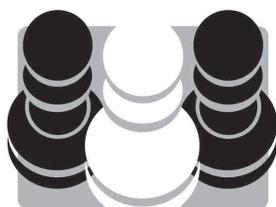


Magnus Carlsen's Middlegame Evolution

By

Ivan Sokolov



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Introduction

Throughout my chess career, I have always found it interesting to study how the world champions approach the middlegame, and how greatly the approach differs from champion to champion.

Two years ago, I had the idea to write a series of middlegame books on the world champions and their respective middlegame approaches – to have players such as Spassky, Fischer, Karpov, Kasparov, Kramnik, Anand and Carlsen in the series.

Whether this idea will ever be fully realized, I frankly do not know, but I have decided to start with the current World Champion, Magnus Carlsen.

Initially my plan was to write just one book on Magnus, but during the process I realized that in that case many interesting middlegame themes would have to be omitted. The plan has changed, and now there will be two books, the second volume coming out in Spring 2022. While writing this book, I came to some pretty clear opinions about what Magnus likes and dislikes in the middlegame.

Strengths:

Space advantage – Magnus loves having a space advantage in general.

Pawn breaks – Magnus loves to have pawn breaks available.

Space advantage in a fixed pawn structure – when holding a space advantage, pawn breaks are not necessarily needed!

Minor sacrifices – you rarely see Magnus ‘sacrificing the house’, usually he opts for a *minor sacrifice*. This minor sacrifice, usually a pawn but occasionally more, sometimes corresponds to the requirements of the position and sometimes aims to unbalance the opponent.

Strong self-confidence – Magnus is excellent at giving his opponents opportunities to go wrong. However, to take the decision to unbalance the situation, one’s level of self-confidence needs to be very high. In this respect Magnus has (in my view) ‘stolen’ a lot from Fischer!

Pattern recognition and knowledge application – Magnus is also excellent at this.

Finding the best chances in inferior/difficult situations – Magnus is often in trouble, but rarely loses.

Weaknesses (all relative to his high-standard!):

Positions with less space in general, and definitely positions with less space and no pawn breaks.

Passive positions.

Chaotic Tal-like positions. In Tal-like positions, pattern recognition has limited to no value. A person who handles those types of positions well – and is able to impose them on Magnus – would hold the keys to the World Championship!

This book consists of nine chapters. Four of these chapters are on standard thematic topics (pawn majority in the centre, hanging pawns in the centre, Sämisch Nimzo-Indian structure, knight dominating bishop), while two others are on themes which are slightly less typical (minor sacrifice, attack and prophylaxis).

The seventh chapter is the hopefully intriguing *Magnus is Human*, which consists of ten games that Magnus lost, and the patterns and connections between them.

The final two chapters are a rather large selection of exercises and solutions, which are intended to put the reader to work.

You may be wondering what will be in Volume 2?

I will mention a few likely chapters:

- Material imbalance
- Ruy Lopez Breyer
- Rossolimo Sicilian
- Sicilian attacks
- Chaotic Tal-like positions
- The World Championship match with Nepomniachtchi!

The upcoming World Championship match with Nepomniachtchi will be fascinating. For the first time Magnus will meet a pure tactician and risk-taker.

Also, should the match go the distance, Magnus will – for the first time in his career – not be the favourite in the tie-breaks!

I hope the reader will find this book both instructive and enjoyable. I have certainly learned a thing or two while writing it.

