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How to Beat Magnus Carlsen

Exploring the Most Difficult Challenge in Chess

New In Chess 2020

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Introduction

In the days of Morphy, there was a single dominant player who roamed as a wolf among sheep. How could this be in our era? There are too many gifted, highly trained players for one single player to dominate. Yet, impossibly, there is one player who does just that. His name is Magnus Carlsen.

‘Finally, given your rise over the past few years, do you believe you can become world champion? Can you challenge Carlsen?’

I think that maybe we have to wait for Magnus to get older! I cannot really challenge him. He is at the top, I think nobody can beat him. But if he is not in his best shape as he gets older, maybe we will have some chance.’
(Chess.com interview with Ding Liren)

Humility comes easily to the talentless. But for Ding Liren, the world’s number three player at the time of his interview, either the above statement is of a staggering level of humility, or perhaps he is a realist who views Magnus as currently untouchable in a classical time control World Championship Match.

This book is as odd as its title suggests. Actually, the only place I can beat Magnus is perhaps in an alternative universe – or maybe in his app when set at his strength on age 11. I fully expect a few ‘How-dare-you-write-a-book-on-Carlsen’s-losses-when-you-lack-the-skill-to-beat-him-yourself!’ Facebook messages after this book comes out. If you are an exceedingly strong player, then people write books about your best games, which tend to be wins; if you are a chess god, then people may even write a book on your losses.

It’s time to discuss a previously forbidden topic: Edward Winter relates that in the April 1994 *Chess Life*, Andy Soltis wrote of an apocryphal story: ‘Shortly after José Capablanca became world champion Znosko-Borovsky published a booklet of the Cuban’s losses called *Capablanca’s Errors*. Asked about it, Capa said he hoped to write a book called *Znosko-Borovsky’s Good Moves* but, he said, “Unfortunately, I didn’t succeed in finding material for it”.’

Edmar Mednis wrote a book on Fischer’s losses, called *How to Beat Bobby Fischer*. Some critics ridiculed him for it, even though he had actually beaten Bobby in a tournament game.

The point of course is, how is a far weaker player (Znosko-Borovsky, Mednis, me) qualified to write a book about how to beat a sacrosanct chess god? In my case the subject is a player who is undoubtedly the strongest player of today, and some say maybe even the greatest player of

all time. The answer is, Magnus' games are so profound that every loss of his – discounting games when he was just a kid – hits us as a shock, and something can be learned from it. A chess writer, unlike a novelist, is unable to type out a happy ending for the hero of his book – and Magnus is the hero of this book, despite the fact that the vast majority of the games within it are his losses. This book is an examination of where Magnus was in the past, not where he is today.

Being part of the world chess community gives us a sense of belonging to an entity greater than ourselves alone. Our CEO is always the reigning World Champion. Magnus finished 2019 with the unprecedented triumph of winning the Rapid and Blitz World Championships, as well as holding the title of Classical World Champion. And in 2020 he proved his superiority in a huge majority of online events during the time of lockdown due to Covid-19. Not since Kasparov's reign have we seen such absolute dominance.

Normally matters on the chessboard go Carlsen's way, the way the Red Sea parted for Moses. In this book we examine the opposite of the norm, that rare moment when a player who is as close to perfection as we have ever seen, loses.

The player who never loses: Carlsen's humungous non-losing streak

When this book uses the words '... beat Magnus,' it really means Magnus of the past, since the one in the present hardly ever loses a chess game. In the fourth round of the 2019 Tata Steel Masters in Wijk aan Zee in the Netherlands, Magnus drew with Dutch GM Jorden van Foreest. In doing so he shattered the record for the longest non-losing streak in chess history. Magnus' previous loss was on July 31st 2018, against GM Shakhriyar Mamedyarov. This record eclipsed the previous record of 110 games set by the Dutch/Russian GM Sergei Tiviakov in 2005. When he finally lost to Jan-Krzysztof Duda in October 2020, Carlsen had even stretched the record to 125 games! His record is also far more impressive, since the average Elo rating of Tiviakov's field was 2476 FIDE, while Magnus' opposition was just over 2700!

You would think that random chance would have struck Magnus down somewhere in his massive streak, yet no matter how unsoundly he played, no matter how busted he was, no matter how strong his opposition, one thing remained the same: Magnus never lost a classical time control chess game, over an astonishingly large number of games. What Carlsen's opponents discovered to their horror, during his seemingly endless streak, was that he could be knocked down, but he always got back up. They faced a player who just did not stay down for long, since deeply hidden

counterplay always popped up, as if by magic, to save him. Just when they believed that his run of luck was at an end, then guess what? he got a new dose of luck, which, of course, is not luck at all.

Carlsen's immense power

The stories of legends tend to grow in their telling. We can debate the point if Magnus is the greatest player of all time, yet there is no disputing (at least to my mind) that he is the strongest player of all time. His mid-2018 to 2020 run of tournament and match victories easily rivaled Morphy's European tour, Capablanca's dominance in the early 1920s, Fischer's run up to his title match with Spassky, and Kasparov's dominance in the 1990s. Magnus Carlsen is a chess killing machine, young, athletic, psychologically cool under pressure, with a blood pressure reading of 10 over 6, which most doctors consider remarkably low. He reached the elite summit of untouchability in a chess game.

