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SANDS: Giri, in a wild chess finish, wins Reggio Emilia

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Was it the field or the format? This year's Reggio Emilia Tournament, the 54th edition of the event held in the small northern Italian city at the start of the new year, proved to be one of the most entertaining events in recent memory, with a large number of decisive games, an epic collapse by American GM Hikaru Nakamura and a stunning come-from-behind victory for 17-year-old Dutch star Anish Giri, who won the first of what likely will be many elite tournament trophies in the coming year.

Nakamura dominated the first half of the event and appeared to be coasting to an easy victory before three losses in the final three rounds enabled his rivals to catch up. By contrast, Giri started with two losses and two draws - ordinarily enough to doom one's chances in a 10-round elite event. But he scored five points in his next six games, including a Round 9 win over Nakamura, to finish alone in first.

Reggio Emilia's organizers benefited from an intriguing cast of characters who enjoy mixing it up, including Nakamura, Russian star GM Alexander Morozevich and mercurial Ukrainian veteran Vassily Ivanchuk, along with a contingent of hungry youngsters represented by Giri and young Italian GM Fabiano Caruana.

But the Italian organizers also adopted what has become known as the "Bilbao Rules," a scoring system in which wins are worth three points and draws one instead of the traditional one point for a victory and a half-point for a draw. With a win now three times more valuable than a draw, players tend to fight longer and harder, and those like Giri who start out poorly still have a fighting chance of getting back into the mix.

In Reggio Emilia's final round, Giri drew with Caruana, while Nakamura was losing to Ivanchuk and Morozevich was blowing a won game against fellow Russian GM Nikita Vitiugov, giving Giri 16 "Bilbao" points to 15 for Nakamura, Morozevich and Caruana.

Whatever the cause, we should be grateful for the games the players produced, starting with Nakamura's wild battle with Ivanchuk in Round 5, which put the American in the lead for the first time. Playing Black, Ivanchuk actually wins the opening battle in this English Opening, with 23. ... h5! and 25. ... b5 severely pressuring White on both sides of the board.

The play becomes radically unbalanced on 31. Qb3 Qe5! (playing for the attack) 32. Ne3 Rxd1 33. Qxd1 Rxc5!? 34. Nc4 Qc7 35. Bxc5 Qxg3+ 36. Kh1 Qxh3+; Nakamura has a rook for three pawns, but it's an open question how long his king can survive on his own against the Black queen and knights. Ivanchuk may have missed a win on the next move, as after 37. Kg1 (see diagram), 37. ... Ng4! 38. Qe2 Nh4 39. Nd2

On the game's 37. ... Qg3+?! 38. Kf1 Ng4 39. Qd8+ Kh7 40. Qd5 Qf3+? (the computers say Black can still draw with 40. ... Nh2+ 41. Ke2 Nd4+!! 42. Qxd4 [Bxd4 Qf3+ 43. Kd2 Qd3+ 44. Ke1 Qf1+] 41. Qg4+! 43. Ke3 Qg3+ 44. Kxe4 Qf3+, with a perpetual) 41. Ke1 Ng3 42. Rc2, White has set up a defensive barricade that (barely) blocks mate, with the bishop on c5 covering the critical squares.

In the final position after 56. Rd6+ Kg7 57. Rd8, Black has no checks and his king soon will be mated; Ivanchuk resigned.

Giri's Round 9 win over Nakamura was a far more straightforward affair and one that played a crucial role in the event's outcome. In a Petroff, Giri criticized White's 11. Bd3 d5 12. Ng5?!, which proves to be a major waste of time after 12. ... Nf8! 13. h5 Bf6, and the knight is already looking for a way to retreat.

White's 16. gxf3 Ne6 17. f4, hemming in his own dark-squared bishop, is a sign things have gone seriously wrong, and soon Black is dictating the play with his queen-side pressure. Both players may have missed a tactical finesse after 20. Bf5 Na4 21. Qd3, as 21. ... Nxc3! - instead of the game's 21. ... Nc5 - appears to give Black a solid edge in lines such as 22. Bd3 (bxc3? Bxc3 23. Reg1 c5) d4! 23. bxc3? dxc3 24. Be3 Qxa3+ 25. Kd1 Rad8.

