

# **Magnus Wins With Black**

Zenon Franco

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## Introduction

This second volume of the games of world champion Magnus Carlsen contains 30 of his most instructive wins from 2006 to 2020 as Black. It also follows the “move by move” format with exercises and questions, which is a good way to train.

The main difference between these games and those in the previous book is that fewer of them are attacking games than when Carlsen plays White. This should not come as a surprise, because White has more chances to dictate the game scenario. Nevertheless, there are still some examples in this volume where Carlsen wins by attack. Another important difference is that there are more endings in this volume, which is also understandable.

What remains unchanged is that the fights are always intense. Carlsen never stops trying to win the game, no matter if, objectively, his chances are small. There are several examples where, at some point, his opponents collapse, unable to withstand the tension that Carlsen maintains in the game.

I also try to emphasise the practical, “human” side of the battle. That is very important for understanding the game, sometimes more relevant than the opinion of the computer.

It is interesting what Carlsen says about this:

“Obviously you have to play well, you have to play good moves,

but I think when looking at the games with computers it’s hard to understand what’s actually going on in the minds of the players. When I look at chess I try to look as little as possible with the computer, because I know that once we get past the preparation phase then it’s not really relevant what the computer says and it’s more about psychology and everything.”

He talked later specifically about the Sveshnikov Variation of the Sicilian, but these comments are valid for lots of structures and positions: “This particular opening is a special case. If you turn on the computer early on it will say that White is better, but it doesn’t say whether the position is easier to play for White or Black. Once he got out of the opening then it feels like, yeah, he’s a pawn up, but it feels like the stakes are kind of higher for him. I’m going for mate, and he has to survive. Yeah, I think psychology is definitely a huge part of the game. It’s one of the reasons why this particular line is doing well.” As always, I have tried to include the opinion of the main protagonists, above all Carlsen and then his opponents, as well as of Peter Heine Nielsen.

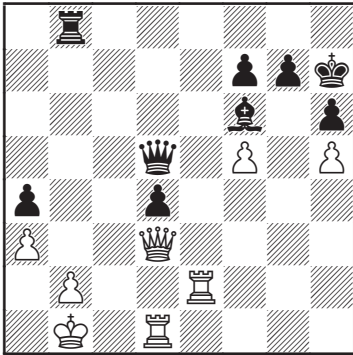
Regarding your task, I think that there is no reason to be upset if you don’t manage to “guess” a large number of moves. It is really more important to think about them as

deeply as possible, and then compare your thoughts with the explanations given. This will become very useful for your chess skills.

Magnus Carlsen continued to try new openings and defences during the 2020 pandemic. He played the Philidor Defence for the second time in his life at the St. Louis Rapid and Blitz 2020, after playing it against Guseinov in a blitz tournament in 2017.

**Leinier Dominguez Perez  
Magnus Carlsen**

St. Louis Rapid and Blitz chess24.com (5), 16.09.2020



*White to play*

Carlsen has sacrificed an exchange for a pawn and obtained the better chances. A lot of things have happened and now the position is

rather unpleasant for White, but it's still unclear.

White has weak pawns on h5 and f5, but as long as Black's bishop remains inactive White's position should be tenable. However, that would only have held true with a longer time control...

**37. ♖e4?**

White wants to play 38. ♖d3, with his queen very well situated on e4, but the absence of a blockader will be punished.

**37... ♖xb2+!**

The bishop enters the game, and, combined with the d-pawn, makes the queen attack irresistible.

**38. ♖xb2 d3+ 39. ♖c1 ♖c5+  
40. ♖d2 ♖c2+ 41. ♖e1 ♗h4+!**

**0-1**

I enjoyed writing this book: looking deeper into the games of Magnus Carlsen is always a great pleasure. I hope you like it too, and it will make me happy if it helps you to understand better our mutual passion, chess, from the games of one of the greatest chess players in history.

Dedicated to Yudania.

**GM Zenon Franco Ocampos  
Ponteareas, September 2020**

Winning the exchange, because after 45. ♖f2 ♔e1+ 46. ♖f1 Black has 46... ♗e2+! and mate.

### 0–1

This victory gave Magnus what just two days earlier seemed a completely improbable result: he shared first place in the tournament with Ding Liren.

“I made my own luck in the last two rounds...I have to say I didn’t believe it one bit before today and especially before yesterday,” said Carlsen. “Today I knew I had a chance. Obviously when we got this very complicated strategic position from the opening then I’m starting to think: well, I have some hope but still it’s a bit surreal. Now I have to get back to earth because there’s more chess to play tomorrow.” (Ding Liren won the playoff).

