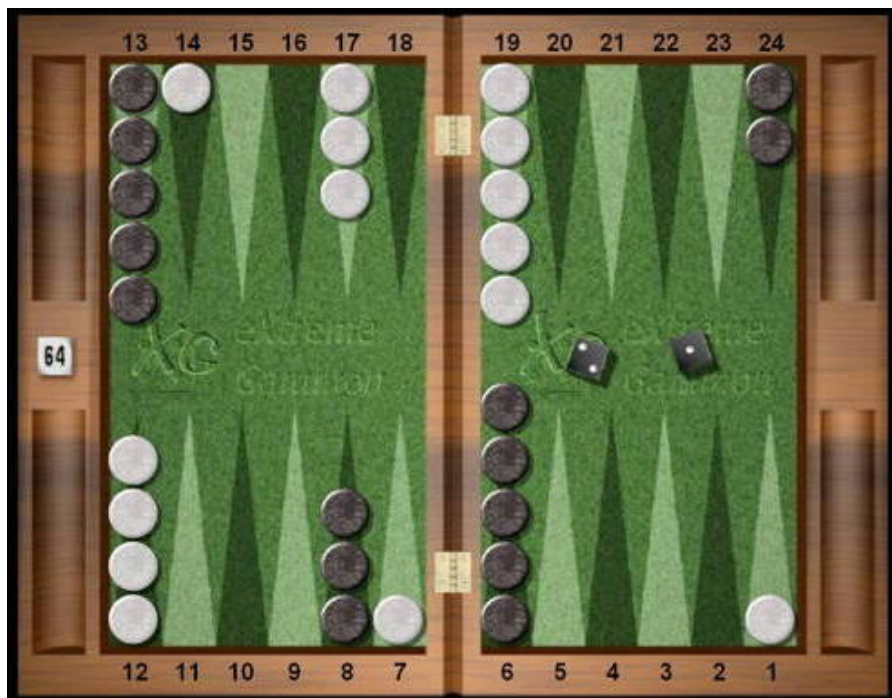


Understanding the Opening Replies

A principles-based approach to mastering the 651 most common 2nd-roll positions in backgammon.



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Introduction:

Of course a great deal of work has already been done on the opening replies, and many of the guidelines for play included here were originally published by others and have become “common knowledge” in the modern backgammon world. I encountered many of these rules in articles by Stick Rice and Walter Trice published online in *BackgammonVillage Magazine*, which is *well* worth a subscription, and from Jeremy Bagai’s paper “Bagai’s Replies: Mastering the Second Roll,” which accompanies his *Flashback* quizzing app.

However, I found that a “rules & exceptions” approach to mastering the replies wasn’t going to work for me. I can learn rules as well as the next guy, but I’m not good at retaining them over time. Also, since I have learned backgammon mostly from chouette play, where discussion is allowed only after a cube turn, my understanding of *why* you’d make various opening plays was rudimentary compared to my understanding of later phases of the game. So I decided to work through the opening replies from “a to z” on my own, applying rules and principles I had learned from various sources and trying to systematize my own understanding of the opening replies.

Bill Robertie told me once that the greatest beneficiary of any backgammon book is the author himself, because of the depth of thinking and the sheer amount of time required to make sense of any particular aspect of the game. I thought if I tried to understand the opening replies well enough that I could articulate the reasoning behind the proper plays on paper, my game would get a lot stronger. Writing this essay has certainly improved my game, and since it’s on paper I figured I’d “put it out there” in case it can help somebody else’s.

My approach begins with four early-game “Imperatives” and then addresses meaningful and easily remembered subsets of the replies to arrive at a principles-based (as opposed to a rules-based) understanding of how to play these important positions. There are always difficult “exceptions” to deal with, but rather than trying to list them under a series of increasingly-specific sub-rules, I have offered them up in a ‘Taskmaster’ quizzing format where each problem is discussed individually and can be practiced to the degree the player finds worthwhile.

Diagrams in this paper are taken from extreme Gammon 2.10 ‘Opening Book’ plays.

Thanks go out to Marty Storer for giving this paper a read and offering his constructive comments as well as encouragement that I’ve got things basically right.

Scope:

The player who wins the opening roll of a backgammon game is faced with one of only 15 situations, since, out of the 36 possible rolls, the 6 doublets are disallowed and half the the remaining 30 rolls are duplicates. If everyone played these opening rolls the same way, the second player might be faced with 15 possible board positions x 21 possible rolls = 315 opening reply situations.

But everyone doesn't play the openings and replies the same way. Looking at eXtreme Gammon's opening book, if we include plays that are within .03 of the best candidate, there are 30 reasonable opening plays, though some are not often seen. Here they are, with XG's "best" play in bold:

12 slot 12 split	23 split high 23 two down* 23 split low	34 split low 34 two down* 34 split high 34 two up	46 split 46 point* 46 run**
13 point	24 point		56 run
14 split 14 slot*	25 split 25 two down*	35 point	
15 split 15 slot*	26 split 26 run 26 slot*	36 split 36 / 45 run	<u>Plus:</u> 41 (13/8) -.039
16 point		45 split 45 two down*	*Best at Gammon-Go **Best at Gammon-Save

Multiplying those 30 plays by the 21 possible rolls available on the second play of the game yields the larger figure of 630 positions you are likely to encounter as the replying player in regular play. In performing this study, I have also included the beginner play of 13/8 with an opening 41 because considering the situation of an opponent with one extra checker in the attack zone with no other diversification might prove useful as a reference point for more complicated situations. (And who knows, maybe you'll play a beginner someday).

So the total number of positions under study is $31 \times 21 = 651$. Of this number I would characterize about 265 of them as obvious plays for a low intermediate player, and another couple dozen where the top contending plays worth considering have less than a .01 difference between them. That leaves something around 360 problems I would describe as both non-obvious and consequential.

Of course, depending on your level of play, you might find a larger portion of the 630 positions to be "obvious."

I: Four Opening Imperatives

Proper early-game checker plays are a matter of prioritizing and balancing four imperatives that vie for attention as both players seek to establish an edge. Here they are, in order of priority:

A) Blots Want *Hitting!*

Unless your opponent rolled one of her “natural” point-making rolls or ran to the midpoint with “lover’s leap,” she will have left one or more blots around the board. Typically, you’ll want to be hitting one or more of them if you can. Doing so will rob your opponent of the first-mover advantage gained by her opening play, erasing whatever racing lead she had established and frustrating whatever plan she had hoped to pursue.

Since sending your opponent backwards in the race is a virtue, it stands to reason that ***the farther back you can send them by hitting, the better.*** Hitting on your opponent’s side of the board has the added benefit of getting one of your stragglers in motion, while hitting in your own outfield has the advantage of bringing a fresh checker into the attack zone, the better to pressure your opponent if he doesn’t anchor promptly. Hitting blots that have ventured to the higher points in your home board is also often correct, but carries greatest risk, since you are liable to be hit in return from the bar, losing 20+ pips of your own.

B) Points Want *Making!*

Your favorite opening rolls are still among your best replies: if you can make a fresh point in your home board, including your bar, you’d need a very compelling reason not to . . . such as hitting an enemy blot (see above!).

