



LARS TRABOLT VS. SLAVA PRYADKIN WORLD CHAMPIONSHIP FINAL

Part 2: How to Give a Gammonish Recube

By Jason Pack

In our last issue I began to explore the psychological dimensions of match play. My goal was to examine those situations in which the world's best players deliberately vary from "correct" — or computer-recommended — moves. I observed that Lars Trabolt's "non-bot plays" (I prefer not to call them errors) earlier in the match (before he fell behind significantly) were small issues of deliberate cautiousness (i.e.,

avoiding leaving lots of blots, not cubing/recubing when he technically should have, and dropping too early). These sub-optimal decisions could be thought of as having been forced by Pryadkin's aggressive tactics and cube play — which we will now explore in more detail. Studying the match in its entirety, I find that Slava's doubling strategy was consistent and global: it reveals a clear plan calculated to maximize his chances

against a technically superior opponent who was well versed in modern theory.

As we saw in Part I, Slava preferred to surrender points one at a time and then win his points in bunches. He won six games while Lars won seven; yet he won the match 26-9. After the match, Slava told me that his strategy was to cube and recube early in gammonish positions only, while tak-



Studying the match in its entirety, I find that Slava's doubling strategy was consistent and global: it reveals a clear plan calculated to maximize his chances against a technically superior opponent who was well versed in modern theory.

ing conservatively. On the cubing side of things Slava certainly actualized his game plan. On the taking side of things, I am not sure to what extent Slava's words accurately reflect his decisions. Generally, the advice to weaker players playing long matches against the best players in the world is to cube early in gammonish positions, while also taking deeply/aggressively in high-volatility situations.

It is clear that this is what Slava did. He was able to "action up" the cube by taking a near pass trailing 5-6 and a clear pass leading 14-9 and then turning the games around and getting in dastardly recubes.

Those recubes were strokes of pure genius and it is impossible to wax too poetic about them. Slava clearly wanted to redouble Lars in rather than out. The desire to double or redouble one's opponent in rather than out is a strong psychological theme which is frequently relevant in money games, but has hardly been written about in its application to match play. Slava's masterly performance in this match, which earned him a World Championship title, has filled this gap in our knowledge. He combined excellent technical knowledge of the game, gambler's nerves, psychological insight, and clutch rolling to take home the laurels.



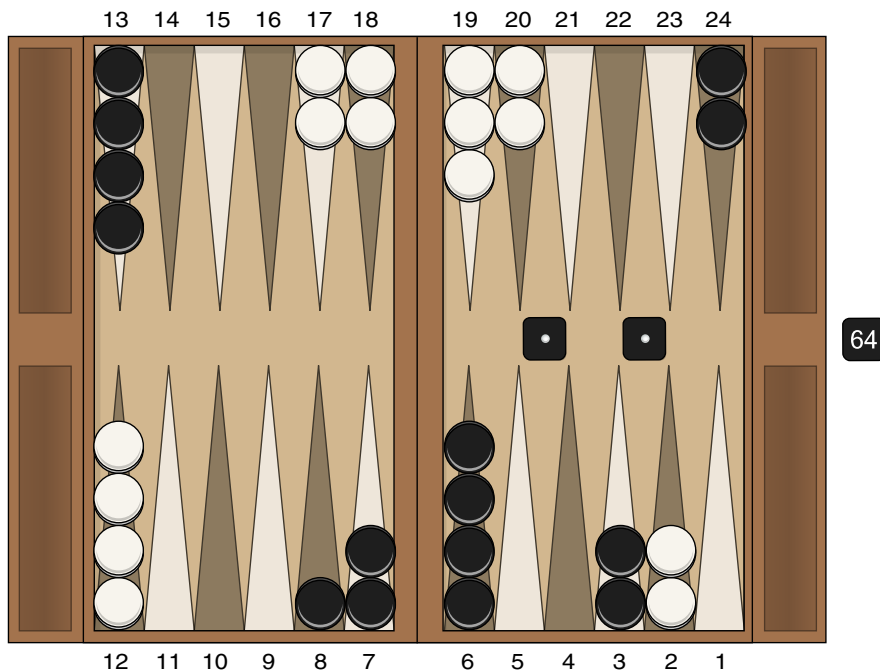
⤴ LARS TRABOLT

Lars ponders not just the position, but also what he thinks the opponent understands about the position. He also envisions what is likely to happen over the next few sequences of rolls.

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Returning to our coverage of the match: with Lars leading 4-2 to 25, Slava made another slight connectivity error early in the opening when he rolled double ones. The

Position 7



Pip: 156
Lars Trabolt
21-Away

23-Away
Slava Pryadkin
Pip: 152

Game 6, Move 3: Black (Pryadkin) to play 11

1.	XG Roller++	24/23 8/7 6/5(2)	eq: -0.220
	Player:	43.67% (G:12.40% B:0.51%)	
	Opponent:	56.33% (G:15.44% B:0.72%)	
2.	XG Roller++	8/5 6/5	eq: -0.291 (-0.071)
	Player:	41.99% (G:12.15% B:0.55%)	
	Opponent:	58.01% (G:16.49% B:0.78%)	

first three aces are clear: 6/5(2) to make the five point and 8/7 to safety the blot which is facing a direct shot. By failing to split 24/23 with the last ace, Slava allowed his back men to remain trapped behind Lar's prime. The split, which would have given him more escape rolls as well as more ways to get to the edge of the prime, would not