Carlsen got a good position after the opening. The best French player played aggressively, but Carlsen defended very well.

MVL lost faith in his position too early. He played his moves very quickly, applying pressure on the clock, but at some moment cracked when he took less than two minutes to commit a positional blunder; after that, Carlsen didn’t give him the slightest chance to save the game.

### Some lessons from this game: \*

1.) Always ask yourself “What is my opponent planning?” or “what defence does he have?” (14.h4?

14. ♗h4! 22. ♗f3? 22. exf5! 32... ♗e6!).

2.) “What’s important is the pieces that remain on the board, not the pieces that are exchanged.” (Tarrasch). (22... ♗xc3!).

3.) General considerations are not as important as concrete analysis at critical points. (24... exf4!).

4.) Once more, “Chess is a state of mind.” (22. ♗f3?).

\* Italics refer to variations, as opposed to moves actually played.

## Game 30

**Alireza Firouzja**

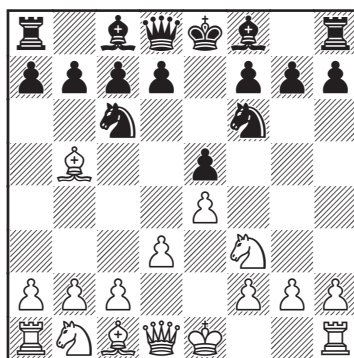
**Magnus Carlsen**

*Ruy Lopez, Berlin Variation [C65]*

Tata Steel Wijk aan Zee (9),

21.01.2020

1.e4 e5 2. ♗f3 ♖c6 3. ♗b5 ♗f6  
4.d3



Carlsen is more frequently seen playing White in this position. Anyway, he was happy to see 4.d3, getting a position where not much would be decided in the early phase.

Playing the Berlin endgame after 4.0-0 ♖xe4 5.d4 ♘d6 6.♙xc6 dxc6 7.dxe5 ♗f5 or 5.♙e1 ♘d6 6.♘xe5 would have been very different.

#### 4...d6

**Question:** Why not 4...♙c5? It is more popular, isn't it?

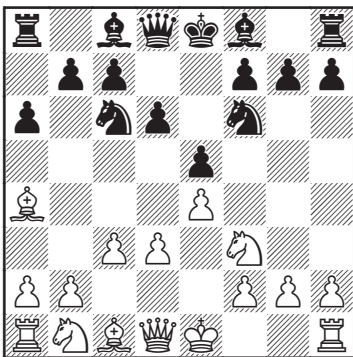
**Answer:** Yes, it is the main line these days, and Carlsen plays it more frequently, but it is simply a matter of taste.

“The ‘Steinitz-lovers’ (like me) prefer the more solid text-move. According to my taste, the dark-squared bishop belongs on either e7 or g7 in the Ruy Lopez,” wrote Lajos Portisch in *My Secrets in the Ruy Lopez*.

#### 5.c3

Firouzja played 5.c4 against Fedoseev in Moscow 2019 at the World Blitz, but here he plays the main line.

#### 5...a6 6.♙a4



**Question:** I guess 6.♙xc6+ was an option, right?

**Answer:** In a similar position, in the Steinitz Defence Deferred, White can play ♙xc6 after 1.e4 e5 2.♗f3 ♘c6 3.♙b5 a6 4.♙a4 d6 5.♙xc6+.

Here it appears that White has gained a tempo. However, as Peter Svidler explained: “It’s very important for White in the structure to develop his knight to c3 before playing d4. So ♙xc6 is not really an option.”

#### 6...♙e7 7.0-0 0-0 8.♙e1

8.♗bd2 is one alternative.

Both sides have several options on each move, and transpositions are frequent; in fact, after a Berlin we have transposed to a Ruy Lopez early d3 variation.

#### 8...♙e8

Carlsen plays this flexible move these days. Ivanchuk – Carlsen, Medias 2011, continued 8...b5 9.♙c2 d5 10.♗bd2 dxe4 11.dxe4 ♙e6 12.♙b3 ♙xb3 13.axb3 ♖d3, and Black was fine.

#### 9.♗bd2 ♙f8 10.h3

Both players played the same position in an online tournament later in 2020, Firouzja – Carlsen, chess24.com INT 2020, continued 10.♗f1 h6 (varying from the typical continuation 10...b5 11.♙b3 ♘a5 12.♙c2 c5, played in Anand – Carlsen, Moscow 2013) 11.♗g3 b5 12.♙b3 (12.♙c2 is met by 12...d5), and now, instead of 12...♗a5, Carlsen chose 12...♙e6 13.♙c2 d5 14.exd5 ♙xd5 15.♖e2 g6 16.h3 ♙g7, with a good position.