Each generation tends to bring with it one player who pushes us into a great evolutionary leap forward in our understanding of the game. We are currently in the Magnus Carlsen generation. Magnus elicits emotions like respect, awe, fear and maybe a tinge of envy from his colleagues. He is not first among many equals, at least not yet. He is the unquestioned king.

In the olden days in BM (before Magnus) time, who was king? Sometimes it was Kramnik, sometimes Topalov and sometimes Anand. The chess world debated wildly and endlessly over who was the best player in the world. If we place Carlsen's top 10 challengers next to him, only a fringe 10% will say one of them is stronger than Magnus. The other 90% are with King Magnus, the First of his Name. 90% of the electorate sounds close to a Saddam/Putin-like fake approval ratings, except that Magnus' stats are actually real!

Wesley So wrote: 'People like to say that I don't play my best against Carlsen. Don't think I hadn't noticed that, but it took my dad Renato to explain it to me: he told me it is like being a very young and talented soccer player and having pictures of Pele all over your room and knowing by heart every game he ever played. You think about him, dream about him, grow up wanting to be as good as him and when playing by yourself even pretend you are him. And then one day Pele suddenly appears on the field. You can't move. You can't breathe. Everything is a blur. Which goal posts are yours? You feel like you might faint. Or die. You are overwhelmed because he is older, bigger and has years of experience on you. You see that you are a kid with an oversize dream.'

Let this sink in for a moment: this is the world's top 5 ranked player and a potential challenger to Magnus! Wesley speaks with honest, humble

clarity of the massive burden of expectation when playing a game against Magnus in a classical chess game, which is an assault on the psyche, as much as a battle across the board.

Playing a chess game against Magnus Carlsen is akin to a sinner practicing for God's wrath on Judgement Day. As you may have guessed, there are virtually endless arrays of spells in the magician's supernatural arsenal. How does he stay on top in a game where his opponents are some of the most brilliant human beings on the planet, and what are the reigning disciplines required to play chess at a dominant World Champion's level?

Let's break down the sources of Carlsen's mysterious and uncanny power:

- An impossibly high concentration/awareness level, as a result of which Magnus is easily the most blunder-free player in the world.
- Endless calculation ability. In my opinion, only Fabiano Caruana and Maxime Vachier-Lagrave can hang with him in this respect. In pure calculation battles, most of Carlsen's opponents are pretty much always one or two or three or four beats behind the orchestra's conductor.
- Supernaturally perfect assessment power. Kasparov once said the source of Magnus' true power is his astonishing ability to accurately assess even the most confusing positions.
- Magnus, in my opinion, along with Capablanca and Fischer before him, is in the top three endgame players of all time category. As all puritans declare, we were not put on this earth to chase after pleasures. Magnus is relentless in technical endings, where he routinely beats strong GMs and even world-class players in drawn endings. He just never gives up and, with infinite patience, waits for his opportunity. When his opponent omits the most insignificant detail, Magnus pounces and converts positions other top GMs fail to win. No other player in the world can claim to be his equal in this phase.
- A wide and creative opening repertoire, filled with theoretical surprises for his opponent. Magnus may play White and grind his opponent down in a London System, and then in the very next round play the Black side of an antipodal opposite, a Dragon or Najdorf Sicilian. If you are a chess player, then a sizable portion of your life is spent classifying and subclassifying your openings. Magnus, with his either photographic or near-photographic memory, plays a bewildering array of openings, in totally opposing styles. This makes him next-to-impossible to prepare against.
- 'I do not fear death. I had been dead for billions and billions of years before I was born, and had not suffered the slightest inconvenience from it,' wrote Mark Twain. Emanuel Lasker, Mikhail Tal, AlphaZero and Magnus Carlsen all understand: a threat doesn't need to be real, for the

opponent to fear it. Magnus, channeling Emanuel Lasker, once said: 'I am trying to beat the guy sitting across from me and trying to choose the moves that are most unpleasant for him and his style.' Magnus is the most fearless chess player in the world, mainly since he is uniquely equipped with a Lasker/Tal/AlphaZero-like element/ability to confuse the opponent.

Each great player is responsible for a new leap forward in our perception of the game. What Magnus taught us is that a human can indeed play like a computer. It was the great Mikhail Tal who proved that a player can reach the greatest of heights with unlimited optimism and zero shame! Sound and unsound are only valid when computers are used. Play a human, and a supreme confuser can get away with murder. One wonders if Tal valued his own life, since he never took care of his health and over the board he smilingly took appalling risks any other player would shrink from. The only difference between Tal and Carlsen is that Magnus is in superb physical condition. Chess-wise, the pair's risk-taking is on an equal scale.

The word pedomorphosis means that a person retains some characteristic of childhood into adulthood. Children, who have trouble relating present risky actions to future potential pain, are often reckless with material sacrifices at the board. Magnus, like Tal before him, carries this child-like trait where he often gambles wildly and, in the great majority of his transgressions, gets away with his crimes. He is scholar and mystic combined, with the ability to play a dry technical ending, and then, in the very next game, to unsoundly sacrifice a pawn and win anyway, against a 2800-rated opponent, sucking him into a vortex of confusion. Magnus is the premier player in the world in irrational positions. Even masters of confusion like Shakhriyar Mamedyarov and Hikaru Nakamura still lag behind. Of course, this is just my personal opinion and you are free to either agree or disagree. The nature of most sacrifices is that they are either unsound garbage or the inspiration of genius, with nothing in between. It's egotistical to believe that our chess games are a creation of our own minds, since this belief fails to factor into the equation our opponents' responses. Magnus is acutely aware of this factor. He is perfectly aware that some of his sacrifices – either materially or structurally – are semi-sound at best. Yet he factors in his clear superiority in unclear positions and believes he will get away with the transgression.

