

American Dream

The Best Games of Hikaru Nakamura

Cyrus Lakdawala

American Dream: The Best Games of Hikaru Nakamura

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Contents

Index of Games	4
Introduction	6
Chapter 1: On the Attack	8
Games 1-15	
Chapter 2: Defence and Counterattack	52
Games 16-25	
Chapter 3: The Dark Side of the Moon – Chaos and the Dynamic Element ..	88
Games 26-50	
Chapter 4: Accumulating Advantages	189
Games 51-60	
Chapter 5: Exploiting Imbalances	227
Games 61- 72	

Index of Games

Game	White	Black	Opening	Year
1	H. Nakamura	A. Lesiege	Sicilian Defence	2002
2	H. Nakamura	I. Smirin	Pirc Defence	2005
3	M. Krasenkow	H. Nakamura	Catalan Opening	2007
4	H. Nakamura	A. Postojev	Sicilian Defence	2008
5	H. Nakamura	M. Barron	Dutch Defence	2009
6	A. Beliavsky	H. Nakamura	King's Indian Defence	2009
7	B. Gelfand	H. Nakamura	King's Indian Defence	2010
8	H. Nakamura	D. Navara	English Opening	2012
9	H. Nakamura	M. Vachier-Lagrave	Grunfeld Defence	2011
10	W. So	H. Nakamura	King's Indian Defence	2015
11	H. Nakamura	V. Akobian	Petroff Defence	2016
12	H. Nakamura	M. Carlsen	Spanish Opening	2020
13	H. Nakamura	M. Carlsen	Spanish Opening	2020
14	H. Nakamura	M. Carlsen	Spanish Opening	2020
15	H. Nakamura	B. Amin	Evans Gambit	2024
16	H. Nakamura	N. Short	Spanish Opening	2010
17	H. Nakamura	A. Grischuk	Queen's Gambit Declined	2011
18	H. Nakamura	E. Bacrot	King's Indian Defence	2012
19	H. Nakamura	E. Safarli	Queen's Gambit Declined	2013
20	H. Nakamura	E. Bacrot	Queen's Gambit Declined	2013
21	H. Nakamura	B. Gelfand	Grunfeld Defence	2013
22	H. Nakamura	M. Vachier-Lagrave	Sicilian Defence	2017
23	H. Nakamura	N. Grandelius	Sicilian Defence	2018
24	H. Nakamura	G. Oparin	Nimzo-Indian Defence	2022
25	H. Nakamura	I. Nepomniachtchi	Petroff Defence	2024
26	H. Nakamura	E. Berg	French Defence	2003
27	C. Lakdawala	H. Nakamura	Trompowsky/Hodgson Attack	2004
28	H. Nakamura	I. Ibragimov	French Defence	2004
29	B. Macieja	H. Nakamura	French Defence	2006
30	H. Nakamura	V. Epishin	Sicilian Defence	2007
31	H. Nakamura	J. Friedel	Two Knights Defence	2009
32	I. Nepomniachtchi	H. Nakamura	Caro-Kann Defence	2011
33	H. Nakamura	L. Van Wely	Sicilian Defence	2010
34	H. Nakamura	F. Vallejo Pons	English Opening	2011
35	H. Nakamura	V. Kramnik	Grunfeld Symmetrical Fianchetto System	2012
36	H. Nakamura	G. Kamsky	Sicilian Defence	2013

