

Carlsen-Liren, St. Louis 2019

The Context

It's 2019. Players are gathered for the 7th Sinquefeld Cup in St. Louis, Missouri, fighting for their piece of the \$325,000 prize fund. Among them is perhaps the greatest chess player of all time: Magnus Carlsen. At the time of the event, he's been world champion for just about six years, not to mention that he won the previous year's Sinquefeld Cup.

Other players in the field include five-time world champion Vishwanathan Anand, 2018 Candidates winner Fabiano Caruana, and five-time US chess champion Hikaru Nakamura, just to name a few. Suffice to say, the field is competitive. Among these players fighting for their chunk of the prize fund: Chinese grandmaster Ding Liren. Unlike many of the other players in the tournament, Ding isn't as well known. Unpredictable, humble, and enigmatic are just a few of the ways Ding has been described. He's a fierce competitor, but it's not exactly clear how well we can expect him to perform.

The event is close, and at the end of the 9 rounds, Carlsen and Liren both find themselves scoring 6.5/11. This is great news for spectators, because that means we're heading to tiebreaks, which means more chess. Unfortunately for Liren, Carlsen hasn't lost a tiebreak since 2007. He's fighting an uphill battle.

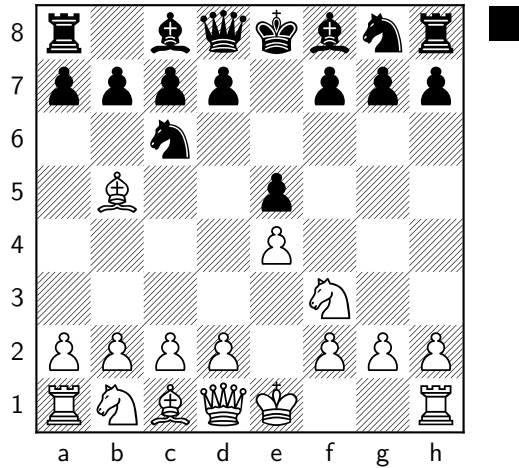
The first round of tiebreaks is undecisive. The standings remain drawn. They must head into another round of tiebreaks. This time: blitz.

In game one of the double overtime, Liren plays an English. He plays a great opening, gaining an early advantage. Carlsen is having a tough go managing his time, but an unfortunate ♖e4? from Liren brings the game back to even. Still, Ding enters the endgame a pawn up, and grinds out a win against the endgame maestro himself. Carlsen flags.

This puts Carlsen in a must-win situation. Coming off of a win, Liren has got some momentum on his side. But again, this is blitz, and he's playing the best player on the planet. Anything can happen.

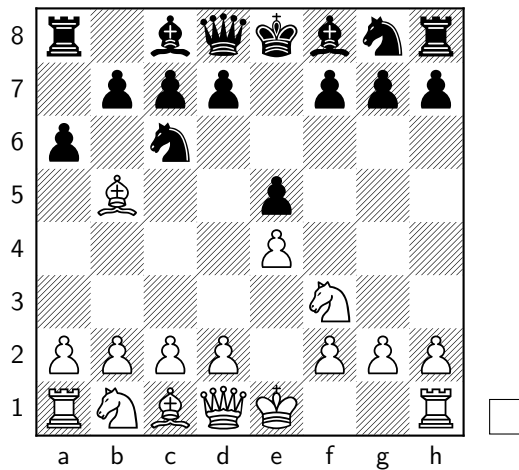
The Game

1 e4 e5 2 Nf3 Nc6 3 Bb5



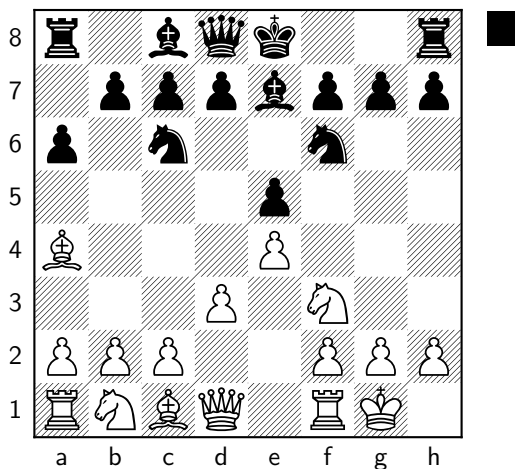
Carlsen opts for the Ruy-Lopez. Classic, solid, and flexible. Don't fix what ain't broke.