While making these pointing plays will feel pretty automatic, it’s important to be conscious of their dual purposes: they contribute to both *blitzing* and *priming* game plans. Why is the 5-point so much more valuable than the 2-point? They both make it equally hard for your opponent to enter from the bar, but the 5-point is far more effective in containing a checker in your home board once he comes in (priming). Points in your outfield quadrant serve a priming function while also providing material for attacking blots in your home board if the opportunity arises -- they are “checkers in the zone,” ready to blitz.

So, other things being equal, ***points in your inner board tend to be better than points in your outer board*** as they keep your opponent on the bar, and ***points closer to your 6-point are better than ones farther away***, as they form a more compact prime for keeping your opponent stuck in your home board. Of course, in any given position, your opponent’s checker placement will affect the value of various points, but in the abstract, you like your 5-point best by far, then your bar and 4-points, then 3 and 8-points. And even the lowly 2-point is no longer despised as it once was in the pre-robot age of backgammon – your opponent can dance on the bar with 62 as easily as 65!

C) Checkers Want *Splitting!*

While beginners quickly pick up on the value of making home-board points or bringing down builders from the midpoint and even running a single back checker to the midpoint or close to it, it's harder to see the positive value of simply splitting the back checkers, getting them onto different points in the enemy's home board, or even up to the bar-point.

Splitting achieves two distinct goods. The bigger one is that ***it makes it easier for you to establish an advanced anchor*** on the next turn or so, by which we mean your opponent's 3, 4, 5, or bar points. (Because the 2-point is firmly blocked by your opponent's 8-point, 6 pips away, it isn't sufficiently advanced to allow you to escape with 6's.) If you venture up to the 4-point and they fail to hit you, you may be able to cover it immediately, gaining a powerful defensive foothold. Or, if you are simply split to the 2-point, several combo rolls will allow you to make an advanced point -- for instance 65 will often make the bar, etc. Securing an advanced anchor is a primary goal in the early game.

Secondly, ***splitting threatens your opponent's outfield***, multiplying your chances of hitting any blots your opponent might drop down from their midpoint as builders. Instead of just 2 or 4 hitting numbers with un-split checkers, your better diversity may afford 6 or more chances in 36.

D) Stacks Want *Unstacking!*

The more different points your checkers occupy (the better **diversified** they are), the greater variety of options you have for playing your roll, and therefore the more likely you are to roll something useful. (That's one reason why stronger players seem to get lucky more often than others.) It only takes two checkers to hold a point, so any further checkers are considered "spares" -- material available for building new points, attacking blots, etc. One spare is very useful, two are okay, but you should get used to viewing three or more spares on a point as inherently ugly, because you have too many checkers wastefully locked up in one place, doing nothing for you. So in the opening set-up, it's as though you have four useless checkers just lying dormant. That's why rolling doubles feels so great in the opening: it's not just making new points, it's getting more material into play.

Unstacking checkers from your heavy mid and 6-points is like getting additional players into the game, where they can start to do useful work other checkers aren't already doing. Unstacking should feel like that moment when a hockey player gets out of the penalty box and tumbles out onto the ice! Other things being equal, you just want to play checkers from your stacked points, ideally making new points with them, or adding them to stripped points, or even risking them as blots to diversify your good numbers on subsequent rolls.

The opposite of a "stacked" point is a "stripped" point -- one with no spares at all. The term **checker distribution** refers to the arrangement of points and spares on the board.

* * *

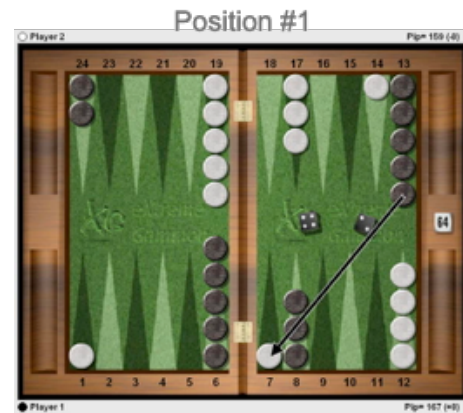
The principles laid out in this lesson rely on those four imperatives, explaining how to prioritize them in various types of situations.

II: Opening Replies: Non-Doubles

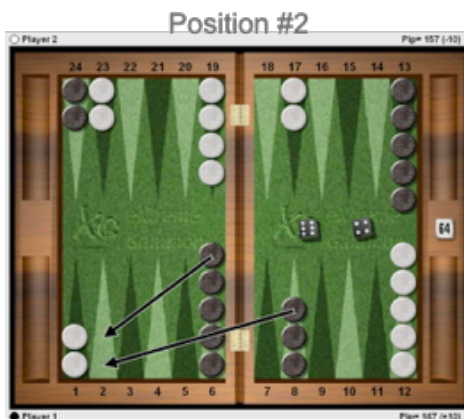
a) The “Natural” plays are generally right. Unless you have a hitting opportunity that pre-empts them, all those favorite opening rolls play the same on an opening reply. 31 makes your 5-point; 42 makes your 4; 53 makes your 3; 61 makes your bar, and 65 springs a back checker to your mid.

Exceptions arise when you have an opportunity to hit blots in your opponent’s outfield or high in your home board to deter your opponent from gaining an advanced anchor. For instance, you should hit a checker on your bar with 42 rather than make your 4-point (Position #1), and hit a checker on your 5-point rather than making your 3-point with a 53.

If you are a player of a certain age, you may need to overcome an old prejudice against making your 2-point with 64, which has become a perfectly acceptable opener -- and one which often provokes misplays by opponents not familiar with how to respond to it.



137*	-0.066
P: 48.4 13.7 0.6	O: 51.6 14.5 0.8
8/4 6/4	-0.094
P: 47.5 13.5 0.5	O: 52.5 13.6 0.6
	-0.028



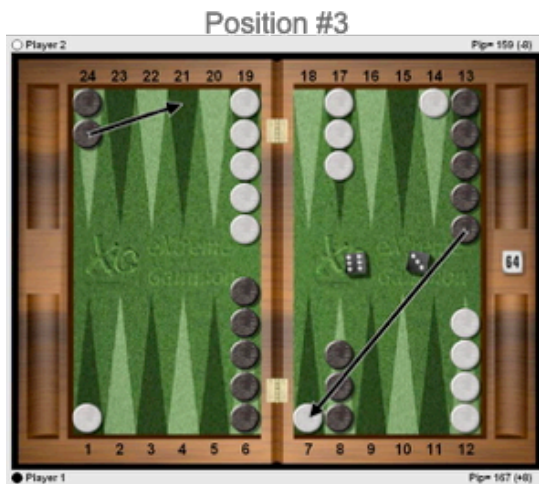
8/2 6/2	-0.107
P: 47.4 14.3 0.6	O: 52.6 16.5 0.9
24/14	-0.178
P: 46.8 10.4 0.5	O: 53.2 17.2 0.6
24/18 13/9	-0.190
P: 46.7 12.2 0.6	O: 53.3 19.8 0.9
	-0.083

You may never choose to play your 64 that way when you win the opening roll, but it will often be correct by a substantial margin to make your 2-point on the opening reply. (This topic is covered in Section II:i.)

