

# GAMMON

THE MAGAZINE ABOUT **BACKGAMMON** & THE PEOPLE WHO PLAY

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**THE ITT  
CHALLENGE MATCH**  
USA VS EUROPE

**MONTE CARLO**  
THE WORLD  
CHAMPIONSHIP SCENE

**EZRA  
TISSONA**  
THE WORLD'S BEST???

**LAS VEGAS**  
THE AMATEURS



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At backgammon tournaments in both Europe and the United States I have asked several experts the following question: Who, in your opinion, are the three best players in the world, excluding yourself? The name mentioned more than any other was . . .

## EZRA TISSONA

*Is He The World's Best?*



When Ezra Tissona speaks, the earth lays back its ears and roars. Tissona is a 34-year-old Israeli whose reputation in backgammon is formidable. His supporters consider him a genius, one of the game's great natural players. His detractors call him a magician, even a dice manipulator. He is respected, feared, loved and hated — but never ignored.

Ignoring Tissona would be impossible. His coal black eyes seem to project laser beams. The intensity of his expression weighs on his shoulders and hunches them. His face still bears the scars of a childhood disease. Not until a smile washes across his semetic features does one sense the warmth and puckish humor that is also part of Tissona. He speaks five languages: Hebrew, Arabic, English, Spanish and Grunt. His voice is either menacing or luxurious. He grandstands his entrances, always surrounded by an entourage consisting of at least one brother (he

Candace Nyles Mayeron

His voice is guttural deep, and when he scowles he looks like a Child of the Night.

"Usually they come three, five, six, ten players against me."

"Maybe Magriel is better than me in mathematics, but for backgammon you don't need that."

has four) and an odd henchman or two. They almost always dress in black.

Although he now mingles with the glittery, international backgammon set as though he were born to it, Tissona learned his game in the streets and marketplaces of Israel, and refined his skills in the Israeli army, where "So long as we weren't fighting, we were playing day and night, night and day.

"Listen," says Tissona, "I'm a good backgammon player because I have a *feeling* for the game. I was *born* with this game. Sometimes in the middle of a game you have to gamble. You have to have a feeling. If you feel the game, the mistakes will be nothing."

Tissona plays instinctively — by the seat-of-his-pants. Were he a tennis player, he'd be Ilie Nastase. His natural talent has no liking for the droll world of probabilities. "I never count," he grumbles. (Some players claim Tissona doesn't even know *how* to take a pip count.) "I can see the situation straightaway, running game or things like this. I don't compute like Paul Magriel does, for example. I was the *worst* in high school in mathematics. Maybe Magriel is better than me in mathematics, but for backgammon you don't need that. Is big mistake if somebody think he have to know. Sometimes, is not good to know all these things." Instead Tissona uses psychology. "Each game I play different," he says. "I tell you, I never play the same. You cannot just play the game, you have to play against your opponent."

Tissona's rough-and-tumble Israeli style was honed to its current sleekness in the gambling parlors of London. He arrived there on holiday at the age of 27, an ex-bus driver with \$500 in his pocket. "I wasn't such a good player when I came to London. I think Israelis are the worst players in the world. Average Europeans are better than the best Israelis. Only the Israelis that live some time in Europe or U.S. become good. After I start to play in London, I saw different moves, and it was the first time in my life I saw these moves. They are putting so much pressure on me. It never happened to me before. So I start putting my moves with the other moves, mixing them together, and that is what happened. They couldn't mix the Israeli move with the European move, but I

could, because I can *see* things . . ."

Tissona met Tony Mancini, the former owner of the White Elephant nightery and himself a very competent player. "After I beat him he brought all the best players in the world over to play against me — Joe Dwek, Philip Martyn, Lewis De-yong, Barclay Cooke, Paul Magriel, Gino Scalandre and Stanley Tomchin. I beat all of them. Nobody won from me one penny. We played up to \$2,000 a point. Took three weeks. Day and night. One time I played three days nonstop. In all I made almost a half-million dollars.

"So then they start to say I am a magician, or I know how to control the dice, and this and that," chortles Tissona, "but I tell you I always played with the other guy's dice, board, everything. So they brought a special machine which rolled the dice. I beat them with the machine too!"

Tissona relishes the memory of the country Israeli boy trouncing the city slickers. "This was the first time I played good players and the first time for big stakes. I didn't play for big stakes in Israel, because I didn't know I was so good. But people told me Mancini was one of the best. So after I beat him, I had no fear of playing Joe Dwek because they were saying the same things about Dwek. I think, 'If this is Tony, so what Joe has to be?' Of course Joe is much better than Tony, but I didn't know that. Is good thing too, or I might never have played Joe and the others!"

The lobby of the Britannia Beach Hotel in Nassau, site of the 1978 World Championships, is swarming with backgammon players. Boards are set on lobby tables for impromptu chouettes. Dice rattle in trip cups, ice cubes clink in glasses, checkers click across felt and leather fields. On the side a crowd gathers around a dark pocket. It's Tissona and his black-shirted gophers. The game is Tissona-style, not exactly heads-up. He is playing a team consisting of Roger Low, Jason Lester and their friend from New York. They are permitted to consult. Tissona is alone.

"I cannot find a player to play against me alone," laments Tissona. "Always it is this way now. I play alone and they are in teams. Usually they come three, five, six, ten players against me." At \$300 per,

Tissona wins seven points.

Actually, \$300 is small stakes these days for Tissona. That he will play them for that amount is a tribute to the skills of Low and Lester. "I don't like to play for less than \$300 a point. I prefer at least a thousand." One might doubt there *are* any so foolhardy as to plunk upwards of \$1,000 a point to play against him — he says he never gives an edge — but says there is no shortage of opponents. "I have enough people. They are not from the backgammon group, certainly. But I have people all over the world. A lot of Arabs, South Americans, Germans. Very rich people. They like the challenge to play against me.

"The most I ever played for was \$50,000 a point. It happened years ago, in Germany. I was winning about a million dollars, but I knew he was not going to pay me so much. So I purposely lost back \$750,000 and then he paid me the \$250,000!" Tissona lets out a roar and slaps his knee at the joke. "Was very rich German industrialist. Everybody knows him. Good guy."

An accomplished poker player also (he considers his poker just slightly inferior to his backgammon), Tissona is the quintessential gambler. "Big money sessions I never lose, only win. One time I lost 15 points to Paul Magriel, but that was after I beat him for 57 points. Somebody might win some points from me one day, but over the week, I will be the winner."

