

# MAGNUS FORCE

COLIN CROUCH

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# About the Author

**Dr Colin Crouch** is an International Master, a tremendously experienced tournament player and a highly regarded chess writer. His books have received great acclaim for their thoroughness and originality.

**Also by the Author:**

*Rate Your Endgame*

*Chess Secrets: Great Attackers*

*Modern Chess: Move by Move*

*Why We Lose at Chess*

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# Preface

For a player who wants to attempt any serious writing, through December 2012 and the beginning of 2013, the most natural point of departure was by going through the games of Magnus Carlsen, as he broke Garry Kasparov's record rating scores. To become ahead of Kasparov at his best is an astounding achievement. Obviously, no other player has as yet achieved this result, but records are there to be broken, and there are a few younger players, or near contemporaries, who would dearly want to improve just that little bit further, to emulate or improve on Carlsen's own achievements.

The core of this book is to analyse all the games by Magnus Carlsen, in the London Classic, December 2012, and Wijk aan Zee, January 2013. This is just a small segment in time, but it is clearly the start of a new chapter of chess history. In my previous book (*Fighting Chess: Move by Move*), I indicated that the younger players, from their early twenties or late teens, were on the way to taking over the chess world, although naturally the more experienced players would not want to give way without a fight. Although Carlsen was the highest-rated player at the time (although not ahead of Kasparov's world record), it was not that Carlsen was vastly ahead of anyone else. Caruana, Karjakin and Radjabov were not far behind in the summer of 2012, although quite clearly Radjabov had a serious crisis in confidence in the Candidates' of 2013, and he has not yet fully recovered. Karjakin and Caruana are, however, still making big strides.

Carlsen too had his own crisis in confidence, during the Candidates' and beyond. He looked like he was clearly winning the London Candidates' (March to April 2013), having just beaten off Aronian's main opposition, but suddenly, after starting off with a string of draws, Kramnik was finding form, with a string of wins. This was unexpected, and not part of Carlsen's game plan. He got tense, lost sleep, and lost two of his last three games. Indeed, both Carlsen and Kramnik lost their final game, and Carlsen qualified to play against Anand in the World Championship at the end of the year. Carlsen won through tiebreak; not the most satisfactory way of finishing the encounter, but ties have to be broken.

Carlsen, after having lost only twice out of exactly a hundred games, suddenly lost four times out of sixteen. This was certainly a crisis in Carlsen's play, but the critical question was whether he would overcome the crisis, and maybe become an even stronger player, or whether he would gradually fall back in strength. Perhaps though such things can be overblown. On one of the later revisions to the text, Karjakin has just lost three successive games in a row, in the Beijing Grand Prix, July 2013, when it looked like he was storming

for victory, with wins in the first three rounds. Maybe Karjakin is no longer going to win this tournament, but the chances are that he will recover his strength, as Carlsen is also likely to do. The sudden crash in Radjabov's play during the London Candidates' makes it appear like he will be suffering a greater lack of confidence in his play, but of course it would be unwise to write off anyone who has hit close to the top in their early or mid twenties.

This, however, is not something that can be covered in depth in this book. Someone else will be able to pick up on this point, maybe when writing up the World Championship match between Carlsen and Anand. A significant point though is that Carlsen had overcome an earlier crisis, when suddenly he lost a lot of games in 2008 and early 2009, sometimes with some unexpectedly bad games. He worked hard on his game, and recovered, and became for a while the most difficult player to beat in the world. Many of these earlier setbacks are examined in the earlier section of this book. Carlsen had clearly learnt from what went wrong.

No attempt has been made here to try any sort of standard biography (Carlsen learning how to play, Carlsen as a junior, etc). There are other players far better placed to write something much more detailed and informative; Simen Agdestein for a start. Instead, the approach is being made to analyse in depth what was happening in games between two really strong grandmasters. Obviously I will occasionally get things spectacularly wrong, but that is all part of the game.

I have not talked directly with Magnus Carlsen, and in some ways this is not totally a bad thing. I have the freedom that this is not an 'authorised biography', and the responsibility is not to write anything too daft. Clearly I have gone through Carlsen's own blog, and I hope I have learnt something from it.