During those months Carlsen also faced 10.d4, and after 10...b5 11.♙c2,



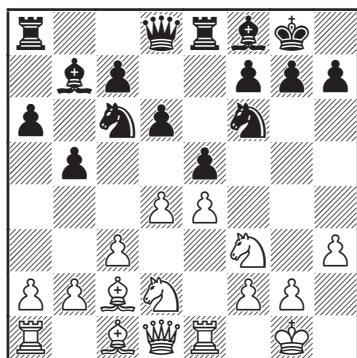
instead of 11...exd4 12.cxd4 ♖g4 13.h3 ♖h5 14.g4 ♗xg4 (or 14...♖g6), he preferred 11...♖b7 in Svidler – Carlsen, chess24.com INT 2020.

**10...b5 11.♖c2**

The bishop moves immediately to c2. 11.♖b3 would allow the typical manoeuvre 11...♗a5 followed by 12...c5.

However, we cannot say that White has “won” a tempo. It is just a different position, because Black will not play ...♗a5, and will try to take advantage of the fact that the bishop is not on the a2–g8 diagonal hitting f7.

**11...♖b7 12.d4**



**12...g6**

**Question:** This position looks familiar to me, but I recall that Black usually plays 12...h6 in these positions, right?

**Answer:** Yes and no. After 12...h6 13.a4, a famous position from the Kasparov – Karpov matches would arise by transposition.

White played d4 in 2 moves, but ♖c2 was played in one move instead of ♖b3–c2.

As we mentioned, in “normal positions” (with the bishop on b3) the move ...h6 is necessary, because there is the threat of ♗g5, but here, with the bishop on c2, there is no such threat, so Carlsen makes a more useful move.

**Question:** But isn’t it more useful to play the immediate 12...♗b8 followed by ...♗bd7? Carlsen plays this Breyer manoeuvre quite often.

**Answer:** Carlsen delayed his favourite manoeuvre so as to stop 13.♗f1!?, because 13...exd4 14.cxd4 ♗b4 would follow.

**13.a3**

This move is frequently played by Firouzja in similar positions. It not only stops the mentioned line based on ...♗b4, but also prepares b4 and then ♖b2.

The most popular continuation is 13.d5 ♗b8, and White supports his d5–pawn playing 14.b3 c6 15.c4.

**13...♗b8**

Carlsen transposes immediately to a Breyer/Zaitsev variation, avoiding 14.♗f1, because 14...exd4 would follow, winning a pawn. He could also play 13...♖g7.

**14.d5?!**

A strange combination with 13.a3. 14.b4 would be more consistent with 13.a3, when after 14...♗bd7 15.♖b2 we have a normal Breyer/Zaitsev position.

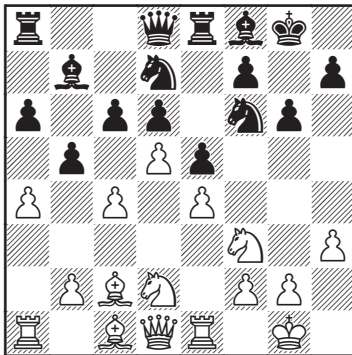
**14...c6**

Black immediately undermines White's centre. Now 15.dxc6?! would admit that there was something erroneous in White's plan.

**15.c4 ♖bd7 16.a4**

This is also an admission that something has gone slightly wrong, as he could have arrived at this position playing a4 with just one move, not two.

Anyway, playing with White, this tempo loss is not so terrible. It means, however, that to gain an advantage will be more difficult.



**Exercise:** How did Carlsen continue?

**Answer:**

**16...♗c7!**

Preparing ...♖ec8, with X-rays on c2. Black could also play 16...bxc4, exploiting the fact that White cannot maintain a pawn on d5. After e.g. 17.dxc6 ♕xc6 18.♞xc4 ♗c7 19.♕d2 ♖ac8 Black is fine, but the world champion preferred to maintain the tension before taking more critical decisions.

**17.b3**

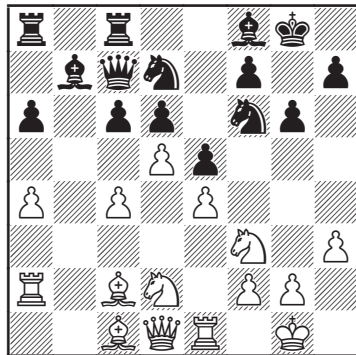
White is, naturally, still trying to get the most from his position, and he doesn't think about heading so early for safer but more passive solutions.