Lest the reader think his only forte is the money side of backgammon, consider his tournament record: he won the Consolation of the first tournament he ever entered (Plaza Hotel, New York, 1973); has won the World Championships (Nassau, 1975); Clermont (London); and Miami. He loves playing in tournaments but isn't as confident of his potential success. "In tournament you need patience. I have no patience. When you play tournament it's like . . . I don't know how to say in English . . . like being handcuffed. You cannot play the same game. You cannot take chances, you cannot take risks, you cannot double the same you double for money. Don't get me wrong, I don't think I'm a bad tournament player — I've won a lot — but I know the chances to win are



“... I like to watch beginners... It's the only place I can learn something.”

“... I don't believe anybody in the world in a hundred years can learn what I know about backgammon.”

very small.”

Unlike many name players, Tissona does not get involved in lengthy money sessions during a tournament week. “Tournaments are the worst places for me to catch people,” he says. “Everybody knows me. So famous you know. And always they buy me for the big price in the calcutta, so everybody's afraid of me.”

If not money games, how does this superstar of players occupy his time while waiting for his next match?

Ezra Tissona, arguably the best backgammon player in the world, spends his idle tournament time... watching the *beginners*! “Is true! I swear to God I like to watch beginners. Beginners do moves nobody else can think about. Sometimes I see situation with beginners it couldn't happen to me, and I see moves I couldn't think about. Take for example a number that all good players would play the same. But beginners, they don't know. They play different, move after move. Then, maybe you can catch one move you didn't think about even. Good player cannot think of it. It's the only place I can learn something!”



He is friendly, but not buddy-buddy with the other backgammon champions. “I tell you something, everyone when he is losing to me... all the time they are complaining I know how to roll the dice, I know this and that.” He sighs. “It is very hard to find someone honest enough to say, ‘Good luck to you, you are a good player.’ As for himself, he has the most respect for the game of Kiumars Motakhasses, an Iranian champion.

Tissona has maintained his roots in Tel Aviv, where he operates a furniture store

and a Wimpy's hamburger outlet he purchased with his backgammon earnings. His wife seldom leaves to accompany him to tournaments, preferring, he says, to remain at home with their three children, a 9-year-old daughter and two sons, 6 and 2½. None yet play backgammon.

“In the U.S. so early they are playing backgammon? I didn't know. Well, they are too small to play, but I am sure my son, he is going to be better than me. This I can promise. I know because I am going to teach him good, from the beginning.

“Listen, when you teach somebody from the beginning good, he must be good. There is no way he going to be bad. Even if he doesn't have the mind for backgammon he must be good. Listen, if I wanted to I would never again have to gamble at backgammon. I could make the same money just teaching. I have people from Western hemisphere to Israel lining up to take lessons. And for big money, too. But I don't like to teach. For friends only I do it, as favor. But teaching for money is boring. It is not that I'm worried they could then beat me. No way that! Because what I know about backgammon, I don't believe anybody in the world in a hundred years can learn what I know about backgammon. Because my *instincts* are so good for backgammon. That means that every time I can make the best move, and nobody else can make the best move. Listen, anything you can show me in backgammon I can deal with it in one second, even if I didn't see it before. I can give a hundred situations to any other champion — who is the best you think — and I going to give him the choice to pick any side he wants. Well, I tell you he's going to lose *both* sides. I promise you. And if he gives me situation, I will win both sides!”

If Tissona sounds arrogant, consider that his assessment has been tried and tested, and he has not been found wanting. And still, his assessment is tempered with reason: “Of course I make mistakes, what you think?! Everybody make mistakes. Sometimes people come to me and say, ‘You did this and this,’ and I see the position, and I don't know how I did that but I did. But I tell you, I am ready to play against anybody in the world right now, and for *any* money.”

## Get The Record Straight !!

Sterling Publishing Company represents the Guinness Book of World Records. When contacted in April by Christopher Skwarko, age 20, and Benjamin Ascone, 19 — both students at St. Peter's College in New Jersey — a Sterling representative detailed the requirements necessary when submitting a record for consideration.

The students then logged 100 hours and 5 minutes, playing 1,524 games of duly witnessed and recorded backgammon, attempting to set a respectable record, worthy of consideration as the first backgammon entry in the famed book.

You see, they had been told there was not currently a backgammon category. They were not told of a similar inquiry made in 1978 by Dick Newcomb and Greg Peterson of Rockford, Illinois, who had been directed to submit an entry comparable to the current world chess record. Dick and Greg complied by submitting proof of an epic 151 backgammon hours, conducted over the 1978 4th of July holiday.

There is no backgammon category in the 1980 edition. Neither of these, nor any other backgammon records submitted are being considered currently by Guinness.

GAMMON, of course, is interested in hearing about any such frivolity — whether done as exhibitions for charity, or as attempts to better another's record.

*“A fool and his cube are soon parted.”*

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# THE

# I N T E R M E

## CUBE BY TED BARR

This section is specifically designed to provide the early players with a strong base capable of supporting understanding and use of the less obvious concepts.

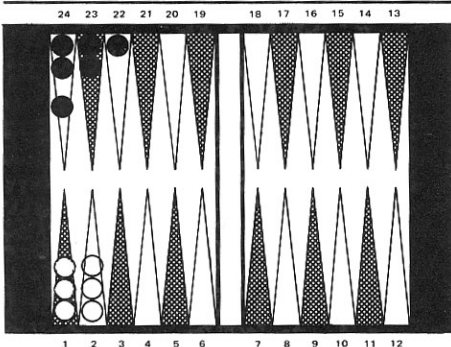
So many new players have questions regarding the cube I am devoting this column to the considerations essential to cube strategy.

In my opinion the cube must always be used when playing backgammon. Whether you play for money, points or "who does the dishes," the cube maximizes the excitement, eliminates the cat-and-mouse aspects and heightens the skill level for effective strategies. If your mistakes are costly, it is not likely you will repeat those same mistakes often.

Knowing when to accept or decline a double is the essential measure of skill among backgammon players. Some players' theory of doubling is to accept the cube only when you are the favorite, and to offer it only when you are winning the game. Anyone who believes this theory is naive, and must consider a number of factors when determining how to handle the doubling cube.

Generally, in the early to middle stage of the game, you should have a three-roll lead before considering a double. Your opponent, by the same token, should also have a three-roll lead before offering the cube to you. If he does not, you probably should accept.

Diagram #1



Should White Double?

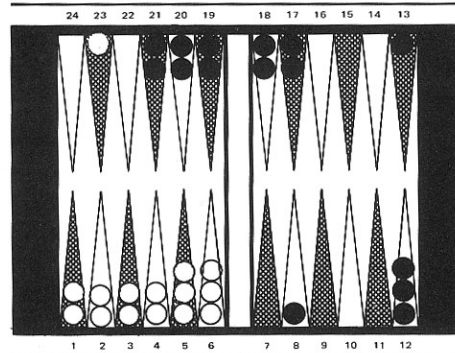
At a late stage of the game a one-roll lead can be sufficient to double. With few rolls left there is less likelihood of a reverse in position. In Diagram #1 White has a half-roll lead, and it is his turn to roll. Should he double? Absolutely!

