



Hoosier
Backgammon
Club

November 2003



HBC's Sunday *Before* Turkey Day Tournament

Sunday, November 23rd, 2003
Arnie's Restaurant (875-7034)
3443 West 86th Street (just west of WalMart)

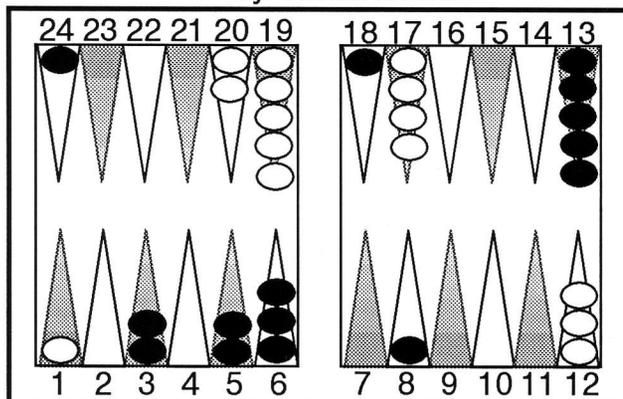
Registration: 12 Noon
Play Begins: 12:30 PM

Open & Limited Divisions
Format: Main-Consolation

Colts @ Buffalo 1:00 PM

Offense OR Defense

by Chuck Bower



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Position One

Score 0-0 in a 7-Point Match.
Black to Play 6-1?

Position One was posted recently on the **GammOnLine Forum** by Robert-Jan Veldhuizen of The Netherlands (**Zorba** being his more recognizable online nickname). **GammOnLine** is Kit Woolsey's internet magazine which features regular monthly issues and daily discussions at the cutting edge of backgammon theory and practice by some of the games most progressive thinkers. Contributors' names which attendees of our annual Indiana Open might recognize include Gregg Cattanach, Ilia Guzei, Mary Hickey, Jeb Horton, Neil Kazoross, Steve Mellen, John O'Hagan, Sam Pottle, and Matt Reklaitis. The subscription rate is \$36 per year and well worth it. The ULR is www.GammOnLine.com.

As in many competitions, we are often put in the position of deciding between an offensive minded play and a defensive one. This is particularly true early in the game, as is the case in Position One. What are the deciding factors to help one reach the right decision? Let's use Position One to look at various considerations.

Three candidate moves have value: make the opponent's barpoint: 24/18 (defensive) with 6/5 being preferable over moving up (24/23), make your own barpoint: 13/7, 8/7 (offensive), or hit loose on your acepoint: 8/1x (offensive).

The last candidate is weakest here and can be eliminated rather quickly. Hitting one checker low in your homeboard early in the game should be for one of two reasons. Either it gives you good gammon chances or you need **tempo**. This latter term says that if you don't hit you will be left wide open to being attacked on your opponent's side of the board. To blitz you need a lot of checkers on your side of the board, usually 10 or more. It also helps a lot to have two opponent checkers on the bar. Neither of those factors is present here, making blitzing a poor primary plan. Since alternate plays (involving 24/18) alleviate the need for tempo, hitting loose is relegated as being unnecessary so 8/1x is out.

1) Safe-vs-bold: Chapter 16 of Magriel's classic book **BACKGAMMON** is a foundation of early game thinking with a series of questions about number of checkers back for each side, number of homeboard points held by each side, and anchor ownership by each side. Here Black has more checkers back, arguing for a bold play. Neither side owns an anchor, so that criterion leads to a neutral recommendation. Black has more homeboard points, another indicator for a bold play. In summary, Magriel's standard tool indicates Black should make a bold play. Moving 13/7, 8/7 is bolder than 24/18, 6/5.

2) Assets: Assets are important. Here both 24/18, 6/5 and 13/7, 8/7 add valuable points. There is no clear preference from this indicator.

3) Race: According to Robertie, backgammon is fundamentally a race. If either leading or close in a race, avoiding swings (such as a big loss by getting hit) can be important. When ahead in the race, try and set the checkers so that the position

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can be fairly easily turned into a race. When behind in the race, try to position yourself to take advantage of a big swing and make your opponent's goal of turning the position into a race as difficult as possible. Here White leads in the pipcount but isn't a prohibitive favorite. Black should give some weight to the race. Moving 24/18 facilitates this. On the other hand, keeping the back checkers split and hindering White's escape are good plays when behind in the race. These argue for 13/7, 8/7. Again this indicator doesn't give a clear preference for either play.

4) Distribution of checkers: Black's checker locations would benefit from unstacking the 13-point. Also, after 24/18 there is no attractive ace. 6/5 is the least-of-evils but Black would prefer to keep the builder on the 6-point. From a distribution standpoint, Black is better off making the 7-point.

