



Veselin Topalov faces the press after the last round.
Once again he has pulled off the trick.

IVAN GRIGOROV

‘Look! It’s Sofia-Man!’

With a rejuvenated and slightly less glamorous cast the big question was if Sofia-Man 3 could match the spectacle and sensation of its successful prequels. Would Veselin Topalov once again claim the MTel Masters and would his bumpy road to victory again fill his fans with protracted fears and hopes? For sure, the script was less bombastic and the special effects less over-the-top, but all in all the spectators in the Bulgarian capital were once again treated to a captivating adventure with a stunning end.

Dirk Jan ten Geuzendam

Treading in the footsteps of great predecessors such as Superman and Spider-Man, the adventures of Sofia-Man are fascinating in their

predictability. The story is essentially always the same, yet the spectators sit glued to their seats, mechanically feeding themselves

popcorn and wondering how everything will end well this time. For those who have never seen one of the wondrous Sofia-Man es-

capex we may briefly sketch the format. The hero, Sofia-Man, is a Bulgarian chess grandmaster by the name of Veselin Topalov. Away from the chess board Topalov is an affable and polite young man, who is always willing to hand out autographs to his fans and generously finds time to speak to the press. However, whenever he sits down to play a game of chess he turns into a predator who wants to tear apart each and every opponent, no matter how long it takes.

Topalov is always accompanied by his cunning manager Silvio Danailov, secretly admired by some, openly reviled by many. Together they travel the world, going from chess tournament to chess tournament, but once every year they come to the capital of their native Bulgaria to play in the MTel Masters. In this 'super tournament' a heavy burden presses on Topalov's shoulders, as the home-crowd feverishly wants him to win. Of course, he also wants to win badly, but no matter how hard he tries, he always ends up in a seemingly hopeless position in the shortest possible time from which he can only extricate himself by turning into Sofia-Man again.

In Sofia-Man 1 (2005) Topalov languished in last place after the first half of the tournament, but he fought back (a staggering 4½ points out of the last 5 games) to finish on top. The dramatic climax was his last-round game against Vladimir Kramnik from Russia (who in a later episode would become his foe after gripping adventures in faraway Kalmykia). Sofia-Man fans can endlessly play back the scene in which Topalov was suddenly lost four moves from the end but still won thanks to an astounding blunder by his opponent.

In Sofia-Man 2 (2006) Topalov's comeback was no less mirac-



The special prize for the winner was a replica of an ancient Bulgarian icon.

ulous. With four rounds to go he was one and a half points behind American grandmaster Gata Kamsky, who was making a remarkable comeback in his own right and

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had dominated the field. But even this handicap didn't stop Topalov from winning the tournament. As if powered by magic, Sofia-Man defeated his last four opponents (Ponomariov, Anand, Kamsky(!) and Bacrot) and triumphed again.

What would Sofia-Man 3 bring us? Much more of the same or a different story? The answer is: a bit of both. Don't worry, Sofia-Man again managed to pull off the trick in a mind-boggling last round, but on the whole the story was less bombastic.

To begin with, the list of participants differed from previous editions. Ever since he organized his first MTel Masters, it's been Danailov's wish to invite the top six players in the world to Sofia. Only when a player is not available will he look lower on the list. In 2005 this wish resulted in the following field: Anand (effectively number 1 in the world rankings as Garry Kasparov was no longer active) Topalov (2), Kramnik (4), Adams (6), Polgar (7), and Ponomariov (19).

Last year the second MTel Masters was no less impressive with Topalov (1), Anand (2), Svidler (4), Ponomariov (6), Bacrot (15) and Kamsky (33).

This year Danailov's mission was considerably more complicated. After a lot of wheeling and dealing he presented the following field: Topalov (2), Mamedyarov (6), Adams (10), Kamsky (19), Nisipeanu (23) and Sasikiran (25).

