

# GENIUS AND GRACE IN MONTE CARLO

## Toshiyuki Moriuchi, Akiko, and a Crash Course in Three-Roll Endings

By Jason Pack

I am one of the very few players on the international backgammon scene to photograph the majority of my cube decisions in both tournament and casual play. Reviewing my cube decisions from the 2014 World Championship, I played some of the best backgammon of my life,

taking on the role of “Giant Killer.” I beat Lars Trabolt (Giant #7) in the Monte Carlo Open, despite overcompensating for our skill difference by cubing far too early on two occasions; I rolled Falafel (Giant #3) off the board in the third round of the Main while playing nearly flawlessly; and

I downed Petko (Giant #6) in the first round after a gutsy take of his slightly early redouble at 6-away, 5-away, followed by a daring recube to eight after hitting a last-ditch shot.

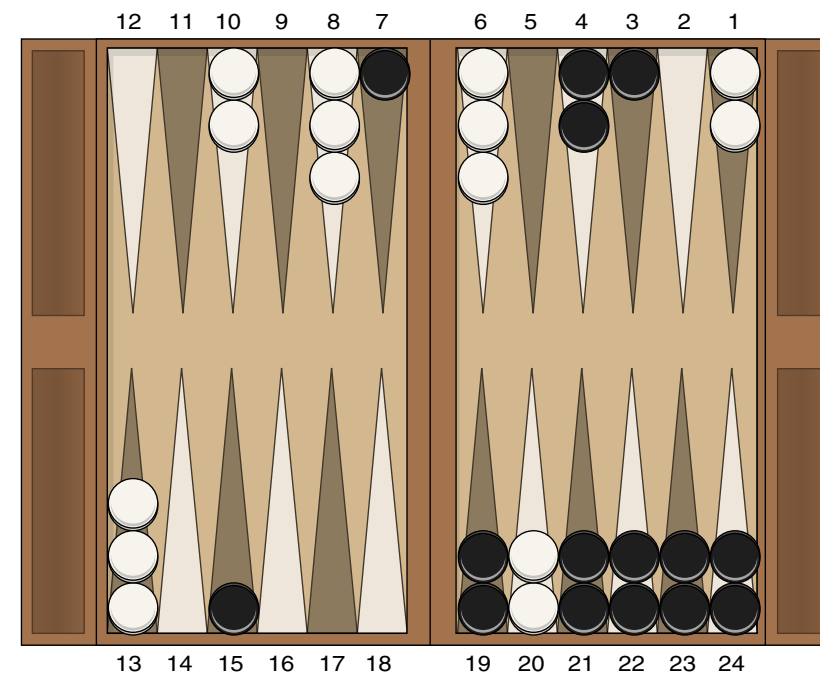


### JASON & AKIKO

Jason with the 2014 World Champion Akiko Yazawa just minutes after her dramatic come-from-behind victory.

JASON PACK

### Position 1



2 Pip: 143  
Petko Kostadinov  
6-Away

5-Away  
Jason Pack  
Pip: 124

White (Petko Kostadinov) on roll. Cube action?

Analyzed in XG Roller++	No redouble	Redouble/Take
Player Winning Chances:	61.78% (G:16.67% B:0.49%)	61.91% (G:17.07% B:0.47%)
Opponent Winning Chances:	38.22% (G:11.65% B:0.23%)	38.09% (G:11.86% B:0.21%)
Cubeless Equities	+0.292	+0.698
<b>Cubeful Equities</b>		
No redouble:	+0.638	
Redouble/Take:	+0.600 (-0.037)	
Redouble/Pass:	+1.000 (+0.362)	
<b>Best Cube action: No redouble / Take</b>		
Percentage of wrong pass needed to make the double decision right: 8.5%		



### PETKO KOSTADINOV

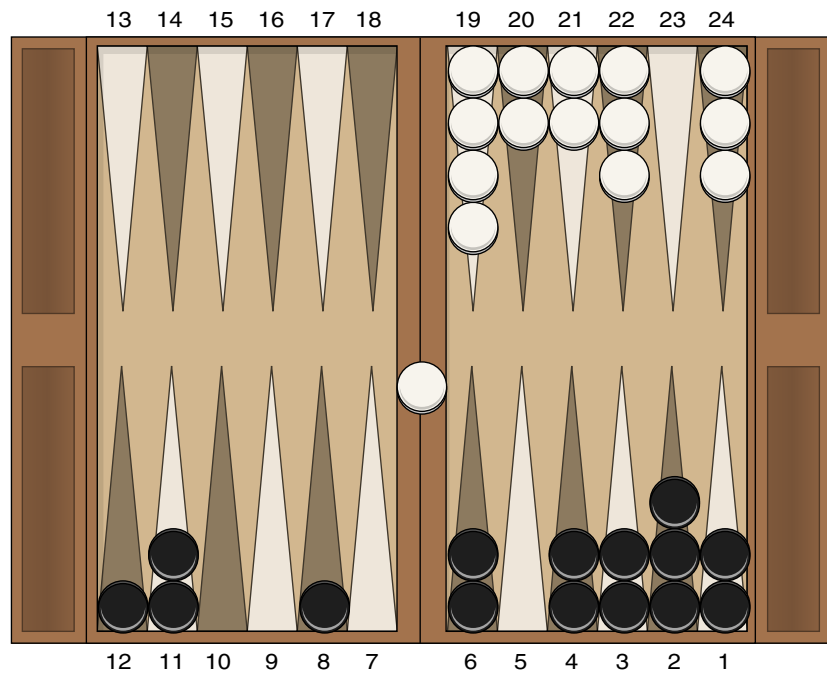
Petko relaxes with a beer after losing his first round match of the World Championship to Jason, who took the above cube to four and turned it around reaching Position 2.



SONYA KOSTADINOVA

## Genius and Grace in Monte Carlo

Position 2



Pip: 79  
Petko Kostadinov  
6-Away

5-Away  
Jason Pack  
Pip: 76

Black (Jason Pack) on roll. Cube action?

Analyzed in XG Roller++	No redouble	Redouble/Take
Player Winning Chances:	82.05% (G:1.16% B:0.01%)	82.22% (G:1.03% B:0.01%)
Opponent Winning Chances:	17.95% (G:0.46% B:0.01%)	17.78% (G:0.40% B:0.01%)
Cubeless Equities	+0.641	+0.793
Cubeful Equities		
No redouble:	+0.804	
Redouble/Take:	+0.793 (-0.010)	
Redouble/Pass:	+1.000 (+0.196)	
<b>Best Cube action: No redouble / Take</b>		
Percentage of wrong pass needed to make the double decision right: 4.6%		

In the round of sixteen, I came up against Toshiyuki Moriuchi — the Shogi grandmaster who was rolling even hotter than I was. As stated elsewhere in this issue of *PrimeTime*, the 2014 World Championship was Toshiyuki's first ever backgammon tournament and he had never before played live opponents outside of Japan. However, as a Shogi professional, his ability to stay

focused and adjust to vagaries of the dice was certainly world class. In the previous round against Rolf Vetch of Switzerland, he had lost a huge advantage and then at DMP managed to come back from a position where he had less than 5% to win by rolling three sets of high doubles, culminating in double sixes on the penultimate roll. While watching the match, knowing I would have

to play the winner in the next round, I grew terrified of Toshiyuki's expressionless demeanor, genius brain, and ability to produce high doubles in racing positions.