My observations of Magnus' sacrifices in late 2018 and all of 2019 and 2020, up to the point of writing this book, are the following:

- His sacrifices are increasing in frequency.

- They tend to fall into that hazy ‘in-between’ of sound and unsound, worthy and unworthy; even the most robust chess minds can be stumped by Carlsen’s pointless/brilliant sacrifices.
- In the coming complications, Magnus confuses the opponent and wins.
- In the coming complications it turns out that either Magnus’ sacrifice was slightly unsound, or the opponent defended well and now has possession of the advantage. Then Magnus’ super-human defensive ability saves the game, which others would have lost.
- He has an Alekhine/Fischer-like monomaniacal will to win. It’s difficult to gauge a player’s level of will, yet Magnus is willing to push for the win, more than his colleagues. Of course, this can be viewed as a negative and there is an entire chapter in the book in which we see Magnus pushing too hard and going over the cliff.
- ‘Of course, analysis can sometimes give more accurate results than intuition but usually it’s just a lot of work. I normally do what my intuition tells me to do. Most of the time thinking is just to double-check,’ said Magnus, who possess a Capablanca/Tal/Fischer-like, near-perfect intuition. Why did I add Tal to the list? Because Magnus is that incredibly rare player who is gifted with both strategic and tactical intuition. Kasparov once said of Tal that, unlike others who merely calculate, Tal magically ‘sees through’ the complications. Magnus is the only other player I know of in chess history who is gifted with this kind of intuition. We have all seen countless examples of Magnus’ strategic wizardry. His tactical intuition is equally acute.
- A Capablanca/Botvinnik/Fischer-like planning ability. Only Fabiano Caruana can hang with him in this aspect.
- Magnus, unlike many other top players, has said he has engaged in a deep study of great players of the past. So this man/machine hybrid you see today is nothing but a condensed distillate of the great players of the past, to the present moment.
- This comes under the category of no-brainer, but anyone who goes over two years without losing a chess game is a master of defensive evasion. Carl Schlechter, Tigran Petrosian and Viktor Kortchnoi could only dream about reaching Carlsen’s defensive stature. Even when he receives a wicked and unexpected blow to the gizzard, by some miraculous power he manages to remain upright, avoiding defeat, time after time.
- More than any other world champion in chess history, Magnus is a player of constantly shifting stylistic identities. Like Boris Spassky before him, Carlsen is the epitome of stylistic universality, who seems to play every possible stage of the game in equally deadly fashion. He is a stylistic agnostic who refuses to embrace and worship a single style of play. In

one game he will go berserk, à la Tal, confuse his opponent and win with a dubious double pawn sacrifice, then in the next game he goads his opponent on in Laskerian fashion, then in the next game he grinds out a less-than ‘±’ technical ending, winning in 80 moves. His style is in reality a collection of styles.

What benefits do we derive from the study of a great player’s losses?

Your writer, a noted chess theologian, believes there is no more holy and noble deed a chess player can perform than to engage in a deep study of a great player’s games, putting his each and every move under the microscope. But normally we only study the great player’s greatest games – not their failures and reversals. When a player becomes so strong that he just stops losing, it is of great value to look at this player’s earlier incarnations, where he did lose games.

Carlsen and his opponents in this book interpret chess very differently than we do. Our job is to identify the difference. Playing over such high-level games can frustrate us, since the players’ comprehension level of head-spinning complications towers over ours. But just remember that studying that which we fail to completely understand, presages a completely new level of awareness in our otherwise normal internal pattern recognition database. The decisions Magnus and his exalted opponents make may appear mistakenly inhuman, yet they were taken by human minds. At the beginning we don’t understand many of their motivations. Then, as we play through more games, our recognition shifts and it almost feels as if the patterns find us, and not the other way around. By studying the games of the great Magnus Carlsen – even his losses! – our mind is awakened from a life-long sleep, into full awareness. We learn far more through our failures than through our successes. There is not a doubt that Magnus Carlsen has examined all his losses under a microscope. If he benefits from this process, then so will we.

The chapters in the book are:

Chapter 1 – Witchcraft: Magnus miraculously escapes death from objectively awful or practically difficult positions.

Chapter 2 – Quicksand: Magnus gets outplayed, mostly strategically. Sometimes he is outplayed tactically, dynamically, or gets out-calculated.

Chapter 3 – Planning your own funeral: In a chess game we face the following opponents:

- A) Our opponent’s powerful play.
- B) Our low clock.
- C) Our mind of fevered ambition.

In this chapter we examine C) on this list. The mind of ambition is always hard at work, trying to outsmart everyone, sometimes including our own position. This is the chapter where Magnus over-presses and goes off the cliff's edge. It is the situation where the patriarch of a rich and powerful family brings poverty, scandal and disgrace to it, via gambling away the family fortune and influence.

Chapter 4 – Tales of the Lost Tribe: In this chapter we examine games where Magnus loses, via an inability to find the correct plan in the position, or by not asking the correct questions.

Chapter 5 – Outbooked: Magnus emerges from the opening in a poor position, to the point where he is unable to recover. Sometimes he is out-prepped, and sometimes the damage is self-inflicted.