What happened? A number of things, but they all seemed to be connected to the turbulent match between Topalov and Kramnik in Kalmykia that we already briefly referred to. Was it pure coincidence that FIDE staged the Candidates' matches for the world championship in Elista with the first round beginning only four days after Sofia? Danailov doesn't believe so and he may well be right. In any case, two of the players he invited, Aronian and Polgar, declined because of the matches in Elista. In fact, Danailov was lucky that Adams and Kamsky had played little recently and saw Sofia as a welcome opportunity to warm up before they travelled on to Kalmykia. Apart from this unfortunate decision by FIDE, there was also the Russian Chess Federation, which had no qualms to let their team championship clash with Sofia, which prevented Ivanchuk from going there.

But what about the other top players who were not involved in the Candidates' matches? Did he invite them? Some yes, some no. Unfortunately, the world's number one, Vishy Anand, informed him that he had a commitment in India in the same period. However, Danailov didn't approach Kramnik ('Come on, he refused a cool one million for a rematch in Sofia, so why should I bother?') or Morozevich ('He behaved badly towards Veselin in Linares by not shaking hands before the game, and apart from that he is very unpredictable. On more than one occasion he signed a contract, only to withdraw at the last moment.')



Michael Adams ran out of luck in the second half of the tournament.

Having no choice, Danailov preferred to see the absence of several top players as a blessing in disguise that offered a number of great talents who rarely or never get invited to super tournaments a chance to show their mettle. Shakhriyar Mamedyarov only made one disappointing Wijk aan Zee appearance, but with his sixth place in the world rankings and his aggressive style he was obviously a perfect participant. Krishnan Sasikiran has only played a number of closed tournaments in his life, but with his 2700 rating, the second Indian player certainly deserved a chance at this level. And Liviu-Dieter Nisipeanu did not become European champion in 2005 by accident, did he? These were the arguments that Danailov offered, and indeed he had a point.

In fact, the field proved to be so balanced that it will be hard to find a tournament in the history of chess in which the race was so close. Without exaggeration it can be said that all participants could have won. In fact, five out of six still had a chance to do so at the start of the last round. Typical of the small differences was a remark by Mamedyarov at one of the final press conferences. To his mind,

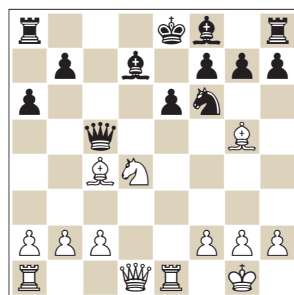
Adams, who finished in bottom place, had shown the best chess.

Mamedyarov, the other 'other boy from Baku', topped the table after the first half of the tournament thanks to an easy win against a seemingly rusty Kamsky in Round 1 and a shocking defeat of local hero Topalov two days later. The former junior World Champion suddenly became the hot favourite, but he 'lost' the tournament in Rounds 6 and 7, when he was first outplayed by Kamsky and then suffered a highly dramatic defeat against Sasikiran from a winning position. (During the press conference after Round 6 Topalov, looking for an explanation of Mamedyarov's loss against Kamsky referred to the football match on the free day between a selection of Bulgaria's champion Levski and a team of chess players, 'Chess United'. Towards the end of the match, which the football pro's won 6-4, Mamedyarov and Topalov's second Cheparinov both went for a header only to hit each other's heads. 'That was our preparation on the free day', Topalov quipped.)

Deeply affected, Mamedyarov

described his second loss as the 'unhappiest day in my life'. He fought back the next day with a fantastic fighting game against Topalov, but after his inspired attack with the black pieces had ended in a draw he could no longer muster sufficient strength in the remaining rounds.

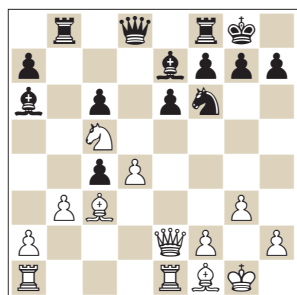
Halfway through, Michael Adams was half a point behind Mamedyarov and the situation might easily have been reversed if the Englishman had converted a winning advantage in their game in Round 5. Adams' training for Elista seemed to be working very well, as witness the way he crushed Nisipeanu in Round 3.



