THE KING'S ENDGAME

A chess star emerges in the post-computer age

AMITAVA KAR

A new king has arrived in the world of chess, and it's a 22-year-old who is as much at home posing for fashion shoots as he is pushing pawns. Magnus Carlsen of Norway won the chess world championship on November 22, 2013, becoming the first Westerner since Bobby Fischer to hold the title. Carlsen, a former child prodigy who has been on a list of the world's sexiest men and has moonlighted as a model, defeated defending champion Viswanathan Anand of India in a title match that was the game's most highly anticipated in decades. Without losing a game in the best-of-12 series, held in Anand's hometown, Chennai, Carlsen so dominated the match that it lasted only 10 games, with Carlsen winning three and the others ending in draws with the score 6,5-3,5. Carlsen had taken an overwhelming lead, 4 points to 2, by winning Games 5 and 6. Then, with Games 7 and 8 ending in quick and uneventful draws, it appeared as if Anand was ceding the title to Carlsen. But Anand did not become world champion and hold on to the title for six years by playing timidly. So in Game 9, he came out swinging, and nearly succeeded in breaking Carlsen's momentum. Carlsen expanded on the queenside, while Anand prepared to attack Carlsen's king on the other side of the board. Anand said that he had gone for an all-out attack because "the match situation didn't leave me much choice." In the end it was Carlsen who triumphed.



Carlsen (right) beats defending champion Viswanathan Anand.



Taking on another master: Carlsen (left) and Kasparov.

The match broke all records of the most seen event on TV, printed media, or the internet. Millions of fans followed the championship daily, while the match was trending on social media to top positions in several countries. British Fashion and Style magazine GQ ran a story about the match in the same issue containing a photo feature, billed as the sexiest catwalk show on earth, on the Victoria's Secret lingerie show in New York. The surprised editors posted on Twitter, "So this story about #chess is currently more popular on the site than our 100 shots of Victoria's Secret models."

For his victory, Carlsen will receive 60 percent of the roughly $2.5 million prize.

The last chess match to get as much publicity as this was the 1996 contest between then-champion Garry Kasparov, considered by many the greatest chess player of all time, and IBM supercomputer Deep Blue in New York City. Some saw that battle as a historic test for human intelligence. The outcome could be seen as an "early indication of how well our species might maintain its identity, let alone its superiority, in the years and centuries to come," wrote Steven Levy in a Newsweek cover story titled "The Brain's Last Stand." Kasparov won 4-2 in the six-game human-computer chess match while a team of IBM programmers, engineers and chess experts directed and reprogrammed the machine between games.

Many years later, Carlsen, then only 13, drew the game with Kasparov in their first ever encounter. Kasparov arrived late for the game, trying to intimidate Carlsen. After the draw, shaking hands with Carlsen, he left in a hurry, embarrassed. Since