

What Colour is the Wind?

A Backgammon Book

Chris Bray

Changes Summary

General

1. Font changed to Calibri
2. Index added
3. Bibliography Updated

Specific Pages

| Page | Title | Changes |
|------|--------------------------------|---|
| 10 | Books on Doubling | Author's Note added. |
| 20 | Zugzwang | Text updated |
| 24 | Non-trivial Bear-off | Solution changed – text amended. |
| 65 | You won't believe it but ... | Text updated |
| 67 | Early Game Double | New position and commentary |
| 68 | Hit and Split Time | Text Updated |
| 77 | Freight to Shift | Clear redouble and take. Text changed. |
| 85 | The History of Doubling | Author's Note added. |
| 87 | Early Aggression | The hit is clearly correct. Text amended. |
| 89 | The Difficulty of Double Aces | Diagram changed (15 th checker added) and author's note added. |
| 97 | 1999 World Championship III | Solution changed- text amended. |
| 98 | Beware of the Blitz | Slight change to the position |
| 101 | One that Got Away | Position changed slightly – text amended |
| 117 | Feb Newsletter | As per page 67. |
| 124 | April Newsletter | Position adjusted very slightly |
| 132 | July Newsletter | Position updated as per p98. |
| 158 | Race versus 5-point | Author's Note added. |
| 162 | A Tricky Double One | Text amended. |
| 163 | Swift Punishment | Author's Note added to clarify matters. |
| 175 | A Lesson in Priorities | Author's Note added. |
| 177 | 2-Point Holding Game | White's spare checker on his 6-pt moved to his 1-pt |
| 183 | Duplicate Backgammon Part 2 | Text updated in line with new rollout. |
| 213 | Woolsey's Law Revisited | Position and text updated in line with revised rollout. |
| 218 | A Champion's Vision | Tiny diagram change |
| 227 | Disagreement at The Bell | Solution change and text change after an updated rollout. |
| 228 | Softly, Softly, Catchee Monkey | Text amended slightly. |
| 232 | One Against One | One white checker moved 3 pips. Text now valid. |

Acknowledgements

First and foremost I must acknowledge the contribution made by wife Gill, who over the years has painstakingly proof-read all of my work, correcting my many errors and making my prose intelligible. Without her, neither this book nor my previous work would have seen the light of day. The book itself was reviewed in great detail by my colleague Ray Kershaw and I am indebted to him for his many corrections and suggested improvements. Only he knows how many hours he spent checking diagrams, counting pips and shots and calculating percentages. All the while he was steadfastly correcting my prose and I trust that he has now cured me of my habit of splitting more infinitives than Captain Kirk. Any errors that remain are entirely my own.

I should like to thank the Independent newspaper for continuing to publish my backgammon column on a weekly basis and also thank the readers for their continued positive responses to the column. I hope to produce it for many years yet.

Thank you also to the backgammon press, *Flint Area Backgammon News*, *Chicago Point and Bibifax*, for publishing my work, and encouraging me to write more. Thank you to Carol Joy Cole and Bill Davis for letting me use positions that first appeared in their periodicals.

As mentioned in the dedications the diagrams in this book were made possible by Steve Smith who developed the Monte Carlo True Type font for backgammon and many other fonts for various games. Over the years I liaised regularly with Steve. He helped me by producing variations of the font for specific printers and I provided suggestions for enhancements such as how to show more than 5 men on a point. I was deeply saddened to hear of his premature death in a cycling accident. His son continues to market and distribute the font but there will be no further enhancements in the foreseeable future.

I should like to clarify one point with regard to intellectual property in the backgammon world. It can safely be said that no one owns a backgammon position but that the analysis that pertains to a particular position belongs to the author(s) who created it. All the analysis in this book is original and any comments made are my own unless explicitly stated to the contrary. Positions that first appeared in other books and periodicals are acknowledged within the individual articles that refer to them.

Finally, I would like to thank all the players who have wittingly, or unwittingly, contributed positions to this book. Without you life would indeed be dull!

Addendum: My thanks to Paul Plumptre for his extensive analysis of the 2002 version of this book which led to this 2015 version being produced.

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Introduction

In the four years since I published my first book, *Backgammon – An Independent View*, our knowledge of the game has increased by leaps and bounds, largely due to the growing strength of neural net backgammon programs such as Snowie. One look at the books published in the last four years will quickly give you a measure of how much we have come to rely on having the bots, as they are known, available to us.

In putting together this anthology of articles I thought at first that I would follow the same approach as with my previous book and group articles by subject type. However, I quickly discarded this idea in favour of presenting them in chronological order. By doing this the reader is able to see how and when programs such as Snowie entered the market and also the influence that they have had on my own writings and those of others. Following this approach the odd word or article may now seem out of date but I make no apology for this as I believe that by publishing the material verbatim I can maintain a better sense of history.

The book consists primarily of my articles from the last four years that have been published in the Saturday edition of the Independent newspaper. In addition to these there are some articles that I wrote for Netgammon when it first launched on the Internet and a few longer articles that I wrote as handouts for readers of the newspaper column.

This brings us nicely to the problems of writing a newspaper column. The size of the column has varied over the years depending upon the whim of the editor of the Weekend Section of the newspaper. It has ranged from 225 to 400 words. It currently stands at 275 words. To convey meaningful and useful information in such a brief form is a non-trivial activity. I have to bear in mind that my readers are by no means all expert players and thus the articles must be intelligible to the casual player whilst at the same time providing education for the more serious player. Some articles are geared to one or other extreme of the range of possible players but in the main I try to keep them balanced.

I must also keep a balance between instruction, history, humour, anecdote and pure whimsey. If I presented an in-depth technical article every Saturday morning I would soon have no readership. An anthology of articles, such as this book, should maintain that same balance so that it can appeal to a wide range of people and hopefully serve the purpose of bringing new players into the game.

Books such as “Classic Backgammon Revisited” by Jeremy Bagai or “New Ideas in Backgammon” by Kit Woolsey and Hal Heinrich are targeted at the expert player and rightly so. Both these books are very good and will considerably enhance the understanding of the student but, because of their target audience, they do have to make the assumption that the reader has a certain level of backgammon education. In producing this book I have assumed a much broader readership, ranging from the person who plays backgammon six times a year but thoroughly enjoys the game and wants to learn more, all the way through to the expert audience addressed by the likes of Bagai.

This last point is very important because it means that I write my articles in a certain way precisely because the audience is so broad. This point was dramatically missed by one critic

of my previous book who reviewed it as if it was targeted only at the likes of himself and his peers. He could not comprehend that at the end of the day books are written for the readers and not for the authors. He made the mistake of assuming that everyone reading it was as knowledgeable about the game as himself. They aren't.

Human beings are as different in their ability to learn as they are in their appearance. During my career I have done a fair amount of teaching and lecturing on a variety of topics and have always been fascinated by the way people absorb, retain and re-use information. I have often been guilty of exactly the same fault as that ascribed to my critic above. I assume too much about a person's knowledge or ability to learn from very little information. Time and again when reviewing my articles my wife Gill has commented "But how do we know that?" or "That might be obvious to you but it certainly isn't to me" or even more damning "Did you really mean to say that?!"

The way we learn about backgammon and become better at it is by maintaining a mental model that we constantly refine according to experience. We learn about position types and general game plans (strategy), we learn detailed techniques such as pip-counts and bear-off rules (tactics) and we learn about the interaction with other players (psychology). The combination of the three defines our backgammon capability. How far we develop that capability depends upon many things including our intelligence, our willingness to learn, the time we have available and the sources of new information.

Unlike chess that has many well-known positions, particularly in the opening, backgammon skill is developed largely by the application of general principles. As we improve so we build a store of reference positions but these are nothing like the number of positions "known" by strong chess players. Rather we develop the ability to apply principles to types of position. The more accurately we apply the principles the better players we become.

G.H. Hardy in his famous "A Mathematician's Apology" said of his breed: "a mathematician, like a painter, like a poet, is a maker of patterns." I think we can safely extend that definition to backgammon players. Played at its highest levels backgammon is an art form and the very best players thoroughly understand their landscape and the patterns that they help to weave upon it.

Studying one particular backgammon position will marginally improve our ability. Studying a group of positions with a linked theme is much more likely to result in a step change in our ability. For that reason I and other authors constantly re-iterate broad principles and repeat position types so that the message gets across. As noted above we all learn at different speeds so whilst one person will learn by studying two positions another person may take ten.

The most dramatic case of misunderstanding the ability to learn was given to me when I was in my teens. I was watching a TV documentary on how a little boy who had been blind since birth was taught about the world in which he lived. The documentary followed his progress and his teachers were very pleased with how he was developing and felt that he was getting a good grasp of our complex world. All went well until the end of the programme when he suddenly asked, "What colour is the wind?" A salutary lesson for all involved. It's possible to

believe you are doing a really good job when in fact you might be way off the mark and have missed something fundamental.

Given this understanding about the way we learn, over time I have slightly adapted my style and learnt to be frugal with the 275 words at my command in order to get my messages across. I have no doubt that on occasion I will fail for some readers but I hope that in the vast majority of cases the lesson or point of the article is clear.

A few words now about the use of computer programs. Articles later in the book trace the history of the development of these programs and you can probably detect from the tenor of my articles how they have influenced my own thinking and writing. As others have said before me it is wrong to assume that they are infallible. It is known that they still play some types of positions incorrectly, particularly back games and surprisingly the bear-in during a race.

Quite often at normal playing speeds they do not find the best play but will do so if you give them time to perform a rollout of the position – in this respect they are almost human! The other point to watch out for is in positions where the cube decision is a borderline take. Snowie and JellyFish make the assumption that the side being doubled will win a certain percentage of gammons in calculating the equity. In fact the defending side, if it turns the game around, will quite likely win with a redouble and thus will not win the level of gammons specified by the bots. This reduces the taker's equity and so a close take can become a close drop.

Having said this I have made extensive use of both Snowie and JellyFish when writing my articles and in all positions where I believed it to be appropriate I have used the bots to perform large numbers of roll-outs. Sometimes I have used JellyFish's interactive rollout facility when I have considered that to be the best method of analysis.

If we look forward five to ten years we are going to see some significant changes in the bots' performance levels. The reason they don't play at "rollout" strength today is that computers are not generally powerful enough to deliver the results in an acceptable time. However Moore's Law states that computers double in speed and storage capacity every eighteen months. Whilst there are some issues regarding silicon chips that might preclude this law being true ad infinitum enough research is going on into alternative chip and storage media to ensure it will be true for some years yet.

Neural net technology will also improve. This means that not long from now programs such as Snowie will be running on computers that will enable them to play a much stronger game than they do today. Indeed when Fredrik Dahl originally created his neural net program he named it JellyFish precisely because its brainpower was equivalent to its namesake. By 2014 at the current rate of computer development they will have the capability to perform as many brain operations per second as a human being. It doesn't take a genius to see where the future lies.