3... a6



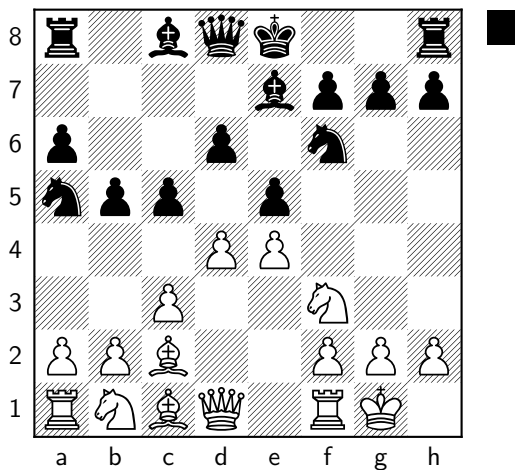
Liren chooses to go into the Morphy variation. Also possible was the Berlin with 3... Nf6 4 O-O Nxe6 , after which 5 d4 and 5 d5 both bring the players into well-known (but drawish) middlegames. He only needs a draw here, so perhaps this wouldn't have been such a bad choice. But Liren is well known for playing a great Marshall, so 4... a6 is not shocking.

4 ♖a4 ♜f6 5 O-O ♗e7 6 d3



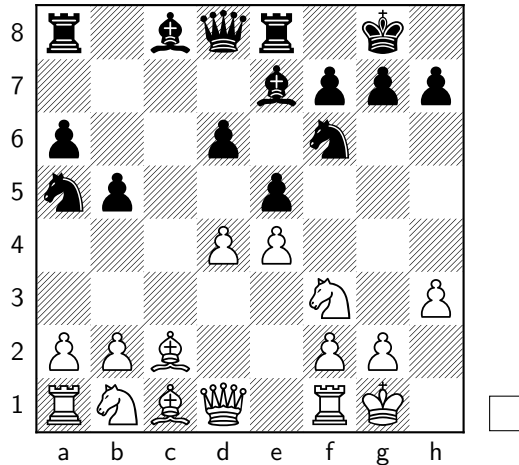
Carlsen chooses to avoid the typical **c2-c3** and **d2-d4**, This makes a Marshall more difficult to achieve. While a transposition is still possible, it's unlikely. Had he been okay going into the Marshall, Carlsen would have instead continued with **6 ♖e1**. The mainline then goes **6... b5 7 ♗b3 O-O 8 c3**

6... b5 7 ♗b3 d6 8 c3 ♜a5 9 ♗c2 c5 10 d4



A standard-looking Ruy Lopez position, but without **h2-h3** from white and **... O-O** from black. No player is in any real danger, and the game is quickly heading towards the middlegame, as is quite common in the Spanish.

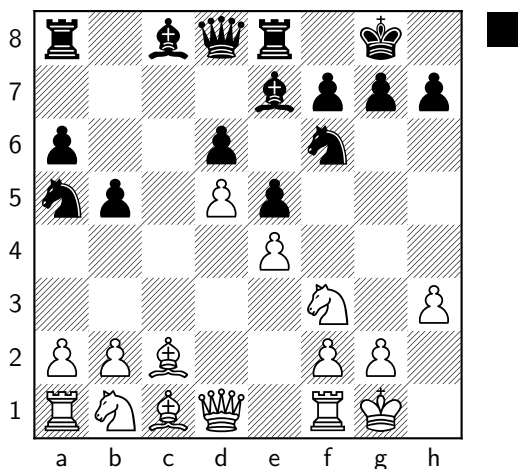
10... cxd4 11 cxd4 O-O 12 h3 ♖e8



Starting to get out of theoretical territory, but this position is still quite normal. There are other ways that Liren could have continued:

