

World Chess Championship 2013

Anand – Carlsen: psychological observations

Psychological aspects played a role in the Anand - Carlsen match. Title defender Anand seemed to be afraid to push too hard in the first games. Challenger Carlsen was nervous during the first three games. He managed to get his nervousness under control and made Anand play the kind of chess he wanted: long games with many practical decisions to be made. Both players made mistakes as a result of information overload, self imposed pressure, wishful thinking and falling short on self-management.

The role of psychology in chess

Chess performances are determined by chess technical qualities, physical condition, psychological aspects and coincidence.

Psychology is the science of the brain and human behaviour. Knowledge about it offers a lot of practical applications.

Chess is a complex mind game and the thinking of a chess player is a complex process. It happens consciously and unconsciously and in a controlled and uncontrolled, structured or less structured manner.

Functions of chess thinking are perceiving patterns and relationships between patterns, memory, reasoning, applying heuristics (rules of thumb), search strategies, calculation, decision making and intuition (unconscious knowledge and reasoning).

The qualities of the brain are affected by talent (nature) and development (nurture).

Human thinking is full of biases and illusions and can be influenced by emotions. The good news is that one can, to a certain extent, become aware of them and control them by developing routines in thinking and behaviour.

Self-management plays an important role: it means control of yourself and your situation. Aspects of self-management are self-confidence, self-talk, motivation, concentration, decisiveness, stress regulation and resilience.

The quality of chess thinking is influenced by the physical condition of a player: a player who is tired can concentrate less and remembers less knowledge.

The physical condition is influenced by physical sport, sleep, food and energy management.

A key question is how a chess player constructively deals with setbacks. To be successful, a chess player faces himself realistically and focusses fully on his game. He who wants to develop himself would do well to think about his own thinking (meta-cognition).

Before the match

World champion Viswanathan Anand has a rating of 2775, has much match experience, a plus score against Carlsen and he is 43 years old. He won three world championship matches. He is an independent thinker and is socially skilled. In India, he has made chess very popular and he is accorded hero status. The match is played in his home town, Chennai, which might have had a double edged effect on him: feeling pressured by expectations of fans and feeling comfortable at home.

Anand has an eye for what psychological science has to offer. In his lecture 'Building a Beautiful Mind' (reading NIIT University 2011, YouTube video) he speaks, inter alia, about the stimulating impact of an artistic environment, the role of the left and right hemispheres of the brain, the self-developing brain, serendipity (being open to unexpected experiences), the role of the unconscious and bisociation (creating links between domains), the influence of emotions, stimulating memory, the importance of self-control, simulating competition conditions in training and taking risks. Overall, he advocates an open mind.

Challenger Magnus Carlsen has a rating of 2870, has an overall minus score to Anand but won their last game. He is 22 years old. When he was very young, he was already very ambitious and self-confident. He has a fighting spirit and can concentrate very well for hours on end. His memory is a strong asset. He is socially skilled. Carlsen does a lot of physical sports and is in excellent physical condition at the start of the match. This could be decisive, in particular, in long exhausting games.

GM Sergey Shipov (magazine New In Chess) analyzed Carlsens losses. He thinks Carlsen is rarely outplayed but loses only when he is overconfident or goes for excessively creative play. Carlsen always wants to win. Shipov thinks Anand has a chance when in the heat of the fight Carlsen is tired and goes too far.

Both players prepared for months with their respective teams, chess technically and mentally. GMs in the team take care of opening preparation and how to avoid opening preparation of the opponent. A team manager takes care of practical things. A doctor (in the case of Carlsen, a chess playing friend) can give advice about energy management and food, which for Carlsen seems to be prepared by his own cook. The team members support mentally and they should be ready to disagree with their boss.

Carlsen refused to talk about his team during the match. Later, it became clear he had contact via the Internet with second GM Jon Ludvig Hammer who was based in Norway. About possible mental trainers nothing is known

The match

G1 Carlsen – Anand draw

Carlsen plays white, solid and careful. Anand surprises by playing the Grünfeld. Carlsen isn't too accurate on move 9, experts say. Anand can complicate the game, but doesn't do so. There follows repetition of moves and a quick draw.

Normally, Carlsen fights even for chances to get chances. During the press conference he says he doesn't want to force anything.

Clearly, the players respect each other. Quite different from e.g. Korchnoi and Karpov in their World Championship match, which involved a lot of psychological warfare.

G2 Anand – Carlsen draw

Maybe Anand didn't expect Carlsen to play the Caro-Kann. The question is how a player deals with unexpected events. Carlsen did his preparation well. Anand doesn't play 3. e5 which demands a lot of concrete knowledge. The game goes to a draw. Both players seem to acclimatize and avoid risks.