Position #2 should drive the point home. You would not often have seen the position resulting from this play in 1980! You *don't* want to get this one wrong at a whopping cost of -.072.

b) Okay, hitting is the easy part: what about the other number? It's going to be broadly true, with relatively few exceptions (mostly involving doublets) that if your opponent leaves a blot anywhere from his own home board all the way to your own 3-point, you're going to want to *hit* that guy if you can. If it's a fly shot that you hit with a non-double 8, 9, or 10, that's that, you smile and pick up your dice. But if you are able to hit with one number, what are you to do with the other one? *It's all about the checker distribution in your outfield. If there are still 5 checkers on your midpoint, unstack it!* If you used a 6 to hit on your bar-point, you will have already diversified your outfield checkers nicely, in which case you split your back men (Position #3). But if you stripped your 8-point by hitting with a 1, notice how thin and lopsided your checker distribution looks (Position #4). Bringing a checker down from the mid bolsters your supply of outfield checkers for building and attacking.

Remember that you *want* to split your back men, and putting an opponent on the bar gives you an excellent opportunity to do so ("hitting & splitting"). But since hitting puts you on offense, getting a good distribution of attackers in your outfield is the priority. Either way, you get to fulfill *two* of the four "Opening Imperatives."



24/21 13/7*	-0.001
P: 49.7 14.3 0.7 O: 50.3 13.4 0.6	
13/10 13/7*	-0.051
P: 48.8 15.0 0.8 O: 51.2 15.2 1.0	-0.050



13/11 8/7*	-0.110
P: 47.4 13.3 0.6 O: 52.6 15.5 1.0	
24/22 8/7*	-0.144
P: 46.8 12.3 0.5 O: 53.2 14.8 0.7	-0.034

These hitting replies are very common, so you'll find these guidelines will apply very frequently over the board. They usually lead to a freewheeling exchange of hitting plays as both players try to lock down new assets -- an advanced anchor, home-board points, priming points -- while also trying to deny these gains to the opponent.

A straightforward exception is that you won't want to volunteer a blot on your bar-point if you aren't hitting a checker there. This would only arise when you're hitting a blot in your opponent's home board, and you should find it natural enough to just keep that checker going into the outfield, as you should (Position #5). But per the rules, unstacking with 13/8 is better than running to the outfield with a 5 after such a hit. Bringing an extra checker safely into the attack zone while smoothing your distribution is a definite gain, and the 20-point is a fine place for a checker to be with your opponent on the bar: you'd rather be hit loose there in reply than be hit in your opponent's outfield.



And there's a further reason to remain on the 20-point in Position #6: at this early stage of the game, you would much rather make a secure advanced anchor in your opponent's home board than successfully escape one checker, leaving a straggler behind. You run all the way with the 64 hit (Position #5) not so much because you want to, but because getting hit on your bar-point is so costly, and so *likely* (16 numbers hit).

In the "freewheeling" blot-hitting stage of the early game, *denying your opponent useful 6's from the bar is a vital tactic*. Since you always own your own 6-point, whenever they roll a 6, it means they will have to enter with the other number and then look around for their 6 . . . so you have a special opportunity to limit options and force a weak play by precluding any good 6's anywhere on the board.

c) “Should I hit in my home board, risking a direct return shot from the bar?” **Yes, you probably should!** Since establishing an advanced anchor is such a major achievement in the early game, you should be eager to deny your opponent that prize, even at the risk of the 20 pips or so you lose in the race when your opponent hits you back. So when you roll 53, don’t reflexively make your 3-point if there’s a checker to hit on your precious 5-point (Position #7). In fact, you should even smack down an opposing blot down on your 3-point in a similar situation when you roll 64! If you’re able to hit with a single number, from either your 8 or 6-points, you should take the opportunity to *unstack* your midpoint, bringing a valuable 9th checker into the attack zone to back up your attacker while your opponent is back on their heels (Position #8).



After knocking your opponent off a high anchor point, **hitting a second checker on your ace-point is a common rookie mistake**, perhaps born of a misguided idea that you’re launching a blitz. The double-hit brings no fresh material into the attack zone to sustain a blitz, and playing to your ace-point cripples your priming chances as well, so the double hit doesn’t pursue *either* game plan effectively. Furthermore, **when you hit a blot high in your board, you’ve just slotted a valuable point of your own** (“Points Want Making!”). So while you’re less likely to be hit back if you double-hit, you don’t gain nearly as much when your opponent misses you.

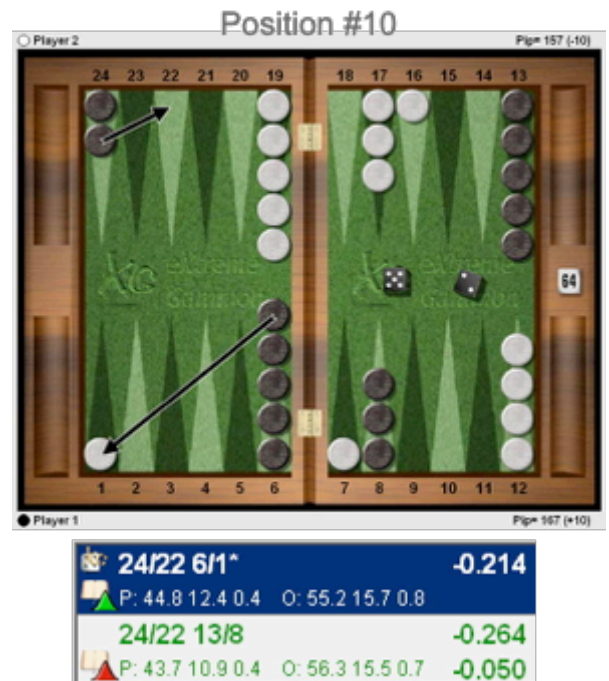
The only time it's solidly correct to hit a second checker in your home board is when your opponent has split 24/23 with an opening ace. Other plays are far too passive, and there simply isn't a better use for the ace after hitting 6/2*: splitting your back men would invite attack with White's otherwise useless 6's from the bar. Here you are hitting "for tempo" to deny your well-diversified opponent a free roll to improve.

As a side-note, modern theory is that you should look to **cover that blot on your ace-point at the first opportunity** when it is missed. In olden times, before the advent of robots like XG, a common practice was to try to "re-circulate" that checker rather than claim such a lowly point and take two checkers out of play. Such "pure play" neglects the importance of the race and the power of any extra point to help keep your opponent on the bar.