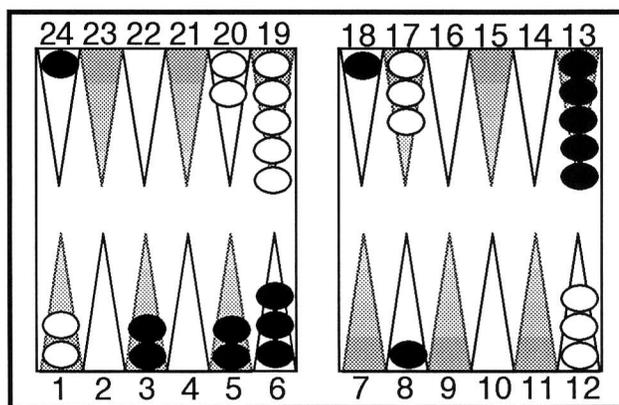
5) Game plan: 24/18, 6/5 puts Black solidly into a holding game. Having the race within reach, this is not merely a **stay in the game** approach but a potential winning game plan as well. Moving 13/7, 8/7 is a priming strategy. With only one opponent's checker to trap, this is usually not right. Unless you can build a 5- or 6-prime quickly, it's quite difficult to prime a single checker. If Black had one or two more checkers on the homeside, a blitz game plan would be promising. As we concluded early when eliminating 8/1x, this strategy is unlikely to work. Conclusion: 24/18, 6/5 leads to a more coherent game plan.

6) Gammons: Anchors, especially high in your opponent's board, protect against gammon losses. The opponent's barpoint, although not truly an anchor (since he can still make a closed board), is a strong asset in gammon avoidance. From the offensive standpoint, making the 7-point leads to more gammon wins. Still, with only one checker trapped you need to get more checkers in place to carry out a blitz, or send another checker back. Here there seems to be a bit of an edge to avoiding getting gammoned (24/18) compared to increasing your own gammon chances (making 7-point). Still, the two tend to offset so let's call this factor neutral as well.

7) Doubling cube: The cube is centered giving both players the opportunity to use it first. Black can render the cube useless to White for quite a while by simply making the 18-point. Making the 7-point doesn't go this far. White is a roll or two away of escaping the back checker. In addition, with Black's back checkers split White can go on the offensive and an awkward slip or two can add significantly to the gammon threats, quickly bringing a double into White's arsenal. Basically,

after 24/18 there is little White can do over the next several rolls that can blow Black out of the game. That is not the case after White makes the 7-point. 24/18, 6/5 has the edge here.

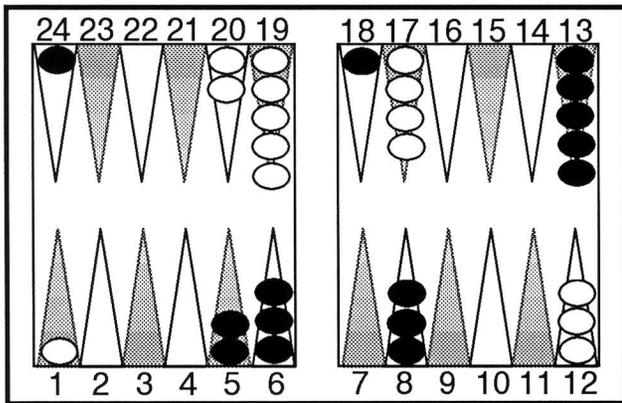
So where are we? There are a lot of conflicting factors: Items 1 and 4 favor 13/7, 8/7. Items 5 and 7 favor making the 18-point. The other three issues (2, 3, 6) are neutral. It looks like a stalemate! To resolve this we need to apply some prioritization of importance to these issues. Game plan(5) is the strongest of all these considerations. After that, assets(2) and race(3) are about equal. The other four factors: safe-vs-bold(1), checker distribution (4), gammons(6), and doubling cube location(7) are all tie-breakers. With the game plan favoring making the defensive barpoint and both asset and race considerations neutral, there doesn't seem to be a need to break a tie. 24/18 is the solid choice. Unless one of the secondary factors overwhelmingly goes against the three primary ones, there is no need to resort to them. A **GNU-bg** program (see Page 4 for information) rollout puts 24/18, 6/5 better than 13/7, 8/7 by 0.05 cubeful equity units. The two plays win about the same number of games but leaving the back checkers split gives White nearly 9% more gammons while making the 7-point leads to only 4% more gammon wins by Black.



Position Two
Score 0-0 in a 7-Point Match.
Black to Play 6-1?

As is customary in these articles, I like to change the position around a bit to see what factors call for a different play. In Position Two, Black is in better shape in the race with White having a second checker on Black's acepoint. Pipcount consideration alone argue for 24/18, 6/5. However, a **GNU-bg** rollout says the decision is a tossup. The reason is that with two checkers back priming now becomes a strong game plan for Black. Furthermore, the need to get two checkers

out of Black's homeboard often redirects White's offensive priorities, making his attacking chances less threatening.



Position Three
Score 0-0 in a 7-Point Match.
Black to Play 6-1?

Position Three results in a completely different situation. Here Black is way behind in the race. Simply making the defensive barpoint may not be enough to avoid the cube. If White can escape the back checker, he'll have a solid double based upon his chances of converting the position to a pure race with a big pipcount lead. Making the defensive barpoint isn't a great winning game plan here. Its primary value is to avoid getting blown away. A short **GNU-bg** rollout says making the 7-point is preferred by 0.08 units of equity, winning 4% more games.

