



# LARS TRABOLT VS. SLAVA PRYADKIN WORLD CHAMPIONSHIP FINAL

## Part 1: Limiting Gammonish Volatility

By Jason Pack

In the pre-bot era, the only tried and true way to become a top-notch backgammon player was by watching or playing against world class players. In the 1980s and early 90s, Kit Woolsey and Bill Robertie published a series of books deconstructing the key decisions in some of the best World Championship finals matches.

Now, in the 21st century — the age of

the advanced bots — students of the game seem, unfortunately, to have lost interest in these high-level contests. Instead of immersing ourselves in the play of two human experts — analyzed by a skilled, bot-aided commentator — we examine various themes — bear offs, blitzes, and priming games — in isolation. This trend is a shame, because in its essence backgammon will always remain a psychological contest

between two human opponents. The more technically skilled the opponents are and the more divergent their styles, the more clearly the psychological dimension will appear. In other words: the decisions and “errors” of the world’s best usually reveal some sort of tendency, deliberate strategy, desire to promote or avoid volatility, emotional strength or weakness, or attempt to confuse or pressure one’s opponent.

Geoffrey Parker Games

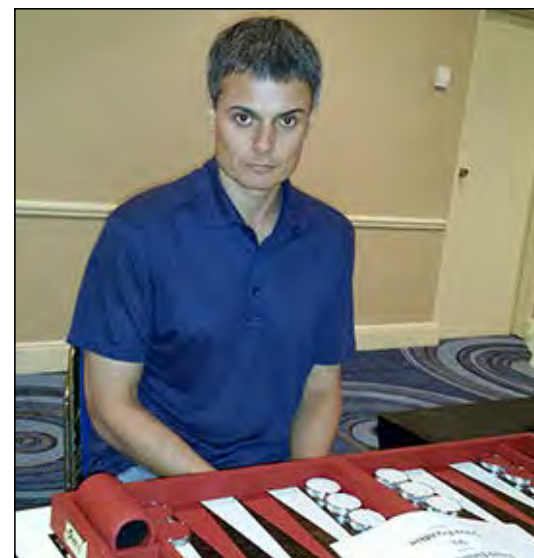
The semi-finals and finals of the 2013 World Championships in Monte Carlo turned out to be a perfect vehicle for studying the intentionality and psychology of backgammon’s greatest experts. At GammonVillage.com in October 2013, I examined [the 23-point semi-final between Petko Kostadinov \(USA\) and Lars Trabolt \(DEN\)](http://www.gammonvillage.com/backgammon/magazine/article_display.cfm?resourceid=6524). This is available at [http://www.gammonvillage.com/backgammon/magazine/article\\_display.cfm?resourceid=6524](http://www.gammonvillage.com/backgammon/magazine/article_display.cfm?resourceid=6524)

In this four-part article, based on extensive interviews with the players, I will analyze the 25-point final between Lars Trabolt (DEN) and Vyachslav Pryadkin (UKR). Trabolt was in his third WC final in the last six years, having also won the first consolation in 2012. Pryadkin, a master gambler, is famous for making a fortune playing cash games against the world’s best players. His most successful tactic was to offer a consortium of experts the option of consulting with Snowie on all their plays if they spotted him a point and a half every ten games. This was a recipe to make a killing.

Both Lars and Slava are masters of the psychological/strategic aspect of the game. Like most top Danes, Lars is known for great technical skill, deep understanding of match-score dynamics, and staying cool under pressure. If he ever deviates from technical play, it may be in his very slight tendency to limit volatility against weaker or lesser-known opponents. Crucially, Slava was largely unknown to Lars as the two had never played a long match before. Lars told me after the match that

he had only played Slava once before: after a previous year’s gala dinner in a series of dmp matches for 500 euros a pop. In the WC final, Lars’ checker play was superior to Slava’s. Lars made many bold yet correct plays as well as some which showed great finesse. Slava’s checker play was mostly fine. At times it was overly aggressive or old-school, but it was not erratic. Slava’s errors tended to arise from pre-bot- style tactics. He is known as a top-notch money player who is not too concerned with the

precise doubling window or take point at uneven match scores. Due, presumably, to his vast experience in high-stakes money action, he has developed his own theories about how the cube should be handled. In their finals match, both men played at a very high level. XG++ rates Lars’ performance at 4.9PR and Slava’s as 5.9PR. Most of Lars’ lost equity came from cautious cube play, whereas Slava’s lost equity came mostly from checker-play mistakes.