- **12... exd4 13 ♗xd4** opens the center and gives white the potential for a decent kingside initiative with moves like ♗f4 and ♖d4 or ♖g4. In addition, the solid e4 pawn will provide an important e4-e5 thrust should black get too hasty with ... d5. For example, **13... ♖e8 14 ♖e1 ♗b7 15 ♗c3 ♖c8 16 ♗f5 ♗f8 17 a3 d5?! 18 e5! ♗e4 19 ♖g4** was *Moussard-Loiseau, Chartres 2023*, after which **19... ♗h8 20 ♗xe4 dxe4 21 ♖d1 ♖b6 22 ♗e3 ♖c6** leaves white with a nice position. Moussard went on to win this game.
- **12... ♗d7** is a more patient move which asks white how they wish to continue. **13 a3** was *Firouzja-Dubov, Titled Tuesday 2022*. Black can then control the open c-file with ... ♖c8 and bring their knight away from the rim. This can be done via ... ♗c4-e5 after capturing on d4, or ... ♗b7-c5 should white choose to plug the center with d4. On the other hand, white can retain nice control over the a1-h8 and b1-h6 diagonals after b2-b3 and ♗b2 in addition to a well-timed f4 break (if they captured on d4).

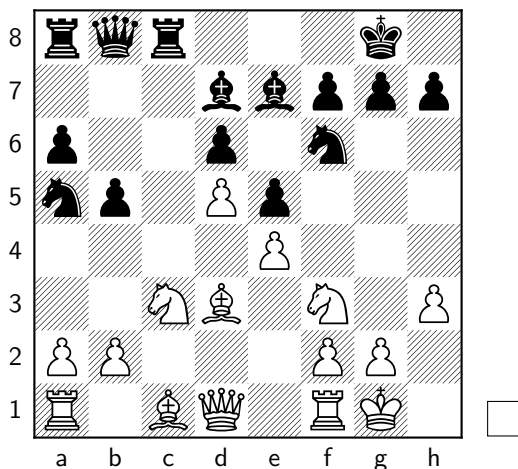
13 d5



A closed position is just what the doctor ordered for Carlsen. He decides to clog up the center. Should Liren opt for $\dots \text{♖c7}$, the game will transpose into a version of the Chigorin with exchanged c-pawns.

Typically, the Chigorin is reached by way of $6 \text{ ♜e1 b5 } 7 \text{ ♙b3 O-O } 8 \text{ c3 d6 } 9 \text{ h3 } 10 \text{ ♘a5 } 11 \text{ ♙c2 c5 } 12 \text{ d4 } 13 \text{ ♖c7}$. Kasparov's response of choice was then $12. \text{ d4-d5}$. Though it allows black the chance to place his knight onto the c4 square via $12. \dots \text{ ♞c4}$, the most common reply is 13 b3 , immediately kicking it out. Once black retreats with $13. \dots \text{ ♞b6}$, 14 a4 undermines the pawn chain along the **a6-f1** diagonal and threatens to exploit the a-file pin by capturing on b5. When black relieves this threat with $14. \dots \text{ ♙d7}$, white can continue to thrust forward with $15 \text{ a5! } 16 \text{ ♘c8}$. Such was the case in *Topalov-Shirov, XXI SuperGM Linares 2004* and *Bacrot-Svidler, Nalchik 2009*, for example.

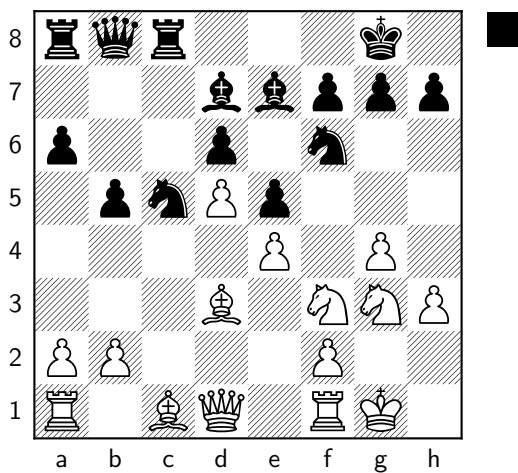
13... ♖d7 14 ♗c3 ♜b8 15 ♘d3 ♝c8



Ding makes his intentions clear. He's aiming to mobilize on the queenside. The heavy pieces on a8, b8, and c8 will retain nice control over each of their respective files, especially as the a6- and b5-pawns advance deeper into the queenside.

