

**From Boy to Man to Challenger  
The Fiercest Battles of Gukesh D**

Cyrus Lakdawala

## From Boy to Man to Challenger: The Fiercest Battles of Gukesh D

Author: Cyrus Lakdawala

Typesetting by Andrei Elkov

Front cover: Gukesh at the TePe-Sigeman tournament, May 2023.

Taken by and courtesy of David Llada

Sources used for this book: *ChessBase* Magazine, with annotations by Sagar Shah

*New In Chess* Magazine, June 2024 issue

© Elk and Ruby and Cyrus Lakdawala, 2024. All rights reserved

Follow us on Twitter/X: @ilan\_ruby

www.elkandruby.com

ISBN 978-1-916839-39-7 (paperback); 978-1-916839-48-9 (hardback)

## Contents

Index of Games .....	4
Introduction .....	6
<b>Chapter 1: Playing World Champions.....</b>	<b>9</b>
Games 1-17	
<b>Chapter 2: The Challenger .....</b>	<b>69</b>
Games 18-24	
<b>Chapter 3: On the Attack .....</b>	<b>102</b>
Games 25-34	
<b>Chapter 4: Defence and Counterattack .....</b>	<b>132</b>
Games 35-44	
<b>Chapter 5: Dynamic Element.....</b>	<b>166</b>
Games 45-50	
<b>Chapter 6: Chaos .....</b>	<b>185</b>
Games 51-57	
<b>Chapter 7: Accumulating Advantages .....</b>	<b>214</b>
Games 58-65	
<b>Chapter 8: Exploiting Imbalances .....</b>	<b>241</b>
Games 66-70	

## Index of Games

Game	White	Black	Opening	Year	Game	White	Black	Opening	Year
1	D. Gukesh	M. Carlsen	French Defence	2022	37	C. Aryan	D. Gukesh	Sicilian Defence	2022
2	M. Carlsen	D. Gukesh	London System	2021	38	D. Gukesh	A. Fier	Semi-Slav Defence	2022
3	D. Gukesh	M. Carlsen	Giuoco Piano	2023	39	A. Gupta	D. Gukesh	Queen's Gambit Declined	2023
4	D. Gukesh	M. Carlsen	Giuoco Piano	2023	40	A. Donchenko	D. Gukesh	Nimzo-Indian Defence	2024
5	D. Gukesh	M. Carlsen	Sicilian Defence	2023	41	P. Maghsoodloo	D. Gukesh	Queen's Gambit Declined	2024
6	D. Gukesh	M. Carlsen	London System	2023	42	D. Gukesh	P. Maghsoodloo	Nimzo-Indian Defence	2023
7	M. Carlsen	D. Gukesh	Sicilian Defence	2023	43	D. Gukesh	R. Praggnanandhaa	Giuoco Piano	2023
8	M. Carlsen	D. Gukesh	Nimzo-Larsen Attack	2023	44	D. Gukesh	A. Erigaisi	London System	2021
9	D. Gukesh	M. Carlsen	Two Knights Defence	2024	45	M. Mohammad	D. Gukesh	Caro-Kann Defence	2021
10	D. Liren	D. Gukesh	Queen's Gambit Declined	2021	46	D. Gukesh	Z. Varga	Scandinavian Defence	2022
11	D. Gukesh	D. Liren	Queen's Indian Defence	2023	47	D. Gukesh	J. Hjartarson	Queen's Indian Defence	2022
12	D. Gukesh	D. Liren	Giuoco Piano	2024	48	D. Gukesh	V. Mikhalevski	Pseudo-Grinfeld	2022
13	D. Gukesh	V. Kramnik	Queen's Indian Defence	2023	49	D. Gukesh	A. Suleymanli	Queen's Gambit Declined	2022
14	V. Kramnik	D. Gukesh	English Opening	2023	50	J. Van Foreest	D. Gukesh	Scotch Game	2024
15	V. Kramnik	D. Gukesh	English Opening	2023	51	R. Vaishali	D. Gukesh	Sicilian Defence	2021
16	V. Kramnik	D. Gukesh	Sicilian Defence	2023	52	D. Gukesh	R. Praggnanandhaa	Colle System	2023
17	D. Gukesh	V. Anand	Caro-Kann Defence	2023	53	D. Gukesh	R. Praggnanandhaa	English Opening	2023
18	R. Praggnanandhaa	D. Gukesh	Catalan Opening	2024	54	D. Gukesh	V. Akobian	London System	2023
19	D. Gukesh	N. Abasov	Petroff Defence	2024	55	P. Harikrishna	D. Gukesh	Colle System	2023
20	A. Firouzja	D. Gukesh	London System	2024	56	D. Gukesh	R. Vaishali	Queen's Gambit Declined	2023
21	S. G. Vidit	D. Gukesh	Two Knights Defence	2024	57	Y. Wei	D. Gukesh	Giuoco Piano	2024
22	N. Abasov	D. Gukesh	Nimzo-Indian Defence	2024	58	D. Gukesh	M. Cornette	Reversed Benoni	2019
23	D. Gukesh	A. Firouzja	Ruy Lopez	2024	59	D. Gukesh	B. Adhiban	King's Indian Defence	2022
24	H. Nakamura	D. Gukesh	Queen's Gambit Accepted	2024	60	F. Caruana	D. Gukesh	Sicilian Defence	2022
25	V. Prraneeth	D. Gukesh	Semi-Slav Defence	2017	61	D. Gukesh	M. Yilmazyerli	Petroff Defence	2023
26	D. Gukesh	M. Warmerdam	Semi-Slav Defence	2021	62	A. Esipenko	D. Gukesh	Bogo-Indian	2023
27	K. Georgiev	D. Gukesh	Nimzo-Indian Defence	2021	63	D. Gukesh	S. Sevian	London System	2023
28	Y. Hou	D. Gukesh	Sicilian Defence	2021	64	D. Gukesh	M. Bartel	French Defence	2023
29	D. Gukesh	G. Jones	Grinfeld Opening	2022	65	D. Gukesh	G. Vescovi	Ruy Lopez	2023
30	D. Gukesh	C. Vr Aravindh	Slav Defence	2023	66	G. Quparadze	D. Gukesh	Caro-Kann Defence	2023
31	D. Gukesh	M. Bryakin	Caro-Kann Defence	2023	67	D. Gukesh	A. Giri	Sicilian Defence	2023
32	D. Gukesh	A. Volokitin	English Opening	2023	68	D. Gukesh	A. Smirnov	Petroff Defence	2023
33	S. Sjugirov	D. Gukesh	Giuoco Piano	2023	69	D. Gukesh	A. Giri	Grinfeld Opening	2024
34	D. Gukesh	V. Keymer	Nimzo-Indian Defence	2024	70	D. Gukesh	I. Nepomniachtchi	Queen's Gambit Declined	2024
35	S. S. Ganguly	D. Gukesh	Nimzo-Larsen Attack	2021					
36	B. Adhiban	D. Gukesh	Sicilian Defence	2022					