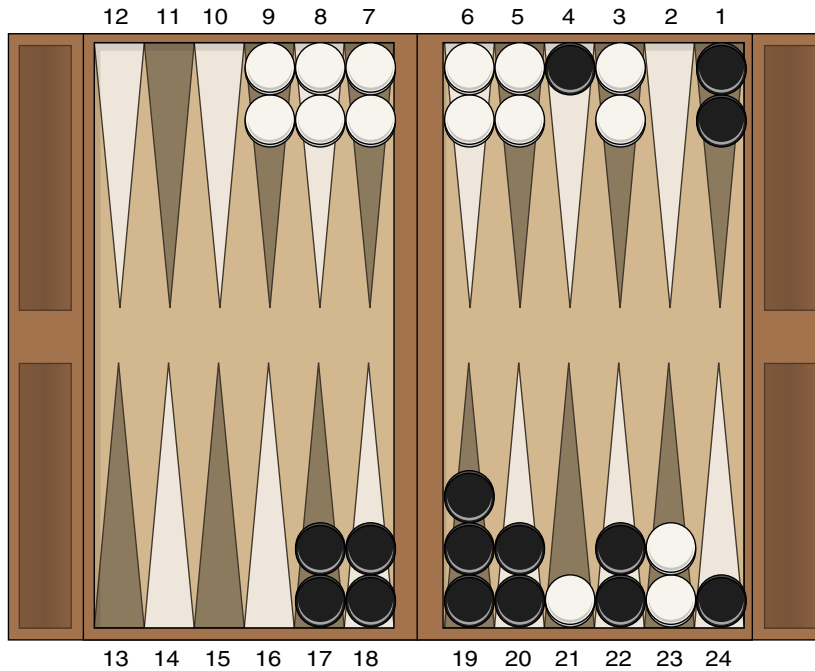
have been particularly dangerous: Lars is not looking to attack next turn but only to bring more men down from the midpoint. Connectivity seems to be a concept that Slava is not too keen on. And this diagnosis applies to a lot of money players who learned the game before the concept was popularized by Robertie's seminal text,

Modern Backgammon.

With both players' back men increasingly cut off from the rest of their armies, this game would evolve into a prime vs. prime battle. Lars reached Position 8.

Part 2: How to Give a Gammonish Recube

Position 8



Pip: 143
Lars Trabolt
21-Away

23-Away
Slava Pryadkin
Pip: 134

Game 6, Move 11: White (Trabolt) on roll. Cube action?

Analyzed in XG Roller++	No double	Double/Take
Player Winning Chances:	67.68% (G:25.40% B:2.20%)	67.63% (G:25.70% B:2.32%)
Opponent Winning Chances:	32.32% (G:10.63% B:0.52%)	32.37% (G:10.63% B:0.52%)
Cubeless Equities	+0.523	+1.053
Cubeful Equities		
No double:	+0.657 (-0.116)	
Double/Take:	+0.774	
Double/Pass:	+1.000 (+0.226)	
Best Cube action: Double / Take		

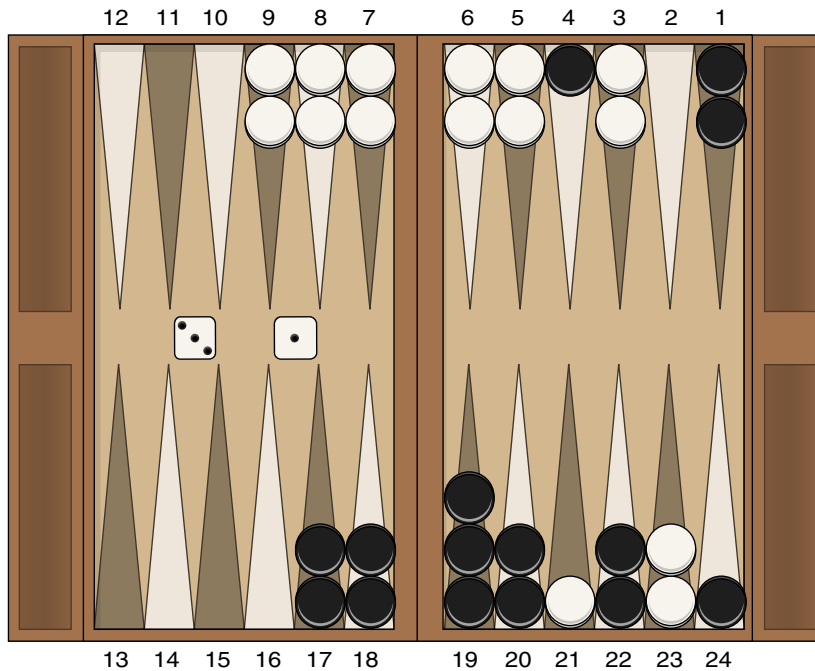
Here Lars chose not to cube — possibly because he understood all too well how volatile the position was. Had he cubed and then failed to execute his attack on Slava's blot on the 4 point, or to anchor on his own 21 point, or to spring his back men beyond the prime, he could shortly be

facing a recube to four. According to XG, not cubing is a blunder. But the position is two-way gammonish — and given what we have seen so far, we can understand and account for Lars' hesitancy. However, after not doubling Lars threw a 31 and showed that he genuinely was playing too cautiously.

He chose to clear the nine point — 9/6, 9/8 — rather than attacking with 8/4*.

Part 2: How to Give a Gammonish Recube

Position 8-A



Pip: 143
Lars Trabolt
21-Away

23-Away
Slava Pryadkin
Pip: 134

Game 6, Move 11: White (Trabolt) to play 31

1.	XG Roller++	8/4*	eq: +0.351
	Player:	61.31% (G:23.46% B:1.89%)	
	Opponent:	38.69% (G:16.37% B:1.12%)	
2.	XG Roller++	9/8 9/6	eq: +0.242 (-0.109)
	Player:	55.85% (G:19.21% B:1.28%)	
	Opponent:	44.15% (G:13.14% B:0.60%)	
3.	XG Roller++	7/6 7/4*	eq: +0.171 (-0.180)
	Player:	53.91% (G:20.72% B:1.77%)	
	Opponent:	46.09% (G:16.18% B:0.95%)	

Since the theme of the position is to escape and attack, this is a clear blunder. According to the Magriel criteria, a bold play is called for (as Slava has a blot in his inner board and leads in the race). Attacking on the four point would prevent Slava from anchoring while increasing Lars' own chances of doing so. This is not one of those symmetrical prime vs. prime positions where

zugzwang is the order of the day. Here the reverse is the case: whoever is on roll has a distinct advantage, since he can either anchor, escape, or attack. Psychologically we can connect this passive move with Lars' decision not to cube: both show the same desire to decrease volatility and minimize his chances of losing a big game (either a high cube or being gammoned).