### ↑ VYACHSLAV "SLAVA" PRYADKIN

Slava Pryadkin followed through on his match strategy to steer the World Championship final towards big cubes and high volatility.

Steen Gronbech

## Part 1: Limiting Gammonish Volatility

Yet there was much more to the players' decisions than an attempt to ape the programs. Their advanced technique and unique understanding of match dynamics meant that there was a great degree of psychology involved in the decisions made in this match. Pryadkin knew he was the underdog and said as much to interested spectators. To compensate for this, he relied upon his mental toughness and daring match strategy. He sought to increase volatility and to redouble whenever he had the opportunity to win 4, 8, or even 12 points at a time. This strategy countered Lars' desire to give scope to his greater technical skill and knowledge of match-score dynamics by prolonging the match. The way events unfolded, the dice allowed Slava to decisively steer the match in the direction he wanted and to take Lars out of his game plan and comfort zone. All players in the 4-7 PR range should study Pryadkin's performance; it provides insight into the kind of match strategies that may be successfully employed against the world's best (if the dice cooperate!).

In this series of four articles, I will focus upon the key decisions that revealed the players' tendencies and psychology. We shall see, in this first article, that on a number of occasions Lars overcompensated for the skill difference between him and Slava by trying to reduce the match volatility.

In studying the match I confirmed my opinion that cube play constitutes the clearest window into a player's soul — yet opening checker plays, decisions on when

to volunteer shots, hit aggressively, or play purely also provide insight into a player's psychology and tendencies. This may be the case because in the early game it is impossible to do precise calculations and one must rely upon instinct. Similarly, the issue of volunteering shots or avoiding many blots frequently demonstrates how comfortable the player is with short term tactical risk for potential strategic gain. Before we proceed with our analysis, it is worth reiterating that both Slava and Lars are amazingly talented backgammon players — and although I will be focusing on their errors and criticizing their play, they both played a remarkably high-quality match. Given the pressure of the circumstances they showed daring, resolve, cunning, and innovation. I hope they can accept my criticism, my praise, and my attempts to diagnosis their psychologies in the objective manner in which they are intended.

In [the first game](#), both men came out of the gate slowly, making some fairly simple checker-play errors. In the middle game, Pryadkin missed a good opportunity to cube. After the game became a race, he ended up losing a single point by dropping a small but clear take. In interviewing Lars months after the match, he remembers that as Slava dropped the cube, he told Lars that he knew it was a take but that he would pass it anyway. This bizarre tactic may have been a form of psychological warfare — either baiting Lars to cube even earlier in the future or, conversely, using reverse psychology to make Lars cube later. Slava clearly was making a non-bot play.



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## Part 1: Limiting Gammonish Volatility

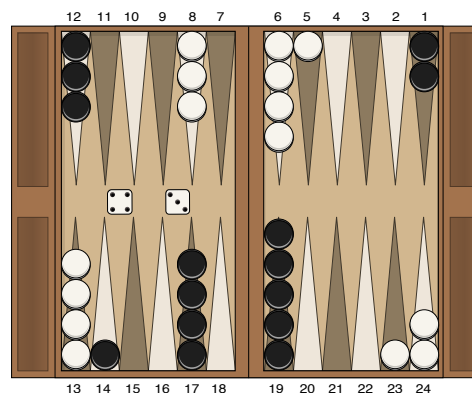
He knew he was only giving up minimal equity, with the upside of getting under his opponent's skin. When I interviewed him months after the match, he justified his action with a piece of life philosophy: "I actually thought of the position as a small take, but I often do what is more comfortable for me in close situations, regardless

of the opinion of computer [or an outside objective/rational observer]. In real life, by the way, this [approach] helps a lot. So, I passed what was possibly a small take." Wisdom from the World Champion.

