

Cyrus Lakdawala

# Caruana

move by move

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# About the Author

Cyrus Lakdawala is an International Master, a former National Open and American Open Champion, and a six-time State Champion. He has been teaching chess for over 30 years, and coaches some of the top junior players in the U.S.

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# Introduction

When I was eight years old, I loathed the outdoors and preferred cloistered study of chess greats, such as Morphy, Lasker, Capablanca, et al. In doing so, I ignored my mother's pleadings to "Go outside and play with your friends; climb a tree." Now there is a new generation of kids who don't want to go outside and prefer the study of chess. Nostalgia is an alluring force which tricks us into thinking that everything in the past was better than everything is in the present. When we study the games of past great players and try to imitate them, are we not echoes of the real thing?

The games of the great players of the present generation are equally inspiring. American/Italian Grandmaster Fabio Caruana, today perhaps the hardest working top grandmaster in the world, was, I suspect, just such a child who wouldn't go outside to play, preferring to study chess. He was born in Miami, Florida, on July 30, 1992. At the age of four, his family moved to Bobby Fischer's home town of Brooklyn, New York. At age five, he learned how to play chess, an event that radically altered his own life and the life of his parents, Lou and Santina Caruana, who recognized in their son a person gifted extraordinary abilities and whose future brimmed with inexpressible possibilities.

His first coach was NM Bruce Pandolfini and then he switched to grandmaster Miron Sher from the age of 8 to 12. There is no such thing as dynastic succession or inheritance in chess. Otherwise we would be awaiting a World Championship match featuring the great grandchildren of Alekhine and Capablanca. Yet very few players who got a shot at a title match can claim sole responsibility for their success. Their parents and coaches get at least a chunk of the credit. Fabiano's parents are people who went well past what we consider parental responsibility for their child. They literally gave up on their own lives to make Fabiano's a success. At the age of 12, his parents made a decision that they would, as a family, work to devote their lives to the nurturing of Fabiano's chess ability. They haven't done such a bad job raising him either, since every time I hear Fabiano speak in an online video he radiates sincere humility, which, as we all understand, is an uncommon trait for a genius living in a world of giant egos. That which appears exceptional to one person may appear completely ordinary to another. What strikes me about Caruana – even more than

his astounding chess ability – is his humility, as if he were the guy next door and nothing special. If he wins the upcoming World Championship match against Carlsen, he will create history by being an egoless world chess champion, the rarest of combinations.

They then moved to Madrid to study with IM Boris Zlotnik. In 2007, they moved to Budapest to work with grandmaster Alex Chernin and, in 2010, moved yet again to Lugano, Switzerland, to work with grandmaster Vladimir Chuchelov. Fabiano's successes began to mount. In 2007, at age 14, he surpassed Hikaru Nakamura's record to become the youngest ever U.S. Grandmaster. From the viewpoint of Italy, Caruana was now their greatest son since Gioachino Greco dominated the chess scene in the early 17th Century. Caru won the elite Dortmund tournament in 2012, 2014 and 2015.

However, it was really in 2014 when the chess world began to see Caruana as a potential challenger who had the potential to dethrone the all-but-invincible World Champion, Magnus Carlsen. In the 2014 Sinquefeld Cup in St. Louis Caruana won his first two games and then in round three defeated Magnus with Black. Caruana went on to do the impossible by notching up seven wins in a row, all against top ten players in the world. He won the tournament by a mile, with three rounds to spare. His performance rating was a typo-like 3103, a number we as chess players are just not used to seeing. Caru's 7-0 start rivals Fischer's incredible 6-0, 6-0 sweeps of Taimanov and Larsen in their Candidates' matches in the early 1970s.

In 2016, Fabiano was on board one for the gold medal winning U.S. Olympiad team. In the same year, he won the U.S. Championship by a full point and then came the World Championship Candidates' tournament. The Candidates is an event where a single player is given the opportunity to show that he is better than the rest, who are merely pretenders to the throne. It looked as if Caruana had a chance to become Carlsen's next challenger, only for the opportunity to be taken from him at the last minute through a tragic final round loss to Karjakin, who became the challenger.

2018 was Caruana's year. He won the Candidates with a dominating performance, including two crucial wins at the end against Aronian and Grischuk, and earned the right to play Carlsen for the world championship in November. He then won the Grenke Super Swiss, ahead of Magnus. Caruana played brilliantly at the 2018 U.S. Championship, scoring a towering 8-3, way past his main rivals Nakamura and So. The only problem was Caruana didn't come in first, since he was outpaced by the unlikely surprise winner grandmaster Sam Shankland, who scored a half point more and went undefeated in the tournament. (In an email my buddy IM Tony Saidy compared Shankland's U.S. Championship performance to Fischer's 11-0 score against a far weaker field.) Caru looked like he was going to have a bad tournament at Altibox in Norway, since Magnus got his revenge to defeat Fabiano in the very first round. This looked like a gloomy harbinger of their coming match, except that Caru fought back from his first round debacle, eventually caught up with Magnus, and then won the tournament in dramatic fashion by beating Wesley So in the final round, while Magnus could only draw his game. So harbinger evaded!