Finally one thing I do know is that writing about backgammon gives me as much pleasure as playing it. I hope that you enjoy reading this book as much as I enjoyed writing it and that it

increases your store of backgammon knowledge whilst at the time providing you with some entertainment.

Addendum – September 2015

Thirteen years is a long time in the world of modern technology and that is certainly true when it comes to backgammon neural net software.

When this book was originally written I was using JellyFish and then the early versions of Snowie. Those programs were good and light years ahead of any non-neural net software but we were really still in the infancy of backgammon programming.

After three versions of Snowie the developers turned to other matters but luckily there was a new kid on the block, Extreme Gammon, which has proved to be much stronger than its predecessors. As I write we are using XG2 but an even stronger version, XG3, should be released in 2016.

A colleague of mine, Paul Plumptre, painstakingly analysed the positions in this book using XG and established that some of the solutions that were 'correct' in 2002 were no longer so. He very kindly shared his findings with me and as a result I have updated around twenty five solutions in the book. Sometimes the positions have been adjusted slightly, sometimes the text and sometimes both. In some instances I have added an Author's Note to help clarify matters.

I have also taken the opportunity to modernise the font and have added a detailed contents list.

Is this the last word on these positions? Undoubtedly not. In his excellent book, "Classic Backgammon Revisited", Jeremy Bagai remarks that "the pendulum of style continues to swing throughout the modern era, but the arc gets shorter as progress is made". So you can expect further changes, albeit small ones, as our understanding of the game improves and the software grows ever stronger.

Books on Doubling (p10)

Despite its importance there have been very few books devoted purely to the topic of doubling. Two books were published in the early 1980's. If you ever come across a copy of "Dynamic Cube Strategies" by Gaby Horowitz and Bruce Roman my advice would be to tread warily, much of its content having been shown to be flawed.

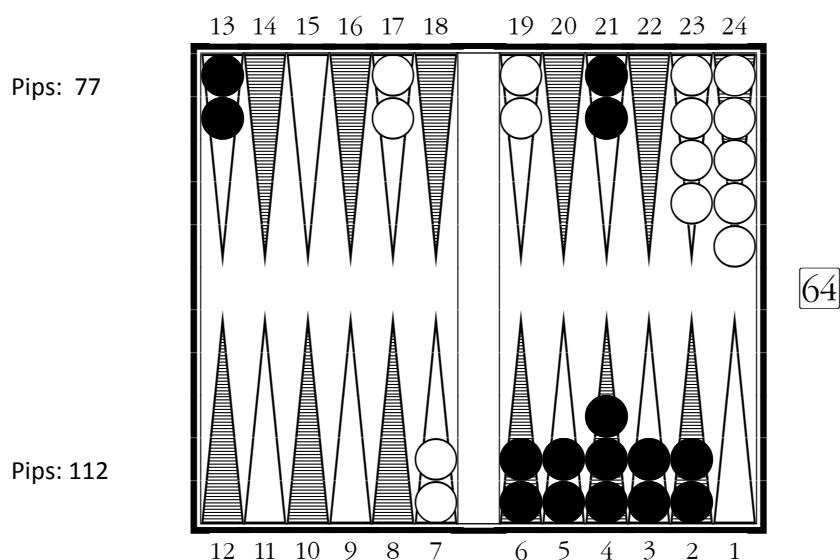
The second book was in an altogether different class and is still excellent reading if you can find a copy. It is "The Doubling Cube in Backgammon - Vol. 1" by Jeff Ward. Intended originally as the first in a multi-volume set, it sets out very clearly the basics of doubling and redoubling, including the maths for those who want to delve that deep, and examines racing doubles in great depth. Ward's refinement of the Thorp Count, known not unsurprisingly as the Ward Count, is well worth knowing. It is a great shame he never found time to write the subsequent volumes.

A new book "Backgammon: Winning with the Doubling Cube" by Peter Bell has just been published by the Gammon Press. Whilst more verbose than Ward's tome and despite some of the prose being somewhat transatlantic it summarises in 200 pages the basics of doubling.

It looks at doubling cube fundamentals, when to double (and when not to double), how to evaluate winning chances in a position, when to take, the psychology of doubling and provides a number of benchmark positions for typical game types. It also looks at how to change your play of the men depending upon who owns the cube and includes some amusing anecdotes to illustrate points made in the text. Bell also looks at the difficult problem of evaluating blitzes, back games and prime v. prime positions by the use of formulae. These formulae are as yet unproved, but in the complex world of doubling something is better than nothing, and they are certainly a step forward. At times the book goes a little fast for my liking but if you are going to cover the doubling cube as a broad topic in a relatively short book then there will have to be some elements that can only be touched on lightly.

At \$30 plus \$12 postage and packing this is not a cheap book. However, if you are serious about improving your backgammon and want to gain a better understanding of doubling cube theory then I would say the investment is worthwhile. Like all backgammon books it will take several readings to get the best out of it and then will come the most difficult part of all - putting into practice what you have learnt.

Author's Note (2015): Sadly Peter Bell's book has not stood the test of time and detailed analysis with modern bots. It must be added to the list of failures.



Zugzwang (p20)

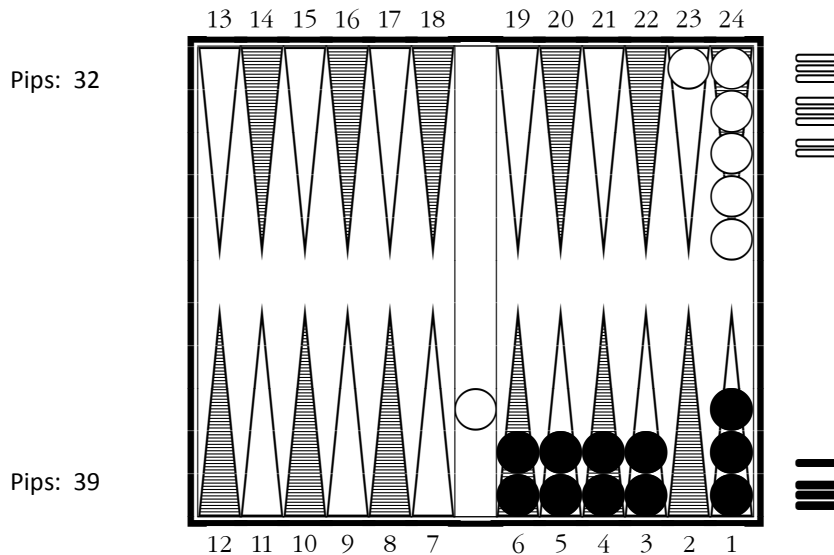
Chess players are used to the concept of “zugzwang” which is where the player whose turn it is would prefer not to move at all as any move will weaken his position. In backgammon zugzwang is not uncommon as a player will quite often have timing problems and would prefer to maintain his position as it is.

The position above is an example of double zugzwang. Both players would prefer that their opponent should move first as whoever does so will irreparably weaken their position. With black on roll his equity is approximately 0.51. With white on roll black’s equity rises to 0.61. Black’s ideal scenario would be that he could double in this position and then ask white to roll! In a money game with black on roll he is not quite strong enough to double.

The position actually occurred in the Double Fives weekly tournament. In a match to 7 points black trailed by 3 points to 5. This match score is quite interesting. The trailing player should double if he has a good chance of winning a gammon. The leader needs only 20% (rather than the normal 25%) winning chances to take, provided there is not a huge gammon threat. After long thought, Julian Fetterlein playing black doubled and after even longer thought The Doyen playing white dropped.

Both the double and the drop were correct. At 3-5 and with a reasonable gammon threat this is an excellent pressure double. Although white will win this position 33% of the time this is offset by the number of gammons he loses when one, two or more of his men get closed out by black. White has to let this game go and play from 5-4 ahead.

This is an excellent example of how tournament and money play can differ. For money black should double and white should take, but in a match black should double and white must drop.



Non-trivial Bear-Off (p24)

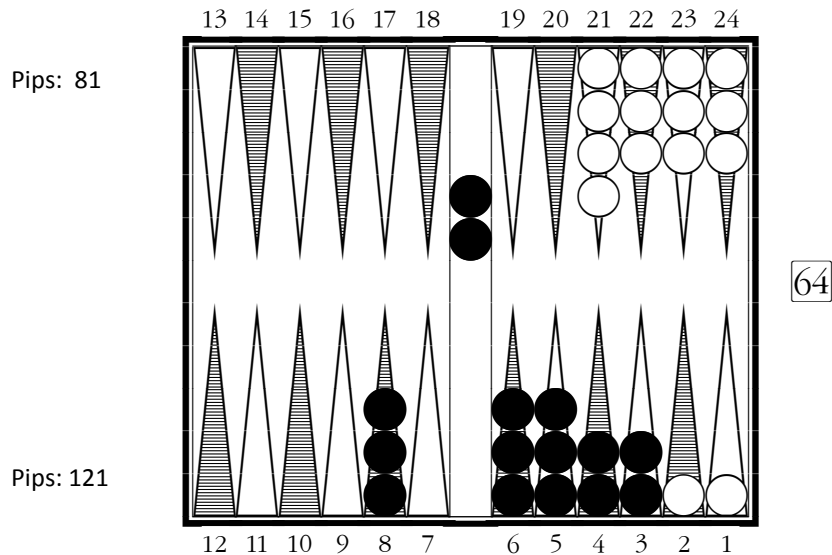
Back to where we left off last week. It is double match point and black has a 53 to play. How would you play it: (a) 6/1, 6/3 or (b) 5/2, 5/off?

The first important point here is that you at least see the possibility of playing 5/2, 5/off. Many players would automatically make the “forced” move 6/1, 6/3. How to evaluate such a position? The first thing is to look at the number of cross-overs (a cross-over moves a man from one quadrant of the board to the next or off the board). Here black needs 11 cross-overs and white also needs 11 (4 to bring his man on the bar to his home board and then 7 to bear off). This means the position is close.

The other key factor is the blot on white’s 2-point. If black plays (b) and white enters with 22, 23, 24 or 26 hitting black’s blot then black in turn will have the chance to hit white’s blot, gaining significantly in the race. If white enters with 25 he should still hit the blot on black’s 2-point by playing Bar/23*/18 rather than play Bar/20/18.

The other benefits of (b) are that it takes a man off and maintains the 6-point for another roll. Compare the positions if white rolls 64 after black has made his play. In case (a) white is a big favourite; in (b) he is still on the bar. The downside of (b) is that white may hit and then black may miss in which case white becomes a very big favourite.

Over the board it is difficult to balance these factors but despite all the arguments above in favour of 5/2, 5/off the prosaic 6/3, 6/1 is the correct play. The downside of being hit is just too big to justify leaving a blot exposed unnecessarily. Black wins just over 56% of the time after 6/3, 6/1 but only 53.5% after 5/2*, 5/off.



You Won't Believe it but ... (p65)

Only the first week of February and already an entrant for this year's "You won't believe it but" award. The Ancient Woodpusher (AW) was playing a few friendly games against The Doyen (TD) when this position arose. White is on roll. Should he double?

