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Fabiano Caruana

His Amazing Story and His Most Instructive Chess Games

New In Chess 2018

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Introduction

His brilliant result at the St Louis super-tournament in 2014, with the remarkable score of 8.5/10 (including, in the first seven rounds, the Fischeresque score of seven victories), propelled 22-year old Fabiano Caruana into the small group of challengers to the World Champion.

In the 2016 Candidates' tournament in Moscow, Caruana was regarded as one of the favourites. This is how he was described in pre-tournament prognostications by grandmaster Emil Sutovsky:

'Fabiano Caruana was somewhat surprisingly regarded as favourite by almost half of the survey respondents. Despite the fact that eighteen months have passed since his legendary performance at St Louis, people understand that the Italian-American is capable of achieving something similar again. However, I personally am mystified that a whole series of appearances at the highest level since then has seen him drop sharply, from his cosmic rating of 2844 to a more modest 2794. Why did the qualitative leap in his play, which was noticed in the summer-autumn of 2014, turn out to be so short-lived? I do not know. But honestly, I would very much like to see that Caruana again – his play was the sort of chess that I personally consider ideal. An extraordinary degree of principle in the opening, a "wholeness" in his formulation of the game, deep strategic plans based on tactical subtleties, and, to the delight of the fans, numerous victories in games against the "Berliners" (including Carlsen). It was chess that was a symbiosis of science, game and sport, rather than the Carlsen approach, which can be described as purely chess-as-a-game. Can Caruana again combine these ingredient and shine? Definitely!'

In that Moscow Candidates tournament, Caruana was close to qualifying for the 'match of his life', but after losing a dramatic game in the final round against Sergey Karjakin, he was forced to settle for 'only' second place. He then followed up with a convincing win in the US Championship and a gold medal with the American team at the Olympiad (Baku 2016), all of which showed that he was ready for a new step forward.

In the January 2017 FIDE rating list, Caruana (2827) occupied second place, only 13 points behind Magnus Carlsen (2840).

Two years after Moscow, Caruana did make the final jump. After a highly convincing win in the Berlin Candidates Tournament in March 2018 (despite losing to Karjakin again!) the American grandmaster is up for his greatest challenge to date. In November he will be playing his World Championship match with Magnus Carlsen. Experts predict that this match will be very close and tense. Will it be the culmination of the amazing story of Fabiano Caruana?

Alexander Kalinin
Moscow, July 2018

Note: In several games I have cited a few comments by Fabiano Caruana himself or by other (grand-)masters. Most of these comments appeared earlier in New In Chess Magazine or on ChessBase.

CHAPTER 1

A running start

Fabiano Caruana was born on 20 July 1992 in Miami. He was the third child in a large Italian family, significantly younger than his brother and sister.

Fabiano showed exceptional chess ability early on, and his father took the five-year-old to the Brooklyn Chess Club (at the time, the family had moved to Brooklyn), the same club where the legendary Bobby Fischer had begun his career! Fabiano loved to read chess books and later said:

‘At first, I studied by myself, from books and magazines, and spent many hours at the board every day. I think this was a very important step, as I acquired the habit of working hard.’

Soon the youngster began working with the popular American children’s trainer, Bruce Pandolfini.

‘I started working with Fabiano when he was only five,’ recalls Pandolfini, ‘and it was obvious that he had a rare intuition, was brave in attack and was one of the five most talented players of his age, whom I had seen.’

Then, between the ages of eight and twelve, Caruana trained with grandmaster Miron Sher.

As expected in this age, the boy plunged into the atmosphere of numerous chess battles with his peers. The habit of playing a lot is one which has remained with Fabiano to this day, and he remains notable for it among his colleagues and to the surprise of experts.

Here are some extracts from an interview which Caruana gave to journalist Evgeny Atarov for the Russian website Chess Pro in 2012:

E.A. ‘You feel a need to play and work constantly?’

F.C.: ‘Most of all, to play! I can greatly enjoy the feeling of battle. Nowadays study means hours and hours of working with the computer, in which you have to be the creator. The computer is excellent at refuting stuff, but you have to come up with the ideas yourself. I prefer the process of play, because here we are in equal conditions with the opponent: he invents something, then I invent something...’

EA.: ‘What aim do you set yourself when you sit at the board: do you want to get pleasure from the game, or just to win and score a point in the tournament table?’

FC.: 'For me, chess is a battle. Most of all, I want to win. Of course, I enjoy it when I manage to create something special on the board, a beautiful idea or something that I can recall with pleasure afterwards...'