Game	White	Black	Opening	Year
37	H. Nakamura	B. Jobava	Bogo-Indian Defence	2014
38	H. Nakamura	M. Adams	Queen's Gambit Declined	2014
39	H. Nakamura	S. Mamedyarov	Caro-Kann Defence	2014
40	H. Nakamura	S. Karjakin	English Opening	2015
41	H. Nakamura	V. Anand	Queen's Gambit Declined	2016
42	H. Nakamura	S. Shankland	Caro-Kann Defence	2016
43	H. Nakamura	L. Ding	Semi-Slav Defence	2016
44	H. Nakamura	V. Anand	English Opening	2016
45	H. Nakamura	J. Xiong	Anti-Grinfeld System	2016
46	H. Nakamura	A. Shabalov	Sicilian Defence	2016
47	H. Nakamura	S. Karjakin	English Opening	2018
48	F. Caruana	H. Nakamura	Queen's Gambit Declined	2018
49	H. Nakamura	A. Firouzja	French Defence	2024
50	H. Nakamura	F. Caruana	Spanish Opening	2024
51	H. Nakamura	J. Moreno Canero	King's Indian Defence	2003
52	H. Nakamura	V. Topalov	Sicilian Defence	2015
53	H. Nakamura	M. Vachier-Lagrave	Queen's Gambit Declined	2015
54	H. Nakamura	A. Lenderman	Catalan Opening	2016
55	H. Nakamura	D. Anton Guijarro	Queen's Indian Defence	2017
56	H. Nakamura	T. Radjabov	Sicilian Defence	2017
57	H. Nakamura	I. Nepomniachtchi	Grinfeld Hybrid	2017
58	H. Nakamura	E. Iturrizaga Bonelli	Queen's Indian Defence	2017
59	H. Nakamura	E. Iturrizaga Bonelli	Queen's Indian Defence	2019
60	L. Ding	H. Nakamura	English Hybrid	2024
61	H. Nakamura	W. Browne	Nimzo-Indian Defence	2002
62	G. Sagalchik	H. Nakamura	French Defence	2003
63	H. Nakamura	S. Karjakin	Scotch Game	2004
64	H. Nakamura	R. Rapport	Chigorin Defence	2017
65	H. Nakamura	V. Kramnik	Nimzo-Indian Defence	2013
66	H. Nakamura	B. Adhiban	King's Indian Defence	2013
67	H. Nakamura	V. Topalov	Sicilian Defence	2013
68	N. Vitiugov	H. Nakamura	Queen's Gambit Declined	2011
69	H. Nakamura	M. Carlsen	Scotch Game	2017
70	H. Nakamura	D. Dubov	Queen's Gambit Declined	2019
71	H. Nakamura	F. Caruana	Ruy Lopez	2022
72	H. Nakamura	F. Caruana	Ruy Lopez	2024

Introduction

Our heroes are reflections of who we want to be. The unattainable goal of the cheap copy (us!) is to one day become the original. Yet we try, since great players gift our own chess with inspiration. There are two players in the chess world who draw the biggest crowds. The first is Magnus Carlsen and the second, Hikaru Nakamura, whose games are the subject of this book. Hikaru is the player I always wanted to be, confident, supremely talented and what feels like (to me at least), all-seeing at the board. Living the American Dream.

Prodigy

“I’ve had to grow up pretty fast, which is not a good thing.”

Hikaru was born in Hirakata, Osaka Prefecture, Japan, in 1987. At age 10, he became the youngest Master in U.S. history at the time. At the same age, he defeated IM Jay Bonin, thus becoming for a while the youngest American to ever defeat an IM. I “met” Hikaru for the first time online on the ICC server when he was a 13-year-old IM. I could usually beat him in 3-minute games. By age 14, however, he already passed me, and by age 15, he would turn me into chutney each time we played. The games weren’t even close.

Nakamura’s Chess Resume

* 5-time U.S. Champion.

* Hikaru is one of the most popular chess streamers in the world with a massive and growing army of followers, several million strong.

* Hikaru played in 5 Olympiads for the U.S., earning a team Gold and two Bronze medals.

*As I write this, Hikaru is the reigning World Fischer Random Chess Champion.

* Hikaru’s peak rating was a stratospheric 2816, the 10th highest of all time.

* In case you didn’t know it, Hikaru is a blitz and rapid chess god. He posted the highest ever blitz rating on chess.com in 2023, a staggering 3336. Not even Magnus Carlsen has been able to surpass that rating high. FIDE began publishing rapid and blitz chess ratings in 2014. In the first publication, Hikaru was ranked number 1 on *both* lists! Since then, he has been either number 1 or tantalizingly close, within striking range of the top spot. In blitz chess, he is easily within the top 3 of all time; in bullet, he may be the GOAT. In one-minute bullet, with no increment, he is the best, at least in my judgment.

