
David versus Goliath

28/01/2016



Let's cut to the chase: the sensation of the first round was Vishy Anand conceding a draw to IM Szidonia Vajda of Hungary, with a rating 435 inferior to that of the legendary Indian. This was Vishy's Gibraltar debut and, as with Magnus Carlsen's recent appearance in the Qatar Masters, his (usually) irresistible force failed to overcome an immovable (female) object in the first round. Massive credit to Szidonia, who was also making her debut in Gibraltar, for putting up such determined resistance. Vishy make take heart from Magnus's subsequent performance in Qatar, finishing as winner of the tournament. Plenty of players have recovered from a minor blip in the early rounds of a Swiss to go on and win the tournament.

Top seed Hikaru Nakamura faced English IM Robert Bellin. I won't mention Robert's age other than to say it is very similar to my own. The American was aware his opponent was a Dutch Defence player and readily played into it. Commentator Simon Williams queried this, since Hikaru had ducked a Dutch when Simon had played 1...e6 against Hikaru's 1.d4 some years ago, instead opting for an uncharacteristic Exchange French. On that occasion, Hikaru had noted how the English GM had defeated Gelfand with the Dutch, but against the English veteran he was not so concerned. He won comfortably, as did Maxime Vachier-Lagrave, second seed, against Ehud Shachar of Israel. Another dropped half point for a super-GM came in the game Vuilleumier-Yu Yangyi, with the much-fancied Chinese GM unable to overcome a Swiss IM rated 2356.

Otherwise it was the usual top half versus bottom half slaughter. Some of these were alarmingly brief. Down in the nether regions of the hotel, nicknamed 'Albert's inferno' after the arbiter, Albert Vasse, who presides there like a benign demon, there was a nine-move game won by Spanish GM Juan Manuel Bellon Lopez, the complete score of which I managed to fit into a tweet. As well as being a very strong player and former Spanish champion, Juan Manuel is famous for two things: (a) he is alleged not to have offered anyone a draw since some time in the 1970s; (b) he brings coloured pencils to the board and likes to spend a few minutes colouring in the rubric at the top and the columns of numbers in pretty pastel shades. Today it was hardly worth him bothering. One of our resident games inputters, IM Jack Rudd, quipped that "Bellon probably took longer to colour in his scoresheet than he did to play his game." Here's the score:

Tradewise Gibraltar Masters 2016, Round 1

J.Bellon Lopez (2376) - M.Kristinsson (1776)

1.d4 Nf6 2.Bg5 e6 3.e4 Be7 4.Bd3 d5 5.e5 Nfd7 6.Bxe7 Qxe7 7.Nc3 0-0 8.Nh3 a6 9.Bxh7+! 1-0

A familiar enough trick – the notorious 'Greek gift' sacrifice. Black is damned whether he captures or whether he doesn't. 9...Kh8 10.Qh5 is mate in a couple of moves, while 9...Kxh7 10.Qh5+ Kg8 11.Ng5 and Black has no good way to stop mate, other than giving up his queen for a second piece.

You might have been forgiven for assuming that was the shortest decisive game of the round but it wasn't. Amazingly, on the very next board to the game above there was perpetrated this eight-move horror show. Tarr - Gulamali: 1.d4 d6 2.Bf4 Nf6 3.e3 c5 4.c3 Qb6 5.Na3 Be6 6.c4 Qxb2 7.Nb5 Ne4 8.Rb1 Qxf2 mate. Eek. Nothing more to say...

The most notable 'David and Goliath' achievement of the round was that of Dave Spence, a 37-year-old police officer and keen amateur player from England, who managed to defeat Grandmaster Zhao Xue, 13th highest rated female player in the world. All amateur players aspire to beating grandmasters, so let's take a look at how an off-duty policeman effected this remarkable citizen's arrest...

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Zhao Xue (2506) - D.Spence (2140)

1.d4 e6 2.c4 Nf6 3.Nf3 b6 4.Nc3 Bb4 5.Bg5 h6 6.Bh4 g5 7.Bg3 Ne4 8.Qc2 Bb7 9.d5!? 'Ello, 'ello, 'ello, what's all this, then? A rather unfamiliar move in a position where White generally plays 9.e3. But it's not entirely unprecedented. **9...Bxc3+ 10.bxc3 Nxg3 11.hxg3 Qe7 12.0?0?0 Na6** Black's pieces keep a close watch on the dark squares. He has a comfortable position already. **13.Nd4 c6** Black is not tempted to take the d5–pawn into custody with 13...exd5 14.cxd5 Bxd5 15.e4 Bb7 as he was probably worried that, after 16.Nf5, he would be unable to keep his opponent's freed pieces under close enough surveillance. **14.e4 Nc5 15.e5**

White is nevertheless determined to cause an affray in the centre. Whichever way Black captures on d5, the knight will have an outpost. **15...cxd5 16.Nb5 Kf8 17.Nd6 Bc6** Many of us would have been intimidated by the knight's threatening behaviour but Dave isn't worried. "Nothing to see here, move along now." **18.Rd4 Ne4!** Good move. Black challenges the d6-knight and he has got the cuffs on the light squares. **19.cxd5** Not **19.Nxe4 dxe4**, when Black can hold onto the extra e4-pawn and also probably win White's e5-pawn. **19...exd5 20.Rxe4** White knows she is in imminent danger of having her collar felt, so she initiates a desperate smash and grab exchange sacrifice plan, followed up by a direct attack on the king. But she's up against the thin blue line. **20.Nf5** is no good as simply **20...Qxe5 21.Rxh6 Rxh6 22.Nxh6 Qe6!** and the knight is trapped. **20...dxe4 21.Bc4 Qxe5! 22.Qd2** Detective Superintendent Houdini was more concerned about **22.Nxf7!?** but even then **22...Qc5 23.Nxh8 Qxc4 24.Ng6+ Kg7 25.Ne5 Qe6 26.Nxc6 Qxc6** and White is a clear pawn down, with little hope of blagging a half point. **22...Kg7** Now White is an exchange down and her knight is banged up on d6. **23.f4 Qc5 24.Kb2 Rae8!**

25.Bxf7 Black offered White the chance to come quietly with 25.Nxe8+ Rxe8 26.Bb3 f6 but she would then be two pawns down with a number of other positional misdemeanours to be taken into consideration. So she tries to burgle Black's position via f7. **25...Re7 26.Bb3 Rf8** 26...e3? would be premature as 27.Qd3! gets White out of jail. **27.Nc4 e3 28.Qd3 Qd5 29.Qxd5 Bxd5 30.fxc5 Rf2+ 31.Kc1 hxc5 32.Re1 Bxc4 33.Bxc4 Rxc2 0-1** It's a fair cop.

Joking apart, I thought that was a really great game by the lower rated played, so well done indeed, Dave.

Meanwhile the 52-year-old German FM Matthias Bach (*photo below*), did extremely well to hold the Indian number 4, Surya Shekhar Ganguly. Rather better than just 'holding', actually: Matthias was pressing for win for most of the game. His reward? A pairing with the Indian number 1, whom you won't need reminding is Vishy Anand. Good luck, Matthias!