My thanks to Mark Crowther, of *The Week in Chess*, who gave me a lot of encouragement in the earlier stages of this work. We were thinking about an e-book together, but he had so many other commitments. I will occasionally write up a tournament in depth, round by round, but he has the stamina of writing such events tournament by tournament, year by year. Respect.

Colin Crouch,  
Harrow,  
September 2013

# Introduction

The central idea of this book is to make a close examination of games by Magnus Carlsen, and two tournaments he won spectacularly, the London Classic 2012, and Wijk aan Zee 2013, in world-breaking style. Just look at his scores. We shall of course go through all of these games later.

Many readers may find it puzzling that the book starts off with a string of losses by Carlsen from the previous two years. The stronger and more experienced players will grasp the point immediately. To reach the top in chess, or even scale the minor peaks that most players have reached, it is not quite enough to win a few games. It is also necessary, even more so, to avoid defeats as far as possible. To improve your chess, and to go beyond your 'natural' plateau, what is important is to learn from your games, and learn deeply and intently. You want to do better next time, and to turn your previous weaknesses into strengths.

Carlsen cut down his losses quite dramatically during 2011 and early 2012, but even this is not quite enough. He avoided losses, but drew too many games, and quite often he needed great tenacity to avoid a few losses from slightly worse positions. He was faced with the old dilemma, that if a player wants to play a game extremely solidly, it is sometimes difficult to try to play for a win, but if he tries instead, from an early stage, to play for a win, he is placing himself in danger that he is out of his own comfort zone, as well as his opponents'.

This leads to what is most puzzling for chess followers, that Carlsen seems to know almost no opening theory, and just seems to play chess on the hoof. It is not the sort of thing that Kasparov would approve of, when he had reached the top, but in his younger years he often speculated wildly in sharp tactical positions, and quite often won, not by playing the most accurate move, but rather trying to outplay his opponent in extremely sharp tactical lines, in which one slip by the opponent would easily end up in a loss. Kasparov later went for a fully scientific approach in the opening, trying to analyse everything in depth, at home, and testing his opponent how accurately he would play. It will take time before Carlsen will have his full depth of understanding and knowledge in the opening, and similarly too with Kasparov in his teens and early twenties. Carlsen, as his play matures, will become even more frightening to his opponent. At the moment though, there are still gaps in his knowledge and understanding.

Carlsen would appear to think about chess very much in the style of Emanuel Lasker,

World Champion 1894-1921. All the time, he is thinking very much about his opponent, almost as much as the board. Naturally, like Lasker, he has an extremely deep understanding of the position, and given a straightforward technical edge, he will try to convert this without too much trouble. There is however a massive gap between what is happening in the start of the game, when all possibilities are open, and neither player has yet gone wrong; and a much later position, when one of the players is winning, or both players, after a battle, will end up with a draw, with best play by both sides.

The chess psychologist, gifted also with exceptionally clear thinking, will be trying to give himself every opportunity for his opponent to make a mistake, whether before move ten, or by move twenty, thirty, forty, or whatever. Carlsen also tries to grind out his opponent in the endgame, often a long way into the second session.

Carlsen, when playing against an opponent that he knows well, and an opponent he has analysed in depth, will tend to grasp very quickly his opponent's strengths or weaknesses. In preparing his openings, he will not try to catch up with the latest analysis twenty moves deep. He would be thinking instead of which sort of opening would make his opponent feel slightly uncomfortable, and therefore more likely to make a mistake.

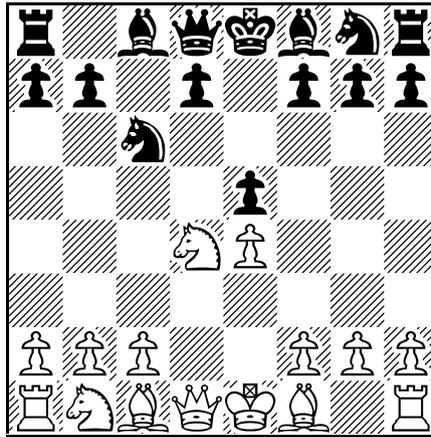
Two examples come to mind, in the Ruy Lopez, as Black against Anand in the London Classic 2010, and as White against Aronian in 2012, at the same venue. In either case, Carlsen had outplayed his opponent in the opening, but somehow he lost his grip in the position, possibly relaxing too much, confident that he had done the hard work of playing better than his renowned opponent. Against Anand he overlooked a tactic and lost, while against Aronian, he won a pawn extremely quickly, but he allowed his pawns to become blocked, and it became far from clear that he was in fact winning. He did win, but one out of two was a meagre result from what should have been two wins against his strongest opponents. He made life much more difficult for himself.

