

FRED LUCAS

Two decades of unparalleled generosity came to an end with the 20th Amber Blindfold and Rapid Tournament. For the farewell edition Dutch Maecenas Joop van Oosterom and his wife Muriel invited the cream of chess to return to Monaco, the traditional home of 'Amber'. In the suave luxury of the Monte-Carlo Bay Hotel & Resort, the inimitable Levon Aronian repeated his victories of 2008 and 2009. Dominating right from the start, the Armenian wizard topped the strongest field ever ahead of Magnus Carlsen (superb in the rapid competition) and World Champion Vishy Anand. **John Nunn**, waxing nostalgic already, reports from the Cote d'Azur.

The cast of 2011: Vasily Ivanchuk, Levon Aronian, Vugar Gashimov, Magnus Carlsen, Vladimir Kramnik, Vishy Anand, Alexander Grischuk, Anish Giri, Boris Gelfand, Hikaru Nakamura, Veselin Topalov and Sergey Karjakin.

End of an Era

As they have done every spring since 1992, in March the world's top players gathered on the Côte d'Azur for the Amber tournament, that festival of chess renowned worldwide for its luxurious conditions. This time, however, something was different. The 20th Amber tournament was to be the final event of the series, so for one last time the players sat in front of their computer screens for the blindfold chess which has made the Amber tournament unique. They were all there; Amber veterans such as Anand, Kramnik and Ivanchuk (the only player to have taken part in all 20 events), those who have risen to prominence in recent years such as Aronian and Carlsen, and newcomers Nakamura and Giri. In the previous

few years the tournament has been held in Nice, but for the final event it returned to its home in Monaco, and was hosted in the luxurious Monte-Carlo Bay Hotel.

The structure of the tournament was the same as it has been since 1993 (in 1992 there was no blindfold chess), a double-round event with one round of blindfold chess and one round of rapid chess. The only innovation this year was the introduction of a daily 'Best Game' prize of 1000 Euros per day, to be judged by a committee of Ljubojevic and myself, with the assistance of Kortchnoi during the first week. The judges were asked to write down their top three choices in order, whereupon tournament director Dirk Jan ten Geuzendam would add up the marks and announce the winner. Some days this wasn't so simple. One day after Kortchnoi had left, Dirk Jan looked at the lists from Ljubo and myself and realised that no game appeared on both lists. At least no thought need be given to improving the system for next year.

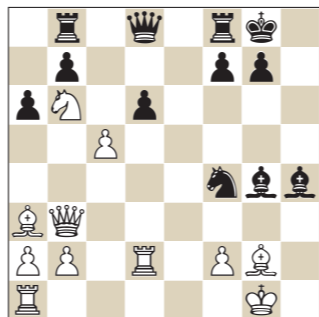
The first round already saw some surprises, as four of the mini-matches ended in 2-0 wipeouts and only two of

the 12 games were drawn. The ferocity of this round wasn't quite matched in later rounds, but the play remained entertaining throughout, with less than half the games ending in a draw.

The clash between Aronian and Giri already provided an excellent example of Levon Aronian's swindling ability. It's tempting to call it luck, but it can't really be due to chance since he swindles even very strong opponents so consistently. Aronian himself points out that even when a position is objectively lost, it's still possible to look for moves which increase the probability of inducing a mistake.

EO 4.8 – A29
Levon Aronian
Anish Giri
 Monaco blindfold 2011 (1)

1.c4 ♘f6 2.♘c3 e5 3.♘f3 ♘c6
 4.g3 ♘d4 5.♙g2 ♘xf3+ 6.♙xf3
 ♙b4 7.♖b3 ♙c5 8.0-0 0-0 9.♘a4
 ♙e7 10.d4 exd4 11.♞d1 c5 12.
 e3 dxe3 13.♙xe3 ♖c7 14.♘c3
 a6 15.g4 h6 16.h4 d6 17.g5 hxg5
 18.hxg5 ♘h7 19.♘d5 ♗d8 20.
 ♘b6? ♞b8 21.♙xc5 ♘g5 22.
 ♙g2 ♙g4 23.♞d2 ♘e6 24.♙a3
 ♘f4 25.c5? ♙h4



The opening has gone horribly wrong for White. Not only is he at least temporarily a pawn down, but his king is exposed and several of his pieces are stuck on the queenside. Black is already threatening an immediate win by 26... ♖g5 and in fact White is just lost.

26.♘d5
 The best chance; it's more important



Viktor Kortchnoi, guest of honour, and John Nunn, our man on the spot, were members of the jury that decided on the daily 'Best Game' prize.