*Hikaru is consistently on a list of the five wealthiest gamers in the world, the revenue mainly generated from his massive streaming audience.

Can Nakamura Still Become World Champion?

“I used to believe in forever, but forever’s too good to be true.”

Every challenger to the throne always believes that they would look dashing wearing a crown. Even though Hikaru has been a constant member of the top 10 players list, he has not (yet!) become world chess champion. However, time is running out for him since in just a few years he will likely be past his prime. While an elderly person can dream of youth, when they awaken, they remain trapped within their old body. As a chess king ages, Caissa slowly refuses to speak to him any longer. In normal life, age 36 (at the time of writing) feels young. However, if you are trying to become world chess champion, you realize 36 years is old since you have access to maybe one more shot at the title before you begin to decline. Every important failure in chess inflicts its own cruel brand of psychic trauma. Hikaru came quite close to a shot at the title in the past. In 2022, he needed to hold Ding Liren to a draw in the final round of the Candidates’ in order to play Ian Nepomniachtchi in a world chess championship match, since Magnus Carlsen was abdicating his title. Tragically, Hikaru lost to Ding, who went on to defeat Nepo and become the reigning champion (as I write this). In the 2024 Candidates’, he needed to beat Ding’s current challenger Gukesh in the final round with the white pieces. However, Gukesh held the draw and is now the official challenger. I’m guessing that Nakamura has one or if he is lucky, two real shots to be the official challenger for a World Chess Championship match.

Nakamura’s Style

On the chess board, there are extremes on the stylistic spectrum, from the peace-loving, to outright vicious. Hikaru began his chess life as the latter, a tactician, chaoticist and wicked attacker. Nakamura craves adventure the way the rest of us need air to live. In the present, he transformed into a more complete, universal player who is happy to win a subtle positional game or grind out a 90–move technical ending. Still, I suspect that in his heart he remains that same kid who loves chaos. The less sense a position makes, the more Nakamura likes it!

May your imagination soar, as you play through the games of one of the most naturally gifted and creative players of all time, Hikaru Nakamura.

Chapter 1

On the Attack

The attack is the magnet of all our chess dreams. Hikaru is an exceptionally gifted attacker, and I could easily write an entire book just on his games from this chapter. In fact, at one point, I collected over 200 candidate games for this chapter alone!

Let's start with a game from a still 14-year-old Hikaru. We are accustomed to Nakamura being the higher-rated player (except when he faces Magnus Carlsen!). In this game the Canadian GM Lesiege outrated Hikaru by nearly 150 points, so this win was at the time something of an upset.

Game 1

H. Nakamura – A. Lesiege

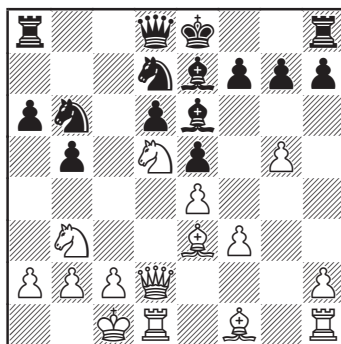
Bermuda 2002

Sicilian Defence

1.e4 c5 2.♘c3 d6 3.♗f3 ♘f6 4.d4
cxd4 5.♗xd4 a6 6.♙e3

“Suffer little children, and forbid them not, to come unto me: for of such is the kingdom of heaven.” What kid doesn't want to play the Najdorf from either side? Hikaru was conversant with the Najdorf from both sides of the board. Since early childhood, he never shied away from heavily analyzed, sharp opening lines. There was no tough right-of-passage for the young Hikaru. It's as if he was born a genetically enhanced soldier with the skills of a veteran warrior, even as a child.

6...e5 7.♘b3 ♙e6 8.f3 ♘bd7
9.♚d2 ♙e7 10.0-0 b5 11.g4 ♘b6
12.g5 ♗fd7 13.♗d5



White allows Black to plug the d5–hole with a white pawn. The cost for Black is either time or light squares.

13...♙xd5

Lesiege is willing to hand over the bishop pair and light squares to avoid loss of time. Weaker is 13...♗xd5?! 14.exd5 ♙f5 15.♘a5 when White looks better due to a coming ♗c6.