After mutually agreeing to return at a sensible hour from the dinner break (i.e. 21:15 instead of 22:30) I was soon down 10-0 while the playing room was still eerily

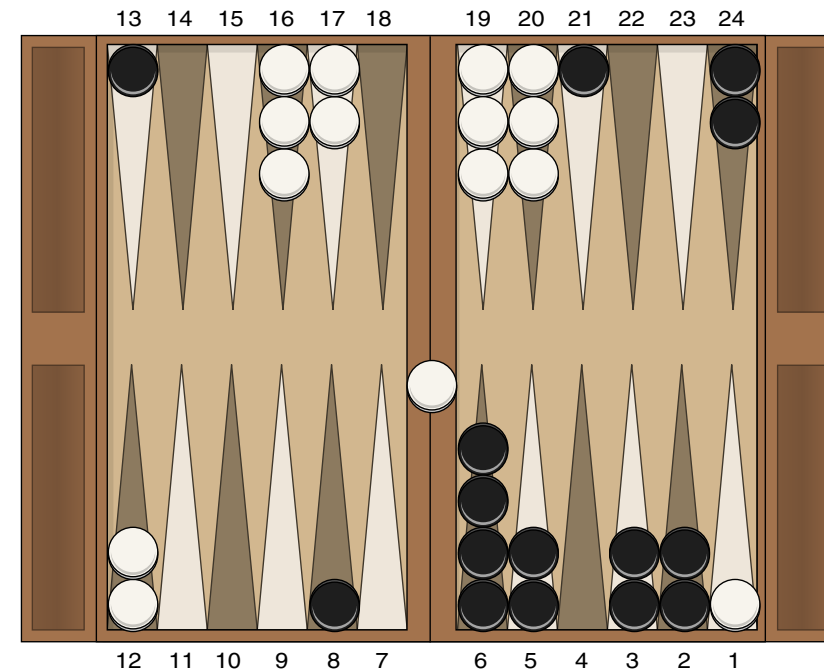
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empty. Even spookier than that was how I managed to get gammoned in a high anchor holding game without ever being hit, by rolling a freak sequence of low numbers.

Then trailing 3-13 to 17, I complicated the games, finally got some good dice, gave some aggressive cubes, and got some incorrect takes (as in the position below),

which allowed me to get two and four points at a time, roaring back to 12-14 from the position below.

Position 3



Pip: 151  
Toshiyuki Moriuchi  
3-Away

9-Away  
Jason Pack  
Pip: 134

Black (Jason Pack) on roll. Cube action?

Analyzed in XG Roller+	No double	Double/Take
Player Winning Chances:	59.81% (G:37.16% B:0.81%)	59.68% (G:37.16% B:0.74%)
Opponent Winning Chances:	40.19% (G:11.81% B:0.91%)	40.32% (G:11.96% B:0.93%)
Cubeless Equities	+0.417	+1.124
Cubeful Equities		
No double:	+0.767 (-0.233)	
Double/Take:	+1.126 (+0.126)	
Double/Pass:	+1.000	
<b>Best Cube action: Double / Pass</b>		

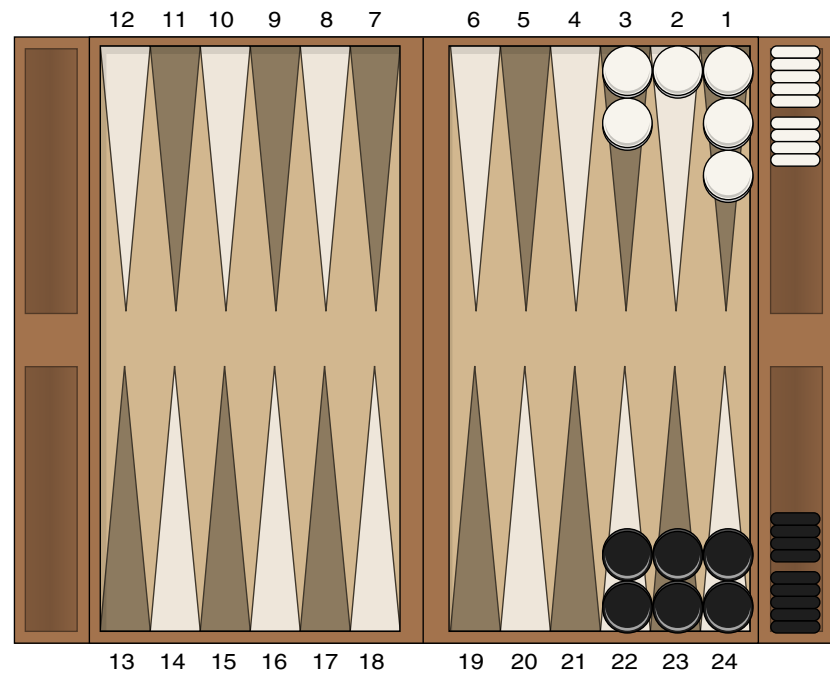
Here Toshiyuki took what would be a borderline double and massive take for money, but is already a colossal pass at 3-away, 9-away due to the high gammon percentage and the leader's inability to use the cube, should he hit a last-ditch shot.

Unfortunately, despite my dramatic comeback to 5-away, 3-away, my luck ran out. At that score, we played a mutual holding game. I missed a shot, but later broke contact with double fours. On the very next turn, I gave an accurate racing double leading by

8 pips, Toshiyuki correctly took, and then two rolls later threw double fives. Later still, he redoubled me to four in the following modified three-roll, three-roll position.

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Position 4



2 Pip: 11  
Toshiyuki Moriuchi  
3-Away

5-Away  
Jason Pack  
Pip: 12

White (Toshiyuki Moriuchi) on roll. Cube action?

Analyzed in XG Roller++	No redouble	Redouble/Take
Player Winning Chances:	80.96% (G:0.00% B:0.00%)	80.91% (G:0.00% B:0.00%)
Opponent Winning Chances:	19.04% (G:0.00% B:0.00%)	19.09% (G:0.00% B:0.00%)
Cubeless Equities	+0.619	+1.087
Cubeful Equities		
No redouble:	+0.797 (-0.011)	
Redouble/Take:	+0.809	
Redouble/Pass:	+1.000 (+0.191)	
Best Cube action: Redouble / Take		

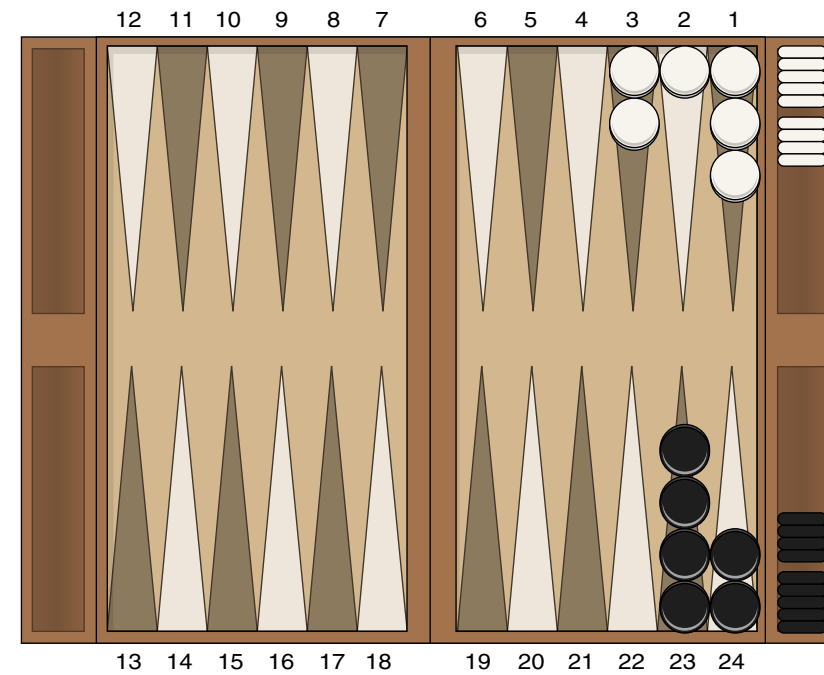
I thought his redouble was early — and judging by the faces of the throng of spectators watching the match, they seemed to agree. In fact, after the match, one overeager Frenchman chastised Toshiyuki for putting the whole match on the line when he can still use the cube highly effectively at this score on the next roll, assuming neither party rolls doubles. Not having seen the rollout that others were conducting on their iPhones, I agreed with the Frenchmen’s analysis. Then, Lars Trabolt pulled me