## Introduction

### **There is birth and there is death. The most important part though is all which happens in between**

Dommaraju Gukesh, affectionately known as Guki by the Indian commentators, emerged from what felt like nowhere to become the youngest challenger ever for the world chess championship. Dommaraju is a patronymic, derived from the name of his father's ancestors. Gukesh is so young that his life is only a partially painted canvas. We don't know if he has peaked (which is highly unlikely) or if he will go on to become a world champion and candidate for greatest player of all time. My intuition says there is a decent chance that he may do just that since he is - and you may agree or disagree with this - probably the strongest teenager of all time.

### **The match with Ding**

In centuries past when two monarchs went to war, both sides believed the words: "God is on our side!" If a challenger loses a match to a world champion, sometimes he is relegated to the level of a footnote in chess history. This is unlikely to occur with Gukesh, since even if he loses his upcoming world championship match to Ding Liren, it's not the end of Gukesh's career. He is so young that he may well have one or even two more shots at the title. In fact, if he loses this match he may well become the challenger the following cycle and win that match. If this happens, Gukesh will *still* be the youngest world champion in chess history! Will the old dynasty survive a challenge against a young pretender to the throne? Who will win the match, Ding or Gukesh? Well, I don't know, since this book was written before the match took place. Let's look at some of the factors:

1. Since becoming World Champion, Ding, dealing with clinical depression, has been in a horrible funk with minus scores in every tournament in which he participated. The question remains: will Ding shake off his slump and enter the match at his old 2800 strength? Magnus Carlsen doesn't believe so. He recently tweeted this: "The question is whether he (Ding) is sort of permanently broken from the last world championship that he played. I'm not sure, but I think there is a possibility that he could be." Your writer's opinion is that Ding is likely being underestimated. I have a feeling that he will indeed be in form to defend his title. If not, Gukesh may blow him out in the match.

2. Ding has the experience advantage from both being older and having played one previous World Championship match. Gukesh is of course heavily preparing for the match, but keep in mind that studying the theory of war

doesn't adequately prepare a soldier for actual combat. Hypotheticals are not the same as actual experience.

3. Ding enjoys a sizable plus score against Gukesh from past encounters, which I discount since if we look back at the Capablanca-Alekhine and first Spassky-Fischer matches, the challengers began the match with dismal scores against the champion, yet both won. If Ding is a stylistic problem for Gukesh, this could be a factor in the result.

4. Ding has likely peaked in strength, while Gukesh, who just turned 18, seems to be improving with each passing month. In the coming match, he may be even stronger than he was in the Candidates tournament.