Carlsen excels under pressure in positions when he is worse, and also in strategically complicated positions in which both players are forced to play with great care. He is not quite so convincing when it looks as if he is clearly better, and it seems a matter of technique to haul in the full point. Often he seems to try to make life complicated, when all that is needed is simple chess. Of course, if the position is genuinely complicated, and requires difficult decisions on both sides, Carlsen is very much in his element.

Carlsen has often been less than convincing against not-quite world class players; say, those rated 2600 to the lower 2700s. He does not like to give away soft draws for his opponent, with the fear perhaps of losing a couple of Elo points, and perhaps more importantly, the possibility of falling behind his top opponents in a big tournament. Sometimes, though, he can overpress terribly. This seems a good link to the next part of the book, examining Carlsen's losses between 2010 and 2012.

Game 28  
**M.Carlsen (2861) - H.Nakamura (2769)**  
 Wijk aan Zee 2013  
*Sicilian Defence*

1 e4 c5 2 ♘f3 ♗c6 3 d4 cxd4 4 ♗xd4 e5



This is the oldest recorded mainline Open Sicilian, dating back to the epic matches between de la Bourdonnais and McDonnell in 1834. How can we tell that there were not any other examples? By inference. In one of the earlier games, McDonnell tried 2 d4 cxd4 3 ♗xd4?, and de la Bourdonnais was quickly on top after 3...♗c6. Clearly all this was new to McDonnell, and he soon had to rethink his play in the Sicilian.

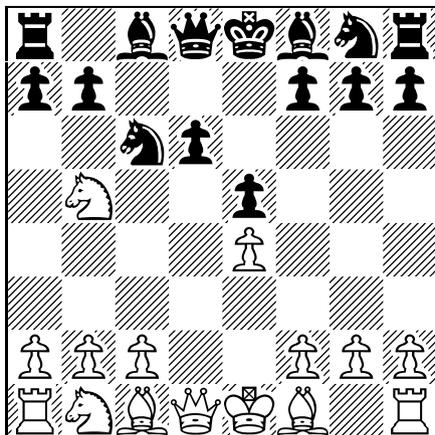
These days, the ...e5 line is usually prefaced by 4...♗f6 5 ♗c3 e5 6 ♗db5 d6, the Pelikan or Sveshnikov Variation. Still, the ‘Kalashnikov Variation’ quite often gets tried, as here.

5 ♗b5

And in 1834? McDonnell, perhaps not overly concerned with pawn structure, exchanged with 5 ♗xc6 bxc6. In that most famous game, the “three pawns on the seventh” game, de la Bourdonnais produced a mind-blowing brilliancy. A fascinating game, which pushed world chess much closer to the 20th century, with complicated tactics and strategic ideas. Even so, perhaps the clue is “three pawns on the seventh”. McDonnell undoubtedly had his chances throughout the game, but there is clearly a danger in allowing the pawns to push that far ahead. Hence the more modern approach, to put pressure on the backward squares on d5 and d6, with no c-pawn fortifying the centre.

5...d6

The mid-19th century approach, as advocated by Lowenthal, is 5...a6 6 ♗d6+ ♗xd6 7 ♗xf6 ♗f6. This is playable, even though some might be concerned about both giving away the bishop-pair, and allowing the backward d-pawn. A slight edge to White?



### 6 g3

The sparring continues for position in the opening. The position here is far more common, if the players had inserted ... $\text{f6}$  for Black, and  $\text{c3}$  for White. There are many slight differences between the strategies of the two lines. The most obvious point for White is that he can try a quick c4, so that  $\text{c3}$  does not block the pawn. This is playable, if not necessarily enticing. If White has slightly strengthened the light squares, he also weakens the dark squares. Also, with correct timing, Black can hit back on the light squares on the kingside with ...f5.

At the higher levels of chess, White quite often simply offers a Sveshnikov Variation, with 6  $\text{c3}$  a6 7  $\text{a3}$ . Black can assent to this with 7...b5 8  $\text{d5}$   $\text{f6}$ , or try instead 7... $\text{e7}$ .