If Slava's spare on the six were moved to cover the blot on the ace, the hit 8/4* and Lars' move 9/6, 9/8 would be much closer; but XG++ still judges the hit superior by .020. This shows how important seizing the initiative is here: even if Lars were outboarded, he should still attack. After the match, Lars explained his decision to not cube and to play safe by saying that "he

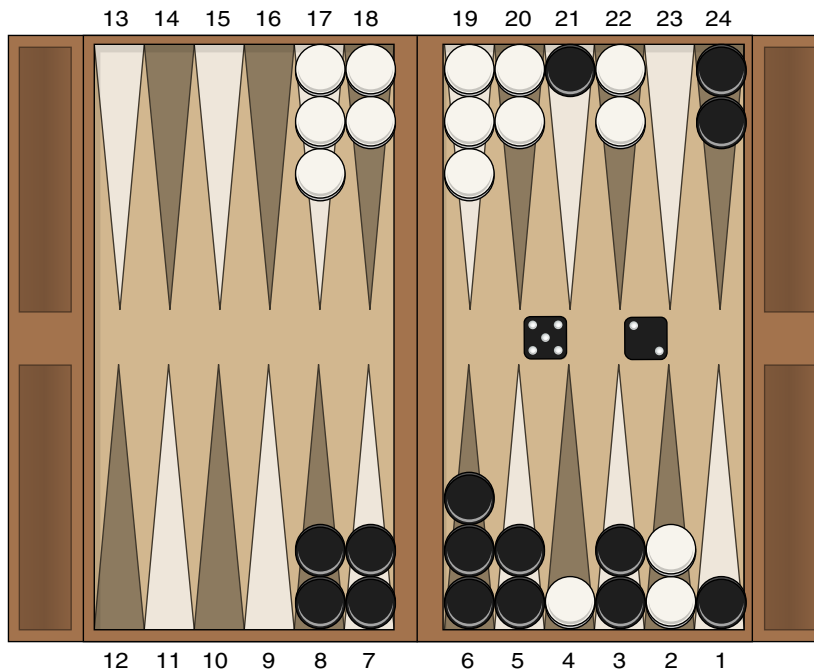
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didn't want to put it all on the line here” because safe plays could still lead to an efficient cube in a less volatile position later on. In my mind, this perspective is shared

by many top players (except notably Falafel and Raj Jansari) and shows how their play differs from the ruthless pursuit of equity by the bots.

Here we see the very next move:

Position 9



Pip: 129
Lars Trabolt
21-Away

23-Away
Slava Pryadkin
Pip: 134

Game 6, Move 12: Black (Pryadkin) to play 52

1.	XG Roller+	21/16 6/4*	eq: -0.226
	Player:	45.75% (G:14.20% B:0.74%)	
	Opponent:	54.25% (G:22.27% B:2.23%)	
2.	XG Roller+	21/14	eq: -0.351 (-0.125)
	Player:	40.65% (G:12.50% B:0.59%)	
	Opponent:	59.35% (G:19.47% B:1.22%)	

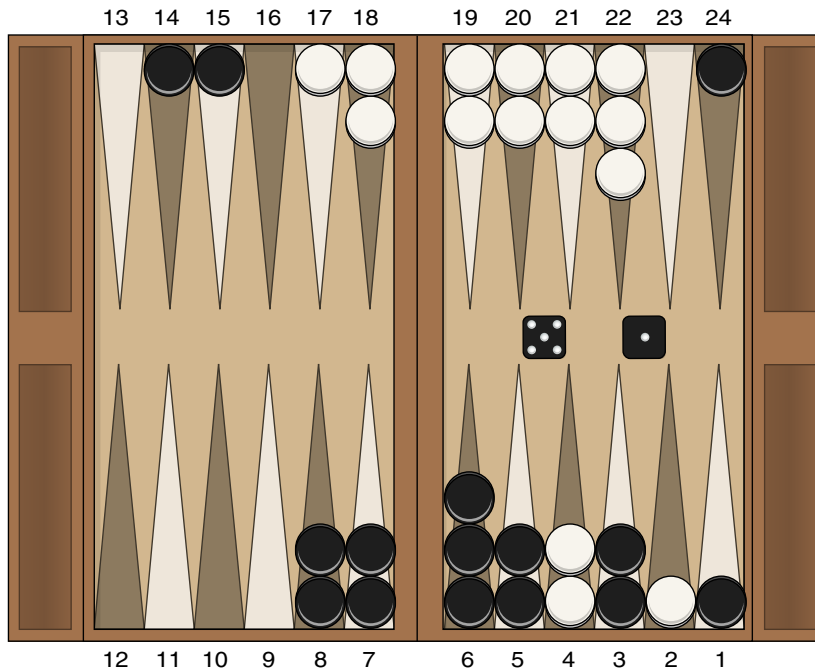
Slava returned the favor, choosing with 52 just to escape 21/14 rather than to escape and hit 21/16, 6/4*. Again, the non-hit was a blunder. This decision was arguably a much tougher one than last turn's, as here

the hit allows Lars 21 shots from the bar at two blots. Yet it is still massively correct: Slava needs to fight for his four point and prevent Lars from anchoring there and then strive for an efficient cube turn.

