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## Jason Pack at the 2013 London Open

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*by Jason Pack*

The London Open is the UK's premier backgammon tournament with over $30,000 in total prize money (including side pools, jackpots, side events, etc). The event used to have a lower profile and was held in East London. Since it was taken over by Sean Williams a few years ago, it has arguably become the most sleek, professional, and punctual affair on the international backgammon circuit. Sure, the Nordic Open might feature stronger players and Monte Carlo might have much more money in the kitty, but the London Open crams the most high quality backgammon into the shortest amount of time, in the best setting, of any tournament I've yet played. Tournament director Mike Main makes sure that if you do well in the "Open" or the "Professionals" or if you join many side events you can play 8-12 matches in two days, while Zoe Cunningham, its media personality, adds some 21st century glamour by doing both TV filming and live streaming. For the last couple of years, it has been held in a 19th century courthouse in London's Covent Garden that has been converted into a restaurant and event space. And this is why for the past few years the organizers have had to turn away prospective entrants because the venue simply can't hold them all. This will be corrected next year when the tournament will be moved to a bigger venue in Bloomsbury, and then if the tournament continues to grow it is likely to join Novi, Vegas, Northern Cyprus, Tokyo, the Nordic, and Monte Carlo as one of *the* fixtures on the international backgammon seen.

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This year's 2013 London Open held on May 18 and 19 illustrated in striking fashion what we all intrinsically know about the post-bot era in backgammon: it is impossible to win consistently without both a high understanding of modern backgammon theory which allows one to imitate the bots on most moves, while also possessing a great intuition about when to eschew the "bot-move" and play one's opponent psychologically, tempting him to make errors. Striking the right balance between pure math and pure psychology is what makes great backgammon an art and not a science -- although Walter Trice and Jake Jacobs did try to quantify this type of knowledge in their book *Can a Fish Taste Twice as Good? Doubling in an Unequal Backgammon Match.*

Out of a field of 64 in the "Professionals" and 128 in the "Open" there were only three Giants of Backgammon competing -- Raj Jansari, Julian Fetterlein, and Carlo Melzi. Various American Giants were slated to play, but even after pre-paying the registration fee, they didn't show! Of the attending Giants, remarkably all three of them made the semis *in both tournaments.* It was like watching the old days of Nadal, Djokovic, and Federer at the French Open and then at Wimbledon: despite the differences of play on clay or grass or between short matches or long

ones, there seemed to be an aura of inevitability about the three titans of the sport meeting in both the semis. But clearly backgammon is not tennis as a whole lot of luck is involved.

The Professionals' Tournament was six rounds of single elimination, 11 point matches against a fairly strong field (I would estimate the field as a Bell distribution centered on an XG rating of 6 PR) while the "Open" was 7 rounds of single elimination, 5-pointers against a more diverse field (I would estimate the overwhelming majority of players having XG ratings between 5-12 PR with a handful significantly worse). We all know that even the best backgammon players in the world lose quite frequently to intermediates playing around a 12 PR in 5 point matches. To present how truly remarkable it was for the three Giants to make both semis, I'd like to take a page out of Douglas Zare's playbook and do some basic math.

Let us first grapple with the most extreme case of its unlikelihood, by modeling tournament BG matches as pure luck with the outcome of each match modeled as a simple coin flip. Now for simplicity's sake, let us assume that the draw always has the three Giants in separate quarters of the draw as it would in any seeded tournament as in professional tennis. (In the actual London open, because the draw was totally random it was quite an occurrence that in both tournaments the three Giants ended up in separate quarters, making the overall occurrence far less likely than even the calculations in this article suggest.) In the Open tournament each Giant had to win 5 matches to reach the semi-finals and in the Professionals' tournament each Giant had to win 4 matches to reach the semi-finals. If a Giant had a 50% chance of winning each match, the probability that the three Giants reach the semi-finals of both tournaments would be: $(0.5)^5$ x $(0.5)^5$ x $(0.5)^5$ x $(0.5)^4$ x $(0.5)^4$ x $(0.5)^4$ = 1/[2^27]=1/134,217,728 which is about one time in 134 million or .000000745%.

So armed with this information, either match backgammon is mostly luck and the 2013 London Open witnessed a truly breathtaking event that even given a favorable draw would still only happen once every 134 million, or tournament backgammon is far more about skill than it is about luck and the Nadal-Djokovic-Federer phenomenon of the three best players meeting in back to back semis is not that random at all. Tennis is 99% skill and the true "Giants" of tennis sport stand light-years ahead of the rest. For example, the probability of Djokovic losing to any player outside of the top fifty is far less than 1% and Nadal essentially never loses on clay no matter who the opponent is. In fact, during their heydays from 2008-2012, Nadal, Djokovic, Federer met in the majority of the semifinals of the Grand Slam tournaments. So clearly Backgammon is somewhere in between these two poles, but it is possibly closer to the tennis than to the coin flipping model outlined above.

But how much closer? I hazard that what makes Julian, Raj, and Carlo true Giants of Backgammon standing head and shoulders above most of the competition on this island is precisely their ability to consistently dominate inferior opponents even in short matches. In fact, Julian Fetterlein is known as being one of the best players in the world at exactly this skill.