### **The source of Gukesh's power**

What are some qualities which led to Gukesh coming ahead of favourites Caruana, Nakamura and Nepomniachtchi in the 2024 Candidates tournament which gave him the right to challenge Ding Liren for the world chess championship?:

1. A sober maturity, well beyond his then 17 years. This is what Gukesh said after he won the Candidates: "It's good to be ambitious, but ambition should be controlled. You need to do what is demanded of the position. That was my main focus. I was trying to do it throughout the tournament - just know what the position needs and play it accordingly. If it's a draw, go for a draw. And if I have a chance then I take it. Mainly, I was trying not to do anything stupid!" If you look at the games of other young, more volatile players in the tournament, like Vidit, Praggnanandhaa and Firouzja, their play was up and down, seesawing between brilliance and disaster. One astonishing factor about Gukesh's games in the Candidates tournament was that he never got outplayed even once, when he had time on the clock.

2. An intense work ethic. You know that infomercial which claims that we can achieve six-pack abs, with only three minutes of exercise per day? Well, they are lying to us. Mastery comes with a mammoth level of hard work, no matter how great the natural talent. It's clear from Gukesh's play and opening preparation that he logs a massive number of hours into his chess training.

3. Mental toughness. After the heartbreaking loss to Firouzja in round 7 (had Gukesh won the game, he would have been in sole possession of first place), some pundits expected Gukesh to collapse mentally. The opposite happened and Gukesh went on a roll after the disheartening loss.

4. Gukesh obviously has strong nerves from his play in the latter part of the Candidates tournament, which will likely transfer over to the coming championship match against Ding. Gukesh's second, GM Grzegorz Gajewski,

said in a press conference after the tournament that nothing seems to fluster him.

5. Gukesh engages in both yoga and tennis for physical stamina. It's important to remember that at this level, chess is just as much a physical sport as it is a mental art form.

6. Adaptability and a Universal Style. Although mainly a strategist, Gukesh demonstrates that he can play chess in any style, from arid positions to pure chaos, with great competence.

### Gukesh's style

We all want to be copies of Morphy, Capablanca, Tal, Fischer, Kasparov or Carlsen, yet we are so far off that we don't even reach the level of a cheap knockoff. Gukesh's Anaconda-like play, on the other hand, reminds us of a young Karpov who was a master of incremental gains so subtle that opponents barely noticed their positions degenerating. In fact, even Gukesh's critics remind me of Karpov's critics who continually underestimated him as well. Nepomniachtchi: "Kids grow very fast, but I don't see anything special in Gukesh's play. It's very strong, but it's not bright. It's hard for me to bet on him, but at the same time it's more like betting against Ding than betting on someone else." This is how I responded to a Gukesh critic on my Facebook feed: "I don't believe he (Nepo) is right at all. Nepo certainly didn't have the skill to win the Candidates at age 17. Also, the criticism I heard from many on social media that Gukesh didn't beat any of the top players is nonsense. It was likely his tournament strategy to draw the top players and beat up the lower ones. And he did just that. Gukesh's record against past world champions is quite high, even though he only scored a half point out of three games against Ding." Let's end the Gukesh-can't-beat-the-top-players false narrative in the first chapter of the book, which is exclusively Gukesh's battles against world champions, past and present.

## Chapter 1

### Playing World Champions

In this chapter, we look at how the younger version of Gukesh measures up against past (and present) world champions. If I were asked the question: "How many world champions did you draw and defeat when you were a teenager?" My answer would be zero. Gukesh is not like other teens. In this chapter, we see that even at such a young age, he racked up a huge number of wins against the chess gods. Let's begin with the Big Kahuna, Magnus Carlsen, himself a candidate for the title of greatest player of all time. Gukesh began with a bang, winning his first game against the Norwegian.

#### No. 1

#### D. Gukesh – M. Carlsen

Meltwater Champions INT, 2022

#### French Defence

#### 1.e4 e6!?

Magnus doesn't often play the French.

2.d4 d5 3.♘c3 ♘f6 4.e5 ♘fd7 5.f4 c5 6.♘f3 ♘c6 7.♙e3 a6

This is Black's most popular line in the Classical French.

8.♚d2 b5 9.dxc5 ♙xc5 10.♙xc5

With this swap, White secures the superior remaining bishop.

10...♘xc5 11.♙d3

11.♚f2 is White's main line.

11...♚b6

Black scores horribly after 11...♘xd3+?! 12.cxd3!.

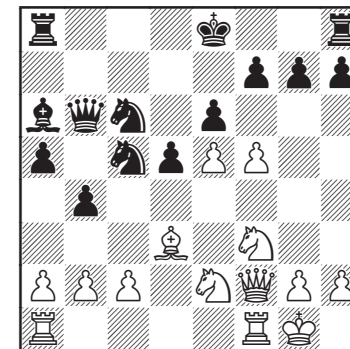
12.♚f2 b4 13.♘e2 a5

The idea is to debadify Black's bad bishop, via a6.