### **Botvinnik 2.0: Caruana's Style**

Chess is a world where we are identified by our styles, as much as our playing strength. As chess players we are more than just the sum of our study and experience. There is something else there – a distinct, one-of-a-kind identity, which pops up from time to time. If we admire, let's say, a movie star, we may begin to dress like them, or have our hair done the same way, or adopt their mannerisms of how they speak or walk. In the same way, when we admire a great player, like Botvinnik or Caruana, we (perhaps subconsciously) begin playing a bit like them, albeit a lot worse! I remember desperately trying to emulate Botvinnik's iron logic and Capa and Fischer's frictionless quality in my play, and maybe a tiny bit of it rubbed off in the end.

Here are some of the features of Fabiano's (early) Botvinnikian style. Caruana's chess style is so vibrantly dynamic and alive that, after studying his games, my own games, by comparison, feel as if a zombie plays my side.

Caruana is one of those rare players blessed with the ability to switch from a slow positional build-up to irrational tactics, without loss of efficiency in either mode. He is combative, a high risk taker, in every stage of the game, yet almost always from a strategic vantage point. In this book, we find many examples of speculative pawn sacrifices for vague compensation. He also seems to delight in playing positions with opposite castling, relishing the opposing wing attack war. Caruana's opening preparation is the last word in sophistication. He is supremely prepared in this phase of the game and, along with Kramnik, is perhaps the best prepared player in the world. In his game against Anand (Game 11), the Indian former world champion hit Caruana with a theoretical novelty. Caruana responded immediately and without thought. He had already foreseen Anand's idea and had preparation ready for an idea which had never been played before! I still remember the Cub Scouts of Canada motto: "Be prepared." But I logically ask: How on earth was Caruana already prepared for an event which was never supposed to happen? His home analysis work ethic takes the idea of opening preparation to a never-before-seen level. Caruana, perhaps along with Aronian is in my opinion, is the deepest and most accurate pure calculator in the world. Caruana is on par with Magnus Carlsen, when it comes to strategic build-up, planning and slowly improving one's position.

Conclusion: Caruana unique super-aggressive/strategic style makes him a modern day youthful Botvinnik.

### **Capablanca versus Botvinnik: Carlsen and Caruana at War**

Sometimes, I find it bizarre that for some of us chess players our self-worth is entirely based upon our rating, or title. For players like Caruana and Carlsen it's a different story, since their burdens, when juxtaposed with ours, differ wildly in magnitude. What they achieve or fail to achieve will be recorded in the history books, unlike the rest of us, where history doesn't really give a damn if our rating goes over 1900 or remains frustratingly at 1895. When we play a chess game we realize – at least subconsciously – that we are not fighting the most important battle in the history of the human race. So why does it always

feel like we are? Is it an illusion to believe that a single person can make a difference in the world?

Each world champion influences an army of fans, altering their styles and beliefs of what is possible and what is not on the chess board. It was Shakespeare's Henry V who said, "If it is a sin to covet honour, I am the most offending soul alive." Caruana is now the boxing contender who is just one big fight away from being crowned Heavyweight Champion of the World. We all compare the chess player we are now to the non-existent player we want to become, and my belief is that every chess player alive harbours the secret fantasy of becoming world champion, if not in this life, then in the next. How does it feel when you are given the opportunity to fulfil a lifelong dream? On top of it, the fulfilment lies solely in your own hands. When the living give fond remembrance to the great players who are now dead, do the dead rejoice? Maybe they do, wherever they are. Most top players run their course, grow old and then all but vanish from history's sight. Every top ten player of every generation desperately craves the title of world champion with their name beside it, enshrining themselves forever in history's memory.

There remains a single unanswered question; who is going to win the 2018 World Championship match between grandmaster Fabiano Caruana and world champion Magnus Carlsen? Well, I don't know, since my deadline for this book is the end of July 2018 and the match is being played in November. Having now written books on both challenger and champion, I feel that I am at least somewhat qualified to understand the two titans' strengths and weaknesses. I'm guessing that Carlsen is an approximate 55%-45% favourite to retain his title. Let's now compare their strengths and weaknesses.

### **1) Opening preparation**

Advantage Caruana. To have knowledge of what has come before arms us for battle in the present. Had a chess player spent the last four decades in a coma, he or she would be astounded by the fact that, in our new computer/database era, thinking at the board is now only optional in the opening stage of the game. Caruana and Carlsen are children of this new age and both have mastered vastly divergent opening repertoires. Yet, in my opinion, Caruana is the greater master in this element of the game. In the opening phase, Caruana's often astonishingly detailed pre-game preparation allows him a familiarity and ease which his contemporaries find intimidating enough to dodge their normal opening favourite lines.