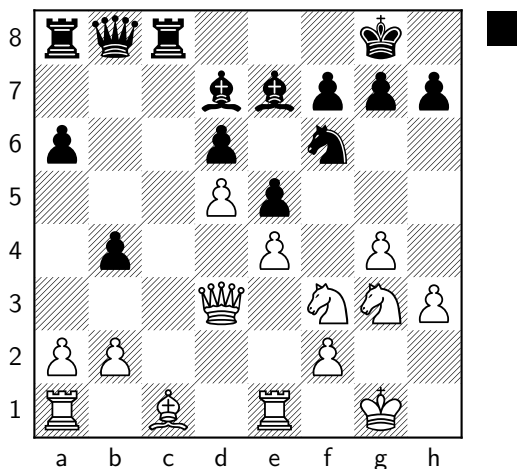
Meanwhile, Carlsen can fight back with the emphatic **g2-g4**, which in addition to a ♗e2-g3-f4 reroute, **g4-g5** and **h3-h4**, can grant some nice counterplay.

16 ♗e2 ♗b7 17 g4 ♗c5 18 ♗g3



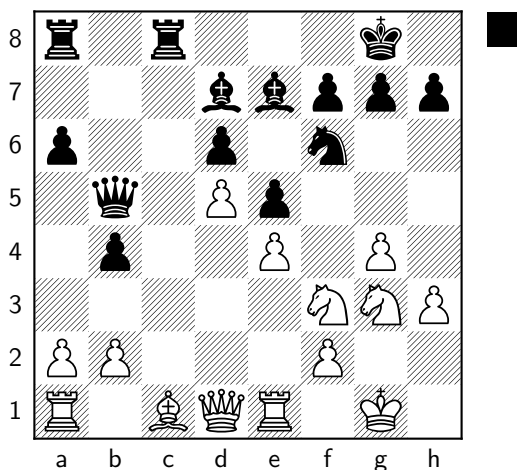
The players continue with their plans.

18... ♖xd3 19 ♗xd3 b4 20 ♖e1



Liren snaps off White's d3-bishop, removing it from its reign over the **a6-f1 diagonal**. Then, his ... **b4** pawn push clears the square for a heavier piece. His bishop or queen may use in order to reclaim ownership over the diagonal, then black will continue the queenside push with ... **a5-a4**. Carlsen is privy to Liren's tactical threat, and slides his rook away from the diagonal. Had he failed to do so, he would have payed a fee of 1 exchange because of **20... ♗b5**

20... ♗b5 21 ♗d1



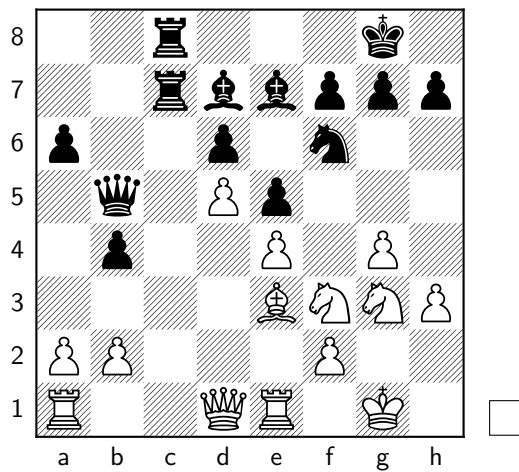
Carlsen again refuses to trade queens, putting his queen back on its starting square to avoid such a trade. **21 ♗x b5 ♗x b5** drastically increases the drawing

odds, since a powerful attacker is removed from white's arsenal.

21 ♖b3 was also possible to avoid the trade, but then begins a scary-looking squeeze with **... a6-a5-a4**, which appears to be on the way regardless of whether or not b3 houses white's queen. Still, white is completely fine after **21... a4 22 ♗d2**

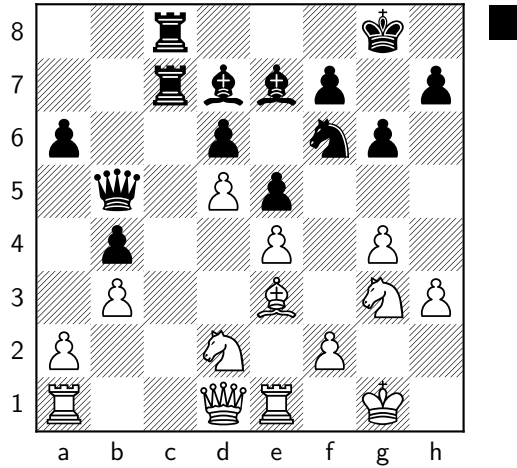
In any case, white should avoid a retreating move which leaves the queen on a dark square. Moves like **21 ♖d2** and **21 ♖e3** prevent the c1-bishop from getting any development.

