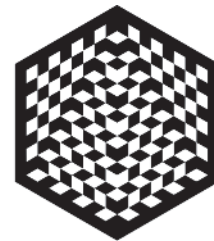


Nepo Nails It



Ian Nepomniachtchi triumphed to qualify in Jerusalem. Yochanan Afek reports

The fourth and final leg of the FIDE Grand Prix Series organised by 'World Chess' (formerly known as Agon), took place at the Notre Dame Centre in Jerusalem. The spectacular towering cathedral (and guest house), with the lovely 'rook pair' on top, was built some 130 years ago next to the old city's newest gate and provided an inspiring venue for the strongest individual tournament ever to be held in Israel.

16 players began this tough knockout, with a schedule of two classical games per mini-match followed, when needed, by tiebreak games of rapid, blitz and Armageddon. The prize money was €130,000, with €24,000 for the winner. Wang Hao and Dmitry Andreikin replaced Teimour Radjabov and Levon Aronian who had to decline their invitations for health reasons, while the sixteenth player was Boris Gelfand, selected by the host federation, as promised to the winner of Netanya Invitational last summer.

All eight games were drawn in round one, and just one of the return games was decisive, Wesley So defeating Yu Yangyi. Come the playoffs Dmitry Andreikin and Dmitry Jakovenko knocked out Radoslaw Wojtaszek and one of the favourites, Shakhriyar Mamedyarov, respectively, while Maxime Vachier-Lagrave and David Navara progressed at the expense of Veselin Topalov and Wang Hao.

Four of the play-offs were decided after two rapid games, with the Nepomniachtchi-Gelfand match especially exciting. The Russian later considered this opening match his toughest of the tournament.

B.Gelfand-I.Nepomniachtchi 3rd matchgame (rapid)



29 ♖xe5! fxe5 30 ♜xe5 ♖g8

The only defence against both threats, the

other being 31 ♜xf5.

31 ♜e4!?

White could try 31 ♜f6!?, but after 31...♗h7 32 c6 bxc6 33 ♖e1 ♖he8 34 ♜xe8 ♖xe8 35 ♖xe8 ♜xe8 36 ♖f2 ♜d7 37 ♜b2 ♜b7 38 ♜d4 ♜f7 Black seems to have defensive chances as the white king is so exposed.

31...♗f8 32 ♜f6+ ♖xf6 33 ♜xf6 ♖h7

34 ♖e1 ♖e8 35 ♖xe8 ½-½

I.Nepomniachtchi-B.Gelfand 4th matchgame (rapid)



34...b6?

A careless strategical blunder, weakening a key junction after which Black will have to cope not only with White's superiority along the open c-file, but also with the now exposed sixth rank.

35 ♖c4 ♜b5

It's hard to cover up all weaknesses as shown by the following possible continuation: 35...♖c8 36 ♖ac1 ♖xc4 37 ♖xc4 ♖h7 38 a4 ♖g7 39 b3 ♖f7 40 b4! ♜xa4 41 ♜c1 ♖g7 42 ♖c7+ ♖f7 43 ♖xf7+ ♖xf7 44 ♜c7+ followed by picking up the black pawns.

36 b3 ♖ef8 37 ♖ac1

White's positional efforts begin to bear fruit, starting with doubling on the open file.

37...♜a5

Trying to create some counter-threats on the queenside, but the queen has moved away from where she is most needed, protecting the totally exposed kingside.

38 ♖1c2

A loss of time. The immediate 38 ♖c6! ♖h7 39 ♖g6 ♜d2 40 ♖cc6 would have been game over.

38...♖f7 39 ♖c6 ♖h7 40 ♜c1

Even tripling...

40...b5 41 ♖e6 ♜d8 42 ♖cc6

...Followed by doubling on the key sixth rank.

42 ..♖4f6 43 ♖xf6 ♖xf6 44 ♖c7+ 1-0

Anish Giri also did not make it through, having gambled on a tempting yet false attack (30...♜f4), overlooking his opponent's counter tactical resource at the end of the line (35 ♜e8!).

Wei Yi-A.Giri 4th matchgame (rapid)



30 ♜e8! ♜xf4??

Falling for the poisoned pawn, whereas following 30...♖f7 31 ♜xg7 ♜xf4 32 ♖e3 ♖xg7 33 ♖e7+ ♖f8 34 ♖xh7 ♜h3+ 35 ♖g2 ♜f4+ 36 ♖g1 ♜h3+ the game would have ended in a draw by perpetual check.