Ivan Sokolov
Amsterdam, August 2021



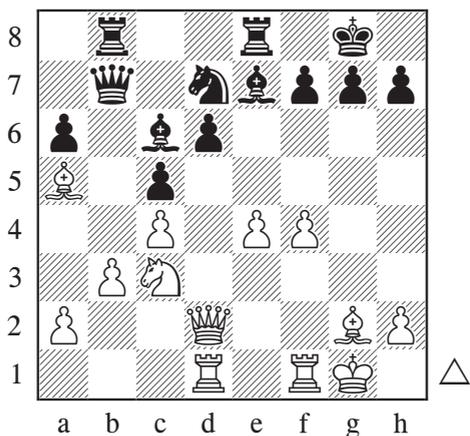
Chapter 1

A Minor Sacrifice

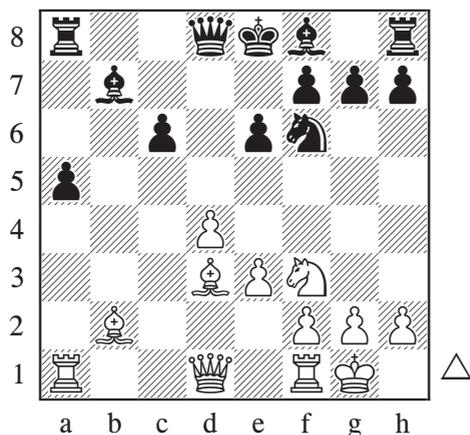


Test Yourself

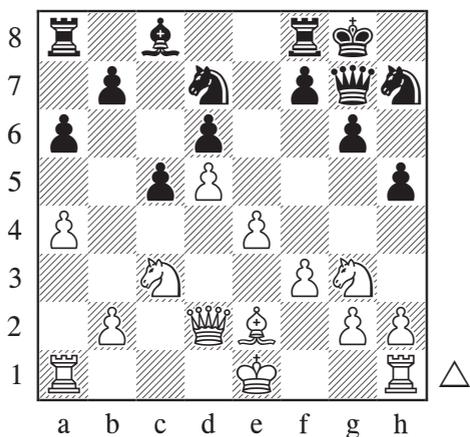
On this page you will find four positions you can use as exercises. They are mixed and should not be considered as normal 'play and win' exercises, but interesting positions you may enjoy thinking about before you read the chapter.



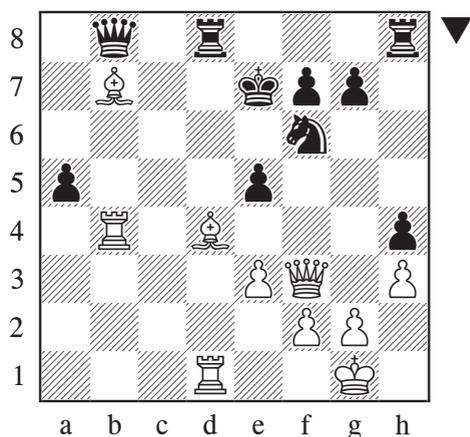
How did Magnus build an initiative?
(see page 16)



How did Carlsen create problems for his opponent?
(see page 29)



How did Ivanchuk organize his pieces?
(see page 19)



How should Aronian have defended?
(see page 39)

Magnus often uses what we will describe as a *minor sacrifice* (usually a pawn) to achieve different aims.

Sometimes it's because he believes this to be the best move in the position, but often the minor sacrifice is aimed at unbalancing the position or – even more so – psychologically unbalancing the opponent!

The three games selected exemplify the following points.

In the first game versus Richard Rapport, Carlsen's pawn sacrifice was the best move in the position: by opening files and diagonals, White quickly gets a beautiful and harmonious attack. White's piece harmony throughout the game makes it all look incredibly easy. I strongly recommend studying this game and applying the same method (playing White) against this line.

In the game against Nepomniachtchi, we have an exchange sacrifice leading to unbalanced positions (in which it is easy to go wrong), while the sacrifice is probably also the objectively best decision in the position.

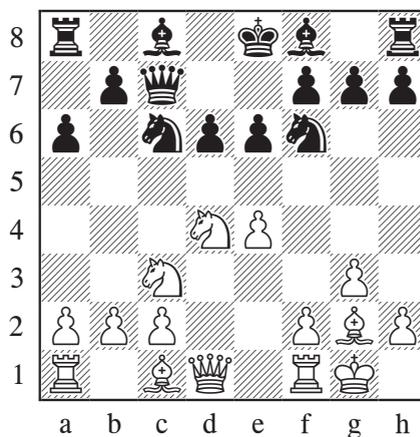
In the game versus Aronian, Magnus's minor sacrifice of a pawn had a purely psychological aim! I do not think that Magnus thought his 15.d5! sacrificial idea was objectively best, but the move looks very surprising and is not a regular candidate move; it unbalanced the position and certainly unbalanced Aronian!

Magnus Carlsen – Richard Rapport

Wijk aan Zee 2019

In this game Magnus will utilize a minor sacrifice in order to develop an initiative and attack on open files. From the perspective of opening theory, I like the plan Magnus goes for: it looks like an easy way (as no memorization of long theoretical lines is required) to achieve an opening advantage against this often-played Sicilian line.