14.0-0

It would be crazy for White to castle queenside since Black already has a head start in the attacking race.

14...♙a6 15.f5!?



Are you certain you want to do this? With a single speculative move, Gukesh enters the Great Out There. He boldly offers to sacrifice a pawn to accelerate his kingside initiative. The idea is sound yet soon goes horribly wrong. 15.♙h1 is White's main line.

15...exf5 16.♘f4

16.♙xf5?? ♙xe2 17.♚xe2 g6 18.♙h3 ♘b3+ wins a full exchange.

16...♘e7 17.e6 f6!?

This is an ambitious decision. Carlsen hopes to later round up

and win White's e6–pawn. 17...0-0 18.exf7+ ♖xf7 19.♗g5 ♕f6 20.♗ge6 ♕xd3 21.cxd3 d4 22.♖xd4 ♘a4 is also equal.

### 18.♖ac1?

A novelty and a bad one. This is an unnatural plan to play for c2–c3. 18.♖ad1 is correct. After 18...0-0 19.♕xa6 ♖xa6 20.♗xd5 ♘xd5 21.♖xd5 ♘xe6 22.♖xb6 ♖xb6 23.♖xf5 ♖a8 chances are balanced.

### 18...0-0 19.c3!?

The attempted remedy only intensifies White's pain. 19.h4 g6 20.♖fe1 ♖c7 21.♖e3 ♘e4 doesn't look like much fun for White either.

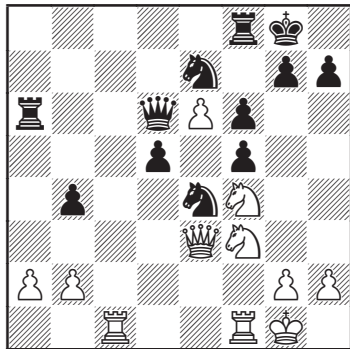
### 19...♖d6!

Now both ...♖xf4 and ...♗xd3 are threatened.

### 20.♕xa6 ♖xa6 21.cxb4 ♘e4

There will be no way to evict the entrenched squatter from e4.

### 22.♖e3 axb4



Carlsen achieved a winning position:

1. The a2–pawn hangs.
2. Black also threatens ...g7–g5 followed by ...♖xe6.

3. Black owns an entrenched, monster knight on e4.

4. Black is up a pawn, with the potential for more white pawns to fall.

### 23.♗d4 ♖xa2

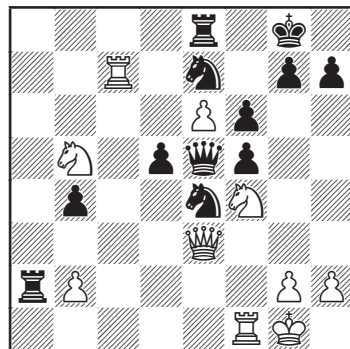
Not good. Gukesh is down two pawns against the highest ranked player in the world. At this point, it appeared as if the Indian prodigy was getting blown out. 23...g5! looks even stronger. 24.♗d3 f4 25.♖e1 ♖b6! 26.♖xb4 ♖a7!. Threats include ...♖b8 and ...♖a4. 27.♗h1 ♖a4 28.♗b5 ♖xb4 29.♗xa7 ♖d4 30.♗e1 ♗f5 and White is busted.

### 24.♗b5 ♖e5

More accurate is 24...♖b8! 25.♗c7 ♖xb2 26.♗fxd5 ♗xd5 27.♗xd5 ♖e8 28.e7 ♖e5 29.♖cd1 b3 and here too, White is busted.

### 25.♖c7 ♖e8??

With 25...♗g6! Black's survival instinct jolts awake. This is lost for White due to 26.♗h5 (if the knight moves to d3, Black's queen isn't trapped since he has the simple push of the d–pawn, counterattacking White's queen) 26...f4! and if 27.♖h3 ♗g5 28.♖g4 ♗xe6 Black wins.



**Exercise (planning):** When we turn our win into a loss with a horrible blunder, our browser history may show the Google search: “Best ways to commit suicide.” How did White exploit Black's last move blunder?

**Answer:** Move the queen to b6, threatening ♖xe7! followed by ♖d8+, forcing mate, as well as threatening ♗d3! trapping Black's queen in mid-board!

### 26.♖b6! ♗g5

a) 26...♗h8 27.♗d3 traps Black's queen in mid-board!

b) 26...d4 27.♖xe7!. The rook can't be touched, due to the deadly queen check on d8. 27...♖b8 28.♖b7! exploiting Black's weak back rank. Black is unexpectedly mated after 28...♗h8 29.♗h5! ♗c5 30.♖e8+!. Clearance. 30...♖xe8 31.♖xg7#.

### 27.♖xe7!

The rook's DNA and fingerprints are all over the crime scene. Just like that, Carlsen finds himself down a piece.

