

BETWEEN THE LINES

October 4, 2022

Carlsen's Gambit

Introduction

On September 4, Hans Niemann, a 19-year-old American grandmaster beat reigning World Chess Champion Magnus Carlsen in Round 3 of the prestigious Sinquefeld Cup. The next day, Mr. Carlsen withdrew from the tournament without explanation. Instead, he cryptically tweeted a video of Portuguese soccer manager Jose Mourinho, saying: "I prefer really not to speak. If I speak, I am in big trouble." The unprecedented move was widely interpreted as Mr. Carlsen insinuating that Mr. Niemann was cheating. On September 19, the two grandmasters played again in a preliminary match for the Julius Baer Generation Cup. Mr. Carlsen suddenly resigned from the game after only one move without saying a word.

These events have led to one of the biggest chess scandals in years, dividing chess professionals into two camps: one in support of Mr. Carlsen and the other in support of Mr. Niemann. Note that Mr. Carlsen has yet to directly accuse Mr. Niemann of cheating in games against him personally, and Mr. Niemann has denied ever cheating in an over-the-board game, although he has admitted to cheating in online games when he was younger. In this edition of *Between the Lines*, we examine statements from both Mr. Niemann and Mr. Carlsen using BIA's proprietary Tactical Behavior Assessment® (TBA) methodology to gain insight into what our behavioral indicators suggest really happened. Here is what we discovered.

White Attacks Black; Black Attacks Back

Hans Niemann's defeat of reigning, five-time World Chess Champion Magnus Carlsen was history-making; Mr. Niemann was the lowest ranked grandmaster in the 10-person over-the-board tournament and was playing Black, which is inherently a significant disadvantage. Furthermore, Mr. Niemann made a rare opening move against Mr. Carlsen who, until September 4, had been unbeaten for 53 straight games. During a post-game interview on September 7 after Round 5 of the Sinquefeld Cup tournament, Mr. Niemann is asked to address "the elephant in the room" referring to the controversy involving Magnus Carlsen. In response, he says he will "discuss a few things." He proceeds to deliver a rambling monologue that touches various aspects of the insinuations.

On the topic of cheating, Mr. Niemann says, "I think I'm the only one who knows the truth. So, there are a few things that need to come to light." He goes on to admit he cheated in online games: once when he was 12 years old during a tournament and then again in an undisclosed number of games when he was 16 years old and was subsequently confronted by Chess.com and banned from the platform. He explains that when he was 16, during his streaming career, he cheated because he was trying to improve his rating so he could play stronger opponents. He insists that he cheated in "random," "unrated" games and that "never, ever in my life cheated in an over-the-board game, in an online tournament." He emphasizes that, other than when he was 12 years old, "I have never, ever, ever, and I would never do that, that is the worst thing I could ever do, cheat in a tournament with prize money." While these statements appear to be strong denials of cheating, they fail to specify the extent to which Mr. Niemann cheated when he was 16, suggesting that he cheated in significantly more games than he implies. **Notably, Mr. Niemann does not take the opportunity to specifically say he has *not* cheated since he was 16 years old, which, from BIA's perspective, leaves open the possibility that he has continued to cheat.**

"...that is the worst thing I could ever do, cheat in a tournament with prize money." – Hans Niemann

It is also notable that, despite insisting that he has never cheated in an over-the-board game, Mr. Niemann never specifically denies that he cheated against Mr. Carlsen in the Sinquefield tournament. Indeed, when speaking directly about the insinuations from Mr. Carlsen, and from Hikaru Nakamura—a grandmaster who has publicly questioned the validity of Mr. Niemann’s rapid ascent in the chess world—Mr. Niemann says “Hikaru, I never, ever cheated against you in an online game.” Mr. Niemann, however, makes no such statement regarding Mr. Carlsen. Instead, he attacks Mr. Carlsen’s credibility, saying, “as far as Magnus, the fact that he did it without saying it, he knew the insinuations that would follow” and “to see my absolute hero try to target, try to ruin my reputation, ruin my chess career, and to do it in such a frivolous way, is really disappointing.” Mr. Niemann goes on to more broadly attack the chess community, saying, “the most ridiculous part is that the same players that in this tournament are insinuating that I’m cheating have also made insinuations about people who are making insinuations about me, so let’s just say the people who are saying things about me, they’re not that innocent themselves.”

“...so let’s just say the people who are saying things about me, they’re not that innocent themselves.” – Hans Niemann

Immediately after his defeat of Mr. Carlsen, Chess.com again banned Mr. Niemann from their platform (and later, on Oct. 4, accused Niemann of “likely cheating” many times on the platform in 2020 and earlier). With this backdrop, Mr. Niemann goes on to say, “I’m not going to let Chess.com, I’m not going to let Magnus Carlsen, I’m not going to let Hikaru Nakamura... simply slander my reputation because the question is, why are they going to remove me from Chess.com right after I beat Magnus. What’s with the timing?” While it is understandable for someone to lash out if falsely accused of something, the fact that Mr. Niemann resorts to attacking and discrediting his critics to give the impression that the accusations are false rather than setting the record straight suggests that he is psychologically and factually unable to refute the insinuations. **This is strong behavioral evidence that leads BIA to believe it is highly probable that Mr. Niemann did in fact cheat against Mr. Carlsen.**

Miracles Transpose to Master Moves

One of the specific points of contention among his critics is Mr. Niemann’s unexpected response to Mr. Carlsen’s first move in their Round 3 match. During a post-match interview on the heels of his victory over Mr. Carlsen on September 4, Mr. Niemann describes his rare first move as a “ridiculous miracle” where he “had no idea why” he was compelled on the morning of the match to “check” or anticipate Mr. Carlsen’s first move. On September 7, however, Mr. Niemann changes his account, saying, “it’s not a miracle, it’s actually me being extremely tedious and going through every single possible transposition or line that [Carlsen] could play in the Catalan.” This is a strong behavioral indication that, three days earlier, Mr. Niemann was unable to explain his rationale, suggesting he did not truly have one for making the move.