Both players settled down in the second game. Lars' otherwise sound play was

marred by a defensive style which resulted in some small, yet noticeable "suboptimal decisions." In the opening, if given a choice between making the offensive five point or the defensive twenty point, it is usually correct to make the offensive five. Here, on the third move of the game, Lars had a 43 to play.

Position 1



Pip: 176  
Lars Trabolt  
24-Away

64

25-Away  
Slava Pryadkin  
Pip: 160

Game 2, Move 3: White (Trabolt) to play 43

1.	XG Roller++	24/20 8/5	eq: +0.091
	Player:	52.21% (G:15.82% B:0.78%)	
	Opponent:	47.79% (G:13.76% B:0.64%)	
2.	XG Roller++	13/9 8/5	eq: +0.070 (-0.021)
	Player:	51.91% (G:16.47% B:0.83%)	
	Opponent:	48.09% (G:14.86% B:1.00%)	
3.	XG Roller++	24/20 23/20	eq: +0.037 (-0.054)
	Player:	51.01% (G:13.46% B:0.50%)	
	Opponent:	48.99% (G:12.71% B:0.47%)	

## Part 1: Limiting Gammonish Volatility

Lars' choice of the 20 point (by playing 24/20, 23/20) instead of the five point (24/20, 8/5) opens a window into his priorities. With the 20 point established he is far less likely to be gammoned. Asked about the play after the match, Lars said he didn't know what the technically best play was, but wanted to make the play that would get gammoned the least and steer the game towards less volatility, depriving Slava the chance for any fireworks. Whether Lars' overall strategy was wise or not, in this situation the Magriel criteria call for an

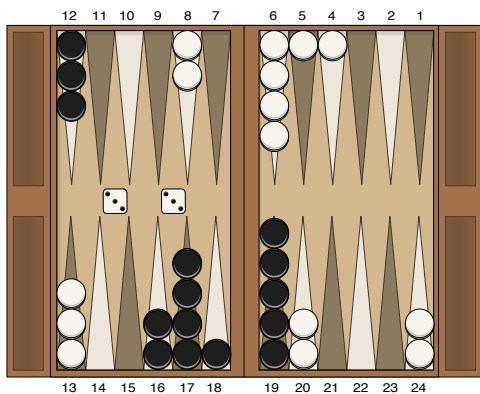
aggressive play: Lars has more men back, trails in the race, and the board strengths are equal.

We could also deduce that 24/20, 8/5 must be the right play by thinking about how best to prevent our opponent from achieving his goals — hitting the slot on our five point or making his own five point. It is easier for him to hit a blot that we leave on our five point (15 shots) than for him to make his five point on the head of our checker spilt to the 20-point (only 9 shots). Lastly,

in a position like this where it seems quite likely that there will be an exchange of hits, strengthening our board first (8/5) allows us to seek favorable contact by splitting, whereas making the anchor deprives us of this tactic.

Lars exhibited a similar cautious/defensive tendency a few moves later, when he rolled a set of double threes that allowed him to hit and cover.

Position 2



Pip: 176  
Lars Trabolt  
24-Away

64

25-Away  
Slava Pryadkin  
Pip: 126

Game 2, Move 7: White (Trabolt) to play 33

1.	XG Roller++	24/18* 18/15 8/5	eq: -0.183
	Player:	45.95% (G:12.26% B:0.34%)	
	Opponent:	54.05% (G:15.80% B:0.79%)	
2.	XG Roller++	24/18* 13/10 8/5	eq: -0.224 (-0.040)
	Player:	45.67% (G:12.20% B:0.35%)	
	Opponent:	54.33% (G:17.91% B:0.99%)	
3.	XG Roller++	24/18* 8/5(2)	eq: -0.236 (-0.053)
	Player:	43.69% (G:11.52% B:0.27%)	
	Opponent:	56.31% (G:14.01% B:0.59%)	