### **2) Early middlegame**

Advantage Caruana, since the momentum of his opening preparation will allow him to coast, even in the early middlegame.

### **3) Middlegame**

50/50 chances.

#### **4) Late middlegame**

Advantage Carlsen. The more pieces are removed from the board, the better Carlsen's chances become, since he is unrivalled in simplified positions.

#### **5) Endings**

Advantage Carlsen, who is clearly the king over his rivals in the ending. I rank his endgame play in the top three of all time, in the company of Capablanca and Fischer. Silences come with differences. One kind can be peaceful, while the other is ominous. Carlsen's magic is that he can enter a completely placid ending against a world-class player and his opponent's gentle decline is all but imperceptible to everyone watching, except for one person, Magnus himself. Very few of us look upon a coming dry technical ending and think, "Man, there will be some serious fun ahead!" Carlsen thinks just that, and why not, since he is one of the greatest endgame technicians of all time.

#### **6) Clear positions**

50/50 chances. Caruana's Botvinnik logic matches Carlsen's effortless Capablanca insight in clear positions.

#### **7) Irrational positions**

Advantage Carlsen. His astonishing intuition somehow keeps him grounded in the most dizzying of complications. When he aims his second sight at even the most irrational of positions, the answer usually returns to him with a clarity only he is capable of seeing. Like a conjurer/magician, Magnus produces resources, seemingly out of nowhere, since his subliminal pattern recognition is unrivalled in the world.

#### **8) Positional play**

50/50. Caruana and Carlsen are, in my opinion, the two deepest strategists in the world today. Both are premier squeezers who make their opponents feel the vice.

#### **9) Attack, Sacrifice and Risk-taking**

When attacking it isn't possible to possess an incalculable stock of resources, mainly since the chess board is a finite place, with strict limits. But also keep in mind, as we have seen from Morphy's famous opera box game, our opponent's numerical superiority doesn't always translate to victory. The fact that both players are brilliant attackers is hardly a newsworthy item.

I feel that Carlsen's attacks are more explosively imaginative than Caru's, yet I still give the edge to Caruana in this category, whose attack-meter registers at a higher level. Caru to my mind is the superior natural attacker, backed up by his comp-like ability to crunch numbers. Just as his opponents relax, the second wave seems to follow. With Fabiano on the attack, his opponent's position is the prosperous city skyline, moments before the alien warship's death rays turn it into an instant graveyard. The scriptures tell us that the devil



loves to implant mischief in idle hands. Carlsen is the devil's favourite, since he is in my opinion the one more likely to take grave risks, sometimes past Reason's boundaries. And why not? He gets away with it so often. Yet sometimes it blows up on him. Caruana is the more stable risk-taker of the two, which may or may not be a virtue, since Tal would take Carlsen's side.

### **10) Defence**

Self-preservation is the most primordial of instincts and the rule, don't get yourself mated, is the one inviolable law in chess we can never break. It was the Buddha who said that our present pain is the ripening effect of our karma of past misdeeds. In chess, as in life, when we make mistakes, we sometimes get a second (and sometimes third!) chance. When there is no rational solution to our troubles, the next best plan is for us to try and bluff or swindle our way out.

Here I give the edge to Carlsen, whose defensive fancy footwork is worthy of Jack Dempsey. He is virtually impossible to beat when he doesn't want to lose. He also tends to wiggle out of more wretched positions than Caruana is able to. I once saw a blitz match on chess.com where Nakamura tortured Carlsen in a good knight versus bad bishop position. There were only two results possible, Carlsen would lose or the game would end in a draw. Carlsen hung on like grim death, taunted Nakamura to push too hard and, as a result, Carlsen won an impossible-to-win game against a world-class player. The thing is, he routinely achieves this kind of feat. Sometimes his philosophy is, "Why try and amass wealth through hard work, when we can achieve the same result through deceit and embezzlement?" He is also the premier "finders-keepers" player in the world. We have seen him grab impossible-to-grab pawns and pieces (some of which would have made Morphy blush with shame) in a sector of the board and in a fight where his opponent's forces outnumber his own, then miraculously he survives the ordeal and converts smoothly, in completely inhuman, computer-like fashion.

### **11) Calculation**

Advantage Caruana, who I'm guessing holds a slight edge over Carlsen in this area. We all know from experience that even a fractional error in our calculation can leave us miles from our intended destination.

### **12) Intuition**

Advantage Carlsen, whose supernaturally powerful intuition rivals both Capablanca's and Fischer's.

### **13) Assessment**

Advantage Carlsen. My belief is the main reason Carlsen has held off all challenges (so far!) and remains world champion is his supernatural ability to correctly assess an otherwise un-assessable position.

#### **14) Rapid play**

A massive advantage to Carlsen, who is absolutely dominant in the realm of rapid and blitz chess. Why does this matter? Because if the match is a 6-6 tie, then I assess Caruana's chances at no more than 10% to win the rapid section of the match. This means that the clock will be running for Caruana in the classical time control games and if the score gets to say, 5-5, Caru will be forced into desperate measures to win, since he needs to avoid a rapid play-off at all costs.