Svidler mentioned the continuation 17.axb5 axb5 18.♖xa8 ♖xa8 19.dxc6 ♕xc6 20.cxb5 ♕xb5 21.♞b1, where White is solid but Black is slightly better after ...♕c6 and ...♗b7.

**17...♖ec8 18.♖a2**

White played this unnatural move because 18.♕d3?! cxd5 19.exd5 (19.cxd5? ♗c3) 19...♕xd5! was worse.

**18...bxc4 19.bxc4**



**Exercise:** Carlsen has obtained a favourable version of the Breyer Variation. How did he improve his position?

**Answer:**

**19...a5!**

With two purposes: it stops a5 and with the idea of playing ...♕a6 later.

**20.♞f1?**

White plays a logical and typical move, but it is a mistake. The young

Iranian didn't sense the danger. His knight heads for e3 to reinforce the defence of the c4-pawn but it will obstruct the activity of the remaining pieces.

This was a good moment to reconsider the situation for White, and accept that he was no longer in a normal position with a slight advantage.

The "strange" move 20. ♖b1! was a much better attempt. After 20... ♗a6 he would play 21. ♖a3, trying to get the knight to b5 from where it would put up resistance to Black's progress on the queenside.

20... ♗a6! 21. ♖e3 ♖c5

Black continues with the same manoeuvring approach. It was also possible to play 21... cxd5, but Black doesn't fear 22. dxc6.

22. ♖d2

White's position is also unpleasant after 22. dxc6 ♗xc6 23. ♖d5 ♖cd7 24. ♖d2 ♖ab8!, increasing the pressure, rather than 24... ♗xc4? 25. ♖xc4 ♗xc4 26. ♗b3, with decent compensation for the pawn.

22... cxd5

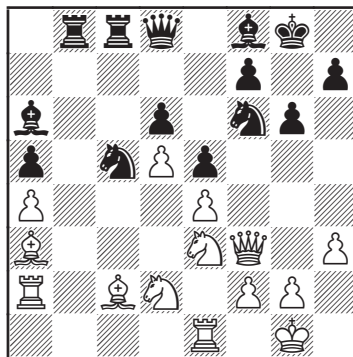
Black has no more preparatory or simply useful moves.

23. cxd5 ♖ab8 24. ♗a3 ♗d8

"A good move, also for illustrative purposes, as Magnus retreats his queen to the back rank but clears the c-file for his rook." (Nielsen).

25. ♗f3

Black is progressing. Almost all his pieces are in ideal positions, but he needs more.



**Exercise:** How did Carlsen increase the pressure?

**Answer:**

25... h5!

This prepares the activation of his only passive piece, the bishop, to its best place, preventing a possible ♖g4.

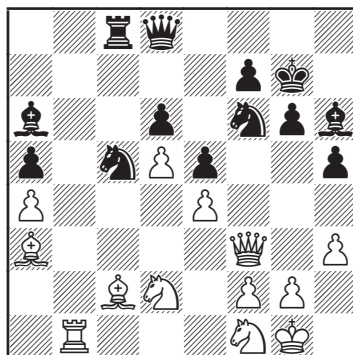
26. ♖aa1 ♗h6

Both Black's bishops are now very active and dominate White's centre.

27. ♖ab1 ♖xb1 28. ♖xb1 ♗g7!

A good preparatory move. The king gives more protection to the f6-knight, freeing up the queen.

29. ♖ef1



**Exercise:** And now, how did Carlsen gain more terrain?

**Answer:**

**29...h4!**

The bishop gets a good post on f4.

It's amazing how Black, without making direct threats, keeps improving his position, while White cannot create counterplay, because his pieces are not well coordinated. Active moves will lead to material loss and he can only wait.

**30.** ♖e3 ♙f4 **31.** ♖ef1 ♚c7

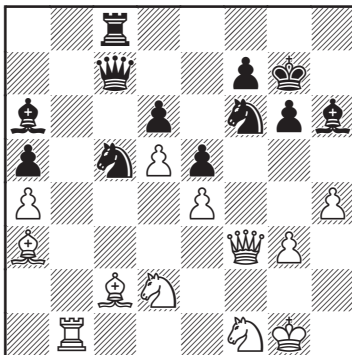
It's time to reintegrate the queen into the offensive, with ideas like ...♗cd7 and penetrating with the queen down the c-file, or in some lines with ...♚a7.