aside for some words of paternal instruction — “Jason, I wouldn’t have recubed it, but it is a good recube. This Shogi expert is damn good and I wouldn’t have liked to play him.” Although at 3-away, 5-away, a standard three-roll ending (each side with six checkers on the ace) would normally be a big no redouble for the 3-away player (-.085), in this instance the fact that double twos and aces don’t help me bear off makes it a borderline correct redouble (+.011), even though Toshiyuki can miss if he throws 2x

followed by 21, or 21 followed by 2x, or 21 followed by 1x followed by 21 again (only 2.48% chance in total). Unfortunately for me, the main variation played out: he didn’t miss but also didn’t throw doubles (68.5%), and I failed to roll a relevant set on my two tries (79%). In studying the position further and examining related three-roll endings, I was able to determine that even if only my double deuces were also activated, his redouble would have been a blunder (-.112).

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Position 4-A



2 Pip: 11  
Toshiyuki Moriuchi  
3-Away

5-Away  
Jason Pack  
Pip: 10

White (Toshiyuki Moriuchi) on roll. Cube action?

Analyzed in XG Roller++	No redouble	Redouble/Take
Player Winning Chances:	78.09% (G:0.00% B:0.00%)	78.09% (G:0.00% B:0.00%)
Opponent Winning Chances:	21.91% (G:0.00% B:0.00%)	21.91% (G:0.00% B:0.00%)
Cubeless Equities	+0.562	+0.963
Cubeful Equities		
No redouble:	+0.755	
Redouble/Take:	+0.643 (-0.112)	
Redouble/Pass:	+1.000 (+0.245)	
Best Cube action: No redouble / Take		

This slightly modified position highlights the importance of doing the bear off math at lopsided match scores. No serious open-level player should avoid doing the mental arithmetic to analyze a three-roll ending. Assessing such a position on feel alone is a huge risk. Furthermore, the math required is trivial and the outcome of such an endgame may well decide the whole match. What I would suggest is first using Neil’s Numbers to figure out the match equity and take points, and then taking Robertie’s or Lam-

ford’s Mini-Max approach to approximate the taker’s winning chances by considering the only variations in which the taker can win. It would seem that even if Toshiyuki didn’t apply precisely this technique, he did figure out his doubling window at this score (which is quite narrow) and his winning chances very accurately.

In fact, like many Japanese players, Toshiyuki appeared a backgammon natural: blessed with good dice, an ability to stay

focused under pressure, and an intuitive understanding of match score dynamics. It is truly incredible that three of the final 8 players at this year’s World Championship came from Japan and that none of them were Japan’s number 1 or number 2 Giant. This reveals how the Japanese are beginning to emulate the Danes of ten years ago — producing not only the world’s very best players, but also having tremendous depth of talent.



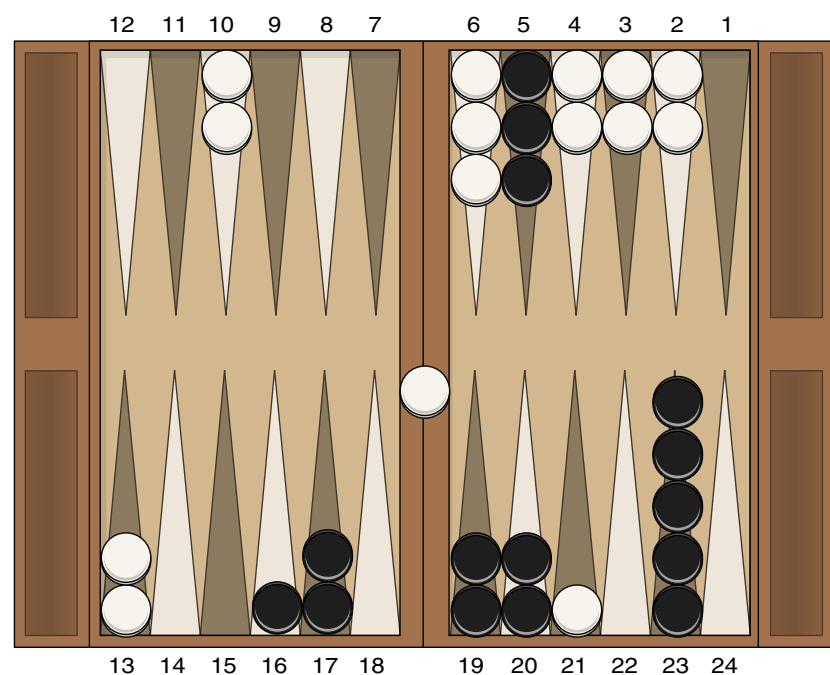
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Akiko Yazawa is a shining example of that talent. Facing her countryman and world number one, Mochy, in the semifinal of the undefeated bracket, Akiko told me

afterward that she adjusted her play so as to increase volatility and promote big cubes. In the last game of that match, Akiko was leading 6-away, 12-away. Mochy gave a

dynamic, score-based cube from the roof, which was technically correct, although an easy take for Akiko.

Position 5



Pip: 128  
Mochy Mochizuki  
12-Away

64

6-Away  
Akiko Yazawa  
Pip: 117

White (Mochy Mochizuki) on roll. Cube action?

Analyzed in XG Roller+	No double	Double/Take
Player Winning Chances:	62.73% (G:12.97% B:0.35%)	62.63% (G:12.56% B:0.34%)
Opponent Winning Chances:	37.27% (G:7.94% B:0.16%)	37.37% (G:7.86% B:0.17%)
Cubeless Equities	+0.298	+0.626
Cubeful Equities		
No double:	+0.527 (-0.020)	
Double/Take:	+0.547	
Double/Pass:	+1.000 (+0.453)	
<b>Best Cube action: Double / Take</b>		

After cubing, Mochy danced with boxes and the game tipped in Akiko's favor, as she began bringing her men around from the 20-point. Then Mochy hit a fly shot as she was trying to bring her last two stragglers around and Mochy managed to close out the two checkers. Going for a gammon,