#### **15) Nerves**

50/50. I don't know who has an edge here. Carlsen has proven he has incredible nerves when, against Karjakin, he trailed by a point with only four games remaining in the classical section and managed to win a game to tie the match at 6-6. He then went on to dismantle Karjakin in the rapid section with ease.

In the 2018 Candidates' Caruana lost a crucial game to Karjakin, lost his lead and trailed with only two rounds to go. The world prepared for Carlsen-Karjakin II. Instead of going on tilt, Fabiano showed that he has ice-cold nerves as he managed back-to-back wins against Aronian and Grischuk, to overtake Karjakin and become Carlsen's new challenger. He also won dramatically in the final round at Altibox this year, while Magnus as Black took a quick draw against Maxime Vachier-Lagrave, an outcome that cost him first place.

#### **16) Natural ability**

Advantage Carlsen. Both players were astounding chess Einsteins at birth. My intuition leans to giving the edge to Carlsen.

#### **17) Creativity**

This is the when-you-wish-upon-a-star segment. While creativity and imagination are two of the most cherished traits in a great player, from the standpoint of results, in my opinion, it's one of the least important. From what I have seen of the two players' games, I feel that Carlsen comes up with more original ideas, when it's outside the realm of the opening. But now I ask the important question: is creativity a virtue in chess? The answer is, "sometimes" and creativity, especially excess creativity, can be a curse as much as a blessing, since Carlsen's heart sometimes fills with impossible to implement aspirations. I give Carlsen no points for winning this category, since unchecked creative power comes with the demerit of a belief that you are above the law. Carlsen also loses games when he allows his creativity to run amok, while Caruana is more dispassionate and is less likely to allow a wild idea to run rampant. So this one is a wash. In essence, Caruana is the mathematician/scientist, who is only interested in the raw data, so he thinks, "Why grasp for something which we know empirically we have few chances of ever reaching?"; whereas Carlsen is the poet who witnessed a murder and gives a description to the police sketch artist: "She had soulful eyes and a whimsically malicious smile."

### **18) Consistency**

Advantage Carlsen. Magnus can be off form, yet rarely plays unhinged and has a terrible tournament. A bad tournament for him is second place! I also believe that Caru is slightly more blunder-prone than Magnus, which can be a critical factor in a short match, since a single blunder can alter the final outcome.

### **19) Tactical prowess and the ability to find Combinations**

I would rate the two players at close to even, with no clear winner in this category.

### **20) Intangibles**

What if one side is off form and the other on? What if one side is sick for a portion (or worse, the entirety) of the match? What if one of the players has a fight with his girlfriend, just before a crucial game? The relative shortness of a 12-game match also means that if either side loses a game after a string of draws, the downside is being induced to play desperately/recklessly. These intangibles can throw a logical prediction completely off. It's a different thing to have a theory and to prove it. I'm certain that Sherlock Holmes and sidekick Dr. Watson deduced that Professor Moriarty was the one who sprinkled arsenic in the Viscount's soup. But how will they prove it to a jury?

### **21) Converting an Advantage**

This one is tough to score. A winning position sometimes fosters complacency. Not with these two. Both parties are highly efficient in converting advantages, Caruana in middle-games, and Carlsen in simplified positions and endings. I think this one is a wash and score it even.

### **My prediction**

A hush falls over the readers as I reveal my prediction of the winner. Who would win the match if Capablanca and Botvinnik lived in the same era and played in their primes? So I ran the numbers on their strengths and came to the conclusion that 13 is a higher number than 7. The final score in the categories: Caruana 7, Carlsen 13. Remember, though, that not all data is important or is a reliable predictor of an outcome. Do you still remember your 10th grade high school locker combination? Keep in mind that these predictions, if done by the numbers, are given equal weight, whereas in reality they are not. There is also the matter of degree. Is Carlsen 12% better than Caruana in the ending? Is Caruana 10% better than Carlsen in opening theory? We have no way of knowing.

Keep in mind that probabilities are not actual reality until the match comes to its conclusion. Karjakin played ultra safely in his match versus Magnus. I have a feeling that Fabiano won't do that and will go for it. He may get blown out doing so. On the other hand, if he hits Magnus with a couple of early blows to the head in the match, Magnus is unlikely to recover. This is not the case of the Rocky I-IV movies. Caru is the underdog, but not that much, since he is the second ranked player in the world. If anyone is going to beat Magnus,

it will be Fabiano. His life story is not going to be reduced to the result of 12 games and history will remember him as one of the all-time greats, no matter what happens in the match. So Caruana's chances may be far closer than my completely subjective numbers indicate. I'm thinking that Carlsen is approximately a 55%-45% favourite to retain his title, with a final match score of +1 at 6½-5½ for Carlsen. I may be correct, or I may be way off. Only time will tell if your writer is a prophet or a fool in my prediction.

