

Chapter Five

Magnus Carlsen (1990-)

One of Magnus's great strengths is his broad opening repertoire ... we live in a time of information overflow and the new champion could be the one that handles this best ... he has to know everything, like a computer."

Simen Agdestein, *New in Chess*

The above quote is from an article that takes stock of Magnus Carlsen's career, written in the middle of 2006. Aged 16, Magnus had by then already been a grandmaster for a couple of years, played in his first FIDE World Cup tournament, and achieved 60th place in the world rankings. Agdestein's words both point to his young compatriot's attributes and to the challenges facing him. It was by now clear that, in Carlsen, we had a superbly gifted player with a wide range of universal skills. Brought up entirely in the new chess computer age, the question was not whether he could become a great player, but whether he might eventually rise to the world number one spot.

Norwegian grandmaster and former football international, Agdestein, was particularly well qualified to express these words. He had been part of the Magnus Carlsen adventure since it started seriously to gain momentum in organised schools chess, around 2000. Agdestein was acutely aware just how exceptionally talented Carlsen was, as a player, and how he strove "to know everything, like a computer."

Various family friend, confidant, mentor and coach, Agdestein had collaborated with the Carlsen family in producing the book, *Wonder Boy - How Magnus Carlsen became the youngest chess grandmaster in the world*. In this intimate,

sympathetic and insightful work, Agdestein chronicles Carlsen’s chess story from his earliest steps, to winning the grandmaster title, aged 13 years, three months and 27 days, in 2004.

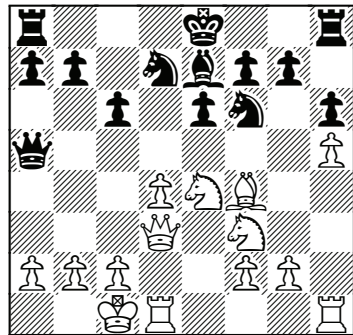
Wonder Boy should be required reading for the parents of any precocious young talent and all chess coaches. The young Magnus was brought up in a family and coaching environment that acted both as a solid support for the development of his chess skills and as a protection against any undue pressures that might threaten to disturb normal schooling and family life. Above all, Carlsen’s routine put the idea of learning through fun at its centre. He grew up in a disciplined but enjoyable chess-playing environment and was far from unhealthily hot-housed. This balance was achieved through a regime of light coaching that aimed primarily at facilitating Carlsen’s own self-awareness and ability to develop his own skills. It was based on exposure to regular play in many competitive tournaments.

This mix worked well. Interviewed in *New in Chess* immediately after his son had become the world’s youngest grandmaster, Magnus’s father, Henrik, said, “Everything has gone quicker than we expected ... so far Magnus has enjoyed everything he has done [and] I’d hate to see him lose that joy [in the game].” The ability to play with ideas and simply rejoice in discovering what the pieces can do is a great classical virtue and a key motivator for all the great players featured in this book. As Magnus breezily put it, in the same *New in Chess* interview, “I like open positions with small tactics in them ... threatening and threatening, when I have the initiative ... maybe sacrifice some pawns.”

In earning his first grandmaster norm with a joint 1st place in the C Group at Wijk aan Zee, in 2004, Magnus won a fine game in that vein. Notably computer knowledge didn’t play a decisive part in the result. Carlsen impressed by his vision and tactics.

Game 29
M.Carlsen-S.Ernst
 Wijk aan Zee 2004
Caro-Kann Defence

1 e4 c6 2 d4 d5 3 ♘c3 dxe4 4 ♘xe4 ♙f5
 5 ♘g3 ♙g6 6 h4 h6 7 ♘f3 ♘d7 8 h5
 ♙h7 9 ♙d3 ♙xd3 10 ♚xd3 e6 11 ♙f4
 ♘gf6 12 0-0-0 ♙e7 13 ♘e4 ♚a5

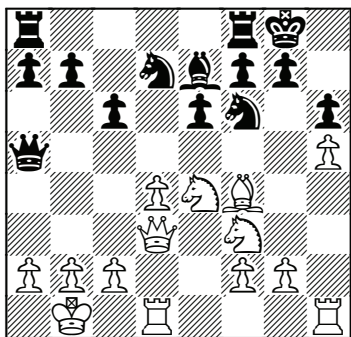


The early moves in this variation have already been discussed in the notes to Game 24, Anand-Ponomarev, which varied here with 13...♖xe4 14 ♖xe4 ♖f6 15 ♗d3 ♗d5.