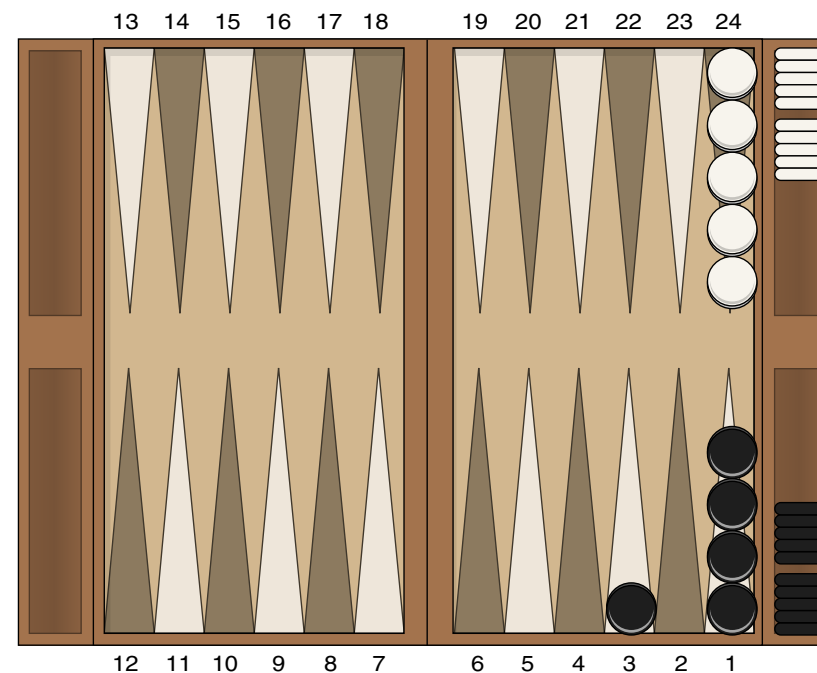
he then chose to bear off too aggressively, making his only checker-play blunder of the match.

Retribution was swift. With six men borne off, he blotted, Akiko hit, and despite her Swiss-cheese board with its huge two-

point stack, she was able to contain the hit checker. After Mochy entered he was only a slight underdog, but Akiko threw a brilliant 22 in the bear off, taking four men off and improving her awkward distribution. As Mochy rolled small, Akiko seized an advantage and strategically redoubled.

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Position 6



Pip: 5  
Mochy Mochizuki  
12-Away

2

6-Away  
Akiko Yazawa  
Pip: 7

Black (Akiko Yazawa) on roll. Cube action?

Analyzed in XG Roller++	No redouble	Redouble/Take
Player Winning Chances:	78.78% (G:0.00% B:0.00%)	78.78% (G:0.00% B:0.00%)
Opponent Winning Chances:	21.22% (G:0.00% B:0.00%)	21.22% (G:0.00% B:0.00%)
Cubeless Equities	+0.576	+1.024
Cubeful Equities		
No redouble:	+0.769	
Redouble/Take:	+0.717 (-0.051)	
Redouble/Pass:	+1.000 (+0.231)	
<b>Best Cube action: No redouble / Take</b>		

Here we have a straight three-roll, three-roll ending. It is irrelevant that Akiko has five men left with one man on the three point or that Mochy has only five men on the ace. The position is functionally equivalent to each side having 6 men on the ace point.

As any decent backgammon player should know, the standard three-roll ending is 78.78% winning chances for the side on roll, with 21.22% for the player not on roll. It is, therefore, a double or redouble, and

a pass at money or at most roughly-even even a no redouble when the side on roll is far ahead in the match, especially if the trailer can redouble to give his opponent overage. That is exactly the situation here, at 6-away, 12-away. Akiko, the 6-away player, is holding a two cube. If she goes to four, Mochy, the 12-away player, can redouble to 8 even as a significant underdog, since Akiko can only use 6 of the 8 points, while he can use all 8. Akiko understood that this

three-roll ending is therefore a slight no redouble, whereas the two-roll ending (i.e. next turn, assuming that neither side rolls doubles) would be a big redouble and a big pass. Technically accurate cube handling in this situation will mean that Akiko will never be able to double her opponent in at this score. However, she knew that she was playing Mochy — the world's best player — and that if she didn't wait and chose to redouble him to 4 right here and then didn't roll doubles, Mochy would have

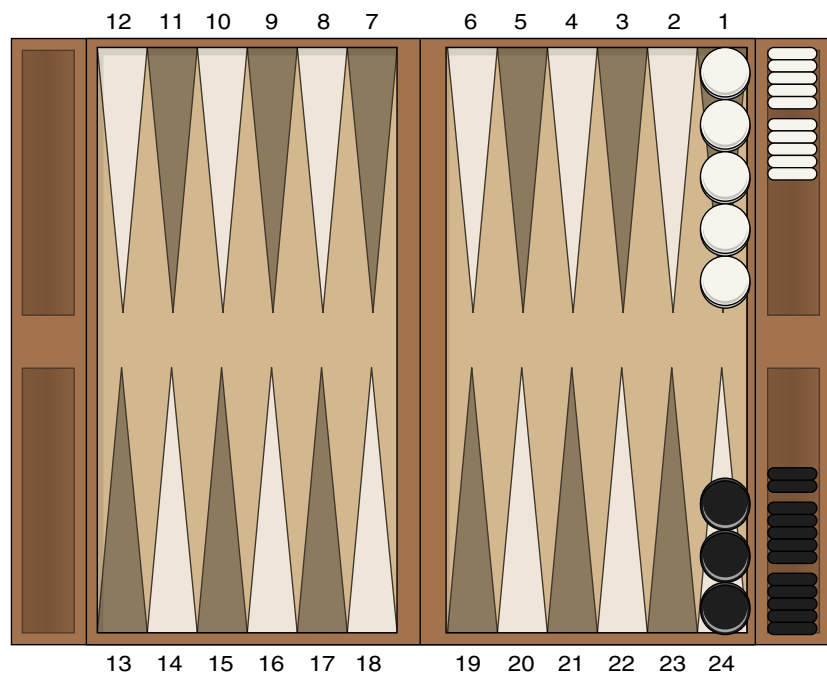
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to grudgingly ship to 8, placing the whole match on the line. Mochy would then have to roll doubles on one of his next two rolls or the match would be over.

After doing the math and assessing the psychology of the situation, Akiko boldly redoubled. She then didn't roll a set and Mochy was faced with the unenviable

position of being forced to put the whole match on the line even though he was a big underdog.

### Position 7



4 Pip: 5  
Mochy Mochizuki  
12-Away

6-Away  
Akiko Yazawa  
Pip: 3

White (Mochy Mochizuki) on roll. Cube action?

Analyzed in XG Roller++	No redouble	Redouble/Take
Player Winning Chances:	25.46% (G:0.00% B:0.00%)	25.46% (G:0.00% B:0.00%)
Opponent Winning Chances:	74.54% (G:0.00% B:0.00%)	74.54% (G:0.00% B:0.00%)
Cubeless Equities	-0.491	-0.309
Cubeful Equities		
No redouble:	-0.475 (-0.167)	
Redouble/Take:	-0.308	
Redouble/Pass:	+1.000 (+1.308)	
Best Cube action: Redouble / Take		

Mochy redoubled despite having only 25.5% chance to win, showing his mastery of match score dynamics and fearlessness in their application. Akiko, on the other hand, was rewarded for her daring play. Mochy didn't roll a set on his first attempt

and she denied him a second opportunity by throwing double aces herself.

After this glorious victory against her compatriot, Akiko played John Broomfield (who was having the tournament of his

life) in the final of the Main (undefeated) Bracket. I was unable to watch the match, but I heard that Akiko got down 0-6 but stormed back, combining psychological insights about Broomfield's game with her traditional attacking style of play. By

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the time that match was over it was late Saturday night — but rather than going straight to bed — aiming to wake up as fresh as possible for the biggest day of her backgammon career — Akiko continued to play in a high-stakes chouette until the wee hours of the morning. Like recent world champion Nezvät Dogan, Akiko appears blessed with both boundless energy and a happy-go-lucky disposition.