1.e4 c5 2.♘f3 e6 3.d4 cxd4 4.♘xd4 ♘c6
5.♘c3 ♚c7 6.g3 a6 7.♙g2 ♘f6 8.0–0 d6



9.♘xc6!?

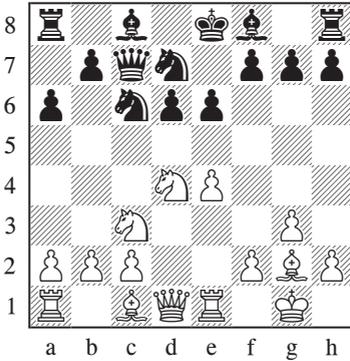
Magnus wants to follow a well-known plan, but without including the move ♙f1-e1.

9.♙e1 is White's main move. He obtains some opening advantage with it and I will give some lines and comments that I think might provide useful opening knowledge.

a) 9...♙e7 is the old main line for Black, leading to the following pawn structure: 10.♘xc6 bxc6 11.e5 dx5 12.♙xe5 We have seen many top-flight games from this position; Black's queenside pawn structure is vulnerable and White has scored well.

b) If Black prevents the idea we have just seen with:

9...♗d7

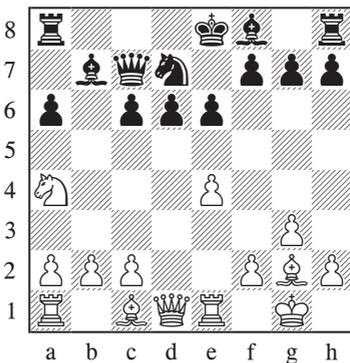


White is probably better by following a plan similar to that of Magnus in our main game. However, White also has an enterprising option in:

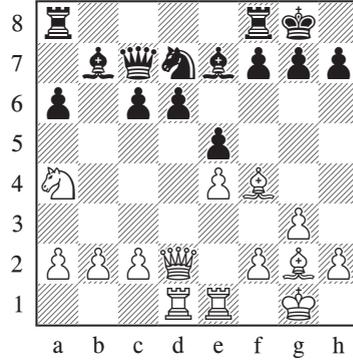
10.♘d5!?

A typical Sicilian piece sac. However, in this particular position in GM practice, it has only been seen in one game (meaning that it might pay off for readers interested in opening theory preparation to investigate this sacrifice further!). Black can quickly get into terrible trouble here.

10.♘xc6 bxc6 11.♘a4 Following a plan which is in a way similar to Carlsen’s (White pushes c2-c4 and takes space) brings White an opening advantage. One top-level GM game proved quite instructive: 11...♙b7

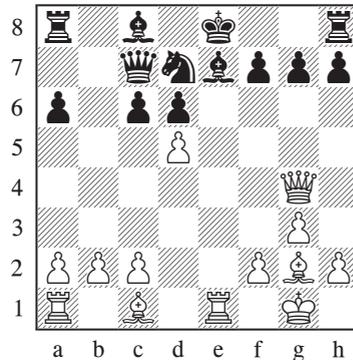


Where to develop White’s dark-squared bishop? 12.♙f4! White has a strategic idea in mind (seen on move 15). 12...♙e7 13.♗d2 0-0 14.♞ad1 e5



What to trade and what to keep? White makes a good strategic trade. 15.♙g5! ♙xg5 16.♗xg5 Black will have problems protecting the d6-weakness. 16...♘f6 17.c4 c5 18.♗d2 ♞ad8 19.♞e3! ♙c6 20.♘c3 ♗b7 21.b3 Black still has his d6-pawn weakness to worry about, and no counterplay. White was clearly better and went on to win in Sutovsky – Movsesian, Ohrid 2001.

10...exd5 11.♘xc6 bxc6 12.exd5† ♙e7 13.♗g4



A critical moment! Black’s best move is not obvious.

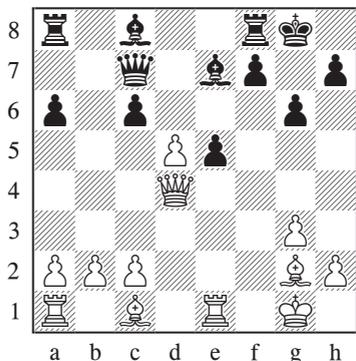
13...g6

Black’s best was 13...♞g8! and we get complicated play after 14.dxc6 ♘e5 15.♗a4 ♘f8 16.♙d2. My engine gives zeros but in a game between humans, I would prefer White.