14 ♖b1 0-0

White regains his pawn and may have a very slight edge due to his marginally more active pieces and queen-side pawn majority after 14...♖xh5 15 ♙d2 ♗f5 16 ♖d6+ ♙xd6 17 ♗xf5 exf5 18 ♖xh5, and Black must either lose his f- or h-pawn.

Black can also consider 14...♖xe4 15 ♖xe4 ♖f6 16 ♗e2 ♖xh5! (16...♗b5!? has also been tried). This line, however, went well for White, in Y.Pelletier-P.H.Nielsen, Internet 2004, after 17 ♙c1 ♖f6 18 ♖e5 ♖d7 19 g4 ♗f8 20 ♖xd7 ♖xd7 21 ♖h5 ♗c7 22 d5 cxd5 23 c4 ♗ad8 24 cxd5 exd5 25 ♙e3, and White had a dangerous attack.



15 ♖xf6+ ♖xf6 16 ♖e5 ♗ad8 17 ♗e2

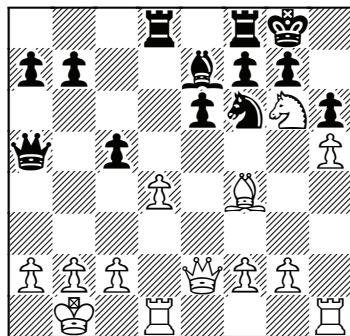
White can possibly improve on this move, by playing 17 ♗g3!. E.Bacrot-K.Asrian, Moscow 2005, continued 17...♖h8 18 ♗d3 ♗d5 19 a3 ♖d7 20

♖g4 ♙g5 21 ♙c7 ♗c8 22 ♙d6 ♗fd8 23 ♖e5 ♙g8 24 ♙b4 ♗e4 25 ♖c4 ♗h7 26 ♖d6, with a definite pull for White.

17...♙c5!?

This provocative move invites a dangerous knight sacrifice. Black should probably prefer the precautionary 17...♗b6!, so that after 18 ♖g6?!, he can play 18...♙a3!, and if 19 ♙c1 fxe6 20 ♗xe6+ ♖h8 21 hxe6 ♖g8 22 ♙a1 ♗d6. Instead V.Anand-E.Bareev, Moscow 2002, steered towards an immediately peaceful outcome after 18 c3 c5 19 ♙e3 ♖d5 20 ♙a1 ♗c7 21 g4 ♖xe3 22 fxe3 ♙f6 23 ♖d3 b6 24 ♖hf1 ♗fe8 25 ♗f3 e5 26 dxe5 ♙xe5 27 ♖xe5 1/2-1/2.

18 ♖g6!



White's knight sacrifice is much stronger than in the previous note. And, with hindsight, it is clear that Black should really decline the offer. After 18...♗fe8 19 ♖xe7+ ♗xe7 20 dxc5, Black might still battle on, by playing 20...♗ed7 21 ♙e3 ♖d5, although after 22 ♗d3!, and if 22...♖xe3 23 ♗xe3 or 22...♖b4 23 ♗a3, White is better.

18...fxg6? 19 ♗xe6+ ♖h8 20 hxe6!

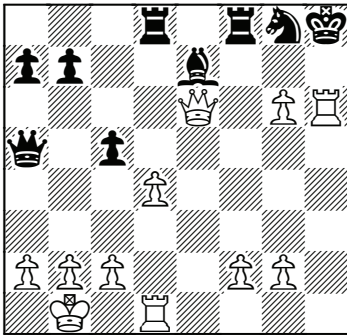
Now, however, Black's king is in serious danger. Over the board, Carlsen was convinced that White must be winning. White's immediate threat is 21 ♖xh6 gxh6 22 ♛xe7. This would leave Black defenceless against either of two follow-up threats, 23 ♜xh6+ and 23 g7+.

Logically Black should now defend his bishop with one of his rooks, but both available rook moves contain tactical flaws. Black's defences collapse immediately after 20...♜fe8?! 21 ♖xh6 gxh6 22 ♛f7, and if 22...♘g8 23 ♛h7 mate. Black also loses after 20...♞de8?! 21 ♜xh6+! gxh6 22 ♖xh6, due to White's twin threats. 23 g7+ and 23 ♜h1. As 20...cxd4?! 21 ♖xh6 gxh6 22 ♛xe7 is also clearly hopeless, Black's actual reply is virtually forced.

20...♘g8 21 ♖xh6!

