

JASON PACK

Greek *VICE News* Backgammon Interview

By Melpomeni Maragidou

Jason Pack was interviewed by Greek *VICE News* following his 2018 Backgammon World Championship first-place results in the Doubles Tournament and the Belair Team Tournament. In the 64-team Doubles event, he partnered with former World Champion and three-time finalist, Lars Trabolt (Denmark) to defeat the Greek team of Giorgos Kleitsas and Platon Tserliakos in the final. In the Belair Team Tournament, he was part of the “Three Geezers” team with Martin Barkwill (UK) and Alireza Sarabi (Iran) that won first place in a field of 26 teams, edging out the all-French “Atlantico” team. Below is an abridged, edited version of *VICE News*’s piece for which Jason provided written answers to the magazine’s questions. The original is available at vice.com. – *Ed.*

When did you start playing backgammon?

As a youngster, my parents and grandparents taught me chess and I took the game semi-seriously until I was about 15 years old. I joined my New Jersey high school chess club and competed in regional tournaments. I was not especially talented. Always a keen games player, I recall that my best friend’s father introduced us to many strategy games like gin rummy, *Risk*¹, and backgammon. I became more interested in backgammon when I was living in Damascus. In Syria, as in Greece, there are multiple variants played on the same backgammon board with 15 checkers for each side. In Arabic-speaking countries, backgammon as we know it is called *franji* (or Frankish) and played without the doubling cube. In Syria in 2004, I learned to play other games like *mahbousa*, *maghrabi*, and what the Greeks call *plakoto*, but realized that *franji* was by far the most dynamic. Late one night in 2006, in a different Middle Eastern capital, a complex backgame led to my inadvertent discovery of the “real game”—backgammon for serious money, played with the doubling cube. My friend and I noticed that the player who

appeared to be very far “behind,” with multiple pieces occupying two points in his opponent’s home board, happened to win the game. For any serious player, it is no surprise that the backgame formation leads to many wins for the player who is behind in the race. But for us social players of the Eastern Mediterranean game, it was counterintuitive and even revolutionary.

We decided to play a series of games starting from that specific backgame position. This was a kind of primitive rollout. As we were progressively learning from this experience, my buddy wondered if there was any backgammon literature to be read. He postulated that there was not—as the game was clearly not academic like chess. I bet him that there was. I then searched online and found Bill Robertie’s book, *501 Essential Backgammon Problems*. I was hooked immediately. Over the course of the next two years, I moved back to the States and read all the backgammon books I could get my hands on, discovering such concepts as recube vigorish and the match equity table. Armed with a little bit of knowledge and fancying myself a strong player, I went to my first tournament in 2009 as an intermediate, and the rest is history.

1. *Risk* is a registered trademark of Hasbro, Inc.

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↑ STELLAR PERFORMANCES

Left: Doubles finalist Platon Tserliakos is flanked by winners Jason Pack (left) and Lars Trabolt. Top right: Belair Team Tournament finals, between Atlantico (left) and Three Geezers. Bottom right: prize winners of many events, including Jason Pack, Platon Tserliakos, Michy Kageyama, and 2018 World Champion Akiko Yazawa.

How did you become a champion?

I am naturally a very competitive person and I have certain mental aptitudes that are particularly suited to backgammon. Most crucially, I have a nearly photographic memory and a tendency to organically categorize information—be it languages, historical events, wine types, or backgammon positions. As soon as I got involved in backgammon, I tried to memorize and integrate all the relevant probabilities, match equity tables, take points, reference positions, and key concepts. But even after my game significantly improved, I did not meet with success at first. I traveled frequently and thought I was quite unlucky in the main American and European tournaments that I played at the Open level from about 2010–2013. Then in the 2014–‘15 season, I had a breakout year: winning the UK Open, the Nordic Open Super Jackpot, the Michigan Masters, and the Connecticut Open and Masters. Since

then I have practiced and played less often, and I think my game and PR (eXtreme Gammon performance rating) may be getting technically worse. However, I also think I am improving at the game's softer skills: demeanor at table, gauging opponent tendencies, and how to compete psychologically to win big matches.

Is backgammon a hobby or a job for you?