14. ♖d4 ♗e5 15. f4

White now gets his piece back and is clearly better.

15...0-0 16. fxe5 dxe5



17. ♖c3

Even stronger for White was 17. ♖xe5! ♗f6 (17... ♗c5 loses to 18. ♖xc5 ♖xe5 19. ♗d2)

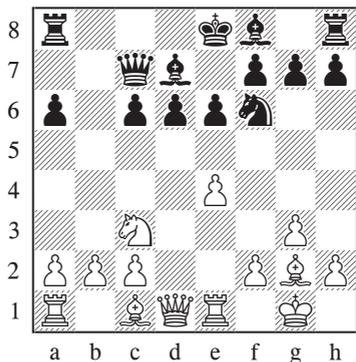
18. d6 with a large, even winning, advantage.

17... ♖b8 18. ♖xc6 ♗c5† 19. ♗h1 ♖a5 20. ♗h6 ♖b6 21. ♖c7 ♗d6 22. ♖c4

White is still better, however the nature of the pawn structure offers Black hopes of counterplay. Black indeed turned the tables and won in Negi – Grachev, St Petersburg 2012.

c) 9... ♗d7 10. ♗xc6 bxc6

If Black plays 10... ♗xc6 White has a fairly standard way to obtain an advantage: 11. ♗d5 ♗xd5 12. exd5 e5 White is better in such positions.



White can play Safarli's relatively new idea: 11. e5!

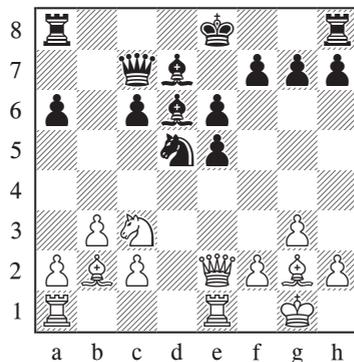
This temporary pawn sacrifice is unpleasant for Black. White will regain his pawn at some point, while Black will be left worrying about his queenside pawn structure.

11. ♗a4 with a later c2-c4 pawn push has been considered the main move.

11... dxe5 12. ♖e2 ♗d6 13. b3

Black cannot prevent White from collecting the e5-pawn, after which White will have an advantage.

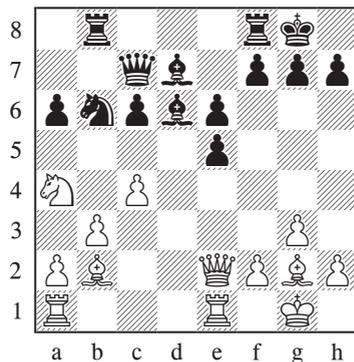
13... ♗d5 14. ♗b2



14...0-0

14...f6, trying to hold on to his extra pawn, is not a good idea for Black, as after 15. ♗e4 ♗e7 16. c4 ♗b6 Black is behind in development and the position opens in White's favour. 17. f4 is strong and 17. ♖h5† is also good for White.

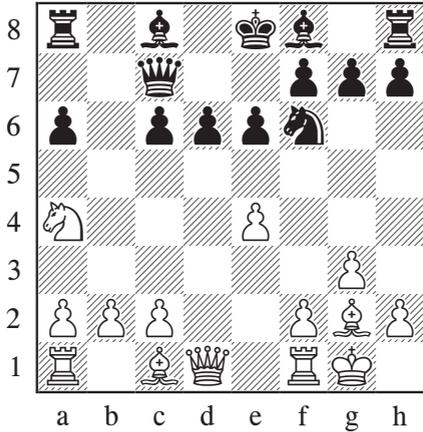
15. ♗a4 ♖ab8 16. c4 ♗b6



17.c5! ♖xa4 18.cxd6 ♜b6 19.♙xe5

White has regained his pawn and boasts a large advantage, though Black managed to survive in Safarli – Gelashvili, Minsk 2017.

9...bxc6 10.♘a4



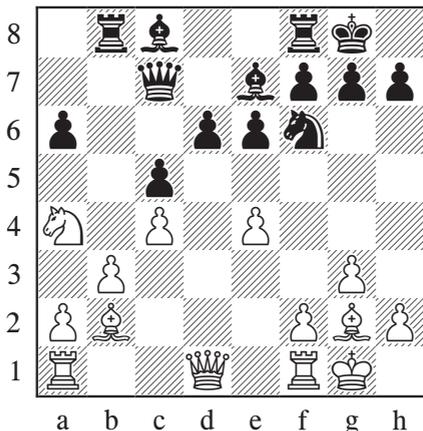
10...♝b8

Both 10...♙e7 11.c4 and 10...♙b7 11.c4 can lead to similar play.