Carlsen is ready enough to try out his own ideas. The point of the kingside fianchetto in such openings is that as well as making it difficult for Black to try ...d5, White also restrains Black from playing ...f5, as White can exchange pawns, and open up, and make good use of the long diagonal for the bishop.

### 6...h5

From Carlsen's comments after the game, it is clear that he had sensed that this was the move that Nakamura was likely to play, even though there were various other options. Carlsen, like Lasker a century ago, has an excellent instinctive grasp of practical chess psychology, of sensing what the opponent was thinking.

### 7 $\text{c3}$

"Just force him to weaken his queenside a little bit," according to Carlsen. This is worth thinking about more closely. The instinctive reaction is that a pawn advance on the flanks is a positive reaction, to start to create an initiative. A common theme in the Sicilian might well be to exchange on d4, so that the c-file is half-opened, and then perhaps ...a6, to allow the queen to reach c7, without hassle from any  $\text{b5}$  attacks, and then perhaps ...b5 and ... $\text{b7}$ . This is a mixture of attack and defence. Or, in the Ruy Lopez, White plays  $\text{b5}$ , then Black attacks the bishop at some stage, with ...a6, and if  $\text{a4}$ , then when the timing is cor-

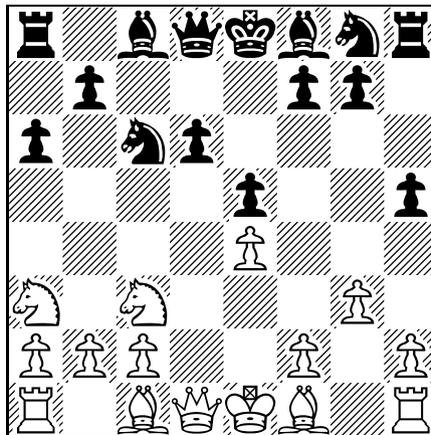
rect, ...b5. Such a line may give various attacking possibilities for Black, but more realistically, he wants to kick the bishop from the a4-e8 diagonal, and the first priority for Black is not to allow his b- and a-pawns to become too weak. There are many prods in this opening with a4 at some stage.

Sometimes weaknesses on the edge can spread to other parts of the board, particularly the centre. If the a-pawn advances, then there is the danger of a slow-burn chain reaction, if, for example, the b-pawn needs to advance to hide the weaknesses on b6, and then the c-file is weakened, and in turn the d5-square is weakened, possibly seriously.

And so on. By coincidence, or perhaps by judicious choice of opening, Carlsen tempted Nakamura to set up precisely this pawn set-up as Black in round 8 of the Tal Memorial 2013, on the day I was setting up the final revision for this book. Nakamura, as Black in the English, played against a fianchetto line, with a pawn exchange on d5 (...dxc4), and when Carlsen recaptured with the queen, Nakamura (after he has already played ...c6), played ...b5 and ...a6. He was soon in trouble, and Carlsen was able to press effectively the d-pawn, once Black had played ...c5, and then later attacked the b-pawn with a4.

Carlsen has always been extremely acute in noticing slight weaknesses in his opponent's pawn structure, and in his handling of such positions.

**7...a6 8 ♖a3**



Presumably Black has not equalized yet, but how much of an edge has White got?

**8...b5?!**

In view of the previous comments, this pawn push needs to be treated with suspicion. Black has already pushed his outside kingside pawn, and now he wants to push his pawns on the queenside. There are likely to be difficulties in the centre, as Black will be unable to find any defensive solidity on either side of the board.

Attention therefore draws to the kingside, and whether ...h5 is reasonable enough, or quite simply bad. 8...♘f6?! 9 ♔g5 gives a very clear example of a weak square, created by an earlier pawn advance. It is extremely difficult for Black to dislodge the bishop on g5.