Chapter 6 – Data overload: Terrible diseases and fatal car accidents are things we believe happen to other people – until they happen to us. Even players at Carlsen's stratospheric level occasionally commit catastrophic blunders.

Chapter 7 – What time is it?: This is the chapter where Magnus totally outplays his opponents and then forgets about his clock and flags.

Now most of the games tend to be a mix of multiple categories. For example, Magnus may not have equalized in the opening, then he refuses to defend patiently and lashes out with an overly risky plan, his position worsens and then he blunders in time pressure in a difficult position. In which category do I place this game? It could be in any one of them. So my picks for chapter are in many cases purely subjective and you might have placed the same game in a different chapter.

Cyrus Lakdawala
San Diego, October 2020

We feel the pull between consumerism and delayed gratification. White gives up something valuable in the present, to get something even better in the future. This is wonderful strategic judgement. Motylev correctly assesses that Black's power on the dark squares is less than White's power on the light ones.

25... ♖xe5 26. ♖f2!

Intending 27. ♖h3.

26... ♖xd5

The d5-parasite is removed, at the high cost of further eroding Black's hold over the now fatally weakened light squares. After 26... ♖f8 White could either swap into a won ending or keep the queens on with 27. ♖e3.

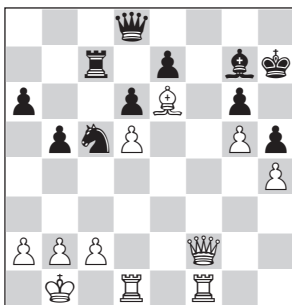
27. exd5 ♜c5 28. ♖h3 ♜c7 29. ♜hf1 ♖g7

Also hopeless was 29... ♖e8 30. ♖e6+ ♜xe6 31. dxe6.

30. ♖e6+ ♜h7

After 30... ♜xe6 31. dxe6 ♖c8

32. ♜de1 Black is busted.



Exercise (combination alert):

We lurch toward critical mass, but White isn't home free just yet. Find a path to the black king's destruction.

Answer: 31. ♖f7! Annihilation of defensive barrier. This is essentially a repetition on a familiar theme. Black's g6-pawn has been weak, ever since White played 13.f5!. There is no way to halt the bishop sacrifice on g6, which fatally exposes Black's king.

31... ♖d7

Magnus covers f5, but it's not enough. Black has no time to counterattack on the dark squares. There isn't a hope in hell that with 31... ♜a4 Black's attack will be faster than White's: 32. ♖xg6+ ♜xg6 (32... ♜h8 33. ♖e2 also mates, since ♖xh5+ is coming) 33. ♖f5#.

32. ♖xg6+! ♜xg6 33. ♖f7+ ♜h7

34. ♖xh5+

Black resigned.

Let's examine the time lapse footage: 34... ♜g8 35.g6 and Black is mated.

Game 9

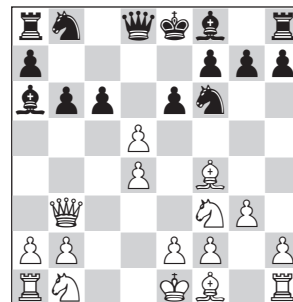
Alexander Morozevich

2741

Magnus Carlsen

2690

Monaco (blindfold) 2007 (10)



I am in staggered awe when I see world-class players battle out a

blindfold game. They easily play at sighted 2400 strength, which is beyond belief. In this blindfold game Magnus pretended to blunder with his next move:

7...cxd5!?

Ah yes, the old question of move-orders is the unanswerable Zen koan: the chicken hatched from the egg, which required the chicken to lay it. So which came first?

Wait. Doesn't White have 8. ♖xb8, followed by 9. ♖a4+ and 10. ♖xa6? Now you may believe that this line should join the dodo on the list of extinct species. This is not the case. Actually, it's not so simple and Magnus, without sight of the board, attempted to draw one of the best street fighters in the world into a tactical mess.

A) 7... ♗xd5 8. ♖xb8 ♜xb8 9.e4 ♕xf1 10. ♖xf1 ♗f6 11. ♗c3 with a pleasant edge for White;

B) 7...exd5 is untried and looks perfectly playable for Black, at least to my eyes.

8. ♗c3

The direct 8. ♖xb8 leads to great complications, not unfavourable for Black, after 8... ♖c4! (zwischenzug) 9. ♖a4+ b5 10. ♖d1 ♖b4+ 11. ♗bd2 ♜xb8 12. ♖g2! (after 12.b3? ♗e4 White is in trouble, since if 13.bxc4? ♖f6! 14. ♖g2 ♖xd2+ 15. ♖f1 bxc4 White can resign) 12... ♗e4 13.0-0 0-0 14. ♗b1! ♖a5 15.a3 ♜fc8. The comp likes White, who is still unable to win that c4-bishop. If 16.b3? ♖c3 17. ♜a2 b4! White is in trouble. If 18.bxc4? b3 19. ♜d2 ♗xd2

20. ♗fxd2 ♖xd2 21.cxd5 ♖g5 White is busted.

8... ♖c4!

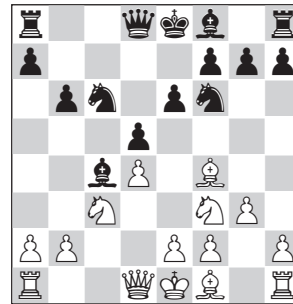
8... ♖d6 9. ♖a4+! looks better for White, who leads in development and ruins Black's castling rights.