To illustrate just how good Julian, Raj, and Carlo are let's envision an alternate London Open in which they didn't participate and were replaced by three entries of XG2 playing at its XG++ setting. My intuition and my experience tell me that it is exceedingly less likely that all three XG entries would have made the semifinal in both tournaments. How much less likely though? I've

experimented with some back of the envelope calculations and will illustrate below that it is probably at least two orders of magnitude less likely. And the reason I start with this extended anecdote and demonstration is to stress my key contention, i.e. that the best players in the world play weak players far better than any computer program would and that they do so by grasping the psychological dimension of the game and possessing a great sense of "table-feel." To carry the point further, in a hypothetical Calcutta Auction at the beginning of a tournament I would take Falefel or Julian Fetterlein over XG anytime, because every tournament has fish and Falefel and Julian know how to fry them. In my reckoning, XG++ is only better than Julian at playing itself or Mochy or Lars Trabalt or other Giants. Against almost all other human opponents, Julian appears to perform better than we would expect XG++ would. A surprising contention, no doubt. Yet, Trice and Jacobs have demonstrated in *Can a Fish Taste Twice as Good?* how humans can employ a match doubling strategy optimally suited to maximizing their gains against their opposition by gauging relative skill difference. In short, so firmly do I hold the conviction that the best humans are better at frying fish than machines, that I'm willing to wager that any of the top twenty Giants of BG have a significantly better chance than XG++ in an 11 point match against a weak advanced (roughly XG PR 8) player.

To illustrate my calculations and reasoning, XG's chances (according to how error ratings work) are probably only 70% of victory, while given an empirical study I've conducted at recent British tournaments (which is facilitated by the fact that most tournaments in the UK play 11 point matches), the Giant has around an 80% chance against the weak advanced player. And in a five point match against intermediate opposition (let's say roughly XG PR 11) the gap between the best humans and XG++ is compounded further still (e.g. the best humans rarely get gammoned with the cube on 2 against inferior competition in a short match and maximally exploit the opponent's lack of understanding of match scores like 4-away, 3-away and 3-away, 3-away). XG++ probably has only around a 60% chance of victory against the real pigeons in a super short match while my preliminary research shows that against this inferior competition the Giants may win a staggering 75% of the time. Given that these are exceedingly loose back of the envelope calculations, which although grounded in some data are not yet based on a statistically sufficient sample size, I would nonetheless like to use them for modeling the London Open and trying to understand where it lies on the skill/luck dichotomy. To do so let us revisit the question of how likely it is that the three giants all reached the semis of both tournaments (given the favorable draw of being in separate quarters). This is $(0.75)^5$ x $(0.75)^5$ x $(0.75)^5$ x $(0.8)^4$ x $(0.8)^4$ x $(0.8)^4$ = .8^12*.75^15=0.00091833005 which is about one time in 1090 or .09%.

Wow! On the one hand that illustrates that it is a fairly unlikely occurrence, yet on the other it shows that it is significantly more frequent than one in 134 million. In fact, this makes tournament Backgammon appear closer to tennis than to coin flipping or somewhere right in the middle in between Chess and War. Now if we look at the figures for the three hypothetical bot entries all reaching the semis of both tournaments (given the favorable draw of being in separate quarters) we get .7^12*.6^15= 0.000006507965409 = one in 153,658. This means that, given the assumptions of our model, the best humans all get to the semis 140 times more frequently than the best bots, hence my assertion above about it being about two orders of magnitude more likely.

In short, to return to what we all knew without any of the pseudo-mathematical proof presented above: it is truly worth knowing when to vary your checker play and cube decisions from the XG

play to squeeze out the maximum amount of equity from your opponent. And as more and more domains of backgammon are reduced to memorization, reference positions, and number of hours of study with a bot, this is the field of backgammon that most requires ingenuity, experimentation, and pure talent. Any shark will tell you it is also the most financially lucrative to master and that merely memorizing and implementing a match equity table which takes into account skill difference such as the one in *Can a Fish Taste Twice as Good?* will only help so much OTB. With this theme ever present in our minds, let me continue where I left off last month by investigating some interesting positions from my matches at the London Open.

Unlike my run of incredible luck at the British Open in April, in May's London Open Professional's Tournament I quickly found myself down 3-7 to 11 facing decidedly intermediate opposition. Furthermore, he was rolling doubles and perfectas almost every other turn. (I recorded the match and later rigorously studied the key cube decisions and I deduced that my biggest mistake, which got me into the hole, was that I took a technically correct yet borderline take in a gammonish position tied 3-3 and got gammoned after he threw a sick set of double sixes. Knowing the skill difference and the opponent's aggressive taking tendencies, I probably should have dropped, but in the moment I impulsively took, probably feeling that I would outplay him in the position and that a gammon was unlikely.)

Then in the next game, I gave a timely cube down 3-7 (i.e. 8-away, 4-away). I then executed my threat and put two of my opponent's men on the bar with all of my points except the four point closed. Over the course of many turns, I was unable to close the four point, but each time he entered one man I repeatedly attacked him via picking and passing to prevent him from anchoring. In this way I started to bear in with my four point open and a weird distribution of my spares and both his men on the roof. Then, a very cruel accident happened on the way to the bank. I threw an unfortunate set of double sixes which bore in my last two men from the nine and seven points, and bore off two of my three checkers on my six point, exposing a direct shot from the roof. Next, unsurprisingly given his dice that day, my opponent hit, entering one man. At this point, I was still favored in the game as he had the five point open in his board giving me many rolls to come in before he could enter his second man and come around the board with both of his men and begin bearing off. However, I fanned six rolls in a row and we reached the following position with my opponent on roll holding a two cube and up 4-away, 8-away.

**Position London Open 1:**


is Player 2

score: 7
pip: 50

11 point match

pip: 57
score: 3

is Player 1

XGID=-DBC-C----------c-cdcbA:1:-1:-1:00:3:7:0:11:10

on roll, cube action?

