

CHESS

Sasikiran and Negi start badly

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NEW DELHI: Ironical as it may sound, the host turned party poopers.

Seasoned campaigner K. Sasikiran and National champion Parimarjan Negi tripped by turns even as decisive results came on all three boards following fierce battles in the opening round of the AAI International Grandmasters chess tournament here.

If top seed Fabiano Caruana overcame an unpleasant early phase in the Ruy Lopez game against Negi in 49 moves, young Filipino Wesley So benefited from Sasikiran's late miscalculation under time pressure of their 38-move battle in Sicilian Defence.

The day's other battle saw second seeded Czech Victor Laznicka stop women's World champion Hou Yifan in a Carokann game which he should have won much earlier than 65 moves.

Slow starter

Sasikiran is known to be a slow starter. And no one knows this frustrating fact better than the man himself. On this day, So benefited early from some overcautious moves from the third seeded Indian.

Later, Sasikiran did acknowledge the fact that he could have played more actively in the middle game.

With both players having castled on the queenside, So enjoyed space advantage and

marshalled his pieces better. Sasikiran, sensing that the Filipino youngster was preparing for a queenside assault, was ready with a defensive plan well but the script went awry once the players appeared short of time to make the stipulated moves at the first time-control.

On the 34th turn, Sasikiran made the decisive mistake when he chose not to capture a central pawn with his queen. Thereafter, So punished Sasikiran in a hurry.

"My position was pleasant throughout but Sasikiran played some inaccurate moves to give me winning chances. Of course, he blundered in time-pressure," said So, beaming after a fine start at the expense of a higher-rated rival.

Sasikiran rued the continuation of the sequence of poor starts in his career. "There are still nine rounds, we (along with Negi) can still come back strongly." About his own game, Sasikiran admitted to going wrong towards the end of the fourth hour.

Flattering to deceive

Negi raised visions of bringing down the top seed when he held a rook for a bishop and pawn by the 18th move. "The continuation was far more complex than what appeared at

that stage," the youngster was to say later.

Caruana, at this stage, was happy to escape with a draw. "Clearly I was worse. But once Negi thought he had clear chances and pressed for victory instead of taking a draw by repeating the moves, my chances improved.

In fact, I would have been happy with a draw after the 24th move," said Caruana.

Negi's position began to collapse as he lost a queenside pawn. This clearly handed the advantage to the Italian. "I should have settled for a draw," rued the 18-year-old looking back at the deterioration of his position with every passing move in the second half of the game.

With both players under time-pressure, precise calculation was not easy. But Caruana's position was pleasant and that made things even more difficult for Negi.

The results:

First round: Parimarjan Negi (Ind) lost to Fabiano Caruana (Ita) in 49 moves; Hou Yifan (Chn) lost to Viktor Laznicka (Cze) in 65 moves; Wesley So (Phi) bt K. Sasikiran (Ind) in 38 moves.

Second round (pairings): Caruana-Sasikiran; Laznicka-So; Parimarjan-Yifan.

- **Laznicka stops women's World champion Hou Yifan**
- **Sasikiran hopeful he and Negi will bounce back**