## Part 1: Limiting Gammonish Volatility

After playing the first three 3s 24/18\*, 8/5 Lars was faced with the rather challenging problem of how to play his last 3. He chose to move 8/5 a second time so as to clean up his position and play with three blots instead of four or five. But this is the wrong time to play cautiously. Lars is way behind in the race, has a better board than Slava, and owns the best anchor. Here the Magriel criteria strongly indicate a bolder play (amazingly even the very loose five-blot play 13/10 is slightly better than Lars' cautious play). Lars should play purely, putting his men where he wants them: poised to make the four point and to remake the 8 point. Playing 24/18\*, 8/5(2) leaves 25 ways to make the four point if the slot is missed while the correct 24/18\*, 18/15, 8/5

leaves 28 ways and many additional ways to remake the 8 and begin to control the outfield. That being said, it is very easy to understand Lars' rationale for tidying up. If after playing 24/18\*, 18/15, 8/5 he is hit back from the roof he will be scrambling to clean up the extra blots. However he is already behind in the race and must, with his better board, seek contact.

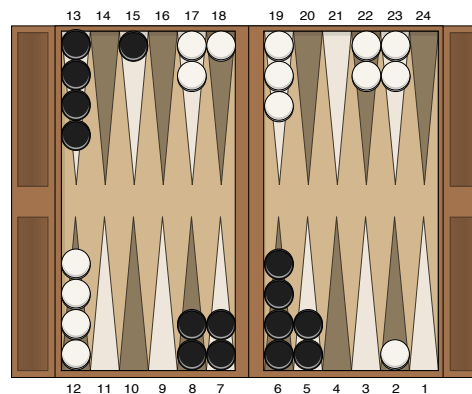
In both of the small "mistakes" we have just looked at, Lars chose the play that got him gammoned the least. As a top player, he may have even been aware that his was not the XG play. When asked about this later, he told me that he has been consciously trying to play less "loose" and knew that Falafel would criticize him in his commentary for

moves like this one.

Observed through the prism of match psychology, this tendency is perfectly understandable and potentially even "correct" for Lars inasmuch as — against a less accomplished, partially familiar opponent — he wants to avoid losing a big game should the dice turn against him. Ironically, fate would not allow Lars to successfully lower the volatility in this match.

The rest of game 2 was fairly uneventful. Lars cashed the game after Slava needlessly volunteered an extra blot — apparently in an unsuccessful attempt to make Lars play on. In game 3, Slava "missed" another marginal non-gammonish cube.

Position 3



Pip: 126  
Lars Trabolt  
23-Away

64

25-Away  
Slava Pryadkin  
Pip: 131

Game 3, Move 6: Black (Pryadkin) on roll. Cube action?

### Part 1: Limiting Gammonish Volatility

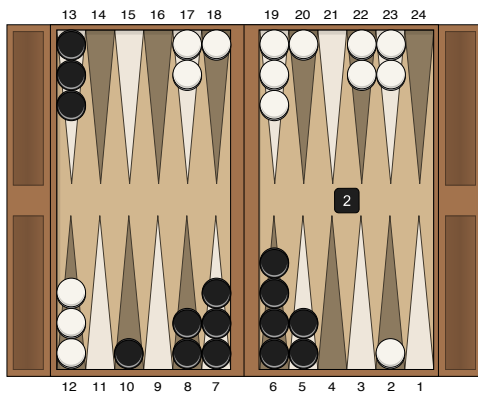
Analyzed in XG Roller++	No double	Double/Take
Player Winning Chances:	71.32% (G:10.13% B:0.22%)	71.43% (G:11.05% B:0.23%)
Opponent Winning Chances:	28.68% (G:4.01% B:0.07%)	28.57% (G:4.25% B:0.07%)
Cubeless Equities	+0.489	+1.007
<b>Cubeful Equities</b>		
No double:	+0.792 (-0.024)	
Double/Take:	+0.815	
Double/Pass:	+1.000 (+0.185)	
Best Cube action: Double / Take		

Slava's decision to not cube here may be evidence that his strategy was only to cube early in positions that were very scary and gammonish or likely to provoke an

error from his opponent. This is not such a position. Lars would scoop this cube as he is ahead in the race by five pips, and despite being trapped behind a four prime

has the better board should an exchange of hits occur. Slava's wise decision not to double paid off as he reached this position on his next roll.