For me, backgammon is primarily a hobby. I am an entrepreneur with four separate small businesses, predominantly relating to analyzing Libya, so I look at backgammon as hobby, business, and recreation combined. My hope has been that it will pay for itself or even generate a small amount of spending money. Since my big wins in 2014–‘15, and especially with my good results at the World Championships in 2018 (where I won both the Doubles and the Team tournament), I feel this approach seems to be paying off.

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In Greece, we are accustomed to saying that backgammon is one of our “national sports.” Have you ever heard this saying?

I have spent much time in the Eastern Mediterranean and have close family friends in Greece. So yes, I am aware of this saying. Most Eastern Mediterranean, Caucasian, and Middle Eastern countries have some form of backgammon as their truly national sport. Not all males in any country can be physically fit enough to play soccer, but almost all men in these countries are familiar with the rules of cubeless backgammon (hence just in this broad region, over 400 million people can play backgammon), and probably one-tenth of these men fancy themselves expert players or enjoy the game as one of their primary hobbies. This demographic would really enjoy using the doubling cube, studying the neural-net computer programs, and playing for money. I strongly wish the backgammon community in the USA and Western Europe would focus its outreach on the Eastern Mediterranean, with the goal of bringing that natural reservoir of players into the modern international tournament game.

Tell us the story of when you beat Giorgos Kleitsas and Platon Tserliakos of Greece in the Doubles final.

Miraculously this year at Monte Carlo, I won two events: both the Doubles and the Team. I still have a hard time believing that I went 11-0 in those two events. I think winning the Doubles is by far the greater achievement.

Fortunately for me, my Doubles partner was the Danish professional Lars Trabolt, whom I consider to be the best in the world in match play against non-professional players. To my mind, some Japanese and American professionals play a highly technical style which emulates the computer and is best against other top humans or the computer, but does not sufficiently capitalize on human weaknesses, as Lars’s style does.

Lars and I played six teams of six nationalities (Japanese, Brazilian, British, Russian, Swedish, and Greek) and together we represented all four of the main continents that play tournament

backgammon—as well as many styles, ages, reasons for playing, demeanors, and more.

It was a panoply of humanity. The Greeks in the final were energetic, distracted, emotional, tenacious, and constantly fidgeting with their phones. The Swedes were serious, jovial, and disarmingly open with their remarks, translating their pip counts into English so as not to hide their deliberations from me. The British team, comprising a serious player and a friend’s wife who is a hobbyist, were self-deprecating and witty, engaging in humorous banter with BBC-style accents. The Brazilians played super-quickly, and their lounging postures conveyed that they were on vacation. The Russians had the demeanor one would expect of a Soviet chess master. In short, all of the teams were essentially out of Central Casting.

Monaco pretty much has that Central Casting feel just about everywhere, but especially at the tournament hotel, the Fairmont. At the rooftop pool, the Russian oligarchs and their trophy wives, the partying Western hedge-fund guys, and even the scantily clad and heavily made-up prostitutes, behaved surprisingly one-dimensionally. In Monte Carlo, things truly seem larger than life. Human foibles and cultural eccentricities are on naked display, like nowhere else I know. As they say in business, “Money is truth,” and in Monaco the pursuit of money, or the corresponding great urge to spend it, appears to bring out people’s true characters.

And now, back to the tournament narrative. I was so excited Saturday night that I slept only two or three hours. And then on Sunday, everything happened at once. The Team final could be played only after all the participants were out of the Last Chance. Since I had two finals ahead, I did not want to spend too much energy on my Last Chance match—once I became an underdog, I didn’t try too hard and promptly lost. Now I was ready for the Team final, which I’ll tell you about before I get to the Doubles.

Each team had three players and a team match consisted of three separate matches, the winner being the team that won a majority of the individual matches. Monte Carlo team matches have traditionally been to five points, and Alan Grunwald provides

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watches for the winners. This final, too, was a five-point match. Our opponents were a French team from Paris.

One of them asked to start his match before all my teammates were out of the Last Chance, saying he had to catch a flight from the Nice airport at 5 p.m. We accommodated him, allowing him to start at 3 p.m. He quickly won against our Iranian member, Ali Reza Sarabi, and was off to his flight. As team captain, I sat in the middle seat and saw that we were underdogs on the third board as well. We were in dire straits indeed.