EA.: 'Many children fall madly in love with chess when they first start to play, but gradually, when they have to work at it, this love dissipates and gives way to necessity. Haven't you lost your love of chess over the years of work?'

FC.: 'Undoubtedly, it is hard to retain all your life that initial feeling of wonder. I have the same story, but I have never come to hate chess... over the years, I have come to like some aspects of chess more and some less, but every time, I find something special. Chess opens before one a mass of tempting possibilities, such as the chance to see the world.'

EA.: 'So the love remains, all the same?'

FC.: 'Hmm. Probably, yes... I have never thought about this, but now you ask, I have to say probably yes. I get enormous pleasure every time I sit at the board. Every time!'

EA.: 'What does a professional chess player need, so as constantly to improve?'

FC.: 'First and foremost, never relax your demands on yourself. One must constantly work, not give oneself pauses and indulgences. It is also very important, in my opinion, to constantly maintain one's form, i.e. all the time to be involved in the game. You have to be constantly engaged in chess, and if you are not sitting directly at the board, you should be engaged, looking at what is happening around you... you must constantly improve, find and identify for yourself what is new. If you are talented and do all this, you will constantly grow. I don't think there is any other method of self-perfection.'

EA.: 'Looking at yourself, do you sometimes ask yourself where you get the energy to work and play so much? Do you have problems with energy?'

FC.: 'Yes, chess requires a lot of energy. After a seven-hour game, one often finds it hard to stand up, one is so tired. But it's not a problem for me. I don't get so tired during a game as others do. I don't know the explanation – maybe it is just my physiology. I recover my strength quickly.'

EA.: 'Do you do sport or anything? Gymnastics or maybe jogging?'

FC.: 'None of these things at all. I walk a lot...'

EA.: 'We understand that you can play 20 or more games in a month. But do you enjoy it, when you play so much?'

FC.: 'Not always. You can't play every game with the same degree of pleasure. Sometimes you just feel tired. But I try to get pleasure from the process of playing, from every game, and do not think about the fact that

I played yesterday, and the day before, and will play again tomorrow. After all, this is my job and I should try to do it properly.'

In 2002 and 2003, Caruana won the Pan-American Championship (under 10) and achieved the FIDE Master title. At this same period, he scored his first victory against a GM in a one-to-one game. In the first round of September's Manhattan Chess Club tournament, his victim was the experienced Alexander Wojtkiewicz.

Game 1 Sicilian Defence B27

Fabiano Caruana

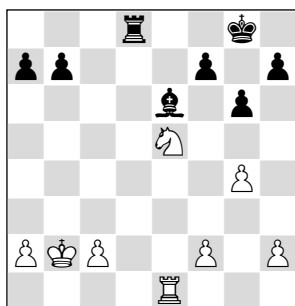
Alexander Wojtkiewicz

New York 2002

**1.e4 c5 2.♘f3 g6 3.d4 ♘g7 4.♙e3
♘f6 5.♘c3 cxd4 6.♙xd4 ♘c6 7.♙b5
♘xd4 8.♚xd4 0-0 9.e5 ♘e8 10.0-0-0
d6 11.♚d2?!**

He could keep the initiative with 11.♚h4!. Now the advantage passes to Black.

**11...♙g4 12.♙xe8 ♜xe8 13.exd6
exd6 14.♚xd6 ♙xc3 15.♚xd8
♙xb2+ 16.♘xb2 ♜axd8 17.♜xd8
♜xd8 18.♘e5 ♙f5 19.g4 ♙e6
20.♜e1**



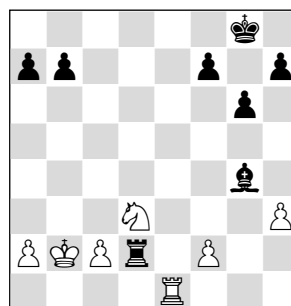
The endgame favours Black, thanks to his strong bishop and superior pawn structure. Now 20...♜d6 is tempting, planning to attack with the queenside pawns, or 20...

g5, fixing the g4-pawn on a light square.

20...♜d2?

The rook will be attacked on the d2-square. It is hard to say exactly what the grandmaster overlooked, but almost every one of his next few moves looks doubtful.

21.♘d3 ♙xg4 22.h3



22...♙f3

As soon becomes apparent, Black is ready to sacrifice the exchange. But why not do so whilst picking up the h3-pawn: 22...♙xh3 23.♘c3 ♜xd3+ 24.cxd3 ?

23.♜e3 ♙c6?

The other bishop retreat, 23...♙h5 leads to a draw by repetition after 24.♜e7 ♙f3 25.♜e3, Perhaps the GM was working on the principle that it was better to lose than to draw!