Both parties have something to prove. Caruana is ranked number two in the world and everyone knows number one is a more desirable place. Also, Carlsen's lifetime score is considerably higher, so Caruana has something to prove to the world. Carlsen can't be happy with how this last year went, since Caruana upstaged him in the last two tournaments where they competed together, taking first in both. So I have a feeling this will be a far more exciting match than Carlsen's two previous matches with Anand and his rather dull affair against Karjakin, which felt like a match between Karl Schlechter and his twin brother, where every game seemed predestined to end in a dull, technical draw. I predict the long-awaited Carlsen-Caruana match will not disappoint us.

### **Acknowledgements**

Many thanks to Byron and Nancy. May Caruana's Botvinnik iron logic rub off on our own play.

Cyrus Lakdawala,  
San Diego, September 2018

*Game 17*  
**Ma. Carlsen-F. Caruana**  
 Sinquefield Cup, St. Louis 2014

**1 e4 e5**

As mentioned in a previous game, Caruana could do no wrong at the 2014 Sinquefield Cup. Here he takes out the world champion with the black pieces.

**2 ♗c4**

Carlsen may be anxious to dodge a theoretical fight with the scariest openings expert in the world. I advocate the ancient Bishop's Opening, the excavated Mastodon, in my book *Opening Repertoire: 1 e4*. It cuts down heavily on theory when compared to the Ruy Lopez and has the added benefit of eliminating the need to study Petroff's Defence. Carlsen actually beat Caruana in their rematch with this line in 2018.

**2... ♖f6**

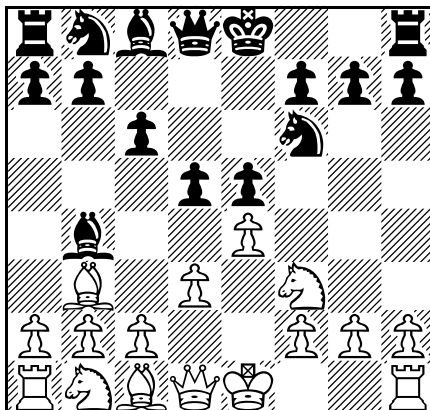
Black can play any number of ways. This move is by far the most popular response to the Bishop's Opening.

**3 d3**

3 ♘c3!? is the Vienna version, which allows the now somewhat defanged Frankenstein/Dracula variation, running 3... ♖xe4 4 ♕h5 ♘d6 5 ♗b3 ♘c6?! (objectively, this gambit is unsound, which doesn't stop club players from bashing it out; 5... ♗e7 is the safer and sounder alternative) 6 ♘b5! (threatening to destroy the defender of f7) 6...g6 7 ♕f3 f5 8 ♕d5 ♕e7 9 ♘xc7+ ♔d8 10 ♘xa8 b6 and the comps tell us that White is borderline winning, while we foolish humans love to play Black, who does have a dangerous initiative for the sacrificed material.

**3...c6**

Straightforward play. Black wants to gain a tempo with ...d7-d5.

**4 ♘f3 d5 5 ♗b3 ♗b4+!?**

**Question:** Doesn't this simply lose a tempo?

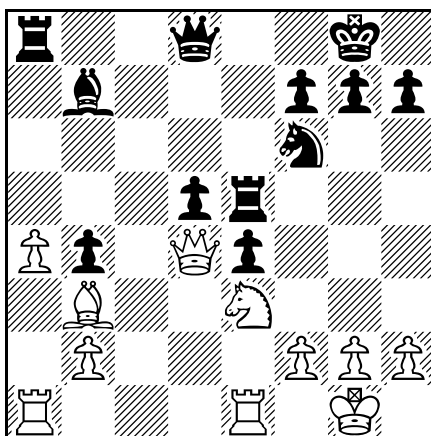
**Answer:** It does, yet the point behind it is that White will be denied  $\text{♞c3}$ , which takes the pressure off Black's d5-pawn.

$5...♙d6$  is Black's normal response, whereas  $5...dxe4?!$  is weak, due to  $6 ♖g5$ .

**6 c3**

$6 ♙d2$  is also seen here. Play can continue:

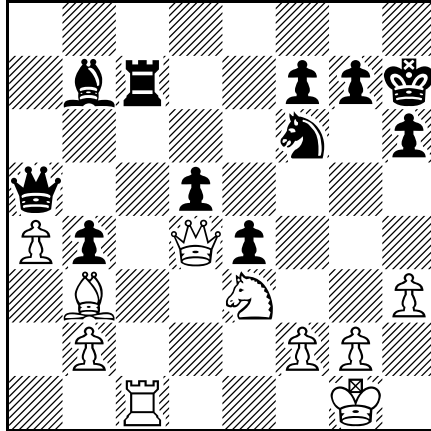
a)  $6...♙xd2+$  (we now follow Ma.Carlsen-F.Caruana, Stavanger 2018)  $7 ♖bxd2$  a5  $8 c3$   $♞bd7$   $9 exd5$   $cxd5$   $10 0-0$   $0-0$   $11 ♜e1$   $♜e8$   $12 ♞f1$  b5  $13 a4$  b4  $14 cxb4$   $axb4$   $15 ♞e3$   $♙b7$   $16 d4!$  (Carlsen boldly sacrifices a pawn for a dark square blockade)  $16...e4$   $17 ♞e5$   $♞xe5$   $18 dxe5$   $♜xe5$   $19 ♞d4$ .