The game evolved in Slava's favor. He was then faced with a tough choice at Position 9-A.

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Position 9-A



Pip: 126
Lars Trabolt
21-Away

23-Away
Slava Pryadkin
Pip: 118

Game 6, Move 14: Black (Pryadkin) to play 51

1.	XG Roller++	15/14 6/1	eq: -0.075
	Player:	46.12% (G:15.98% B:0.61%)	
	Opponent:	53.88% (G:15.61% B:0.73%)	
2.	XG Roller++	24/23 6/1	eq: -0.167 (-0.092)
	Player:	47.38% (G:15.20% B:0.63%)	
	Opponent:	52.62% (G:24.38% B:1.36%)	

With this 51, Slava should obviously use the five to cover his blot on the ace. Then with the one he has the choice of stepping up (24/23) or consolidating his outfield blots (15/14). Stepping up is highly risky: it puts Slava's blot on the point that Lars most wants to make. Slava's decision to stay back is excellent: it buys time, allowing Lars to bust if he is unable to escape or forcing him put his checkers out of position by attacking on the ace point. Lars complimented Slava's move: "Slava played a very mature 51, deciding not to move up to the edge of

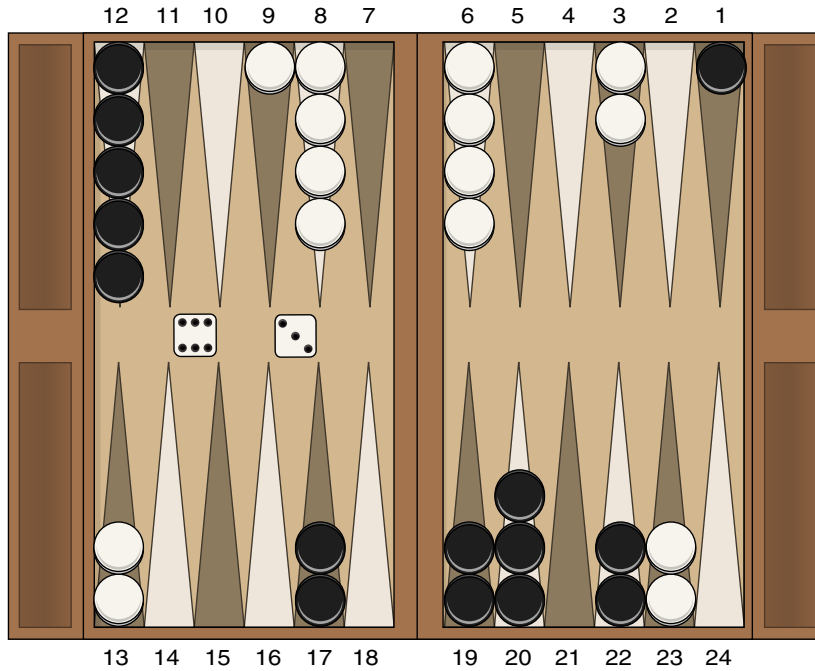
my prime. Not many players would have gotten this one right!" Curiously, Slava modestly berated his own good play, telling me: "I have played 6/1, 15/14 instead of 6/1, 24/23. Unfortunately, I have a propensity to overestimate the value of having an anchor. [Translation: I tend to play conservatively with my checkers and my take/pass decisions when I lack an anchor.] That explains by the way my takes in positions later in the match. So for the sake of comfort [because I lacked the anchor] I have stayed on the ace point and got rid of the liabilities [by

playing 15/14 instead of making a bolder play 24/23]." A few moves later Slava was rewarded with a 61 joker. Lars, however, was never able to spring his last checker, which remained trapped on the two point. Slava got in a good cube which Lars correctly took. Slava won. This leveled the score at 4 points all.

In the next game Lars' cautious play resurfaced.

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Position 10



Pip: 143
Lars Trabolt
21-Away

21-Away
Slava Pryadkin
Pip: 138

Game 7, Move 5: White (Trabolt) to play 63

1.	XG Roller++	9/3 8/5	eq: -0.667
	Player:	32.06% (G:8.18% B:0.19%)	
	Opponent:	67.94% (G:15.87% B:0.76%)	
2.	XG Roller++	9/6 8/2	eq: -0.735 (-0.067)
	Player:	31.29% (G:7.44% B:0.18%)	
	Opponent:	68.71% (G:16.39% B:0.80%)	
3.	XG Roller++	9/3 6/3	eq: -0.790 (-0.123)
	Player:	29.54% (G:5.86% B:0.12%)	
	Opponent:	70.46% (G:14.03% B:0.61%)	

It is difficult to fault Lars for not slotting here with 9/3, 8/5 (he thereby minimizes gammons), but that move was mandatory. By stacking two dilly builders on the 3 point, he makes it almost impossible to build a board. True, if he slots and is hit he will be in trouble; but the cube is in the center. Since Slava can't cube after the slot, it's better to let him lose his market if he hits. In contrast, Lars' safe play is more likely to lead to an efficient cube turn for