24.♘c1 ♜xd3 25.♜xd3

Stronger was 25.cxd3, creating a passed pawn.

25...♖g7 26.♔d2 ♖f6 27.♖e3 ♖g5
28.♔d4 ♖h4 29.♖g3 f5 30.♖e5 ♔e4
31.c4 g5 32.♖b3 ♔g2 33.♖xf5 h6

34.♔g6 h5 35.♔h6 g4 36.hxg4 hxg4
37.♔g6 ♔f3 38.♖f5 ♖h3 39.♖f4
♖g2 40.♖b2 a6 41.c5 ♖h2 42.a4
♖g2 43.a5 ♖h2 44.♖b3 ♖g2 45.♖xf3
Black resigned.

Of course, the game is far from being a masterpiece, but the sensationalist Americans claimed that, by winning this game at the age of 10 years and 61 days (!), Caruana had become the youngest player ever to defeat a grandmaster in an official game. This is probably true, although one should remember that in 1922, the wunderkind Sammy Reshevsky, also aged 10, defeated the great David Janowski at the New York tournament of American masters.

In 2002 and 2003, Fabiano took part in the World Junior Championships (at U-10 and U-12 respectively), but without any special success. On neither occasion did he even get in the top three medallists. Luckily, in chess, as well as sporting success, there are also creative criteria, by which one can judge the potential of a young player.

Once again, we turn to the 2012 interview with Atarov:

EA.: 'How would you describe your chess style? Are you a tactician or a strategist?'

FC.: 'I would not measure in such categories. It seems to me that I'm a good fighter. It gives me pleasure to play different positions, both tactical and strategic. I cannot say that I avoid anything. I can attack with a full board of pieces or manoeuvre about in a roughly equal position, I have nothing against the endgame.'

EA: 'Do you now understand how you played as a child?'

FC.: 'Oh, then I preferred to attack all the time. I loved to sacrifice pieces and break through to the enemy king. I was like that for a long time, but eventually, as I got stronger, I understood that winning by a direct attack is not always possible... I had to become more universal, learn to manoeuvre, defend, etc.'

Maybe the young Fabiano really did sacrifice pieces right and left, but those games that have come down to the database present a quite different picture! Sacrifices are extremely rare and instead, one is astonished at the ten year-old's ability to harmonise his pieces and find possibilities for continually strengthening his position. One sees combinations in his games, but modest ones, which arise out of the logical demands of the position.

CHAPTER 6

Centralisation as a weapon

The theme of centralisation is one of the main weapons in Caruana's armoury. It is reflected in our hero's opening preferences, which involve mainly classical schemes.

In Game 42 a sharp battle to centralise all the pieces is turned into a direct attack on the king.

In Game 43 both players appear to devote the same attention to centralisation. But when play opens up in the centre, it suddenly transpires that Caruana's pieces are more harmoniously placed.

Games 44 and 45 give us examples of effective piece operations against the enemy centre.

The popular topic of a knight outpost in the centre is shown in Games 46 and 47.

Game 48 demonstrates the strength of a mobile pawn centre, for which White sacrifices a gambit pawn on c4.

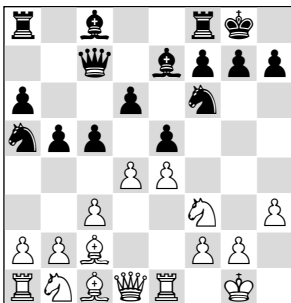
Even one piece established in the centre can exert a decisive effect on the course of the game. In Game 49 the white queen secures the post e4 and, without leaving the square, directs operations over the whole board!

Game 42 Ruy Lopez C99

Fabiano Caruana 2646
Mikhail Klenburg 2426

Budva tt 2009 (1)

**1.e4 e5 2.♘f3 ♘c6 3.♙b5 a6 4.♙a4
♘f6 5.0-0 ♙e7 6.♞e1 b5 7.♙b3 d6 8.c3
0-0 9.h3 ♘a5 10.♙c2 c5 11.d4 ♚c7**



This system of development, suggested by Chigorin, retains popularity to this day.

12.♘bd2 cxd4

In the middle of the 20th century, Black often played Rubinstein's manoeuvre 12...♘c6 13.d5 ♘d8 followed by ...♘e8, ...g7-g6, ...♘g7, ...f7-f6 and ...♘f7, setting up a solid defensive line on the kingside. Nowadays, preference is given to the pawn exchange in the centre, which leads to more lively play.