## Magnus Force: How Carlsen beat Kasparov's Record

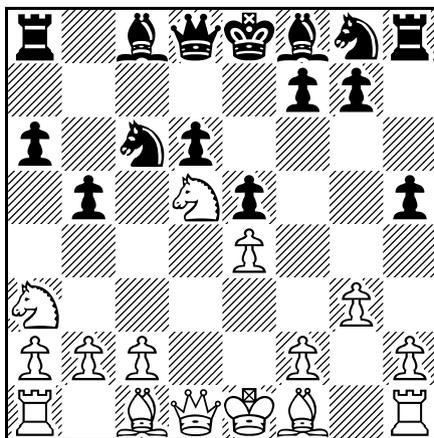
8...h4 is a possibility, and has been tried out in an earlier Wijk aan Zee tournament. After 9 ♖g2, all Black will achieve by 9...hxg3?! would be to give away a couple of tempi with the pawn, after 10 hxg3 ♜xh1+ 11 ♖xh1. Leaving the pawn on h4 does not make any great sense. This means the logical line is 9...h3 10 ♖f1. The pawn in itself is not so weak, but there is little coordination with the other kingside pawns, once one pawn has advanced so far.

In J.Nunn-N.Short, Wijk aan Zee 1990, play continued with 10...b5 11 ♘d5 ♘ce7 12 ♖g5 f6 13 ♖e3 ♘xd5 14 ♜xd5 ♜b8 15 0-0-0, with an eventual win for White, since Black's d6-pawn drops on 15...♗e7?! 16 ♜xd6 ♜xd6 17 ♜xd6 ♘f5 18 ♜b6 ♜xb6 19 ♖xb6 ♘d6 20 f3. However, 15...♖b7! looks fully playable, making use of the long diagonal opened up by the bishop. Indeed, if anything, it is White who has to try to equalize.

If 16 ♜e6+ ♜e7, and if then 17 ♜xd6?! ♜xe6 18 ♜xe6+ ♔f7 19 ♜b6 ♖xa3 20 bxa3 ♘e7, and the rook is in a tangle, with the threat of ...♗c8. Instead, 17 ♖xh3 seems to end up equal after 17...♖xe4 18 ♜he1 ♜xe6 19 ♖xe6 d5 20 ♘b1!. So, unless there are improvements for White, Black's opening play can be justified, though probably not his 8...b5.

8...♖g4 9 f3 ♖e6 is another possibility, much as in the main line, but without the unnecessary ...b5. White keeps an edge. Also, if 8...♘d4 9 ♖g2, and White can develop with comfort.

9 ♘d5



Carlsen wanted to play ♘d5 anyway. The only reason therefore why Black wanted to play ...b5 was to prevent White from playing ♗c4. Naturally for the next couple of moves Carlsen was considering c4, opening up lines, but in the end he decided on quieter development, with c3 then ♘c2.

9...♗ge7 10 ♖g2 ♖g4

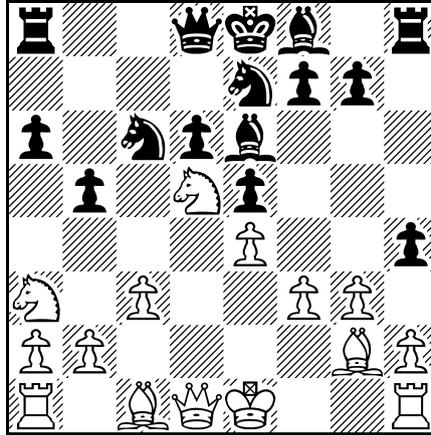
Carlsen suggested 10...♘xd5 11 exd5 ♘e7, while considering that White was better anyway. It is not all that clear for Black that prompting White to play f3 is all that effective, given that the pawn on e4 blocks the long diagonal anyway. Given that, it is not fully clear

that Black should move the bishop anyway, with or without White's extra tempo with f3.

**11 f3 ♖e6**

Carlsen felt that 11...♗d7 was better, on the basis that it would give extra flexibility for Black to exchange knights, with ...♞xd5. White is better anyway.

**12 c3 h4**



**13 ♞c2?!**

This is such a natural and casual move, that one could easily believe that White's play is beyond criticism. After all, the knight is moving to a better square. Even so, White will want to develop all his pieces, and so far his queenside pieces, apart from the knight, have still not yet moved.

13 ♖e3! starts off this next stage of development. There is the additional slightly unexpected point that if Black continues, as in the game, with 13...♗xd5 14 exd5 ♞a5, White's knight turns out to be better on a3 than on c2. White can cover any ...♞c4 ideas.