Now my opponent deserves credit for his good recube here. Technically, he could have cubed last turn and has already lost his market by reaching this position as I have a pass here. Yet, the match score dynamics make the position complex to analyze and many people would scoop this cube. Looked at from his perspective, he can use all four points and can further "overshoot his market" to the point where most humans would pass on the next turn if he doesn't cube and instead rolls taking two men off without me entering. Also even though I am 8-away and can immediately recube to 8 putting the whole match on the line, the position is sufficiently favorable for my opponent (without doing any advanced math you can tell he is a massive 85+ % favorite) making this a clear and powerful recube at this score. In short, I was not happy to see this cube coming my way. I was inwardly enraged as two minutes earlier I was very close to leveling the match at 7-all and making up for my atrocious luck so far.. Hence, my first impulse was to make a steamer's take and focus on the fact that I had two men off and the opponent had none and I only appeared to trail by two crossovers. Moreover, it is very tough to drop a recube in a game that was so completely won just moments before and especially when you can take the recube and ship it back over for the whole match. We all know how emotionally appealing it can be to take a big cube while behind in the match and immediately reship the cube to play out the game for the whole match. Yet understanding the gravity of the situation, I stopped to do the math. This position resembles a reference position that we all should know: Two men off with one man on the roof closed out facing a perfect distribution of spares (i.e. on the 4, 5, and 6 points). That position is known to win 10% of the time cubeless, which is how I would be playing after recubing to 8. Clearly, my position is better off in many ways than that. Firstly, because my opponent's five point is open. Therefore, I may enter immediately with a five at which point I will likely only be two crossovers down in the race. Moreover, my opponent may immediately blot with 65 after which I will hit with any six or 51. This immediate hitting parlay happens about 1% of the time (2/36*13/36) and we can assume I win almost all of those games, clearly boosting my wins to at least 11%. So far all of my reasoning was correct, then I incorrectly assumed that I was far better off in the race than in the standard two men off reference position because his board wasn't closed and he might miss with subsequent fives in

the bear off, hence I boosted my wins by another percent for that. I also assumed that, in addition to helping me in the race, my opponent's gap on the five point meant that he was more likely to blot on subsequent rolls giving me about one percent more of later hits and wins than the reference position, but these were erroneous assumptions. The reference position with two men off and the rest closed out relates to my having all my remaining men on the low points in a no-miss formation. In the actual position, the gap on my four point and my heavy five point hurt me severely in the games where I quickly come around and begin racing. Move the three men on my 5-point to my 4-point and I have a significant take winning 13.5%; move my men into a no-miss position, say all my men on the ace and deuce points and it would be a slight error for him to cube as I would be winning 14.5%. In the actual position, given that I have too many men on my high points, even if I enter immediately, I am exceedingly unlikely to win the race without a high double. Not seeing how my position was ill-suited for a race was my primary error. Furthermore, my opponent actually has his spares in very good positions (he won't blot with a high double now or in subsequent turns if he plays safely) and is in fact unlikely to blot soon except in clearing his six point and by the time he is potentially blotting on the lower points, I will either have run past him or it will be too late to win with a late hit because I won't be able to contain the checker. In short, over the board I thought I had 13% but in reality I only have 11% because of my poor distribution and his excellent distribution.

Well, how many percent do I need to take? I.e. what is my take point on a four cube trailing 4-away, 8-away? The answer to that should be fairly easy; it is the same as my chance of winning a match trailing 2-away, 8-away. The match equity table (I use Woolsey-Heinreich) says that is roughly 12%. Over the board, I reasoned I had 13% and took. As we can see from the roll out below this is significant error obviously giving away something like 1% match equity and being considered a .140 blunder.


is Player 2

score: 7
pip: 50

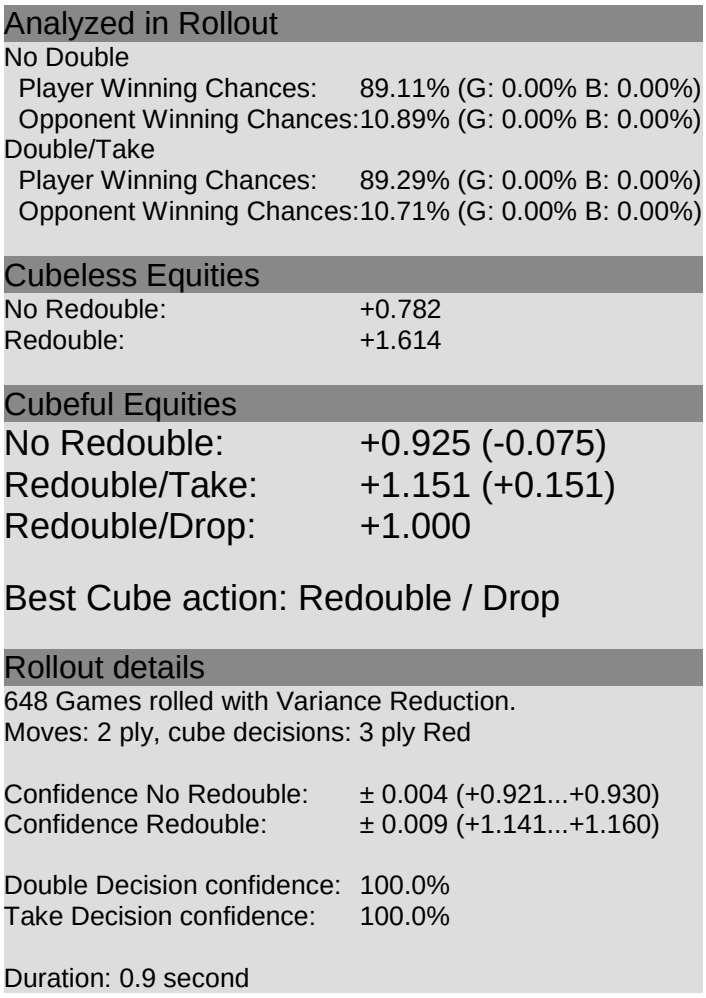
11 point match

pip: 57
score: 3

is Player 1

XGID=-DBC-C----------c-cdcbA:1:-1:-1:00:3:7:0:11:10

on roll, cube action?