It is late in the game. A half-roll lead is commanding since Black must roll doubles on one of his next two rolls to win. If White fails to double here, he gives Black the *free* opportunity to roll doubles. Furthermore, Black may only have one more roll if White rolls doubles.

White should use the cube to force Black out of the game and eliminate the possibility of his getting lucky. Black should decline, since to double the stakes in the hope of a long shot (rolling doubles) would be ridiculous.

Another factor which bears consideration in doubling is your position on the board, which is just as significant as your lead in the race. A substantial lead in the race will not win if, as a result of your board position, your lead dissipates.

Diagram #2



Should White Double?

Diagram #2 illustrates the importance of analyzing your position on the board. Here White holds a commanding five-roll lead, but should he double? Although White has an adequate

lead, his concern at this point is escaping. If he does not escape within the next three turns he will most likely lose the game.

As Black brings more of his men around, he will have the additional builders to put White on the bar and close his home board. Even if Black fails to hit, failure to escape will result in the dissipation of White's own home board, with three negative effects.

First, until his runner escapes, any large numbers rolled by White will be wasted. This is like taking away a portion of his turns.

Second, if White should hit Black later in the game, White will not be able to contain him long enough to escape, since his home board will be virtually wide open.

Third, if White *does* hit Black, it may result in White's having a man hit when Black re-enters from the bar.

Remember, when determining whether or not to give your opponent the cube, it is critical that you be aware of your position on the board as well as your lead in the race.

Another factor to consider is the position of the cube. By position I do not mean whether the cube is on 2 or 8 or whatever. I mean who owns it. Possession of the cube is most significant because whoever owns it controls the stakes or points for which the game is being played.

When the game begins, either player may double his opponent. Since you may double *or* be doubled, you are not giving up exclusive access to the doubling cube.

However, when the cube is in your possession (by virtue of an earlier double by your opponent) you must be more conservative about doubling as you are also giving up the *exclusive* control of the cube.



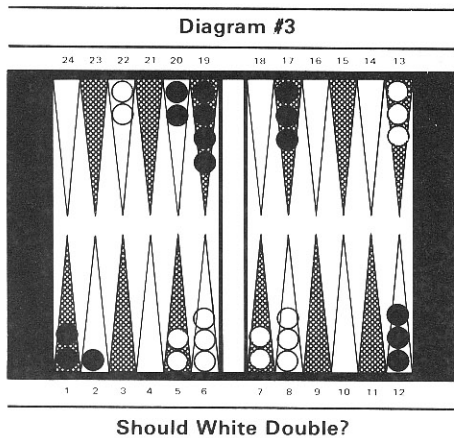
# D I A T E

## EVERYTHING IS A TAKE

By "Jersey" Jim Pasko

I recently read an article that stated, contrary to common belief, 25% is not the minimum necessary chance to win that justifies taking a double (in no-gammon positions). The article demonstrated that, in at least one case, a 20% chance of winning was sufficient to justify accepting the double.

The following example shows the minimum acceptable chance of winning (and to justify a take), is actually 18.75%! Suppose a particular game has developed into a race and Black doubles. Furthermore, suppose White has some way of determining that he can reach the following position 25% of the time, and lose 75%.



An example of this distinction can be seen in Diagram #3. White has an advantage in the game. Should he double?

Yes, if the cube is neutral (in the middle). He does not own it, and therefore, by doubling is not giving up exclusive control of it. But, if White does own it (it is on his side of the board) he should *not* double. He has only a slight advantage and giving up exclusive control of the cube is not yet justified.

Exclusive control of the cube is valuable. Guard it zealously by not making a loose double. If you possess the cube and the game goes well, you can increase your wealth or point position in the match by doubling. If the game turns sour, you can play it out, at no additional premium, and hope your opponent makes a mistake or that the dice turn your way. To have these options you must own the cube.

Finally, when dealing with the cube, consider your opponent's attitude. If he is leery of the cube and tends to turn down your doubles when you have only a slight advantage, by all means double him, force him out when your advantage is very slight.

If on the other hand, your opponent is stubborn and finds it difficult to

decline your doubles, you can afford to wait until you have a commanding lead before doubling. He will still accept. So make sure you want him to accept before offering the cube.

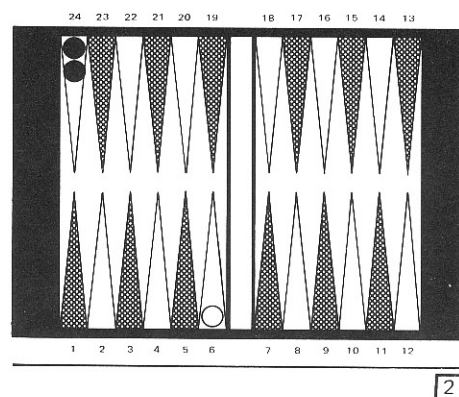
Observing certain characteristics in your opponent's game can give you a tremendous edge. Nearly all games of skill reward the player who observes his opponent's behavior. In poker you analyze your opponent's betting habits. In bridge, you should consider your opponent's bidding ability. In golf, you look for the weakness in your opponent's game, be it putting, stamina or whatever. In backgammon, the player who observes his opponent's doubling habits or even his game turns sour, you can play it out, at no additional premium, and hope your routine strategy moves has a marked advantage over the player who just plays his own game, oblivious to the playing patterns of his opponents.

Until you have taken all of these factors into consideration, you are not totally prepared to accept or decline, offer or withhold the doubling cube. If, however, you weigh these factors carefully, your doubling cube play will most likely be more effective than your opponent's.

Remember, the experts use the doubling cube so effectively that even if they forfeit three games out of four, they make it all back — and then some — in the few games they win.

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*"To slot is human, to cover is divine; but to point on his blot is a real winner."*



Now, since there is no equity gained or lost by Black in either accepting or declining the recube, then let us assume he takes. It should be easy to see that after the original acceptance, White will win 25% of the games. Multiply this 25% by his chance of winning after Black accepts the redouble, or 25% x 75%. Therefore, in this original position, White has a legitimate take, even though his winning chance is only 18.75%.

It is fairly simple to prove that (in no-gammon positions) this is the minimum winning chance to justify a take (steaming is not a justifiable reason).

There are certain, one-way gammon positions in which a smaller winning percentage allows an acceptance of the cube. In fact, if every win were to lead to a backgammon for the person accepting the cube and all his losses were single games, then a 12.5% chance of winning would be the minimum. My God, is everything a take?!