9. ♖d1

9. ♖a4+ ♖d7 doesn't bother Black.

9... ♗c6!?

Über-risky, since White can play for ♖a4 tricks.



10. ♗d2!?

Moro attempts to destabilize with a theoretical novelty. Previously seen were 10. ♜c1 and 10. ♖g2, neither of which gave White anything.

10... ♖a6

A) After 10... ♗xd4?? 11. ♗xc4 dxc4 12.e3 ♗c6 13. ♖a4 Black is busted;

B) GM John Emms suggests 10... b5! 11.b3 b4 12. ♗a4 ♖b5 13.e3 ♕xf1 14. ♖xf1 ♖d6 and Black looks okay.

11. ♖a4 ♖b7

11... ♖d7? is a sucker's material grab after 12. ♖xa6! ♗b4 13. ♖b5 ♗c2+ 14. ♗d1 ♗xa1 15.e3. Black's a1-knight will soon be lost, after which White's two minor pieces are overwhelmingly superior to Black's rook.

12. ♗b5!

This move looks amateurish, yet is the only try for an advantage.



12...♔d7!!

Moment of Contemplation:

... and speaking of amateurish-looking! At first sight this looks like a completely disproportionate response. In reality, it's only with this brilliant defensive move that Magnus could maintain a solid position: 12...♖c8? 13.♘xa7 ♖a8 14.♘xc6 ♗xa4 15.♘xd8 ♔xd8 leaves White up a pawn in the ending.

13.♙g2 a6 14.♘c3 ♙d6?!

Maybe Magnus should have gotten greedy, getting away with the crime with 14...b5! 15.♗d1 ♘xd4 16.e4 ♔e8! 17.0-0 b4 18.♘e2 ♘b5 which the comp calls dead even. I prefer Black's extra pawn to White's not-so-clear initiative.

15.♙xd6 ♔xd6 16.e4! b5

16...dxe4?! 17.♘cxe4+ ♘xe4 18.♙xe4 ♖c8 19.0-0 is obviously uncomfortable for Black, whose king doesn't look all that healthy bouncing around the centre.

17.e5+!

In case you didn't know it, Alexander the Great, Morozevich, is one of the best blindfold chess players

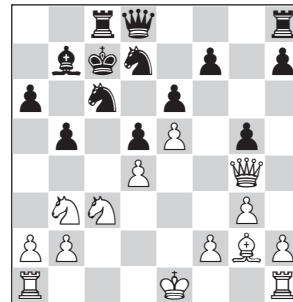
in the world. He converts a tactical advantage into a strategic one.

17...♔c7 18.♗d1 ♘d7 19.♘b3

1. White owns greater central space;
2. Black has created a hole on c5, which may later be occupied by a white knight;
3. Black's king looks slightly unsafe on the queenside;
4. Black's bishop looks like one arising from a mishandled Advance French Defense, since too many pawns are fixed on its colour;
5. The existence of number four on the list automatically means that Black is weak on the queenside dark squares.

Conclusion: Black is in deep trouble, strategically.

19...♖c8 20.♗g4 g5!?



Moment of Contemplation: A

typical Magnus high-risk gamble. He is willing to pay an excessively high strategic cost to complicate his souring position. Black is in violation of the **Principle:** Don't pick a fight from a position of inferiority. Magnus interprets a passive defensive move, defending g7, as the greater evil.

21.f4!

An open f-file favours White.

21...h6 22.0-0 ♖b8!?

Magnus offers (or perhaps blunders, since this was a blindfold game) his f-pawn for no good reason. 22...♖h7 was wretched, yet better than the move played in the game.

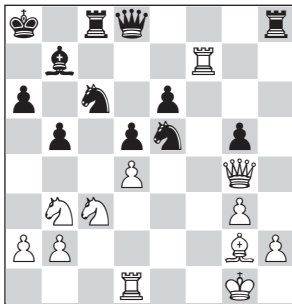
23.♖ad1!?

It was Mark Twain who wrote that ‘the difference between the right word and the almost right word is the difference between lightning and a lightning bug.’ Moro plays it uncharacteristically cautiously. Objectively strongest was 23.fxg5! ♖b6 24.gxh6 ♕cxe5 25.♖f4 ♖a7 26.♖h1 ♕c4 27.♖xf7 ♖d6 28.h7 ♕f8 29.♕c5 ♖c7. Here White has the stunning 30.a4!! ♖xf7 31.♖xf7 ♖xh7 32.♕xb7! ♖b6 33.♖af1 ♖xf7 34.♖xf7 ♖xd4 35.♕d8+ ♖a8 36.♖xf8 and Black is busted. Yet who can see all this sighted, much less without sight of the board?

23...♖a8?

23...♖c7 was forced.

24.fxg5! hxg5 25.♖xf7 ♕dxe5!



A good practical try in a sightless game, but as it turns out it's no more than a long suicide note. Magnus does the best he can to

muck it up. Morozevich remains unconfused.

26.dxe5 ♖b6+

26...♕xe5 27.♖xe6 ♕xf7 28.♖xf7 is completely lost for Black.

27.♕d4!

It's psychologically difficult to deliberately walk into a pin.

27.♖h1?? hangs an entire rook to

27...♕xe5 since after 28.♖xb7 ♖xh2+!

29.♖xh2 ♕xg4+ 30.♖h3 ♕f2+

31.♖h2 ♖h8+ it's mate in four.