### 27...♖ea8

No point in brooding. What's done is done. 27...♖b8 28.♖xe8+ ♖xe8 29.♗d6 ♖f8 30.♖c7 and there is no reasonable defence to the push of the e6–pawn.

### 28.♖c7 ♖e3+ 29.♗h1 1-0

Black's back rank is weaker than White's. 29...♗h8 30.♖d7 ♖g8 31.♖e8 ♖a8 32.♖xa8 ♖xa8 33.e7 h6 34.♗d6 ♖xf4 35.e8=♖+ wins.

## No. 2

**M. Carlsen – D. Gukesh**  
Goldmoney Asian Prelim INT, 2021  
*London System*

### 1.d4 d5 2.♕f4 ♗f6 3.e3 ♕g4!?

Damned hippies and their heathen ways! This is no longer your grandfather's London System. All kinds of newfangled ideas for both sides have emerged since I began playing the London decades ago and the opening is - dare I say it? - a lot more interesting now than it was in the past.

### 4.♕e2

Gukesh as White played 4.♗f3 on Yu Yangyi, while I would be more inclined to toss in 4.f3 which Magnus played three times on Aronian.

### 4...♕xe2 5.♖xe2 e6

Gukesh doesn't worry about a white queen raid to b5.

### 6.♗f3

6.♖b5+ ♗bd7 7.♖xb7 ♖b8 8.♖xa7 ♖xb2 is judged even by the engine.

### 6...c5 7.dxc5

Magnus attempts to complicate.

### 7...♗c6

On 7...♕xc5 White can go pawn grabbing with 8.♖b5+ ♗bd7 9.♖xb7 although the engine believes in Black's full compensation.

### 8.♖b5!?

Anand's troubles. He likely had two goals, one secondary to the other:

1. Win against his slightly lower rated opponent from an inherently balanced position.

2. Don't push too hard, so that the even position turns into inferiority. Black's last move was in violation of number 2 on the list.

32...♖e5! 33.♙xd4 ♘xd3! 34.d6 ♘xf4 35.♙xf4 is equal. Black's queen shouldn't chop the h5–pawn due to g2–g4.

**33.g4! ♙h7 34.♖c1!**

Suddenly, Black's back rank feels wobbly.

**34...g5!?**

I don't know if this is desperation or a psychological coping mechanism. Anand, searching for an emergency exit for his king, is willing to agree to the devil's bargain which weakens both his pawn structure and his king to offer his king air.

a) 34...♘xd5?? costs Black his queen after 35.♖c8+.

b) 34...♙h8 35.♙xd4 leaves Black a pawn down and paralyzed.

**35.hxg6**

Ensuring that Black's kingside structure suffers from hygiene issues.

**35...♙xg6**

35...♘xg6?? 36.♖c8+! wins on the spot, since if the king moves to g7, then ♘h5 is mate; if Black's knight blocks on f8, then ♘e6 is crushing.

**36.♙h4! h5**

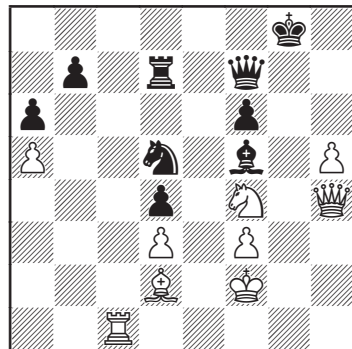
36...♙h7 37.♙f2! with either ♘e6 or ♖h1 following is decisive.

**37.gxh5 ♙f5 38.♙f2!**

The g-file is cleared for White's rook.

**38...♘xd5**

38...♙h7 39.♖g1 ♘xd5 40.h6 ♙f8 41.♖g7+! ♖xg7 42.hxg7+ ♙xg7 43.♘e6+! ♙xe6 44.♙h6+ wins.



The defence furiously pumps on the handle of a dry well.

**Exercise (planning):** Do you see Gukesh's winning plan?

**Answer:** Step 1: Give check on c8.

**39.♖c8+! ♙h7**

Or 39...♙g7 40.♙g3+ ♙h7 41.♘g6! threatening mate in 2, with a rook check on h8, followed by h5–h6 mate. 41...♙xg6 42.hxg6+ ♙xg6 43.♙h3+ ♙g7 44.♙h8+ ♙f7 45.♙e8+ ♙g7 46.♙g8#.

Step 2: Sink the knight into g6, after which there is no reasonable defence to the threat ♖h8+ and ♙h6 mate. Black is also mated if the knight is captured. And if Black's queen moves to g7, then a knight check on f8 is devastating.

**40.♘g6! 1-0**

This knight reminds us of the alien creature from the original Star Trek, which fed on others' fear.