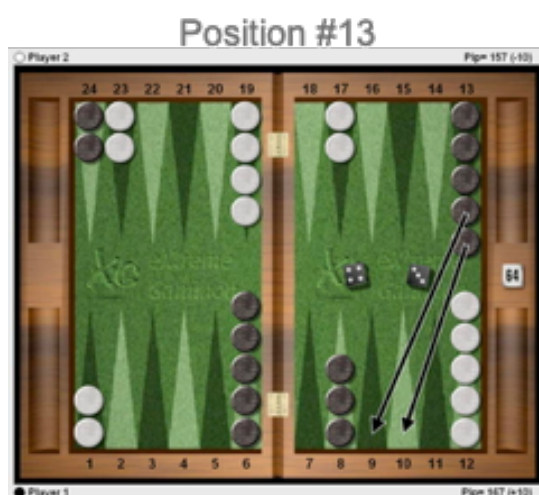
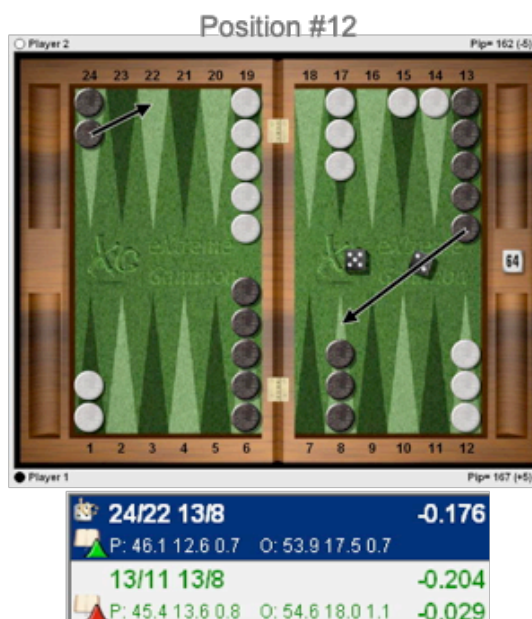
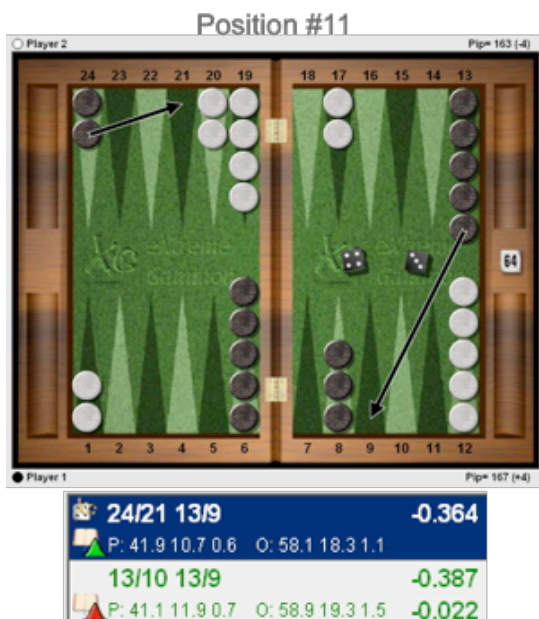
If your opponent splits to your bar and you can't hit her there, hit her on the ace-point with 52 or 54. (Position #8) The main idea is not only to break communication between her back men, making it harder for her to gain your bar point, but, to seize the opportunity to split your back men.

This is once again a "tempo play" -- a hit that is designed to disrupt the flow of your opponent's activity for one turn. If you regard this as a blitzing play you might follow up the hit with 13/11, bringing a new checker into the attack zone -- which isn't just wrong, it's a big -.087 blunder, much worse than not hitting at all!

And that's why you *don't* hit on the ace point when it takes your whole roll to do so (43, 41 or 32): you don't get the added benefit of splitting.



d) **An opposing *Priming Stance* motivates splitting.** This important concept can be counterintuitive. For a long time, I felt frightened to split my back men if my opponent opened with a natural point-making number. But that's exactly wrong. With only 8 checkers in the attack zone, your opponent doesn't have enough material to blitz effectively. But *he's already made progress priming you*, so you need to get those checkers moving right away (Position #11). Even if he doesn't make a new point on the opener, if your opponent is able to bring builders safely into his outfield (Position #12), or to slot his 5-point without being hit, you should generally regard him as posing a priming threat, and look to split.



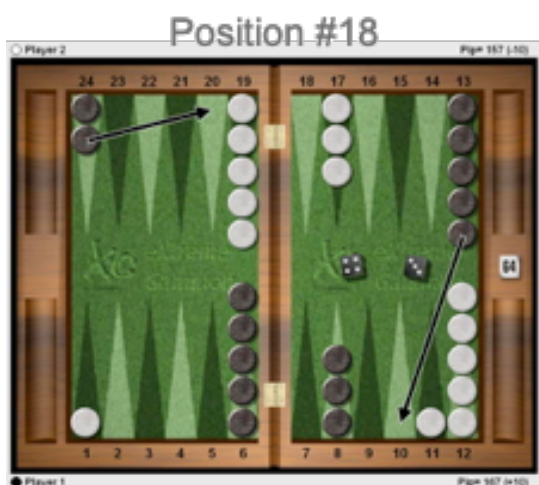
Note however that **making the 2-point does not place your opponent in a priming stance**, because it undercuts the blocking potential of the 8-point (the two points are not part of the same 6-prime). Since his priming potential is actually *weakened*, he will be much more eager to attack your split checkers.

e) An opposing *Attacking Stance* discourages splitting. The converse of the previous principle is that when your opponent hasn't improved her *priming* game, there is less urgency to split. And if she has loaded a fourth checker on her 8-point (Position #14), splitting would invite a dangerous attack. Again, this may seem counterintuitive: she doesn't have any new points, and she doesn't have much variety in hitting numbers, so why worry? The point is that such stacks afford few productive point-making rolls, but by splitting *you open up a whole additional game plan for her*. She'll happily hit you if she has nothing better to do -- and if you don't hit back promptly as she brings material into the zone, you can find yourself overwhelmed in short order. What about replying to an opening 61 (Position #15)? It may feel as though the remaining stack on his 6-point is mostly good for attacking, but the bar point is an exceptionally powerful priming point and you should usually split. Splitting puts pressure on the stripped 8-point, so it's harder for your opponent to develop her position with rolls like 31 or 42. And notice that attacking would require dismantling the small but useful prime.



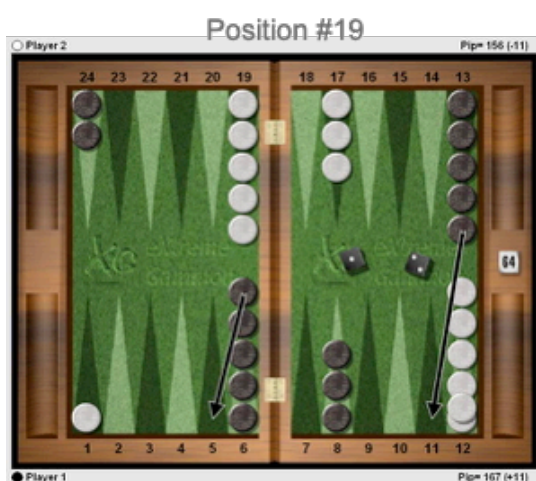
Having said all that, “split or down?” decisions make up *most* of the more difficult problems among the opening replies, as they don't lend themselves to easily remembered and consistently applicable “rules.” These positions are captured in Jeremy Bagai's “Rule 6” which I find the most difficult section to master under his system. As a result, they're the ones that you're just going to have to “learn by heart” -- the “Study by Mastery Level” option in the Quiz section of this Taskmaster file should help.

f) **An opposing *Running play* motivates *splitting*.** A further major category of replies arises when your opponent successfully runs beyond your 8-point without being hit. The proper defense against a running game is a holding game, which requires an advanced anchor. Splitting furthers that end, and also affords you extra fly-shots when your opponent's next roll forces him to drop a blot or two in the outfield. Positions #16 and #17 illustrate the challenge involved in playing these positions accurately: ***splitting isn't enough -- you have to split with the right number or you'd often be better off not splitting at all.*** These two positions would seem to suggest that the 21-point is the ideal anchor target, but it turns out that many of these kinds of positions resist easy generalization (Position #18).