31 ♜e7 ♜h3+ 32 ♖f1! ♜f5+ 33 ♖g2 ♖d7 34 ♜xf6+ ♖xf6 35 ♖e8+! 1-0

The missed zwischenzug? It all starts and ends on the same square. 35...♖g7 36 ♜xd7+! ♜xd7 37 ♖xf6+ decisively regains the queen.

The Dutchman considered his Grand Prix performance one of his worst ever, but will, of course, still appear in the Candidates thanks to qualifying by rating.

The longest match was played to the bitter end between Sergey Karjakin and Pentala Harikrishna. Every single game was drawn, allowing the former world championship challenger to progress after having Black in the decisive Armageddon game.

The opening games of the second round were notable for being especially short: all four games ending in a draw after barely an hour and a half. Perhaps the Shabbat in the doorway accelerated their peaceful conclusion. The next day Navara was the only player to qualify for the semi-finals, knocking out Jakovenko after an exemplary exploitation of an opening edge.

Come the tiebreaks, in his second rapid encounter with So, Nepomniachtchi managed to turn a slightly better queen and rook

endgame into a completely winning rook ending and send home the American, who later, indeed, doubted his own fatal decision to go for the queen exchange. Another favourite who made it to the semi-finals was Maxime Vachier-Lagrave, who defeated Andreikin 2½-1½. He won the first rapid in style, but a couple of strange events in the return appeared to suggest that tiredness was becoming a serious factor in what was by then a race between the French no.1 and Nepomniachtchi to qualify for the Candidates (Alexander Grischuk did not play the Jerusalem leg and qualified once it became clear that his two main rivals could not meet in the final there).

M.Vachier-Lagrave-D.Andreikin
4th matchgame (rapid)

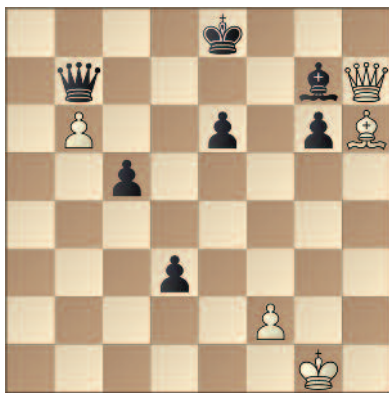


28...♙xb2?

After 28...♙c3 29 ♖h2 ♘f8 30 ♙xc3 ♙xc3 31 b5 White is somewhat better, but Black's 'positional' exchange sacrifice seems suicidal.

29 ♙xb2 ♘c6 30 b5 ♘cxe5 31 ♖h2! ♘xg4 32 ♖h7+ ♘f8 33 ♙a3+ ♘c5 34 dxc5 bxc5 35 ♙c1?

This must be tiredness. Why not 35 ♙f3? 35...♙xc1+ 36 ♙xc1 ♘xe3 37 ♙xe3 d4 38 ♙c1 ♖e7 39 a5 d3 40 b6 axb6 41 axb6 ♖b7 42 ♘xe6+ fxe6 43 ♙h6 ♙e8



44 ♙g8+?

The temptation to capture with check is natural, but here it allows Black to escape to safety. After 44 ♙xg7! d2 45 ♖g8+ ♘d7 46 ♖f7+ ♘c6 47 ♖xe6+ ♘b5 48 ♖b3+ ♘a6 49 ♙c3 White wins comfortably. 44...♘d7 45 ♖xg7+ ♘c6 46 ♖xg6?



Not being involved in the finals of the Grand Chess Tour likely benefitted Ian Nepomniachtchi. The 29-year-old eliminated a clearly tired Maxime Vachier-Lagrave at the semi-final stage in Jerusalem, then overcame Wei Yi to qualify for next month's Candidates.

46 ♖c3 was more than adequate, whereas now the passed d-pawn becomes a serious factor.

46...♖d7 47 ♙e3 ♘xb6

Refusing to fall for 47...d2?, which would prove a decisive error following 48 ♖e4+ ♘xb6 49 ♖b4+ ♖b5 50 ♖xb5+ ♘b5 51 ♙xd2, with a simple win for White.

48 ♘f1 ♖d5

This time 48...d2?? is met by 49 ♖b1+ ♘c6 50 ♘e2 when White wins the pawn and the game, but now, despite being a piece ahead, White has no good winning plan.

49 ♖h7 ♘b5 50 ♖h8 c4?

This hasty move should have cost Black dearly. Not only does it weaken the dark squares, but it also deprives the black king of a comfortable shelter.

51 ♙e1! ♖f3? 52 ♖b2+ ♘a4 53 ♖a2+ ♘b5 54 ♖b2+ ♘c6 55 ♘d2 ♖g4 56 ♖b6+ ♘d7 57 ♖d4+ ½-½

Draw? White does have a winning position, but, of course, half a point was sufficient for the Frenchman to advance to the semifinals.