21... ♖c7 22 ♗e3 ♖ac8



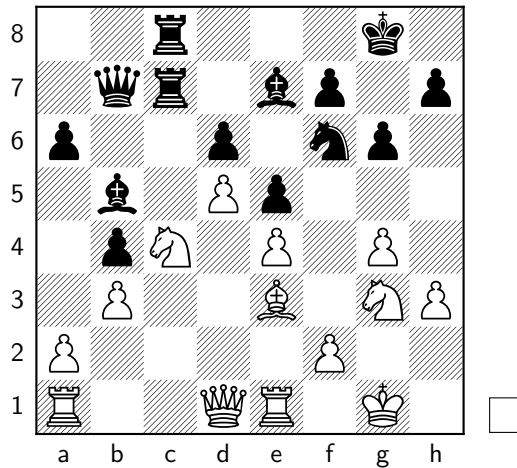
Liren doubles up the rooks, tightening his control over the c-file. But Carlsen finds a plan that will mitigate their strength...

23 ♖d2 g6 24 b3



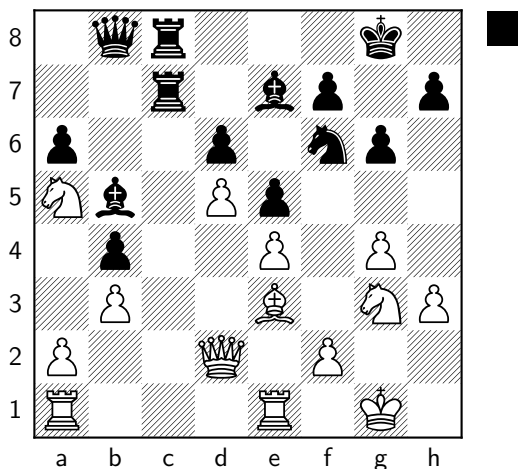
With ♖d2, Carlsen signals that he's going to build an outpost on c4, which will impede upon Liren's control over the c-file. This knight will not be removed immediately, especially since the b5-square is currently being occupied by black's queen and he doesn't have any other pieces he can use to excavate the knight from his post. To compensate, Liren chooses to counter this by removing Carlsen's access to the powerful f5 and h5-squares with ... g6.

24... ♜b7 25 ♖c4 ♗b5



Carlsen's knight hops into the newly-formed c4 outpost. In the meantime, Liren clears the b5-queen for his light-squared bishop. He wouldn't mind exchanging it for the annoying knight in order to once again clear the c-file.

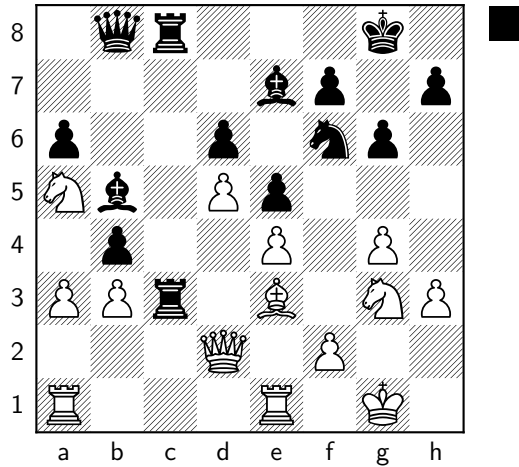
26 ♖a5 ♜b8 27 ♜d2



Anticipating an undesirable exchange on c4, Carlsen's knight dodges by jumping to a5, attacking Liren's queen in the process. The queen is forced to retreat. This knight also provides a nice blockade against black's a5-pawn, leaving b4 unprotected in the meantime.

Earlier, Liren could have avoided the line that occurred in the game by fully retreating with **24... ♜b8**. Then, after **25 ♖c4 ♗b5**, Carlsen's **26 ♖a5** holds less merit. Still, his use of the knight to mitigate the power of the two c-file rooks will at least somewhat succeed, since his knight can jump to b6 with protection from the e3-bishop. The c8-rook will be forced to move away from the file (e.g. **26 ♖b6 ♜d8** or **26... ♜d8**). Following this, white can contest control over the file with **27 ♜c1**.