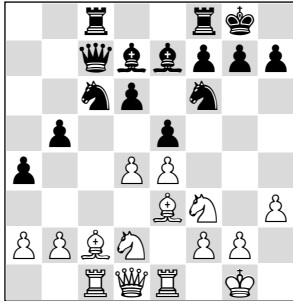
13.cxd4 ♘c6 14.♘b3

Now 14.d5 is premature, because after 14...♘b4 15.♙b1 a5 16.♘f1 ♘a6 Black transfers the knight to c5 and achieves a comfortable position.

**14...a5 15. ♖e3 a4 16. ♘bd2 ♙d7
17. ♜c1 ♜ac8**

Preparing the retreat of the queen to b8, from where she can control the squares b5 and e5.

More often seen is 17... ♗b7, immediately opening the ♙e7’s path to b6 and not yet determining the position of the rook.



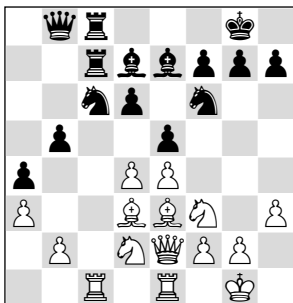
18.a3

A typical Caruana choice. Most players would play the standard Spanish manoeuvre ♘d2-f1-g3 here, concentrating forces on the kingside. Fabiano, however, prefers to play in the centre – ♙d3 and ♗e2, striving to create pressure over the whole board.

18... ♗b8 19. ♗e2 ♜c7

It was worth considering 19... ♘a5 20. ♙d3 ♜fe8, strengthening b5 and e5.

20. ♙d3 ♜fc8



21. ♗f1!

This modest queen retreat defends the ♜c1 and creates a threat against the b5-pawn (the immediate 21. ♙xb5? fails to 21... ♘xd4!).

It is difficult for Black to maintain the tension any longer and he clears the centre.

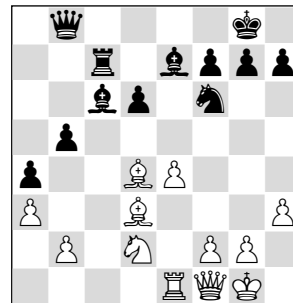
21...exd4

He could have forced the exchange of all the rooks by 21... ♘xd4 22. ♘xd4 (22. ♜xc7? ♘xf3+) 22... ♜xc1 23. ♜xc1 ♜xc1 24. ♗b7, but even in this case, White’s chances are preferable, thanks to his more aggressively placed pieces.

22. ♘xd4 ♘xd4 23. ♜xc7 ♜xc7?!

The positioning of the major pieces on the b8-h2 diagonal proves vulnerable. Better was 23... ♗xc7 24. ♙xd4 ♗b7, aiming for a more harmonious piece set-up.

24. ♙xd4 ♙c6



25.e5!

The ideal moment to open the centre!

25... ♘d7 26.e6!?

The continuation 26.exd6 ♙xd6 27. ♗e2 ensures White the initiative in a symmetrical position, thanks to his more aggressively-placed

pieces. With the text, Caruana aims for more.

26...fxe6 27.♖xe6 ♘c5!

Forcing the exchange of one of the white bishops, and getting rid of the weakness on d6.

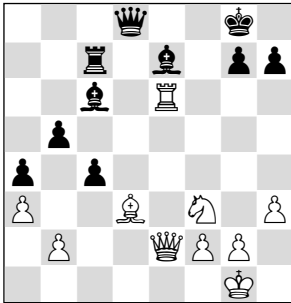
28.♗xc5 dxc5 29.♚e2

Again Caruana prefers centralisation! The alternative is 29.♚b1 h6, forcing a weakening of the black king position.

29...♚d8 30.♘f3

In this open position, despite the opponent's two bishops, White has the advantage, because the defences of the black king are seriously weakened by the absence of the f7-pawn.

30...c4



31.♗c2

As Mihail Marin pointed out, rather more dangerous for Black was the move 31.♗f5!, when the white bishop is ready to develop activity, not only on the diagonal b1-h7, but also via the square e6. By way of an illustration of the possibilities, the Romanian GM gives the following variations:

A) 31...♗d7?? 32.♖xe7 ♗xf5
33.♖e8+;

B) 31...♗d5 32.♘g5! h6 33.♖e5 ♖h8
34.♘e6 ♗xe6 35.♖xe6 with a strong attack, which is strengthened further by the presence of opposite-coloured bishops;

C) 31...♗f8 32.♘e5 ♗b7? 33.♚h5
g6 34.♖xg6+! hxg6 35.♗e6+! with mate;

D) 31...♗f6 32.♘e5 ♚d5 33.♚g4
♗xe5 34.♖e8+ ♗xe8 35.♗e6+, achieving a material advantage.