In the longest match of round two, Wei Yi overcame Karjakin 3½-2½. The Russian lost the first rapid, but came back to equalise. He then lost the next, faster rapid, but this time failed to recover and could only draw.

The third round saw the highlight of the event: the clash between Nepomniachtchi and Vachier-Lagrave which would decide who would qualify for the Candidates. If the latter won the match, he would qualify straight away, but the Russian also needed to win the final to secure sufficient Grand Prix points to qualify. Nepomniachtchi was well prepared for the first game.

I.Nepomniachtchi-M.Vachier-Lagrave
1st matchgame
Grünfeld Defence

1 d4 ♘f6 2 c4 g6 3 ♘c3 d5 4 ♘f3 ♙g7

5 ♖b3 dxc4 6 ♖xc4 0-0 7 e4 ♘c6 8 ♙e3

This rare line was the surprise Nepomniachtchi had prepared especially for this important game. "It's nothing serious," he said afterwards. "But it worked out pretty well. He (Maxime, and after 20 minutes' thought) chose an interesting way, but strategically it's very dangerous."

8...♘g4 9 e5 ♘xe3 10 fxe3 ♙g4 11 h3 ♙xf3 12 gxf3 e6 13 h4 ♘e7 14 f4

White enjoys a solid pawn centre, but the position is level until Black now decides to create some queenside action.

14...b5?! 15 ♖c5

Electing to keep the file shut, but there was no real risk in grabbing the pawn.

15...♘f5 16 ♘f2 f6 17 ♙d1 b4 18 ♖xb4 ♙b8 19 ♖a3 fxe5 20 dxe5 ♖e8 21 ♙g2



21...♖e5?

An unfortunate miscalculation. 21...♖e7 was necessary.

22 fxe5 ♘xh4+ 23 ♙g1 ♘xg2 24 ♘e4!

This powerful response was apparently missed by Black in his calculations prior to his fatal bishop sacrifice. As the black knight isn't going anywhere, White may postpone capturing it and so avoid Black's counterplay following 24 ♘xg2 ♖c6+ 25 e4 ♖b6! 26 ♙h3 (26 ♙hf1 ♖e3 27 ♙f6 ♙bd8! is also fine for Black) 26...♙f2+ 27 ♘h1 ♙bf8 28 ♙g1 ♙f3! 29 ♙xf3 ♙xf3 30 ♖e7 ♖e3 when perpetual check by one side or the other is the most likely result.

24...♖d8



25 ♖c1!

The black knight is still poisonous: 25 ♖xg2? ♖c6 26 ♖b4 ♖c2+ 27 ♗d2 ♖d3! 28 ♖xh7! ♖dd8!! 29 ♖hh1 a5 30 ♖c3 ♖f5! and White will soon be mated.

25...♖b5

25...♖d5 26 ♗f6+ ♖xf6 27 exf6 ♖g5 28 ♖c5! also wins.

26 ♖e7 ♖d7 27 ♗f6+ ♖xf6 28 ♖xf6 ♖f7 29 ♖d8+ ♖f8 30 ♖xc7 ♖f7 31 ♖d8+ ♖f8 32 ♖e7 h5 33 ♖xe6+ ♗g7 34 ♖c7+ ♗h6 35 ♖xh5+ ♗xh5 36 ♖h3+ 1-0

36...♗h4 37 ♖h7+ ♗g5 38 ♖xh4+ ♗f5 39 ♖f4+ ♗e6 40 ♖xf8 is clearly hopeless.

The other semi-final match between Wei Yi and Navara saw a rare incident: the Chinese player arrived at the game expecting to play Black, which left him unprepared when he discovered he actually had the white pieces. That cost him a great deal of his time, allowing his opponent to equalise and even to obtain some slight chances in the resulting rook ending. Wei Yi, however, defended accurately enough and the game was finally concluded with just both kings remaining.

In the return must-win game, Vachier-Lagrave managed to catch Nepomniachtchi unprepared and obtained a clear edge out of the opening, but then lost the thread with a grave error on move 25. He offered a draw soon after, realising that his position was going from worse to worse, and that he had nothing to play for anymore. Meanwhile Navara and Wei Yi drew once again in a rook ending, with Navara defending successfully a pawn behind. The first rapid game was drawn from an inferior position for Navara, but in the return the Czech no.1 confused his opening lines and allowed his opponent a considerable edge which Wei Yi did not fail to exploit.

Wei Yi-D.Navara
4th matchgame (rapid)
Reti Opening

1 ♗f3 d5 2 b3 ♖f5 3 ♖b2 e6 4 d3 h6 5 ♗bd2 ♗f6 6 g3 c5 7 ♗e5 ♗bd7 8 e4 ♖h7 9 ♗xd7 ♖xd7 10 ♖g2 ♖d8? 11 exd5 exd5?