11.c4

Magnus follows his space-advantage strategy and avoids ♝f1-e1, as he plans to place a different piece on that square.

11...c5 12.b3 ♙e7 13.♙b2 0–0

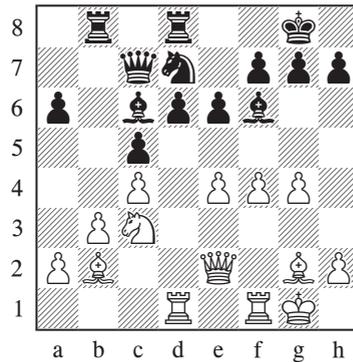


14.♜e1

We now see the reason Magnus refrained from putting the rook on e1: White wants to have the possibility of ♙c3-a5. Black does not have an easy life; White builds on his space advantage, while Black struggles to find counterplay.

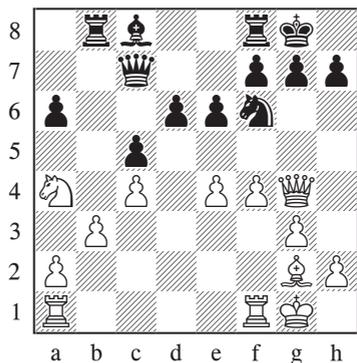
The plan chosen by Magnus is logical and best fits his style. However, he also had a more straightforward plan at his disposal: 14.f4 White wants to push e5 and it looks as though it works.

a) 14...♞d8 15.♜e2 ♙b7 16.♞ad1 ♘d7 It makes sense for Black to remove his knight from White’s tempo-gaining e5-push. 17.g4 ♙c6 18.♘c3 White plans g4-g5, which would be unpleasant for Black. 18...♙f6



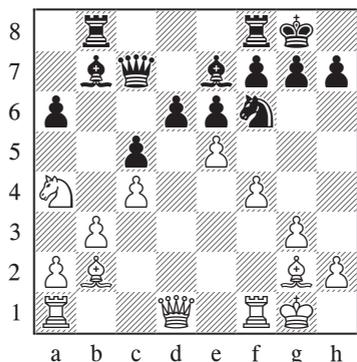
Now White has the typical Sicilian central pawn break: 19.e5! dxe5 20.♙xc6 ♜xc6 21.fxe5 ♙xe5 Leading to a material imbalance that is favourable to White. (21...♙e7 leads to a clear White advantage after 22.♘e4 ♘f8 23.♜f3 ♜e8 24.♘d6.) 22.♞xd7 ♙xh2† 23.♜xh2 ♜xd7 24.♘e4 Black has problems with his weak king.

b) In the case of 14...♘d7 White can execute a favourable trade, similar to that seen in Sutovsky – Movsesian in one of our earlier comments. 15.♜g4 ♙f6 16.♙xf6 ♘xf6



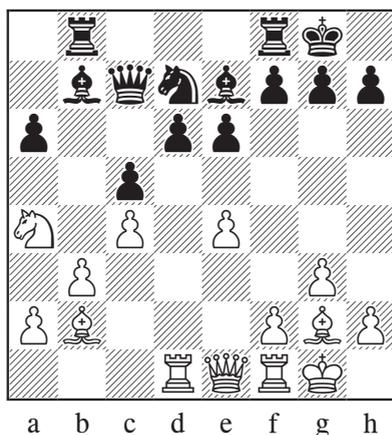
For the side with less space, it is not a bad idea to trade pieces in general, but here Black will have problems protecting his d6-weakness.
 17. ♖e2 ♙b7 18. ♞ad1

c) 14...♙b7 15.e5!



15...♞e8 (15...♞d7? leads to a winning advantage for White: 16.exd6 ♙xd6 17.♙xb7 ♞xb7 18.♞g4 e5 19.♞ad1) 16.♙xb7 ♞xb7 17.♞e2 White has good attacking prospects, while Black has no counterplay.

14...♞d7 15.♞d1 ♙b7



16. ♙c3

White could also have gone for an immediate 16. ♙c3 ♙c6 17. ♙a5 ♞b7 18. ♞c3 with a follow-up similar to the game.

