

Introduction

The Caruana Difference

It reads like a Hollywood script:

A Brooklyn boy dreams of becoming the world chess champion. He makes the unheard-of decision to become a professional player at age 12. His family moves to Europe so he can learn from the best teachers. He studies and plays constantly. In two years he is a grandmaster. By age 16, sponsors from Azerbaijan to Germany are bidding to have him play for their teams.

As in any good movie plot, this is the first stage of a narrative arc. There is a roller coaster of changes to come:

His great victories are followed by severe reverses. His progress is halted. Younger players seem to surpass him. He talks of giving up chess. Then he registers the greatest winning streak in chess history. Major media outlets flock to interview him. Gossip web sites claim he has amassed a fortune of more than \$10 million. His return to play for the United States is an international news story. He finally wins the right to challenge the world champion. He battles undefeated through the most-watched championship match in history. Then in a dramatic playoff he wins and becomes history's 17th world champion.

Yes, it's a typical Hollywood fantasy. But except for the final sentence, Fabiano Caruana's story is true.

And if he had a celebrity personality – that of a Magnus Carlsen, a Bobby Fischer or a Garry Kasparov – his story would be known well beyond chess circles. But Caruana is Caruana. “He is shy and modest, like a conservatory student,” one of his teachers said. He is content to let his moves do most of the talking.

To appreciate how he accomplished what he did in his first 30 years, it helps to understand why he is different in so many ways from Carlsen, Kasparov and rivals such as Ian Nepomniachtchi and Hikaru Nakamura.

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Second Chances to Sparkle

“Back then I preferred to attack all the time,” Fabiano recalled about his adolescent style. “I really loved sacrificing pieces to get at the enemy king. I played like that for quite a long time.”

He was allowed to win that way because his opponents were often poor defenders. Sloppy defense can make any tactician a Tal. In this game, he rushed his attack and was granted a second – and then a third – chance to sparkle.

Caruana – Adalberto Villavicencio

Andorra la Vella 2006
Sicilian Defense,
Najdorf Variation (B96)

- 1 e4 c5
- 2 ♖f3 d6
- 3 d4 cxd4
- 4 ♗xd4 ♘f6
- 5 ♗c3 a6

In Europe, Caruana faced opponents who knew more about trendy, sharp openings than Americans.

There were about three times as many FIDE-rated players in Spain than in the United States when he moved in 2004.

But even in his first strong Spanish tournaments he often faced opponents who ran out of memorized book moves long before he did.

For example, Raphael Cortes Jurado – Caruana, Madrid Championship 2005 went: 1 e4 c5 2 ♗f3 ♗c6 3 d4 cxd4 4 ♗xd4 ♗f6 5 ♗c3 e5 6 ♗db5 d6 7 ♖g5 a6 8 ♗a3 b5 9 ♖xf6 gxf6 10 ♗d5 ♖g7 11 c3 ♗e7 12 ♗xe7 ♜xe7 13 ♗c2 ♖b7 14 ♖d3 f5 15 ♗e3 fxe4 16 ♗f5 ♜f6 17 ♖xe4 d5 18 ♖c2? (*The first new move, in place of 18 ♖xd5 ♜d8 19 ♜g4 ♖f8 19 a4 b4 20 a5 0-0-0 21 ♗g3 ♖b8 22 0-0 h5 23 ♜e1 h4 24 ♗f1 ♜g8 25 ♜e2 e4 (25...b3!)*) 26 c4 b3 27 ♖xb3 d4 28 c5 ♖xc5 29 ♜h5 e3 30 f3 ♖xf3 31 ♜xc5 ♜xg2+ 32 ♖h1 ♜f2+ White resigned.

Yet the following game is the first Najdorf Sicilian of his that you will find in many databases. He soon finds himself improvising in a rare sideline.

- 6 ♖g5 e6
- 7 f4 ♜c7

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New Era Novelties

In the Internet age, the value of introducing a new opening move was transformed. A novelty still forced an opponent to think for himself. But the TN (theoretical novelty) that turned an equal position into a very favorable one was increasingly rare.

Information was shared too widely to allow even mild improvements to remain secret for long. When Garry Kasparov was asked about his storehouse of thousands of theoretical innovations he shrugged it off. "Everyone has a computer," he said.

Instead, what a new move could do is force an opponent to come up with a reply that was hard to find. By 2008 Caruana was able to do this in various openings.

**Oscar de la Riva Aguado –
Caruana**

Olympiad, Dresden 2008
*Sicilian Defense,
English Attack (B80)*

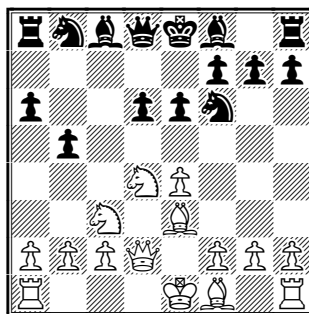
- 1 e4 c5
- 2 ♘f3 d6
- 3 d4 ♘f6
- 4 ♘c3 cxd4
- 5 ♘xd4 a6
- 6 ♙e3 e6
- 7 ♖d2

Caruana's opponent had helped popularize this queen move, in place of 7 f3.

Unlike the similar and more popular 6...♘g4 7 ♙g5 h6 8 ♙h4

g5, Black just loses time after 6...e6 7 ♖d2 ♘g4 8 ♙g5.

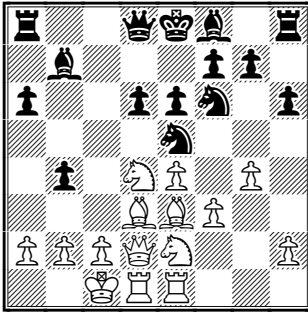
7 ... b5



8 f3 ♘bd7

Black would be able to coordinate his pieces faster after 9 a3 ♙b7 10 g4 h6 11 0-0-0 ♖c8, for example. Then he is poised for 12...d5!.