The Monte-Carlo Bay Hotel & Resort was the venue of the 20th and final Amber Blindfold and Rapid Tournament. In the left top corner you can see the Vista Palace in Roquebrune, the hotel where in 1992 the first Amber tournament took place.

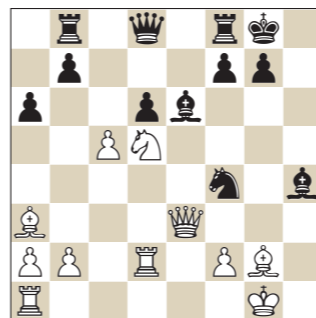
NEW IN CHESS

to get the offside knight back into play than to regain the pawn.

26... ♙e6
 The best reply, pinning the knight and again threatening to win by 27... ♖g5 (or 27... ♘xg2 followed by ... ♖g5+).

Here a 'normal' continuation would be 27. ♞ad1 ♘xg2 28. ♘xg2 ♖g5+ 29. ♘f1 dxc5 30. ♙xc5 ♞fe8 but it's obvious not only that White is lost (pawn down, exposed king and pinned knight) but also that no special skill is required to win it.

27. ♖e3
 Objectively worse because it allows Black an instant win. But the win is not too easy to see in blindfold and if Black does not spot the decisive line then his victory is no longer so clear-cut.

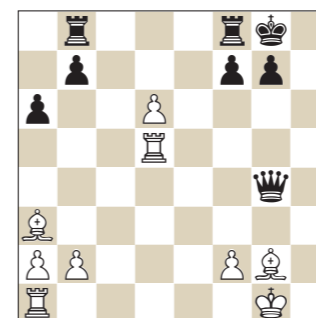


27... ♙xd5?!

27... ♘xg2 28. ♘xg2 ♞e8 wins at once because there's no good square for White's queen; for example 29. ♖d3 (29. ♖f4 ♙g5 and 29. ♖f3 ♖g5+ are also hopeless) 29... ♖g5+ 30. ♘f1 (30. ♘h2 ♙xf2 31. ♞xf2 ♙xd5 wins) 30... ♙f5 31. ♖c3 ♖g4 followed by ... ♙e4, with a winning attack.

28. ♖xf4 ♙g5 29. ♖xg5!
 Once again, Aronian avoids the 'normal' line 29. ♖xd6 ♙xd2 30. ♖xd5 ♖xd5 31. ♙xd5 since he would then be an exchange down for nothing in an ending.

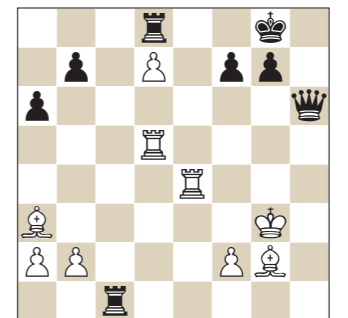
29... ♖xg5 30. ♞xd5 ♖g4 31. cxd6



Here White has two bishops for the queen and while the position is still lost, it's possible to see some positive points for White. Firstly, the threats to his king have evaporated, at least

for the moment, and secondly the advanced d-pawn will at least be very irritating for Black.

31... ♞fd8 32. ♞e1 ♞bc8 33. ♞e4 ♞c1+ 34. ♘h2 ♖g6 35. d7 ♖h6+ 36. ♘g3
 36. ♙h3 ♞h1+ 37. ♘xh1 ♖xh3+ 38. ♘g1 ♞xd7 is a technical win.



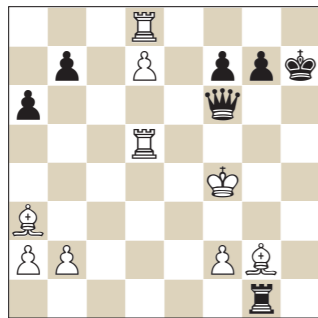
36... ♞g1?
 At a stroke Black throws away half a point. 36...f5! 37. ♞e8+ ♘h7 was the decisive line, since 38. ♞xd8 leads to a lengthy mate by 38... ♖g5+ 39. ♘f3 ♖g4+ 40. ♘e3 ♞e1+ 41. ♘d3 ♖e2+ 42. ♘d4 ♞d1+ 43. ♘c3 ♞c1+ 44. ♘b4 ♖c4+ 45. ♘a5 b6+ 46. ♘xb6 ♖c7+ 47. ♘xa6 ♞c6+ 48. ♘b5 ♞b6+ 49. ♘a4 ♖c6+ 50. ♘a5 ♞a6+ 51. ♘b4 ♞a4+ 52. ♘b3 ♖c4 mate.