## Chapter 2

### The Challenger

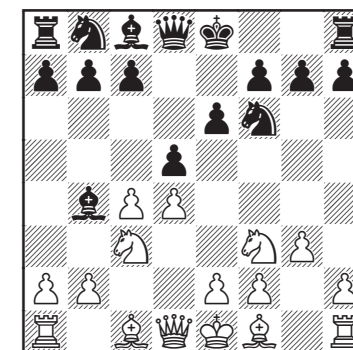
Before the Candidates tournament, on a wild whim I posted on my Facebook feed my pick of Gukesh to win it, ahead of favourites Caruana, Nakamura and Nepomniachtchi. Despite being teased and mocked by a few Facebook friends, in the end I got the satisfaction of a few well-deserved “I told you so!” responses. By winning the Candidates Tournament in early 2024, Gukesh earned the right to a match against World Champion Ding Liren and became the youngest challenger in world championship history, at age 17. Gukesh will play Ding at age 18 and, if he wins, he beats Kasparov's previous record of youngest world champion by a staggering four years! Just as he did the last two times, Ian Nepomniachtchi led the Candidates tournament from start to (almost!) finish. To Nepo's crushing disappointment, he was overtaken by Gukesh at the end when it counted. The Indian prodigy finished with a burst of 2.5 out of his last three games where competitors' nerves are the rawest. The final round was a nail-biter. Gukesh led with all the pre-tournament favourites on his tail a half-point behind. He faced down Nakamura with Black and needed a draw to ensure at least a tie for first. Caruana played White against Nepo with both desperate to win. Gukesh almost effortlessly held off Nakamura's desperate challenge and drew. Meanwhile, Fabi brilliantly outplayed Nepo and achieved a completely won position. It looked as if there was going to be a playoff between Fabi and Gukesh. It wasn't to be. Fabi blundered, Nepo defended ingeniously, holding the draw. This allowed Gukesh to win the tournament by a half-point, scoring 9 out of 14, with the frustrated group of Nakamura, Caruana and Nepomniachtchi a half-point behind, which was so close yet still a million miles away.

#### No. 18

**R. Praggananandhaa – D. Gukesh**  
FIDE Candidates 2024 (2) Toronto,  
Canada, 2024  
*Catalan Opening*

**1.d4 d5 2.c4 e6 3.♘f3 ♘f6 4.g3 ♙b4+ 5.♘c3**

This risky move, which turns the game into a gambit, is Pragg's attempt at an ambush. 5.♙d2 is the



overwhelming choice in the position. Gukesh faced this position against both Abdusattorov and Maghsoodloo in 2024.

**5...dxc4 6. ♖g2**

6. ♖a4+ ♗c6 7. ♖g2 ♗d5 scores well for Black in the database.

**6...0-0 7.0-0 ♗c6 8.a3**

Black scores over 50% in the line 8. ♖a4 ♗d5 9. ♖c2 ♖e7 10. ♖d1 ♖b8.

**8...♖e7**

After 8...♖xc3 9.bxc3 ♖b8 White's bishop pair and centre offer full compensation for the sacrificed pawn.

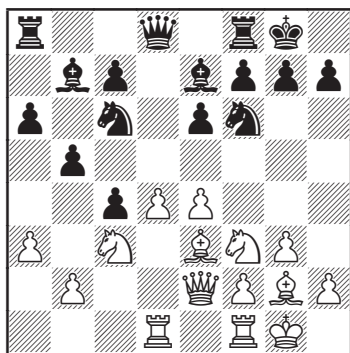
**9.e4 a6**

The idea to play ...b7–b5 is slightly offbeat. 9...♗a5 is Black's main line.

**10. ♖e3 b5 11. ♖e2**

After 11.e5 ♗d5 12. ♗xd5? exd5 White's kingside attacking chances look slower than Black's monster queenside majority.

**11...♖b7 12. ♖ad1**



The engine calls it close to even. White sacrificed a pawn for a strong centre, which could later lead to attacking chances. I don't really

believe in White's full compensation for the pawn, since Black is not so far behind in development and at this stage his position is weakness-free. If 12.e5?! ♗d5 13. ♗xd5 ♖xd5! White lacks a useful discovery on Black's queen.

**12...♗a5!**

Multipurpose:

1. The knight opens up the bishop's attack on e4.

2. The knight frees Black's c-pawn for a potential break on c5, later.

3. The knight gets out of the way of White's d4–d5 push, while eyeing the b3–square.

**13.d5**

White thematically creates confrontation while leading in development. 13. ♗e5 ♗b3 14.f4 Shankland,S-Vokhidov,S PRO League Prelim INT rapid 2023. I like Black's chances after 14...♖e8! 15.g4 ♖d8 16.g5 ♗d7.

