

How Magnus Carlsen Became the Youngest Chess Grandmaster in the World

The Story and the Games

**by his trainer
Simen Agdestein**

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Preface to the new edition

I assured myself after writing the first edition of this book that there would be no follow-up. No Wonderboy II or III from me.

Magnus had become a grandmaster at an extremely early age and I had been given the chance to follow this extraordinary talent from when he started getting interested in chess at the age of 9 to when he was the youngest grandmaster in the world four years later. It was an adventure and certainly a story to tell!

However, such enormous success also brings a lot of pressure. Magnus has been a prey for journalists since he was 13 and I didn't want to add to this by pretending I was his personal biographer. I was worried already then about how all this attention would affect him. Magnus certainly was very mature for his age and chess-wise he was of professor level even before he was a teenager. But still, he was just a child.

In hindsight we can breathe a sigh of relief that things turned out as well as they did. Magnus became the number one in the world when he was 19 and is now way ahead of the next players in rating. He's certainly been recognized as one of Norway's greatest sportsmen and worldwide he is perhaps more famous than any Norwegian ever.

Magnus is a tremendous chess talent, but his success hasn't come by itself. There has been quite a bit of wisdom accompanying him on his way. His family deserves

all possible praise for giving him such a good start. A great job has been done, but the main thing is perhaps that Magnus has kept his enthusiasm for the game throughout; so much so that he's spent on average more than five hours on chess per day in a period of more than ten years.

In Norway we say that it takes 10,000 hours to become world-class in something, and that makes sense for Magnus. He's been playing almost 200 tournament games per year, and with preparation before and analysis after the games that's a hell of a job.

It may seem that Magnus has played his way to the top, but that is only partly true. He has trained and worked too. It's just that he's been doing it his own way. The family got plenty of advice about how important it was to do this and do that when he was 14-15 years old. Even Garry Kasparov added to the choir by claiming that these years would be crucial.

But such words did not bite Magnus. Magnus is unique, but still he's very 'Norwegian' in his approach. That may sometimes be understood in negative terms, but I'm not so sure about that. I think almost any foreigner coming to Norway would be struck by the lack of discipline in Norwegian culture, but we do actually have some fantastic athletes around here. With a talent like Magnus' I think one should be very careful not to try to force anything upon him. The job of those around him should simply be to tend to the garden and let the plant grow freely.

However, I sometimes wonder how strong Magnus could have been if he'd had the discipline of Garry Kasparov in addition to all the other assets he has. Magnus has his weaknesses and he knows this very well himself. Even now, when he's number one in the world, I sometimes say 'he's got good potential'.

I'm very glad when in interviews I hear Magnus say the same thing we said when he was 10 years old, namely that the goal is to master the game. And of course he's smart enough to understand that there still is a lot to learn. I think this mental concept is very clever, as it's very easy to be misled by external goals like achieving a title or a rating or whatever. The focus should be on the process and on nothing else.

Magnus has been very good at such mental adjustments, but in the Candidates' tournament in London even he was in trouble when so much was at stake. In the last three rounds he was totally out of control and actually he was extremely lucky to win and qualify for the World Championship match with reigning champion Vishy Anand.

There are actually a few things that we talked about when Magnus was just a little boy that we can still see in the way Magnus plays today. Kasparov was really dominant at that time, but one day he would quit, and then how would the next number one play? Anatoly Karpov had his style, and it worked in his day – Kasparov had a completely different style. Kasparov was the first and the best in exploiting the power of the computer, but the others followed in his footsteps and soon their preparation became just as good as Kasparov's.

The way to get away from all this would simply be to vary your openings all the time. Kasparov's opening repertoire was fairly limited (although I believe he knew absolutely everything!). The next number one had to be totally unpredictable. And that is exactly what Magnus is now. He can play anything and you never know what to expect from him. While Kasparov is (or was) concerned about 'eternal values', Magnus is only interested in what works to beat that particular opponent on that particular day.

I have the impression that Kasparov was close to analysing many of his lines until the very end, but this approach seems more like science. Magnus is a sportsman. By changing your openings all the time you force your opponent into unknown territory and you also keep the game much more interesting for yourself. How exciting it is to discover new ideas over the board!