No, of course not. The gammon chances on either side influence the drop/take decisions a great deal. However, there *are* many positions that appear to be very bad, which in fact are actually good takes.



# THE 1979 WORLD CHAMPIONSHIP MATCH

by Bill Robertie

The final match for the 1979 World Championship of Backgammon in Monte Carlo pitted Jeff Westheimer of the United States against Luigi Villa of Italy. Westheimer, a top-ranked competitor in both backgammon and bridge, had reached the finals by defeating El-Zanaty of Egypt. Villa, regarded as Italy's best player, had overcome Karl Laubmeier of Germany 21-18 in the other semi-final match.

After some uneventful early play, Westheimer scored gammons in the 10th and 12th games to take a tremendous 15-5 lead. Villa then narrowed the gap somewhat, but after 20 games, Westheimer still led 21-13. The 21st game proved to be the turning point of the match.

Luigi Villa (13)	Jeff Westheimer (21)
Black	White
1. (4-2) 8/4 6/4	(3-2) 12/15 12/14
2. (5-1) 13/8 6/5	

Since White has two blots in the outfield, I prefer 24/23 with the 1.

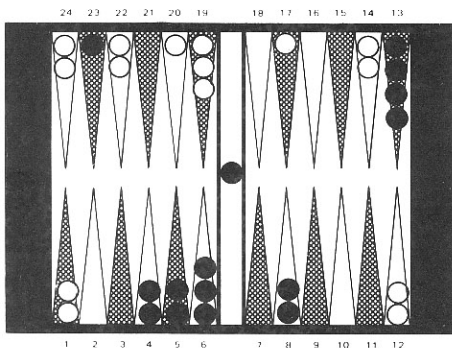
2. ... (5-2) 12/14 15/20

A better plan is 14-21, duplicating 3's. Apparently useless rolls in the opening, like this 5-2, can often be played to best advantage by looking for duplication.

Black doubles White accepts

A good double and a proper take, given the score in the match. Villa cannot afford to wait, as a number of sequences would not allow Westheimer to take next turn. This would not, of course, be a money double.

3. (3-2) 8/5 24/22	(5-5) 19/24(2)x
	17/22(2)x
4. (2-1) Bar/23	



White to play 6-3

4. ... (6-3) 17/20 1/7 !

A very difficult position. If Black's home board position were weaker, the clearly correct play would be 17/23x 20/23, creating maximum blitz potential. White would then be prepared to hit loose on the 4 and 5 points as Black re-entered, trying for a shutout. This strategy is not so effective here, since a return hit by Black, coupled with his strong home board, would make him a favorite. Westheimer improves his overall position, trying to reach equilibrium before playing for the win.

5. (4-4) Bar/21 13/9 5/1(2)x

Bad. Black ruins his position for some momentary safety. He should play Bar/21 13/1x, preserving his strong inner board and awaiting developments. With the 5 point now open, Westheimer will be entitled to take more liberties with an all-out blitz, which he might not otherwise have dared to do.

5. ... (5-3) Bar/3 7/12

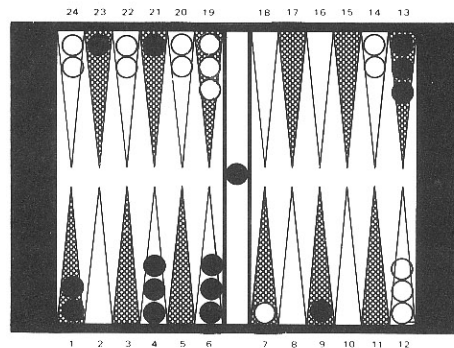
6. (5-4) 8/3x 8/4

I'd rather make an outside point with 8/3x 13/9.

6. ... (4-3) Bar/3x/7

White could hit two men (Bar/3x 19/23x) although the absence of cover numbers for the blot on the 2 point makes this play less appealing. Probably the best play with the 4 is 12/16, bringing another builder to bear on the vital 4 point at little risk.

7. -0-



White to play 4-4

7. ... (4-4) 14/18(2) 7/15

A play that might have cost the World Championship. White could win the whole match with a gammon in this game, and this was certainly the time to play for it. Simply 7/23x was better than the play he made, but best looks like 19/23(2)x 7/15 (!) eliminating the 2 point and trying for the shutout.

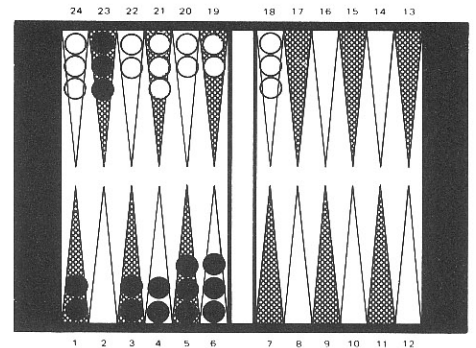
8. (3-2) Bar/23 13/10	(5-4) 12/21x !
9. (6-2) Bar/23 9/3	(6-2) 15/21 19/21
10. (4-1) 4/3 10/6	(3-1) 12/16 !

Correct. White breaks the midpoint while he still has three men trapped behind a 5-point prime.

11. (5-2) 13/8 13/11	(2-1) 16/19
12. (5-1) 11/5	(6-5) 12/18 19/24

Forced, but very awkward. White can easily get into trouble from this formation.

13. (3-1) 8/5 6/5



(3-1) 18/22

If this position were presented as a problem, virtually everyone would find the correct play: 19/22 19/20. Under the pressure of the World Championship, it is not so easy. The play in the game leaves White stripped and subject to four immediate double-blot numbers (6-5 and 5-4) plus potential future troubles.

14. (6-1) 23/16

Technically 5/4 is correct with the 1, giving three numbers to close the 2 point instead of two (double 2's and 4-2 instead of 4-3).

14. ...	(6-5) 18/24 19/24
15. (4-1) 23/19x/18x	-0-
16. (4-3) 6/2 5/2	



Three nightmare numbers in a row, and now Villa is playing for the gammon. Right now he has about a 40% chance of getting it.

- 17. (6-4) 23/17 18/14
- 18. (2-1) 14/11
- 19. (3-3) 16/10 11/8 17/14
- 20. (3-3) 10/4 14/5 !

Black played *five* 3's.