However, in practice my error was far, far greater than the 1% match equity that XG points out because I knew my opponent was an intermediate and a deep taker. In *Can a Fish Taste Twice as Good?* Trice and Jacobs postulate that the superior player trailing 8-away, 2-away wins a staggering 24% of the time if he has a 63% chance of winning any given game cubeless. Using the math, they demonstrate and giving myself the more realistic 55% chance of winning any given game cubeless against this opponent plus adjusting for the fact that trailing 8-away, 2-away was exactly the kind of score line in which my opponent was likely to make big taking errors, I believe I could would have had a 17+% chance of victory if I had dropped. Hence, even if my math is slightly off or my opponent was slightly stronger than I had assumed, my real chances at 2-away, 8-away would have been enormously better than the 12% I could get from taking the cube and recubing to 8, especially in a position such as this one which requires zero skill and the cube is entirely dead. In fact, even against a total novice in this position who might misplay one pip in bearing off my chances would only be in the 13% range. In short, after doing the math, even if I thought I had calculated that I technically had a take against an equal opponent by 1%, I should have reasoned that over the board this was a massive massive pass *against this opponent*. Lastly, studying the position at home I learned just how important it is that my opponent has a good distribution. If one of his spares from the six point is moved to the three

point (gaining him three pips in the race), but making him odd on the end meaning that he can blot immediately with high doubles and 65 the position becomes a borderline take, but still *not a take* against a weaker opponent in a big tournament match.

Now, after my big psychological misplay putting me out of the London Open Professional's Tournament, I entered the main jackpot called the London Cup -- a single elimination jackpot format of nine point matches. Here my luck was to be a quite a bit better and my cube handling/opponent management was to be wiser as well.

In the first round of this Jackpot, I played the experienced Spanish-Lebanese Player Ricardo Malas, who played very admirably in our match. After getting gammoned with the cube on two in the first game and ending up trailing 7-3, I managed a remarkable comeback, even though Malas played all of his take/pass decisions correctly.

Then in my second London Cup match I played a strong and highly technically accurate Norweigan player, Dagfinn Snarheim (the current Norwegian Backgammon Champion, I however did not know this useful piece of information at the time of the match). In the first game of the match I went on the attack reaching the below position where I have escaped both of my backmen to the bar point anchor and have his men behind a four and a half prime which I can turn into a five prime with a 2 or a 9 (17 numbers) or I can attack his blots with many of my remaining numbers.

**Position London Open 3**


is Player 2

score: 0
pip: 142

9 point match

pip: 130
score: 0

is Player 1

XGID=--aaABDBB---cB---cBbbc----:0:0:1:00:0:0:0:9:10

on roll, cube action?

| Analyzed in Rollout | |
|---|---|
| Player Winning Chances: | 68.13% (G: 24.08% B: 0.67%) |
| Opponent Winning Chances: | 31.87% (G: 7.27% B: 0.26%) |

| Cubeless Equities | |
|---|---|
| No Double: | +0.534 |
| Double: | +1.102 |

| Cubeful Equities | |
|---|---|
| No Double: | +0.744 (-0.120) |
| Double/Take: | +0.864 |
| Double/Drop: | +1.000 (+0.136) |

Best Cube action: Double / Take

eXtreme Gammon Version: 1.21, MET: Rockwell-Kazaross

The double is quite sound and it should be clear that volatility is sky high here and that I win a lot of gammons--standard indicators for a good double. Now what about the take? The attack is fraught with danger because he has a very strong homeboard with all his pieces in play. Also I have some very poor #s (!) like 61, 65, 51, 64, 66. Therefore, in a significant number of variations, I cannot cover or am forced to hit loose. Then if am hit back, I am likely to be cubed out unless I can quickly recover from the hit. Similarly, if I don't hit, whether or not I make the five prime, Dagfinn will likely eventually anchor and then have play against my bar anchor which I will have to clear and may leave a shot in the process. For these reasons and my lack of a good distribution of spares, the position is a take. To his credit, Dagfinn spotted this. And later as my attack faltered, he hit a shot and I was forced to drop the recube. In the next game trailing 0-2, I got in a good cube in a prime vs. prime position, but the game turned against me.

**Position London Open 4**


is Player 2

score: 2
pip: 73

9 point match

pip: 124
score: 0

is Player 1

XGID=----aCDBBB--A---a--bbbbbcA:1:-1:-1:00:0:2:0:9:10

on roll, cube action?

| Analyzed in Rollout | |
|---|---|
| Player Winning Chances: | 72.27% (G: 36.48% B: 0.16%) |
| Opponent Winning Chances: | 27.73% (G: 2.00% B: 0.04%) |

| Cubeless Equities | |
|---|---|
| No Redouble: | +0.795 |
| Redouble: | +1.348 |

| Cubeful Equities | |
|---|---|
| No Redouble: | +0.824 (-0.152) |
| Redouble/Take: | +0.976 |
| Redouble/Drop: | +1.000 (+0.024) |