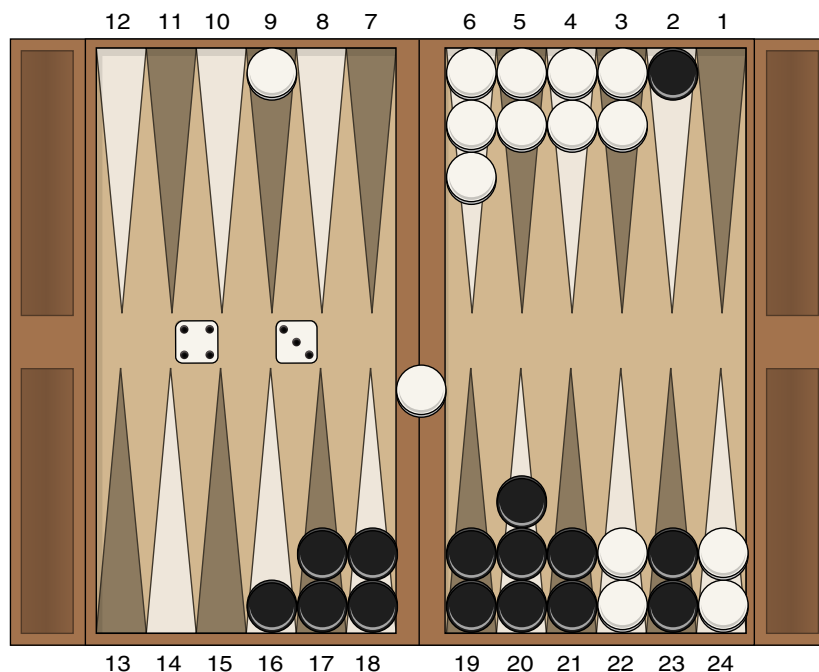
Slava. Lars explained to me that he was aware that his safe play was incorrect even as he made it, but emotionally he did not like giving Slava a game-winning shot so early. After throwing a series of jokers, Slava ended up cashing a position that was slightly too good.

Then, leading 5-4 in the eighth game, Slava rolled well and got in a nearly perfectly efficient cube on move 3 that Lars took. After

a series of jokers and counter-jokers Lars reached a poorly timed backgame. Faced with a very difficult decision, he made a cautious move – one that likely would have been the choice of most of the world's top players. But XG considers it a slight error.

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Position 11



2

Pip: 168
Lars Trabolt
21-Away

20-Away
Slava Pryadkin
Pip: 101

Game 8, Move 15: White (Trabolt) to play 43

1.	XG Roller++	Bar/22 6/2*	eq: -0.418
	Player:	35.86% (G:4.61% B:0.18%)	
	Opponent:	64.14% (G:30.91% B:4.15%)	
2.	XG Roller++	Bar/22 9/5	eq: -0.440 (-0.023)
	Player:	33.69% (G:3.89% B:0.15%)	
	Opponent:	66.31% (G:27.98% B:2.98%)	

According to XG++ the two plays are almost equal; but clearly the hit on the deuce is more likely to seize the slight opportunity of winning by going forward. At DMP, hitting is right by a wide margin. Conversely, Lars' buttoning up move, bar/22, 9/5, is massively correct at Gammon Save. Based on what we have seen so far, it should be no surprise that the GS move was Lars' choice here. Stick and other backgammon writers have stated, "When in doubt make

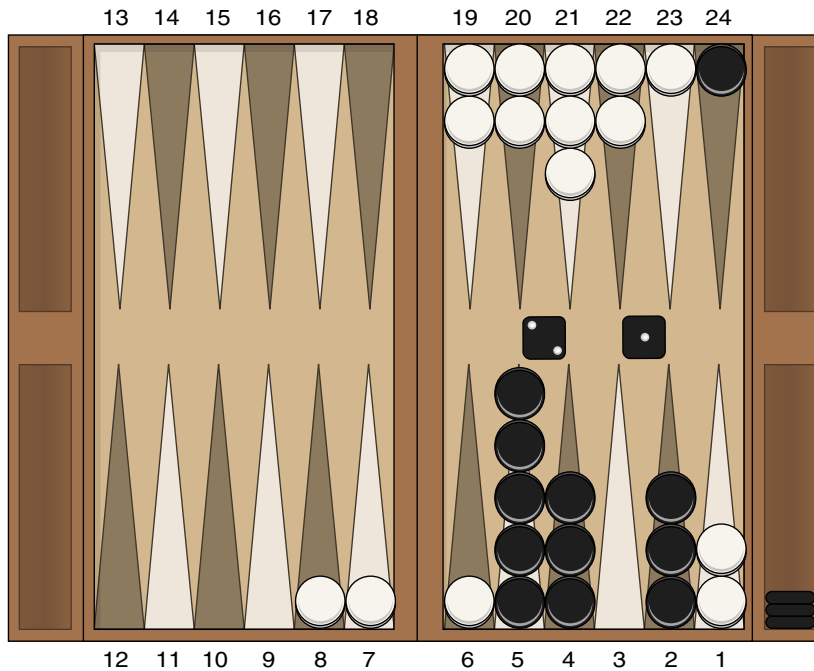
the DMP play." Yet, when the two plays are quite close in equity terms, top players frequently choose the GS play when playing non-Giants. I would therefore like to defend the logic of personal preference and counsel making the play you are comfortable with. Talking about his own choice, Lars said that in an online match he would certainly have hit with little thought, but playing live under high pressure, he was overly concerned about saving the gammon

even though rationally it was too early in this game to worry about that. He justified his decision over the board by focusing on the six immediate cracking numbers (66,44,33,42,22) that his play gave Slava.

Later, after getting hit in the bearoff, Slava faced a fascinating choice.