- 21. (5-4) 8/4 5/off
- 22. (3-3) 6/off(2) -0-
- 23. (5-3) 5/off 5/2 -0-
- 24. (4-2) 4/off 4/2 (5-1) Bar/5
- 25. (6-5) 4/off(2) (6-3) Bar/9
- 26. (6-5) 3/off(2) (5-4) 5/14
- 27. (4-3) 2/off(2) (6-2) 9/15 14/16
- 28. (4-1) 2/off 1/off (2-1)

Villa wins a gammon

Villa thus surged back into contention, trailing now only 21-17. With another gammon in the 23rd game, Villa finally took the lead at 22-21, only to have Westheimer tie the match at 22-all, reducing the World Championship to a best-of-three series.

**Game Number 25**

- 1. . . . (4-3) 12/16 12/15
- 2. (5-2) 13/8 13/11 (6-1) 12/18 17/18
- 3. (4-3) 13/9 8/5 (6-1) 1/7 15/16
- 4. (5-2) 9/7x 6/1x

A poor throw. This way of playing gives Black the best chance to make the 5 point.

- 4. . . . (3-2) Bar/2 Bar/3
- 5. (6-5) 11/5 7/2x

White Doubles – Black Accepts

In a three-point match, a player with a slight advantage should double quickly. The player being doubled should also be quick to drop. Owing the 5 point, I think Villa is correct to take.

- 5. . . . (5-2) Bar/2x/7
- 6. (5-3) Bar/20 6/3x (3-3) Bar/3x  
17/20(2)x  
12/15 !

12/15 is better than 7/10. With two men on the bar, White should throw all his efforts into creating builders.

- 7. (4-2) Bar/21 (3-1) 12/15 3/4 ?  
Bar/23

The play 3/4 is strange. 19/20 is much more natural.

- 8. (4-1) 8/7x 8/4x !

Unable to make an anchor, Black correctly tries to go forward.

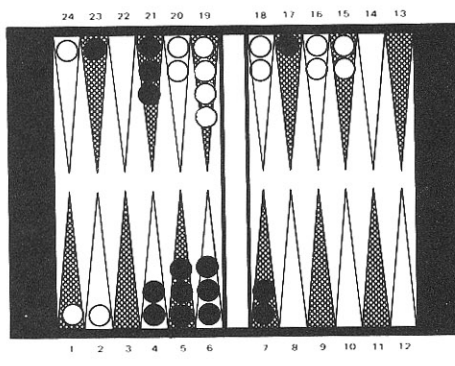
- 8. . . . -0-
- 9. (3-1) 7/4 23/22

This play of the 1 doesn't accomplish much. I prefer 8/7, slotting the bar to make a 4-point prime as soon as possible.

- 9. . . . (6-1) Bar/1x
- 10. (4-1) Bar/21  
13/12 !

Good. Black splits in the outfield to try to make the bar or the 8 point.

- 10. . . . (5-2) Bar/7
- 11. (4-1) 12/7x -0-
- 12. (3-3) 13/7 8/5 (5-2) Bar/2 19/24x  
24/21
- 13. (5-2) Bar/23  
22/17



- (4-3) 19/23x  
19/22 ?

White's position has become very fragile, and trying to hold all five points in front of Black is a vain hope. He should play 15/8 15/19. This leaves him with four spare checkers, and the ability to hold his remaining position for several turns.

- 14. (3-2) Bar/23x 17/14

Hitting two men was also reasonable, but I prefer this play. Black keeps the builder on the 5 point for making the 3 point.

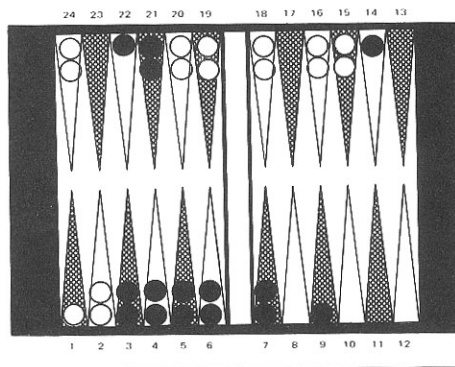
- 14. . . . (6-1) Bar/1 2/8
- 15. (5-2) 14/9 6/4

There was nothing wrong with simply 14/7.

- 15. . . . (4-3) 8/15
- 16. (4-3) 21/14 (4-1) 15/19 1/2 !

White is correct to give up the anchor. He desperately needs escape numbers for his back checkers, or his front position will start to crumble.

- 17. (1-1) 23/22x (5-2) Bar/23 6/1  
5/3 4/3



Final position

**Black Redoubles – White Passes (?)**

White's position is about to fall apart. Black has no bad rolls this turn and should take a roll to try for the gammon that could decide the match.

The final game proved anticlimactic. Villa quickly built an overwhelming advantage and cruised home to win the title 25-22. ■

**MONTE CARLO, JULY 9 - 15, 1979**

**RESULTS**

**Championship –**

- 1st: Luigi Villa (Italy)
- 2nd: Geoffrey Westheimer (New York)
- Semis: Karl Laubmeier (Germany)  
F. El-Zanaty (Egypt)

**First Consolation –**

- 1st: Alan Martin (Los Angeles)
- 2nd: H. Michaelides (Greece)
- Semis: J. Maas  
Aram Kouleyan (Los Angeles)

**Second Consolation –**

- 1st: Hugh Sconyers (Los Angeles)
- 2nd: David Winn (Houston)
- Semis: Lee Genud (New York)  
F. Gorgone

**Last Chance –**

- 1st: J. Daglas
- 2nd: Nouri Pakzad (Iran)

**Intermediate –**

- 1st: Hilda Lee (Los Angeles)
- 2nd: T. Hey
- Semis: N. Coral (London)

**First Consolation –**

- 1st: Philippe Narboni (Switzerland)
- 2nd: Roger Dionne (Los Angeles)
- Semis: Lutfu Basaran (Turkey)  
A. Azaria

**Second Consolation –**

- 1st: J. Los Arcos
- 2nd: Wolfgang Passman (Germany)
- Semis: Simi Lee (Los Angeles)  
Joel Rettew, Jr. (Los Angeles)

**Beginner –**

- 1st: C. E. Dime
- 2nd: J. Ruscher
- Semis: S. Yefet / E. Sosin

**First Consolation –**

- 1st: R. Bushman
- 2nd: C. Peroni
- Semis: S. Bernstein / De Pedraza

**Second Consolation –**

- 1st: Dr. Coplans
- 2nd: N. Achkar
- Semis: D. Semmig / Prosslinger

**Last Chance –**

- 1st: Max King (U.S.)
- 2nd: Sylvia Lapierre (France)



# S K I L L L E V E L S

B Y G A B Y H O R O W I T Z  
A N D D R. B R U C E R O M A N

LEVEL	CLASSIFICATION	PREDOMINANT CUBE BEHAVIOR
I	BEGINNER	TAKES ALMOST ALL CUBES
II	ADV. BEGINNER	PASSES ALMOST ALL CUBES
III (Low)	WEAK INTERMEDIATE	GUESSES ON MOST CUBE DECISIONS
III (Medium)	INTERMEDIATE	GUESSES ON MOST CUBE DECISIONS
III (High)	ADV. INTERMEDIATE	GUESSES ON MANY CUBE DECISIONS
IV	TOP PLAYER (WEAK CHAMPIONSHIP)	IN GENERAL MATHEMATICALLY CORRECT CUBE DECISIONS
V	EXPERT (CHAMPIONSHIP)	MATHEMATICALLY CORRECT CUBE DECISIONS
VI	MASTER	SUPERLATIVE CUBE HANDLING

The terms *top player*, *expert* and *master* are often loosely assigned to backgammon players with little regard to their true meaning.