Best Cube action: Redouble / Take

eXtreme Gammon Version: 1.21, MET: Rockwell-Kazaross

With Dagfinn on roll, I was unsure if he was too good, if he should cash or if he was perfectly within his market. I was really hoping he would take a roll as it might have been 54, 44, 53, 33, or some such anti-joker, or on the other side, if he rolled and it was a six he would royally lose his market and have to play on. As should be obvious, he has only 8 playable pips and quite a few numbers that bust immediately. Robertie says that in these positions where you have one man closed out and the opponent is at the edge of your five prime that you can take if he has up to 14 playable pips before having to break his six point. By that rubric this would be a take, and Dagfinn more likely to bust than in the reference position which is a borderline take. However, the relevant Robertie reference position has my prime extending from my deuce to my six point with no extra men able to be picked up. So let's say on the positive side of things that he busts slightly more than half the time here, but on the negative side, he is also highly likely to gammon me far more than in the reference position, with an immediate six making a gammon highly likely. In fact, in many variations he gammons me *even without picking up the extra man* as I have 8 checkers to bring into my home court. I analyzed that if he throws a six in either of his first two turns, he is almost certain to win (90+%) and a favorite (60+)% to gammon me. Moreover his gammons on a four cube at 7-away / 9-away, win him the match, but they do so with some wastage which is quite relevant to making this a take. (If Dagfinn were up only 8-away, 7-away where he would get perfect efficiency on his redoubled gammons, it would be a monster pass while if he was ahead 6-away/9-away the recube would be a triple blunder.) Now there are other ways in which the score helps me: if he busts, I'll have great recube vig and a monster gammon killing cube to 8 if he exposes a shot, or busts down to only four points, but those happy scenarios seemed to me quite a distant possibility when evaluating the cube action. Moreover, I didn't think Dagfinn was likely to misplay any aspect of this position or take a recube of mine when it would be a pass. In fact, I judged him far more likely to play the position correctly than myself. Therefore on the strength of that analysis and my aversion to putting the whole match on the line, I dropped. XG has this position as a take by .024. I think only a very bold or very mathematical player can take a four cube here, unless he thinks his opponent is significantly weaker and will misplay the position or conversely if he thinks the opponent is

significantly stronger than him and he would like to have a chance to essentially win (i.e. go up 8-2) or lose the match this game.

Down 4-0 after this game I would again surge back to take a 5-4 lead. In that game, I correctly took an early cube and then later got closed out and then my opponent double-blotted while bearing in exposing checkers on the four and six points. Reaching London Open 5A:

**Position London Open 5A**


is Player 2

score: 4
pip: 45

9 point match

pip: 107
score: 5

is Player 1

XGID=--B-BDD------B-----adacbbA:1:1:1:00:5:4:0:9:10

on roll, cube action?

| Analyzed in Rollout | |
|---|---|
| Player Winning Chances: | 40.28% (G: 0.00% B: 0.00%) |
| Opponent Winning Chances: | 59.72% (G: 14.00% B: 0.07%) |

| Cubeless Equities | |
|---|---|
| No Redouble: | -0.411 |
| Redouble: | -0.607 |

| Cubeful Equities | |
|---|---|
| No Redouble: | -0.179 |
| Redouble/Take: | -0.792 (-0.613) |
| Redouble/Drop: | +1.000 (+1.179) |

Best Cube action: No Redouble / Take

eXtreme Gammon Version: 1.21, MET: Rockwell-Kazaross

I then made a daring psychological play. I pretended to consider cubing the double shot on the pretext of killing his gammons and activating the full four points I needed to win the match. As

we were playing on a clock, I considered it perfectly appropriate and not a breach of etiquette to take a full minute now to consider my present and subsequent cube action. After a few moments reflection, however, I realized that cubing before hitting was absurd (-.613) especially because I was leading 4-away, 5-away. At this score, he could just scoop up the cube and would have an automatic redouble to 8. We would then play the game out for the match and my chances would be far less than 50% as I was much more likely to lose the game after throwing one of my 20 hitting numbers than Dagfinn was to lose the game if I missed this first shot. If I hit, I had a lot of work to do to contain his hit checker, but if he was missed, he was quite likely to tidy up and was not likely to blot again in subsequent turns. In short, despite my double shot, I was a decided underdog in the game because my board was not yet able to contain a hit checker. I further reasoned that Dagfinn *might even have a take after being hit on the six point and fanning or being hit on the four point and entering and safetying his second blot*. On realizing this to be the case, I decided to pretend like I might actually have cubed this position, but then decided against it and rolled, hoping that this charade would later cause Dagfinn to drop my post-hit recube that might be a big take.

The dice gods favored me as I hit with a six and Dagfinn spelling fanned. Reaching London Open 5:

**Position London Open 5B**


is Player 2

score: 4
pip: 64

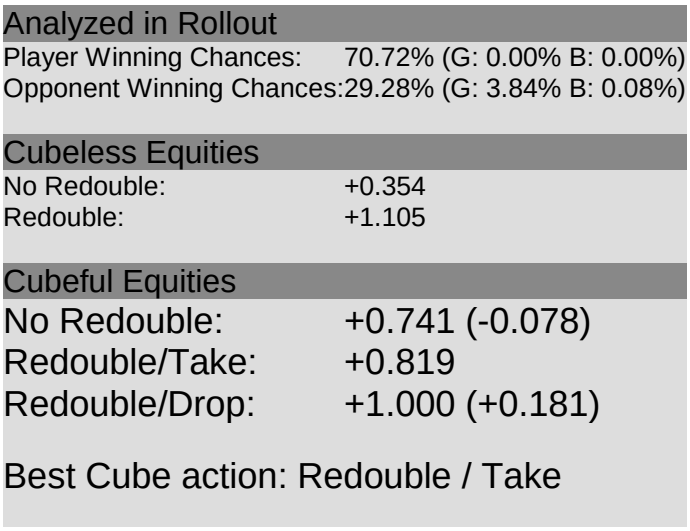
9 point match

pip: 101
score: 5

is Player 1

XGID=a-B-BDD------B-----Adacbb-:1:1:1:00:5:4:0:9:10

on roll, cube action?




I instantly whipped the recube like I was just cashing the game. And without giving it a moment's thought, he dropped.

