamura ends up a pawn down but it was not enough to lose him the game. This is something super-GMs do a lot; they go into lines with their eyes open where they know they are going to be a small amount of material down but in the sure and certain knowledge that (a) it is not a theoretical loss and (b) their technique is up to the task of holding. It is something to sit back and admire, but at the same time resolving never to be so rash as to try it in your own games.

9th London Classic, Round 2, 03.12.2017

White: Maxime Vachier-Lagrave

Black: Hikaru Nakamura

Sicilian Dragon B78

1.e4 c5 2.Nf3 d6 3.d4 cxd4 4.Nxd4 Nf6 5.Nc3 g6 6.Be3 Bg7 7.f3 0-0 8.Qd2 Nc6 9.Bc4 Bd7 10.h4 h5 11.Bb3 Rc8 12.0-0-0 Ne5 13.Bg5 Rc5 14.Kb1 Re8 Most of us are familiar with the theory until about here, if only from playing through many published games which feature it. Games featuring the Dragon are the last refuge of a chess writer desperate for interesting material. Here Black usually plays 14...b5, having



prepared for it by playing 13...Rc5 but it is not obligatory. 14...b5 **15.g4** White must prise the kingside open if his attack is to get started. **15...hxg4 16.f4 Nc4 17.Qd3 (diagram)** Here Black instantly... did nothing. He carried on doing nothing for 53 minutes. Such long grandmasterly thinks often intrigue us amateurs, and this one also puzzled the watching GMs, such as Julian Hodgson and Jon Speelman. One could speculate why but I don't suppose we could find an answer. And asking the player after the game would be likely to receive an evasive answer since we are still in the book and he might not want to reveal too much. **17...Na5 17...Qc8** has been played more often, with Black

scoring remarkably well after **18.Bxf6 Bxf6 19.h5 g5 20.fxg5 Bxg5**, etc, when White's h5-pawn is more a hindrance than a help to him in pursuing his attacking plans along the file which it blocks. But perhaps Nakamura felt he was being drawn into a trap and was looking deeply into the position to find an improvement for White which his opponent might have worked on in his laboratory. Answers on a postcard. Personally, my gut feeling is that White might have been planning something like **18.h5** rather than surrendering the g5-bishop in order to get in h4-h5, which doesn't open up the h-file anyway. **18.Bxf6** Now we are into the unknown. White plays the same move that has hitherto been deployed against **17...Qc8. 18...exf6** After **18...Bxf6 19.e5!**? starts to look menacing. **19.Bd5** With the pawns now doubled on the f-file, White now senses it is a good moment to preserve his light-squared bishop, which eyes f7 and doesn't have to worry about an e7-e6 rebuff any more. **19...Nc6** Engines favour the tricky move **19...f5!**? **20.exf5 Bc6 21.Bxc6 Nxc6 22.Nxc6 bxc6 23.fxg6** when engines aren't concerned about Black's slightly fragile-looking kingside. **20.Nxc6 bxc6 21.Bxf7+!**? The game gets tactical. If **21.Bb3 Qe7 22.Qxd6 Qxd6 23.Rxd6 Be6** Black has no particular worries. **21...Kxf7 22.Qxd6** The queen forks rook and bishop so White must at least regain his piece. **22...Rxc3!**? Black retaliates with his own tactic. **23.Qxd7+ Qxd7 24.Rxd7+ Ke6 25.Rxg7 Rf3 26.Rxg6 Rxf4 27.Rg1 Rxe4 28.R6xg4 Rxg4 29.Rxg4** White has won a pawn but it transpires that it is not

enough to win. Black had to be aware of that some eight or nine moves previously. **29...f5 30.Ra4**