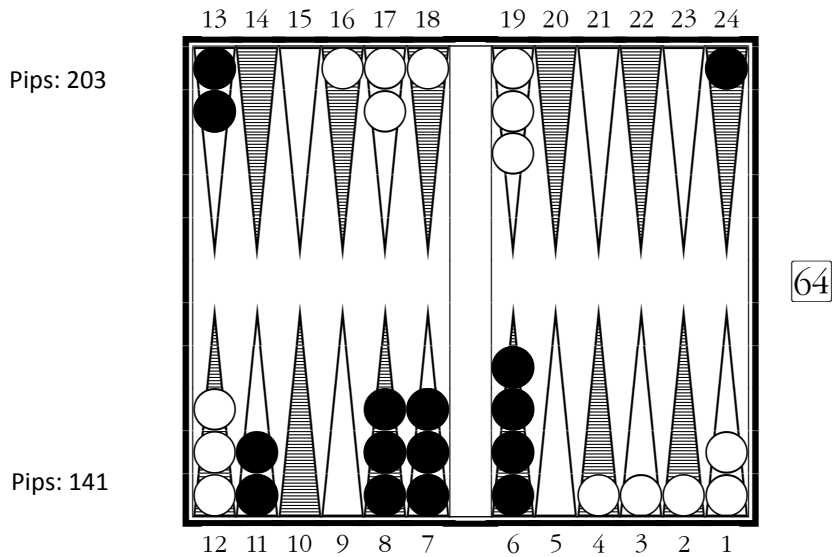
The answer is a resounding no. White is not even the favourite in this position. If he doubles black should beaver (turn the cube to 4 and keep it on his side of the board). Even if white escapes one of his back men from black's home board and black stays on the bar white's double will be borderline at best!

However, TD did double and AW took but didn't beaver. TD's next two rolls were 65 played 24/18, 23/18 and 66 played 18/6(2). AW meanwhile continued to stay on the bar and did so for quite a long time. Eventually he just managed to save the backgammon!

AW of course had seen it all before – after all not for nothing is part of his soubriquet "Ancient" - and he proceeded quietly on with the next game. Not for him the low-flying dice cup or the manic gesticulations of the Tempestuous Turk. He phlegmatically accepted what the fates had dealt him and just got on with it.

There is a real lesson to be learnt from this sorry tale because if you play backgammon long enough this sort of thing is bound to happen to you. If you then spend the next five games chasing the points you have lost from a position such as the one above you will only compound your problems (and your losses).

You must remember that the only important game is the next one. By all means learn from the game that has just been completed but don't dwell on it unnecessarily.

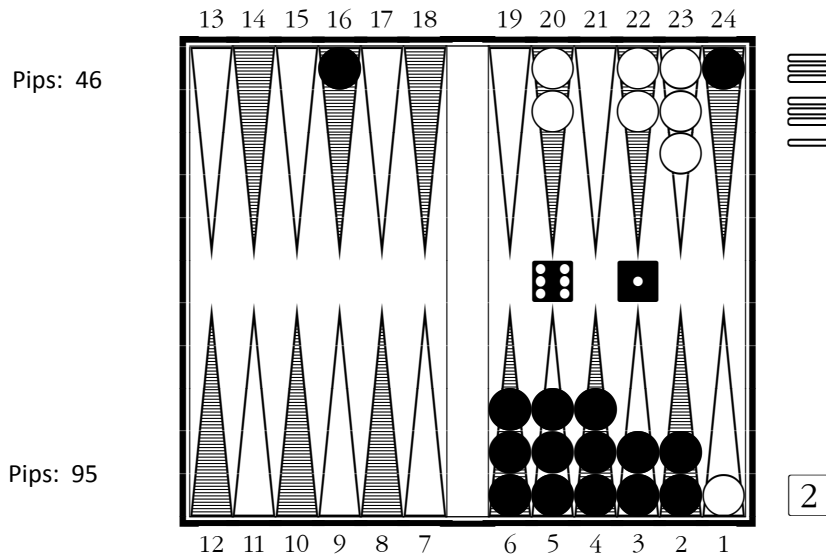


Early Game Double (p67)

When should you offer an initial double? In general you should do so when you have a threat such that your opponent will not be able to take a double on your next turn. In addition the position should be such that you will not immediately lose the advantage whatever happens.

The position above is a classic doubling situation. Black has one man back versus five for white. He has a big lead in the race. He is threatening to hit the man on white's bar-point and/or some of the white men in his home board. If black hits two men, for example with 62 - played 24/18*, 6/4* or 33 - played 7/4(2)*, 6/3(2)* - and white fails to hit back then black will have lost his market by a long way. He must double now to activate his gammon threat (remember the Jacoby Rule states that you cannot win a gammon unless the cube has been turned).

White has a take but it's closer than you might think. With five men back already it will take a long time for white to establish any position of strength and he will often have to play a back game, not ideal by any means. When this position occurred in a chouette black correctly doubled. All the team players took and two of them actually beavered – a huge error of judgement but proving once again that the biggest errors in backgammon are made with the cube.



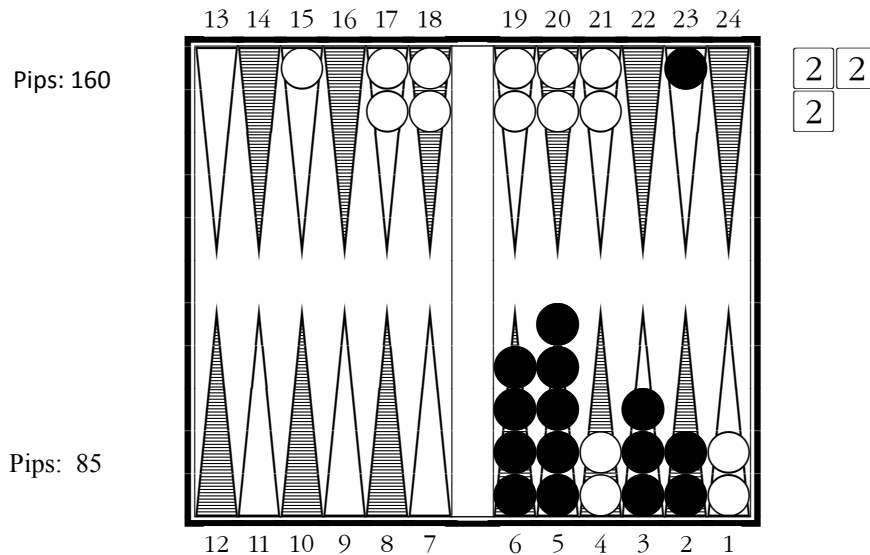
Hit and Split Time (p69)

Strange positions sometimes demand strange plays. When I had this position a few weeks ago I was annoyed not to be able to hit white and quickly played 16/10, 4/3. White ran out with 65 and the game was soon over.

My play was dreadful and I deserved to lose. What should my plan have been? Firstly I should not have given up coverage of the outer boards. I should have played 24/18, 16/15. Then if white rolls a number with a 6 (except 66) I will have a reasonable chance of hitting his escapee. If he doesn't roll a 6 then I can attack him on my 1-point next roll.

But go back to my original statement that I couldn't hit white. Couldn't I? What about the odd looking play 24/18, 2/1*? Now white stays on the bar on 16 of his rolls and I have lots of builders in place to rebuild my board. 4 of white's rolls (14,41,24,42) leave three blots and 4 more rolls (13,31,23,32) are nearly as bad. Only 6 rolls (16,61,26,62,25,52) are really any good for him. If he does manage to escape my coverage of the outer boards is still good.

It's difficult over the board to find plays like this and weigh them against the merits of the more prosaic 24/18, 16/15. In this particular case, however, the equity difference is big and 24/18, 2/1* is clearly the best play. The really important thing is to make sure you consider all the candidate plays.



Freight to Shift (p77)

White, the box, had been playing a 1-4 backgame and had hit an early shot. Black entered with 22 and this position was reached. White redoubled the team of whom one dropped and the other two took. Who was right?

Let's look at game plans. To win white must contain black's trapped man. To do this he will need to make a full prime. At the moment he has only 11 men on his side of the board so he will have to bring reinforcements to achieve his task. For example if he rolls 61 he will play 21/15, 10/9 threatening to make a full prime next time. Black meanwhile will attempt to free his back man by rolling a 1 and then a 6 and at the same time he will want to maintain the strength of his home board.

This is quite easy because he cannot play 5's or 6's and all his other numbers can be played comfortably. If white leaves with one man black will attempt to attack the blot left behind and build a 5-point board.

White still has a lot of work to do to win this position. Even if he builds a prime he still has to escape his back men and bring them home. One mis-timed set of double fives could spell ruin.

However, there is sufficient volatility in the position such that White could lose his market by his next turn. White should redouble now because of this volatility. Black's take is clear but a lot of players would drop, as evidenced by what happened in the chouette from which the position was taken.



The History of Doubling (and Beavers) (p85)

Some time in the 1920s a lone genius or more likely a group of avid gamblers in New York or Long Island came up with the idea of doubling. More or less overnight backgammon became an exciting game rather than just a good one. Initially matchsticks were used to keep track of the value of the game. The doubling cube itself was a later invention.

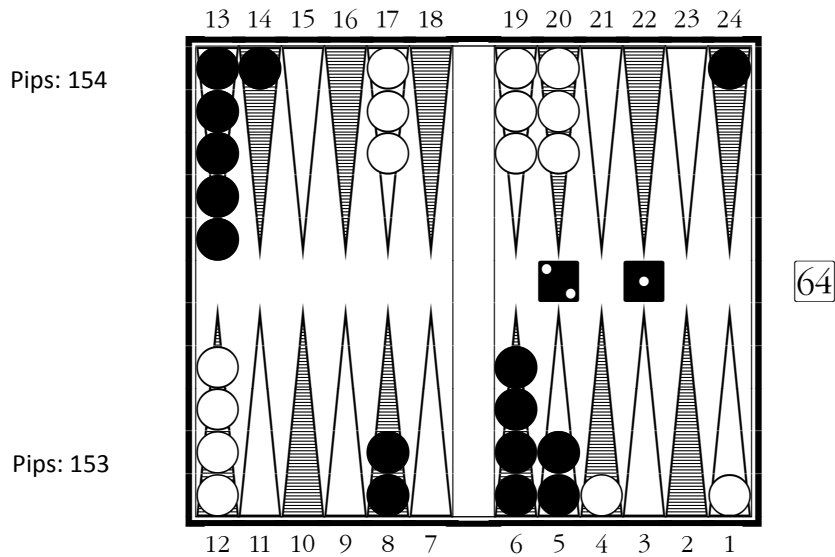
Despite a lot of research the exact origin of doubling remains lost in the mists of time. As there is probably no one left alive today who played in those heady games of the 1920's it may do so forever. A recent discussion on the backgammon newsgroup on the Internet shed no new light on the situation.