Still, Giri maintains a clear positional advantage as White tries desperately to restrain his opponent's coming central pawn break, a break that loses none of its force after the queens are off the board: 30. Qd3 b6 31. Qxc4 Rxc4 32. Rd1 d4! 33. cxd4 cxd4 34. b3 (White may have counted on this move to evict the rook, but Black has seen just a bit further) dxe3!! 35. bxc4 exf2 36. Rf3 (Rh3 Re1 37. Rh1 Bh4! preserves Black's bind) Re1 37. Kc1 Bd4, when White is paralyzed as 38. Kd2 would be met by 38. ... Be3+! 39. Rxe3 Rxd1+ 40. Kxd1 f1=Q+, winning.

As it is, after 38. c3 Be3+ 39. Kc2 f5 40. a4 a5 41. c5 Bxc5, Nakamura soon will face zugzwang as Black penetrates decisively; e.g. 42. Kd2 Be3+ 43. Kc2 g5 44. fxg5 hxg5 45. Rxf5 Kg7 46. Rf3 Rxd1 47. Kxd1 g4 and wins. Nakamura resigned.

Nakamura-Ivanchuk, Reggio Emilia, Italy, January 2012

1. c4 Nf6 2. Nc3 e5 3. g3 Bb4 4. Nf3 Bxc3 5. bxc3 d6 6. Bg2 O-O 7. O-O Re8 8. Ne1 c6 9. d3 h6 10. Rb1 d5 11. Qb3 b6 12. cxd5 cxd5 13. Nc2 Nc6 14. h3 Bb7 15. Nb4 Na5 16. Qb2 d4 17. c4 Rc8 18. Bxb7 Nxb7 19. e4 dxe3 20. Bxe3 Qd7 21. Kh2 Nd6 22. Rbc1 Nf5 23. Rfd1 h5 24. Qe2 h4 25. Nc2 b5 26. Qf3 bxc4 27. dxc4 hxg3+ 28. fxg3 Qe6 29. c5 Red8 30. Bf2 e4 31. Qb3 Qe5 32. Ne3 Rxd1 33. Qxd1 Rxc5 34. Nc4 Qc7 35. Bxc5 Qxg3+ 36. Kh1 Qxh3+ 37. Kg1 Qg3+ 38. Kf1 Ng4 39. Qd8+ Kh7 40. Qd5 Qf3+ 41. Ke1 Ng3 42. Rc2 f5 43. Kd2 Nf6 44. Qd8 Ne2 45. Ke1 f4 46. Rxe2 Qc3+ 47. Kd1 Qxc4 48. Qd4 Qb5 49. Rh2+ Kg6 50. Kc2 a5 51. Be7 Qc6+ 52. Qc5 Qa4+ 53. Kc1f3 54. Bxf6 Kxf6 55. Rd2 g6 56. Rd6+ Kg7 57. Rd8 1-0.

Nakamura-Giri, Reggio Emilia, Italy, January 2012

1. e4 e5 2. Nf3 Nf6 3. Nxe5 d6 4. Nf3 Nxe4 5. Nc3 Nxc3 6. dxc3 Be7 7. Be3 Nd7 8. Qd2 O-O 9. O-O-O c6 10. h4 Re8 11. Bd3 d5 12. Ng5 Nf8 13. h5 Bf6 14. Nf3 Bg4 15. Rde1 Bxf3 16. gxf3 Ne6 17. f4 h6 18. a3 Qa5 19. Qd1 Nc5 20. Bf5 Na4 21. Qd3 Nc5 22. Qd1 Qb5 23. Qe2 Qa4 24. Qd1 Ne4 25. Bxe4 Rxe4 26. Rhg1 Rae8 27. Rg3 Kh8 28. Reg1 Qc4 29. Kb1 c5 30. Qd3 b6 31. Qxc4 Rxc4 32. Rd1 d4 33. d4 d4 34. b3 d 3 35. b 4 f2 36. Rf3 R 1 37. K 1 Bd4 38. 3 B 3 39. K 2 f5 40. 4

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