Position 4



Pip: 118  
Lars Trabolt  
23-Away

25-Away  
Slava Pryadkin  
Pip: 120

Game 3, Move 7: Black (Pryadkin) doubles. Take or pass?

### Part 1: Limiting Gammonish Volatility

Analyzed in XG Roller++	No double	Double/Take
Player Winning Chances:	75.85% (G:10.75% B:0.20%)	76.30% (G:11.41% B:0.22%)
Opponent Winning Chances:	24.15% (G:2.81% B:0.04%)	23.70% (G:2.92% B:0.05%)
Cubeless Equities	+0.598	+1.238
<b>Cubeful Equities</b>		
No double:	+0.932 (-0.068)	
Double/Take:	+1.088 (+0.088)	
Double/Pass:	+1.000	
Best Cube action: Double / Pass		

Slava had improved his forward structure, and has gained three pips, but got Lars to take anyway. This is something that I feel XG should reward players for doing by lowering their PRs via giving them some kind of psychological bonus points. [Hint, hint Xavier!] Slava's decision process here teaches a good psychological lesson. Rather than cubing at the bottom of the doubling window as the computer does, it is frequently a good idea in non-volatile positions not to give a marginal cube that is unlikely to elicit a mistake and instead wait for a more difficult cube, which can pressure your opponent into a mistake. This is a tactic which all top money players utilize. In the backgammon literature it is sometimes called the reverse Woolsey Law or the Simborg Corollary.

Position 4 is a clear candidate for the application of both of these principles. That is to say it is quite difficult to evaluate if this position is a take or a pass. It is a very good double: White has 12 numbers that extend his four prime; he can attack with 6 other numbers and on those variations benefit from the blot in Black's board; if Lars steps up to the edge of the prime, he is likely to be pointed on; Lars' forward position has

big gaps and blots, so he must avoid most contact. All in all this spells a small pass: on board strength and the race alone it appears to be a take, but Lars is unlikely to be able to escape without throwing a joker.

Yet Lars' take, given his tendencies, was almost to be expected, for this is a fairly gammon-free and low-volatility position. To say that he blundered in taking would only be telling half the story: Slava's facilitated and "forced" the error. After the take,

the game played out uneventfully — Lars became stuck behind a six prime and was then closed out.

The score now 2-all, Lars played perfectly in game 4 and Slava made some connectivity errors. These mistakes would recur throughout the match: evidence that Slava was wedded to an older style of backgammon.

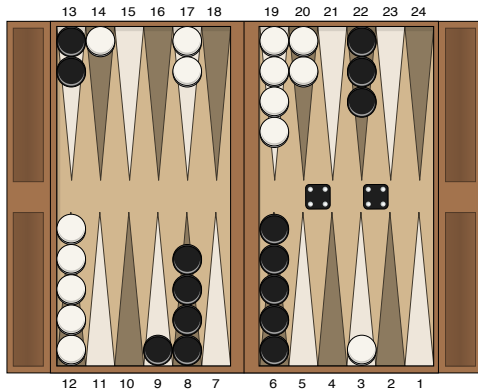


**WORLD CHAMPIONSHIP FINAL STREAMED LIVE**

Watch the Pryadkin-Trabolt match and enjoy the engaging commentary by the #1 Giant of Backgammon Falafel Natanzon.