Things then took a turn for the worse when I fell behind in my match. My opponent was a very well-dressed woman with amazing Parisian diction, like a French government functionary in a black-and-white film. As is typical of certain members of the northern French professional class, she had an extremely formal demeanor—and one or two interesting quirks.

Even though we were playing with a baffle box, about one in three times she would roll her dice directly onto the board instead of sending them through the box. I would then point at the box and say, *“Je suis désolé mais on doit utiliser le baffle,”* and make her reroll. In the first game of the match, we ended up playing a three-anchor backgame that lasted about 70 or 80 moves—and despite my polite reminders, about every third roll she would still forget to use the baffle box. I told her that if she placed her dice cup far away enough from the board, she would be unable to reach her cup and would have no choice but to remember to use the baffle box. But she refused to follow this suggestion, saying that she liked to hold her cup *even when using a baffle box*. She wasn’t bothered in the slightest by the fact that she had to waste time redoing fully one-third of her rolls. Each time she just smiled and rerolled. She was unfailingly polite, cheerful, and businesslike.

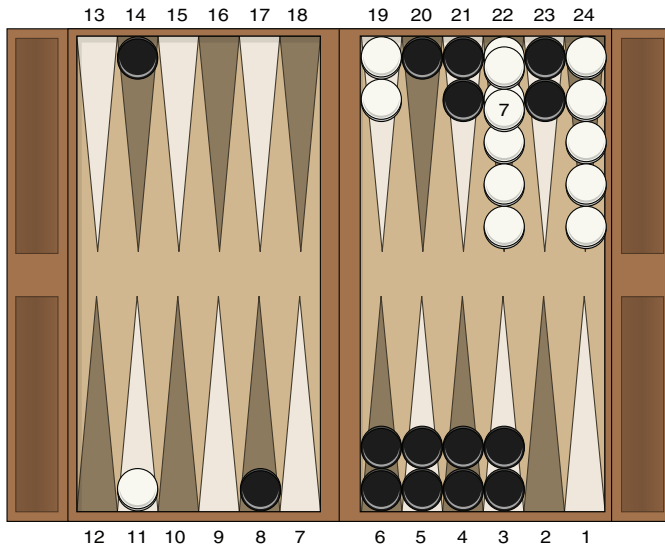
That was the only backgame I played in the whole tournament. It arose after I chose to complicate by slotting and hitting. My opponent hit back many times, and I ended up with seven checkers occupying the 23, 21, and 20 points. But I maintained good timing, and was never at serious risk of crunching. She did not try to make me bust, but played safe. That strategy backfired—she ended up with many checkers on her ace and three points and left a shot in her outer board before she could bear off a checker. I hit from my 20 anchor and attempted to contain her, but she kept coming out and around as I still had no board and no prime. Eventually I rolled double 3 to form a four-point board consisting of my 3 through 6 points. She advanced her straggler to her 14 point. I had a direct shot plus multiple indirects: 20 hitting numbers in all. I had to decide whether to double. Due to her previous cautious play, the cube was still centered.



Lars and I played six teams of six nationalities (Japanese, Brazilian, British, Russian, Swedish, and Greek) and together we represented all four of the main continents that play tournament backgammon...

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Position 1



64

Facing her weak inner board and stripped 6 point, I knew that the next two-roll sequence would be critical. If I hit, which I am better than 75% to do before she bears off a checker, she may be forced to come in and leave a second blot, say with 32, 31, or 51, after which I could hit two checkers and gammon her. Even if she safeties her blot, it seems nearly impossible for her to avoid future shots. Furthermore, as this is a five-point match, she can rarely recube as doing so would largely kill her gammons.

Those are the reasons to double. The downside is that I may miss multiple shots, after which she would be too good to redouble. I could then lose a four-point gammon, putting me behind in the Crawford game. However, I thought that I might have more than 70% winning chances, and greater gammon chances than she did. And I realized that she could potentially see her position as ugly enough to pass.

