

GCT Semi-Finals Day 1: Sparks fly in Magnus v MVL

Magnus Carlsen & Maxime Vachier-Lagrave duke it out to a fighting draw in unconventional Najdorf in their opening Grand Chess Tour Semi-Finals game

The other GCT Semi-Final sees Lev Aronian & Ding Liren halve the point with perpetual check in 28 moves

David Howell draws first blood in British Knockout Semi-Finals, turning around a lost position against Gawain Jones

The first day of the Grand Chess Tour Semi-Finals saw a sharp battle in the Sicilian Najdorf between Magnus Carlsen and Maxime-Vachier Lagrave after the World Champion essayed an unusual opening plan (6 Bg5 and 7 f3) – a hybrid between an English Attack (6 Be3 and 7 f3) and a Main Line Najdorf (6 Bg5).

MVL responded by steering the game into more conventional English Attack lines, then launching a dangerous attack on Carlsen's king and sacrificing a piece, only to be met by accurate defence by Magnus and a draw in 32 moves.

The encounter between Aronian and Ding Liren was an altogether quieter affair, with a Queen's Gambit Semi-Tarrasch leading to early simplifications and a perpetual check in 28 moves.

The two draws set up a more tense second day, as Carlsen is seen as very much the player to beat and a strong challenge is expected from Ding Liren, after the Chinese player's two wins over Magnus in the Tata Steel India Rapid & Blitz last week.

In the British Knockout Semi-Finals, David Howell eventually emerged victorious against Gawain Jones, despite coming under a lot of pressure in the early middlegame. After Jones missed various wins, Howell was able to survive by sacrificing his queen for rook and bishop, and then marching his king up the board to escape and eventually queen an advanced passed pawn.

The other British KO Semi-Final game, Mickey Adams v Luke McShane, was a no-frills Ruy Lopez Berlin Defence, where Adams – who had narrowly escaped being knocked out in the Quarter-Finals the day before – elected to take no chances and steered the game to a quiet draw in 30 moves.

Magnus Carlsen, Ding Liren, Maxime Vachier-Lagrave and Lev Aronian are playing for a total prize fund of \$350,000 in The Grand Chess Tour Finals, with a first prize of \$150,000.

The British Knockout has a prize fund of £42,000, with a first prize of £10,000.

After two classical games in the GCT and British KO Semi-Finals, play switches to rapid and blitz on Day 3.

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