## Part 1: Limiting Gammonish Volatility

Position 4-A



Pip: 148  
Lars Trabolt  
23-Away

23-Away  
Slava Pryadkin  
Pip: 163

Game 4, Move 5: Black (Pryadkin) to play 44

1.	XG Roller++	22/18(2) 22/14*	eq: -0.076
	Player:	48.76% (G:9.34% B:0.27%)	
	Opponent:	51.24% (G:12.00% B:0.42%)	
2.	XG Roller++	22/14* 8/4(2)	eq: -0.093 (-0.017)
	Player:	46.53% (G:14.77% B:0.47%)	
	Opponent:	53.47% (G:13.28% B:0.54%)	
3.	XG Roller++	22/18(2) 13/9(2)	eq: -0.098 (-0.023)
	Player:	46.77% (G:7.93% B:0.18%)	
	Opponent:	53.23% (G:8.15% B:0.26%)	
4.	XG Roller++	22/18(3) 13/9	eq: -0.101 (-0.025)
	Player:	46.88% (G:7.97% B:0.17%)	
	Opponent:	53.12% (G:8.49% B:0.28%)	
5.	XG Roller++	22/14* 13/9(2)	eq: -0.115 (-0.040)
	Player:	46.20% (G:11.99% B:0.42%)	
	Opponent:	53.80% (G:11.78% B:0.41%)	
6.	XG Roller++	22/14*(2)	eq: -0.149 (-0.074)
	Player:	46.86% (G:10.77% B:0.41%)	
	Opponent:	53.14% (G:14.89% B:0.55%)	
7.	XG Roller++	22/14* 14/10 13/9	eq: -0.174 (-0.099)
	Player:	44.92% (G:11.92% B:0.44%)	
	Opponent:	55.08% (G:12.89% B:0.49%)	
8.	XG Roller++	22/18(3) 9/5	eq: -0.210 (-0.134)
	Player:	43.74% (G:7.05% B:0.13%)	
	Opponent:	56.26% (G:8.23% B:0.25%)	

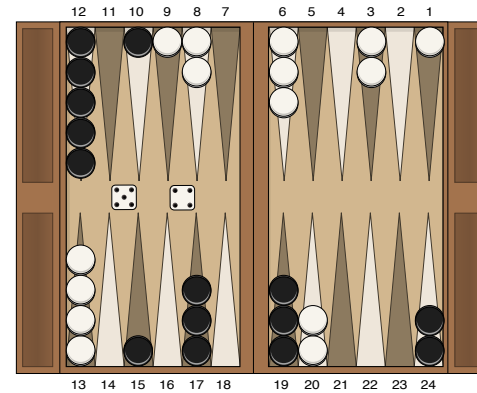
## Part 1: Limiting Gammonish Volatility

Rolling an excellent set of double fours, Slava was faced with many choices with only a small equity difference between them. He chose to hit and make a partial outside prime 22/14\*, 13/9(2) rather than to hit and partially escape 22/14\*, 22/18(2) or hit and build his board 22/14\*, 8/4(2). Slava's move is not a big error but the correct move 22/14\*, 22/18(2), keeps the back men connected to the rest of Slava's army. He is no longer behind in the race and hence he doesn't want to stay back to wait for a

shot; he should prepare to move forward while keeping his soldiers all marching in formation in an attempt to control the outfield where the real struggles in this game are likely to unfold. However, Slava's play is certainly the most instinctive. The bot play is decidedly counterintuitive: even though the theme of the position is racing and simplifying the position, the bot play leaves two blots, while his play leaves only one and makes an extra blocking point.

After falling further behind in the game Lars would throw a double 4 joker of his own which allowed him to cash on the next move to take the lead in the match 3-2. In game 5, Lars made a very minor error shown below as position 5. I am only choosing to point out such a minor "non-bot" play, because it appears to jibe with the psychological tendencies I am attempting to diagnose.

Position 5



Pip: 142  
Lars Trabolt  
22-Away

23-Away  
Slava Pryadkin  
Pip: 134

Game 5, Move 4: White (Trabolt) to play 54

1.	XG Roller++	20/15* 15/11	eq: +0.213
	Player:	55.21% (G:16.84% B:0.50%)	
	Opponent:	44.79% (G:12.15% B:0.45%)	
2.	XG Roller++	20/15* 13/9	eq: +0.194 (-0.020)
	Player:	54.63% (G:16.24% B:0.46%)	
	Opponent:	45.37% (G:12.20% B:0.39%)	
3.	XG Roller+	13/9 6/1	eq: -0.093 (-0.307)
	Player:	46.17% (G:5.12% B:0.06%)	
	Opponent:	53.83% (G:2.78% B:0.07%)	