As you have probably guessed, I cubed and my opponent took. I rolled 64 hitting from my 21 anchor, leaving one checker remaining on that point. She entered with a startling double 2. I had not envisioned that parlay, which is her best two-roll sequence that starts with being hit. After entering, she switched from her 6 point to her 4 point, putting me on the roof.

But I wasn't too worried yet. She still had to escape through the

Score

5-away White (French Player)

5-away Black (Jason Pack)

Pips

52

166

Black on roll. Cube action?

● ND Winning Chances: 71.25% (G:18.32% B:0.64%)

○ ND Winning Chances: 28.75% (G:17.78% B:0.39%)

● D/T Winning Chances: 71.83% (G:19.70% B:0.89%)

○ D/T Winning Chances: 28.17% (G:17.62% B:0.60%)

Best choice: Double / Take

No double	+0.695	(-0.149)
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✓ Double/Take	+0.844	
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Double/Pass	+1.000	(+0.156)
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outfields, which I controlled fairly well. That would be difficult unless she could jump directly from my home board to hers. Lo and behold, I threw a regular entering number and she replied with double 5. Now, I was in a deuce-point game with most of her checkers cleared, and I was behind by 100 pips, about to get gammoned. As small consolation for me, she had an odd number of checkers on her 3 point; but she threw a small number to get rid of the odd checker, and later rolled boxes to clear all her points. She rolled no more doubles that game, and I got off the backgammon.

That meant I was down 0-4 in a match to 5. At this score, winning a two-point gammon in the Crawford game would not help me much as I would still have three points to go. However, if I could get a three-point backgammon, it would be one game for the match. The problem is that with proper play, backgammons occur in less than one percent of all games. And in a situation where one should play to avoid backgammons (known as "backgammon save"), the chance of a backgammon goes down to about 1 in 300 with proper play.

Nonetheless, I decided that I should try to win the match in two games. I needed to backgammon her in the Crawford game, or win a regular game followed by a doubled gammon. I told myself that I needed to go all-out for a bloody backgammon in the next game. That was the first time in my life I had adopted this plan.

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In fact, in my entire tournament career I had never once scored a backgammon at a backgammon-go score.

Nonetheless, I doubled down on my strategy of the match's first game, hitting and slotting everything. Both of our positions became crazy. She had seven blots strewn around the board—and then the magic happened. I hit and she danced. I then hoovered up all of her blots and pinned her into an ace-point game. I thought I had about 50% backgammon chances at that point, and I probably played more aggressively than I ever had in a similar position. I did not pre-clear or strip my high points, and just ripped checkers off with little thought of safety.

I never left a shot, and she never rolled high doubles. When I had come down to five checkers on the deuce point, she still had three on my ace and another still in my home board. I rolled two non-ace non-doubles to expose my last checker on the deuce. Her first roll only allowed one of her checkers to get out of my board,

leaving two on my ace and one on the 21 point. On her second turn, she failed to hit with an ace or to roll boxes (the only roll that would get her off the backgammon without hitting). She had no choice but to keep her 24 point, hoping that I would stall with double ace, after which she would hit—but I bore off and scored the backgammon.

In the post-Crawford game, I decided that since I needed only a simple win, I wouldn't force things and would let the dice take us where they would. Our fate was a simple holding game. Leading in the race, I cruised to a win. Meanwhile my teammate Martin Barkwill had turned around his match to win on the third board, and we had become World Team Champions! It was absolutely wild to have started my match with a massive seven-checker backgame and lost to a freak sequence of doubles—and then to have played an even wilder game that led to seven checkers back for my opponent.

After counting some winnings in a little side room, and taking some photos with draw sheets and fist pumps, I had a snack in my room and got a text saying the Greeks were anxious to play the Doubles final as quickly as possible. Although the match could have been streamed if they were willing to wait until the Singles final was finished, they insisted on playing immediately. This slightly annoyed me, but Lars said he was happy to play first so that we could drink before the prize-giving. (Lars holds to a strict regimen, refusing to drink a drop of alcohol during a tournament. He inspired me to try that in 2014, but I found that when I was deep into a tournament, I couldn't sleep without a nightcap to help wash away all the day's intensities.)