14.exd5 ♗c4?!

The knight refuses to remain on the sidelines as a passive observer. Today, we know this to be a sub-optimal line on Black's part. The main

line runs 14...♖c8 15.♘a5 ♘xd5! Discovered attack. 16.♙xd5 ♙xa5 White's bishop pair, light-square control and ownership of d5 offer full compensation for the sacrificed pawn.

15.♙xc4 bxc4 16.♘a5

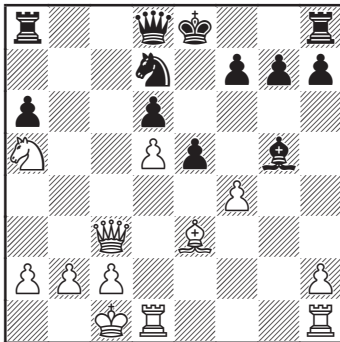
Eyeing both the c4–pawn and c6–square.

16...c3

16...♙c7 17.♘c6 ♘b8

18.♘xe7 ♙xe7, Andrzejewska,A-Demidowicz,A POL-ch U18 Girls Leba 2006. White has a clear advantage after 19.f4.

17.♙xc3 ♙xg5 18.f4!



Principle: *Open lines when leading in development.* Black's king will not find safety either on the kingside or in the centre.

18...exf4

18...♙f6 19.♘c6 ♙c7 20.fxe5 ♘xe5 21.♖hf1. Black is busted since if 21...♘xc6 22.♖xf6! gxf6 23.dxc6 his king has no place to hide.

19.♘c6! ♙c7

19...♙f6 20.♙a3 ♙c7 21.♙xf4 ♙e5 22.♙xe5 ♘xe5. Recapture with the e-pawn allows mate in one on e7. 23.♘xe5 dxe5 24.d6 ♙d7 25.♖he1

f6. Castling, allowing ♖xe5, is just as hopeless for Black. 26.♙b3. Black's king is caught in the middle, while the d6–passer ties Black down.

20.♙d4!

Hikaru plays for mate rather than a won ending. His move is even stronger than 20.♙xg7 ♙f6 21.♙b6!. Opening the e-file for White's h1–rook. 21...♙xg7 22.♙xc7 and Black is busted since there is no way to save the d6–pawn.

20...f6

20...♙f6 21.♖he1+ ♙f8 22.♖e7! is quite awful for Black.

21.♖hg1

♖xg5! is in the air. 21.h4 ♙h6 22.♖he1+ is similar to the game's continuation.

21...♙h6

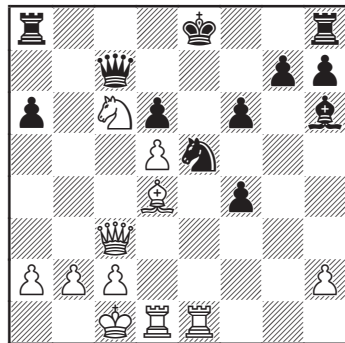
a) 21...♖c8 22.♖xg5! fxg5 23.♙xg7 ♖g8 24.♖e1+ and Black's king gets fried.

b) 21...♘e5 22.♙xe5 dxe5.

Recapture with the f-pawn hangs the bishop on g5. 23.d6 ♙d7 24.♘xe5 ♖c8 25.♙d4 and Black is crushed.

22.♖ge1+! ♘e5

22...♙f8 23.♖e7 ♖e8 24.♙e1. It's time for Black to resign.



Conflict arises when both sides desire an object, and both believe: “This belongs to me!”

Let’s take stock:

1. Black is up a pawn.
2. Black owns a centralized knight entrenched in the e5–hole.
3. Black’s king is in the middle, endangered and desperate to castle kingside or at least shift over to safety in that zone with ...♔f7.
4. Every white piece participates in the attack.

Exercise 1 (critical decision): Black hopes to create a defensive barrier on e5. White can only break it if he is willing to give away a massive material debt with 23.♙xe5, followed by 24.♖xe5+. Should White go for it, or is there a way to attack Black without the sacrifice?