G3 Carlsen – Anand draw

Anand chooses a non-symmetrical structure. A sign a battle could be there in a few moves. Commentators IM Lawrence Trent and IM Tania Sachdev say on the official tournament site that Carlsen seems to be surprised by the opening. By taking his time and his tense body language, you could infer he is out of book and has to improvise. Or, maybe, he has to remember his preparation. Anand refuses move repetition and seems to fight for a win. However, he doesn't take too much risk and declines the possibility to play 29...Bxb2. He doesn't want to take risks he cannot oversee, he later explains.

In the press conference Carlsen admits he had a worse position in the middle game and felt stress. However, he reflects: that is what chess is about, tension at the board and in your head.

Carlsen is very clear about a journalist's question about having regrets about certain moves: he doesn't have them and doing so would be a wrong focus.

People don't perform well in information processing when they are under too much tension. Tension can exist when a task is important and one is not sure about a positive outcome. Being under tension

could explain why Carlsen missed some variations. His body language indicates he isn't happy about the game. Anand seems to be relaxed and under control.

G4 Anand – Carlsen draw

The player who takes the initiative puts a heavy mental burden on his opponent. After three rounds, Anand can be satisfied he had the initiative most of the time. Carlsen can be satisfied by having defended well.

Openings play an important role in top chess. Anand is better in this respect, so Carlsen does well by trying to get away from Anand's preparation and getting into middle games and endgames he likes. The players play the opening fast. It can be important to suggest to your opponent you control the game. On the other hand, as GM Nigel Short pointed out during his Tromso commentaries, you should not feel too big to invest time if you are surprised in the opening.

After 18. Ne2 black can take on a2 with his bishop. The position reminds of the first game in the Spassky – Fischer World Championship 1972. Carlsen takes the pawn even though not every implication is crystal clear.

Remarkable is the fact that Anand is sitting most of the time at the board, while Carlsen often goes to his private room. There, he seems to have orange juice, which he has been drinking during games from his youth. Routines contribute to a player's feeling of well-being. For some, routines can even escalate to becoming superstitions.

Energy management is important during a game. Anand stays most of the time at the board, while Carlsen often goes to his private room. Is he taking some rest or is he thinking all the time? Concentrating all the time can be exhausting.

Carlsen seems nervous. He pulls his jacket off and on several times. He shows on his face more emotions than Anand, notes commentator GM Susan Polgar. After the thirtieth move, his position is well and he looks noticeably more relaxed. Anand fidgets in stressful situations but more often with his hand to his face.

After the first time control, Anand takes some rest. Players quite regularly blunder on move 41 because unconscious time stress is over and they feel less danger.

The question remains how Carlsen deals with huge tension. During the Candidate Matches in London, he lost two games of the last three, probably under tension.

Carlsen continues creating complications. For Anand this means a lot of information to process. The more information, the more chances of mistakes. Anand seems to relax until, just before the second time control, Carlsen produces another dangerous rook move. Carlsen goes for every possibility. 'This is about the world championship', he articulates later in the press conference. The personal relationship between the players is well. During this press conference, they analyze positions together. Anand answers questions concisely and professionally. Carlsen takes care that he doesn't say wrong things, by saying nothing or a regular 'I don't know'. His face is an open book when asked about Kasparov. It is clear he is annoyed by the question.

G5 Carlsen – Anand 1-0

Carlsen comes up with 10. Qd3; a new idea. Ambitious and not common, Chessbase commentator GM Daniel King says. Again, Carlsen goes often to his private room. Carlsen likes to play without queens. Anand allows him to exchange queens and to go for an endgame. Is Anand afraid of a complicated middlegame fight?

After 19. c5, Carlsen comes in an endgame position which he likes. He seems relaxed. In the rook ending Carlsen has the initiative. Anand has a lot of variations to calculate. Eventually he makes a mistake and loses the game.

During the press conference, Anand says he is obviously disappointed. Carlsen is relaxed but not overconfident.

G6 Anand – Carlsen 0-1

Anand comes up with a new move 10. Bg5. Carlsen thinks for 20 minutes. He has to find the right

response. It costs time and energy. For a change, Carlsen stays at the board after his move. After some time, Carlsen seems more relaxed. He sits with his right leg over his left one. Sitting in a relaxed way makes one feel well and helps one focus.

Carlsen feels well getting the initiative in endings. This can bring him into a 'flow' state, in which thinking is optimal.

There is a subjective element in perception. Information is interpreted and emotions can influence perception. For example, sometimes players see not what is there, but they see what they are afraid of. They see ghosts.

GM Daniel King thinks sacrificing a second (h)-pawn could indicate that Anand is impatient and wants to force a draw.

Carlsen offers three pawns and brings new dynamics into the game. It gives Anand chances to make mistakes while defending. After being under pressure for many hours, Anand doesn't find the right defense and loses.

During the press conference Carlsen is more talkative than usual. But he remains objective and states: it was a draw, but I saw a pitfall and he went for it.

When asked for an explanation, Anand answers in brief: I didn't know anymore.