27...♕xe5

Forking White's queen and rook. At this point, I will bet the spectators thought Moro had blundered in this sightless game. He hadn't.

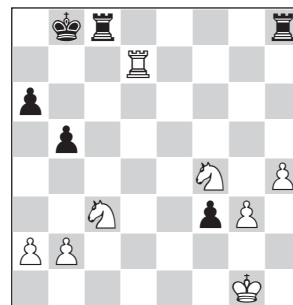
28.♖xb7!

Avoids the trap 28.♖xe6?? (it would be so easy to make this move in a blindfold game) 28...♖xe6 29.♕xe6 ♕xf7 when White is down an exchange and busted in the ending.

28...♖xb7 29.♖xe6 ♖xe6 30.♕xe6

g4 31.♕f4 ♖a7 32.♖xd5 ♕f3+

33.♕xf3 gxf3 34.♖d7+ ♖b8 35.h4!



Principle: Passed pawns should be pushed. White is completely winning, barring a catastrophic blindfold oversight.

35...b4 36.♕e4 ♖c2

Game 51 Caro-Kann Defense

Jan-Krzysztof Duda 2757**Magnus Carlsen** 2863

Stavanger 2020 (5)

If Magnus' games were movies, they would all be directed by Quentin Tarantino. In this one the law of averages finally caught up with Magnus. October 10th 2020 (my 60th birthday!) will be remembered in chess history as the day when Carlsen's non-losing streak came to an end, at the astonishing number of 125 games, including two World Championship Matches. In this game Magnus went on a berserker sacrificial spree, playing brilliantly imaginative chess, reminiscent of Tal in his most fanatical period. In the end Magnus gave away too much.

1.e4 c6!? 2.d4 d5 3.♟c3 dxe4**4.♞xe4 ♟f6!?**

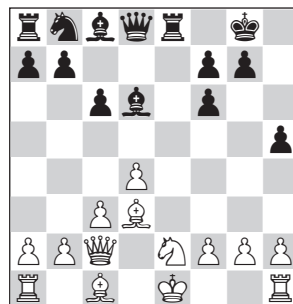
Magnus is playing for the full point. Über-solid are the lines 4...♟f5 and 4...♟d7. A safe line can also be interpreted as a purposeless one. Neither of these suits Magnus' style.

5.♞xf6+ exf6

Black gets freedom and a relatively safe king. The only problem is that his kingside majority is devalued and unable to produce a passed pawn in any king and pawn ending. White on the other hand can create a passed pawn on the queenside. Of course, it's a long way to a king and pawn ending. I was surprised to see that Black scored 53.9% from this position, which is actually slightly above average.

6.c3

Duda heads for what is considered White's optimal set-up, with bishop on d3, queen on c2 and knight on e2.

6...♟d6 7.♟d3 0-0 8.♞c2 ♞e8+**9.♞e2 h5!?**

If you are shocked by Magnus' last move, then don't be, since this is now Black's main line! The idea is to disrupt White's knight if it should move to g3, with ...h5-h4. From 498 games in my database, White only scores 47.4%!

10.♟e3

The most aggressive option is to castle queenside and go for opposite wing attacks. 10.0-0 is a safer route: 10...♞c7 11.h3 h4 12.♟d2 ♟d7 13.c4 ♞d8 (giving the d6-bishop air on c7, should White push c4-c5) 14.♞fe1 ♟f8 15.♞ad1 ♟c7 16.d5 cxd5 17.cxd5 ♟d7 and I prefer White, since the d5-pawn covers the important c6- and e6-squares, Xiong-Najer, Douglas 2019.

10...♟d7 11.0-0-0

Here we go! Both sides play for mate.

11...b5!?

This move looks premature but there is no talking sense to a zealot. This is actually a risky – possibly

outright dubious – pawn sacrifice. Most players in this position opted for the far safer 11...♖f8.

12.d5!

This undermining move wins material by force.

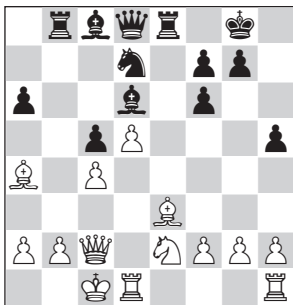
12...c5!

As is his habit, Magnus is eager for adventure, while simultaneously disdainful of peril. There is day-to-day reality and then there is mysticism. Magnus chose his path on the previous move, and it's too late to back down now. Black gives up the b-pawn to open the file against White's king.

- A) Certainly not 12...♙b7?? 13.♙h7+! (clearance) 13...♗h8 14.dxc6 and Black loses a piece;
- B) 12...cxd5? 13.♙h7+ ♗h8 14.♖xd5 ♘e5 15.♙e4 (threats: 16.♖ad1, and also 16.♖xd6, followed by 17.♙xa8) 15...♙e6 16.♖d4. White threatens ♙xa8 as well as ♖hd1 and Black is in trouble;

- C) After 12...♘e5 13.dxc6 ♖c7 14.♙xb5 ♖b8 15.♙a4 ♘c4 16.♙b3 ♘xe3 17.fxe3 Black is in trouble since 17...♖xc6?? is met with the skewer 18.♙a4.