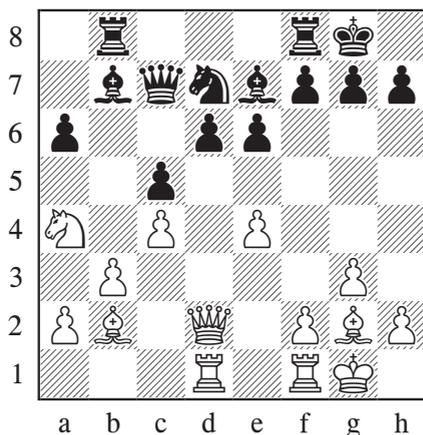
16...♙f6

16...e5 is the kind of move that (for obvious reasons) Richard wanted to delay for as long as possible, because after 17. ♞c2 ♙c6 18. ♞c3 a5 19.a4 Black has an ugly, passive position.

17. ♞d2 ♙e7 18. ♞c3

It takes Magnus a move repetition to figure out that 18.f4! is the way forward for White.

18...♙f6 19. ♞d2 ♙e7



20.f4!

21.e5 is a threat and Black is now forced to play the move he wanted to avoid.

20...e5

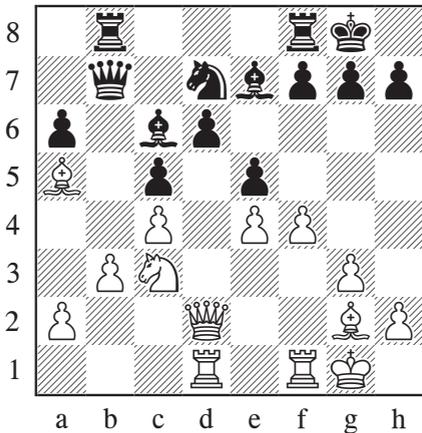
20...♙c6? loses to 21.e5; while 20...♞fd8? runs into 21.♙c3.

21.♙c3

Magnus wants to bring his bishop to a5, controlling the d-file.

The simple 21.♘c3 gives White an advantage as well.

21...♙c6 22.♙a5 ♖b7 23.♘c3

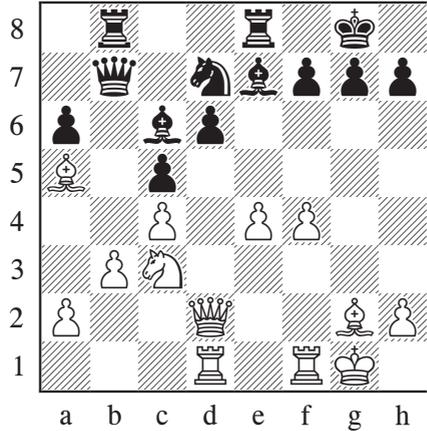


Black’s only possible counterplay is to attack White’s e4-pawn and this is what Rapport does.

23...exf4

Alternatively, 23...h6 24.♘d5 (also 24.♞e3 and 24.f5 are decent options) 24...♙xd5 25.♞xd5 ♞xd5 26.♞xd5 and White has a strategically winning position.

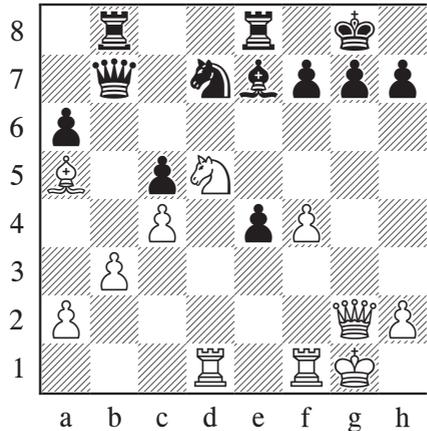
24.gxf4 ♞fe8



Now Magnus goes for a nice minor sacrifice aimed at using the open files for his rooks.

25.e5! ♙xg2 26.♞xg2 dxe5 27.♘d5! e4

Or 27...♙f8 28.♙c7 wins an exchange, as the b8-rook cannot move due to ♘f6† with a discovered attack on the now-undefended black queen. 28...♞bc8?? 29.♘e7†



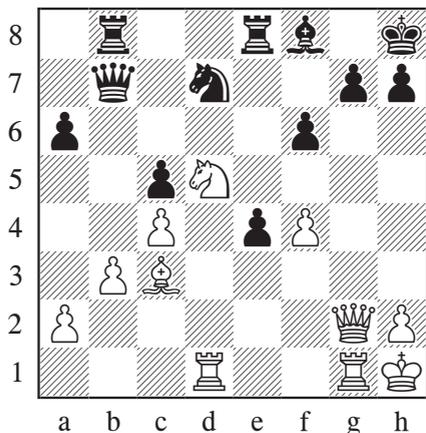
28.♙c3!

