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# *Introduction:*

## **What Made Magnus**

As 2020 began Magnus Carlsen celebrated ten straight years as the world's highest rated player. He held three world championship titles, in blitz, rapid and "classical" chess, an unprecedented achievement. Within days of the new year he broke the record for playing more than 107 straight games without a loss.

The term "super-tournament" has no precise meaning. But it has come to mean a round robin with classical time controls, in which each player is an elite grandmaster. In recent years the Sinquefeld Cup, Norway Chess, Wijk aan Zee and the Gashimov Memorial have become synonymous with super-tournament.

Bobby Fischer never won a super-tournament. Garry Kasparov won outright or tied for first place in 35 super-tournaments in his nearly-30-year career. His fans said this was further evidence that he was the greatest player in chess history.

But Magnus Carlsen won some 40 super-tournaments, plus another

14 "super" speed tournaments before he was 30.

"What makes Carlsen different?" is a good question. But a better one is: How did he make himself different?

The simplest answer is that he played an extraordinary amount of chess and did it long before he was a master. One on-line database, Chessgames.com, contains 1,000 games he played before he was 17.

In contrast, Kasparov played his 1,000<sup>th</sup> game when he was 27 – and had already been world champion for five years, according to the same source.

Of course, large numbers of games, even of a famous player, are typically missing from databases, especially in their early years. But the 1,000<sup>th</sup> game of Fabiano Caruana preserved by Chessgames.com came after he had been competing in tournaments for 16 years. Carlsen did it in half that time.

Playing a lot doesn't necessarily teach. What did Carlsen learn from so much chess?

# 1

## Magnus' Morphy

*By the time Carlsen was world champion he had forgotten the way he once played. He discovered this when he tested the app "Play Magnus."*

*When Carlsen played against the 12-year-old clone of himself, he concluded the app designers got it wrong. "Magnus 12 is only going for king attacks and he has no technique," he said. "It's all tactics. That's not right. That's not how I played at that stage."*

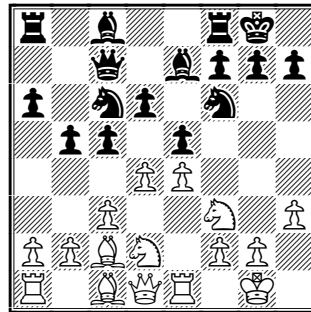
*But then Carlsen took another look at games he played when he was 12. That was a shock. "I realized it was right," he said of the app. At 12 he was tactics-focused, just like "Magnus 12."*

*This game has his most impressive finish from his early years. He could have played much better, by shifting between queenside pressure and kingside threats. But then we would have never seen his sparkling queen sacrifice.*

**Carlsen – Hans Harestad**  
Copenhagen 2003  
*Ruy Lopez,*  
*Tchigorin Defense (C98)*

1	e4	e5
2	♞f3	♞c6
3	♙b5	a6
4	♙a4	♞f6
5	0-0	b5
6	♙b3	♙e7
7	♖e1	d6
8	c3	0-0
9	h3	♞a5
10	♙c2	c5

11	d4	♚c7
12	♞bd2	♞c6



13 d5!

The knight would be offside after 13...♞a5 14 b3.

13	...	♞d8
----	-----	-----

# 5

## Moscow

*When 2004 began, Magnus had made a strong impression in big-time chess locations, such as Stockholm, Copenhagen, Budva, Gausdal and Budapest. But when you can do it in Moscow, it is something else.*

*At the 3<sup>rd</sup> Aeroflot Festival he was dazzling. All nine of his opponents were grandmasters and he scored five wins and a draw against them. One of his victims was Sergey Dolmatov, who was later the chief trainer of the Russian national team.*

*“It was at the very start of the tournament, and I was sitting with some boy,” he recalled. He had not heard of Carlsen and did not expect much of a 13-year-old. But, he said, “I have to say Magnus didn’t leave me any chances.” The same could be said of Carlsen’s next-to-last round opponent.*

**Carlsen – Hannes Stefansson**  
Aeroflot Festival, Moscow 2004  
*Nimzo-Indian Defense,*  
*Three Knights Variation (E21)*

- |   |     |     |
|---|-----|-----|
| 1 | d4  | ♘f6 |
| 2 | c4  | e6  |
| 3 | ♞c3 | ♙b4 |
| 4 | ♞f3 |     |

Gambit Declined’s Ragozin  
Variation (4...d5).

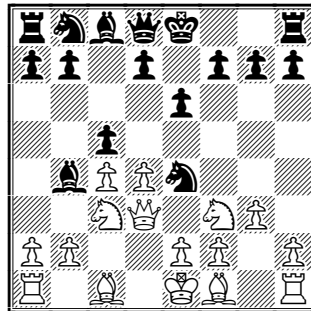
- |   |     |    |
|---|-----|----|
| 4 | ... | c5 |
| 5 | g3  |    |

Or into the old main line of the  
4 e3 Nimzo-Indian, after 5 e3 0-0  
6 ♙d3 d5.