My ploy had worked and gained me .181 of equity. Dagfinn's take seems quite clear as he has two men off and I have a lot of work to do to build a prime or close him out and I may never get a chance to attack for his second blot as I can't slot with impunity against such a strong board as he still has. There is no way to know if Dagfinn would have dropped just the same without my little charade. Studying the match later and knowing now that he is reigning Norwegian Open champ (i.e. quite good as the Norwegians are a first class backgammon nation) whereas I am only reigning British Open Champ (doesn't necessarily mean much) I am even further convinced that Dagfinn is a better technical backgammon player than I. So it is actually quite likely that my ploy threw him off as he dropped without really evaluating. Like many Scandinavians, his counting of pips and understanding of match equity were clearly excellent; his play of the complex prime vs. prime game was flawless. He did not however seem to make a single psychological or 'opponent-influenced' play the whole match nor did he seem to consider that I might be doing so. He tried to play me like he was a blond-haired, blue-eyed version of XG. I guess I should consider this an honour. Finding himself trailing 7-4, he was unable to come back or to give me any difficult cube decisions in a gammonish position where I might have been likely to make a mistake.

Still alive in the London Cup but out of the Open and Professionals' tournaments, I was told that the London Cup was initially supposed to be a 32 player tournament with thirty-two hundred pounds for the winner. But because not enough people had entered, new entrants were forbidden, and my next round match became the final for a reduced prize pool. This disappointed me as the jackpot was smaller than I had hoped but I learned that next year there will be a 32 person 'Super Jackpot' with a thousand pound entry fee (i.e. $50,000K prize in the super jackpot) and that this is likely to bring a slew of top quality international players as it will mean the total prize pool

(sidepools+jackpots) of next year's event will be over $90K. After the lovely Gala dinner and awards ceremony, I got a good night's rest.

**London Gala 2013**

In the morning, I faced another Norwegian, Rune Færvåg (who I later learned is the reigning Norwegian Open Finalist having lost to Dagfinn in the Finals). I made only a slight hedge as friends told me that he was quite experienced but not necessarily as good as his countryman Dagfinn. The wisdom of this course of action was demonstrated by our match.

In the London Cup final, I decided that I was going to play as accurately and yet as psychologically as I could. In later studying the match, especially relative to my other performances, I feel that my game was very much on and that even my 'mistakes' i.e. my non-XG plays were done with a purpose and helped me win.

For example in the second game of the match the opportunity arose to test Rune's mettle and attempt to force a mistake.

**Position London Open 6**


is Player 2

score: 1
pip: 137

9 point match

pip: 129
score: 0

is Player 1

XGID=-bB--BDABA--cA---c-c--bBb-:0:0:1:00:0:1:0:9:10

on roll, cube action?

| Analyzed in Rollout | |
|---|---|
| Player Winning Chances: | 61.49% (G: 20.35% B: 1.17%) |
| Opponent Winning Chances: | 38.51% (G: 10.05% B: 0.34%) |

| Cubeless Equities | |
|---|---|
| No Double: | +0.335 |
| Double: | +0.694 |

| Cubeful Equities | |
|---|---|
| No Double: | +0.523 |
| Double/Take: | +0.439 (-0.084) |
| Double/Drop: | +1.000 (+0.477) |

Best Cube action: No Double / Take

eXtreme Gammon Version: 1.21, MET: Rockwell-Kazaross

Rune was leading 1-0, but had two men partially trapped on the ace point, with my having 28 shots to make the bar point further closing them in. I had no idea if it was technically a double. Yet, I knew it was a scary cube and I wouldn't want to get cubed here. I would much rather wait for my opponent to vastly improve his position and miss his market or give me a few rolls to equalize matters. On further study of the position, I hazarded it was a take because the race was close and we both had three points in our board and low anchors. I much preferred my position and my immediate threats were quite real, but I realized that Rune could counterprime me as well and that his spares were in good positions and that he could use them to build his board or attack my backmen when I would try to leave anchor to bring the position home. As you can see, XG says the position isn't a double, but notes that it is a good cube if you think the opponent has

a 13 or more % chance of dropping. Having never played Rune before and this being the second game of the match, I certainly felt that there was a chance that any non-Giant opponent might drop this cube. In fact, despite it being rated a small blunder to cube here, I think this is a must cube against most opponents. To Rune's credit he took but was unable to turn the game around.

Then two games later, an opportunity arose for a strikingly similar ploy.

**Position London Open 7**


is Player 2

score: 2
pip: 183

9 point match

pip: 145
score: 3

is Player 1

XGID=-cBB--D-Aa--cBb--AbbCb----:0:0:1:00:3:2:0:9:10

on roll, cube action?

| Analyzed in Rollout | |
|---|---|
| Player Winning Chances: | 56.41% (G: 24.94% B: 2.74%) |
| Opponent Winning Chances: | 43.59% (G: 9.10% B: 0.37%) |

| Cubeless Equities | |
|---|---|
| No Double: | +0.343 |
| Double: | +0.734 |

| Cubeful Equities | |
|---|---|
| No Double: | +0.446 |
| Double/Take: | +0.255 (-0.191) |
| Double/Drop: | +1.000 (+0.554) |

Best Cube action: No Double / Take

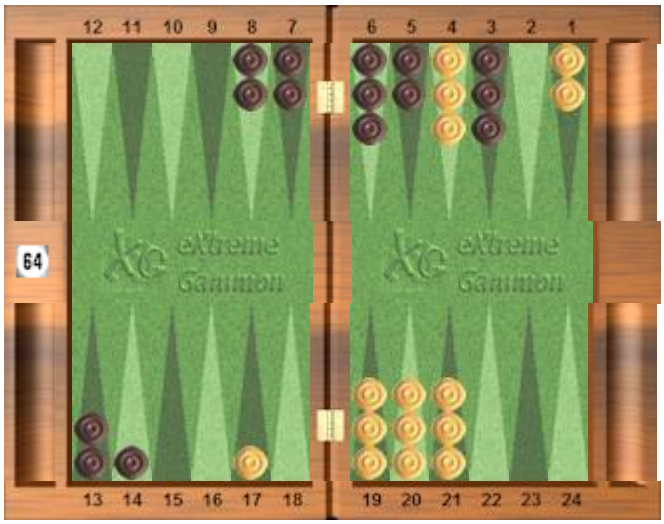
eXtreme Gammon Version: 1.21, MET: Rockwell-Kazaross