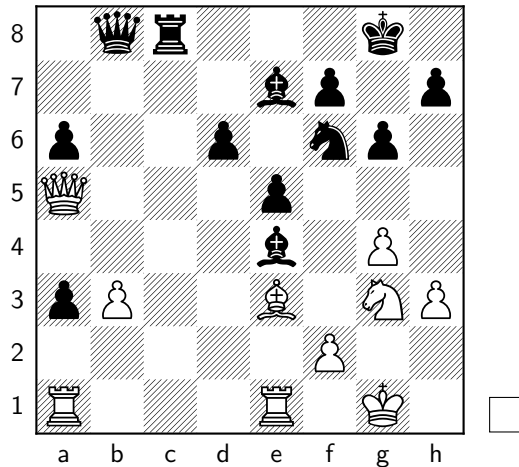
27... ♖c3 28 a3!



Liren sticks his rook into enemy territory, cutting off the queen's view of the weak b4-pawn. ... ♕c7 is on the way, and he's aiming to extract the knight from its blockade. With almost no safe squares for the knight to jump to, Liren is going to win at least a pawn if he can get away with this plan uncontested.

Sensing this, white immediately undermines black's protection over the c6-rook with a2-a3. Yes, he allows black the chance to immediately liquidate his unprotected pawn, which is potentially a weakness, but in the process he will spawn a newly undefended piece: the offside rook. And with the pawn removed from b4, the once-meeek knight can swoop in to interfere with the connection between the two rooks. It's a great decision from Carlsen.

28... bxa3 29 ♖c6! ♗xc6 30 ♖xc3 ♗xd5 31 ♖a5 ♗xe4

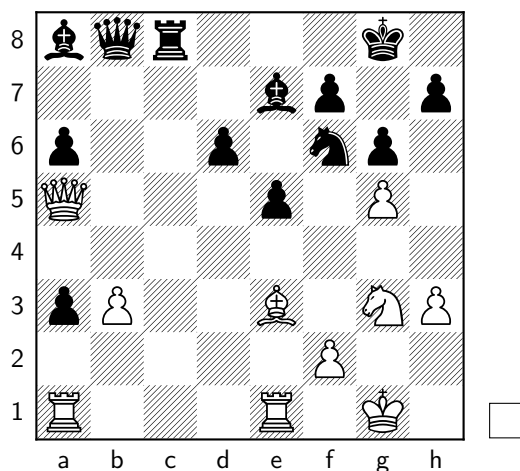


The **a2-a3** push from Carlsen succeeds, and he proceeds with cutting off the circulation between the doubled rooks. Liren opts to give up the exchange in order to eat two more central pawns, a nice decision seeing as the rook has little space. The compensation is sufficient enough to keep the game near equal. It was also possible for Liren to give up the exchange with **29... ♖3xc6 30 dxc6 ♗xc6**. It is going to be slightly challenging for white to muster up an attack with **... ♖b7** and potentially **... d4** coming.

If, after **29... ♖3xc6**, white wants to try to hold onto their pawn, **30 ♗g5** defends the pawn by pinning the knight to the e7-bishop, but then comes **30... d5!** liquidating black's backwards pawn. White cannot capture it immediately (**31 exd5 ♗b3!** ♖), nor can he simply ignore the tension in the center (e.g. **31 ♖ec1 d4!** ♖). Before capturing on d5, they will need to first remove the knight.

One sample line is **31 ♗xf6 ♗xf6 32 exd5 ♖d8 33 ♖e2 ♗xe5 34 ♖xa3. ♗e7 35 ♖xa6 ♖xb3 36 ♖xe5 ♖f3 37 ♖e4** ♖ where with accurate play, black's drawing chances are quite nice (e.g. **37... ♗c5! 38 ♖f6 ♖xh3 39 ♖f4 (watching g4) ♗xe4 40 ♖xe4 ♖g3 41 ♖f1 ♖h3 42 ♖e2 ♖c3 =**). A player of Liren's caliber will likely be able to draw this.