⌚ OUTSTANDING RAPPORT

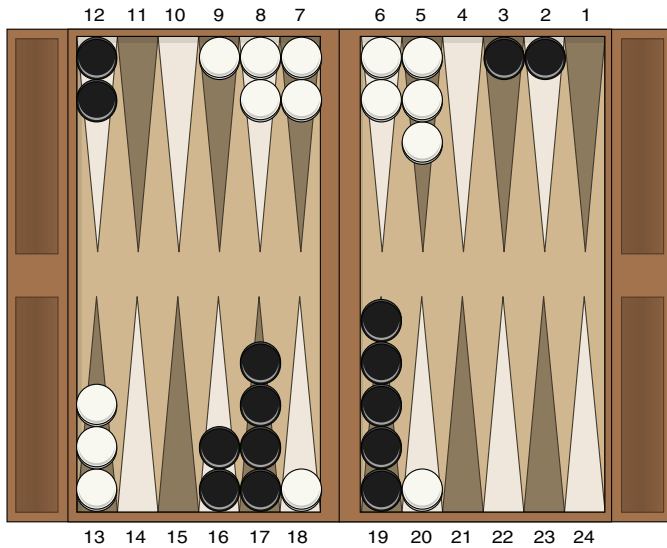
Great communication, combined with deep experience and clutch rolling, helped Lars Trabolt and Jason Pack (pumping fist) win the 2018 Doubles championship in Monte Carlo.

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We opened strong in the first game, rolling an early double 1 to hit, make our 5 point, and establish a four-point prime. They entered awkwardly and passed our cube on the fourth move.

We had to pass in each of the two games that followed, and in the next game we got into gammon danger and chose to pass what we thought might well be a slight take.

Position 2



Score

5-away	White (Giorgos & Platon)	52
6-away	Black (Jason & Lars)	166

Pips

White on roll. Cube action?

ND Winning Chances: 71.17% (G:20.49% B:0.84%)

ND Winning Chances: 28.83% (G:6.25% B:0.23%)

D/T Winning Chances: 71.17% (G:21.46% B:0.88%)

D/T Winning Chances: 28.83% (G:6.24% B:0.49%)

Best choice: Double / Take

No double	+0.814	(-0.101)
Double/Take	+0.915	
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Double/Pass	+1.000	(+0.085)

Lars says:

Here our opponents had the advantage in every department of the game (race, development, priming potential, blitzing threats, etc.). Conversely, they had only a two-point board and we were not on the bar, so we probably had enough counterplay for a technical take.

After our decision to pass, our 1-0 lead had evaporated into a 1-3 deficit, so we took our usual cigarette break, with mutual pep talk. As I had done when we trailed 2-5 against the Swedes the previous night, I insisted to Lars that we needed to win a doubled gammon and had to get the cube in, even at the risk of being a touch early.

In theory this is a great strategy, but it is difficult to implement in practice. Many games are just not volatile enough to get in that perfectly timed cube, and it's difficult to win a gammon even with aggressive play. Gammons are only about one-quarter of total wins—that is, the chance at the start of a game of getting a gammon for your side is only about one-eighth; if the opponent plays to avoid a gammon at the cost of giving up some wins, that chance should drop to about 9%.

We emerged from the half-time tunnel with Vince Lombardi's pep talk still resounding in our ears. Just as we had on the previous night, we got to a position with promising priming and attacking prospects.

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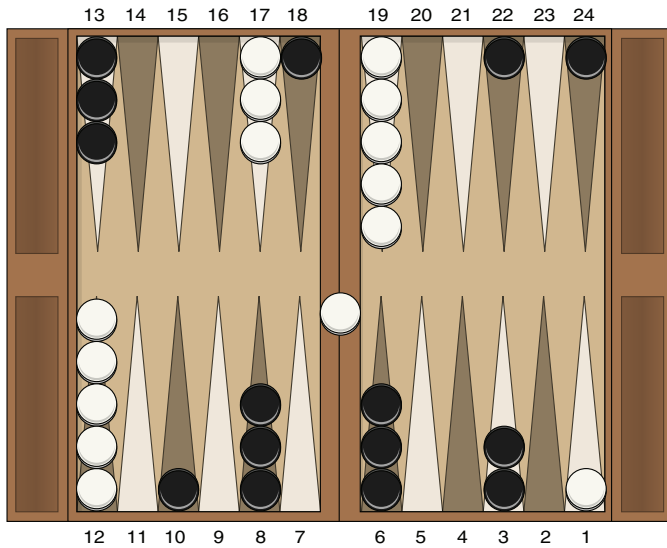
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Position 3



Score

4-away	White (Giorgos & Platon)	168
6-away	Black (Jason & Lars)	161

Pips

Black on roll. Cube action?