31...♗f8

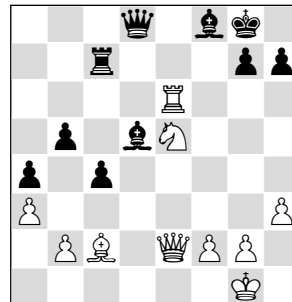
After 31...♗f6 White develops the initiative by means of 32.♘e5 ♗xe5 (32...♗d5 33.♗xh7+) 33.♚xe5 with advantage.

32.♘e5 ♗d5?

The decisive mistake.

Also unsatisfactory was 32...♚d5 in view of 33.♘xc6 ♖xc6 34.♖e5.

As Marin pointed out, it was possible to defend with 32...♗b7!, and it is not obvious how White can carry his attack to a victorious conclusion. Thus, after 33.♚h5 g6 the sacrifice of the white rook or any of his minor pieces on g6 leads only to perpetual check – 34.♖xg6+ hxg6 35.♚xg6+ ♖g7 36.♚e6+ ♖h8 37.♚h6+ etc.



33.♗xh7+!

The decisive combinational blow!

33...♖xh7 34.♜h5+ ♘g8 35.♞e8

With the bishop on b7 instead of d5, Black would have the move 35...♜d5!. Now, however, he suffers decisive material losses.

35...♜e7

After 35...♜f6 (or 35...♜d6) White decides things with 36.♘g6!.

36.♞xe7 ♞xe7 37.♘g6 ♞e1+ 38.♖h2

♙d6+ 39.f4 ♙e4 40.♜h8+ ♖f7

41.♘e5+ ♙xe5 42.fxe5 ♙d5 43.e6+

♙xe6 44.♜h5+ ♖f8 45.♜c5+ ♖g8

46.♜xb5 1-0

Game 43 Ruy Lopez C88

Fabiano Caruana

2773

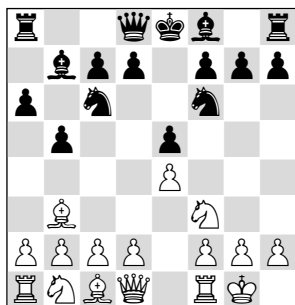
Vladimir Georgiev

2586

Istanbul ol 2012 (7)

1.e4 e5 2.♘f3 ♘c6 3.♙b5 a6 4.♙a4

♘f6 5.0-0 b5 6.♙b3 ♙b7



The introduction to the sharp Arkhangelsk Variation, the main lines of which are 7.♞e1 ♙c5 8.c3 d6 9.d4 ♙b6 or 7.c3 ♘xe4 8.d4 ♘a5 9.♙c2 exd4 etc.

7.d3

A quiet continuation, the main idea of which is to limit the activity of the ♙b7.

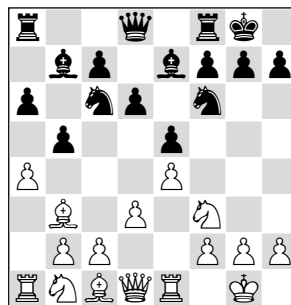
7...♙e7

Developing the bishop on the more aggressive Arkhangel square with 7...♙c5 has the drawback that Black may later feel its absence from the d8-h4 diagonal.

A typical illustration was the miniature Carlsen-Beliavsky (Wijk aan Zee 2006): 8.♘c3 d6 9.a4 ♘a5 10.♙a2 b4 11.♘e2 ♙c8 12.c3 bxc3 13.bxc3 ♙b6 14.♘g3 ♙e6 (14...h6!?) 15.d4 ♙xa2 16.♞xa2 0-0 17.♙g5 exd4 (the attempt to escape the pin with 17...h6 18.♙h4 g5? leads to catastrophe after 19.♘xg5!) 18.♘h5 dxc3 19.♘h4 ♖h8 20.♘f5, and Black resigned.

8.a4 0-0 9.♞e1 d6

Play has transposed into one of the lines of the Anti-Marshall, usually arising from the move order 5...♙e7 (instead of 5...b5) 6.♞e1 b5 7.♙b3 0-0 8.a4 ♙b7 9.d3.



10.♘bd2

There was a time when 10.♘c3 was regarded as the main line, aiming to provoke the move ...b5-b4, weakening the square c4. But practice showed that here Black retains full-fledged play: 10...♘a5 11.♙a2 b4 12.♘e2 c5 13.♘g3 ♙c8!,