It would be valuable and educational to have a classification system for the various skill levels of backgammon players. As no system has yet evolved, this article is intended to fill that void.

The doubling cube is a most difficult and most important aspect to master. We have used the cube as the principal determinant for classification, but have also described the emotional characteristics and checker movement inherent at each level.

## LEVEL I – BEGINNER Takes Almost All Cubes

The Level I player neither fears nor respects the cube. His attitude when doubled is not unlike that of the naive child about to touch the hot stove, thinking, "Why not?" He regards the cube as a gambling *toy*.

Most beginners belong in this category, especially following a short explanation on "how to use the doubling cube."

The other large segment of Level I players is the Old School Runner. The Runner is so named because his one and only game plan is running. Here we find the immigrant from Eastern Europe or the Middle East, where the game has been played for generations *sans* cube.

This type of player is unshakably convinced that he knows *everything* there is to know about the game. He will seldom be bashful about informing one and all concerning the extent of his knowledge; "Of course, I play the game very well, it's a (*name-of-his-country*) game," or "In my country you are born with the game in

your mouth." Quite frankly, we have yet to hear a plausible explanation as to how the game can start at one end of the digestive system and migrate.

The Old School Runner looks with disdain upon the relatively relaxed pace at which the game is played in the West. In the "old country" backgammon is played very fast with maximal slamming of the checkers against a greasy wooden board. The speed at which the checkers are moved, rather than their final destination, seems to be the yardstick for determining superiority.

When first shown the cube, the Old School Runner will look at it wide-eyed. Nevertheless, following a brief explanation, he is confident that he has successfully assimilated this "trivia" and he is most anxious to prove how very simple this all is.

Since he is not accustomed to the cube, but is conditioned to playing each game to completion, he will simply accept *all* cubes proffered. Regardless of how lucky he is, he can't win since he either forgets to double or does so too late and frequently gets gammoned owning the cube.

He can be spotted by the following tactical indiscretions, which include, but by no means are limited to:

- 1) Making his 2 point with an early 6-4.
- 2) Running with an opening 4-5.
- 3) Establishing his 1 point early in the game.
- 4) Indiscriminately piling up men on his 6 point with 4-3's and 5-2's.
- 5) Rarely splitting his back men.
- 6) Never slotting in his inner board.

This segment of Level I players can "go for a telephone number" (lose a considerable amount of money). It is wise to substantiate his cash-on-hand and to establish a policy of paying up after each

game to avoid being stiffed.

When a Level I player is more than a few points behind in the score, he starts to double very early (hoping to get lucky). It is best to establish a set period of time to play (the longer the better) and elicit the agreement that the winner cannot quit before the designated time. This will protect you against the "hit-and-run" in which the player who is ahead quits after a couple of games.

For the professional hustler, the nurturing of an "onmiscient" Level I player can provide a regular source of income. Two very successful actions in accomplishing this are:

1) Consistently compliment him on his "fine plays." (It's much easier to control your laughter when you are talking than when you are silent.) This is especially effective when his friends or relatives are present.

2) When he looks around in bewilderment as if to say, "Why are the dice doing this to me?"; lend him your shoulder to cry on.

Be very wary of the Level I player in tournament play. Extra caution with the cube is mandatory. He will *not* drop games that should be dropped, and if you have played more than two games of backgammon, you already know that *no* game is completely over until the last checker is removed. Therefore, he can take a bad cube, get lucky, and turn the game around. Most tournament matches are relatively short and an accident at a high cube can be very costly.

A Level I player can be very superstitious. It is not uncommon for him to ask you to change directions on the board, switch seats, dice cups and/or dice. Many times he will extend his hand in a congratulatory manner after you have gam-



moned him. He believes that by shaking hands, his bad luck will be passed to you and your good fortune to him.

This player has a tendency not to shake the dice correctly. He moves the cup in a horizontal direction, side by side, very slowly, rather than vertically.

Lastly, you will often find the all-knowing type of Level I player in the championship division in tournaments. It can be very disconcerting to fall victim to him, but remember, you can always play him for money later!

After a period of time, usually highlighted by substantial monetary outflow, the Level I player realizes something is wrong. He decides to change his handling of the cube.

Reasoning that taking all these doubles was the cause of his consistent losses, he begins to exhibit the classic symptoms of chronic "cube fear." He now passes whenever he is presented the cube. He has progressed to Level II.

#### LEVEL II – ADVANCED BEGINNER Passes Almost All Cubes

At Level II we find a slight improvement in the timing of his doubles, still late, but not as inaccurately. Most of the doubles he offers will be in racing positions since these are the easiest to understand. The propriety of the double will be determined visually, rather than a pip count, as he has little or no information on the mathematics of backgammon.

While capable of executing only simple gammons, he will be able to detect obvious positions in which he will be the one to get gammoned.

There is no improvement in the checker movement at this level. His play is overly defensive resulting in very inflexible positions. He can be observed killing checkers with utter abandon.

When a Level II player gets considerably behind in the score, he will drop down to Level I and begin doubling very early and taking all cubes.

Matched against a Level I or Level II player in a tournament, be prepared for a longer match in which high cubes (4 or more) rarely occur. You may congratulate him on his "fine pass" (or a clear take). This will encourage him to pass even more and increase the predictability of his mishandling the cube.

The Level II player will be successful against the Level I player because he will cash in on his good games, winning the maximum number of points (through use of the cube) which will more than compensate for the takes that he declines. *It is much less costly to pass takes than to take passes!*

Eventually the Level II player realizes that passing most doubles is not the panacea he had hoped for. He may be losing at a slower rate, but the basic direction of money flow has not been reversed.

A combination of Level I and Level II is subsequently attempted, i.e., taking and passing, with guessing being the common denominator.

#### LEVEL III (Low) – WEAK INTERMEDIATE Guesses On Most Cube Decisions

One of the first steps in learning is to realize that there is something that you don't know about the particular subject.