9 g4



13 ... d5!

If you look solely at the two central files, this move looks suicidal.

But without ...d5 to worry about, White would be freed to choose one of two powerful plans.

One is preparing a crushing sacrifice (♟f4 and ♟fxe6).

The other is taking slow aim at the kingside (h2-h4 and g4-g5-g6).

For example, 13...♞a5 14 ♔b1 ♙e7 15 ♟f4 ♞c8 16 h4 with a nice game.

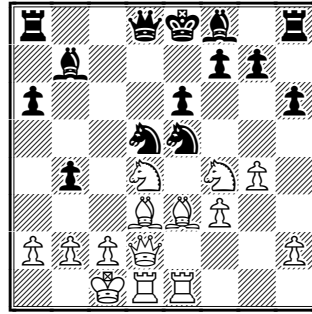
14 exd5

Black's main idea was not 14...dxe4 but 14...♞xf3! 15 ♟xf3 dxe4.

14 ... ♞xd5

15 ♟f4

The point of retreating the knight to e2 was to prepare a knight sacrifice on e6.



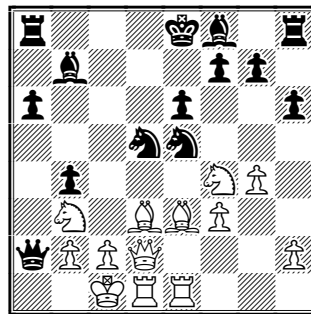
Chances would be mixed after 15...♙d6 16 ♞dxe6 fxe6 17 ♞xe6 ♞f6 18 ♙d4, for example.

“For that reason the great Sicilianist Lev Polugaevsky played 15...♞d7 here,” Yuri Razuvaev said. “But Fabiano had prepared a surprise for his opponent.”

15 ... ♞a5

We are still in “book.” The natural 16 ♔b1? allows 16...♞xf3! and 17 ♟xf3 ♞c3+! 18 bxc3 bxc3, as in a 2002 game.

16 ♞b3 ♞xa2



17 ♙e4!

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Bidding to Better Bobby

Bobby Fischer maintained a phantom presence in US chess long after he played his final game. Amateurs grew up on his games. Caruana said when he played in American tournaments before leaving for Europe, “in a way, he was always there.”

Fischer was there, indirectly, in his earliest lessons. His teacher Bruce Pandolfini based some of Fabiano’s study on examples from Soviet texts written by I. O. Lipnitsky and Georgy Lisitsyn and a Polish book on rook endgames. Pandolfini showed the books to him because they had once been Fischer’s own copies. “I did that deliberately since Fabiano seemed to be inspired by Bobby,” he said.

Fabiano grew up in the post-Fischer era when talented American youngsters were regularly compared with Fischer by US mass media. “Is He the Next Bobby Fischer?” a Wall Street Journal headline in 1991 asked, above a profile of Jorge Zamora. The New York Times, in 2005, and National Public Radio, in 2012, called Hikaru Nakamura the next Fischer. Caruana would have been subjected to the same burdensome comparison if he had not left for Europe just as he was becoming a master.

As he edged closer to the world championship, he was inevitably asked if he was motivated by Bobby. “I’d say the one player who has always blown me away and inspired me has been Bobby Fischer,” Caruana told Britain’s Guardian newspaper.

In the following game he discovered the same opening nuances that Bobby had.

Caruana – Wei Yi	4	♙a4	♘f6
Wijk aan Zee 2016	5	0-0	♘xe4
<i>Ruy Lopez, Open Defense (C83)</i>			

1 e4 e5

2 ♘f3 ♘c6

3 ♙b5 a6

The Open Defense of the Lopez bears a resemblance to the Berlin Defense (3...♘f6 4 0-0 ♘xe4).

Like the Berlin, it has had widely fluctuating appearances at the elite level.

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Waiting for Magnus

A consequence of playing so much before the world championship match is Fabiano had to determine how much of his opening preparation he was willing to reveal. He risked using up his surprises.

Viktor Korchnoi adopted a traditional policy in the months before his matches with Anatoly Karpov. He concealed the variations he intended to use. But he seemed uncomfortable when he unveiled them. He surprised Karpov but also seemed to have surprised himself.

Caruana's solution was to play his normal game of chess.

Ray Robson – Caruana
 US Championship 2018
Petroff Defense,
Nimzovich Variation (C42)

1 e4 e5
 2 ♘f3 ♘f6

In the months before the title match, Caruana played nearly 40 games as Black in which he faced 1 e4.

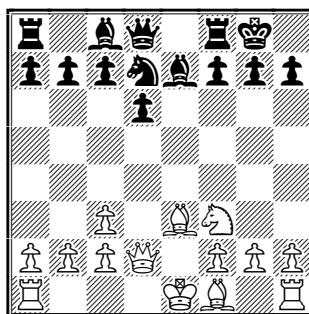
He defended with the Petroff in 15 of them, even though he would rely on it against Carlsen.

3 ♘xe5 d6
 4 ♘f3 ♘xe4
 5 ♘c3 ♘xc3
 6 dxc3 ♙e7
 7 ♙e3

In fact, this is how his game with Carlsen began during the Sinquefeld Cup later that summer.

Magnus dodged a theoretical debate, by meeting 7...♘c6 with the rare 8 ♙c4. He nursed a slight advantage well into an endgame before a draw was agreed.

7 ... 0-0
 8 ♙d2 ♘d7



This development of the knight, rather than 8...♘c6, was popularized by Boris Gelfand. One idea is to keep c6 free for a pawn that can support ...d5.