It would have been interesting to see Kasparov's depth added to Magnus' pragmatism, but the general answer to all this well-meaning 'advice' is that you can't argue with success. Magnus has been extremely successful with his over-the-board fighting approach. Now he is the number one, and the one whose play everyone tries to imitate. In that respect, he's very powerful.

However, that the news magazine *Time* should nominate Magnus to be one of the 100 most powerful people in the world seemed a bit weird to me. I've even seen him being named as one of the sexiest men on the planet. Being the number one chess player in the world has brought him a lot, and for those who have known Magnus as just one of the lads, all this celebrity stuff seems a bit strange.

To me, Magnus' chess is the real piece of art here. Already the games in this book, those that were played before he was 14, are very nice. When I was going to publish this book in Norwegian there were plenty of publishers contacting me, but they asked me if I could take out the games. They just wanted the story, not the games. That would have been totally wrong. This is a chess book and not a biography of a little boy's life.

Magnus without his games is actually not that special. He's been going to ordinary school, playing football and having fun with his friends, and in those situations he's just like anybody else. He's always had a good sense of humour and he smiles and laughs a lot.

However, somehow his public image has become completely different. Magnus has managed to create a fantastic mystique around him. He's a very demanding interviewee and doesn't easily open up. Sometimes he can even seem rude and extremely arrogant, but at other times he can be brilliant even in this role.

Actually he's had no choice but to learn to handle all the attention, and, typically, he's become very good at that too. Magnus is really a fast learner and his talent is not only restricted to chess. Magnus has held superb speeches on great sport galas live on TV, and on the biggest talk shows on American TV his frank and to-the-point answers seem to make the hosts wild. Perhaps they expect that a world's number one chess player should be very peculiar in some way, and when it turns out that he's just absolutely normal, he becomes a real hit.

I remember how in his early teens Magnus used to hate photographers and to

loathe having to follow their orders and pose in particular positions. Magnus looked even angrier than James Dean on those pictures, but the effect actually seems to have turned out the same: Magnus has also become an icon.

The Dutch clothing company Raw decided to associate themselves with the brilliant chess player and signed him on as a model. Soon after, Magnus was parading on New York Fashion Week with the biggest celebrities in the world. Liv Tyler, the very famous American actress who was his co-model for Raw, was very nervous doing that walk, but Magnus just found the whole situation peculiar and didn't worry a bit.

A lot has happened since this book was written. We left the story after Magnus became a grandmaster and the last thing he dealt with was the World Cup in Gadhafi's Tripoli in Libya, where Magnus lost to Levon Aronian in the first round. Magnus was very annoyed about that, but such encounters were surely very useful for him. Magnus got the chance to play the best players in the world early, and it took a while even for Magnus to get used to that.

Just getting the chance to play on this level on a regular basis is very demanding for upcoming players. Being famous and a 'personality' is actually part of the game, and as such Magnus has really been walking on stars. He's been given the chance to play top-class tournaments over and over again. Gradually he's adjusted and eventually he's surpassed all his rivals.

After Magnus became a grandmaster at the age of 13, he more or less worked on his own for the next two years. I saw him occasionally and he trained a little with

others too. It was in this period that people came and claimed that Magnus should get a ‘proper trainer’, and so on. I’m not sure, however, that having a personal trainer at that age is the way to go. I thought then that developing independence was wise and Magnus was doing just fine. We tried to keep up the enthusiasm in different ways and in hindsight I believe both Magnus and those around him chose the right approach.

When he was 16, Magnus started as a regular student at my chess department at *Norges Toppidrettsgymnas* (The Norwegian College for Top Athletes) and I saw him more or less on a daily basis when he was not away playing tournaments. This was of course a very inspiring period for all of us – both for the other students and for me and, hopefully, for Magnus too. Also in that period I remember people calling for a ‘proper trainer’, as if I didn’t exist.

When Magnus left school three years later, he was the number 3 in the world.

He then started to train with Garry Kasparov and soon rose to the very top. It must have been tremendous working with the man who I believe is the greatest chess player in history ever (Magnus still has a way to go before he can compete with Kasparov in that respect). Magnus even got hold of Kasparov’s database with all his work from the last 20 years or so. According to Magnus that was pure gold!