Similarly the origin of the beaver (your opponent doubles you, you turn the cube to 4 but keep it on your side of the board) is also a mystery. The first reference I can find in a book is Jacoby and Crawford's "The Backgammon Book" of 1970 where they say: "Beavers have no real part in backgammon, but they give desperate gamblers a chance to turn the cube over faster than otherwise." Of the beaver's cousins, the racoon (to beaver a beaver), the skunk – sometimes known as the aardvark - (to beaver a racoon), etc., I can find no mention.

Backgammon bibliography before 1970 is sketchy and I have only a few books that predate that time. If any reader has any old backgammon books wasting away in their library I would like to hear from them so that we can continue the search into the history of the game.

Author's Note: This article generated quite a debate on the backgammon newsgroup on the Internet but didn't really make a lot of progress in unearthing concrete facts. In the final issue of "Backgammon Today" Bill Robertie is quoted as saying that doubling was introduced at the New York Stuyvesant Club in 1926/27. However having spoken to Bill on the topic it is clear that this is still hearsay as there is no hard evidence to support the proposition. Maybe we will never know.

Author's Note (2015): All of the above was turned on its head with the very recent discovery of a 1930 edition of "Harper's Bazaar". From this it is clear that doubling originated in 1926 on the playboy circuit (Deauville, Biarritz, Cannes and Monte Carlo) in France. It is likely that the first game involving doubling took place in The Travellers Club in Paris. The Harper's Bazaar article and a wealth of other material on this fascinating topic can be found on the Chicago Point Website (see Bibliography).



Early Aggression (p87)

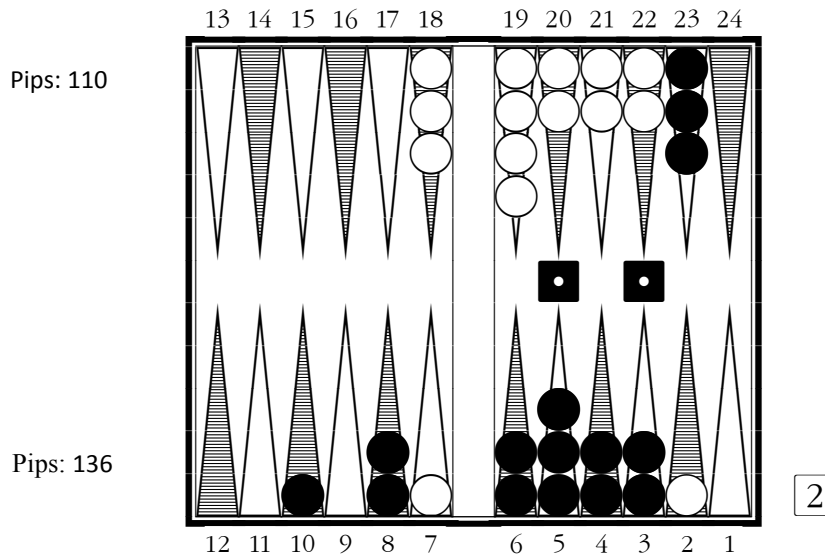
This position is from very early in the game. Black has a 21 to play and has two reasonable options. He can play 14/13, 24/22 with the plan of trying to escape his remaining back man as soon as possible. The alternative approach is to play aggressively with 14/13, 6/4*.

The first option is the gentle approach, hoping to win by stealth and intending to double once the last back man has escaped to safety. By that time white will in all likelihood have built an anchor and the game will move along relatively predictable lines with little volatility.

The aggressive plan seeks to gain an early advantage, create a position of high volatility and quickly reach a point where the cube can be turned. In this variation if white does not return hit from the bar then black could quickly develop a very strong position.

Although the two moves are quite different and the equity difference between them is relatively small the rollout shows that hitting is the better play. Many players are uncomfortable with this type of loose hit, fearing the return hit. However, if white does not return hit then black's position is likely to have improved considerably and of course white fans completely with four rolls.

As with many moves in backgammon you should also take into account how well your opponent is likely to play both types of position before making your decision. I have always favoured aggression in the opening – I like to double as soon as I can, but I recognise that many may feel more comfortable with the quieter play. The key here is to have a plan and then stick to it.



The Difficulty of Double Aces (p89)

This is a very difficult position where black has a myriad of choices with his double 1's: (a) $8/7(2)^*$, $3/2(2)^*$; (b) $8/7(2)^*$, $10/9$, $5/4$; (c) $10/7^*$, $8/7$; (d) $8/7^*$, $5/2^*$; (e) $10/7^*/6$ are but five of the possible plays. Over the board I selected play (b).

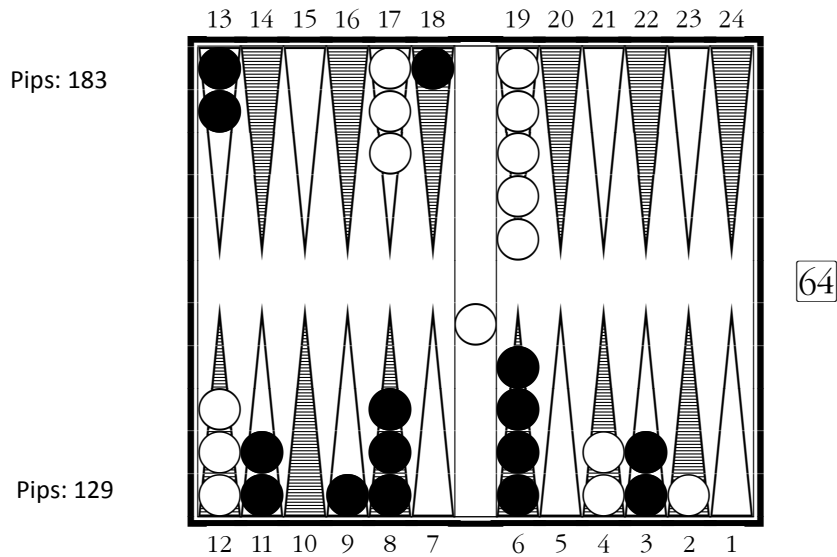
A detailed analysis of all the plays is not possible. Suffice it to say that when studying the position later it came down to a choice between (a) and (b). The two moves support very different plans. (a) is the attempt to win by brute force, putting both of white's back men on the bar and hoping to escape from white's board whilst he languishes on black's bar. (b) is the pure play hoping that either black will escape or that white's prime will crack when he enters from the bar. Which is right?

A rollout using Snowie produced, for the first time in my life, a dead heat. There was no difference in equity between the two plays! Therefore it would seem that my choice of (b) was OK and no worse than (a).

Wrong! There is one small matter to be taken into account and that is the doubling cube. The huge difference between the two plays is that (a) generates far more efficient doubling situations than (b). More on this next week.

As we learn more and more about backgammon it is apparent that the efficiency of the use of the doubling cube is a very major factor in the game. I believe it will come to dominate the development of our theoretical knowledge over the next few years.

Author's Note (2015): Extreme Gammon has $10/9$, $8/7(2)^$, $5/4$ as the best play by 0.013 thus reinforcing how difficult this problem is. Most of the other plays above have very similar equities so can be said to be tied for second. No doubt XG3 will have another opinion!*



1999 World Championship III (p97)

A final look at this year's World Championship final. In this position Granstedt (black), who was leading Carmelli (white) by 8-0 in a match to 25, doubled. Carmelli took. Black won a single game and established a commanding 10-0 lead.

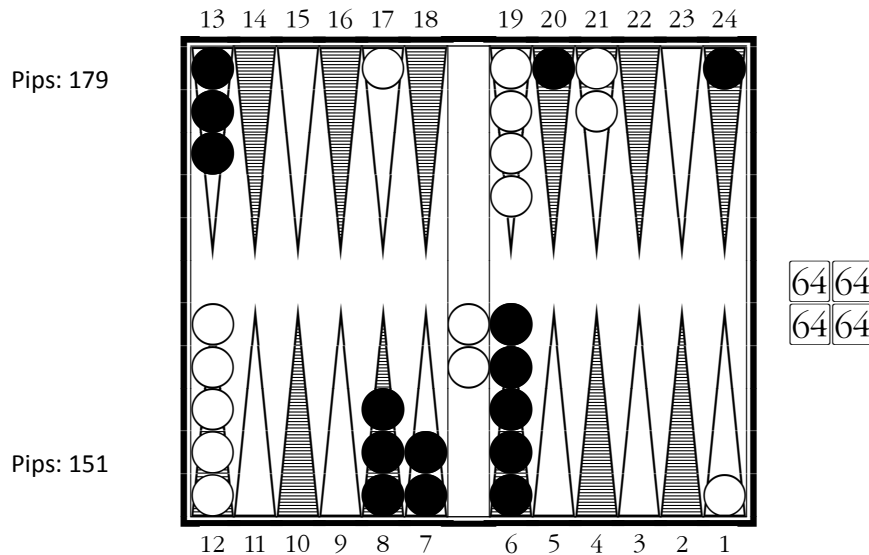
The position ably demonstrates the difference between money and match play. In a money game Carmelli would have had to pass. White's plan is predicated on establishing a good holding game or a 2-4 back game. His plan also requires him to build up his home board (currently non-existent) so that he can contain any hit men.

This is a reasonable plan. The problem is that white doesn't get to execute it all that often. Black has a powerful attack, a 54 pip lead in the race, and white will often end up losing a gammon, his home board still undeveloped. Most of black's numbers play well and some of his doubles, e.g. 44 or 66, give him excellent blitz potential.

The gammon loss percentage pushes white into drop territory. However, at this match score Carmelli gets tremendous value from holding the cube. Imagine him turning the game round, redoubling to 4 and winning a gammon. Suddenly the match would be tied at 8-8!

If Carmelli does later redouble to 4 Granstedt would have to become a huge favourite to ever turn the cube to 8 so his cube actions will be very different from a money game.

What is a clear drop for money becomes a close but correct take at this score because of the change in subsequent cube actions for both players. This is an area of the game that has had little study applied to it but the best match players are able to understand the subtleties and use them to their advantage. Granstedt is one such a player.