Adams-Nisipeanu
position after 12... ♖c5

After 12 moves in a Tarrasch French, Adams could not resist the temptation to sacrifice a piece for a stifling grip on the black position. **13. ♖xe6 fxe6 14. ♖xf6 gxf6 15. ♖xe6 ♖xe6 16. ♖xe6+ ♖e7 17. b4 ♖c3 18. ♖e3 ♖c7 19. ♖h5+ ♖f8 20. ♖ae1 ♖e8** With his awkwardly placed king it proves impossible for Black to free himself. **21. ♖h6+ ♖f7 22. ♖h5+ ♖f8 23. ♖h6+ ♖f7 24. c3 ♖hg8 25. ♖xh7+ ♖g7 26. ♖h5+ ♖f8 27. g3 ♖d7 28. ♖e6 ♖g5 29. ♖h8+ ♖f7 30. ♖h7+ ♖g7 31. ♖h5+ ♖g6 32. c4 ♖g7 33. ♖d5 ♖c7 34. ♖e4 ♖f7 35. c5 ♖d7 36. ♖f5 ♖g7 37. ♖e4 ♖f7 38. ♖f5 ♖g7 39. ♖h5** Black resigned. He's suffered long enough. There is no remedy against White's plan of ♖g2, followed by f4-f5.

Adams ran out of steam in the second half. Or rather, he ran out of luck. He lost two games and did not make the most of the chances he got in other ones. It all started with a highly unusual blunder in Round 6.



Sasikiran-Adams
position after 18.♟c5

This position arose from a Queen's Indian. A normal continuation now would be 18...♖b6, but Adams spotted another possibility, which is based on an oversight. **18...♟d5?** **19.♞xa6 ♟xc3 20.♖xc4** And here, realizing that after 20...♗b6 21.♖xc3 the knight on a6 cannot be taken because of the bishop on f1, Adams decided to give up an exchange: **20...♞b5 21.♞xb8 ♖xb8** But after **22.a4 ♟d6 23.♖xc6 ♟f5 24.♗ad1 ♟f6 25.♖e4 ♖xb3 26.d5 ♟d6 27.♖e3 ♖xe3 28.♗e3 e5** there was no compensation and he soon lost.

As said, all players could have won the tournament, including Nisipeanu and Kamsky, who would have earned a tiebreak, had they won their game in the last round (true, Nisipeanu seemed to have some chances against Mamedyarov, but Kamsky had to work miracles to save the draw against Adams). Nisipeanu felt very much at home at the Sofia Grand Hotel, where once again the organizers had created top-notch conditions for the players, the spectators and the press. Obviously, the Romanian number one was quite pleased with



IVAN BRIGOROV

Gata Kamsky's trade-mark fighting spirit remains unwavering.

his win over Topalov, and his revenge on Adams in Round 8 was equally impressive, but on the whole he felt that his opening preparation had not been profound



Some people, it is said, even call Krishnan Sasikiran the Junior Tiger of Madras.

enough. Similar thoughts must have crossed Kamsky's mind. The American grandmaster was the undisputed tail-ender after five rounds, but then he beat Mamedyarov in a good game and fought with great tenacity in his other games. Kamsky may no longer excel in the opening, as he did when he was at his peak, but his fighting spirit remains unwavering.

But the player who had by far the best chances to win the tournament was Krishnan Sasikiran. In

a way, Sasikiran could be seen as the replacement of Anand, who had played in the first two Sofia tournaments. He is, after all, India's number two player at the moment and he also hails from Chennai, just like his great example. Some people, it is said, even call him the Junior Tiger of Madras (the old name of Chennai). 'Sasi', as his friends call him, definitely added exotic flavour to the event. For most of the games he appeared in suit and tie (adhering to the Sofia dress code), but a couple of times, much to the delight of the audience and the photographers, he turned up dressed in a long, white, embroidered shirwany which, together with the traditional tilak rubbed on his forehead, made for great pictures.

Sasikiran concluded the first half at 50 per cent. He won a hard-fought game against Kamsky and went under in a wild King's Indian tussle against Topalov. Then, in Rounds 6 and 7, everything changed. First he exploited the aforementioned lapse of Adams and then he was on the winning side of one of the most sensational games of the tournament. Playing Black against Mamedyarov he found himself completely outplayed and a pawn down after the opening, but with great resourcefulness he created counter-threats in a wildly complicated position. As a result, Mamedyarov first threw away the win and then made one of the gravest mistakes in his career. Instead of taking his time to discover that he could and should force a draw on move 41(!), he pushed his pawn to d7 without much thought. It looked like a strong move, but a closer look convinced both players that White was suddenly lost. While Sasikiran came to this conclusion while getting up from the board to fetch himself a drink and

get over the time-trouble emotions, Mamedyarov sat at the table in shock, preparing himself for an extroverted Kasparovian show of self-hate.