However, I don’t see that much of Kasparov in Magnus’ style today, I must say. Without claiming any honour or anything – I’m just one of many that have been around Magnus –, to me it seems that Magnus is now playing more or less exactly the way we already visualized when he was 10.

My thanks to New in Chess for publishing the book again! Perhaps it will be read in a different way now. I hope Magnus completes the circle by becoming World Champion already this autumn!

Simen Agdestein
Asker, Norway
June 2013

6 International Master

January-July 2003

**‘Magnus talks like he is 18, plays like he is 25,
but is, incredibly, still just 12 years old.’**

– Hans Olav Lahlum in a pre-Norwegian championship report.

In just over two years, since his chess enthusiasm began in earnest in autumn 2000 until the end of 2002, Magnus managed to play nearly 300 serious, rated, tournament games in addition to various blitz and other minor events. The time between tournaments went to different types of chess training for several hours a day. Magnus had the fever.

His father had to use enormous amounts of time on Magnus. The boy could not travel alone and between events Henrik worked around the clock to provide for the family and raise money for new chess trips.

The female wing of the family, Magnus’ mother and three sisters, lived their normal lives in Lommedalen. Just before Christmas 2002, it was their turn to decide the travel destination. That trip went to Tenerife, a normal seaside holiday for the entire family. There aren’t any other chess-free trips to record in this book. Magnus has been in a total of 20 countries in the course of his short career, but only once with a motive other than chess.

When he (finally) came home just before Christmas, it was full speed ahead on the Internet Chess Club to make up for lost time. Full of energy, he set a new personal blitz rating record with 2996 at the

ICC, which is solid grandmaster level and at least Norwegian elite. Still, he did not win the first online Norwegian blitz championship arranged on the ICC on one of the last days of 2002. There was not much of a turnout and Magnus was the heavy favourite, but in the final he got sloppy and surprisingly lost to Kjetil Stokke (who uses the handle ‘Styggen’ – Ugly). Magnus didn’t take it too seriously, and was right not to.

The Open Norwegian quick-play championship in Vikersund on the first weekend of 2003 was more serious. It was biting cold, about -20°C, but over 100 players had braved the weather and made their way to the site, which is best known for its ski-flying hill. This quick play tournament enjoys great prestige and is considered one of the country’s major events.

The year before Magnus had taken the bronze in a very tough event. This year’s field was not as dangerous, but neither was Magnus. Before, he might have been able to profit from being so small and delicate that some people underestimated him, but the situation was different now. He might still be small, but everyone knew what he could do.

Magnus lost three games and finished with 6½ out of 10, sharing 4-6 place. But

he beat me, which did not go unnoticed in the media. In my defence, I have to say that I had just had an operation on knee ligaments and according to an acupuncturist I know, the knee is on the same energy path that leads to the brain. Alternative explanations escape me...

Just two days after the Open Norwegian quick play came another edition of the Gausdal Troll Masters. Hans Olav Lahlum was not just committed to chess in Gausdal but also to Magnus. Before announcing tournaments he used to check with Magnus that he was coming. As Lahlum said in his presentation of Magnus on the tournament web page: 'He has been the main reason why I have decided to organise Gausdal tournaments in 2002 and 2003. I think it is a very good reason.'

The entire Carlsen family has thrived in Gausdal and they cannot praise Lahlum highly enough for his efforts. The Carlsen girls came along this time, and they all lived in a cabin about a kilometre from the hotel. Magnus and his father skied to and from the games.

The field was tough, but that didn't stop Magnus from broadcasting his goal of achieving an IM norm. This corresponds to a rating performance of 2450, which was by no means unthinkable taking into account his result at the World U-12 the year before. But his father wriggled a bit when it came out this way. It is fine to think like this, but saying it can suddenly create external pressures and expectations. But this was met with indulgent smiles and his ambitions were quietly played down. That Magnus would go out

and make the norm was something that only he believed.

He started well enough with a first round win over a 2000 player and then a careful draw against Russian grandmaster Alexey Lugovoi (2540). The Russian said after the game that he thought he was going to win in a few moves, but shortly afterwards a draw was agreed.

Magnus did not hide that at this time his first goal was to draw the strongest players. He needed a little time to feel his way forward, learn how strong they really were, before he would be ready to play for a win against grandmasters as well. A year later he would play hard to defeat even super-grandmasters rated over 2600.