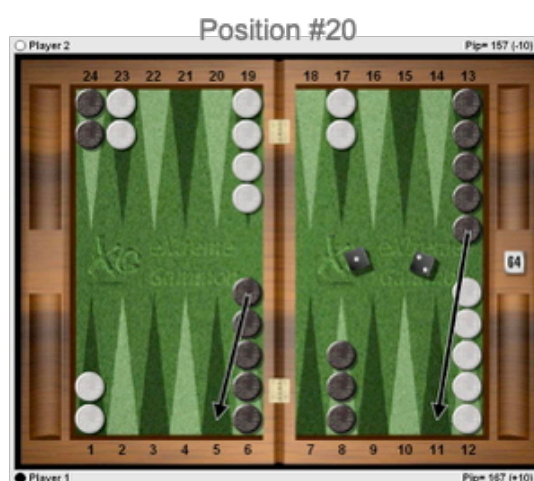


What a difference a pip makes! Positions where White runs safely to your 9, 10, 11 or 12-point offer a varying constellation of splitting options. Several of these cases will rely more on memorization than on applying tactical principles.

g) Slotting your 5-Point is a good use for an Ace. Slotting makes a bid for your best offensive point and usefully unstacks your heavy 6-point, at the risk of being sent back 20 pips when hit (Position #19). The usual alternative, splitting with 24/23, is the least effective of splits, since it does not make a direct bid for an attractive advanced anchor by occupying your opponent's 3, 4, 5, or bar-points. On the other hand, the ace-split does give you several chances of gaining a quality anchor with mixed numbers like 12, 23 etc., while also multiplying your chances of hitting an outfield blot. **There are two clear situations where you *don't* want to slot with your ace**, and they are pretty self-evident. First, it should be obvious that **if your opponent's back men are split**, slotting is far too risky. Secondly, **if your opponent opened with a play that has placed him in a "priming stance,"** splitting is your immediate priority -- and you certainly don't welcome a blot-hitting exchange when your opponent has a stronger home board than you. Position #20 shows another instance where slotting is best, and serves as a reminder that an opening 8/2 6/2 does not put White in a "priming stance." Note that slotting is also clearly superior to the moderately productive 13/10 unstacking play.



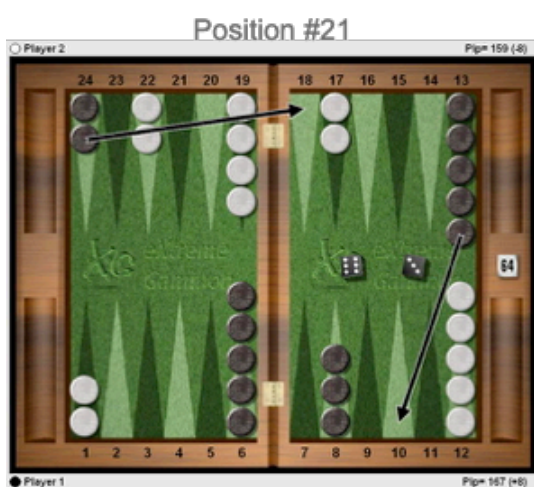
13/11 6/5	-0.190
P: 45.5 12.0 0.5 O: 54.5 14.7 1.1	
24/23 13/11	-0.214
P: 44.3 11.6 0.5 O: 55.7 13.1 0.8	-0.024
24/21	-0.251
P: 43.2 9.6 0.3 O: 56.8 12.2 0.5	-0.061
13/10	-0.261
P: 43.1 10.6 0.3 O: 56.9 14.1 0.7	-0.071



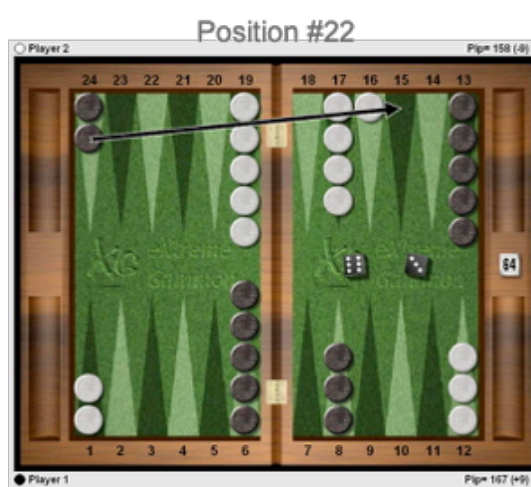
13/11 6/5	-0.123
P: 48.5 13.5 0.6 O: 51.5 18.5 1.5	
13/10	-0.156
P: 47.1 13.3 0.6 O: 52.9 17.7 1.2	-0.033
24/21	-0.178
P: 46.7 12.0 0.6 O: 53.3 17.5 0.7	-0.055

Check out the *magnitude* of error for the incorrect choices! The penalty for getting the slotting plays wrong is pretty steep -- you want to be getting them right every time.

h) When you roll 62 or 63, weigh the cost of parking on your opponent's bar-point. Unless you are hitting an outfield checker or running all the way to your midpoint with 65, you'd prefer not to abandon a straggler in your opponent's home board. Keeping your checkers connected is generally desirable, and given a choice between safely escaping one checker and claiming a quality advanced anchor with two, you would choose the latter. If your opponent made a natural point with her opening roll, you will be eager to split to any available point including the bar in the hopes of making it (Position #21). But if your opponent has simply brought new attacking material down from the midpoint, you'll need to weigh whether the increased likelihood of being hit on the bar point is tolerable. In Position #22, not only are you safer on the 15-point, but you force your opponent to strip the midpoint to hit you at a time when she would much rather be playing the stacked checkers on the 6 and 8 points. ***If you can run past any extra builders your opponent brought down from his mid-point, you should do so.***



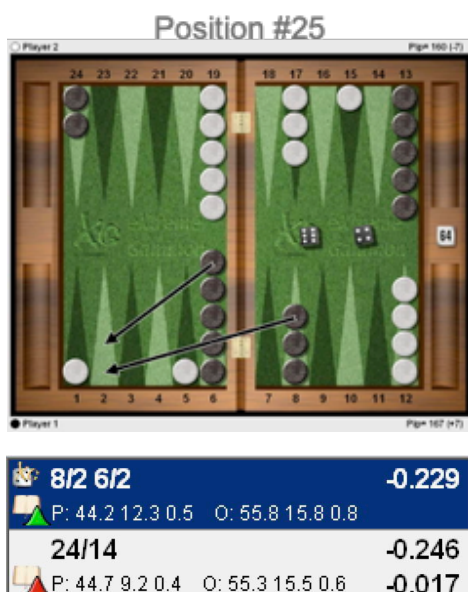
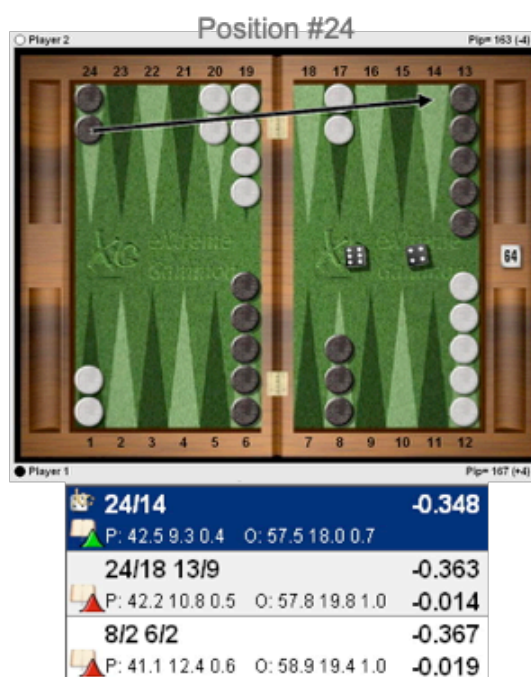
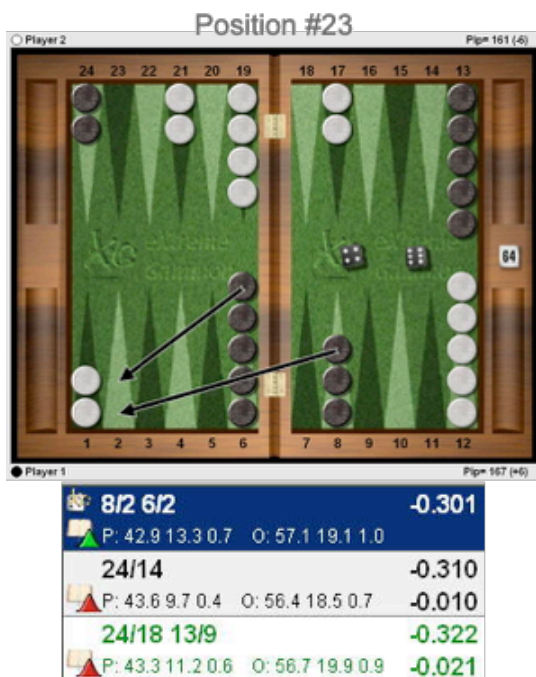
24/18 13/10	-0.235
P: 45.6 11.8 0.7 O: 54.4 19.7 1.2	
24/15	-0.256
P: 45.1 10.2 0.6 O: 54.9 18.2 0.9	-0.021
13/4	-0.263
P: 44.2 12.3 0.7 O: 55.8 18.3 1.3	-0.028