- ND Winning Chances: 62.42% (G:22.82% B:1.10%)
- ND Winning Chances: 37.58% (G:8.79% B:0.64%)
- D/T Winning Chances: 62.71% (G:23.02% B:0.94%)
- D/T Winning Chances: 37.29% (G:8.99% B:0.78%)

Best choice: No double / Take

No double	+0.677	
✓ Double/Take	+0.675	(-0.002)
Double/Pass	+1.000	(+0.323)

According to XG, it was the most borderline of cubes, too close to call after 1296 rollout trials. The race was close, we had three checkers back, and they had no structural weaknesses. But cube we did, and with little hesitation. I thought that if we threw a good number and they responded with a bad one we would be favored to win the match. So rock and roll! But if we rolled badly and they rolled well, we would be serious underdogs with less than 20% match-winning chances.

According to Lars:

We are ahead in development and clearly have the initiative. Given the score and the way Jason was rolling, this was a must-cube!

We rolled 52, which did nothing much, neither hitting nor pointing. We added a builder with 18/11, and they danced again on our two-point board! As we improved our board, we were able to pick up another checker. They used it to grab our 2 point. Later they upgraded their anchor to the 4. They were then faced with a difficult 41, which presented two radically different game plans.

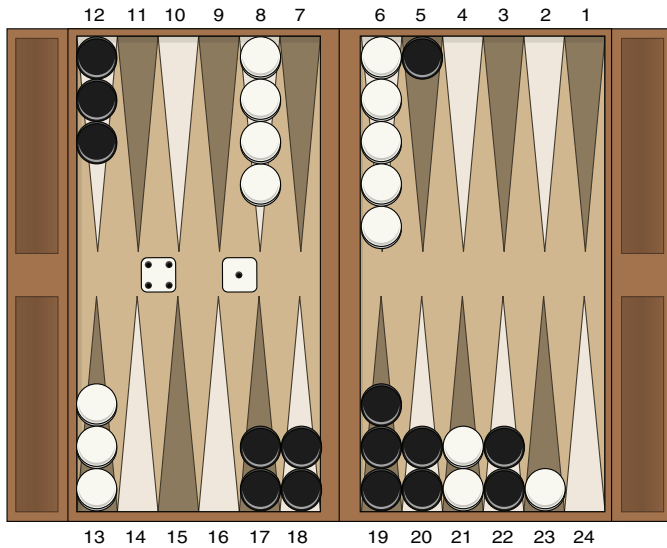


← WORLD DOUBLES CHAMPIONSHIP

Before the action starts, Giorgios Kleitsas (front, left) and teammate Platon Tserliakos, both of Greece, shake hands with Jason Pack (front) of the USA, and Denmark's Lars Trabolt. Director Arda Findikoğlu stands at rear.