Magnus had to bow to grandmaster Sergey Ovsejevitsch (2517) from Ukraine in round three but made up for this defeat with two consecutive wins. Against those rated below him Magnus was ruthless. This is how he handled Olaf Berg (2056) from the Faeroe Islands.

□ **Magnus Carlsen**

■ **Olaf Berg**

Gausdal 2003

1.e4 c5 2.♘f3 d6 3.d4 cxd4 4.♙xd4 A varied repertoire is especially important for all ambitious players. One advantage is that it becomes more difficult for future opponents to prepare themselves to meet you, but learning new things is even more important and a good reason not to linger too long in the same old openings. **4...♗c6 5.♙b5 a6 6.♙xc6+ bxc6 7.♗c3 c5 8.♙d3 ♗b7 9.♙g5 g6 10.0-0 f6**



OMAR OSKARSSON

Magnus in his first game against Garry Kasparov. The number one in the world rankings got into trouble but managed to escape with a draw. Undoubtedly much to his relief, Kasparov won the second game quite easily.



The Norwegian press had a field day with the historic moments from Reykjavik. Karpov's chivalrous resignation made the front page.



Magnus was highly annoyed by his weak play in the second game against Kasparov. His unforgettable comment: 'I played like a child'.

8 Grandmaster!

January-May 2004

‘This is real talent!’

– Alexander Nikitin, Kasparov’s former trainer, on Magnus.

During the autumn Magnus had gone up about 100 rating points, from 2346 to 2461 on the Norwegian list and from 2385 to 2484 on the international, FIDE list, which is a great deal. Suddenly he was ranked number six in Norway, behind five grandmasters and ahead of one. There was plenty of praise, but neither Magnus nor his family felt as if he had done anything special recently. His results had only been so-so and he had struggled a lot with illness and fatigue. Three relaxing weeks in Norway would turn out to work wonders.

After our analysis session just before Christmas there were a few quiet days of watching TV and the usual post-Christmas rituals at his maternal grandparents’ home in Solør, near the Swedish border. Magnus gradually recharged his batteries. The first week of school of the new year he stopped in at NTG’s chess course and was very impressive. One thing learnt by experience from the rigours of the autumn tour was that Magnus needed more rest between the tougher events. The rest of the family also felt that constant travel was a bit of a strain, so the next semester in the year-long sabbatical was going to be structured differently.

Their house was still rented out until the first of July, so the Carlsens did not have a

home, but kind grandparents could put them up and it was also possible to live in a cabin, either in the mountains or by the sea. So now they had their base in Norway and flew to tournaments instead of driving around in their aging van. The first stop would be the famous Corus tournament in Wijk aan Zee in the Netherlands, from 9-25 January, perhaps the best organised event in the world and one that attracted most of the world elite.

Besides an array of smaller tournaments for the general public, there tend to be two closed GM groups of 14 players each, the strongest of these featuring the best players in the world. New this year was a C-group with a mix of talented players, Dutch title candidates and some grandmasters. This section was also strong, with an average rating of over 2450.

Getting into such a tournament is no easy matter. Magnus had been discovered by the editor of *New In Chess*, Dirk Jan ten Geuzendam, during the European Club Cup in Crete some months before. There Magnus, sick and miserable, had managed a 2500+ performance against strong opposition. Dirk Jan was impressed and called Jeroen van den Berg, head of the Wijk aan Zee tournament, urging him to invite Magnus to the C-group.

But Henrik was not completely sure that the rest of the family would be content in this wind-swept coastal city, a half hour's drive from Amsterdam, in the middle of the winter. The organiser also smiled a bit at the concern that the tournament might be a bit weak – the group had not then finalised its quartet of grandmasters.

The family decided that only Magnus and his father should go to the Netherlands. The girls were not tempted by charming Dutch atmosphere or top chess players and stayed with their grandparents in Solør. It was a bit strange staying behind in Norway and not going to school, but they quickly adapted to a life of tending horses, skiing, evening cinema visits and other pursuits. Schoolwork they took care of on their own.