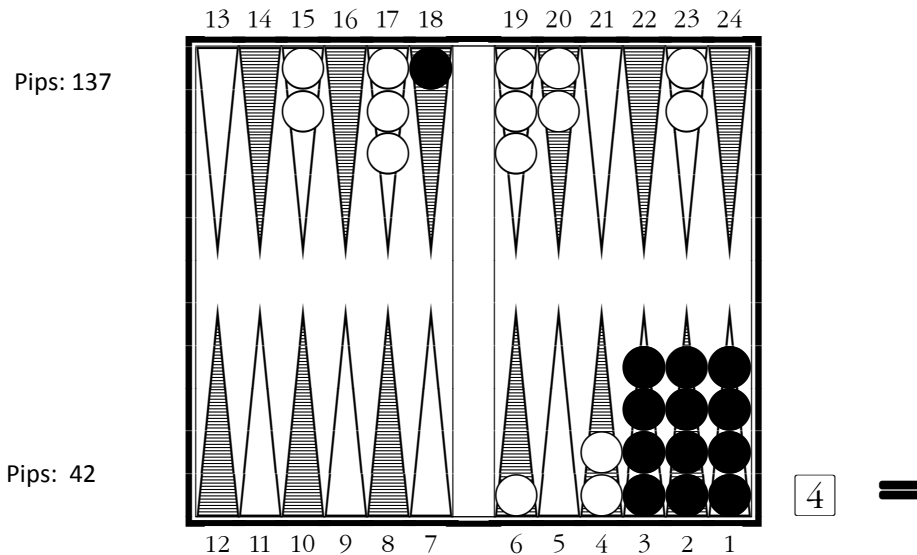
Beware of the Blitz (p98)

Another night of heavy losses at The Diogenes Club had made me question whether I should give up the game. Whenever I took a double in the box I seemed to get gammoned, the position above being a case in point. I was playing white and Mycroft Holmes was the captain. I thought the team's double to be premature and was happy to take. A few rolls later and with four men closed out I wasn't feeling nearly so joyous.

In the comfort of 221B Baker Street, relaxing in front of a roaring fire, I was able to ask the opinion of the great detective. "Holmes, what did you think of that position where I lost a gammon to Mycroft?"

"An excellent question my dear Watson. In my early days of playing this game I too would have thought the double to be premature but as you know my long nights of analysis, aided by my trusty abacus, have made me revise my opinion of such positions. Two men on the bar is a severe handicap. Couple this with the facts that there are two more exposed blots and that black has plenty of men ready to attack your men when they enter and this becomes a marginal take at best and in fact I think it is a pass.

"People constantly underestimate the strength of blitzes and take when they should quietly give up the game. Given that you were in the box and pitted against Mycroft, the only player with talents greater than my own, I think you should have let this one go my dear Watson".



One that Got Away (p101)

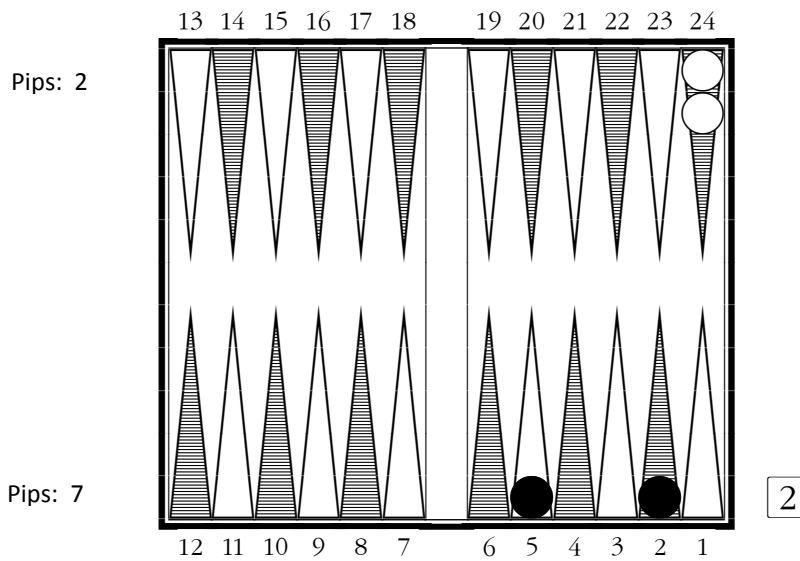
I had this position against Barry Bigplay McAdam the other week. I had borne off two men, BB had hit a shot, and then redoubled me to 4 when he had a double shot to send a second man back. He hit the shot but because of the imperfect nature of his home board he had difficulty containing both of my back men. After a little luck for me (you always need a *little* luck to win these scramble positions) we reached the following position. Should I redouble to 8?

Over the board I didn't redouble but studying the position later I realised I had missed a monster double. A 4 or a 5 with a 1 or a 2 brings my back man closer without leaving a direct shot. Even if I roll something like 62, played 18/10 BB will have 28 shots at the resultant blot but if he misses I may well win a gammon and if he hits his imperfect board still means he has work to do to win the game. Of course, 44, 55 and 66 are wonderful rolls for Black.

In fact the question here is not the double but the take. I should have followed Woolsey's Law (if there is any doubt that this position is a take then it is definitely right to double) and doubled. BB being BB would undoubtedly have taken. A long and detailed analysis shows that taking is the correct action but I should at least have given him the opportunity to make a mistake by passing.

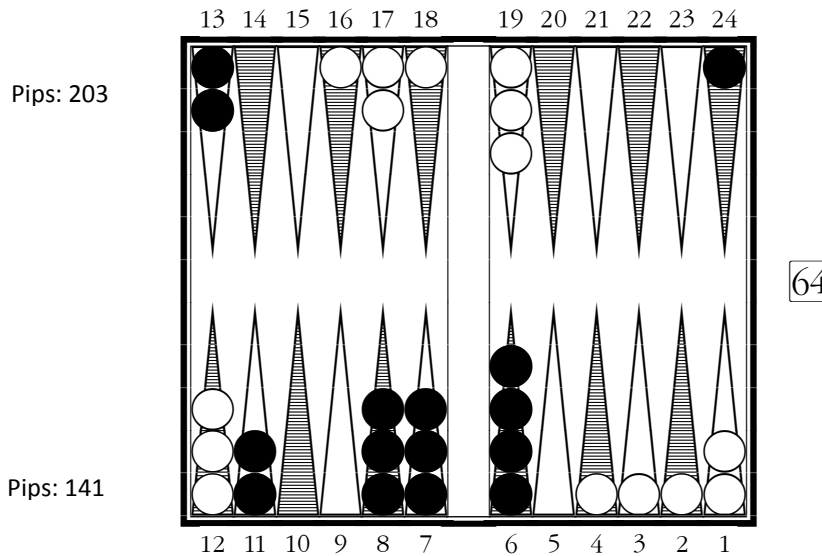
And how did it all end? I effectively ended the game at a stroke by rolling boxes (the backgammon term for double sixes) and won a gammon with no trouble at all – the problem was the cube should have been on 8!

(p117)



He will double (or redouble) this position even though he is only a 53% favourite because his rules tell him that this is a last throw position and any advantage warrants a double. So he is guaranteed to get this right.

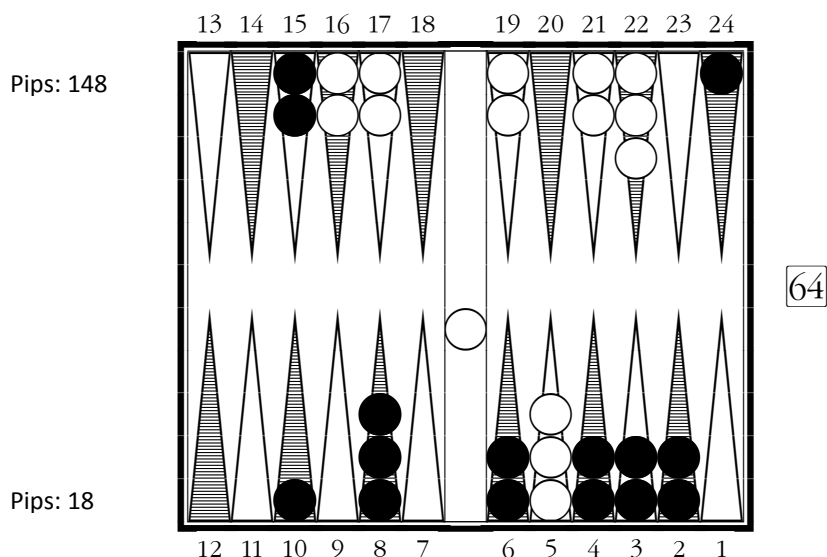
Now let's say in his very next game he reaches this position:



He is on roll as black. Should he double? If he doubles would he expect white to take? In all likelihood his model of backgammon will not include a position like this so he won't have a ready answer. He will have to use the positions in his memory most like this one and the rules that he has built and try to reach a conclusion. He may well get it wrong but if he is astute he will note the position down and study it later. He will then learn that it is a very strong double and only a marginal take. He will file that away in his memory banks for use in another game some time in the future.

(p124)

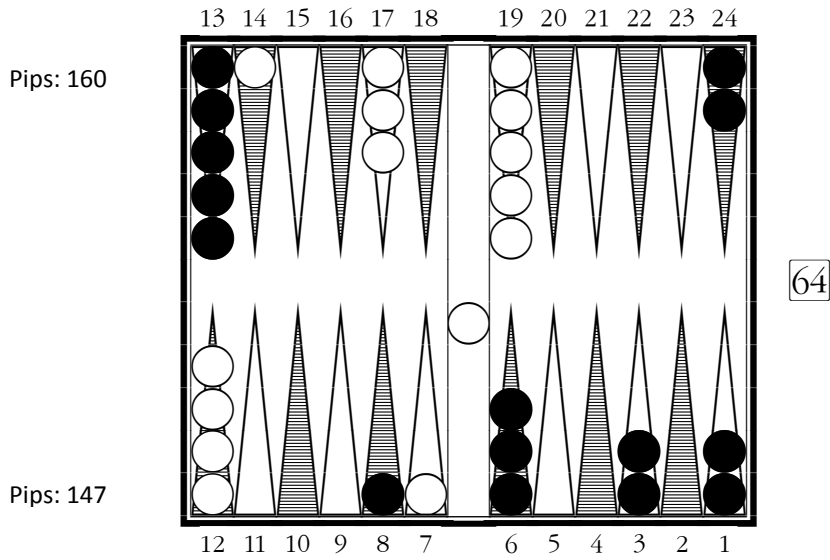
Here is a case in point from one of my own recent matches. I was playing black and trailed 4-5 in a match to 7. Should I have doubled, should white have taken?



In a money game white would have enough chances to win such that he could take the double. If he enters quickly from the bar and can contain black's back man he can later win with a redouble at the appropriate moment. At the 4-5 score white cannot redouble as the 2 points he will get if he wins the game will win him the match. Thus whatever happens black will get to play the game to its conclusion and one lucky roll could turn the game around for him. Also, should white stay on the bar for a while black could quite easily win a gammon and with it the match. These two factors combine to ensure that white must pass this double. In the match I doubled and my opponent correctly dropped.