Rg8 31.b3 Rg4 Another mini-tactic, exploiting the fact that a rook exchange is impossible as the resultant g-pawn would queen. **32.Rxa7 f4** Setting a little trick which wouldn't snare many GMs but might unseat a less



exalted player. **33.Kc1 33.Rh7??** would defend the h-pawn but lose the game since, after **33...f3**, White would once again be unable to prevent the pawn queening. **33...f3 34.Kd2** Black's last move was another mini-cheapo: **34.Kd1?? Rg1+ 35.Kd2 f2** and the f-pawn goes through. **34...Rxh4 35.Ra8 Rh2+ 36.Kd3 Kf5 37.a4 Kg4 38.a5 Rh1 39.Rg8+ Kf4 40.Rf8+ Kg3 41.Rg8+ Kf4 42.Rf8+ Kg3 43.b4 f2 44.Kd4 44.Ke2 Re1+** also draws. **44...f1Q 45.Rxf1 Rxf1 46.Kc5 Rc1 (diagram) 47.Kxc6 ½-½ 47.c4 Kf3 48.a6 Ke4 49.a7 Ra1 50.Kb6 Kd4** also holds for Black. After **47.Kxc6 Rxc2+ 48.Kb7 Kf4 49.b5** looks a bit scary for Black but he can hold: **49...Ra2 50.a6 Ke5 51.a7 Kd5 52.b6 Kc5 53.Kc7 Ra1** when it starts dawning on us that White cannot make progress.

Most of the decisive action of the day was shoehorned into a brief but pulsating period in the afternoon when there was a double Armageddon finish in the semi-finals of the British Knock-Out Championship. Both matches followed a similar course, with Luke McShane - Nigel Short and David Howell - Matthew Sadler featuring draws in both classical and then both play-off games. Maybe it's something they're putting in the drinks in the VIP Room. The next stage of both matches was a single Armageddon game, with White having 6 minutes to Black's 4, with 2 second increments, but only from move 61 onwards. The snag in one of the games proved to be getting to move 61 and indeed, knowing if and when you had got there since the clocks didn't have counters.



British KO Chess Championships, featuring Matthew Sadler, David Howell, Luke McShane and Nigel Short (photos Lennart Ootes)

Luke McShane and David Howell were the players with White and 6 minutes against Nigel Short and Matthew Sadler with Black and 4 minutes respectively. The onus was on White to win, of course, but both managed to do so after many adventures and much feverish clock-bashing. The spectacle drew quite a crowd. Even in the Book of Revelations there was only one Armageddon – at Olympia we got two. I should add that these games were played in fairly close proximity to the top boards of the Open, and these players were sucked into the melodrama, choosing to leave their boards to wait until the biblical double feature had run its course.

It would be cruel and inhumane to expose these great players to universal ridicule by showing some of the idiocies perpetrated during these games so, naturally, that's exactly what I am going to do. For instance, this bit of madness, which I should tell you actually happened in a rapid game prior to Armageddon but was equally time-affected. Luke missed two mating opportunities which might have saved him the Armageddon finish.

British KO Championship Semi-Final, Play-Off Game 2

Luke McShane - Nigel Short



Here, with nanoseconds left on his clock, Luke McShane played **42.Qc6+**, missing **42.Rf6+ Kxe5 43.Qe7** mate. **42...Kxe5 43.Re1+** This time he missed **43.Qf6+ Ke4 44.Qf4+ Kd3 45.Rd1+ Ke2 46.Qd2** mate. **43...Kf5 44.Qxd5+ Kg6** and the game ended in a draw after 88 moves.

I now feel bad about showing you that and must atone for it by giving this rather neat tactic from McShane's Armageddon win.

British KO Championship, Armageddon Decider

Luke McShane - Nigel Short



Here Black had flung his kingside pawns forwards but now his rook is going to find itself in big trouble: **19.Bh7!** Suddenly the g4-rook finds itself without a safe square now that g8 has been covered by the bishop. Nigel Short tried **19...Nd7 20.Nh2 Rg6 21.Bxg6 fxc6 22.Nf4** but his position was a ruin and he never recovered ... **1-0**



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The KO Championship now proceeds to a final with a unique format. David Howell will have White against Luke McShane in the first of four standardplay (Classical) games. These are scored 2 points for a win, 1 for a draw and 0 for a loss. The games are played Monday, Tuesday, Thursday, Friday, with Wednesday being a rest day. Then, on Saturday, the match continues with a four-game rapidplay match scored in the conventional 1-½-0 manner, with McShane now starting with White in the first game. The scores of all the games, standardplay and rapidplay, are then totted up to decide the winner, in other ways the standardplay games count double. All eight games will be played regardless of one player already having enough points to win the match.

ENDS

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