Part 2: How to Give a Gammonish Recube

Position 12



2 Pip: 144
Lars Trabolt
21-Away

20-Away
Slava Pryadkin
Pip: 67

Game 8, Move 24: Black (Pryadkin) to play 21

1.	XG Roller+	5/3 4/3	eq: -0.178
	Player:	42.10% (G:20.30% B:2.54%)	
	Opponent:	57.90% (G:0.00% B:0.00%)	
2.	XG Roller+	24/23* 4/2	eq: -0.246 (-0.068)
	Player:	38.52% (G:22.03% B:3.56%)	
	Opponent:	61.48% (G:0.00% B:0.00%)	

He could either make a new inner board point 5/3, 4/3, which would make it highly unlikely that he would be forced to expose a second blot; or he could hit Lars' blot on the 23 point and then play his only safe deuce 4/2. Instinctively, non-world class players would not give this problem much thought: they would choose the hitting play immediately, which affords a much better chance of escaping. I presume Slava selected the advanced-intermediate play as

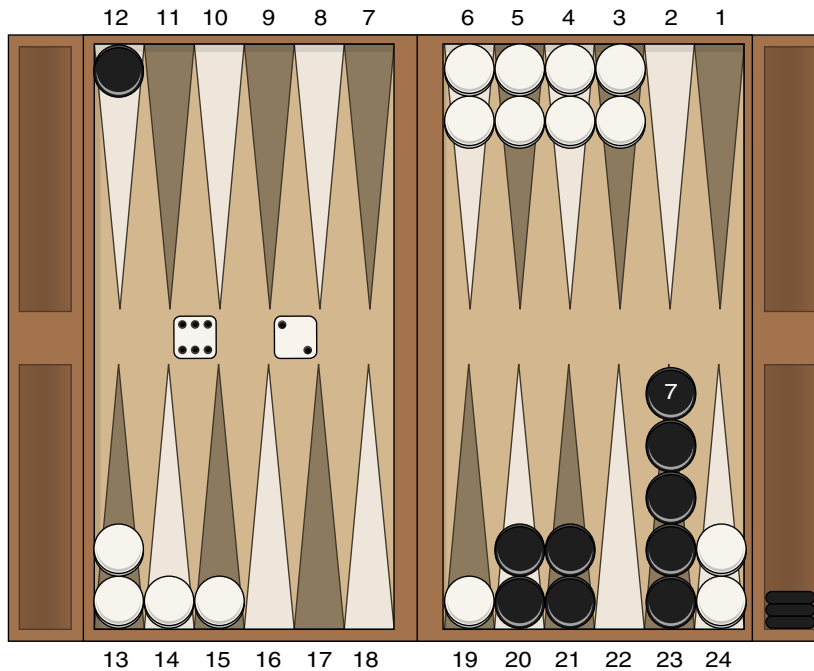
it is the most aggressive and gammonish (it does win 2% more gammons). It is also likely to have immediate rewards while the other play only offers a nebulous long-term dividend. However, it wins 4% fewer games than 5/3, 4/3. It is exceedingly difficult for a non-world class player to see over the board why this is so, but is certainly worth studying. The key to the problem appears to be that in the best-case scenario, where Slava rapidly extricates his back man, the

hitting move will often leave Lars with a viable "phantom 1-3 back game," which is likely to generate shots until the end.

In the actual game, it took Slava a long time to escape from behind Lars' four prime. Meanwhile Lars flooded the outfield, so that when Slava finally escaped Lars rolled a hitting number to send him back behind the prime.

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Position 13



2

Pip: 158
Lars Trabolt
21-Away

20-Away
Slava Pryadkin
Pip: 45

Game 8, Move 29: White (Trabolt) to play 62

1.	XG Roller++	15/9 14/12*	eq: +0.976
	Player:	82.18% (G:0.00% B:0.00%)	
	Opponent:	17.82% (G:7.72% B:0.63%)	
2.	XG Roller++	14/12* 13/7	eq: +0.908 (-0.068)
	Player:	81.84% (G:0.00% B:0.00%)	
	Opponent:	18.16% (G:8.66% B:0.98%)	

Here after the hit 14/12*, Lars chose to play 13/7. This move is unlikely to be correct because when it works it leads to “overkill.” It is not necessary to slot the back edge of the prime, as Lars might want to do if he lacked cube access, because it volunteers six shots that could cost him the game. After the safe play 15/9, Lars can still cash after a fan or any entering number that stays on

the ace or exposes a second blot. In short, because these games aren’t going to be played to their conclusion, Lars doesn’t need to have the back of the prime slotted. After the match, Lars told me that he believes he made a significant error by choosing to slot. Based on his rollouts of this position, not slotting is best even at DMP. XG has shown that in these situations outfield coverage is

usually more important than slotting the back of the prime — which tended to be Snowie’s preference. In the actual game Slava fanned and Lars cashed, bringing us to game 9 with Lars leading 6-5.

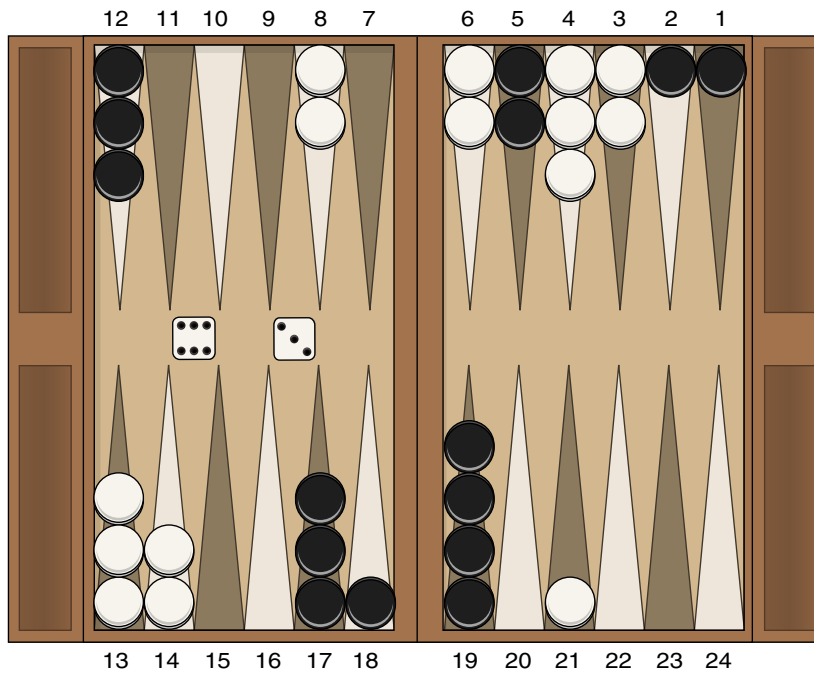
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Lars opened the game with a 53 making the 3-point, Slava then incorrectly slotted with a 51, Lars threw double deuces, hitting and making the four point. Slava fanned and Lars then gave a very efficient blitzing/priming double. Slava made a marginally