The opening had favored me and after hitting a lot of his blots I had made the five anchor and

some low points in my board. Moreover, Rune had three men stacked on his ace point. This usually indicates a drop. Especially because here I was threatening to send back a fourth man with 14 rolls (65, 62, 41, 43, 44, 46, 45, 22) or even better make a fourth inner board point with seven rolls 11, 22, 44, 31, 42. I double counted my super jokers of 22 and 44 meaning that I have 19 good to great numbers. Combining that with being ahead in the race by 38 pips usually means a big cube. Yet, the position actually has low volatility and is sufficiently complex so I couldn't assert with certainty if it was a double, a take, or a drop. Here the only thing I was certain about was that it was not too good. I thought that it might not even be a cube, but that most opponents would drop in a shot so I didn't need to figure out more about the position than that. I cubed and Rune dropped. When I analyzed it at home, I was amazed to see by how much XG says that this is not a double, by a whopping .191, making Rune's pass a colossal .700 error. Despite the gravity of the blunder, in Rune's position I too might have dropped. Yet in the calm of one's study with the rollout figures to hand, the reasons for the take are understandable. Although, Yellow's position is inferior, all his checkers are still in play and there is a tremendous amount of game left. Also he has an anchor so even if things turn against him he will always have a lot of play and will be in it till the end. Furthermore, Red's gap on the four and five points may prove hard to fill and Yellow may end up moving his anchor to either of those two points and then the game will be roughly even as a mutual holding game. In short, this is a position I think one should cube against almost all opposition: against weaker opponents because they will misplay it, against middle of the road opposition because they will likely drop, and against the world's best or a bot because you want to increase volatility with the potential for doubled gammons against stronger players. In short, only if you are one of the best players in the world yourself, you shouldn't cube this.

Ahead 4-2 after the drop, I executed an early blitz leading to a cash; then up 5-2, I had to drop in a holding game. Then trailing 3-5, Rune was able to give me a good pressure cube as he was facing my decently timed 1-4 backgame.

**Position London Open 8**




is Player 2

score: 3
pip: 107

9 point match

pip: 164
score: 5

is Player 1

XGID=----CCC-A--ab----bbcbCc-B-:0:0:-1:00:5:3:0:9:10

on roll, cube action?

| Analyzed in Rollout | |
|---|---|
| Player Winning Chances: | 68.27% (G: 23.52% B: 2.01%) |
| Opponent Winning Chances: | 31.73% (G: 3.33% B: 0.10%) |

| Cubeless Equities | |
|---|---|
| No Double: | +0.613 |
| Double: | +1.344 |

| Cubeful Equities | |
|---|---|
| No Double: | +0.969 (-0.031) |
| Double/Take: | +1.072 (+0.072) |
| Double/Drop: | +1.000 |

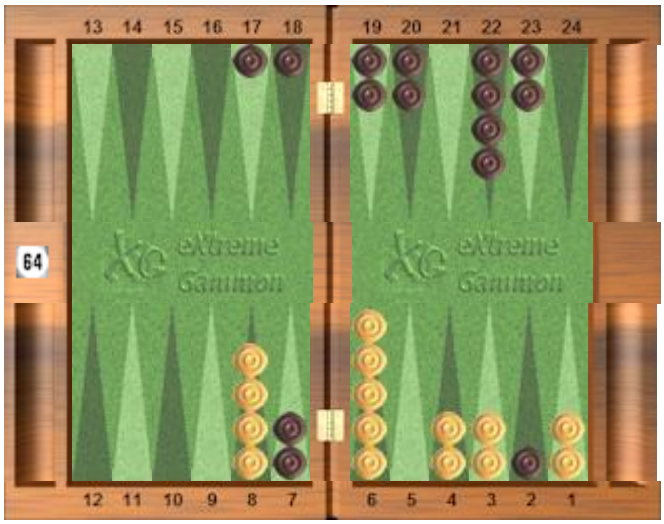
Best Cube action: Double / Drop

eXtreme Gammon Version: 1.21, MET: Rockwell-Kazaross

I reasoned as follows: Rune's cube looks clear as he is trailing in the match and would love to win a doubled gammon. His attack is fierce, his prime formidable and he is close to clearing his midpoint or my timing busting. Moreover, he might make either the 9 or 10 points or I might fail to get the spare on my 4 point into circulation. After either event, I would have a massive drop. So the double is clear, especially given the score. What about the take, drop decision? I decided to pass, thinking that 1-4 backgames are usually weak although if they are perfectly timed they are takes, but more is going on here than a straight 1-4 backgame. On the plus side for me, Rune's two point is open and he has a dilly builder on the three point. More crucially on the negative side for me, my timing at present is not great and if I can't spring my spare from the four point immediately, I may bust. An immediate double 4 or double 3 and I would bust and any subsequent high double is likely to mess up my timing or force me to abandon the four anchor pushing me into an acepoint game. Also at this score (4-away, 6-away) I will have almost no recube. i.e. even after I hit I won't necessarily be able to recube especially if I have to get my guys all the way around from the acepoint. Even more so, Rune's gammon value on a two cube is highly elevated. In short, these factors make this position a significant drop at score (.07), or a small drop at an even score with an elevated gammon price like 5-away, 5-away. It is a sizable take for money (.08) or a healthy take at an even match score with a relatively normal gammon price like 7-away, 7-away (06.)

Wisely dropping to preserve a 5-4 lead to nine, in the next game I found myself playing a bar point mutual holding game. Then I threw a great set of double fives clearing my bar anchor and arriving at a position where I am a massive favorite.