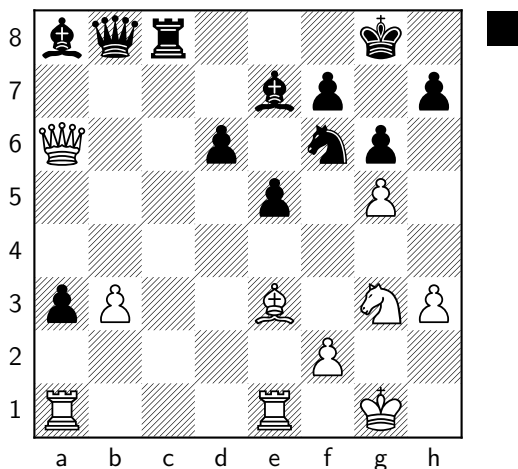
32 g5 ♖a8!!



An absolutely beautiful retreating move. Ding offers up the f3-knight in order to form a frightening battery along the **a8-h1** diagonal. This would guarantee a draw at the minimum, since after **33 gxf3 ♜b7**, **f2-f3** is impossible.

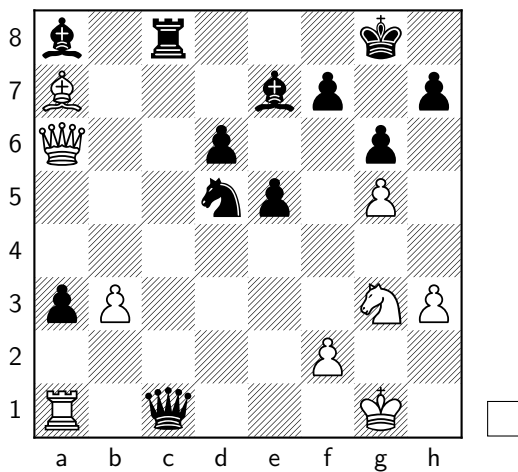
Best for white is **34 ♘f1 ♜g2+** **35 ♘e2 ♜f3+** **36 ♘f1**. And again, a draw is all that Liren needs for the first place finish. Should white accept the knight and try to escape via **35... ♜f3+** **36 ♘d2**, he loses due to **36... ♖d8!**. One possible line is **37 ♜b4 ♜d4+** **38 ♘e2 ♜c2+** **39 ♖d2 (39 ♘e2 ♜g2#)** **39... a5!** -+.

33 ♖×a6?!



An inaccuracy from Carlsen, which really hurts his winning chances. Not that he had any better, anyway. Taking the knight — though the best move — would have likely cemented his second-place finish. At least this way, despite Liren’s knight on the way to f4, he can continue fighting.

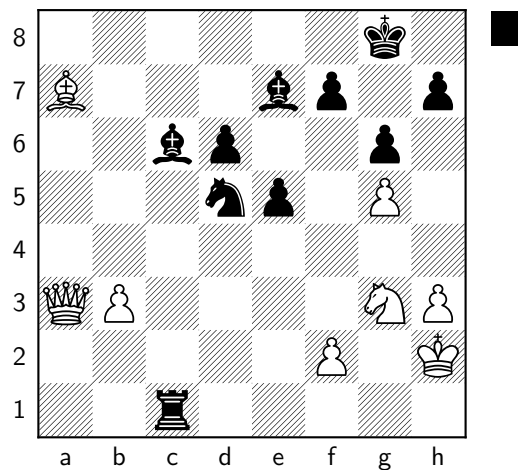
33... ♘d5 34 ♙a7 ♖c7 35 ♜ec1 ♖×c1+?!



Liren opts to sacrifice his queen for the two rooks. It’s a risky choice considering the scenario, but he’s confident that it will pay off, and makes the decision quickly.