Answer: This is not a case of Sunken Cost Fallacy. The sacrifice of a rook is both necessary and strong.

23.♙xe5! fxe5 24.♖xe5+! dxe5

24...♔f8 25.♖f5+ ♔g8 26.♗e1.

Threatening a devastating queen check on e6, as well as a knight check on e7, which wins Black’s queen.

25.d6

Interference. The e5–pawn falls and with it, the black king’s safety.

25...♗d7

25...♗b6 26.d7+ ♔f7 27.♘xe5+ ♔e7 28.♘c6+ ♔f7 29.♗c4+ ♔f6 30.♖d6+ ♔g5 31.♗d5+ ♔h4 32.♘d4! Black must hand over his queen to evade mate.

26.♘xe5 ♗b5

26...♖c8 27.♗b3 f3+ 28.♔b1 ♗f5 29.d7+ ♔e7 30.dxc8=♗ ♖xc8 31.♖d7+ ♗xd7 32.♗f7+ wins.

27.d7+ ♔e7

A person may shun the world, yet the world has a way of pulling us back in via problems it throws at us. Black’s king will not find safety bouncing about in mid board. 27...♔d8 28.♘c6+ ♔c7 29.♘a7+ wins Black’s queen.

28.♗a3+ ♔e6

28...♔d8 29.♗d6! is deadly for Black who is unable to simultaneously defend the c6 and f7 check-squares.

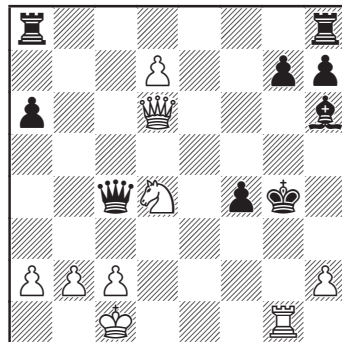
29.♗d6+ ♔f5 30.♘b3

♘d4+ and ♖d5+ are both threatened.

30...♔g4 31.♘d4! ♗c4

Desperately attempting to cover the e6–square.

32.♖g1+



Other than Black’s queen, derelict black defenders are in no way assisting their persecuted king. There is no need to analyze to reach a correct assessment. Our eyes just tell us that

mate is coming, despite Black's extra rook.

32...♔h3

32...♔h4 leads to a spectacular finish after 33.♘f3+ ♔h3 34.♚e5 threatening mate on h5. 34...g6 35.♚e1! Threat: ♚h4 mate. 35...g5 36.♚g3+! You and I both know that Hikaru would have played this move rather than the also effective rook check on g3. 36...fxg3 37.♚xg3#.

33.♚e5!

Threatening mate on h5.

33...g6 34.♚e4! 1-0

Threatening a queen check on g2, followed by mate on g4. 34...♔h4 35.♘f3+ wins Black's queen and, even worse, forces mate in 3.

Game 2

H. Nakamura – I. Smirin

7th Foxwoods Open Mashantucket
2005

Pirc Defence

A strong GM is taken down by the 15-year-old Hikaru with such astonishing speed that we are reminded of those early fights where Mike Tyson knocks out his opponent in the first round.

1.e4 g6 2.d4 ♖g7 3.♘c3 d6 4.f4

The Austrian Attack is White's most aggressive response to the Modern Defence.

4...♞f6

Transposing to a Pirc. 4...a6 stays in Modern Defence.

5.♞f3 0-0

In this line Black is unafraid

to castle and dares White to mate him. 5...c5 6.♖b5+ ♕d7 7.e5 ♞g4 is another heavily contested tabiya position.

6.e5

This is again the aggressive option over developing with 6.♕d3.

6...♞fd7!?

Getting mated is an occupational hazard for Black in this provocative line. 6...dxe5 is played more often and is certainly safer. It follows the Principle: *Meet the opponent's wing attack with a central counter.* 7.fxe5 ♞d5 8.♖c4 when Black scores decently from this position.

7.h4!?

Once the evil genie is freed from her prison, there is no way to talk her back into the bottle. This line is an all-out declaration of war. White neglects development to pry open the h-file.