While Akiko was engaged at the chouette, Doug Mayfield beat the talented Danish player, Morten Lassen, in the Fighter's Bracket Semi-Final. Then, in the final of the Fighter's Bracket, Doug got a chance to avenge his loss to John Broomfield in the third round of the Main three days earlier. Vengeance was his.

Sunday's "finals matches" pitted the nations with the two largest contingents of players at the World Championship against each other. Fascinatingly, for the first time ever, and despite the great distances involved, the Japanese contingent was larger than the American.

Play began only slightly behind schedule on Sunday afternoon. The viewing area was a secluded side room at the end of main concourse at the back of the Fairmont. It provided ideal conditions to cheer on the participants, as unlike in previous years, the spectators were in a separate room from those competing in the Last Chance or remaining side events.

Despite having to win two matches in a



### Ⓢ FINE COMPETITORS

For eight hours in back and forth finals matches, World Champion Akiko Yazawa and Finalist Doug Mayfield put on a dazzling display of high pressure backgammon at its most thrilling.

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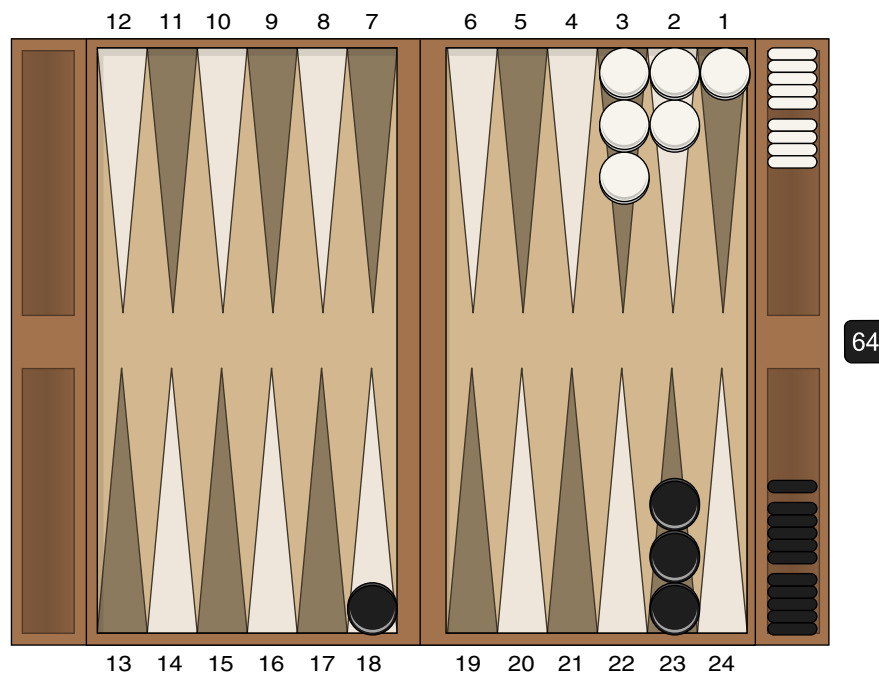
row to claim the title, Doug looked relaxed and unflappable.

He also played like a real fighter — showing no nerves, choosing to put pressure on Akiko by redoubling forcefully in borderline situations and taking a touch deep. In the very first game of the first match a modi-

fied three-roll, three-roll position came up — Doug had hit a last-ditch shot from a seemingly hopeless ace-point game, where he was facing real backgammon danger if he missed. At this point Akiko had 11 checkers off with three on the deuce point. Doug successfully contained Akiko's captured checker and closed it out. He then bore off

aggressively, leaving a few voluntary shots to preserve the high points in his board. Akiko fanned repeatedly, finally coming on with a 64 when Doug had eight men left. One turn later, Doug was faced with a modified three-roll bear off.

Position 8



Pip: 14  
Doug Mayfield  
21-Away

21-Away  
Akiko Yazawa  
Pip: 13

White (Doug Mayfield) on roll. Cube action?

Analyzed in XG Roller+	No double	Double/Take
Player Winning Chances:	67.02% (G:0.00% B:0.00%)	67.02% (G:0.00% B:0.00%)
Opponent Winning Chances:	32.98% (G:0.00% B:0.00%)	32.98% (G:0.00% B:0.00%)
Cubeless Equities	+0.340	+0.687
Cubeful Equities		
No double:	+0.537 (-0.053)	
Double/Take:	+0.590	
Double/Pass:	+1.000 (+0.410)	
<b>Best Cube action: Double / Take</b>		

Initially, we see that Doug's men are in a position which is substantially worse than a standard six checker, three-roll position. Here Doug rates to miss quite a bit. He does so if he throws non-doubles and a single ace on each of his first two rolls (7.7%) or three straight non-doubles each of which contain either an ace or deuce with at least one ace in the three rolls (this can be approximated as slightly less than 12.5%, which is the chance of any combination of three straight rolls of non-doubles, each containing an ace or a deuce). We can therefore approximate that Doug's chances of taking four rolls to bear off are slightly under 20% (in reality the number is 18.58%). Therefore, it seems fair to analyze Doug's position as a modified three-roll position in which he misses a fair amount and also cannot benefit from double aces or double deuces to be off in two rolls.

Doug's position is therefore similar to, but substantially worse than the bear-off I had against Toshiyuki, from which it differs by only two pips. Nonetheless, Doug is on roll here owning the cube, so he needs to decide if he is in his doubling window. The score is functionally irrelevant, as is the fact that he is redoubling as opposed to doubling. Moreover, Akiko can virtually never use her subsequent cube ownership. Akiko is either virtually gin next turn if she has just thrown a working double or far from a cube if she does not, even if Doug has thrown an ace.

As Doug evaluated these features of the position, the first thing that probably came

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to his mind was that a pure three-roll, three-roll position is redouble/pass. Therefore a slightly worse than three-roll position facing a standard three-roll position is a redouble/take, while a substantially worse than three-roll position facing a straight three-roll position is no-redouble take. Doug loses this game a lot of the time even when Akiko doesn't throw doubles, so his position is quite weak for a three-roll ending and would likely fall into the last category. Therefore, if Akiko had a straight three-roll position and we were considering Doug's position in isolation, he would not be in his doubling window here, he needs Akiko to be able to fail to bear off in three — or, even more crucially, not use all of her doubles to bear off in two.

Does Akiko's position satisfy these criteria? Despite having only four checkers, she has five crossovers and hence cannot bear off in two rolls without doubles. With only 5 crossovers as opposed to Doug's six, she is highly unlikely to take four rolls to bear off. In fact, she has something akin to a free miss and will have to miss twice in a row to not bear off in three rolls. This sequence happens only 3.18%. Her only bad numbers on the first turn are 51, 41, 31, and 21. Barring these initial numbers it is very difficult for Akiko to miss subsequently.