White has full compensation for the pawn with:

1. Pressure on Black's b4-pawn.
2. Pressure on Black's d5-pawn.
3. A blockade on d4.
4. Control over the central dark squares.

The game continued  $19...♜e7$   $20 ♜ac1$   $♞d7$   $21 ♜ed1$  h6  $22 ♜c5$   $♜a5$   $23 ♜xa5$   $♞xa5$   $24 h3$   $♞h7$   $25 ♜c1$   $♜c7?$  (the balance is held with  $25...♞a6!$ , after which Carlsen has compensation but no advantage for his sacrificed pawn)



26 ♖xc7 ♜xc7 27 ♜xb4 ♜c1+ 28 ♙d1 ♙a6 29 ♜d4 ♙e2 30 ♚h2 ♙xd1 31 ♜xd1 ♜c7+ 32 ♚g1 ♜c1 33 b4 and Carlsen eventually (1-0, 77) but expertly converted with his two passed pawns on the queenside.

b) 6...♙d6 7 ♜c3 dxe4 8 ♜g5 0-0 9 ♜cxe4 ♙e7 10 h4!? ♜bd7 11 ♜f3 ♜e8?! (Black is in trouble after this artificial response; 11...♜c5 was better) 12 0-0-0! a5 13 a3 ♜d5 14 ♜de1 h6 15 ♜g3 ♜a6 (suicidal is 15...hxg5?? 16 hxg5 with a decisive attack for White) 16 ♜f5 f6? (16...♜c5 had to be played) 17 ♜e6 ♜c5 18 ♜exg7 ♜xb3+ 19 cxb3 ♜g6 20 ♜h3! ♙xf5 21 ♜xf5 ♚h7 22 ♜g3 ♜f7 23 ♜xh6 and Black resigned in F.Caruana-V.Akobian, Pro Chess League 2017, in view of 23...♜e6 24 ♜h5 or 23...♜e8 24 ♜g4 etc.

### 6...♙d6 7 ♙g5

Now d5 is under threat.

### 7...dxe4!

Caruana takes the simple and, to my mind, correct route and plays for equality, which he duly attains.

Maintaining the tension with 7...♙e6 is objectively worse since Carlsen would respond 8 d4! with complications probably slightly favourable to White.

### 8 dxe4 h6 9 ♙h4!?

Carlsen foments strife by goading his opponent into winning his e4-pawn at a strategic cost.

### 9...♜e7!

No thanks. Black can eventually break the f6-pin with ...♜bd7, ...♜f8 and ...♜g6.

Caruana wisely refrains from 9...g5?! 10 ♙g3 ♜xe4?! 11 ♜bd2 ♜xg3 12 hxg3, which offers White massive compensation for the pawn in the form of:

- 1) A development lead in an open position.
- 2) The very loose black structure.
- 3) The open h-file.
- 4) A very exposed black king.

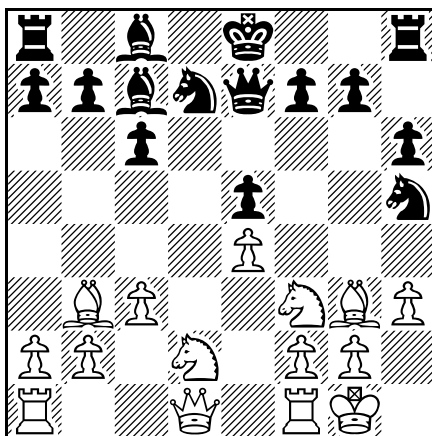
10 ♖bd2 ♜bd7 11 ♙g3!?

I don't really understand why Carlsen broke the pin himself. 11 0-0 is White's normal move here with an equal game.

11...♙c7 12 0-0 ♜h5

Caruana goes after the bishop pair.

13 h3?!



**Question:** Doesn't this move allow serious damage to White's structure?

**Answer:** The move is new and probably not so great. Carlsen hands over bishop pair and damages his structure to open the f-file – not enough in my opinion – for the concessions he makes for it.

Optimists, in their hearts, don't truly believe in the laws of physics and think they can combine/bluff their way out of any strategic inferiority. Now the structural damage will be long term and possibly irreversible. Instead:

a) 13 ♜xe5?? is a miscalculation: after 13...♜xe5 14 ♙xh5 ♙g4 15 ♙h4 g5 White's queen is trapped.