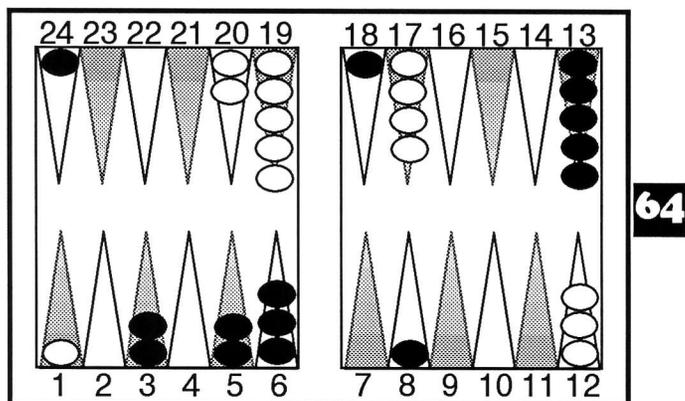
HBC 2003 Gammon Standing
The October Player of the Month
was Jim Curtis with 218 points.

1	Sean Garber.....	1183
2	Jim Curtis.....	1144
3	Chuck Stimming.....	987
4	Larry Strommen.....	824
5	Butch Meese.....	818
6	Rick Steele.....	771
7	Terry Bateman.....	609
8	Woody Woodworth.....	590
9	Scott Day.....	581
10	Josh Riddell.....	540
	Mary Ann Meese.....	486
	Gabe Stiasny.....	306
	Al Gomez.....	258
	Dan Moore.....	242
	Kirk Holmes.....	154
	Terry Leahy.....	80
	Jon Vietor.....	76
	Dave Groner.....	74
	Katya Beshparova.....	68
	Kevin Heacox.....	66
	Frank Scott.....	56
	Mike Friedman.....	54
	Joe Miller.....	51
	John O'Hagan.....	45
	Rica Tarnoff.....	36
	Laura Pinkerton.....	36
	Mark Swanson.....	34
	Jeff Flowers.....	28
	Stuart Thomson.....	28
	Dave Cardwell.....	26
	Peter Kalba.....	24
	Ben Elliott.....	24
	Jack Scofield.....	22
	Steve Brown.....	20
	Dr. Bob Hill.....	20
	Chuck Bower.....	20
	Brian Nelson.....	18
	Sam Shade.....	16
	Ray Woo.....	16
	Bill Gheen.....	12
	Alan Tavel.....	12
	10 More	

	<u>October 1st</u>	<u>October 8th</u>	<u>October 15th</u>	<u>October 22nd</u>	<u>October 29th</u>
1st	Jim Curtis	Kirke Holmes	Jim Curtis	Jim Curtis	Sean Garber
2nd	Butch Meese	Sean Garber	Dan Moore	Scott Day	Kirke Holmes
2nd	Chuck Stimming	Dan Moore	Frank Scott

Nov15-23.....	Pro Am/Las Vegas Open , Riviera Hotel & Casino, Las Vegas. NV.....	702.893.6025
Dec 5-7.....	52nd Gammon Associates Invitational , A. R. Private Club, Los Angeles, CA.....	818.901.0464
Jan 16-18.....	4th Carolina Invitational , Holiday Inn, Woodlawn, Charlotta, NC.....	704.814.0850

Wednesdays.. 7:00 PM at **Neon Johnny's**, 86th & Township Line Rd (Cellular 442-4065)..... HBC 255-8902



Position Four
White leads 6-5 in a 7-Point Match.
Crawford Game. Black to Play 6-1?

Finally, Position 4 is the situation actually posted by Zorba on **GammOnLine**. Here the match score makes gammon losses for Black meaningless while gammon wins are of extra value. The quieter, safer game plan isn't as appealing as going out of the way to make White's situation difficult. The gammon factor is no longer simply a tie-breaker in the decision, but a big contributor to the game plan, making 13/7, 8/7 the preferred choice by 0.07 equity units. As with Position One, total wins are very close between the two plays but the additional 3% gammon wins available after making the homeside barpoint are worth their weight in gold.

Useful GNU Backgammon Links:

GNU Backgammon for Windows

<http://home.online.no/~oeysteij/>

GNU Backgammon Manual

<http://www.gnubg.org/win32/gnubg/gnubg.html>

GNU Backgammon FAQ (Frequently Asked Questions)

<http://www.gnubg.org/docs/faq/>

All About GNU by Albert Silver

<http://www.bkgm.com/gnu/AllAboutGNU.html>

GNUBG for Winxx: Tips, Tricks and Traps

<http://home.earthlink.net/%7Ebaedke/bg/gnubghelp.html>

GNU Backgammon

Editor's note: *Some have heard of GNU Backgammon. Chuck Bower has made reference to it in the articles he writes. The following information is provided in case you would like to know more. The best thing about this program is that it is free. You will have to download it from the internet and install it. Below, I have listed a few sites that provide useful information. Enjoy!!*

GNU Backgammon is a world class backgammon application that works on many operating systems. It can play and analyze backgammon games, matches and positions. The program's evaluation engine is based on artificial neural networks. The program itself is command driven, but there's a graphic user interface on top of the command system.