Following 11...♗xd5 12 0-0 ♖d7 Black is

behind in development, but now his structure will be destroyed too and, even worse, the e-file is open for White to attack down.

12 ♖e2+ ♖e7 13 ♖xf6 gxf6 14 0-0 ♖f5?

The last call for castling was missed.

15 ♖ae1 ♖e6 16 ♖h5! ♖d7?



16...♖f8 was the only defence against the threat of 17 ♖xe6.

17 ♖xe6! ♖xe6 18 ♖xd5 ♖d7 19 ♖xf7+ ♗d8 20 ♖e1 ♗c7 21 ♖e6 ♖d8 22 ♗c4 a6 23 ♖d5 ♖a7 24 ♖f7 ♖e8 25 ♖f3 b5 26 ♗a5

Heading for the deadly outpost which White has just created. Heavy material losses are inevitable.

26...♗b6 27 ♗c6 1-0

The first game of the final between Nepomniachtchi and Wei Yi set a couple of event records. On his 13th move Wei Yi took 53(!) minutes to decline a queen exchange, retreating instead from a4 to d1. No wonder that he remained short of time for the rest of the game. In an equal position on the 31st move Wei Yi could have settled for a repetition, but preferred to play on, missing a powerful positional exchange sacrifice that turned the tables and gave only Black winning chances. Nepomniachtchi took his time, patiently built up for the decisive breakthrough and deservedly won the longest game of the tournament on move 96.

In the second game Nepomniachtchi, with the white pieces, needed just a draw to win the tournament and become a Candidate.

I.Nepomniachtchi-Wei Yi

2nd matchgame
Modern Defence

1 e4 g6 2 d4 ♖g7 3 ♗c3 d6 4 ♗f3 a6 5 ♖e2 e6 6 0-0 ♗e7 7 ♖e1 ♗d7 8 a4 b6 9 ♖e3 ♖b7 10 ♖d2 h6 11 h3 g5 12 d5 e5 13 ♗h2 ♗g6 14 ♖g4 ♗f6 15 ♗f1 ♗f4

15...♗xg4 16 hxg4 ♖d7 17 f3 h5 18 gxh5 ♖xh5 19 ♖xg5 f6 is another way for Black to obtain counterplay, albeit at the cost of a pawn.

16 ♖f5!

Securing control of this key outpost.

16...h5 17 g3 ♖h6?

17...h4!? 18 gxf4 gxf4 19 ♖xf4 exf4 20

♖xf4 ♗d7 might offer better counter-chances.

18 f3 ♖g8 19 ♗h1!



19...♖c8?

After 19...♗g6!? 20 h4 ♗h7 Black keeps on fighting.

20 gxf4 gxf4 21 ♖f2

21 ♖g1! avoids the upcoming desperate tactical attempt.

21...♗e4!? 22 fxe4 ♖g5 23 ♗e3!?

Following 23 ♖xb6! ♖xf5 24 exf5 cxb6 25 ♗h2 ♖xf5 26 ♗e4 ♖g6 27 ♖d3 Black might find it hard to prove sufficient compensation.

23...fxe3 24 ♖xe3 ♖g3 25 ♖xh6

The tournament situation persuades White to forced a draw.

25...♖f3+ 26 ♗h2 ♖g3+ ½-½

Black should settle for a draw since 26...♖xf5 allows the powerful zwischenzug 27 ♖e3!, trapping the queen.

The 29-year-old victor is currently ranked fifth in the world. Nepomniachtchi's rich career already includes, way back in 2010, winning the Russian Superfinal (after defeating Sergey Karjakin in a play-off), and the European Individual Championship. He was also a member of the gold medal-winning Russian teams at both the 2013 World Team Championship in Antalya and the 2015 European Team Championship at Reykjavik.

"I would like to say that it's a very big moment in my career. The run is still on and it's a bit difficult because I'm tired after this year and probably there will be no rest as I need to prepare for the Candidates right now. In fact, every match was tough, including yesterday's game, but the toughest match was against Boris Gelfand. It was the only match where I completely deserve to lose, but managed to escape," commented Nepomniachtchi after winning first prize in Jerusalem.

Asked about his chances in the Candidates, he added: "First of all I should play better in the Candidates than here if I want to have a few chances. I'm not hundred percent sure who is playing there. Clearly it's a good point that I have good experience playing in Grand Chess Tour events with a similar field, including Ding Liren, Fabiano Caruana and others. Let's wait until Candidates happens and let's show the best chess I'm capable of."