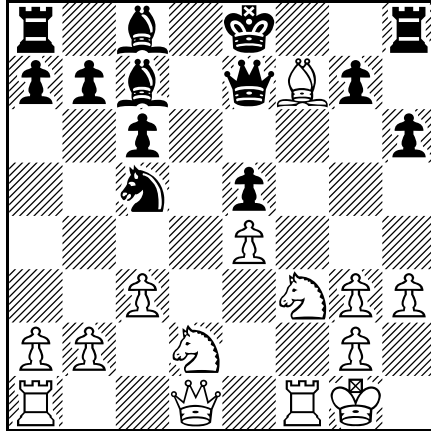
b) 13 ♜c4 is safer, duller and probably better than Carlsen's move.

13...♜xg3 14 fxg3 ♜c5!

Caruana wants both white bishops.

15 ♙xf7+!?





Hmm. Why play the best move when there is an entertaining alternative? It almost feels as if Carlsen is philosophically opposed to Black's totally sound position, without figuring out what to do about it. It appears to me that Carlsen is in direct violation of the principle: *Don't reach for infinity when your position's resources are humbly finite.*

Magnus is in Tal mode (he refuses to put self-imposed limits on his own creativity) and this is not the move of a person lacking in confidence. Caruana has played perfectly soundly, while Carlsen has been playing loosely with the principles, so a crazy sacrifice like this one is highly unlikely to work. Still, discrimination of right and wrong exists in multiple forms in the minds of chess players, when we factor in that wild variable called practical chances. The trouble for White is that passive play with 15 ♕c4 allows Black all his structural benefits at no cost in complications after the simple 15...0-0.

**15...♖xf7!**

The correct recapture. 15...♗xf7?? is a serious error due to 16 ♘xe5, when 16...♗e6?? 17 ♗h5+ wins the h8-rook, no matter where Black's king moves.

**16 ♘xe5+ ♕g8 17 ♘g6**

This looks pretty scary. Black's queen and rook are simultaneously attacked while ♗f8+ is also coming.

**17...♗g5!**

Caruana deftly adapts to the rapidly shifting environment. This is the correct decision. Black goes for a counterattack rather than back down and give up the queen for several pieces after 17...♗e8? 18 ♗f8+ ♗xf8 19 ♘xf8 ♕xf8 20 ♗h5 ♕g8 21 ♗f1 ♕e6. Black has enough material for the queen, yet his h8-rook is shut out. *Komodo* assesses this as a full +1.05 in White's favour.

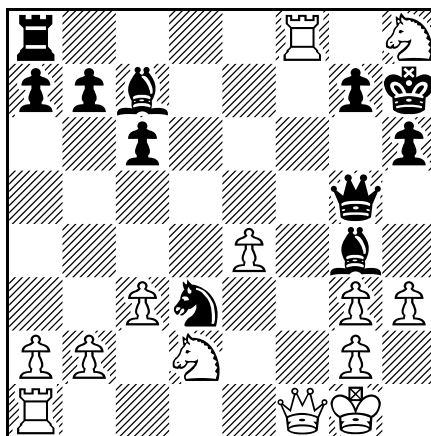
**18 ♗f8+ ♕h7 19 ♘xh8**

No better is the desperate 19 ♗xh8+ ♕xg6 20 ♘f3 ♗xg3. White's attack isn't going anywhere and Black should consolidate.

**19...♕g4!**

He can also toss in the queen check with 19...♚e3+! 20 ♔h1 ♘g4! 21 ♚xg4 ♜xf8 22 ♖g6 ♜f7. White's position is riddled with structural weakness.

20 ♚f1 ♖d3!!



This shot is the mother of all zwischenzugs. Caruana has rook and bishop hanging, so what does he do? He puts a third piece en prise. Black now threatens ...♚e3+.

After 20...♜xf8!? 21 ♚xf8 ♘e6 22 ♖f1 ♜f6! 23 ♚xf6 (not 23 ♚xc5?? ♘b6, winning the queen – world champions don't fall for cheapos this shallow) 23...gxf6, White's h1-knight falls and Black has good chances to convert the ending with two minor pieces against White's rook and two not-so-great pawns. Perhaps Fabiano didn't feel too confident entering a technical ending against Magnus, whose mastery of this phase of the game is unrivalled in his era.

21 ♚xd3!

Carlsen finds his best practical chance. Others:

a) 21 ♜xa8?? ♚e3+ 22 ♔h1 ♖f2+ 23 ♔g1 ♖xe4+ forces mate.

b) 21 ♜f7!? is an emergency solution. After 21...♚e3+ 22 ♔h1 ♚xg3 23 ♜xc7 ♖f2+ 24 ♔g1 ♖xh3+ 25 ♔h1 ♚xc7 26 gxh3 ♘e6 White's knight has no escape square and Black has a strategically won game due to White's numerous pawn weaknesses and exposed king.