Magnus is not interested in recovering his minor sacrifice: he is only interested in using the files for his rooks, with the bishop on c3 being a tremendous attacking piece in the lines that follow.

28...f6

Time now for White to utilize the g-file.

29.♔h1 ♕h8 30.♖g1 ♕f8



Another rook is needed and I love the way Magnus employs the rook lift!

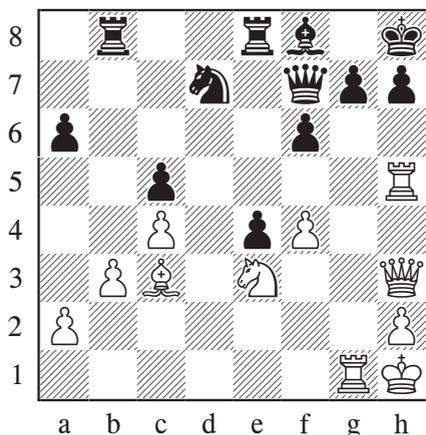
31.♘e3!

31.♘xf6 ♘xf6 32.♙xf6 is also winning.

31...♖c6 32.♙d5!

White attacks with all his pieces (an absolute barrage along the files and across the diagonals!) and Black cannot defend his kingside.

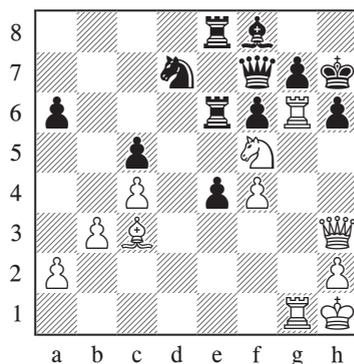
32...♖e6 33.♖h5 ♖f7 34.♖h3



Black is now forced to move one of his pawns, further weakening his king's position.

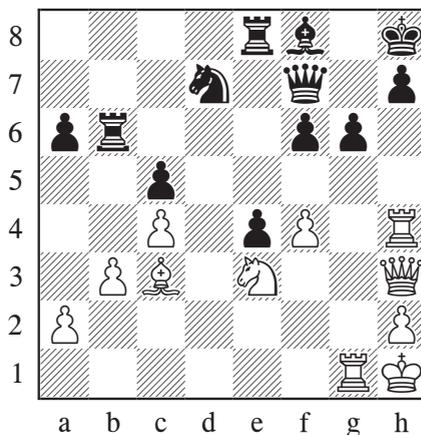
34...g6

34...h6 loses to 35.♘f5 when White will break Black's pawn defences with a sacrifice. White has different ways to win – and your engine will show multiple ways – but I like the following line: 35...♔h7 36.♖h4 ♖b6 37.♖hg4 ♖be6 38.♖4g3 ♔h8 39.♖g6 ♔h7



40.♘xh6! gxh6 41.♖f5! ♔h8 42.♖g4 ♔h7 43.♖g8 and Black is soon mated.

35.♖h4 ♖b6

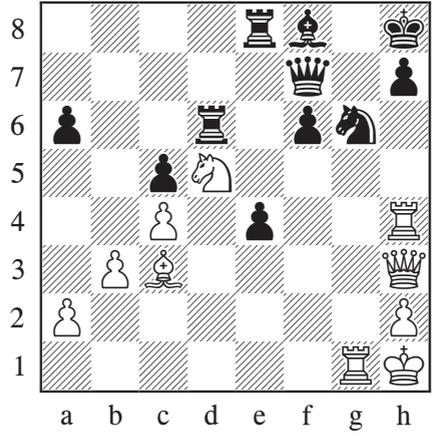


Magnus now performs a swift and clean execution.

36.f5 ♘e5 37.♘d5 ♖d6

37...g5 38.♖xe4 is also hopeless for Black.

38.fxg6 ♘xg6



39. ♕xf6† ♖xf6 40. ♗xh7†

The game will be decided by a deadly fork.

1-0