

GCT Semi-Finals Day 2: Magnus surprises MVL again, mutual stumbles in Ding-Aronian

An exciting day of Rapid & Blitz in prospect after honours even in both Grand Chess Tour Semi-Finals

Magnus Carlsen uncorks 2nd opening surprise on MVL in 2 days, getting slightly better of a draw with Black in a fashionable Open Ruy Lopez variation

First Ding Liren and then Lev Aronian falter, with both players looking slightly under par

David Howell stays ahead in British Knockout Semi-Finals after holding Gawain Jones in a Symmetrical Grunfeld

Day 3 of the Semi-Finals (featuring at least six games of Rapid & Blitz per match) kicks off on Wednesday at 1600 London time. Live coverage here: <https://londonchessclassic.com>

Magnus Carlsen and Maxime Vachier-Lagrave are headed for a rapid and blitz showdown on equal terms on Wednesday in their Grand Chess Tour Semi-Final after the World Champion surprised his French opponent in the opening for the second time in the match.

Magnus played a little-explored line of the Open Ruy Lopez with Black (6...Be7) made famous by Azerbaijan's Shak Mamedyarov and quickly equalised, with Carlsen's more active pieces compensating for a worse pawn structure. MVL admitted after the game that he felt he was a little worse, while Carlsen pronounced himself happy enough with two draws going into the third day of the match, which will be decided by a combination of rapid and blitz, plus a playoff if necessary.

In his post-game interview, MVL said, "I expect a tough fight tomorrow. Hopefully I can play my trumps – it is vital not to be out-prepared in the openings."

The second Semi-Final, between Ding Liren and Lev Aronian, also goes into the Rapid and Blitz day all square, as Classical Game 2 saw the Chinese player stumble out of the opening, playing a weakening pawn push in front of his king to break an annoying pin.

Aronian, who has not been feeling well and is due to undergo medical treatment for an uncomfortable breathing ailment next week, seemed unable to take advantage of Ding's mistake, opting to retreat his rook from an advanced outpost when analysis indicated he could have pressed harder for a win.

In the British Knockout Semi-Finals, after winning in Game 1 David Howell successfully put the shutters up in Game 2, giving Gawain Jones little chance of getting get back into the match. The equalising Symmetrical Grunfeld line chosen by Howell as White ironically had

echoes of a similar one one played against him by Wang Hao in the last round of the Isle of Man FIDE Grand Swiss in October, where Howell blundered, and Wang Hao qualified for the Candidates.

After Tuesday's draw, Howell goes into the Rapid and Blitz portion of the match 9-3 up – making a comeback on Wednesday a very difficult prospect for Jones, who himself won last year's British Knockout after also taking an early lead in the Classical games.

In the other Semi-Final, Mickey Adams comfortably held a theoretical Ruy Lopez Marshall endgame against Luke McShane. The players have mixed results against each other in playoffs, with McShane winning at the London Classic last year and Adams winning at the British Championship in 2018.

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