Note Aronian's strategy; he doesn't mind allowing a win, but only if it is

so complicated that there is a decent chance his opponent is going to overlook it.

37. ♖e8+ ♘h7 38. ♜xd8 ♖g6+ 39. ♘f4 ♖f6+

Now White could force a draw by returning to g3, but Aronian's ambitions have increased and he now takes a colossal risk.



40. ♖e3? ♖xd8?

40... ♜e1+ 41. ♘d3 ♜d1+ wins. For example, 42. ♖e4 ♖h4+ 43. ♖e3 ♜xd5 44. ♖e4+ g6 45. ♖xd5 ♖xd8 and the d7 pawn falls.

41. ♖e4+ g6 42. f3

42. ♖e7 fails to 42... ♖xe7 43. d8 ♖ ♜e1+ but by securing the e4 bishop White now threatens ♖e7.

42... ♜g5?

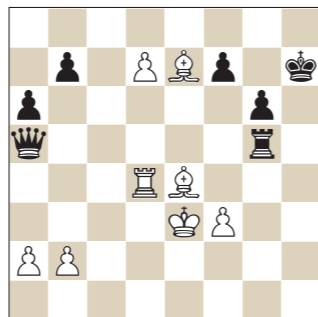
The simplest way to force a draw

was by 42... f5 43. ♖e7 ♖b6+ 44. ♖c5 (44. ♘f4 ♖c7+ 45. ♜d6 ♖c1+ 46. ♖e5 ♖c5+ 47. ♖e6 fxe4 48. ♖f6 ♖xd6+ 49. ♘xd6 ♜d1+ 50. ♖c7 exf3 51. ♖h4 g5 52. ♖g3 b5 53. b4 ♖g6 54. ♖d6 ♜xd6 55. ♘xd6 f2 56. d8 ♖ f1 ♖ leaves Black a pawn up in the queen ending) 44... ♖d8, when White has nothing better than to return to e7.

43. ♖e7 ♖b6+?

The ending after 43... ♜xd5 44. ♖xd8 ♜xd7 45. ♖f6 is miserable for Black, but this was the only way to avoid an immediate loss.

44. ♜d4 ♖a5



45. ♖xg5?!

45. ♖f2! would have won at once.

45... ♖xg5+ 46. ♖f2 ♖d8 47. ♖xb7

It takes longer this way, but with

Black's queen totally immobilised White only needs to create a second passed pawn on the queenside.

47... a5 48. a3 ♖g7 49. b4 axb4 50. axb4 f5 51. b5 f4 52. ♖e4 g5 53. ♖e2 ♖f6 54. ♜d5 ♖e6 55. b6 g4 56. fxg4 ♖f6 57. b7

Black resigned.

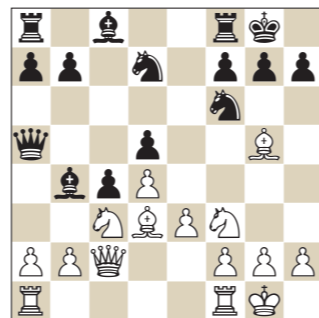
Kramnik surprisingly failed to open his score in the first round. The game he lost with black was especially attractive.



NOTES BY
Alexander Grischuk

NI 27.7 – D38
Alexander Grischuk
Vladimir Kramnik
Monaco blindfold 2011 (1)

1. d4 ♘f6 2. c4 e6 3. ♘f3 d5 4. ♘c3 ♖b4 5. ♖g5 ♘bd7 6. cxd5 exd5 7. ♖c2 0-0 8. e3 c5 9. ♖d3 ♖a5 10. 0-0 c4



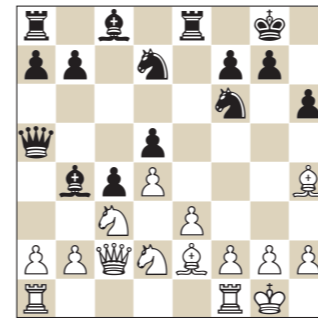
11. ♖e2

A rare move. Usually White plays 11. ♖f5 g6 12. ♖h3, but then sometimes he doesn't know how to get the bishop away from h3. For example, after 12... ♜e8 13. ♘d2 ♖xc3 14. ♖xc3 ♖xc3 15. bxc3 ♘e4 16. ♘xe4 dxe4 one of the main lines is 17. ♖g4 ♘b6 18. ♖e2.