This is the level at which you see a dramatic improvement in checker movement and an earnest attempt to become more knowledgeable about the game. The Level III player reads books, magazine articles and attends seminars. Observing the games of the better player, he transforms into a "brain picker," asking questions whenever possible.

Encompassing a broad span Level III includes most players who participate in tournaments or play for several dollars per point.

The Level III player can detect a gammon possibility several rolls earlier. Working with builders and bearing off reasonably well, he is less fearful of leaving blots.

In his desire for information, the Level III player is less discriminating than prudent in accepting information. Players will volunteer information with little or no regard to the veracity of their statements. It can be said that many backgammon players are "often in error, but seldom in doubt."

Due to the meteoric rise in the popularity of backgammon in recent years, many self-styled backgammon "instructors" have appeared like mushrooms in a forest after the rain. They offer lessons at very low rates, but you get what you pay for. There are very few *qualified backgammon* instructors in the world and not one of them is inexpensive – "usually \$50 - \$200 per hour for a private lesson."

Since a player at this level does not have a set pattern of cube action, it can be very difficult to predict his reaction to a double. This makes the Level III the most treacherous of the six types.

It is at this level that the player will begin to achieve results – sometimes even winning a major tournament. One Level III, who won a prestigious event, proceeded to lose over \$100,000 in the year following his victory. Winning that event was the most destructive thing that could have happened to him as a backgammon player.

Most Level III players acquire sufficient knowledge of the game to enable them to lose more! Note that the person lacking the skill to swim is rarely found drowning in deep water.

When the roll of the dice is with the Level III player, he does reasonably well, but when losing for a short period of time, he will drop down to Level I.

Level III is also the level at which you will find the "dilettante-turned-pro," who forsakes his occupation for backgammon at his local club. Since he is inadequately prepared to win consistently, he soon finds himself in a financially inoperable situation. Having learned little from this experience, he saves his paycheck awaiting the day he can return. This is the cause of the curious phenomenon of players appearing, disappearing and reappearing at regular intervals.

If one is successful, and enters the ranks of Level IV, he then can be looked upon as a professional. If he fails he will persist for the period of time dictated by his opulence, roller-coasting in the "back to work – back to action" syndrome.

The Low to Medium Level III player soon realizes the need for some "angle" or "edge" when playing someone more skilled. This is expressed in two forms:

1) The request for a handicap, such as an opening 6-1, 3-1, possession of the cube, 6 to 5 odds, etc.

2) Learning several "can't lose" propositions and challenging the better players with them. It is very difficult to overcome a 6-1 spot against any Level III. Regardless of your desire to play, it's to the disadvantage of the skilled player to encourage this type of arrangement.

Due to the broad scope of Level III, it is divided into three sections: Low, Medium and High. Following are some of the characteristics and capabilities of each division.

#### Low Level III

1) First "daring" steps into taking again. He vividly remembers the many lost battles he suffered at Level I and therefore his "cube fear" is still quite strong.

2) Slow to double – slower to take.

3) Gross errors of judgment in determining priorities in contact positions.

4) Inadequate knowledge of holding and backgame strategy.

5) Plays most of the opening rolls correctly but poor in replying to the opening rolls.

6) Total inability to blend checker movement with cube action.

7) Timid attempt at duplication, usually incorrect.

#### Medium Level III

1) Exhibits mild "cube fear" – hesi-

tates more on taking than doubling.

2) Still guesses in most positions regarding the cube.

3) Consistently redoubles when his game is too good.

4) Makes numerous errors of judgment in determining priorities in contact positions and in replying to the opening rolls.

5) Has a rudimentary knowledge of the holding game.

6) Totally unable to blend checker movement with cube action.

7) Uses duplication frequently; often incorrectly.

### High Level III

1) More stabilized cube action — mild hesitation on doubling or taking.

2) Doubles/redoubles earlier or later than ideal by one to three rolls.

3) Still redoubles when his game is too good, but with some reserve. Aware of the possibility of the gammon. Still guessing in regard to the degree of gammon possibility.

4) Beginning awareness of blending checker movement with cube action.

5) Increased knowledge of the holding game.

6) Majority of replies to the opening moves incorrect.

7) Duplication is the main defensive tactic. Too often tries to create duplication when unnecessary.

The Level III player will be successful against Level II players and *very* successful against Level I opponents.

### LEVEL IV — TOP PLAYER

(Weak Championship)

In General, Mathematically Correct  
Cube Decisions

At Level IV we find the skilled player who can determine his equity in most positions. He has a conceptual understanding of the replies to the opening rolls and responds correctly to the majority of them.

A Level IV player is very knowledgeable in holding and backgames, and in general, accurately determines priorities throughout a game. There is little guessing on cube decisions or checker movement. The trademark of this level is the technically correct move based wholly on mathematical analysis of the position at hand.

Cube fear has finally been overcome and the player at this level occasionally succumbs to "cube fever," i.e., he becomes overenthusiastic with the cube because of the confidence he has in his game. We find a somewhat improved ability to blend checker movement with cube action at Level IV.

It is at this level that we find the "equity chaser." He always attempts — and usually succeeds — in determining the

equity in a given position and proceeds with total disregard for the Opponent Factor. The Opponent Factor means considering the skill and emotional level of an opponent in conjunction with the technical considerations of the position you are analyzing. He reasons that if a position "requires" a double or a take, that by doing so one hundred percent of the time the law of averages will enable him eventually to come out ahead. A competent technician, the Level IV is able to win or break even when he is not rolling well by using his knowledge of the game to transform his poor rolls into good rolls.

A meaningful differentiation between money game strategy and tournament strategy occurs at this level.

The player at Level IV has "staying power." He has a comprehensive arsenal of backgammon arcana which enables him to survive the lucky streaks of his weaker opponents and subsequently to "grind them out."

However, should his opponent's luck persist to the point that it extends beyond his own tolerance level, he can go down to Level II or even Level I, trying to regain all he's lost by creating big swings.

A Level IV will collect top dollar for his "hot streaks" but will also pay top dollar for his opponent's "hot streaks." *This is the reason that most Level IV players do not prosper financially at backgammon.* As backgammon professionals they lead a Macawberish existence. Most of their large losses occur when they face Level III incompetents running on a hot streak.

The Level IV player fails to differentiate between "head up" strategy and chouette strategy. He lumps both of them together as money games.

A strong player (Level IV), experiences difficulty in obtaining opponents. Anxious for "action," he becomes the victim of the less skilled but shrewd Medium-to-High Level III player who requests handicaps or offers propositions in which the Level IV gets the worst of it. In effect, Level IV becomes Level III's pigeon. Many people use the term "pigeon" to signify a weak player. This is an incomplete definition. A pigeon is a player who, when things go poorly, will pay the maximum price for each lucky roll or game of his opponent.