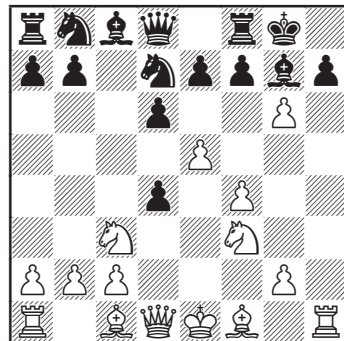
7...c5

Countering White's wing attack in the centre.

8.h5

Another critical line is 8.e6 fxe6 9.h5 gxh5.

8...cxd4 9.hxg6



bxc3 23.0-0-0+ ♔e7 24.♘d5+ ♔d8
25.♘b4+ and the discovered attack
wins Black's queen.

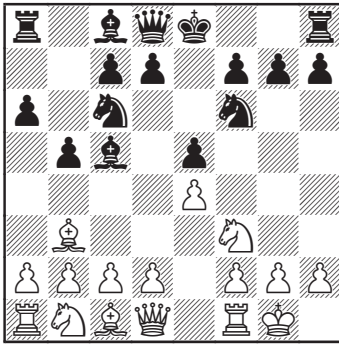
Game 14

H. Nakamura – M. Carlsen

Carlsen Inv Prelim INT 2020

Spanish Opening

1.e4 e5 2.♘f3 ♘c6 3.♙b5 a6
4.♙a4 ♘f6 5.0-0 b5 6.♙b3 ♙c5

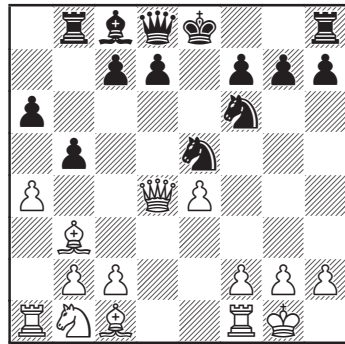


Any time a world champion plays a line, it magically becomes popular by association. This signals entry to the Archangelsk and Moller Variations. What are the differences between the placement of the bishop on c5 over e7?:

1. Black's bishop is more aggressively placed on c5 rather than the traditional and safer e7-square.
2. If the bishop is on c5, Black is vulnerable to a tempo loss if White later plays c2-c3 and d2-d4.
3. If the bishop is on c5, after Black plays ...d7-d6, the f6-knight may be pinned with ♙g5. If Black tries to break the pin in the future with

...h7-h6 and ...g7-g5, then White has an option to sacrifice a piece for two pawns on g5. This can especially be a problem for Black if he commits to castling kingside before playing ...g7-g5.

7.a4
7.c3 is White's main line.
7...♖b8 8.♘xe5!?
8.c3 will likely transpose to a version of 7.c2-c3.
8...♘xe5 9.d4 ♙xd4 10.♙xd4



Let's try to understand the position.

1. It may appear as if White has a big advantage, due to the bishop pair and greater central control.
 2. This isn't so, however, since Black leads slightly in development and will gain queenside space with a coming ...d7-d6, followed by ...c7-c5.
 3. The position's true assessment is much closer to even.
- 10...d6 11.f4 ♘c6 12.♙c3 ♘e7!**
13.axb5 axb5 14.e5
Be careful not to be fooled. It appears as if White has a winning

attack. This is an optical illusion, though, since Black gains time on his next move.

14...♖e4! 15.♚f3 ♘c5!

Gaining time. 15...d5 is slightly in White's favour after 16.♖d1.

16.♙a2 0-0 17.♙e3

Three years later, Hikaru was unsuccessful with 17.b4!? ♘a4 18.♙b3 dxe5 19.♖d1 ♚e8 20.♘c3 ♙b7 21.♚h3, Nakamura,H-Caruana,F Titled Tuesday intern op 31st Jan Early INT blitz 2023. Black looks better after 21...exf4.