On her first turn, we see that all doubles except double aces work (i.e., bear off three men) for Akiko. On her second turn, double threes and higher win outright no matter what she has rolled previously, and

deuces will also win if she has rolled high last turn. Since she will need to be off in two if Doug doesn't miss, it is crucial that most of her doubles work. If we apply the Robertie/Lamford Mini-Max method for computing Akiko's winning chances, we see that in her largest positive variation, she wins without throwing doubles when Doug misses but she does not. This happens about 15% of the time (his 18.5% to miss minus her 3.1% to miss). In the second largest winning variation, Akiko wins when Doug does not throw a working double on his first two turns  $(32/36 * 32/36)$  multiplied by the chance that she throws her double twos or higher on her first roll  $(5/36)$ , about 11%. In the last variation, she can also win by not throwing doubles initially and then throwing a working set on her second roll if Doug has not thrown a relevant set. What works depends on what she rolled first, but is likely double threes or higher  $(32/36 * 31/36 * 4/36 * 32/36)$  or about 7.5% of the time). With this crude math we can see that Akiko is winning about 32.5% of the time and therefore has a massive take.

Conclusion: Doug's redouble is clearly borderline, as his position is substantially worse than a standard three-roll position, while Akiko's take is super clear. Over the board, Doug thought for quite a while to work out this rather challenging problem and then courageously redoubled, putting the pressure squarely on Akiko. In practical terms, this is definitely the right play, though XG considers not redoubling only a .053 mistake or a borderline decision. Yet against any human opponent, it is massively



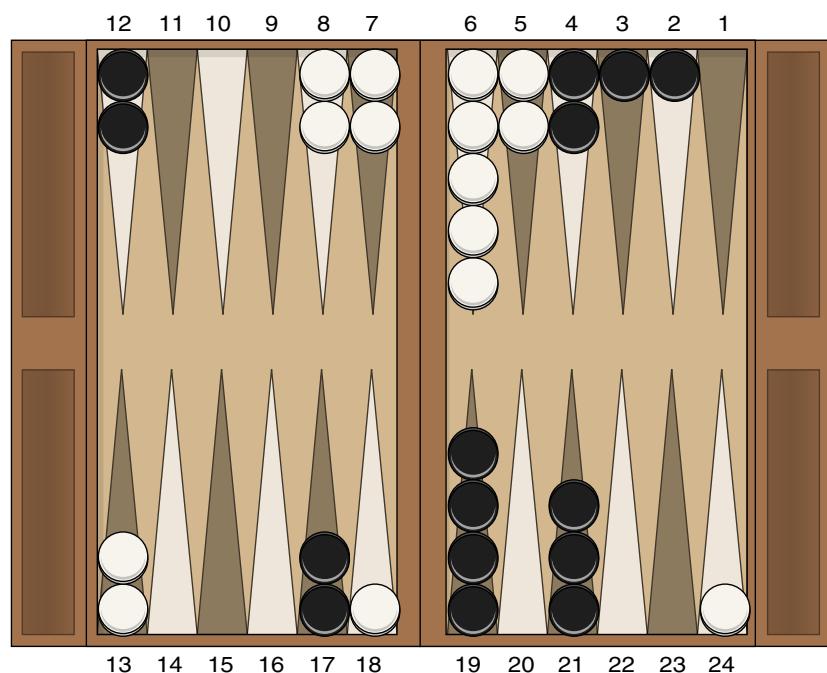
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correct to redouble here. If the opponent is weaker they may misunderstand the position and drop. If they are stronger they may be scared of the high cube in a skill-free position, and hate having to take. Either way, holding the cube will be

virtually useless to the taker. Despite his courage, Doug was not rewarded for his excellent play. He threw a low number and then Akiko hit boxes to steal the first four points of the match.

Trailing 0-4 and potentially considering himself to be facing a technically superior opponent, Doug knew he had to play aggressively and increase volatility. Down 3-6, he used his positional advantage and racing lead to give a solid cube.

Position 9



Pip: 138  
Doug Mayfield  
18-Away

15-Away  
Akiko Yazawa  
Pip: 165

White (Doug Mayfield) on roll. Cube action?

Analyzed in XG Roller++	No double	Double/Take
Player Winning Chances:	68.22% (G:20.56% B:0.74%)	68.17% (G:20.82% B:0.74%)
Opponent Winning Chances:	31.78% (G:6.65% B:0.23%)	31.83% (G:6.65% B:0.22%)
Cubeless Equities	+0.509	+1.049
<b>Cubeful Equities</b>		
No double:	+0.824 (-0.038)	
Double/Take:	+0.862	
Double/Pass:	+1.000 (+0.138)	
<b>Best Cube action: Double / Take</b>		

Doug's goal is clearly to break contact into a holding game. However, he has a long way to go before that happens. Therefore, this cannot be considered a holding game yet. Doug leads by 27 pips and has four of

Akiko's men trapped behind a four prime. Furthermore, Akiko's board is weak and her spares are in the wrong places. Yet, she is in no immediate danger and cannot be blitzed as she holds a high anchor. In

fact, the position almost appears to lack sufficient volatility to be a cube. It is the long-term threat that Akiko will not be able to contain a shot that she might later hit or that she might bust before she gets

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that shot that makes this a clever long-term cube. At this score, where Akiko's ability to redouble is lessened, this is a very smart double. As it played out, Doug anchored on the bar point and then rolled three sets of doubles to escape his back men and bear in against Akiko's four point anchor to bring the score to 5-6.

Furthermore, he could virtually never use the cube. The key feature of the position was that if she hits, Doug will be in severe gammon danger because he is in blot city and Akiko is virtually gin. This position seemed ideal for an action double from the roof.

The first time this scenario arose, Akiko did not redouble. Fascinatingly, a similar situation later repeated itself after Akiko came in and was hit again and Doug couldn't lift or cover. At this second juncture, Akiko correctly redoubled. Doug correctly took and Akiko fanned. Doug then covered the blot and proceeded to win four points and wrap up the rest of the first match, forcing a decisive 11- point contest.

In the second match, Doug got ahead 5-1 and was playing on for an undoubled gammon while Akiko was stuck in a poorly-timed deuce point game. After she ran to get off the gammon with one of her back men, Doug threw an anti-joker 63 and was forced to leave a double shot.



Doug continued his aggressive play and Akiko fell behind.

At one point she was shooting from the roof at a blot of Doug's on the four point. She also had a very strong board and Doug had other blots strewn around. [...]

This position seemed ideal for an action double from the roof.

### GIANTS CONFER

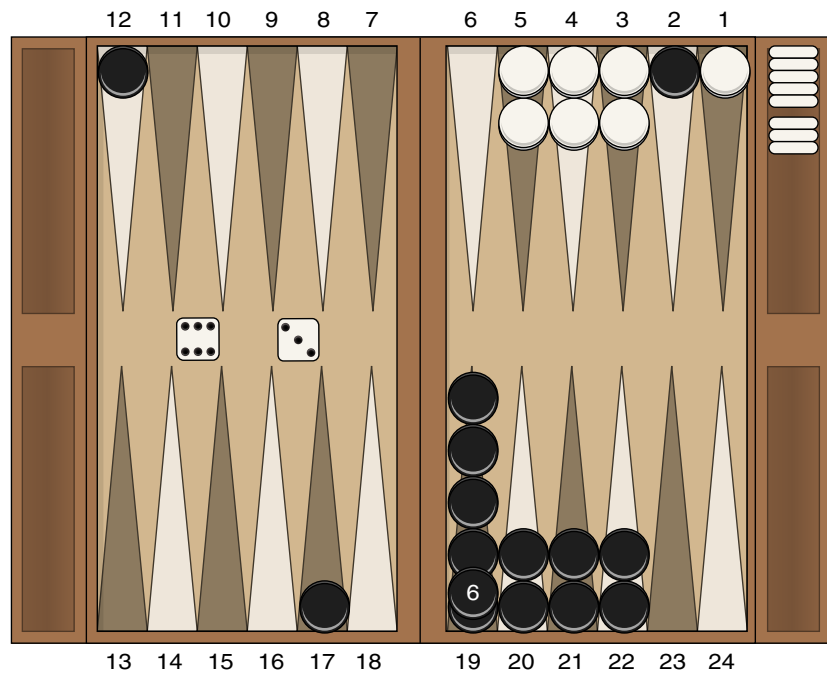
Falafel Natanzon provided stimulating commentary on the Akiko-Mayfield finals matches. Here he gives some words of advice, while World Championship tournament director Steen Gronbeck listens closely.