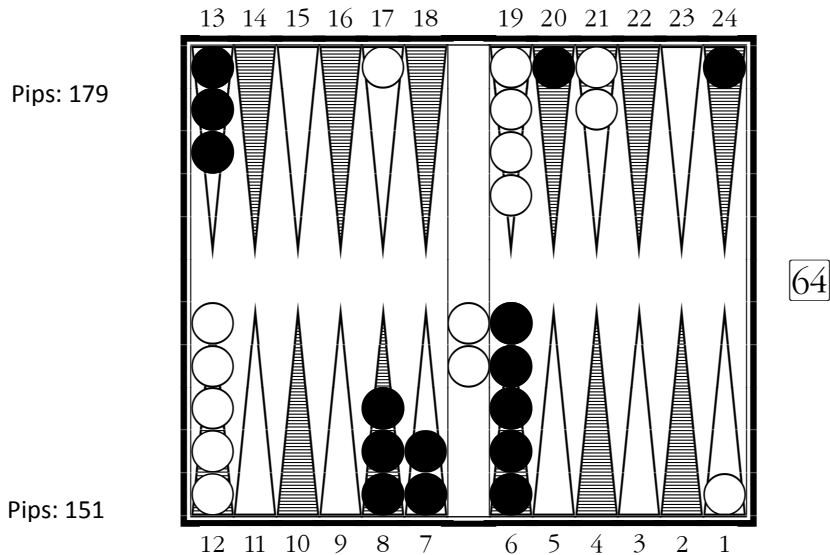
To summarise, be very careful towards the end of a match as the doubling cube assumes characteristics not normally seen in money play. Consider particularly the threat of gammons and the usefulness of the doubling cube to you (or your opponent) at any specific match score. Too often I see players make cube decisions as if they were playing a money game. Remember that you are playing a match and that the score is the overriding factor in most doubling decisions.

(p132)

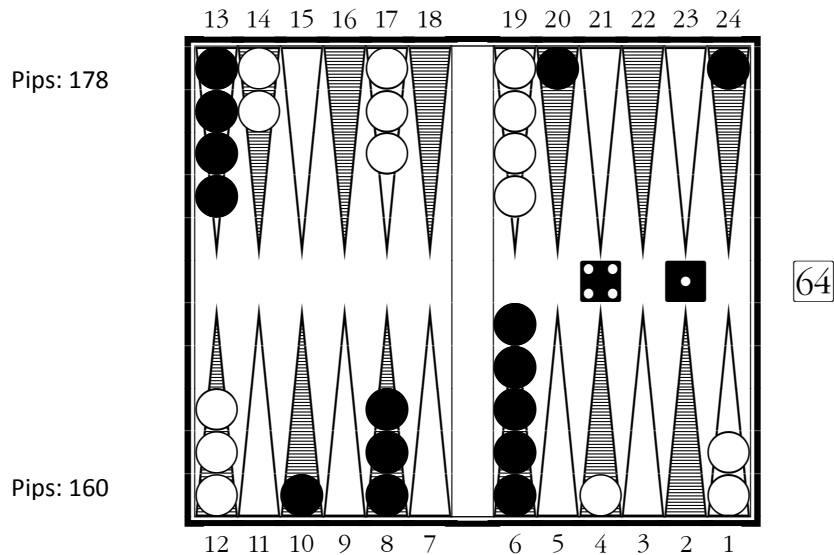


The facts that white's second blot is exposed on black's bar-point to 24 shots and there is another blot on white's 11 point make this position a double and a pass. These two positions should be part of everybody's backgammon "knowledge".

As soon as you have two men on the bar even against a 1 or 2 point board then beware. The following position came up in a game between Paul Magriel (known universally as X-22) and his audience at a BIBA tournament in January 1998:



X-22, playing white, had just rolled 66 and stayed on the bar with both men. The audience moves were being decided by voting. In this position the audience voted by a large majority to double. X-22 accepted saying that he thought this was an easy take and that the audience should have waited to double.



Race versus 5-Point (p158)

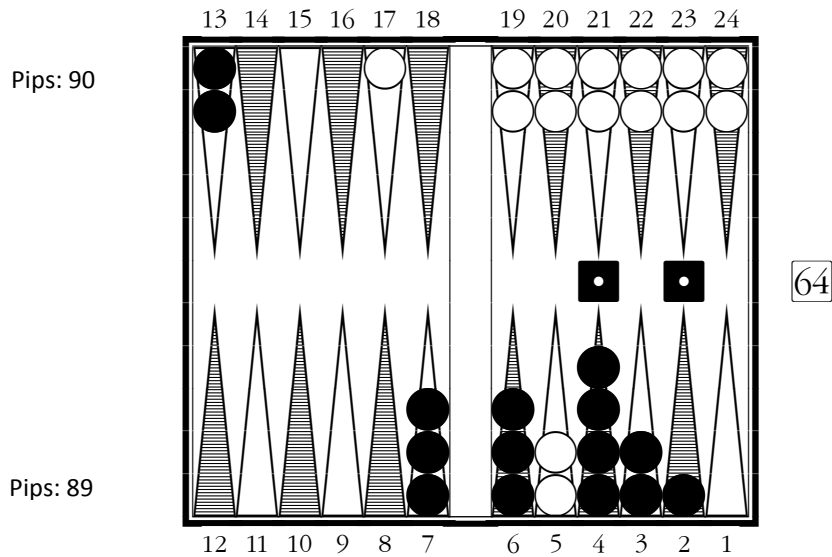
A few weeks ago we revisited Barclay Cooke’s old adage “it’s never wrong to make the 5-point”. Here’s another dilemma from Robertie’s “501 Essential Backgammon Problems”. Should black with a 41 to play take the security of his opponent’s 5-point with (a) 24/20, 10/9 or make his 9-point with (b) 13/9, 10/9?

Barclay would have had no doubts and made his opponent’s 5-point. When I looked at the problem I also instinctively made the 5-point. Robertie and our silicon friend Snowie disagree, both making the 9-point. A roll-out with Snowie shows a significant equity difference between the two plays. Why should that be?

The answer lies in the fact that backgammon is fundamentally a race. In this position black has got off to a good start as he will lead by 23 pips after the roll. (a) gives white 19 numbers to hit black’s blot and equalise the race. In contrast (b) leaves white 10 numbers to make his own 5-point, at the same time putting black on the bar. Admittedly these 10 numbers do more damage to black’s position than the 19 hitting numbers in the other variation. However it would seem that nearly doubling the opponent’s good numbers is giving too much away and black should take the risks associated with playing (b).

It is problems such as this which can fundamentally alter your thinking about the game and lead to a re-assessment of your backgammon model. The lessons of such a problem can be re-applied many times to similar positions and lead to an incremental improvement in your game. Thus is progress made.

Author’s Note (2015): All well and good but a 2015 rollout has the two plays deadheating. As the bots become more powerful and the neural nets become more sophisticated we are going to see further refinements in both strategy and tactics. This is now a position where two game plans are equally valid and the choice between them could well be influenced by the strengths and weaknesses of your opponent. Time will tell.



A Tricky Double One (p162)

Double 1 is often a very difficult roll to play because of the number of choices it presents. Many is the time I have seen someone completely overlook the best play of a double 1 because they have failed to identify all the possible moves.

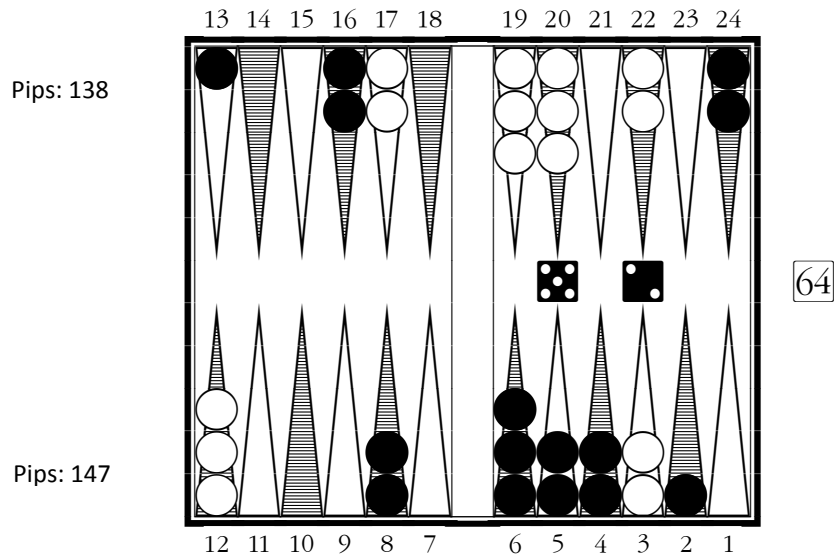
This double 1 is a little easier as there are really only two moves to consider: (a) 13/11(2); (b) 13/12(2), 4/2. The question is should black be trying to block white's sixes with (a) or trying to make sure he can get his men home without leaving white a direct shot by playing (b)?

There are a number of factors that should influence black's thinking: the race is close with black leading by only 5 pips after the roll; after either play black can probably play a couple of rolls without having to move his rearmost men; white will shortly run with one back checker and keep his perfect home board in case he can hit a shot.

The first factor would indicate move (a) whilst the second factor gives no strong indication but the position after (b) is a little more flexible as black has more choice with his sixes. The key is the third factor. If white runs a man black may want to attack white's last man in which case he is better off having the two men on his 11-point. On balance this indicates that move (a) is better.

Backgammon being the game it is black actually made move (b) and white promptly punished him in the most dramatic manner by rolling 66 and won with the cube on his next roll.

A later rollout confirmed that 13/11(2), blocking White's sixes is easily the best move.



Swift Punishment (p163)

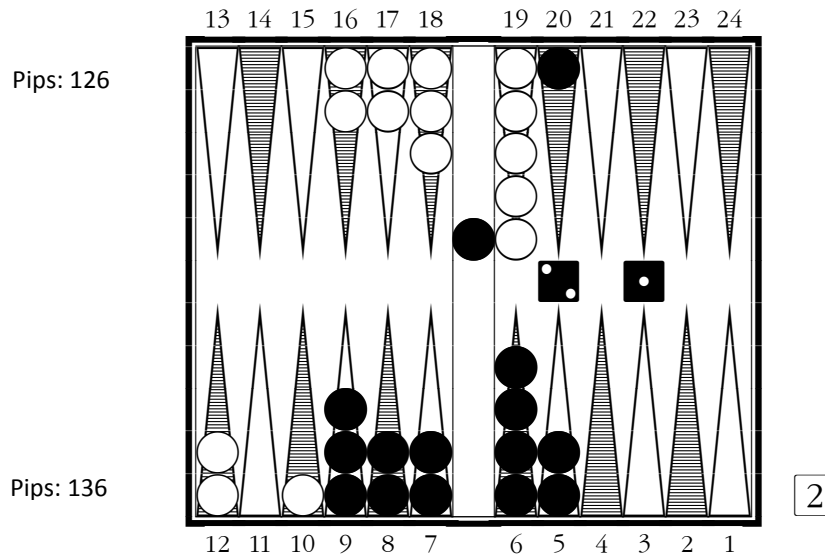
This position occurred in the semi-final of the 1999 Giant Jackpot in Istanbul between Jerry Grandell (white) and Mike Senkiewicz (black). The score was 18-18 in a match to 25 and Senkiewicz had a 52 to play.