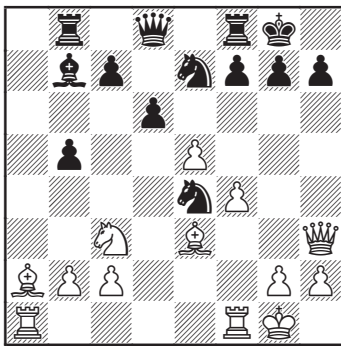
17...♙b7

A novelty. Slightly more accurate is 17...♚d7! and only then ...♙b7. This way White's queen is denied use of h3.

18.♚h3

The queen, secretive as a benegesserit Reverend Mother, has her own hidden agenda against the black king.

18...♘e4 19.♘c3!?



Some people keep their lawns as pristinely manicured as a golf course putting green. Hikaru isn't one of those people. Radical stuff.

Nakamura indicates that he is willing to accept self-inflicted structural damage to eliminate Black's most active piece. 19.f5 dxe5 20.♘c3 ♘xc3 21.bxc3 ♚d6 22.f6 gxf6 23.♖ad1 ♚c6 24.♙h6 ♘g6! 25.♙xf8 ♖xf8 looks dynamically balanced.

19...♘xc3 20.bxc3 ♙d5!

Principle: *When your opponent owns the bishop pair, swap one of them off if possible.* A message is delivered to White's powerful light-squared bishop: "You are not welcome here!"

21.f5!?

Here we witness Nakamura's aptitude for disruption. 21.♙b3 is safer.

21...♙xa2 22.♖xa2 dxe5 23.f6 gxf6!?

23...♘d5! 24.fxg7 ♖e8 is at least even for Black.

24.♙h6!?

24.♖a6! is difficult for Black after 24...♘d5 25.♙h6 ♚h8 26.♙xf8 ♚xf8 27.♚d7 ♚c5+ 28.♖f2.

24...♖e8

24...♚d6! 25.♙xf8 ♖xf8 is no worse for Black, who picked up two pawns for the exchange.

25.♖a6! ♖b6

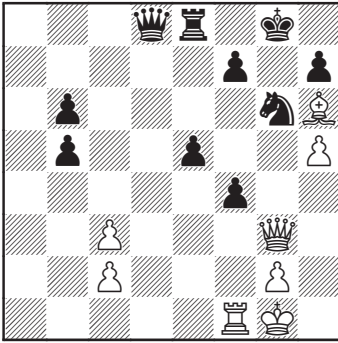
Black is still okay after 25...c6! 26.♖xc6! ♖b6 27.♚g4+ ♘g6 28.♖xf6 ♖xc6 29.♖xc6.

26.♖xb6 cxb6 27.♚g3+ ♘g6 28.h4! f5!?

This is a risky attempt to unbalance an inherently even position. After 28...b4! 29.h5 bxc3 30.hxg6 hxg6 31.♚xc3 g5! 32.♚f3 ♚d4+! 33.♖f2 ♚a1+

34. ♖h2 e4 35. ♗xf6 ♗xf6 36. ♖xf6 e3 37. ♕xg5 e2 38. ♕d2 e1=♗ 39. ♕xe1 ♖xe1 40. ♖xb6 Black should hold a draw in the pawn-down ending.

29.h5 f4



30.hxg6!

Hikaru ignores the hanging queen on g3 and chops Black's knight. 30. ♗g4? allows Black to hold a draw after 30... ♗h4 31. ♗d7 ♗e7 32. ♗g4 ♗h4.

30...hxg6

It isn't always the economic factor which wins a chess game. Black picked up four pawns for the piece, which under normal circumstances would be great. Not here though, since White's dark square control around the black king means that Black must be on high alert for king-safety. 30... fxg3?? fails miserably to 31.gxf7+ ♖h8 32.f8=♖+ ♖xf8 33.♖xf8+ ♗xf8 34.♕xf8 leaving White up a piece in the ending.

31.♗g4 ♗c8?

This is a fatal error since it loses control over the dark squares around Black's king. Black only stands a

touch worse after 31... ♗e7 32.♖a1! ♗c5+ 33.♖h1 ♗xc3 34.♖a7 ♗c8 35.♗h4 ♗f5 36.♕g5 f3! 37.♕f6 fxg2+ 38.♖xg2 ♗xc2+. He delivers perpetual check just in time.