correct take. Why wasn't he scared of this cube in a gammonish position? In our post-match interview Slava explained his take by referencing his strong preference for anchors. In this position he has one (on the ace point), whereas in position 6

he did not. After Slava took, there was a rapid exchange of hits with Slava finally upgrading his anchor to the five point when he threw a well timed Barabino roll (i.e., a 54 from the bar). Lars then had a 63 to play.

Position 14



Pip: 134
Lars Trabolt
19-Away

20-Away
Slava Pryadkin
Pip: 181

2

Game 9, Move 8: White (Trabolt) to play 63

1.	XG Roller++	21/18* 8/2*	eq: +0.403
	Player:	63.97% (G:33.09% B:2.00%)	
	Opponent:	36.03% (G:6.53% B:0.27%)	
2.	XG Roller++	21/18* 13/7	eq: +0.335 (-0.068)
	Player:	62.50% (G:30.66% B:1.60%)	
	Opponent:	37.50% (G:6.67% B:0.28%)	
3.	XG Roller++	8/2* 4/1*	eq: +0.308 (-0.095)
	Player:	61.83% (G:30.39% B:0.97%)	
	Opponent:	38.17% (G:8.39% B:0.36%)	
4.	XG Roller++	21/18* 14/8	eq: +0.303 (-0.100)
	Player:	61.62% (G:29.88% B:1.71%)	
	Opponent:	38.38% (G:6.50% B:0.27%)	

The three is reasonably clear: it should be played 21/18* attacking. Then there are three real choices for the six, 14/8, 13/7, or 8/2* Despite the fact that Slava had anchored on

the five, Lars wisely continued the attack with 21/18*, 8/2*!

This was a brilliant play by Lars. On the

face of things the double hit appears anti-thematic as Lars doesn't want to continue the blitz after Slava has anchored. However, he wants to prevent Slava from establishing a

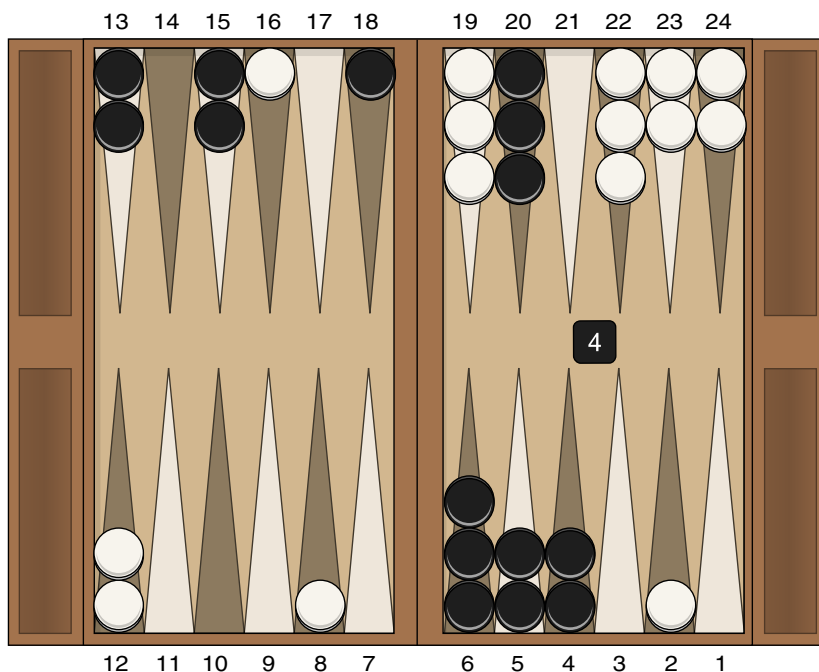
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2-5 backgame with an ace while also gaining time to escape his last man. Finally, since Slava has a very weak board, there is almost no danger in getting hit back, whereas the sequence of keeping Slava dancing and making the two point with the dilly builder on the four point could greatly improve Lars' position (This is the variation that transpired.) As a study problem in an article, this move may seem a no-brainer; but finding it over the board and not fearing the return shot is a world-class play. Asked about the

play after the match, Lars responded that he has learned this kind of hyper aggression against incipient backgames from XG and hence he considers it highly thematic for this type of position and even considered playing the double hit inside 8/2*, 4/1*. Being less on the cutting edge of the game, I'm fairly certain I would have played 14/8 — which is the worst of the bunch, but has the superficial virtue of pre-clearing the potentially troublesome 14-point.

In the actual game, Lars managed to send back more of Slava's men. Then, after a sixth man had been hit, Slava threw a super joker set of double fives that entered on the twenty point and made the 15 point — hitting one of Lars' men there (that he strangely chose not to safety the previous turn). After another exchange of jokers and counter jokers, Slava was on roll in this highly volatile position below:

Position 15



Pip: 108
Lars Trabolt
19-Away

20-Away
Slava Pryadkin
Pip: 170

Game 9, Move 19: Black (Pryadkin) redoubles to 4.