He could try 16/11, 13/11 but that would leave a blot as well as leaving the back men isolated so the choices would appear to be (a) 13/6, or (b) 13/8, 6/4. Superficially there doesn't appear to be much between the plays and Senkiewicz chose (b) in order to diversify his spare men. However, towards the end of the game it is important to check how specific numbers play and in this position Senkiewicz has trouble with 4's and 5's. (a) gives him more flexibility to play these numbers and is therefore the correct play. Both JellyFish and Snowie show an equity difference of 0.04 between the two plays. An equity difference of 0.03 is normally reckoned to be a significant error so we can mark Senkiewicz's choice as a bad mistake.

The denouement was swift and the punishment harsh. After Grandell had rolled 32 and played 13/8 Senkiewicz rolled 54 and played 16/7 leaving two blots but duplicating white's hitting number. Grandell correctly doubled, Senkiewicz took (also correct), Grandell rolled 64 hitting with 22/18*, 22/16 and went on easily to win a gammon.

Senkiewicz won the next game but that was his last point. Grandell then won an undoubled backgammon to win the match 25-19 and subsequently went on to win the final – one of three major triumphs for him in 1999.

Author's Note (2015): My initial analysis was too harsh. XG disagrees with JellyFish and Snowie and there is virtually no equity difference between 13/6 and 13/8, 6/4 with the former winning by a hair's breadth. Apologies to Mike Senkiewicz!



A Lesson in Priorities (p175)

London basked in a late August heatwave and most of the criminals seemed to have gone on holiday along with the rest of the population. Holmes and I relaxed with a few training games in our rooms at 221B.

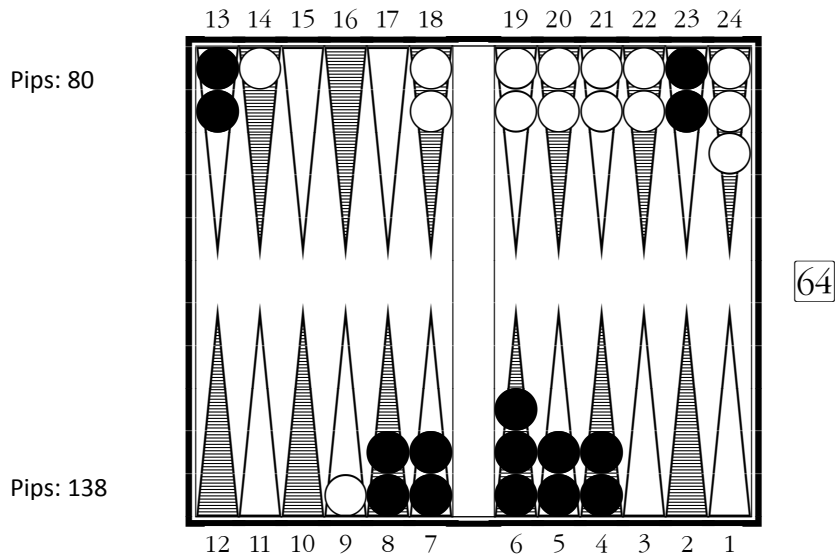
Holmes had doubled me early, got into a few difficulties, but had just rolled a fortuitous 63 and played 24/15* putting me on the bar. I now had a 21 to play and was considering my options. As I pondered my move Holmes interrupted my thoughts.

“Excellent Watson, I see you are deciding on a plan and then on your move. Let’s see if your thoughts are the same as mine. Firstly, you are not far behind in the race so you would like to make my 5-point and play a holding game. Secondly, I have a fragile 4-point prime that I would like to roll forward by attacking the blot on my 5-point if I can. Finally you would like to improve your own home board in case you hit a blot.”

“Precisely Holmes,” I replied. “but I am having difficulty choosing between bar/24, 6/4 and bar/22 as both moves address elements of that plan. What would you advise?”

“A difficult decision Watson. Entering on the 24 point keeps the blot out of harm’s way and gives more numbers to make my 5-point next move. However, if I use the men from my 8 and 9-points to attack your blot on my 5-point you will have very few return shots from the bar. I think that the added pressure that a man on my 3-point would put on my outside prime makes bar/22 the right play by a small margin.”

Author’s Note (2015): This is actually a position where the top four plays are within 0.006 of each other with bar/23, 6/5 just edging out bar/22; bar/23, 9/8 and bar/24, 6/4. Holmes’ comments are still valid but perhaps he didn’t see everything!



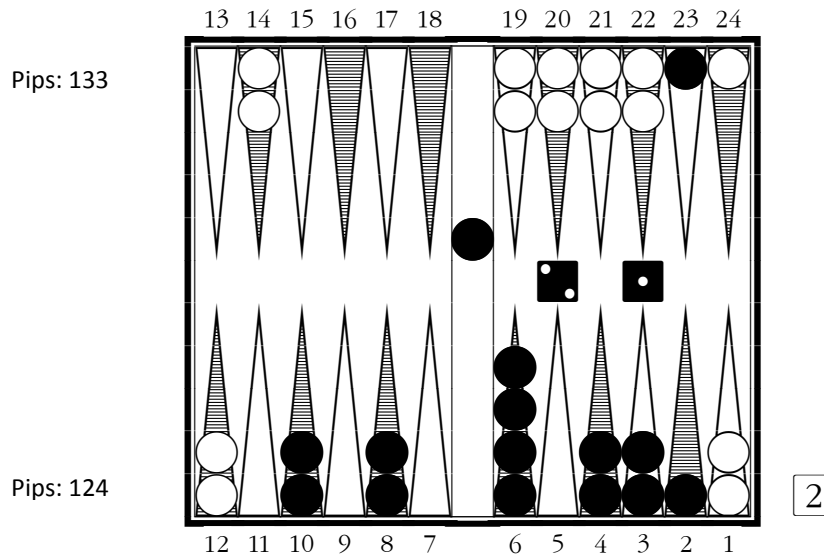
The 2-Point Holding Game (p177)

The 2-point holding game is an interesting animal. Like its relative the ace-point holding game if it is well timed it can lead to a late reversal of fortunes – the very essence of exciting backgammon. Unlike the ace-point game it leads to far fewer gammon losses. This is because it is easier to escape men as the enemy blockade is dismantled earlier in the bear-in.

It is surprising how often the player of a well-timed 2-point game can take a double. The position above came up in one of Paul Lamford's games in Monte Carlo. White, on roll, doubled. After some minutes thought Paul accepted the cube.

At first sight black does not appear to have sufficient winning chances to take. But let's look in detail. Seven rolls (11,22,44,12,21,13,31) leave a direct shot. Ten rolls (66,63,36,64,46,65,56,54,45,33) leave an indirect shot at one blot and six numbers (62,26,42,24,43,34) leave indirect shots at two blots. In addition to these shots on the next roll white will often leave indirect shots on subsequent rolls and may have trouble clearing his bar-point.

Finally there is the bear-off itself. If black stays in white's home board until the end the 2-point game generates a shot 70% of the time. These combined chances of a shot give black sufficient chances to take the double. Note that this would not be possible without two key factors: he has a 5-point prime ready to contain any hit blot; he will be able to use the cube at the appropriate moment to redouble white and give him a difficult take/drop decision.



Duplicate Backgammon – Part 2 (p183)

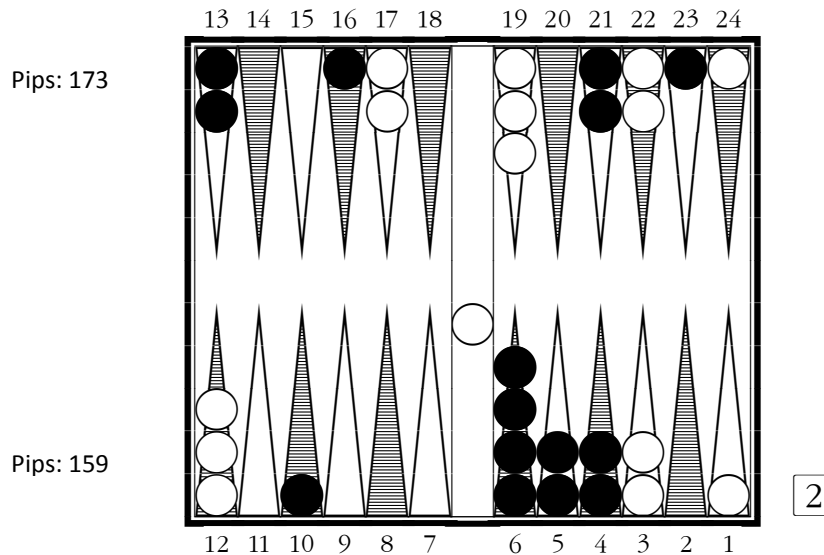
When this position occurred between Phillip Martyn (Black) and Walter Cooke (White) in the international duplicate match in October 1973, Martyn played bar/23, 3/2, ensuring that he had only one blot. Cooke hit with a 62 and went on (after much excitement) to win a gammon. In his book Barclay Cooke criticised the play and considered that bar/23, 6/5 was a much stronger play although he did say it was hard to find over the board.

This is one of backgammon's most celebrated positions and was the subject of an in-depth analysis in *Inside Backgammon* when it appeared as a problem some years ago. In 1991 bar/23, 6/5 just edged out bar/23, 3/2. Time moves on and we now have computer programs that can perform rollouts with a live cube.

I performed an extensive rollout on the position and confirmed that bar/23, 6/5 is the right move albeit only by a small margin over bar/23, 3/2. When white fails to hit either of black's blots, black can quickly build a strong home board and offer a very strong redouble. This ability to create the redoubling possibility is the difference between the two plays.

In the match itself the Americans quickly gained the upper hand and whilst Dwek continued to play to his own high standards, Martyn became demoralised by the loss of some early gammons to Walter Cooke, and his play suffered accordingly. The Americans were comfortable winners. Although Cooke published the first eight games of the match the other 32 have been lost in the sands of time. I would be interested to hear from anyone who might know the whereabouts of the records of those 32 games.

Author's Note: After publication of the first edition of this book Jake Jacobs told me that David Dor-El, author of "The Clermont Book of Backgammon", has the missing games but also has an inflated estimate of their worth. For the moment then we have an impasse, but who knows what the future might bring?



Woolsey's Law Revisited (p213)

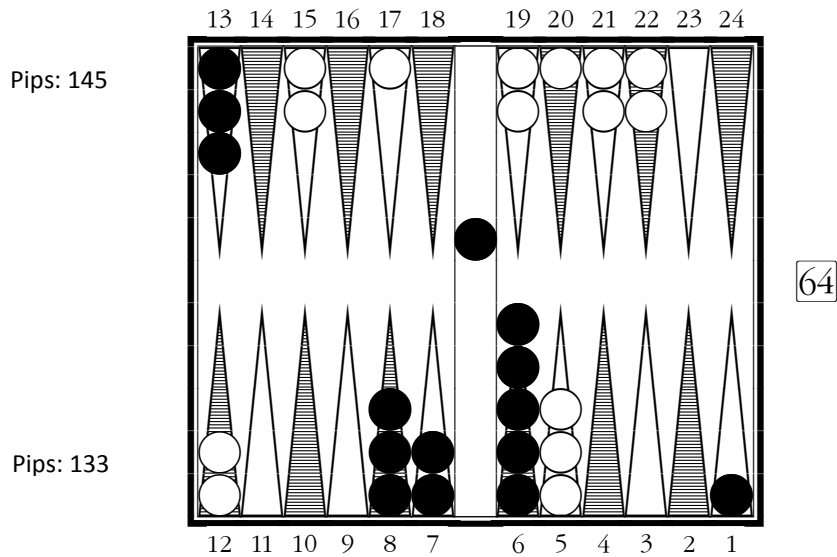
Woolsey's Law states that if you are considering a double and you are not 100% sure that your opponent has a take then it is ALWAYS correct to double. Time and again application of this simple precept has improved my results.