32.♗h4!

The queen appears in her new finery. Threat: ♗f6, forcing mate.

32...♗c5+

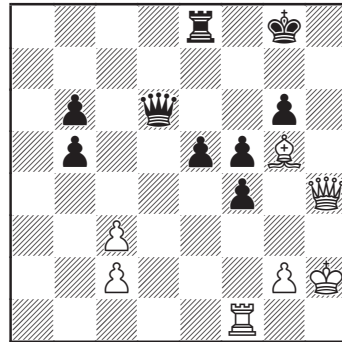
a) 32... ♗f5 33.♕g5. Threat: ♕f6, which is decisive. If 33...♖e6 then 34.♖f3 f6 35.♖h3! wins.

b) 32...♖e6 33.♕g5 ♗c6 34.♖f3 f6 35.♖h3! is fatal for Black.

33.♖h2 ♗d6 34.♕g5

Threatening ♕f6 and ♗h8 mate.

34...f5



Black's central and kingside pawn mass appears intimidating. However, a subterranean reality overrules the partially formed one on the surface.

35.♖f3!

The idea is a rook lift to h3, after which Black is helpless to prevent White's winning attack.

35...e4

35... ♗f8 36.♖d3! Threatening ♖d7. 36... ♗g7 37.♖d6 ♖c8 38.♕h6

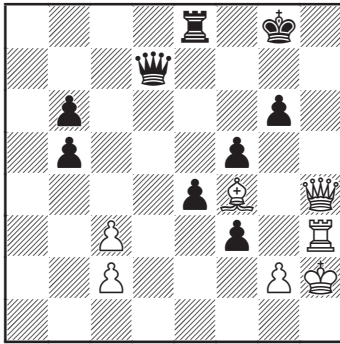
♖f7 39.♖f6 ♖e8 40.♖g5 ♔h7
41.♙f8! wins.

36.♗h3 f3+ 37.♙f4

Black can no longer delude himself that his position is tenable. The engine already announces mate.

37...♖d7

Or 37...♖e7 38.♖h8+ ♔f7
39.♖h7+ ♔e6 40.♖e5+ ♔d7
41.♖c7+ ♔e6 42.♖c6+ and mate next move.



White's coming mate in 3 isn't a brain-buster. Work it out without moving the pieces.

38.♖h8+ ♔f7 39.♖h7+ ♔e6
40.♖e5# 1-0

Game 15

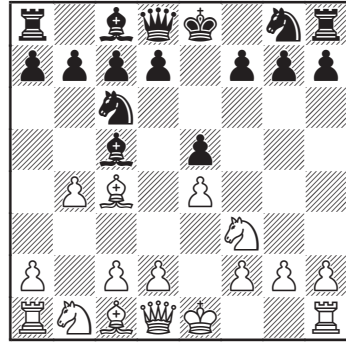
H. Nakamura – B. Amin

Casablanca Chess 2024

Evans Gambit

I “met” GM Bassem Amin in the early 2000s online when he pointed out that my opponent’s moves were perfectly matching Fritz suggestions and that the scumbag I was playing was a cheater!

1.e4 e5 2.♘f3 ♘c6 3.♙c4 ♙c5
4.b4!?



We feel a disorienting sense of time displacement, back to the 19th Century. Oh no. Not you too, Hikaru? All my young students want to play sleazy gambits, which your morally upright writer considers the dregs of polite society. Some personalities hate the idea of peace, preferring war instead. The nature of our species is there is always someone who wants to pick a fight with someone else, somewhere! It takes serious chutzpah to open with that fickle mistress, the Evans Gambit, which is essentially a formal declaration of war against a GM opponent whose rating approaches the 2700 mark.

4...♙xb4 5.c3 ♙a5

As Black I usually play 5...♙e7 6.d4 ♘a5! 7.♘xe5 ♘xc4 8.♘xc4 d5 9.exd5 ♖xd5 10.♘e3 ♖d8. I prefer Black’s bishop pair in this open position to White’s central control. Black scores over 50% from this position in the database.

6.0-0 ♖f6!?