- |   |     |     |
|---|-----|-----|
| 5 | ... | ♞e4 |
| 6 | ♙d3 |     |

When Magnus found himself on the White side of a Nimzo-Indian, he had usually chosen 4 e3. But in 2003 he began experimenting with 4 ♞f3 and then 4...b6 5 ♙g5 and 4...0-0 5 ♙d3.

The knight move is flexible and may transpose into Queen’s Indian Defense positions (4...b6 5 ♙g5 ♙b7 6 e3) or the Queen’s



The variation beginning with 5 g3 was virtually non-existent until the 1980s.

Then, for many years, the main line was 6...cxd4 7 ♖xd4 ♕a5.

There was published analysis of 8 ♘b3 ♘xc3 9 ♙d2 extending past move 15.

6 ... ♕a5

This steers White into slightly calmer and largely unknown waters.

7 ♕xe4!

Carlsen avoids the tepid 7 ♙d2 ♘xd2, when Black is at least equal following 8 ♘d2 cxd4 9 ♕xd4 0-0 or 8 ♕xd2 0-0.

7 ... ♘xc3+

8 ♙d2 ♘xd2+

9 ♘xd2 0-0

Black finds it harder to develop his queenside after 9...cxd4 10 ♕xd4 0-0 because of 11 ♕d6! or 11 ♙g2 ♘c6 12 ♕d6!.

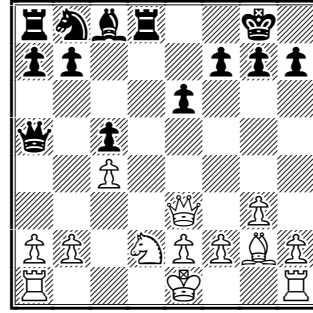
10 ♙g2 d6

11 dxc5

White wants to get out of the pin on the d2-knight and this is better than 11 ♕e3 cxd4 12 ♕xd4 ♘c6! (13 ♕xd6 ♔d8).

11 ... dxc5

12 ♕e3 ♔d8



White's knight is pinned (13 0-0?? ♕xd2). That factor appears to win time for an equalizing ...♘c6-d4.

For instance, 13 a3 ♘c6 14 ♔d1 ♘d4 15 0-0 ♕c7 allows Black to play ...e5 and develop his bishop.

He would have a decent middlegame after 16 ♘b3 e5 or 16 b4 e5 17 bxc5 ♙g4.

13 ♔d1!

This gambit move may have been a rare young-Magnus innovation.

Black was a former world under-16 champion. He must have been disappointed to see what 13...♕xa2 looked like.

The simplest lines are:

(a) 14 ♕xc5 ♕xb2 15 0-0 with good compensation for a pawn. Black's first rank is exposed to tactics after 15...♘a6? 16 ♘e4!.

(b) 14 ♕c3, which prepares to trap the queen with 0-0/♔a1.

# 12

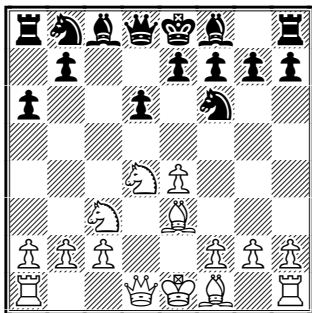
## Payoff

*The training and homework Magnus underwent in these years paid dividends more than a decade later. Daniil Dubov, a young grandmaster who served as one of his seconds in the world championship match of 2018, said Carlsen studied much harder in those early days. “He told me he worked fanatically until 15 or 16, which is why he can afford to take it easy now,” Dubov said.*

*What he learned in his prime study time began to show up when he seemed to win games without effort:*

**Carlsen – John Nunn**  
 Youth vs. Experience match,  
 Amsterdam 2006  
*Sicilian Defense,*  
*Najdorf Variation (B90)*

1 e4 c5  
 2 ♖f3 d6  
 3 d4 ♘f6  
 4 ♘c3 cxd4  
 5 ♘xd4 a6  
 6 ♙e3



This was his early favorite way of dealing with the Najdorf. But

he had also studied – and played – 6 g3, 6 ♙g5, 6 ♙e2, 6 h3 and even 6 ♙d3.

6 ... e5  
 7 ♘f3

Whether the knight goes to f3 or to b3 it may have an ultimate goal of reaching d5.

Two months earlier at the Turin Olympiad, Carlsen’s game with Julio Granda Zúñiga varied with 7 ♘b3 ♙e7 8 ♙e2 0-0 9 0-0 ♘bd7 10 a4 b6 11 f3 ♙b7 12 ♖f2 ♗c7 13 ♙f1 ♖fb8 and now 14 ♘c1! ♘c5 15 ♖d2 ♘e6 16 ♘1a2!.

The idea is ♘b4-d5 Black defended well with 16...♘d4 because 17 ♙xd4 exd4 18 ♖xd4 d5! and ...♙c5 is good for him.

But after 17 ♘b4 ♖d8 18 ♙h1 a5 19 ♘d3 ♘e6 20 ♘f2 he was only slightly worse when he blundered, 20...♘d7? 21 ♘b5 ♗b8 22 ♘xd6 resigns.