They had also been promised a trip to an island somewhere in the Indian Ocean. The plan was that Henrik would buy tickets to Mauritius or a similar destination from Holland, since it was much cheaper there. One of the arbiters convinced Henrik that they should instead head for Curaçao in the Caribbean. Henrik ordered tickets but the holiday had to be scrapped when it turned out to be too big a burden for his credit card. But Magnus would make sure the Carlsens would get to see exciting destinations. The snowball started to roll in Wijk aan Zee.

The conditions were optimal. The consideration and hospitality of the Dutch organisers was evident as soon as they landed. There was no need to worry about transport or any other practical details, everything was taken care of. True, the accommodation was graded, with a grand, luxury hotel for the stars of the A-group, a

slightly smaller hotel for the B-group and an even smaller one for the C-players. The rooms were without bath and toilet, but it was a cosy and intimate hotel and Magnus and his father enjoyed themselves. The weather was cold, so they had a refrigerator by hanging a plastic bag out the window.

The playing schedule was ideal for Magnus, with three rest days and start of play at 1.30 p.m. They had learned how important it was to be rested and Magnus got to sleep as long as he wished. Normally he awoke around 11-12, sometimes he slept even longer. After some Weetabix and orange juice in the room they usually played football for 30-60 minutes in a nearby field, just the two of them. Magnus got a chance to run and romp.

Next it was time to prepare. Magnus began the evening before by checking what his opponent played and then worked out the specifics of an opening or variation just before the game. Magnus is fully equipped with a laptop and all the software he needs but time often ran short and for a few games Magnus turned up a bit late.

Time to prepare was especially lacking in the one game Magnus lost. Magnus had let a software program analyse the critical position but had to go before the computer had finished its calculations. Just afterwards the same position arose on the board in his game. Magnus sank into thought for half an hour but made the wrong decision and got into trouble.

After the games they usually ate at an Italian restaurant nearby. Sometimes the stars from the top group were there as well, which was a big treat, especially

since it was not so easy to watch them in action during the rounds.

The playing area was a large sports hall with room for all the participants in the festival. The A and B groups were given plenty of room, roped off in a corner, while the C-group got its own territory a few metres away. By stretching up on the tips of his toes Magnus could just make out one of the boards from the top group. He was a bit saddened that he was not allowed to go behind the enclosure and watch the biggest guns play. That was something he had been looking forward to. The organisers were worried that if they gave him permission others would come and ask for the same. But after a quick poll of the top players, Magnus was allowed to wander where he wanted in the final round.

By then it was too late. Magnus was completely absorbed with other things. Besides, the top group was not what the public wanted to see any more, it was Magnus and his games that people were flocking around. Peter Leko, ranked number four in the world, responded with a smile when asked if it was OK if Magnus could go behind the barrier to watch him play: 'Yes, but we aren't able to see his games!'

There were a number of monitors set up around the vast hall, transmitting all the games from the A-group. In the C-group only one game was shown. Eventually Magnus completely took over the show. It was not enough just to show his games on the C-screen, when one of the games from the top group was finished Magnus' game was transferred to the vacant screen there.

Nevertheless, crowds built up where Magnus was sitting and where his games

were broadcast. There could be as many as 100 people standing on tiptoe to get a glimpse of the little boy and the miracle unfolding. The first outbreak of Magnus-fever was undoubtedly recorded in Wijk aan Zee in the Netherlands.

He started carefully, with a draw against a fourteen year old Ukrainian girl, Kateryna Lahno (2493), but, just like Magnus, this was not your average teenager. She was already top-rated in the world for her age, regardless of gender, and already the number six ranked woman in the world.

Magnus pushed Lahno in a long end-game but didn't manage to put the ball in the net. As Henrik wrote in *Norsk Sjakkblad*: 'When he eventually found something that resembled a winning continuation he ran short of time and had to simplify into a drawn ending with a piece and two pawns for each player. Many spectators (me included) were nervous when he nonchalantly offered a draw with 45 seconds left on his clock while his time was running. Lahno understandably refused but Magnus elegantly sacrificed a piece and assured the draw ten moves later and with 22 seconds left – whew!'

In the next round he produced a sleek win against Peng Zhaoqin (2419), originally from China, but who after marrying a Dutch chess player settled in Europe.