It was all the more galling therefore when I forgot to apply it when playing a match against John Clark in the Bell weekly tournament. At 0-0 in a match to 9 John had doubled me early, I had slowly turned the game round, and he had just fanned against my 3-point board.

I knew I had the advantage and thought this may well be a double but decided to "wait a roll". On my next roll the game was over and I cashed two points with a redouble (although I probably should have played on for a gammon!). I should have applied Woolsey's Law. Is this a 100% take? Certainly not! White a man on the bar, a poorer home board than black and is behind in the race. Many of black's next rolls will leave white with a potential gammon loss.

After the game John said he had not made up his mind whether he would take or pass but was just glad I hadn't doubled. Application of Woolsey's Law would have made this John's problem instead of my mistake.

In fact later analysis showed that this is a very strong double and a pass (just). Having four men back means that white loses a gammon in nearly half the games that he loses. "Waiting a roll" is probably the single most expensive bad habit in backgammon so remember - apply Woolsey's Law.



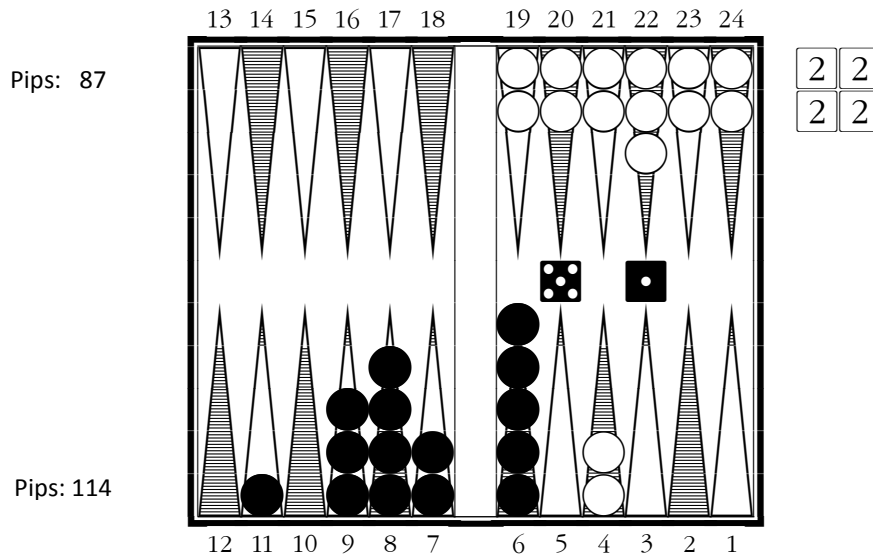
A Champion's Vision (p218)

Double World Champion Michael Meyburg was in town last week and contributed to a lively chouette at the Double Fives. What impressed me most over the course of the evening was his control and concentration. He never hurried or made a decision based on emotion. He calculated deeply when he had to and gave some excellent pressure doubles.

In his first game in the box, playing black, he faced a strong double from the team in this week's position. I know many a player who would scoop up this cube without a moment's thought reasoning that white may not cover his blot on his 5-pt and, even if he does, black will have only one back man to white's three and good winning chances.

Meyburg saw further. White actually covers his blot with 29 of his rolls and even when he doesn't he can play very aggressively because of the state of black's home board. The fact that white holds black's 5-pt is another influencing factor. Black cannot counter attack - his only plan is to hope to run his back man to safety. This plan does not work often enough and black loses too many gammons to be able to take this double.

Meyburg reasoned this out over the board and calmly dropped the double. A mark of a champion in any game is the ability to know when to take risks and when to surrender gracefully. Here Meyburg was spot on with his analysis and went home richer as a result of this decision and a good run in the box later in the evening.



Disagreement at The Bell (p227)

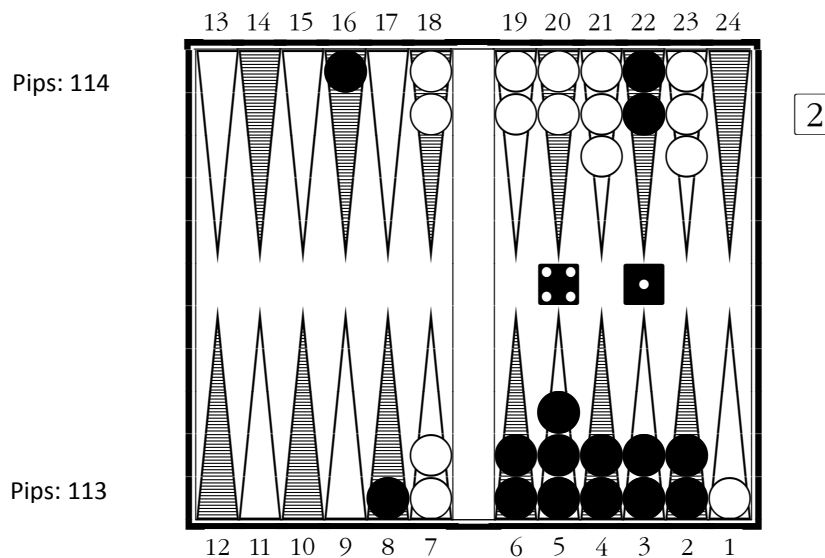
This position caused an argument when it occurred in a chouette at The Bell. Black has two choices with this 51: (a) 8/7, 6/1; (b) 8/7, 11/6. The captain chose move (b) but was he right?

Let's do what the team players failed to do in the heat of the moment and try to analyse the position objectively.

Black trails heavily in the race so to win he is likely to have to prime at least one of white's men. White is not favourite to escape a man next roll so black should be aiming to make his 5-pt as the next point in his prime. If he plays (a) he will have 24 rolls to make his 5-pt next roll; with (b) he will have 16 rolls - advantage play (a). If white does escape one man then black will want to attack the last man. In this variation the blot on the 1-pt from (a) could prove to be a disadvantage as it will often give white a direct shot from the bar - advantage move (b).

Play (a) does suffer significantly when white rolls the hitting 61. With the number of outfield men that black has he will lose quite a few gammons after being hit.

How then to make our choice? Actually the two plays are extremely close and the deciding factor is when White rolls precisely 61 and goes on to win a gammon. It turned out the captain made the right play though the gammon losses may not have been uppermost in his mind.



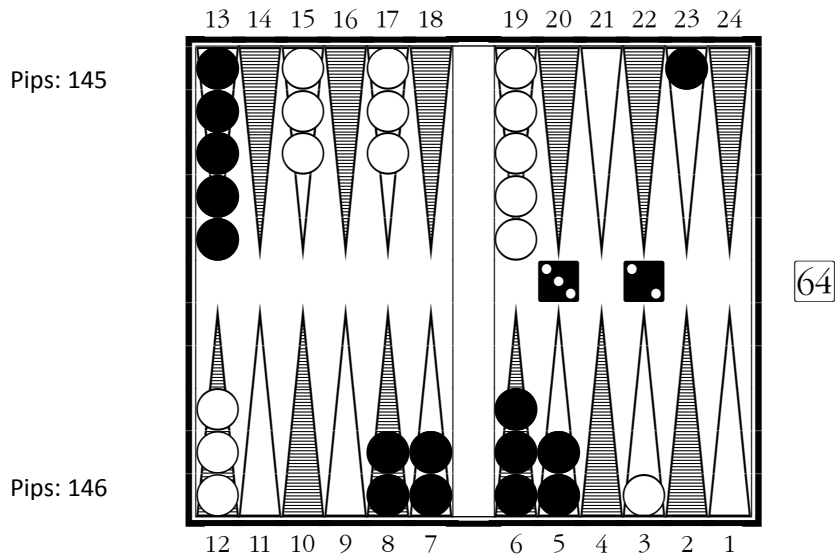
Softly, Softly, Catchee Monkey (p228)

It is not often that the gentle approach is the right one in backgammon as it is a game that in the main rewards aggression. This week's position is an exception. It is taken from a match between Paul Magriel and Vlado Dobrich published in this month's BIBAFAX, the newsletter of the British Isles Backgammon Association.

In this type of position it is normally correct to attack the man on black's 1-pt and Magriel did just that by playing 5/1*, 16/15. The first thing to notice is that Magriel misplayed the 1. He should have played 5/1*, 2/1 which would have given him a direct 6 to cover next roll if Dobrich fanned.

But what about the quiet waiting move 8/3? If white rolls a 6 then black will regret not hitting but look what happens if white rolls one of his 25 non-sixes. Nearly all non-doubles damage white's position. He will either have to weaken his home board or give up black's bar point. In addition black will have two men aimed directly at the white blot on his 1-pt next roll.

If black plays 8/3 then unless white rolls a 6 he is in what our chess colleagues would call Zugzwang – a compulsion to move that weakens a position. As Dobrich was not favourite to roll a 6 Magriel should have chosen the quiet 8/3. These moves are difficult to spot over the board because we are used to playing certain positions in tried and tested ways. I doubt even Magriel gave much thought to 8/3 but computer analysis shows it to be the best move.



One Against One (p232)

Several years ago I had a series of lessons from Paul Magriel. One of the themes that we covered was one man back against one man back. Paul's game plan for these situations was quite simple and can be summed up in the phrase "hit and run".

It's always good to get a timely reminder of lessons that one should have learnt. I was playing a training match against Snowie when this position arose with myself as black. I thought about 13/11, 13/10 but decided this was a little too open and so played 13/8.

Imagine my surprise when Snowie (very politely) informed me that this was a blunder and that the correct move was 13/11, 6/3*. Immediately I went to my notes to see what Magriel had said: "Hitting keeps your opponent off balance. It stops him escaping, it stops him making a point in his own board and awkward entering rolls quite often expose another blot (in this case 61 and 62 are examples). He isn't a favourite to hit back and who knows he may even fan. This should be enough to convince you that hitting is the right tactic in these situations."

And indeed it was. All of Magriel's points apply in this position and an extensive rollout shows that 13/11, 6/3* is right by a long way. What is even more important is that with the cube in the middle not hitting becomes a blunder of gigantic proportions as the hitting play leads to an optimal cube turn far more often than any other move.

The original lesson having been reinforced so powerfully will hopefully mean that I will play these positions correctly for the foreseeable future.

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The Author

Any comments or queries with regard to this book can be addressed to:

chris.bray@btconnect.com