Jason Pack: Backgammon Interview

Position 4



2

Score		Pips
4-away	White (Giorgos & Platon)	166
6-away	Black (Jason & Lars)	123

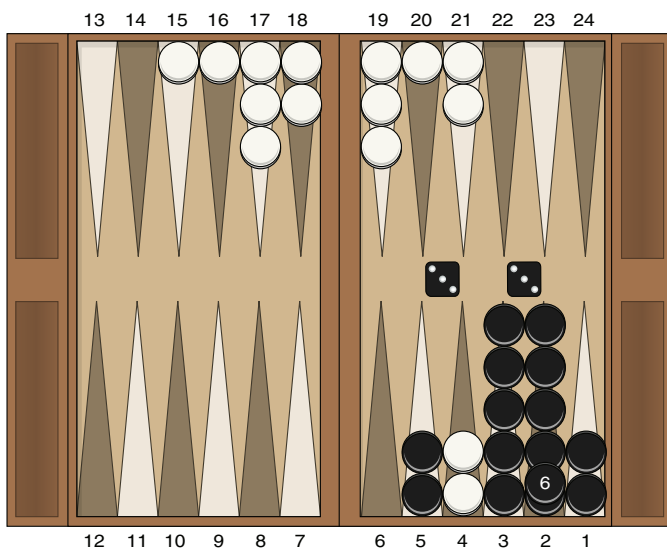
White to play 41

✓ 13/9 6/5*	-0.615	
8/4 6/5*	-0.664	(-0.050)
6/5* 5/1	-0.676	(-0.061)
8/3	-0.689	(-0.075)
13/8	-0.712	(-0.097)

Instead of playing safe with 13/8 or 8/3, banking most of their hopes on a dubious holding game, they hit our lone back checker loose, 13/9 6/5*. I thought this maneuver was too wild, so I was thrilled to see it. However, it is clearly best according to XG's rollout, and over the board Lars thought it was correct and unremarkable. But their bold play backfired, and we picked up a fourth man and later a fifth. They were on the high road to Gammon City, but things took yet another turn as they entered all their checkers with double 4. We were still big favorites to gammon them,

but while still holding the 8 point, I rolled a double 4 anti-joker, causing me to break the 7 and 6 points. They built up their board next turn and we were likely to eventually leave a shot on the 8 point. But as our timing dwindled, I produced a convenient 65 that cleared that point. We were then racing to gammon them, needing roughly the same number of crossovers to bear off that they needed to save the gammon. I threw a double 3 with which we could clear our 5 point and ensure winning the game.

Position 5



2

Score		Pips
4-away	White (Giorgos & Platon)	130
6-away	Black (Jason & Lars)	39

Black to play 33

✓ 3/Off(4)	+1.727	
5/2(2) 3/Off(2)	+1.682	(-0.045)

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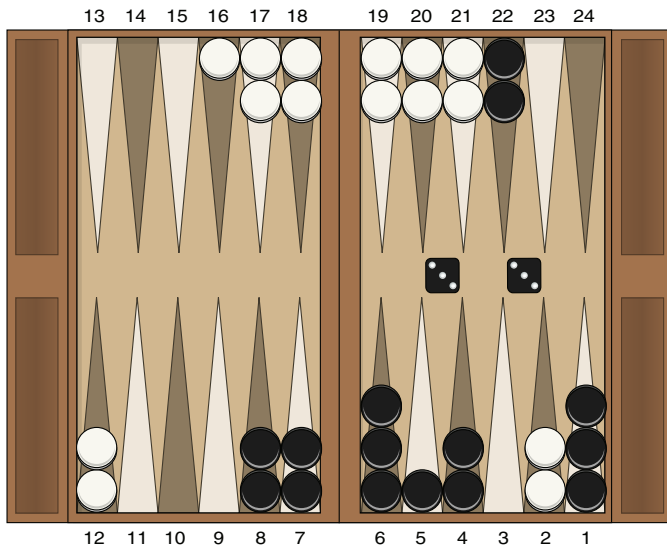
After only cursory discussion, Lars and I agreed to bear off four men from the 3 point instead, vastly increasing our gammon chances but exposing us to the risk of blotting, getting hit, and losing the game.

Fortunately, I cleared the 5 point next turn, and we seemed likely to get the gammon—but they turned the tables with double 4. I answered with another set of 3s. This was the same number that had gammoned our Swedish opponents the previous day to get

us to the final; it was our roll of the tournament, what Antoinette Williams calls “the necklace.” They failed to roll double deuce or better on their final roll, and we won a four-point gammon.