Furthermore, Mr. Niemann attacks his critics on this point, saying, “people are absolute idiots,” “my explanation is going to make all the top GMs look like total idiots,” “there’s this thing in chess called transpositions,” and “this is absolutely embarrassing.” While he goes on to talk about the details behind his move, Mr. Niemann’s impulse to dismiss the intelligence of his fellow players reflects an effort to ward off further inquiry into the topic, which, in turn, suggests he suspects that such inquiry would reveal flaws in his explanation. Based on this behavioral evidence, **BIA’s opinion is that Mr. Niemann’s opening move was not the result of his thorough analysis as he implies.**

White Ends with a Stalemate

Mr. Carlsen remained silent on his actions for three weeks. On September 26, he issued a much-anticipated statement. However, he does not specifically accuse Mr. Niemann of cheating during the Sinquefield tournament. Instead, he continues to merely make insinuations. Mr. Carlsen states that “I believe that Niemann has cheated more, and more recently, than he has publicly admitted.” Yet, the evidence he provides is vague and circumstantial. He says Mr. Niemann’s “over the board progress has been unusual,” and that throughout the Sinquefield game “I had the impression that [Niemann] wasn’t tense or even fully concentrating on the game in critical positions” and that Mr. Niemann “outplay[ed] me as black in a way I think only a handful of players can do.” The only concrete statement about why Mr. Carlsen withdrew from the recent games is because “I don’t want to play against people that have cheated repeatedly in the past, because I don’t know what they are capable of doing in the future.” While this is understandable and no doubt true, these statements suggest that Mr. Carlsen does not have strong evidence on which to directly accuse Mr. Niemann of cheating. Indeed, **Mr. Carlsen concludes his statement with “I hope that the truth on this matter comes out, whatever it may be,” which leads BIA to believe he cannot prove Mr. Niemann cheated during the Sinquefield tournament.**

No Clarity on Next Moves from Arbiter

On September 10, the Sinquefeld Cup Chief Arbiter, Chris Bird, issued a statement outlining the additional security measures implemented after Round 3. At the time, Mr. Bird confirmed, “we currently have no indication that any player has been playing unfairly in the 2022 Sinquefeld Cup.” He goes on to say, “we have been running all the Grand Chess Tour events, including the Sinquefeld Cup, and other major tournaments here in Saint Louis, for many years with the same strict anti-cheating measures that were in place for round 1-3, and we are not aware of any fair-play violations during these past events.” Additionally, in a *New York Times* article published on September 13, Tony Rich, the executive director of the Saint Louis Chess Club, which hosts the Sinquefeld Cup, is quoted as saying, “We try to make sure that any fair-play mechanism that we can implement, we do. If I did find that someone had been cheating, it would certainly be a blow, and I would take it very personally.” Notably, the statements from both men are somewhat defensive, attempting to protect their reputations and ward off doubts about their effectiveness. This suggests that they may be reluctant to publicly air any shortcomings in their security measures, but also signals that they are aware that their current anti-cheating measures may be inadequate. In any event, a resolution to the matter will come from neutral ground. On September 30, the International Chess Federation (FIDE) announced that it will be investigating both Mr. Carlsen’s claims against Mr. Niemann and Mr. Niemann’s statements about his cheating online. In the meantime, the chair of the FIDE’s fair play commission, who will be conducting the investigation, called for an end to all the speculation that has dominated the chess community over the past month.

Checkmate for Cheaters? Accusations Across the Board

To be sure, the findings of the FIDE could have significant ramifications for more than just Mr. Carlsen, Mr. Niemann and the organizers of the Sinquefeld Cup tournament. Mr. Niemann’s attack on the broader chess community—“the most ridiculous part is that the same players that in this tournament are insinuating that I’m cheating have also made insinuations about people who are making insinuations about me, so let’s just say the people who are saying things about me, they’re not that innocent themselves”—implies that many players are suspected of cheating, which, in turn, suggests that cheating in chess is a widespread problem. Notably, statements from Mr. Carlsen hint at the same thing.

Mr. Carlsen was interviewed by Chess24.com on September 22. At the time, he refused to comment at all on the reasons for his actions and whether he felt Mr. Niemann was cheating, saying, “I hope to say a little bit more after the tournament.” However, he did respond to a question about whether cheating is generally a problem in chess, saying, “I think individual people will answer the question differently depending on their own experiences. I think regardless of whether it’s a massive problem or not, it’s I think fairly easy to cheat and, on a general basis, I think that cheaters in the future should not be taken lightly either online or over the board.” The statement “individual people will answer the question differently depending on their own experiences” suggests that Mr. Carlsen believes that what players consider to be cheating and what their tolerance for cheating is varies significantly across the community. Also, **BIA’s interpretation of the statement that “cheaters in the future should not be taken lightly” suggests that Mr. Carlsen believes the chess community to date has not taken cheating seriously.**

“I think that cheaters in the future should not be taken lightly either online or over the board.” – Magnus Carlsen

Indeed, in his September 26 statements, Mr. Carlsen says, “I believe that cheating in chess is a big deal and an existential threat to the game. I also believe that chess organizers and all those who care about the sanctity of the game we love should seriously consider increasing security measures and methods of cheat detection for over the board chess.” This clearly implies that Mr. Carlsen does not believe the chess community at large has done enough to prevent cheating. **Furthermore, calling cheating in chess “an existential threat to the game” suggests to BIA that Mr. Carlsen believes cheating is pervasive.**

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