**13...exd5 14.e5!?**

Radical stuff. With so much at stake, Praggnanandhaa fearlessly gives away a second pawn, hoping his initiative and attacking chances compensate.

a) 14.exd5 ♖e8 15. ♗d4 ♖d6. Now if 16. ♗f5?! (16.h3 is better.) 16...♖c8! 17. ♖c2 ♖xf5 18. ♖xf5 ♖d7 19. ♖c2 ♗b3 Black has successfully unravelled his forces and is a pawn up with the superior position, Goltseva,E-Kovalev,V Titled Tuesday international open Jan Early INT blitz 2024.

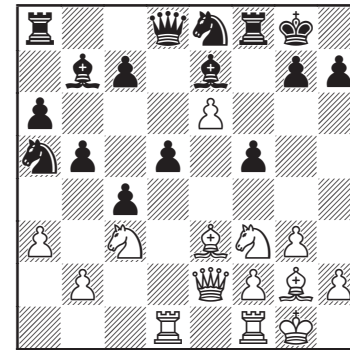
b) 14. ♗xd5 is the engine's preference. 14...♗xd5 15.exd5 ♖f6

16.h4 ♗b3 17. ♗g5 ♖d7 18. ♖c2 ♖c8 19. ♖g5 ♗d4 20. ♖xf6 ♖xf6 21. ♗d5. I don't really believe the engine's near-equal assessment and I would take Black if given a choice.

**14...♗e8 15.e6!?**

Pragg continues his bull-in-china-shop lifestyle!

**15...f5?!**



A novelty and not a great one, since suddenly the evaluation falls to dead even.

15...fxe6! 16. ♖f4 c6 17. ♖xe6+ ♗h8 18. ♗e5 and draw agreed, Troia,E-Veccek,M W-ch WS/M/339 ICCF email 2011. Here Black has the unplayed 18...♖d6! 19. ♗f7+ ♖xf7 20. ♖xf7 ♖e7. He has two solid pawns for the exchange and is close to strategically winning.

**16. ♗e5!**

Pragg unleashes more power upon d5.

**16...♗f6 17. ♖c2?!?**

This move is too slow and should lose the initiative. White gets full compensation for the sacrificed pawns after 17. ♖fe1! ♗b3 18. ♗f7

♖c8 19. ♖g5 ♗d4 20. ♖xf6 ♖xf6 21. ♗d5.

**17...c6?!**

This safe move isn't best. 17...c5! 18. ♗xd5 ♗xd5 19. ♖xd5 ♖xd5 20. ♖d1 ♖xe6! 21. ♖xd8 ♖axd8 is winning for Black, who picked up two rooks and two pawns for the queen.

**18. ♖xf5 ♖e8 19. ♗f7?**

The players are unable to orient their minds to the position's odd geometric nooks and crannies. 19. ♖fe1 was correct.

**19...♖c8!**

Also strong is 19...♖xf7! 20.exf7+ ♖xf7. Black's two extra pawns are worth more than White's exchange.

**20. ♖fe1 ♗b7?!**

20...♗b3! 21. ♖xd5 ♖xe6! 22. ♖xe6 ♖xa3! 23. ♖xe8 ♖axe8 24. ♖g5 ♖xb2 25. ♗d1 ♖a3 and Black picked up way too many pawns for the sacrificed piece.

**21. ♖g5?!**

Somehow the position reminds me of a friend who loved to fish yet didn't know how to swim. He would take his boat out into the middle of Lake Murray and pray that it would stay afloat. The position's insane complexity level makes it next to impossible for either side to find the optimal moves. Both sides miss the engine's shot 21. ♖xd5!! cxd5 22. ♗xd5 ♖xe6! 23. ♗h6+! ♗h8 24. ♖xe6 ♖xa3 25. ♖xe8 ♖axe8 26. ♗xf6 ♖xf6 27. ♗g4 ♖d6 28.bxa3 ♗c5. This unbalanced position is assessed as even by the engine.

**21...♖a7?!**

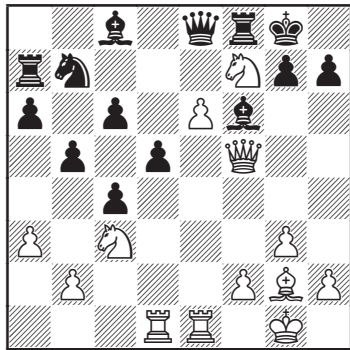


21...♖c5! 22.♗xf6 ♕xe6! 23.♘h6+ ♔h8 24.♗xg7+ ♔xg7 25.♖xe6 ♘xe6! 26.♖xe6 ♔h8. Now ...♗f6 is coming and White is in deep trouble.

### 22.♗xf6!

22.♖xd5!? cxd5 23.♗xf6 ♗xf6 24.♘xd5 ♗xe6! 25.♘xf6+ gxf6 26.♖xe6 ♖xf7 27.♗d5 ♔g7 28.♗e4 ♖h8 29.♖g4+ ♔f8 30.♖f5 ♔g7. When my wife says “Let’s discuss this” the actual translation is: “I make demands and you obey!” which is exactly what is happening to Black’s king. 31.♖g4+ and a draw.