**Position London Open 9**




is Player 2

score: 4
pip: 112

9 point match

pip: 78
score: 5

is Player 1

XGID=-BaBB-EbD--------aabb-db--:0:0:1:00:5:4:0:9:10

on roll, cube action?

| Analyzed in Rollout | |
|---|---|
| Player Winning Chances: | 89.45% (G: 15.95% B: 0.14%) |
| Opponent Winning Chances: | 10.55% (G: 0.56% B: 0.01%) |
| **Cubeless Equities** | |
| No Double: | +0.992 |
| Double: | +2.407 |
| **Cubeful Equities** | |
| No Double: | +1.055 |
| Double/Take: | +2.249 (+1.194) |
| Double/Drop: | +1.000 (-0.055) |

Best Cube action: Too Good to Double / Drop

eXtreme Gammon Version: 1.21, MET: Rockwell-Kazaross

I have a 34 pip lead and many numbers to attack Rune's backman which is stranded on the two point. I realized that Rune has a massive drop especially as I am four away and he is so far behind in the race and is subject to attack and being closed out, but I was unsure if I could play on because my five point is open and I have awkward stacks. I realized that I would be forced to blot by hitting loose on 51, 62, 63 and 65 and that if he hit me back and I fanned he could cash the game. However, this worst case scenario of getting hit in the next exchange of rolls only occurs 4% of the time. Much more common than that variation is that on this turn or the next, I either point on Rune's blot, pick and pass, or I am forced to hit loose but Rune misses the return anyway. Also, if I don't hit and Rune doesn't get a five or a 32, 34, or 36 to escape, my attackers are likely to be better positioned next turn. Only if I throw a lame duck causing me to further

stack my checkers (like a 53 or 42 or Rune escapes (even after throwing his best number 55s) I can still cash the game next turn. This is why despite having only 15% gammon chances it is clear to play on here because the immediate 4% risk of losing is more than compensated for by my G chances, many of which come even after Rune escapes after a few turns on the bar and I attempt a racing gammon. Also if things should begin to turn south in the attack or subsequent race, I can probably cash later or give my opponent a tough cube decision. In short, I violated my own psychological logic by not playing on for gammon in Albion here. Most interestingly, if it was 5-away, 5-away instead of 4-away, 5-away it would be a cash and not a play on. At four away, it is a play on because an undoubled G would take me to 2-away. Similarly, if I was three away, it would be an even more massive play on because the value of the undoubled gammon would take me to Crawford and hence would be well worth the risk.

Therefore after cashing, I was ahead, 3-away, 5-away and after a highly complex opening with lots of hitting and slotting we arrived at the following position:

**Position London Open 10**


is Player 2

score: 4
pip: 183

9 point match

pip: 117
score: 6

is Player 1

XGID=---BCeC-AB-BcA---b-dAa----:0:0:1:00:6:4:0:9:10

on roll, cube action?

| Analyzed in Rollout | |
|---|---|
| Player Winning Chances: | 72.14% (G: 27.02% B: 0.53%) |
| Opponent Winning Chances: | 27.86% (G: 3.71% B: 0.11%) |

| Cubeless Equities | |
|---|---|
| No Double: | +0.729 |
| Double: | +1.443 |

| Cubeful Equities | |
|---|---|
| No Double: | +0.873 (-0.086) |
| Double/Take: | +0.959 |
| Double/Drop: | +1.000 (+0.041) |

Best Cube action: Double / Take

eXtreme Gammon Version: 1.21, MET: Rockwell-Kazaross

Like many positions from this match, it is a truly peculiar -- bordering on insane -- position. One wonders if it can be reached with perfect play. It is only the end of the opening and I am ahead by 66 pips, yet all of my opponent's checkers are in play and he is only facing limited gammon danger. That said, he may have grave difficulties activating the three spares on his five anchor, especially if I succeed in further priming him in by throwing a five or double sixes this turn to make a fourth point in my prime. This, plus my threat to escape my backman or ideally remake my midpoint, represents more than sufficient volatility for me to cube in what might deceptively appear as a non-volatile holding game. Now, most people (myself included) are scared of cubing when leading at a score like 3-away, 5-away. The fear, of course, is that the opponent will take and then have tremendous recube vig and if he gets a slight threat he can even cube to four as an underdog. These issues were certainly on my mind in this position. Yet I felt that my game was very strong and my opponent would need many, many turns before he could develop a threat and if he was to hit me as I was clearing one of my points, he was unlikely to have his board sufficiently built to contain a shot. This combined with the psychological dynamic of this being another one of those Woolsey-law style positions, led me to cube it. Unsurprisingly, Rune dropped. I probably would have in his shoes as well. His game looks horrific. Yet as it is a long game, and with the five anchor he is in it till the end and he loves owning the cube here at this score, he actually has a take. Amazing. What a fascinating position, then, especially given the match score. I wonder how many Giants would get the cube action right and I wonder how many would actually play that way against a human. Against highly inferior opposition a Giant wouldn't cube here as 3-away. And with the shoe on the other foot with the Giant being cubed, against inferior opposition he wouldn't take.

Back to real life, after his drop, ahead 2-away, 5-away, I beat my second highly talented, highly technical Norwegian in a row and won the 2013 London Cup. I hazard that playing my opponents rather than attempting playing the bot moves all the time was a significant factor in this victory.

My thanks go to Sean Williams, Zoe Cunningham, and Mike Main who organized a brilliant and highly enjoyable tournament and to Ray Kershaw who not only helped me practice my match backgammon in advance of the tournament, but also proofread this article and checked that my calculations are accurate. We all look forward to coming back next year and seeing how this relatively new and dynamic event develops into one of the highlights of the international Backgammon calendar.

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