Suddenly Sasikiran was leading the field by a full point. There were still three rounds to go, but what could go wrong? A lot, as it turned out. In Round 8 he got a promising position against Kamsky, which he managed to lose. In Round 9 he reached a position that might safely be called winning against Nisipeanu, but gradually his advantage petered out to a draw. Although Sasikiran said that he had not been nervous before either game, his coach Lev Psakhis did blame his errors on his nerves. Before the game he had explained to him that he was paying back the luck he had had in the previous rounds. That was how Lady Luck operated, Psakhis said. To which the Israeli grandmaster added, throwing up his arms, 'But why should his coach suffer for that?'

Miraculously, after these disappointing games Sasikiran still had a half-point lead. If he managed to keep Topalov to a draw with the black pieces in the last round, he might still win. But it was not to be.

Indeed, what about Topalov? How did Sofia-Man fare? Alas (or predictably), in the early rounds there were very few signs of Sofia-Man. His play was erratic and even his staunchest fans must have feared that the magic was gone. He started with a first-round loss as White against Nisipeanu, and following a draw with white against Adams, he was ripped apart by Mamedyarov in Round 3. Half a point from his first three games – wasn't he over-doing things a bit? He fought back with a good win over Sasikiran



Sasikiran's shirwani and tilak were a treat for the photographers.

with the black pieces, but halfway through he was in second-last place, trailing Mamedyarov by one and a half points. However, the first cries of 'Look! It's Sofia-Man!' began to be heard after he won a fine game against Nisipeanu in Round 6. 'He's coming back, he hasn't given up', the Bulgarians whispered, barely daring to voice their hopes.

But contrary to its prequels, Sofia-Man 3 doesn't take the viewer to a dramatic end with an avalanche of spectacular victories. Instead the pace even slackened, creating a wonderful atmosphere of mounting tension that is no less effective than the fireworks we had expected. In Round 7, Topalov has to work hard to secure a draw against Adams. In Round 8 he seems to be doing fine against Mamedyarov, when suddenly he is almost run over in a fantastic showpiece and only saves the draw by the skin of his teeth. In Round 9 he is again with his back against the wall, this time against Kamsky. He stays afloat and even gets some chances when his oppo-

nent doesn't pay attention, but in the end Topalov has no reason to complain about yet another draw. With one round to go he is half a point behind the leading Sasikiran, sharing second place with Kamsky, Mamedyarov and Nisipeanu. Of course there's hope again, but how much?

As already mentioned, Kamsky needed all the luck in the world to survive in his last game against Adams. Nisipeanu and Mamedyarov played a sharp game that ended in a draw by perpetual check. Which leaves the crucial game between Topalov and Sasikiran. After the opening White has a clear advantage and for Black only two results are possible. It looks like developing into a long fight in which White will patiently sit on his positional plus. Or is there another way he may win? There is, as suddenly becomes clear when on move 35 Sofia-Man materializes and baffles each and everyone with a daring piece sacrifice! It's a beautiful sacrifice, courageous and brilliant, but it contains one tiny flaw. On move 38 Sasikiran can force a draw if he finds the correct move. Will he find it? No, he doesn't. Pressed by time-trouble the Indian misses a subtle king manoeuvre and withdraws his queen to help his defences. The rest is plain sailing for Sofia-Man, and as the press and the public look on in admiration, he hauls in the victory that once again makes him the winner of the MTel Masters.

His compatriots walk around beaming and slapping each other's shoulders, but Topalov is modest in victory. 'Somehow it seemed as if nobody wanted to win the tournament. Generally speaking it was Sasikiran who played the most consistent and also Nisipeanu, but somehow it was me in the end.

The fact that I won this tournament doesn't mean that I played better than the others. We were more or less the same, all of us. But it goes without saying that I am relieved to have won here.'