11... ♜e8

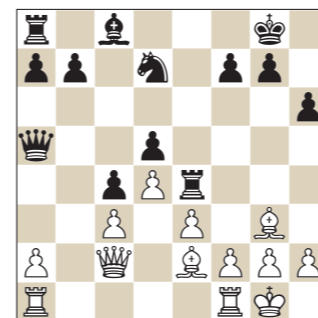
The main idea behind 11. ♖e2 is 11... ♖xc3 12. bxc3 ♘e4 13. ♖xc4! ♘xg5 14. ♘xg5 dxc4 15. ♖xh7 mate.

12. ♘d2 h6 13. ♖h4



13... ♖xc3!? An interesting move: Black sacs the bishop for the knight, but starts a fight for the e4-square.

14. bxc3 ♘e4 15. ♘xe4 ♜xe4 16. ♖g3



16... ♘b6?

This is way too ambitious. Black tries to win the battle for the a4-square, but he doesn't have enough power to do that. Much better was 16... ♜e6, followed by ... ♘f6-e4 or ... ♖d7, ... ♜ae8.

17. ♖f3 ♜e6

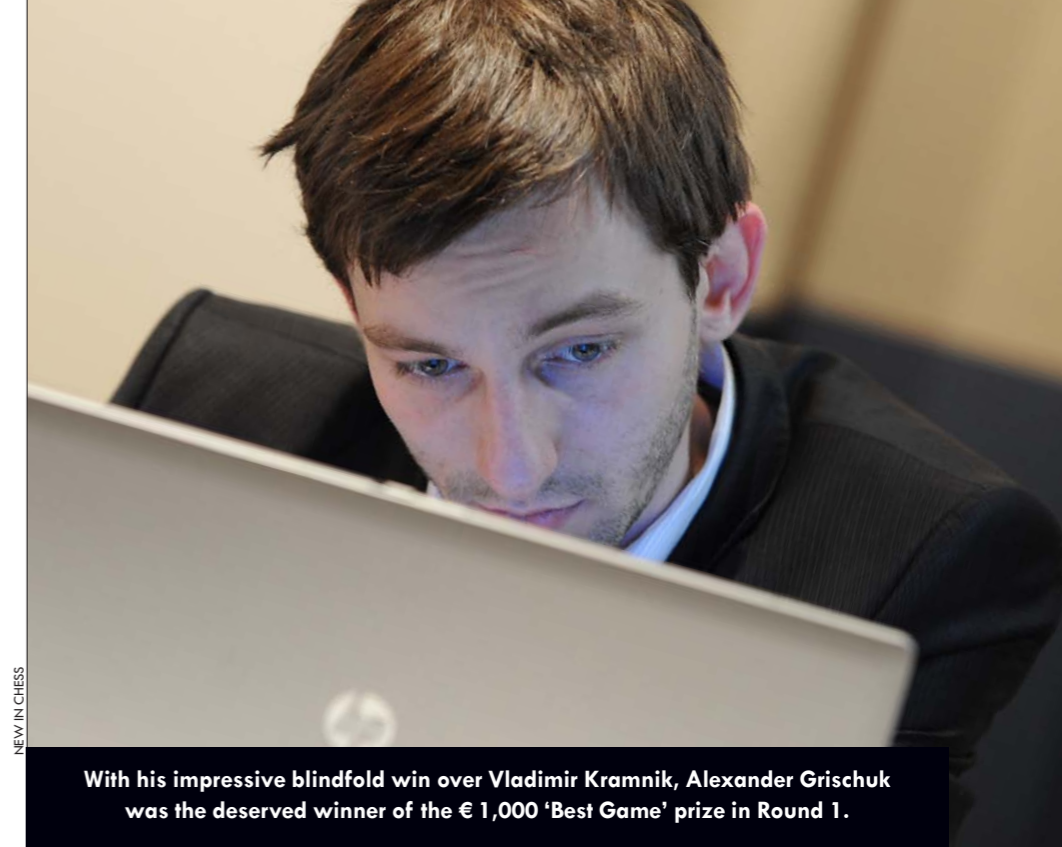
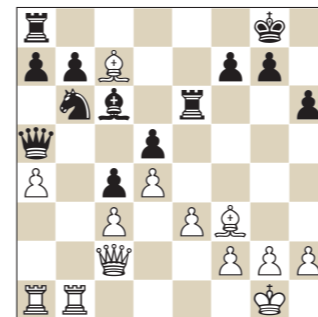
17... ♖f5 18. ♖xe4 ♖xe4 19. ♖d2 is consistent but probably unsound.

18. a4

Now White has an obvious advantage.

18... ♖d7 19. ♜fb1 ♖c6 19... ♖xa4? is out of the question because of 20. ♖c1.