Analyzed in XG Roller++	No redouble	Redouble/Take
Player Winning Chances:	65.52% (G:22.05% B:0.98%)	65.50% (G:22.11% B:1.10%)
Opponent Winning Chances:	34.48% (G:14.31% B:0.25%)	34.50% (G:14.16% B:0.23%)
Cubeless Equities	+0.401	+0.839
Cubeful Equities		
No redouble:	+0.686	
Redouble/Take:	+0.659 (-0.027)	
Redouble/Pass:	+1.000 (+0.314)	

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Best Cube action: No redouble / Take

Percentage of wrong pass needed to make the double decision right: 7.4%

According to XG++ and to a 3-ply rollout this is a small no redouble (.027 by XG++); but trailing 20-away, 19-away in the world championship final facing one of the best backgammon players in the world, it is a brilliant recube. And Slava knew just how good a recube it was. Hamming it up for the audience, he theatrically turned the cube to four and then pumped his fist over the board. This sparked waves of jubilant shouting in the main room from the Slavic players who were watching the match on closed-circuit TV. Even as a non-Slav, I remember my heart beginning to beat faster as Lars considered the take or pass decision. Falafel made clear to us all that the cube was likely a smidge too early. I, however, was of the impression that it was

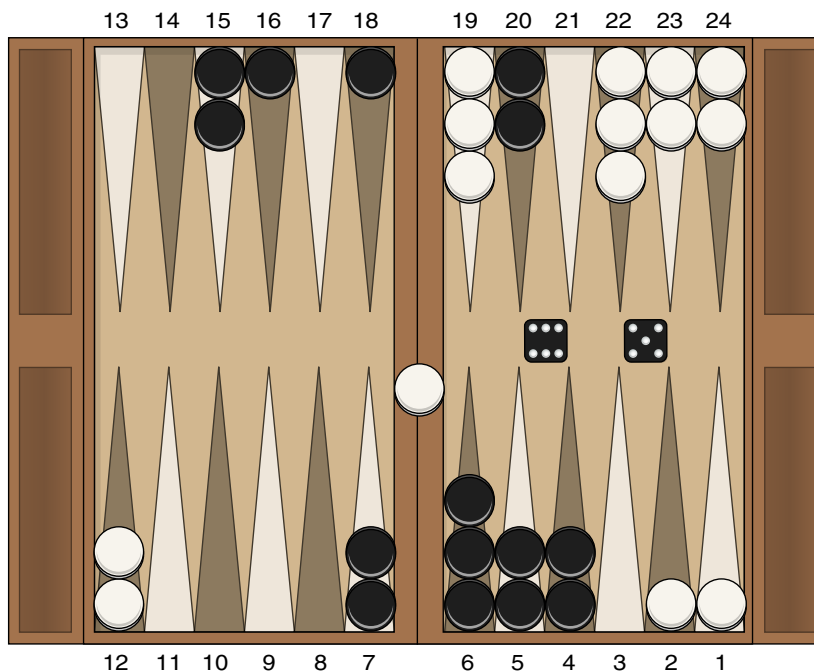
just perfect as it is bound to double Lars in, while simultaneously opening up an avenue to win eight points in one fell swoop. Slava had 2s, 4s, and 5s to hit. Moreover after a good roll and a less than average reply from Lars, Slava would be on the road to gammon city.

Nor was putting the cube in Lars' hands as great a danger as one might imagine. Slava certainly realized that Lars would be quite hesitant to reshuffle it to eight unless he were so significantly ahead that he would be essentially cashing the game. Lars' play throughout the match showed that he was shying away from high cubes, volatility, and gammons while Slava was welcoming them. All these psychological factors

combined to make this a great double: Slava took advantage of good dice and pressured Lars. Finding the cube over the board, having the courage to spin it and the psychological insight to know to double a better opponent in, rather than deciding to "take a roll" — which will frequently result in either market loss or an entire reversal of the position — is enormously to Slava's credit.

Lars took, of course, and Slava followed up his genius cube with a genius roll: a double hitter 54. Lars entered poorly and kept on dancing as Slava went for the kill when faced with the 65 depicted below.

Position 16



4

Pip: 131
Lars Trabolt
19-Away

20-Away
Slava Pryadkin
Pip: 154

Game 9, Move 21: Black (Pryadkin) to play 65

Part 2: How to Give a Gammonish Recube

1.	XG Roller++	18/13 16/10	eq: +0.895
	Player:	82.23% (G:32.50% B:1.79%)	
	Opponent:	17.77% (G:4.43% B:0.08%)	
2.	XG Roller++	7/1* 6/1	eq: +0.647 (-0.249)
	Player:	73.88% (G:30.03% B:1.18%)	
	Opponent:	26.12% (G:7.08% B:0.17%)	

Overeager to score the gammon, Slava made the ace point, blitzing when he should have been content to prime and control the outfield. The temptation to keep Lars dancing is understandable, but Slava's move is a double blunder. If Lars responds by throwing a deuce, he will anchor and have plenty of time to enter his last checker and play a well-timed two point game. And even if Lars fails to throw a deuce, Slava will lack the ammunition to complete the attack immediately. Asked about the move afterward, Slava explained, "My horrible 65, making the ace-point without any builders [was one of my worst plays of the match]."

In fact if somebody would tell me that it was a move played by me, I would never believe it. Simply disgusting."

Rather than being punished for this sloppy move, Slava was rewarded. Luck deserted Lars as he danced both checkers three turns in a row. Slava closed out the three checkers — and even though Lars entered with double sixes at his earliest possible opportunity, Slava responded with two sets of double fives. Slava won a gammon, netting a tidy 8 points, and went up 13-6.

After this big game the players took a break.

We shall follow their lead and now take a brief intermission in our retelling of this great backgammon drama. The next two issues' installments will continue to explore the psychological dimensions of the match. It will be replete with Slava's checker play errors and his brilliant recubes along with some genius, some hesitation, and a lot of ill luck for Lars.

Until then I bid you adieu from England. Stay calm and roll double sixes (when not on the bar). ♦

- JASON PACK



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