13.♙xb5 ♖b8 14.c4 a6 15.♙a4



15...♖e7

Theoretical novelty. The idea, besides unpinning Black's knight, is to swing the rook over to b7. Previously played was 15...♖e5 16.♘c3 (16.♙f4?? loses to 16...♖xe2 17.♖xe2 ♙xf4+) 16...♘b6 17.♙b3 ♙f5 18.♖d2 a5 19.a3 ♘xd5 20.♘xd5 ♖xb3 21.♘c3 ♖b6 22.♘b5 ♖e6 23.♖xa5 ♖b8. which the engine assesses slightly in White's favour, Ivic-Hansen, Porto Carras 2018.

16.♘g3

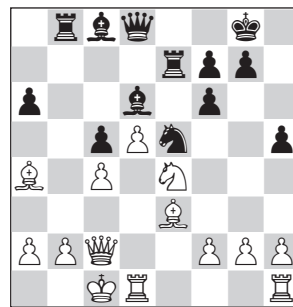
Eyeing f5 and the h-pawn as well.

16...♘e5?!

This isn't Black's optimal plan. With 16...♘b6! 17.♙c6 ♖xe3! 18.fxe3 h4 19.♘f1 ♙g4 20.♖d2 ♙h5! Black has dangerous compensation for the exchange and Stockfish 12 rates it at nearly even.

17.♘e4?!

It's important to cover against ...♖b4: 17.♙d2! ♖eb7 18.b3 h4 19.♘e4 ♙f5 20.♖he1 and I don't see Black's compensation for the pawn.



Exercise (planning): Come up with a plan for Black which offers full compensation for his material deficit.

Answer: 17...♖eb7

Step 1: Double rooks on the b-file.

18.b3

Forced. After 18.♖b3? ♕f5 Black threatens to push the a-pawn to a4 and White is in deep trouble.

18...♖b4!

Step 2: Move the rook to b4. We don't sense a tone of reconciliation behind this move, which is preparation for a dangerous exchange sacrifice on a4.

19.♕d2 ♖xa4!

And there we have Step 3. It's too late for misgivings. Faith is acceptance without question, and Magnus has faith in his ability to attack/confuse his opponent. Black gives up a lot of material, yet the engine still assesses the game as even, since White's king's cover is ripped to shreds.

20.bxa4 ♕f5 21.♖de1 h4?!

Inaccuracies must be factored in in positions of such a high degree of complexity. 21...♗g4! with the threat 22...♗xf2 is Black's strongest plan: 22.♖hf1 ♕e5 23.h3 ♖b2 24.♗d3 ♗h2 25.♖h1 (after 25.♕c3 ♗b8 26.♕xe5 ♗xe5 27.♖h1 ♖b4 Black gets full attacking compensation) 25...♗b6 26.♕d1 ♖xd2+! 27.♕xd2 ♗b2+ and White has nothing better than to take perpetual check with 28.♕d1 ♗a1+ 29.♕d2 ♗b2+.

22.h3!

Duda wisely prevents ...♗g4 ideas.

22...♗g6!

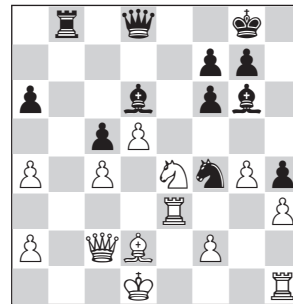
The knight is best posted on f4.

23.♖e3 ♗f4 24.g4

24.g3 hxg3 25.fxg3 ♗h5 26.♖g1 ♕h7 27.♕c3 is in White's favour.

24...♕g6 25.♕d1

Duda doesn't feel comfortable leaving his king on the queenside. White is unable to block the b-file with 25.♖b3? which allows 25...♗e2+ 26.♕b2 ♗e7 27.f3 ♗d4 28.♗d1 (28.♖xb8+?? ♕xb8 29.♗d1 ♗xf3! is a winning attack for Black) 28...♗xb3 29.axb3 ♕xe4 30.fxe4 ♗xe4 with the better chances for Black.



25...f5?!

Principle: Not every creative idea which pops into our head is practicable. Magnus gives up another pawn! Maybe Black's best was to go into a holding pattern with 25...♗e7 26.f3 ♗e5 27.♕c3 ♗e7. It isn't easy to find a plan to improve White's position and the engine just wants to repeat moves.

26.♗xd6 ♗xd6

26...fxg4? 27.♖e8+ ♗xe8 28.♗xe8 ♕xc2+ 29.♕xc2 ♖xe8 30.♕xf4 leaves Black down a piece.

27.gxf5 ♕h5+ 28.f3 ♗f6

Threatening to slip into a1.

29.♕c3 ♗g5!

Threatening discovered attacks on White's e3-rook, while preventing ♖g1.

30.♗e4!?

After 30. ♖he1 f6 I'm not sure how White should continue, despite his huge material plus. 31. ♕d2 ♖g3 32. ♖b3 ♕xf3+ 33. ♖c1 ♗e2+ 34. ♖b2 ♗d4 offers Black play, even though Stockfish likes White.

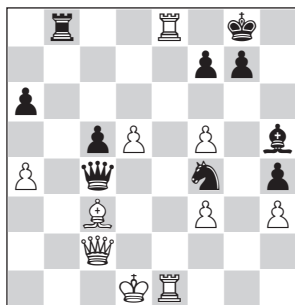
30... ♖g2 31. ♖he1 ♖xa2

We have trouble grasping anything solid, and at this stage any assessment without an engine's help feels like a reflection of a reflection. In truth Magnus is losing, yet from a practical perspective it won't be so easy for Duda to prove it, since the safety-in-numbers theory doesn't apply in chess.