Ahead 5–3, we played a complex 21-anchor game. We hit a shot, primed one checker, and played for an undoubled long-shot gammon which we didn’t get. At 6–3, Crawford, we held the 22-anchor, ahead in the race and behind a partial prime, with risks of breaking our board. We did break, misplaying an interesting double 3:

Position 6



Score

4-away, C	White (Giorgos & Platon)	141
1-away, C	Black (Jason & Lars)	108

Pips

Black to play 33

8/5(2) 6/3(2)	-0.753	
✓ 8/5(2) 7/4(2)	-0.784	(-0.030)
8/5 6/3(3)	-0.840	(-0.087)

We played safe, 8/5(2) 7/4(2). But it is correct to make the 5 point with 8/5(2) and switch to the 3 with 6/3(2), leaving a blot on the 6! Would any humans find that move? The play we made gives us plenty of bad rolls in the future, but leaves no blot immediately. The upside of the correct play is that it keeps a broken four-prime, duplicates White’s 4s to hit and to make their 9 point, and gives us a slight chance to remake our 6 point. It is probably very important

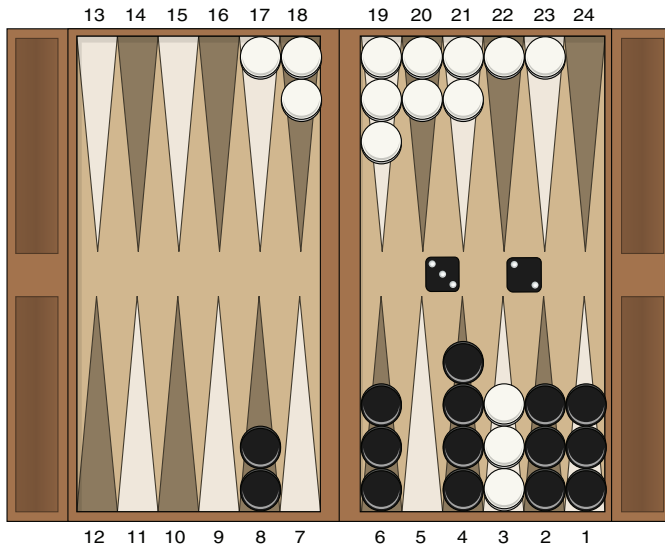
that this move gives our opponents an anti-joker double 5, which forces them to break their five-prime.

As things stood after our “safe” play, we were in trouble, disconnected and behind a five-prime. We were forced off our anchor; they hit loose, I hit back, they fanned, and I rolled a 17-to-1 shot to jump their prime. But we still had difficulties; they had an anchor on our 3 point, and we had gaps in front of it. We left indirect shots in the outfield and reached this position, with 32 to play.



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Position 7



Score

4-away, C White (Giorgos & Platon) 129

1-away, C Black (Jason & Lars) 59

Pips

Black to play 32

✓ 8/6 8/5	+0.266	
6/1		(-0.011)
4/2 4/1		(-0.097)

Their inner board is somewhat weak for the moment, and if we play safe we figure to leave shots later on. So, we decided to go big or go home—correctly volunteering a direct shot, 8/5 8/6. They missed and we cleared, thus becoming World Champions of Doubles Backgammon for 2018.

We had played some of the stronger players in the world to win—and had played three out of six matches where we and our opponents both played below a 5 XG performance rating. In two of our recorded matches, we played below 3.5. That is serious backgammon. What a lovely combination of *Téchni* and *Tyche* (skill/craftsmanship/art and luck/fortune, in Ancient Greek).

Lars and I had embraced the true spirit of doubles backgammon, playing each match didactically. Admitting to each other what plays we were sure about, and which we weren't, might have been our unique skill. In this, properly played doubles backgammon strikes me as having a Socratic component. The truest skill in doubles

or chouette backgammon is “to know what one does not know” and to use a method of questions and answers to elucidate what one can be certain about. Armed with this information, the final step is to hone in on priorities and find the optimal choice that fits the knowns, the unknowns, and the overall game plan. And in this methodology of selecting the best play, Lars and I were both World Champion class.

I admire Lars greatly, because he performs so well at major tournaments, and does so with a style that I struggle to emulate. His approach to backgammon epitomizes restraint, while mine emphasizes boldness. I felt that our combination was like an exquisite dessert wine—sweet, but savory. Every bit of sugar balanced by body and acid; moments of gammon-go, finely balanced by those of gammon-save. ♦

**- MELPOMENI MARAGIDOU
GREEK VICE NEWS**