**13...♗xd5**

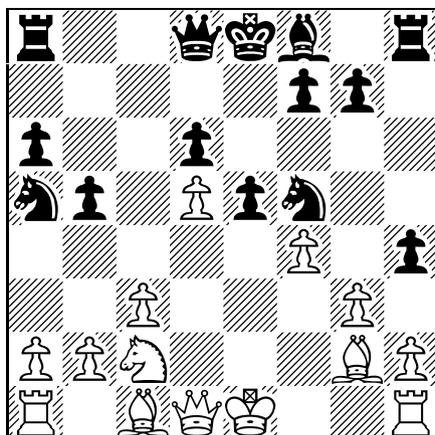
He does not need the bishop-pair after all. Nakamura must surely have felt that he was under pressure, but even so, he was not too far from equality after Carlsen's last move.

**14 exd5 ♞a5 15 f4**

This move now looks slightly rushed, in that White, after some partial opening of the centre, finds his queenside underdeveloped. Carlsen evidently felt that he needs to open up the centre, before Black could stabilize with something like ...f5 and/or ...g6, and various possible exchanges on the h-file.

**15...♞f5?**

Carlsen suggested after the game that 15...hxg3 16 hxg3 ♖xh1+ 17 ♖xh1 ♞d7 needed to be played, and indeed it is not so clear that White has achieved all that much out of the opening. If 18 ♞e3 (so that if 18...♞h3, then 19 ♞f3), then Black can quite simply develop on the kingside, with 18...g6, and a bishop move.



### 16 g4!

A victory for 19th century chess romanticism! This is indeed the best, as Carlsen senses. We are again entering into the realms of La Bourdonnais and McDonnell, and the spectacular and wild chess which so excited chess players of almost two centuries ago. All the characteristic patterns can be seen: unmoved kings on both sides, when the pawn centre is close to being fully open; unmoved bishops, in which somehow neither player got around to moving them; and above all, wildly unstable pawn positioning.

There are some alternatives, aiming for quieter play, but they end up as at best equal, such as the computer recommendation, 16 ♖g4 g6 17 fxe5 hxg3 18 hxg3 ♜xh1+ 19 ♙xh1. This soon ends up as a slight edge for Black, not what White would have wanted. Similarly, and probably even less enticing, 16 ♜d3 g6 17 0-0 hxg3 18 hxg3 ♜b6+.

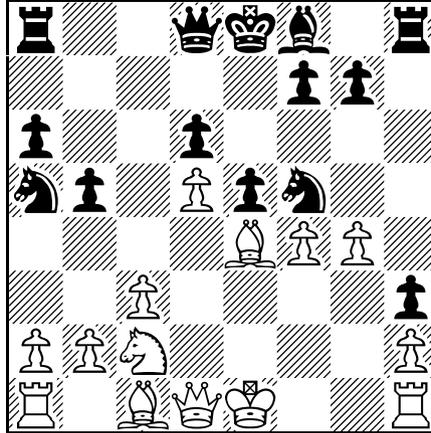
If White were thinking in terms of a very slight technical edge, the very quiet 16 ♘e3 ♗xe3 17 ♙xe3 ♘c4 18 ♜e2 seems a reasonable option. After 18...♜e7, White has 19 0-0 (finally!). Even so, with best play, Black is able to equalize, with 19...hxg3 20 hxg3 exf4 21 ♜xf4 g6!. When players each find themselves well behind in development, through sharp tactical play, just to bring an undeveloped piece into play sometimes feels almost like a gain of a piece. Of course, only "almost".

Carlsen's move looks clearly the best.

### 16...h3

Black has been delaying this for a long time, but it starts to become interesting, once White has vacated the g3-square.

### 17 ♙e4



Clearly Black will move a piece to h4, but is it to be the queen or the knight?

**17...♖h4**

Neither move is fully satisfactory.

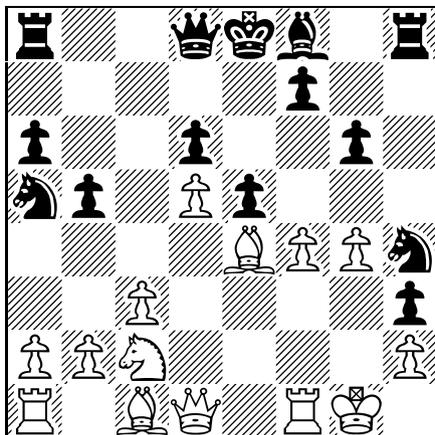
After 17...♖h4+ 18 ♔f1 ♘h6 19 ♗g1! White's king may at first look ridiculously open, but in fact Carlsen has seen that all his pieces, and in particular his major pieces, keep all his weak squares very well covered. Soon White will emerge with a clear attack.