Black threatens 32... ♖b1+. His initiative numbs his material pain temporarily, yet won't fully heal it, if White defends properly.

32. ♖c2 ♖xc4 33. ♖e8+

It must have been a relief for Duda to exchange rooks.



33... ♖h7!

Moment of Contemplation:

Mind over matter! Is this a high-risk decision, or is it a mental health issue? The truth is Magnus correctly gives up a full rook to avoid a fatal simplification. He evades the devilish simplification

trap 33... ♖xe8? 34. ♖xe8+ ♖h7 35. ♖h8+! (attraction) 35... ♖xh8 36. ♕xg7+ (discovered attack) 36... ♖xg7 37. ♖xc4 ♕xf3+ 38. ♖d2 ♗xd5 39. ♖xh4 with an easy win for White.

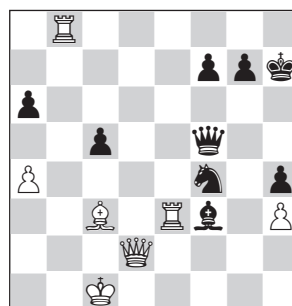
34. ♖xb8

White is robbing a pauper.

34... ♖xd5+ 35. ♖d2!

35. ♖c1?? ♗d3+ 36. ♖b1 ♗xe1 37. ♕xe1 ♖e5! with a double attack on e1 and b8 – Black stands no worse.

35... ♕xf3+ 36. ♖c1 ♖xf5 37. ♖e3



The results of White's wealth confiscation leaves Duda up two rooks for only a minor piece and three pawns, yet his exposed king creates all kinds of practical problems.

37... ♗e2+?

This check, while tempting, is not such a great idea, since it leads to further simplification. 37... ♕d5! was the only way to keep the position on the boil.

38. ♖b2!?

A perplexing decision. White is easily winning after simplifying with 38. ♖xe2! ♕xe2 39. ♖d8! (this may have been the move Duda missed; 39. ♖xe2 loses the rook on b8 after 39... ♖f4+) 39... ♖f4+

40.♔b2 ♕g6 41.♖f8!. The threat is 42.♗xg7+, and if 41...f6 42.♞b7 Black won't survive.

38...♜xc3

There is nothing better. Now Magnus' attempts to attack lose credibility.

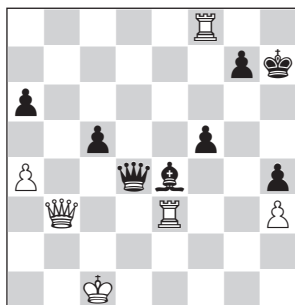
39.♗xc3 ♖f4 40.♗d3+ f5

Black's only hope is to win White's h-pawn, avoid getting mated and then promote one of his kingside pawns. This is asking too much.

41.♞f8 ♖b4+ 42.♔c1 ♕e4 43.♗b3!?

I would be sorely tempted to simplify with 43.♞xe4! fxe4 44.♗d8. Black doesn't achieve perpetual check, for example: 44...♗c3+ 45.♔d1 ♖b3+ 46.♔e2 ♗c2+ 47.♔e3 ♗c3+ 48.♔xe4 ♗c4+ 49.♔e5 ♗c3+ 50.♔d6 (White's king will hide behind Black's c-pawn) 50...♗d4+ 51.♔c7 ♖e5+ 52.♔b6 ♖e6+ 53.♔a7 and the checks run out.

43...♗d4



44.♗c3!

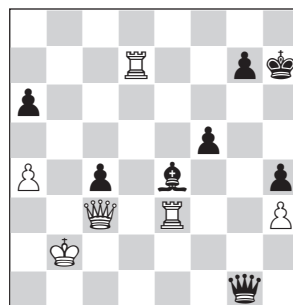
Duda comes up with a plan to take over the initiative. g7 is a target. 44.♗g8+ doesn't lead to anything concrete after 44...♔h6.

44...♗d6 45.♞f7 ♗g6

Magnus puts up superhuman resistance and Duda experiences

difficulty coming up with a simplification plan.

46.♞d7 ♗g1+ 47.♔b2 c4



48.♞xe4!

A practical decision. Now Black can only play for perpetual check.

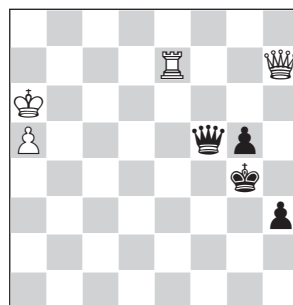
48...fxe4 49.♞d4 ♖f2+ 50.♗d2 c3+ 51.♔xc3 ♖g3+ 52.♔b2 ♗xh3 53.♞xe4 ♖g3 54.♗d4 ♖g2+ 55.♔c3 ♖f3+ 56.♔b4 ♖f8+ 57.♔a5 ♖f5+ 58.♔xa6

Duda could have ended it right here with 58.♞e5! ♖g6 (58...♖f6 59.♞h5+) 59.♖xh4+ ♔g8 60.♖h5!.

58...g5 59.a5 h3 60.♞e7+ ♔g6

61.♖g7+ ♔h5 62.♖h7+! ♔g4

If 62...♖xh7 63.♞xh7+ ♔g4 64.♔b6 ♔g3 65.a6 Black is way too slow.



Exercise (combination alert): Find one move and Black must resign:

Answer: 63.♞e4+! 1-0

X-ray attack. Black loses his queen.