24/15	-0.166
P: 46.7 11.0 0.5 O: 53.3 16.9 0.7	
24/18 13/10	-0.179
P: 46.5 12.1 0.6 O: 53.5 18.0 0.8	-0.013
13/4	-0.230
P: 44.8 12.2 0.6 O: 55.2 17.5 1.1	-0.064

Jeremy Bagai points out the subtle threat of an extra spare on your opponent's "fortified" 8-point (as in Position #22). Now your opponent won't strip the 8-point when she hits you with an ace, so she will be especially well equipped to win a blot-hitting contest or to develop a prime. In these cases you really *don't* want to volunteer blots those checkers can directly hit, so running deeper into the outfield is much safer.

i) **Consider making your 2-point with 64.** This is tough for those of us who learned to play in the 1970's and 80's, because back in those days a lot of people didn't even make the 3-point with an opening 53, let alone the lowly deuce with 64. When your opponent opens making his 2, 3 or 4 point you should stay buttoned-up and make your own 2-point when you reply with 64 (Position #23). But if he makes his 5 or bar points, you should run all the way to his 14-point (Position #24). The easiest way to remember this is that you can treat making your 2-point as a "natural" play just like 61,31, 42, and 53 except in special circumstances where your opponent has a particularly strong "priming stance."



In Position #25, the principles laid out on the previous page would suggest you run all the way past the extra defender, 24/14. But White's split to your 5-point gives him four extra fly-shots at your runner. Some exceptional positions simply need to be mastered on an individual basis.

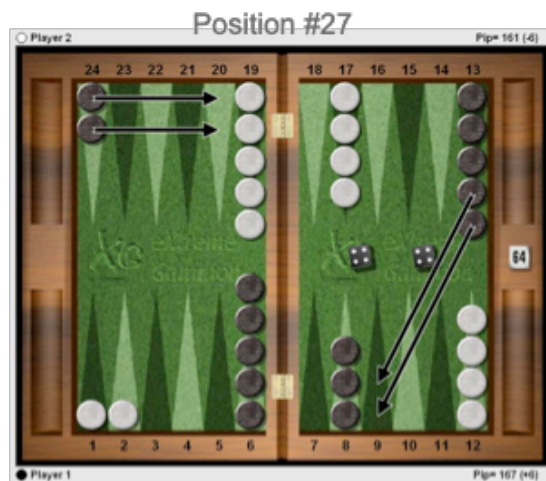
III: Opening Replies: Doubles

You enjoy a big equity surge when you roll doubles in reply to your opponent's opener, but doubles also provide you an opportunity to make a substantial blunder -- so you *don't* want to be getting these replies wrong!

a) Know your default plays for each set of doubles. *These are the plays you will make unless your opponent's opening play gives you a good reason not to.* The old adage that two good things are better than one "great" thing usually holds true. So with *very* few exceptions you'll be moving two different pairs of checkers rather than one pair twice as far. When you roll 33 or 44, you'll typically look to advance your anchor (defense) and unstack your midpoint (offense), as you see in Positions #26 and #27. Note that this "balanced" play is best despite a plausible attacking option with your 44 -- while making your valuable 5-point with 13/5(2) isn't even third-best (it's a -.108 blunder).



	24/21(2) 13/10(2)	+0.249
	P: 55.7 14.4 0.5	O: 44.3 8.8 0.3
	24/21(2) 6/3(2)	+0.233
	P: 55.0 14.7 0.6	O: 45.0 9.1 0.3
	13/10(2) 6/3(2)	+0.208
	P: 54.6 17.5 0.9	O: 45.4 12.6 0.6



	24/20(2) 13/9(2)	+0.405
	P: 59.4 14.6 0.6	O: 40.6 6.9 0.3
	8/4(2) 6/2*(2)	+0.382
	P: 57.5 22.4 1.3	O: 42.5 11.0 0.7
	24/20(2) 6/2*(2)	+0.326
	P: 57.4 14.8 0.5	O: 42.6 7.4 0.2

Another reason for advancing the back men is that when your racing game is strong, you want to prepare to extricate your rearmost checkers. So these "balanced" plays activate *all* your early game plans -- racing, priming, and holding. Nice!

Your smaller sets of doubles, 11 and 22, are less well suited to advancing your back checkers, but are potent *priming* numbers. Making your bar and 5-points is extremely powerful (Position #28), though as we will see, there are plenty of times you can't afford to do that. With 22, your default play is to unstack both of your heavy points with 13/11(2) 6/4(2), as illustrated in Position #29, strong for both priming and attacking.



Against an un-split opponent, the standard 55 (Position #30) and 66 (Position #31) plays are virtually forced. When your opponent *has* split, you will attack with 55 so long as you can hit a checker, but you should always make the usual 66 play even if you could hit twice. These replies rarely pose a problem, but a few examples will appear in the quiz section.

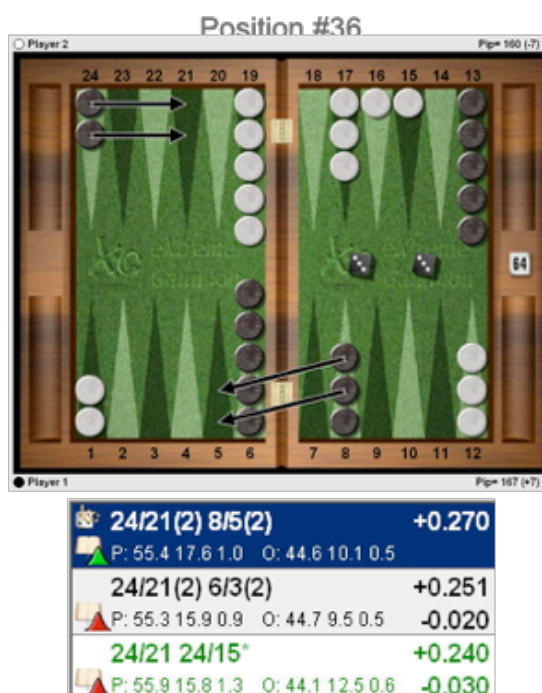


b) Stick to general opening principles, mobilizing your back checkers when your opponent threatens to prime you. If, as we have already seen, it becomes urgent to split your back checkers when your opponent opens by making a priming point, it will be even *more* appealing to advance them with a pair of doubles in these situations, seizing an advanced anchor outright without risk of attack. What about the other two? ***Don't use your whole roll to advance your back checkers twice.*** Remember that two good things are better than one great thing. With the second pair of 2's, unstack your heavy 6-point rather than coming down from the mid, since inner-board points are inherently more valuable than points in your outfield (Positions #32 & 33).