ANNICK HASDENTEUFEL

## Genius and Grace in Monte Carlo

Position 10



Pip: 25  
Doug Mayfield  
6-Away

10-Away  
Akiko Yazawa  
Pip: 104

White (Doug Mayfield) to play 63

1.  XG Roller+ 5/Off 4/1	eq: +0.698
Player: 68.76% (G:31.68% B:1.51%)	
Opponent: 31.24% (G:0.00% B:0.00%)	
2.  XG Roller+ 5/2* 5/Off	eq: +0.541 (-0.156)
Player: 62.15% (G:35.50% B:0.92%)	
Opponent: 37.85% (G:0.00% B:0.00%)	

All legal plays leave Akiko 20 shots at two blots. Taking two off with 5/off, 3/off has to be the worst alternative because it leaves so many repeating shots (sometimes double shots) next turn. Between 5/2\*, 5/Off and 5/Off, 4/1, if Akiko misses, the former looks to leave fewer shots next turn as Akiko may throw a high number and be forced to enter beyond Doug's low blots. Furthermore, hitting 5/2\*, 5/Off appeals as it will clearly score more gammons when Akiko misses: Doug may take one whole roll less to bear off. As the gammon is close it is also relevant that the hit sets Akiko back two pips and gives her four fanning

numbers (44, 43, 33) that would otherwise be almost guaranteed to save the gammon. These short-term considerations must have weighed heavily on Doug's mind as he chose to hit — yet hitting has some very serious long-term drawbacks. On further investigation, 5/2\*, 5/Off is inferior in all variations where Akiko doesn't miss. After Doug gets hit, Akiko can easily go for a second or third checker as Doug's resulting position is brittle — likely to bust with twos and threes if he enters and is primed. This is the main variation in the scenarios in which Doug is hit. In short,

because 5/Off, 4/1 is so much less likely to bust exposing more checkers after Doug is hit and enters, it is not particularly significant that it is more difficult to clean up after being missed and gammons slightly less. To determine why this is the case, we must give far more weight to the overall majority variation. The majority variation, in this case, sees Doug getting hit immediately and re-entering long before Akiko threatens to close him out. He will still have cube access and if played correctly, he will remain a favorite so long as only one of his men is sent back and Akiko doesn't have subsequent shots at other men. Given these

## Genius and Grace in Monte Carlo

factors, I wonder if Doug's choice of the hit reveals that he was carrying his aggressive match strategy too far, rather than trying to make the technically best play.

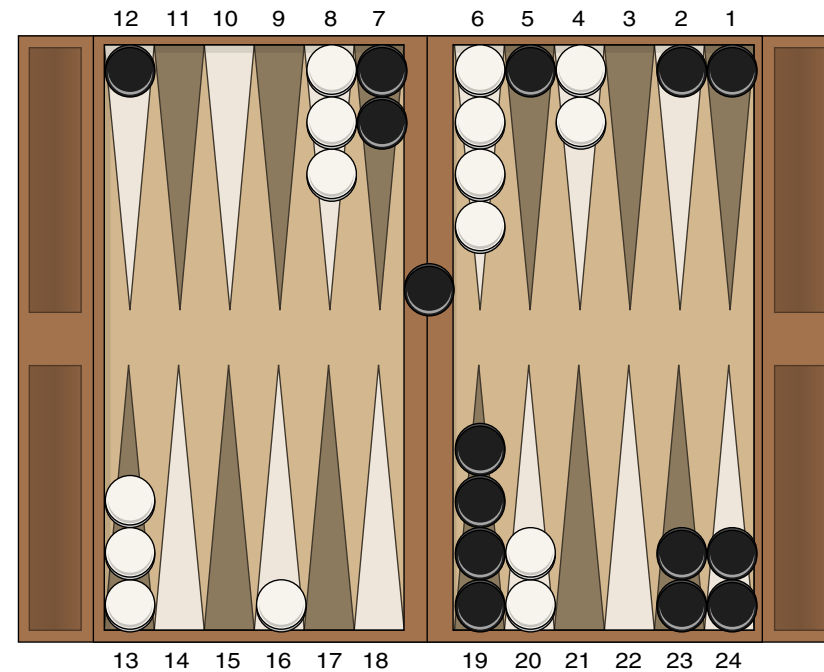
This mistake turned out to be a key turning point in the match. Akiko rolled a 61, hitting and slotting the deuce. Doug entered with a 15. After this sequence, Akiko, still shooting at his other blot on the deuce point, was able to cube Doug — for even if

she missed, Doug had further opportunities to expose more checkers, especially if he does not throw an immediate escaping six. Doug correctly took, but lost the game, bringing the score to 5-3. It seems quite possible that had he made the correct play he would have been up 6-1 or 7-1.

After Doug was punished for his lapse of concentration, Akiko was paradoxically rewarded for what was almost certainly

her worst game of the whole tournament. Feeling the pressure, she played over-aggressively, overrunning her position by continually trying to attack behind Doug's 20-point anchor. She then passed up making her own 20-point anchor, choosing to hit loose instead. She seemed not to grasp the essential features of the position and to be simply choosing the first move aggressive she saw. With Akiko on the roof, Doug doubled.

Position 11



Pip: 151  
Doug Mayfield  
6-Away

8-Away  
Akiko Yazawa  
Pip: 171

White (Doug Mayfield) on roll. Cube action?

Analyzed in XG Roller++	No double	Double/Take
Player Winning Chances:	75.20% (G:36.98% B:3.96%)	75.12% (G:37.26% B:4.08%)
Opponent Winning Chances:	24.80% (G:4.65% B:0.09%)	24.88% (G:4.84% B:0.09%)
Cubeless Equities	+0.929	+1.921
Cubeful Equities		
No double:	+1.077	
Double/Take:	+1.564 (+0.487)	
Double/Pass:	+1.000 (-0.077)	
<b>Best Cube action: Too good to double / Pass</b>		
Percentage of wrong take needed to make the double decision right: 13.7%		



## Genius and Grace in Monte Carlo

All forty-plus spectators knew that this cube was a colossal pass, even though Akiko is slightly behind in the match. Given the immense respect I have for Akiko's game I did not at first consider that she might possibly take. Yet she snatched the cube. XG says that Doug was actually significantly too good and Akiko's take was a .56 super blunder, almost certainly her worst decision of the tournament. This game showed me the downside of Akiko's bold default style. When she was nervous, she attacked and took. Many other top players would play passively and timidly when nervous. Not Akiko.