### 22...♗xf6



Watching this game live, your bewildered writer only managed a vague silhouette of White’s plan. We can gather loads of data and still not have a clear picture of the details. I realized that White needed to sacrifice on d5. But when and with which piece? Pragg answered my questions with his next move. Prepare to get your mind seriously boggled.

### 23.♗xd5!!

White’s position, like Dracula, refuses to remain dead. Pragg finds a

brilliant shot which should have saved the game for him.

### 23...cxd5 24.♘xd5

White threatens ♘xf6+ followed by ♖g4 mate. Gukesh’s next move is forced.

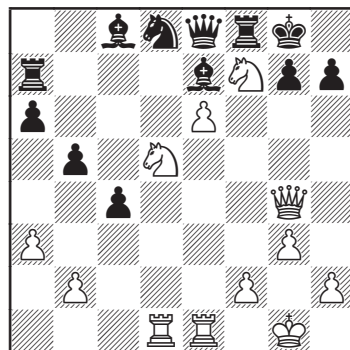
### 24...♗e7!

Not 24...♗xe6?? 25.♘xf6+ ♔xf7 26.♖xe6 ♖xe6 27.♖d7+ ♖xd7 28.♘xd7+ and White wins.

### 25.♖g4?

Praggnanandhaa either incorrectly rejected or missed the saving line 25.♘h6+! gxf6 26.♖g4+ ♗g5 27.♖d4! ♘d8! (27...♖a8?? 28.e7 is awful for Black who loses after 28...♖f7 29.♘c7) 28.♖xa7 ♘xe6 which is a totally unclear mess, unhelpfully judged at 0.00 by the engine.

### 25...♘d8!



This powerful multipurpose defensive move accomplishes the following:

1. The f7–intruder is ejected.
2. More pressure is brought to bear upon e6.
3. Both black queenside rook and knight, who were previously

sleeping, now enter the game and participate.

### 26.♗xd8

This is a bad sign that White’s initiative/attack ran out of fuel.

a) 26.♘h6+ ♔h8 27.♘f5 ♗c5 28.e7 ♗xf5! 29.exf8=♖+ ♖xf8 and Black consolidates.

b) 26.♖d4 ♘xe6! 27.♘h6+ gxf6 28.♖xa7 ♗c5 29.♘f6+ ♖xf6 30.♖xc5 ♖f8 31.♖d5 ♔g7. Once again, Black is winning.

### 26...♗xd8 27.♖d4 ♖b7

The annoying rook continues to safeguard the e7 and g7–squares. White only has one pawn for the sacrificed piece. The power of his passed e–pawn and centralized pieces just isn’t enough to compensate the material deficit.

### 28.♖e4

28.e7 ♗xe7 29.♖e3 ♖f7! and if 30.♘xe7+?? ♖xe7 31.♖xe7 ♖xf2+ 32.♔h1 ♗g4! is deadly for White.

### 28...♗f6 29.♖e3 ♗e7!

The b2–pawn is poisoned. 29...♗xb2?? 30.e7 ♖f7 31.♘c7! ♖xc7 32.♖d8 ♗d7 and White is right back in the game.

### 30.h4

30.♖d4 is met with 30...♖c6 intending ...♗c5.

### 30...♖c6!

...♗c5 is coming, after which White will be placed on the defensive.

### 31.h5

At this stage everything loses. If 31.♖d2 ♗c5 32.♖e1 ♖e8 33.e7 ♗f5 34.♖e5 ♗d3 White can resign.

### 31...♗c5

Obvious moves can still be strong ones.

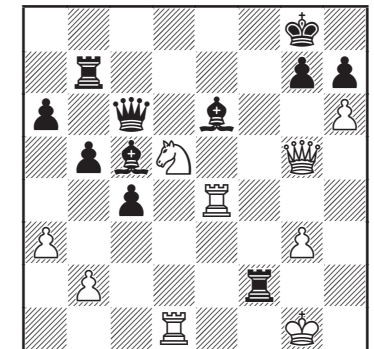
### 32.♖g5 ♗xe6!

White’s e–pawn, the only source of Pragg’s counterplay, is a far higher priority than the f2–pawn.

### 33.h6

Dreams vanish when we awaken, yet ugly reality remains just as it is. By this point Praggnanandhaa must have realized that he was dead lost.

### 33...♖xf2 0-1



With this defeat of his Indian rival, Gukesh moved to plus 1 and a tie for the lead. 34.♘e3 ♖xe4 35.♖xc5 ♖f8 leaves White down a rook for no compensation.

## No. 19

### D. Gukesh – N. Abasov

FIDE Candidates 2024 (5) Toronto, Canada, 2024  
*Petroff Defence*

GM Nijat Abasov played the tournament of his life to qualify for the Candidates. At the Candidates, he was the underdog in every game and