These principles can serve only to suggest the issues at play in these decisions. Many plays will offer compelling but contradictory rationales and must simply be learned through practice and repeated study (Position #34).

c) **Don't sacrifice development in order to hit a blot.** Had you rolled 31 in Position #35, you would hit White's blot because of the likelihood she would cover her 5-point on the next roll, leaving you behind in development. But with 11 you get to make *two* excellent priming points against White's un-split checkers, gaining the upper hand unless White performs exceptionally well on her next turn. Likewise, you'll never be using up most of your roll to hit a blot in the outfield when you roll 33: the correct play in Position #36 secures lasting improvements and doesn't allow your opponent to recover via a blot-hitting contest. Many doublet replies invite you to make this kind of solid play, locking in an enduring positional advantage without inviting a lot of immediate volatility.

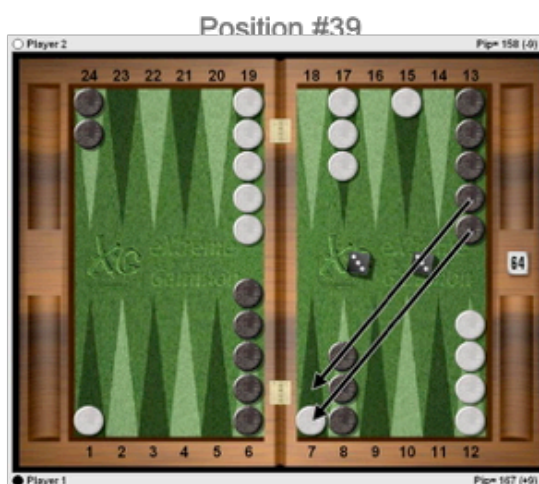


Position #37 offers the sole instance where you use your whole roll to hit in the outfield, after your opponent's 64 split. You do so "for tempo" in order to frustrate your opponent's effort to make your bar point. It's very costly to get it wrong.

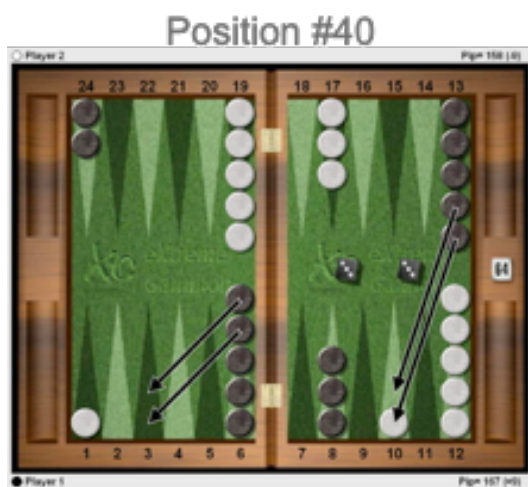
d) **Don't over-play attacking rolls on your side of the board.** A common error is to volunteer a blot on your 8-point in order to make your bar-point with 11. **Keep in mind that your bar-point is most valuable when your opponent is still anchored on your ace-point, and that your 8-point is a valuable asset in itself.** While trading it for the bar is an upgrade, it isn't worth the cost of five fly-shots from the bar -- and splitting your back checkers is especially attractive when your opponent can't attack you with the whole roll (Position #38). Likewise, after hitting a blot on your bar-point with 33, locking up that point is better than making your 5-point because of the many (14!) gratuitous return shots the latter play would gift your opponent (Position #39).



24/22 6/5* (2)	+0.419
P: 59.6 17.9 1.1 O: 40.4 9.7 0.5	
8/7 (2) 6/5* (2)	+0.379
P: 58.4 18.0 1.1 O: 41.6 10.9 0.6	-0.041
24/23 6/5* (3)	+0.376
P: 58.5 17.7 1.1 O: 41.5 10.4 0.6	-0.044



13/7* (2)	+0.218
P: 54.9 16.8 0.9 O: 45.1 11.7 0.5	
13/7* 8/5 (2)	+0.194
P: 53.6 19.1 1.0 O: 46.4 12.6 0.8	-0.024
13/7* 6/3 (2)	+0.174
P: 53.4 17.9 1.0 O: 46.6 12.6 0.6	-0.045



Making your 5-point after hitting the outfield blot should just plain *look* ugly by now. Unstacking the heavy 6-point is a virtue; offering gratuitous return shots after hitting is a vice.

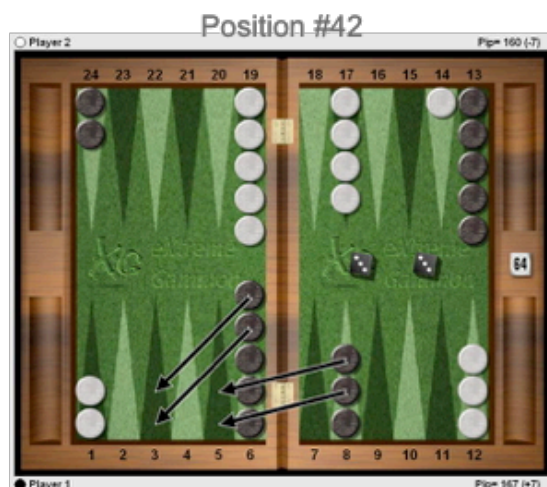
13/10* (2) 6/3 (2)	+0.431
P: 59.3 20.3 1.1 O: 40.7 10.2 0.5	
13/10* (2) 8/5 (2)	+0.380
P: 58.0 20.9 1.1 O: 42.0 10.7 0.5	-0.051
24/21 (2) 13/10* (2)	+0.380
P: 58.5 16.8 0.7 O: 41.5 8.4 0.3	-0.051

e) Study your opponent's checker placement for tactical reasons to deviate from the usual 2-up/2-down "balanced" plays. In particular, look for commitments he has made for his next turn, and consider whether they give you license to make a bold improvement that would normally be too risky. When a player slots the 5-point, for instance, he commits to covering it on his next turn. So, absent doubles, he will only be able to play *one* other checker elsewhere. The upshot is that **you can better afford to leave a blot in your outfield when your opponent can't hit it and also cover the slot.** In Position #41 you should advance your back checkers because of the priming threat . . . but with your other pair *you can afford to seize your own 5-point*, because if he rolls a hitting 7 (and yes, he should hit you), he will have to forgo covering the 5-point. This greatly lessens the cost of the 6 fly-shots that would normally deter 8/5(2).