Despite this critical blunder, the dice gods smiled on her. Rather than being blown off the board by Doug's counterattack and getting gammoned, as we all anticipated, Akiko weathered the storm. She hit a few of Doug's attacking checkers and developed two anchors of her own. She then switched from defense to offense by rolling an amazing set of boxes which turned her quasi-backgame into a holding game. Miraculously, she then threw a set of double fours which helped her bring that holding game home. While bearing in against Doug's anchors on the four and five point, she missed redoubles for four turns in a row.

She had gone from hyper-aggressive in her take of Doug's cube to hyper-timid in not seizing various opportunities to redouble to four even though she was trailing in the match. It appeared she was playing on autopilot as a way of compensating for the pressure of the moment. She lost her market

by a country mile with a set of double twos and then cashed, bringing the score to 5-5 all.

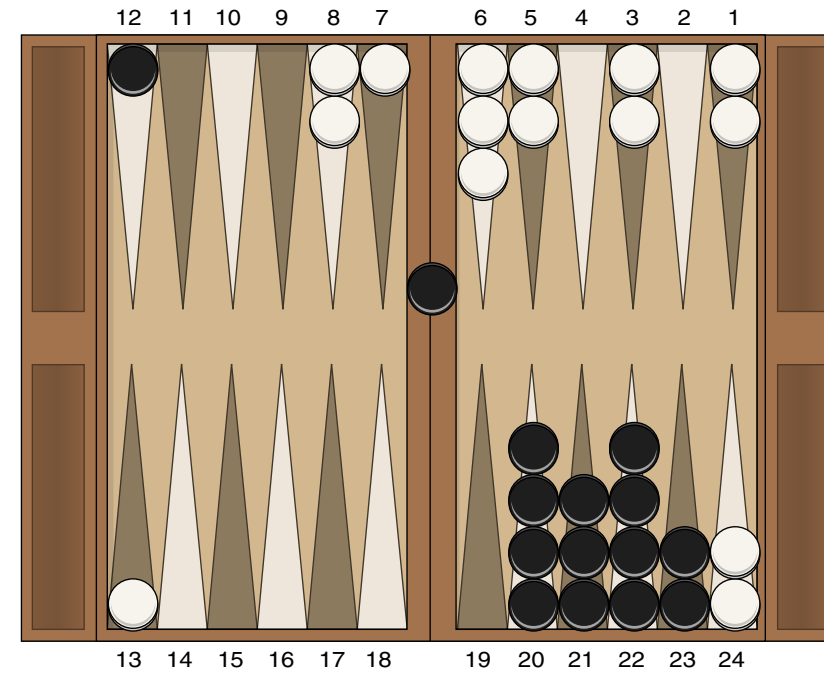
In the next game, Doug missed two standard positional cubes in the early game. Things were becoming tight and both players were scared and expressing it in different ways. Were I in their shoes, I can only imagine how erratic my play might be or in what direction my nerves or sleep deprivation might push my game. After many reversals of fortune,

“ Things were becoming tight and both players were scared and expressing it in different ways. Were I in their shoes, I can only imagine how erratic my play might be or in what direction my nerves or sleep deprivation might push my game.

Akiko hit Doug and he fanned on her two-point board. She pushed her attack and smartly cubed Doug when she had achieved a gammonish position. He correctly took. Akiko then developed a five-point board and put a second of Doug's men on the roof. It looked like it might be lights out for Doug, but Akiko still had many men to bring around. She busted with a horrific set of double threes. Doug then gave a brilliant redouble.

## Genius and Grace in Monte Carlo

Position 11



2 Pip: 120  
Doug Mayfield  
6-Away

6-Away  
Akiko Yazawa  
Pip: 86

White (Doug Mayfield) on roll. Cube action?

Analyzed in XG Roller++	No redouble	Redouble/Take
Player Winning Chances:	70.76% (G:22.39% B:0.55%)	71.68% (G:23.51% B:0.61%)
Opponent Winning Chances:	29.24% (G:9.59% B:0.54%)	28.32% (G:9.69% B:0.56%)
Cubeless Equities	+0.556	+1.103
Cubeful Equities		
No redouble:	+0.750 (-0.219)	
Redouble/Take:	+0.969	
Redouble/Pass:	+1.000 (+0.031)	
<b>Best Cube action: Redouble / Take</b>		

Again everyone in the room knew that Akiko would pass. Falafel was willing to bet the house that she would pass. From the commentary box, he yelled and screamed at her to pass. And again she took. This time her decision was technically correct. On the one hand, her boldness and courage under pressure is to be lauded. On the other, I wonder if taking is the right idea if she considers herself even slightly technically better than Doug. The position requires little skill from either side and there is a

significant chance that she will get gammoned for the match and her dreams of becoming World Champion might be put on hold for decades, if not indefinitely. I breathed a big sigh of relief when she succeeded in anchoring and staving off the gammon.

As both players left for a much-needed comfort break, it now seemed that Doug, leading 2-away, 6-away in the decisive match, had Akiko fully on the ropes. Moreover, it

seemed that he had broken her nerve. And yet, Akiko's errors were behind her! She showed the hallmark of a true champion: the ability to transcend past mistakes and focus on the match ahead. In the next two games, she recovered her best backgammon and rolled incredibly well.

Giving a sharp positional cube against a busted holding game, Akiko scored a doubled gammon to bring it to 2-away, 2-away (functionally DMP). After talk of

## Genius and Grace in Monte Carlo

a hedge eased the tension ever so slightly, Doug played the final game almost flawlessly, achieving a position where he was more than 95% to win. While bearing off, he threw one of his only blotting numbers and was hit. Although he had only three men off, Akiko's board was busted down to four points — so Doug was still a huge favorite. After initially entering, he was exceedingly unlucky to get hit again by an indirect shot, and then fanned three times in a row on a four-point board (the whole sequence was less than a 1% chance).

As Doug stayed on the roof, Akiko zoomed around the board with double fours. Even two sets (double aces and double threes) during the late stages of the bear off were not enough for Doug to clutch the trophy.

Being there live in Monte Carlo, watching the twists and turns of outrageous fortune accompanied by Falafel's expert commentary was pure joy — especially if, like me, you love Akiko and you had part of her action in the Calcutta Auction!

Akiko's come-from-behind win in the second leg of the final proved her tenacity and resolve, even if it was not technically her best performance. She showed clear signs of nerves and lack of sleep as the match progressed. Her play became erratic due to both the occasion and her sense of desperation as she could feel the title slipping away from her. However, her defeat of world number one, Mochy, in the semifinals of the Main amply demonstrated her true ability: Akiko played that 17-point

match with a phenomenal 2.5 performance rating, making only 4 blunders over the course of ten games. She also showed great psychological acuity throughout the tournament, tailoring her match strategy to every opponent.

After winning the title, she wrote on her Facebook page, "I will keep studying backgammon and want to become a legendary champion, more than a mundane champion." This is the spirit the game needs — and, in my book, Akiko is already a legendary champion. She may yet turn out to be the best ambassador backgammon has ever had. ♦

**- JASON PACK**



### JASON PACK

Jason Pack is a Researcher of Middle Eastern History at Cambridge University, president of [Libya-Analysis.com](http://Libya-Analysis.com), and coauthor of *Libya's Faustian Bargains: Breaking the Appeasement Cycle* (Atlantic Council, 2014).

He is also an occasional opinion columnist for *The New York Times*, *The Wall Street Journal*, and other publications.

In backgammon, 2014 has been a [breakout year](#) for Jason as he won the Nordic Open Super Jackpot, was a [finalist](#) in the London Open Professionals' Tournament, and won the side pool in the Monte Carlo Open.



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