Carlsen suggested after the game that 19 g5(!) ♘g4 20 ♖e2 leaves Black in a bad way. This is not so. The wonders of modern computer technology show that 20...exf4!! gives full and clear equality. The discovered check by the bishop would have been harmless after ...♘e5. If 21 ♗xf4, Black can again offer the discovered check in safety, after 21...♘c4. Carlsen slightly misassessed this, when giving his commentary after the game. One could feel reasonably certain that he would have found the better move, though, when confronted with the critical position over the board.

**18 0-0!**

Simple and safe. If Black's attack with the queen is of no great significance, the immobile knight is of even less importance.

**18...g6**



**19 ♔h1?**

Far too delicate. The king is for the moment safe on g1, and trying to move the king to an even safer square ends up in losing a critical tempo. Simply 19 g5!, preventing Black from playing the intended ...f5, is safe enough. There may well be other good moves.

So how should Nakamura reply?

By sticking to his original plan!

**19...♗g7?**

Unless of course the mere bishop fianchetto was the basic plan he intended. Black needed to play actively, with 19...f5!. After 20 ♔d3, Carlsen in his commentary considered only 20...e4? 21 ♗e2, when the pawn structure is close to static again, and White can manoeuvre quietly, and hope to pick up the distant pawn on h3. Black can, however, keep the pawn structure tense, with 20...♞d7!, and if there is any advantage for White at all, it is only slight.

**20 f5!**

Now White has all the kingside attacking chances.

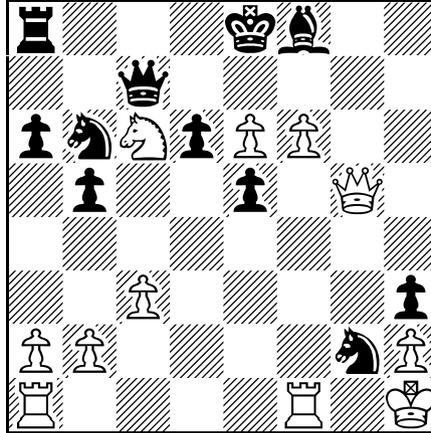
**20...gxf5 21 gxf5 ♖g2?!**

And this does not help, although Black's position looks dismal anyway, after, for example, 21...♗h6 22 ♗xh6 ♜xh6 23 ♜g1 ♜h8 24 ♖e3. What is Black going to do with his knight, or indeed either of his knights?

**22 f6**

And White is totally dominant. The one significant tactical point is that after 22...♗xf6 23 ♞f3 ♜h4 24 ♗g5, White wins the exchange, and eventually the position, after 24...♞xf4 25 ♗xf4.

**22...♗f6 23 ♞f3 ♞c7 24 ♖b4 ♖b7 25 ♖c6 ♖c5 26 ♗f5 ♖d7 27 ♗g5 ♜g8 28 ♞h5 ♖b6 29 ♗e6 ♞xg5 30 ♞xg5 fxe6 31 dxe6 1-0**



The final position just about says it all, except of course the point of chess logic is that Black should have played it better, earlier on.

*Game 29*  
**A.Giri (2720) - M.Carlsen (2861)**  
 Wijk aan Zee 2013  
*King's Indian Defence*

The last game of a long and gruelling tournament, and the end of an unusual chapter in chess history. Carlsen has achieved the highest-ever FIDE rating, and equalled the record for the highest score (in percentage terms) at Wijk aan Zee.

Anish Giri is, at the moment, the youngest player rated over 2700, aged 18 at Wijk aan Zee. There are players who were born just after Giri's birth, who will reach 2700, of course. Wesley So of the Philippines hit 2700 recently, but he is a few months older than Giri. For the moment though Giri holds the record.

**1 d4 ♘f6 2 c4 g6 3 f3 d6 4 e4 e5 5 d5 ♗h5 6 ♙e3**