In Position #42, White has achieved so little in priming potential with her opener, you can be even bolder: making two points in your home board will put her under enormous pressure to get her back checkers moving lest they be even more firmly entombed. Here in effect **you have created extra commitments for your opponent**, and she may have to defer developing her offensive position while she struggles to liberate her stragglers. (This will also be the play when your opponent runs to your outfield with anything but 65.)



24/21(2) 8/5(2)	+0.189
P: 53.5 15.8 0.8 O: 46.5 9.8 0.5	
24/21(2) 13/10(2)	+0.157
P: 53.3 14.0 0.7 O: 46.7 9.8 0.5	-0.032
24/21(2) 6/3(2)	+0.145
P: 52.8 14.0 0.7 O: 47.2 9.7 0.5	-0.044
8/5(2) 6/3(2)	+0.136
P: 52.8 18.5 1.3 O: 47.2 14.4 0.9	-0.053



8/5(2) 6/3(2)	+0.291
P: 56.1 20.1 1.1 O: 43.9 12.7 0.7	
24/21(2) 8/5(2)	+0.269
P: 55.5 17.1 0.7 O: 44.5 9.4 0.4	-0.022
24/21(2) 13/10(2)	+0.257
P: 55.8 15.4 0.6 O: 44.2 9.5 0.4	-0.034
24/21(2) 6/3(2)	+0.254
P: 55.4 15.5 0.7 O: 44.6 9.3 0.4	-0.037

III: Concluding Remarks

It's a commonplace that the opening phase of a backgammon game is important to master because every game has one. It's easier to recognize middle or late-game blunders as crucial moments when you played poorly and lost a game you should have won. Mistakes on opening replies aren't so dramatic, as both players scramble to-and-fro with the advantage often changing hands repeatedly until the game settles into its mid-phase. You might be skeptical that it's important to work at avoiding errors that are "only" wrong by -.02. But these are avoidable errors you'd be making over and over and over again.

The cost of poor play will emerge only in the long run as a tendency to find yourself "back on your heels" more often than your opponent, or feeling "unlucky" that your blitzes tend to fizzle out. But with better opening play, perhaps you would have secured an advanced anchor more often, and perhaps you would have had more material in the zone for pursuing a blitz. And maybe you wouldn't find yourself getting blitzed as often as you do if you didn't split against an opponent in an attacking stance! But no single play seems to "cause" these problems -- because virtually any play, however poor, leads to success often enough to mask the long-term effect of your errors. Backgammon is a great example of a "hostile learning environment," where the experience of playing does not provide reliable, consistent feedback to school a player through experience.

Studying the opening replies by seeking to understand *why* various plays turn out to be better will make your play more deliberate and purposeful, and sensitize you to the various ways a game can develop. In particular, regardless of what the dice bring you, you should form a habit of consciously noting features of the position as they unfold, not just on the opening reply, but for every early-game play:

- *How many checkers does my opponent have "in the zone?"*
- *Are their checkers better poised for priming or for blitzing?*
- *How urgent is it for me to get my back checkers split?*
- *Is my opponent's 8-point stripped (2 checkers)? Is it fortified (4 checkers)?*
- *What "stance" am I in -- Attacking or Priming?*
- *Which of my points are stacked? Which are stripped?*
- *How many commitments does my opponent already have -- can I add another?*
- *Who is winning the race? (It's never too soon to notice!)*

Deliberate Practice in the Early Game

A further avenue for early-game study that can be extremely effective is **XG-supported deliberate practice**. Choose a particular opening scenario -- an opening move that you favor, or perhaps a particular opening reply -- and play it out repeatedly against XG, going only 3 or 4 moves deep into the game, or until the position resolves itself by a player anchoring, or achieving a strong attacking or priming position. For example, perhaps you like to make your 2-point with an opening 64. Are you sure you're following up that play effectively?

In XG, you'd choose "Setup Position" and set up the board having made your 2-point. Then put your opponent "On Roll" and ready for "Cube Action" (rather than checker play). Next copy the position to your clipboard by pressing Ctrl-C (or CMD-C on a Mac). Under the 'Setup' menu, choose the "Play from Position" option and select an XG opponent for the Top Player. Finally, down at the bottom of the window, set the "Mode" to "Coaching."

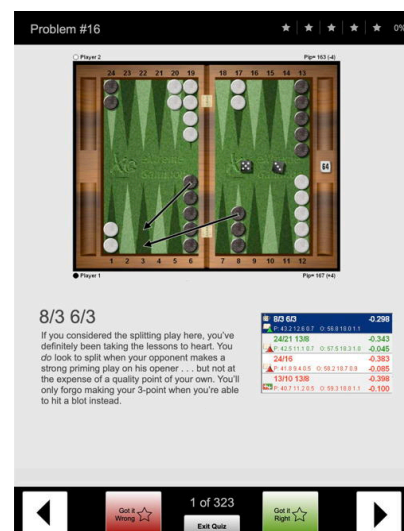
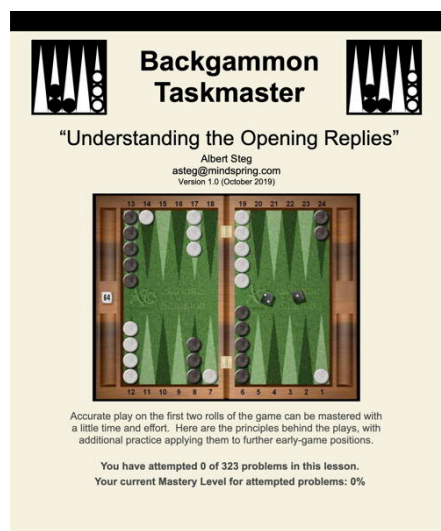
As you play out the game, your plays will be evaluated and errors will be highlighted in the transcription window at left. Now you will get the immediate feedback you need to work on your follow-up plays.

'Taskmaster' Quizzing

While I hope this lesson can be useful on its own, it is meant to accompany and introduce my *Backgammon Taskmaster* quizzing file, which can be downloaded from the NEBC website:

<https://nebackgammon.org/index.php/bg-taskmaster/>

The *Backgammon Taskmaster* is a quizzing app that can be opened in the free *Filemaker Go* iOS app on any Apple iPad. Unfortunately, the Filemaker mobile platform does not work on other tablets.



While this lesson has been all about the opening replies, you'll find the *Taskmaster* file offers three problem sets:

OPENING PLAYS (15 Problems)

While anyone reading this lesson probably already has a good grip on their openers, it's worth looking at them again after studying the replies. While you may know what the "best" plays are, you may be unaware of how reasonable some of the alternatives are. The solution comments also include notes regarding the superiority of various alternatives at Gammon-Go and Gammon-Save.

OPENING REPLIES (194 Problems)

This large set provides a thorough workout on all the principles in this lesson, including plenty of annoying "exceptions" that cost you at least .010 when you get 'em wrong. If you can get 90+% of these problems consistently right, you'll be giving up very little equity over the board.

CONTINUATIONS (129 Problems)

After writing this lesson, I went back to my folder of early-game positions that gave me trouble over the past few years. To my relief, many of them now seem pretty obvious. So here's an opportunity to see whether the guidelines in this lesson will translate more generally to strong early-game play.

* * *

Comments, questions, corrections are welcomed!

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I am available for online backgammon lessons at a rate of \$100/hour for prepared lessons and \$60 for less formal "coaching" sessions (deliberate practice, practice games against XG, trouble-shooting matches, blunders, etc).
[Rates guaranteed through summer 2024].