20. ♖c7

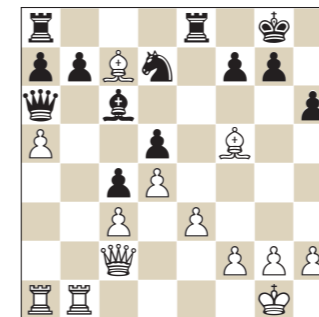


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With his impressive blindfold win over Vladimir Kramnik, Alexander Grischuk was the deserved winner of the € 1,000 'Best Game' prize in Round 1.

20... ♖a6 Not falling for the, for blindfold play, far from obvious trap: 20... ♜c8 21. ♖xb6 axb6 22. ♖g4.

21. a5 ♘d7 22. ♖g4 ♜ee8 23. ♖f5



23... ♘f8 Nobody in his right mind would play 23... g6 24. ♖xg6 fxe6 25. ♖xg6+ ♘h8 26. ♖xh6+ ♖g8 27. ♖g6+ ♘h8, and indeed White wins after the mysterious 28. ♖d6!

24. ♖d2

Now White is in time to transfer the bishop to the b1-h7 diagonal.

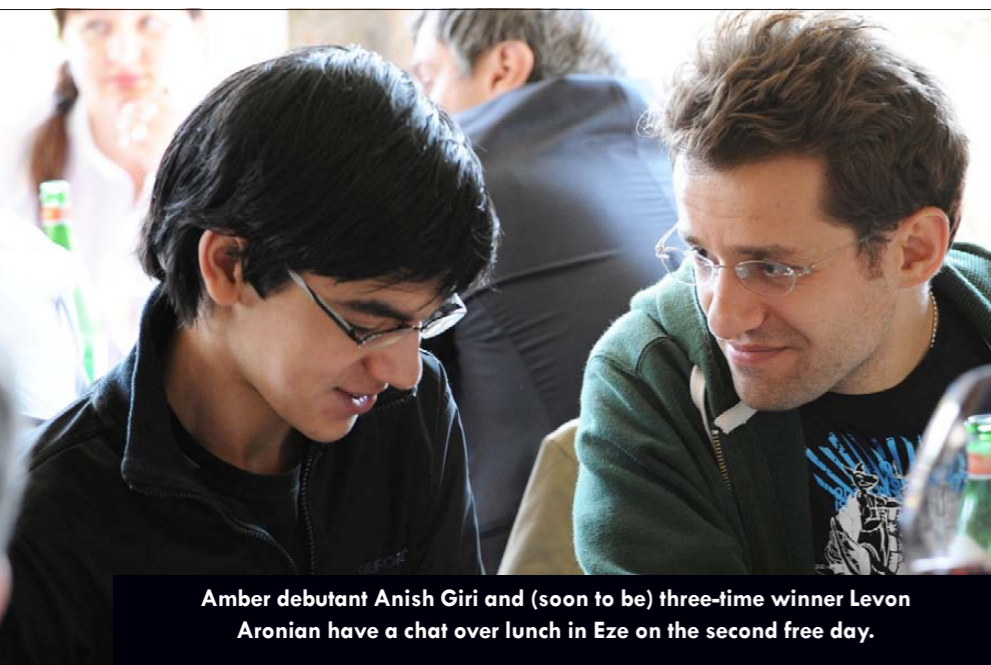
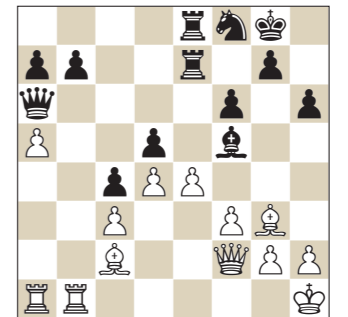
24... ♘e6 25. ♖g3 ♜ad8 26. f3 ♖d7 27. ♖c2 ♘g5

I wanted to drive the knight away from g5 in order to push e3-e4, but without playing h2-h4, since after 28. h4 ♘h7 29. e4 dxe4 30. fxe4 ♘f6 the knight gets the g4-square. That explains my following strange manoeuvres.



28. ♖c7 ♜c8 29. ♖f4 ♘e6 30. ♖g3 ♘g5 31. ♖h4 ♜c7 32. ♖g3 ♜cc8 33. ♖h1 Probably 33. ♖f2 ♜e7 34. ♖e5 was more precise. The king is placed well enough on g1.

33... ♜e7 34. ♖e5 ♜ce8 35. ♖f2 f6 36. ♖f4 ♘e6 37. ♖g3 ♘f8 38. e4 ♖f5?! 38... f5 39. e5 is sad for Black, but the text-move loses practically by force.



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Amber debutant Anish Giri and (soon to be) three-time winner Levon Aronian have a chat over lunch in Eze on the second free day.