**32.g3?!**

Alireza had a difficult position and was also in time trouble. This move only weakens his position. It is easy to criticize it, but it is almost impossible to give good advice now.

"32.♗e3 staying loyal to the back and forth concept could have led to this beautiful line: 32...♗cd7 33.♖c1 ♚c3 34.♗b1 ♚a1! when White is completely dominated and loses material!" (Nielsen). If 35.♙xd6 Black replies 35...♙d3.

**32...hxg3 33.fxg3 ♙h6 34.h4**



After the change of structure on the kingside White's king is also more vulnerable.

**Exercise:** How did Carlsen continue?

**Answer:**

**34...♚d7!**

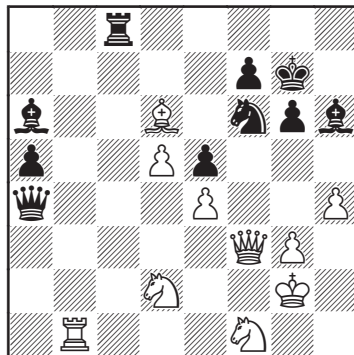
Continuing with quiet but lethal advances. This strong move targets a4. The opening of the position will favour Black as he has more active pieces.

Black could also take advantage of the weakening of White's position, not only the kingside but also in the centre, playing the strong sequence 34...♚a7! 35.♚h1 ♗cd7!, and the black queen penetrates decisively on d4 after 36.♙b3 or 36.♙d1, or on f2 after 36.♚d1, while if 36.♙d3 then 36...♖c3.

**35.♖g2 ♗xa4 36.♙xa4**

Not surprisingly, the complications after 36.♙xd6 favour Black. It is possible to take on c2, but the simple 36...♚xd6 37.♙xa4 ♙xf1+ 38.♗xf1 ♖c4 is also strong, and White's position collapses.

**36...♚xa4 37.♙xd6**



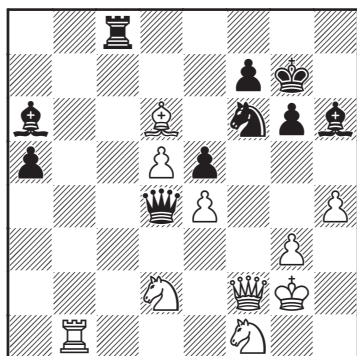
**Exercise:** What did Carlsen play here?

**Answer:**

37...♔d4!

This strong centralization defends e5 and attacks the hanging knight on d2, so 38...♖c2 and 38...♖c3 are also threats.

38.♔f2



**Exercise:** Black has a winning advantage. How did Carlsen continue?

**Answer:**

38...♔xf2+

This move wins, so it is a good practical decision.

Nonetheless, 38...♖c3! was quicker, threatening 39...♗d3, 39...♗g4, etc.. White is almost in zugzwang. If 39.♔h3 the most beautiful response is 39...♖e8!, defending e5, with the idea of playing 40...♗g4! 41.♔xg4 ♗c8+.

39.♔xf2 ♗xf1

And here Alireza, being lost and very short of time, resigned. 40.♗xf1

♗xe4+ loses, but he could still fight after 40.♔xf1 ♗xd2 41.♗xe5 ♗c3 42.♖c1! ♗xe5 43.♖xc8; here both 43...♗xe4 and 43...♗xg3 are winning, but the game would continue.

0–1

Carlsen positionally outplayed his young opponent, who had recorded an excellent start to the tournament.

Carlsen was satisfied with the opening played. In his words, he liked “...to get some position with a bunch of pieces on the board.”

“I got a nice, playable position early on and it felt like it was easier for me to play,” said Carlsen. “It felt like he was drifting, sort of. He couldn’t really find a plan there.”

Nielsen pointed out that there were no tactical complications during the entire game. Black gradually strengthened his position, raising the pressure until his opponent collapsed.

“A great strategical game by Magnus,” he summarized.

### Some lessons from this game: \*

1.) Always ask yourself “What is my opponent planning?” or “what defence does he have?” (19...a5! 20.♗f1?).

2.) Be careful with seemingly “automatic” moves. (20.♗f1? 20.♗b1!).

3.) “How can I improve the position of my pieces?” A question that, posed at the right moment, can give us clues to finding the best moves.

Carlsen did this admirably almost throughout the game. (19...a5! 25...h5! 28...♔g7!).

4.) “Chess is a team game,” i.e. all the pieces should work together. (16...

♔c7! 20...♗a6! 24...♔d8! 26...♗h6! 29...h4! 31...♔c7!).

\* Italics refer to variations, as opposed to moves actually played.