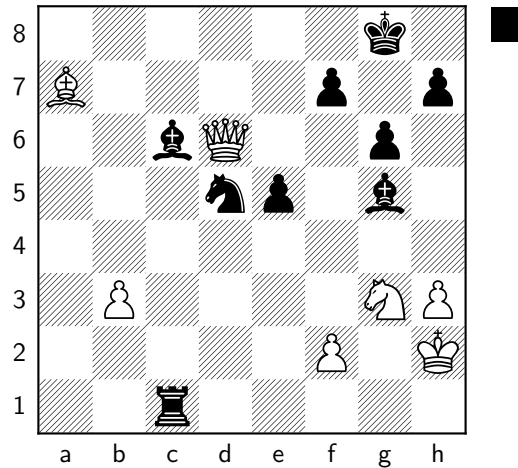
Though it's completely fine, it was unnecessary. He could have intercepted the threat with **35... ♖c6!**. Putting yourself in a pin looks scary, but it makes way for a slick ... ♗c7, attacking h3. This, in addition to the passed pawn on a3, will provide Liren with enough to overload Carlsen eventually. One beautiful line is **35... ♖c6! 36 ♜c4 (aiming for ♜ac1) ♗c7 37 ♜ac1 a2! 38 ♜xc6 ♜xc6 39 ♜xc6 ♗xc6!! 40 ♗xc6 a1♗+ (40 ♗xa2 ♖f4 -+) 41 ♖f1 ♗d1** leaving Liren with a nice advantage.

36 ♜xc1 ♜xc1+ 37 ♖h2 ♖c6 38 ♗xa3



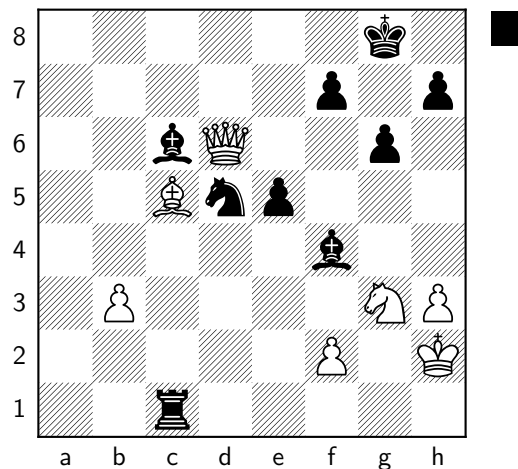
White snaps off the menacing a3-pawn. Now that the prospects of a pawn promotion are gone, Liren will need to coordinate his pieces well in order to counteract Carlsen's agile queen. Fortunately, black's pieces are quite active, and his king quite safe. White's king on the other hand is potentially under some pressure, thanks in large part to the c1-rook and c6-bishop which together eye the h1-square. With a piece on the way to f4, Liren appears to be slowly suffocating black's king.

38... ♖xg5 39 ♔xd6??



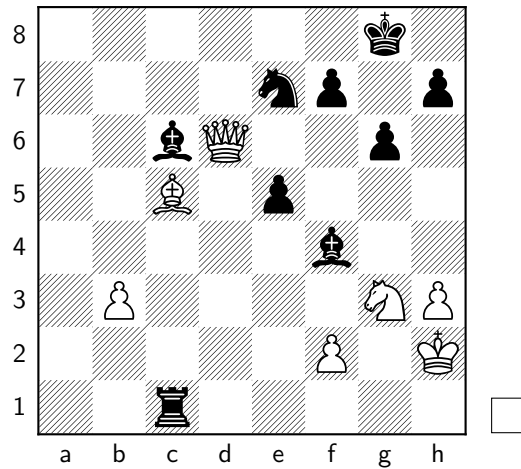
Carlsen blunders. 39 ♖e2 was necessary to tempo the rook, with ♔xd6 in the back pocket should black move their rook away from the c-file (e.g. 39... ♜e1 40 ♔xd6! ♜xe2?! 41 ♔xc6 allows white to remove the effective c6-bishop). In such a scenario, he need not worry about any pieces arriving on f4 just yet. Instead, in the game, he rushes the capture on d6, allowing Liren to immobilize the g3-knight. This may prove to be fatal.

39... ♖f4 40 ♖c5



A good looking move where Carlsen appears to fork the c6-bishop and mate with ♖f1. It's a valiant try, and appears as though he's getting some material back, but Ding has a beautiful counter under his sleeve.

40... ♖e7!



Boom. In one move, Liren intercepts Carlsen's threat with one of his own. It's a beautiful way to illustrate on how even a single tempo can make all the difference. It's often said that a backwards knight move is hardest type of move to see, but Ding makes it look like a piece of cake, and right in time for when it matters most.

0-1

Carlsen resigns. There is simply no good way to prevent the mate on a8. With this win, Ding locks in a first place win at the 2019 Sinquefield Cup, and this game cements itself as one of my favorites. Who doesn't love a good underdog story? And just look at how beautiful that final position is!