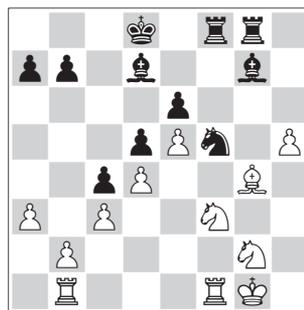
□ **Magnus Carlsen**

■ **Peng Zhaoqin**

Wijk aan Zee 2004

1.e4 e6 2.d4 d5 3.e5 I believe that 3.♘c3 gives the best chances of an advantage, but

it demands some experience to understand the difficult positions in the Winawer variation (3.♘c3 ♙b4 4.e5 c5 5.a3 ♙xc3 6.bxc3). **3...c5 4.c3 ♖b6 5.♘f3 ♙d7 6.a3 c4** As Alexander Rustemov showed against Magnus in the last round of the Aeroflot Open Black has good chances for equality with 6...♙b5. The game ended in a draw after 7.b4 cxd4 8.♙xb5+ ♖xb5 9.cxd4 ♘d7 10.♘c3 ♖c6 11.♘a4 ♘e7 12.♙e3 ♘b6 13.♘xb6 ♖xb6 14.0-0 ♘f5 15.♙c1 ♖d8 16.♖a4+ ♖d7 17.♖a5 ♙e7 18.♙c7 b6 19.♙xd7 bxa5 20.♙b7 axb4 21.axb4 0-0 22.g4 ♘xe3 ½-½. **7.g3 ♘c6 8.h4** The difficult question in this variation is how to answer a black break with the f-pawn. Presumably White should take on f6 and pressure the e6-pawn, but in that case 8.♙h3 is a more logical move. However, the way Black plays it is nice to secure a bit of space on the kingside. **8...h6 9.♙h3 ♘ge7 10.♘bd2 ♘a5 11.0-0 ♖c7?** What is the point of this I wonder? **12.h5 0-0-0 13.♘h4** White prepares to charge with his f-pawn. **13...g5 14.♘g2! ♙g7 15.f4 f5 16.g4!** White's chances lie on the kingside. That his king is also on this side is not so dangerous. With such a colossus of a pawn centre it will take a lot before Black can dream of attacking on this flank. 16.exf6 would only open lines and diagonals for Black. **16...♙hg8 17.♘f3 ♘b3 18.♙b1 ♘xc1** Before White runs off with the bishop, leaving the knight pointlessly placed. **19.♖xc1 ♗df8** Both 19...gxf4 20.gxf5 ♘xf5 21.♙xf5 exf5 22.♖f2 and 19...fxg4 20.♙xg4 gxf4 21.♖xf4 give White a positional advantage. **20.fxg5 hxg5 21.♖xg5!** Bold! **21...♖d8** The knight was hanging. **22.♖h4 fxg4 23.♙xg4 ♘f5 24.♖xd8+ ♖xd8**



25.♘fh4! By returning the pawn Magnus completely takes over the initiative. **25...♘xh4 26.♘xh4 ♖xf1+ 27.♖xf1 ♙xe5 28.♘g6 ♙g7 29.♖f7!** All of White's pieces are working at maximum power. **29...♙h6 30.♖h2 ♙c1 31.♘e5 ♙c8 32.♖f2** A temporary withdrawal in preparation for the final assault. **32...♖e7** After 32...♖e8, planning 33...♖f8, Magnus must remember to insert 33.♘g6, when Black has no active options. **33.♖h3 ♖e8 34.♘g6 ♙d7?** This makes things easier for White. The best defence was to wait passively, going back and forth with the dark-squared bishop, when it is not obvious how White breaks through. **35.♙c2 ♙g5 36.♖e2!** Now the e-pawn falls as 36...♖f7 costs material after 37.♘e5+ ♖e7 38.♘xd7 and the bishop takes on e6. **36...♙c1 37.♙xe6 ♙xe6+ 38.♖xe6+ ♖d7 39.♖e2!** All counterplay is prevented. **39...♖e8 40.♘e5+ ♖c7 41.♙c2 ♙e3 42.♖g2 ♖e6 42...♙c1** is tougher, but would not have changed the result. **43.♖g7+ ♖c8 44.♖g6** Black resigned. The h-pawn decides.

The first rest day came as early as after the second round. Magnus protested as much as he could – he wanted to sit inside and watch Eurosport – but he was not going to miss a hike along the magnificent seashore