Carlsen smelt blood. He tells he capitalized on the win of the day before and decided to put Anand under pressure.

G7 Anand – Carlsen draw

Again, Anand plays the Spanish. No 1. d4 to create complex tactical positions. Commentator GM Gupta thinks playing solid positions helps Anand to emotionally get over the two losses.

Carlsen plays fast and confidently. He easily equalizes after the opening and Anand doesn't get any advantage. So, a draw.

During the press conference, the players are asked what they did on the rest day and how they deal with stress. Anand says he did nothing special and Carlsen said he played some football and basketball. Both players confirm psychological aspects play a role during the match. Carlsen refers to round 5, the outcome of which, in his opinion, influenced the course of the 6th game: You do your best, but it is not easy, especially not if you lose.

Asked about his initial stress, Carlsen responds he probably grows into the match.

G8 Carlsen – Anand draw

Two points behind, Anand has to hit back. But when and how? Not today. He plays black and probably thinks he can better try to surprise Carlsen after the following rest day with white in the ninth round. In the meanwhile, he can recover from the mental blow of two lost games.

Chess is about what you can do and what you don't allow your opponent to do. Both players don't do much and, for sure, don't allow their opponent to win.

Carlsen opens for the first time with 1. e4. The game follows well known lines. It is boring. After 33 moves, the players shake hands with a smile. As Carlsen says during the press conference: We played a few moves, went to the doping control and now we are here.

GM Ian Rogers writes in The Hindu that Anand could decide to be a smart gambler. He made two solid draws instead of directly trying to seek revenge for the two losses. Hereby he could re-energize himself and lure Carlsen in a false sense the match is effectively over. For his strategy to succeed, Anand himself should be in great form. Carlsen, on the other hand, should have a bad day, be overconfident and/or become nervous.

G9 Anand – Carlsen 0-1

It is now or never for Anand. He opens with 1.d4. Both players play their first moves quickly. Probably Anand's strategy will be to create a sharp tactical game. This happens, with white attacking on the kingside and black on the queenside. Carlsen is physically very strong and he can outplay opponents on concentration in long games. Carlsen takes time for his moves and gets a half hour less on the clock in the middle game. With his nerves, nothing seems to be wrong.

Kasparov tweeted after move 18 that Anand could probably be better off choosing moves that would create chances for Carlsen to make mistakes instead of playing forced lines.

At move 23, Anand takes a lot of time and even gets less time. Most of the time, Carlsen stays at the board. He needs to calculate variations very accurately, since a single mistake could give Anand a winning attack.

After a long thought of about 40 minutes, Anand plays 23. Qf4. The following moves are played fast. Anand blunders with 28. Nf1 instead of 28. Bf1. Maybe he has seen possibilities for this move (verification) and overlooked disadvantages (falsification). Wishful thinking is a pitfall.

Carlsen answers with 28...Qe1 and suddenly the game is over.

In the press conference, Anand says he saw a refusal of 28. Bf1 and he got excited seeing attacking chances by playing 28. Nf1. Just after moving the piece, he saw that the knight is now no longer blocking the diagonal to h4. So, it would seem that Anand probably lost self control under pressure. Carlsen says he expected a tough sharp game. He knew he had to calculate a lot and that was what he was doing, he told the journalists. No less, no more.

Asked about his opinion about a tweet of GM Nigel Short that 'an era is over', Carlsen is clear: 'Let's be correct.'

G10 Carlsen – Anand draw

Carlsen only needs one draw to become world champion. The opening is played fast by both players. In a Bb5 Sicilian game Carlsen is rock solid, he exchanges a few pieces and white is slightly better. He shows a lot of self confidence. Anand is looking for possibilities to complicate matters. Carlsen looks focused. Anand is focussed and sometimes seems to show doubts with subtle mouth movements. After move 28. a5 white is better and then Anand plays 28...Qg5? losing a pawn. Carlsen plays fast and doesn't play the best continuation. Possibly he is excited, which hinders objective analysis. The commentators mention that it is dangerous to play for a draw, because that could weaken one's focus and mistakes are possible. The game transfers to an endgame with a knight and six pawns for both players. Objectively, Carlsen is better. The only chance Anand has is that Carlsen makes a blunder. Therefore, he plays a long endgame. Anand has to complicate and take risks. Eventually the game goes to a draw.

The last press conference

Anand says he made several mistakes. But they were provoked by strong play of Carlsen. You can prepare well for a match, but what is decisive is the execution. Losing the 5th game was a heavy blow. Carlsen says he played solidly in the last game, missed something after time control and eventually went for a safe draw.

Carlsen relates that he grew into the match. He mentions both Anand and he were nervous and vulnerable in the first games. After the 3th and 4th game he got control over his nerves, Carlsen says. He realized he should play his own play and succeeded to do so: I play my game and if you keep pushing, usually things go right.

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