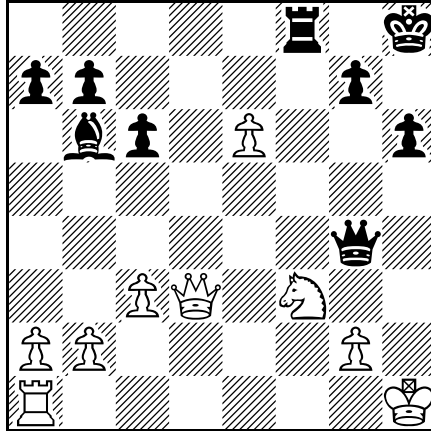
21...♜xf8 22 hxg4 ♚xg4

Sometimes, when we have tripled pawns and our opponent chops one of them, we feel an odd sense of relief, thinking: "Whew! Now it's down to doubled pawns."

23 ♖f3 ♚xg3 24 e5+

White can complicate more with 24 ♖f7! ♜xf7 25 e5+ g6! (after 25...♔g8?! 26 e6 ♜e7 27 ♜e1 ♘b6+ 28 ♔h1 ♚g4 29 ♜e4 ♚h5+ 30 ♜h4 ♚d5 31 ♚xd5 cxd5 32 ♖d4, White may be able to hold a draw) 26 ♜f1 ♘b6+ 27 ♔h1 ♔h8 28 ♚d6. Here White creates problems with his active queen and passed e-pawn, although objectively he is still in deep trouble.

24...♔xh8 25 e6 ♘b6+ 26 ♔h1 ♚g4!



**Question:** Does White's advanced e-pawn make up for Black's other strategic advantages?

**Answer:** The tactical melee ends with the inescapable conclusion that the advantage is firmly with Black, because he has the superior pawn structure and safer king. Also, Black's remaining bishop is clearly superior to White's remaining knight.

Finally, the x-factor is White's passed/potentially weak e-pawn. Is it a strength or a weakness? I believe the game shows that the pawn is actually weak and adds to Caruana's advantages.

**27 ♖d6**

Following the principle: *Placing your rook behind your passed pawn* ceases to function if in doing so you hang material. Not 27 ♖e1?? ♜xf3! 28 ♜xf3 ♜h4+, when Black clips the loose e1-rook and mates in four moves as well.

Note that after 27 e7 ♜e8 28 ♜e1 ♜h5+! (displacing White's knight) 29 ♘h2 ♙c7 30 g3 ♜f7 31 ♜e3 ♙d6 White's e-pawn falls.

**27...♜d8! 28 ♜e5**

28 e7?? essentially loses a pawn after 28...♜xd6 29 e8♜+ ♜h7. Sure, White got his queen back but when we do the arithmetic, we see that his former passed e-pawn is missing.

**28...♜d5**

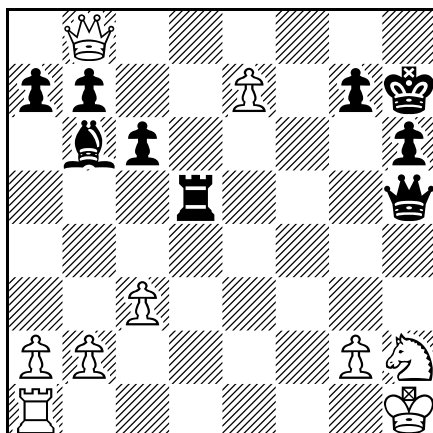
Eyeing both the white queen and a check on h5.

**29 ♜b8+ ♜h7 30 e7**

This looks rather dire, since White is about to promote to a new queen, but Caruana had worked everything out.

**30...♜h5+ 31 ♘h2?**

Carlsen needed to abandon his dream and play 31 ♜h2 ♜e8 (threatening ...♜h5) 32 g4 ♜d7! 33 ♜e1 ♜xe7 34 ♜xe7 ♜xe7 with an extra pawn and a winning ending for Black.



Carlsen escapes the danger, only to walk headlong into a far greater one. So disorganized is White's position that each part seems to function independently of the others.

**Exercise:** Magnus has just blundered in an already lost position. How did Caruana finish the job?

**31...♖d1+**

**Answer:** Weak back rank/double attack.

Step 1: Give a rook check on d1.

**32 ♜xd1 ♚xd1+ 33 ♜f1**

The only legal move.

**33...♚xf1+**

Step 2: Pick up a piece with check.

**34 ♜h2 ♚g1+ 0-1**

Step 3: Force White's king to the third rank, after which a queen check on e3 double attacks and wins White's would-be promoting pawn.

After 35 ♜h3 ♚e3+! the e7-pawn's dream of being crowned at Westminster Abbey is shattered.

*Game 18*  
**V.Topalov-F.Caruana**  
 Sinquefield Cup, St. Louis 2015

**1 e4 e5 2 ♘f3 ♘c6 3 ♙b5 ♘f6**

The Berlin Defence is all the rage these days, ever since Kramnik weaponized it to neuter Kasparov's Ruy Lopez in their World Championship match.