The world of backgammon can be divided into two categories: donators and collectors. The donators are the pigeons regardless of their skill level. The history of backgammon is replete with stories of Level IV players losing substantially to players of lower caliber.

One of the most popular *private lessons* for the Level III player is "How to Prosper From the Encounter with a Level IV."

The results from this series of lessons show conclusively that an emotionally well-balanced Level III with several "gaps" in his game can be guided into consistently winning against the average Level IV player.

### LEVEL V — Expert (Championship) Mathematically Correct Cube Decisions

It is at Level V that we find the backgammon expert. He does everything well and can be counted on to give a consistently solid performance at the table.

At this level we see an "awareness of the opponent" factor.

Although the expert rarely makes a technical error in checker movement, he does not ordinarily exhibit any significant amount of creative ability. He has a higher tolerance level, but under duress will still steam or dwell on previous unfortunate games.

There is still present an "only one" philosophy in which there is no desire to teach or educate others but rather an attempt to keep information to himself.

There are perhaps forty experts in the world at present.

### LEVEL VI — MASTER Superlative Cube Handling

It is at Level VI that we finally arrive at the rarefied stratum of the master.

Most people tend to lump all the top players, experts and masters into one homogeneous grouping. This is grossly unfair.

Technically, there are two very important abilities that serve to separate the master from the expert. While the expert is able to determine his equity in any given position and act upon a strict mathematical computation thereof, the master has the ability to determine in which equity it is wisest to invest his money dependent upon the Opponent Factor. Therefore the master will double certain opponents earlier than would be considered technically correct and refrain from doubling other opponents in a position which technically "demands" a double. He will take a double that is a pass against one opponent and pass a double that is a perfect mathematical take against a different opponent. Constantly considering the potential gain versus the potential loss in each game, he continually observes the Opponent Factor.

While playing at the board, the maximum return on his investment is his primary consideration, not ego aggrandizement. The master does not expect to win each game because he is aware of the nature of backgammon and thus he can accept defeat without adverse emotional effects. The Level VI player *never* steams.



He is capable of paying the minimum for his opponent's good rolls and hot streaks; the master is very creative in extracting the maximum price from his opponent.

The second technical factor that distinguishes the master from the expert is the ability to employ different strategies for heads-up play and chouette play. When playing in a chouette, if the session goes poorly for the master, he will break even or at most lose a few points. The Level IV and V can lose quite substantially in a chouette when they are running "salty."

As L. Ron Hubbard stated, "A being is only as valuable as he can serve others." The master feels the duty to share his knowledge with the backgammon community and seeks to create an ever-expanding base of information which can be drawn upon by the lesser skilled player. Writing books, articles, giving seminars and lessons, he often volunteers information to his fellow club members and friends. He shares in the successes of his students and suffers with them in their defeats.

The masters are a unique and special breed with only a handful of members comprising their ranks.

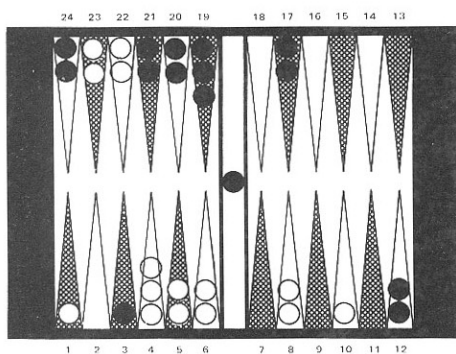
**Barclay Cooke**  
*"Paradoxes and Probabilities"*  
**Typographical Errors**

*Courtesy of Lee Silverstein, Director—Minneapolis/St. Paul Backgammon Club*

Page	Line	Reads	Correction	Page	Line	Reads	Correction
27	9	W5	R5	94	11	either of these	this
34	19	W12	R12	97	16	R1	W1
50	12	W1	White	128	2	W5	W6
59	10	he	Red		3	W5	W6
70	7	R1	W1	148	8	R2	W2
	8	R7	W7			R7	W7
	13	R1	W1	156	17	W3	W4
75	24	R12	W12	164	10	W3	W4
79	19	bidder	Builder	174	15	twenty-one	twenty-three
90	9	W12	R12		17	7-5	9-5
	11	12	R12	180	8	a 2-1	an 8-5
94	11	or R8	(omit)		9	twelve	fourteen
				183	5	R10	W10

**How Little We Know**  
 by "Jersey Jim" Pasko

This interesting position developed in a game I was recently involved in.



White to play 5-4

After discussing the problem with many of the top players, I collected a number of different solutions which were basically as follows:

- |   |  |   |
|---|--|---|
| ▶ | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a) 23-14</li> <li>b) 22-13</li> <li>c) 23-18, 22-18</li> <li>d) 10-6, 8-3</li> <li>e) 10-1</li> </ul> | ◀ |
|---|--|---|

The interesting thing about this position is that each play leads to a completely *different* game plan. Furthermore, after doing lengthy statistics on the problem and becoming quite confident on the order of solutions from best to worst, I noticed some startling facts. The first choice of the great majority of the top players was most likely the *worst* solution and the two choices selected least often were in fact almost certainly the two *best* choices.

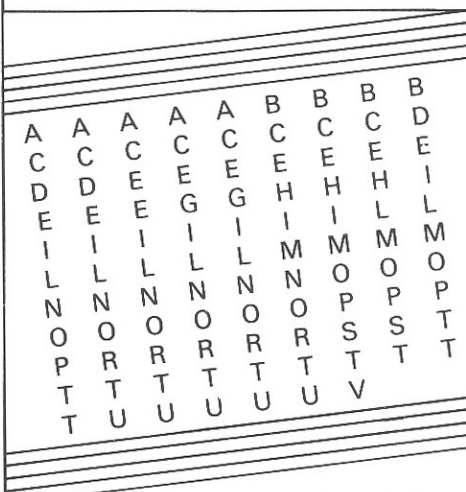
I think this points out very vividly what the top players *do* know, and that is how much we really don't know about the game. This is what makes backgammon the great game that it is.

Think about the above position, and if possible, play out the various alternatives as many times as possible. Try the solution chosen by most of the best players — 8-3, 10-6. This is the poorest option available. After examining the alternatives, there is little question that making Black's bar is the best play.

*"Two is company, three's a chouette."*

*"He's not heavy, he's my builder."*

How many words common to backgammon can you construct from the letters listed below? One of our editors listed 18 words with no letters left over.



We'll make this a "contest" and give away GAMMON T-shirts to the 25 readers submitting the best\* lists of words. Entries must be postmarked by February 15, 1980.

*\*Those lists using all the letters and received the earliest.*