He admits that he had no special opening preparation to show as White. 'In the last couple of years I have used up nearly all my novelties. Now it is time to start working again.' But working hard is not easy when you have no clear goals. Topalov is excluded from the world championship and has no wish to play in the World Cup in Khanty-Mansiysk at the end of the year. For the moment he is pinning his hopes on the Grand Slam next year. In Sofia, Mexico City was announced as the venue for the fourth Grand Slam tournament. The four winners will play a double-rounded tournament in Bilbao with a prize-fund of 400,000 euro. 'Yes,' Topalov agrees, 'that might be a goal to work towards.'

The MTEL Masters ended with a cocktail party and the prize-giving. However, the only prizes to be presented were the special prizes for the best game and a Bulgarian icon for the winner. As Danailov explained there were no money prizes. 'All the money is in the starting fees, as in boxing. I think this is better. We look for ways to get the best entertainment. That's why we have the Sofia rules that prevent players from making short draws. And that's why there is no prize-money. Because then they can just play and don't have to make all kinds of calculations whether they should take risks or not.' And would he mind revealing how much money he spends on the starting fees? 'No, the negotiations are private and I prefer not to speak about them. That could only harm my negotiating position for next year.'

NOTES BY
Veselin Topalov

NI 6.1 – E52
Veselin Topalov
Krishnan Sasikiran
Sofia 2007 (10)

The only way for me to have a chance of finishing first was to win this game in the last round.

1.d4 ♖f6 2.c4 e6 3.♗c3

While I was preparing with Ivan (Cheparinov) for the game, we expected Sasikiran to go for the Queen's Indian. We also noticed that my opponent didn't have much experience in the Nimzo-Indian with 4.e3, the classical Rubinstein Variation. We found some blitz games in which he was not too convincing. So this was my surprise.

3...♙b4 4.e3

Apparently it was a good choice, because he thought for some 15 minutes after this move. As I played rather quickly and he kept spending a lot of time in the opening, we reached a theoretical position in which I already had a huge time advantage.

4...b6

A surprise on his part, as by now he must have realized that I knew that he mostly played 4...c5 here.

5.♙d3

A bit more precise than 5.♗f3 at once. Other moves are 5.♗e2 or 5.f3, which is quite popular as well.

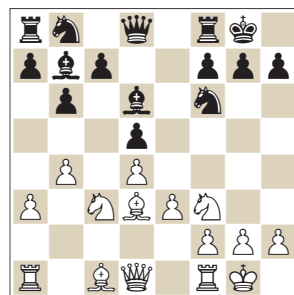
5...♙b7 6.♗f3 0-0 7.0-0 d5

The classical main line, which is considered to be better than 7...♙xc3 8.bxc3 ♗e4, because in that case White is not forced to play 9.♗c2 f5 but instead he can play 9.♗d2, as it's not necessary to protect the pawn on c3.

8.a3 ♙d6 9.cxd5 exd5 10.b4

A well-known position that is playable for both sides. I had a look at it some time ago and remembered that I liked a game of Ivanchuk in which he beat Piket. It was played

in the 1999 Amber tournament, where I also took part.



10...♗bd7 11.b5

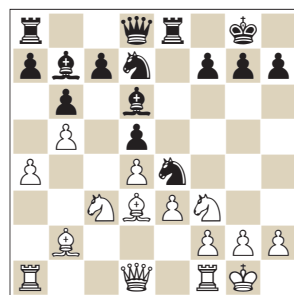
This is the most direct approach, which has not been played very often.

11...♗e4

This shows my opponent's inexperience in this variation. White wants to play b5, a4, ♙a3, and to prepare this plan he usually plays the preparatory ♗b3 or ♙b2 so as to be able to meet ...a6 with a4. The text-move, 11...♗e4, was also played in Knaak-Beliavsky in 1979.

The correct answer was to play 11...a6 in order to eliminate the white pawn on b5. In that case I wanted to play 12.♗c2, when after 12...♗e7 Black should be OK. After the positional mistake 11...♗e4 he allows me to fix the pawn-structure on the queenside.

12.♙b2 ♖e8 13.a4



13...♖e6

At first I thought he wanted to play his knight on d7 to g6 via f8, but this is a bit slow. The rook move looks logical. He wants to