But Black's game caves in on h6 anyway. After 21...♗xh6 22 ♜xh6+ gxh6 23 ♛xe7, White again mates with his queen on h7.

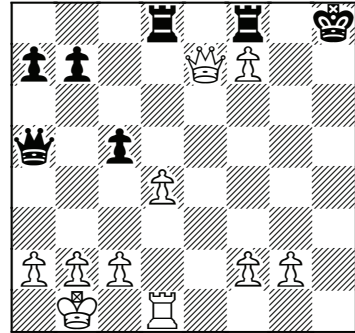
21...gxh6 22 ♜xh6+!



White goes a rook behind, but he

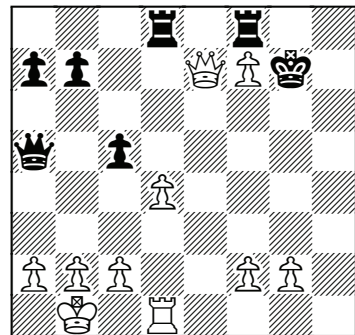
has a mating attack.

22...♗xh6 23 ♛xe7 ♗f7 24 gxf7!



Apparently unknown to both players, certainly to Carlsen, play to here had been following an earlier game, P.Almagro Llanas-J.Gustafsson, Madrid 2003, in which White now forced a draw by repetition. Black got off the hook after 24 ♛f6+ ♔g8 25 ♜h1 ♗h6 26 ♛e7 ♗f7 27 ♛f6 ♗h6 28 ♛e7 ♗f7 1/2-1/2. Carlsen saw more deeply into the position!

24...♔g7



25 ♜d3!?

White could have won immediately, by playing the most accurate finishing

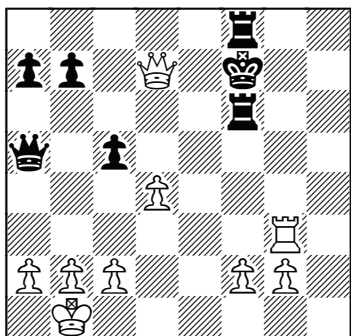
sequence 25 ♖e5+! ♜xf7 26 ♚d3, and if 26...♗b6 27 ♚f3+, quickly mating.

Now Black could have played 25...♗b6 26 ♚g3+ ♖g6 (or if 26...♜h7 27 ♖e4+ and mates) 27 ♚xg6+ ♜xg6. Fortunately Black prefers to fall on his sword in more honourable fashion, forcing White to find a much more aesthetic and worthy end to this fine attacking game.

25...♚d6 26 ♚g3+ ♖g6 27 ♖e5+ ♜xf7

Or if 27...♜h7 28 ♗h5+ ♚h6 29 ♗f5+ ♜h8 30 ♖e5+ ♜h7 31 ♗g7 mate.

28 ♗f5+ ♚f6 29 ♗d7 mate (1-0)



The finish is now straightforward, perhaps – but still rather pretty and quite arresting!

There was no stopping the 13 year-old boy now, and he rapidly scored his second grandmaster norm, in March 2004, with a solid, 2660 rating performance, at the very strong Aeroflot Open, in Moscow. This was soon followed by his third and final norm, at the Dubai Open.

At the Aeroflot event, Kasparov's

former coach, Alexander Nikitin, had expressed the view that Carlsen's promise, at 13, could only be compared to that of the young Kasparov. Between Moscow and Dubai, Carlsen then managed to scare Kasparov, by scoring 1/2-1 1/2 against him in a rapid event in Reykjavik, a result that made immediate world-wide headlines. Throughout all such excitement, the Carlsen team kept their feet firmly on the ground. While others might enthuse, their typical take at the time was summed up clearly by words used by Agdestein, in his 2006 *New in Chess* interview, "We calculate our success in terms of what we learn, not in how many points we score."

In *Wonder Boy*, Agdestein goes on to relate that when asked by Dirk Jan Ten Geuzendam, "What about Karjakin?" Nikitin replied, "No, he just studies a lot. This is real talent!" Agdestein's book consistently puts such comments in a more restrained light. He writes of the world's then top two 13 year-olds, that they were "both ... huge talents [who] must develop at their own pace [and] will both become stars of world class." Agdestein and others, however, do make an exception for Magnus's excellent memory. "Magnus's memory is incredible," writes Agdestein. After a mutual training session, in 2004, Peter-Heine Nielsen noted that Carlsen didn't take notes, but just remembered things. Carlsen didn't always have total recall, but when his memory kicked in it was formidable.