## Part 1: Limiting Gammonish Volatility

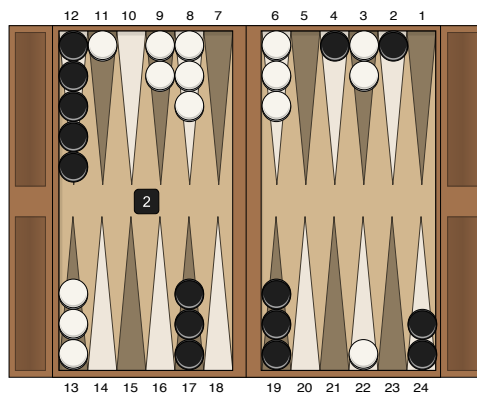
That Lars must hit 20/15\* should be quite clear: before the roll he trails in the race, and Slava is threatening to fully escape his back men. That Lars has a blot on the ace, which he cannot cover if he elects to hit, must not distract him from hitting. After Lars hits 20/15\*, if he plays 15/11 he triplicates Slava's ones (i.e. ones hit on the 24 point, the 14 point, and the 5 point), while if he plays 13/9 he triplicates his own good fives (i.e. fives to make the 15 point, to hit Slava's blot on the 10, if it is not moved, and to cover the blot on the ace). In short,

the correct move 15/11 diversifies his own good numbers while triplicating Slava's ones. These short term tactical factors are more important than battening down the hatches and making the nine point. This move is a case where tactics trump securing long-term assets and the risk of leaving an extra blot is actually minimal. As many players would instinctively play 15/11, Lars' choice almost certainly demonstrates his penchant for avoiding plays that leave too many blots. In fact, when asked about the play, Lars told me he "instinctively"

played 13/9 without giving 15/11 serious consideration. The correct play, 15/11, leaves four blots while Lars' play leaves only three and makes an asset, so he didn't look more deeply into the position. This situation and Lars' instincts parallel position 2.

Later in the game, Lars missed or deliberately withheld a few very borderline cubes. A few rolls later he reached position 6:

Position 6



Pip: 138  
Lars Trabolt  
22-Away

23-Away  
Slava Pryadkin  
Pip: 153

Game 5, Move 8: White (Trabolt) doubles. Take or pass?

## Part 1: Limiting Gammonish Volatility

Analyzed in XG Roller++	No double	Double/Take
Player Winning Chances:	70.53% (G:20.09% B:0.83%)	70.49% (G:20.75% B:0.81%)
Opponent Winning Chances:	29.47% (G:5.85% B:0.12%)	29.51% (G:5.89% B:0.12%)
Cubeless Equities	+0.564	+1.147
Cubeful Equities		
No double:	+0.814 (-0.102)	
Double/Take:	+0.916	
Double/Pass:	+1.000 (+0.084)	
Best Cube action: Double / Take		

Lars was justified in holding his cube so that he could give Slava a difficult decision in a position like this. In choosing to pass, Slava exhibited what he classified as "his conservatism in taking" in gammonish positions. He told me later his strategy for the match was essentially to get the cube up to four or eight, but only by taking in positions that didn't frighten him. Apparently this one didn't qualify, as Slava confessed to me that he tends to be afraid when he lacks an anchor.

Yes, this is a scary position: Slava trails in the race by 15 pips and Lars has 12 numbers which make a point on his head (66, 55, 44, 22, 64, 54, 52, and 42 — with double aces, Lars should make the 5 point rather than switching points and hitting loose, while with double threes it is correct to make the five point rather than pointing on the deuce). Despite this powerful attack, on the remaining 24 numbers, Slava will have the chance to attack Lars' back man or to counter attack after a loose hit. If Slava's blot on the 21 point were on the 20 point where he would be under the gun of four builders instead of three, the position would be a clear drop. Similarly, if we were to take away Lars' race lead without much improv-

ing Slava's position structurally — say by moving two builders from Slava's midpoint to the eight point and six point (giving Slava 12 fewer pips) then Lars wouldn't even have a cube. This shows us that this cube is a combination of racing, attacking, and positional chances and Slava can take because none of the threats is particularly overwhelming in itself. Many players may want to instinctively pass here because black's ace point looks structurally very weak, but the bots have taught humans that the ace point is not as much of a liability as was once thought.

With Slava's drop, Lars pulled ahead 4-2, all four of his points having come from Slava's drops. Slava, on the other hand, established his trend of cubing Lars in. We will explore all of these themes and their implications for match strategy in my next installment.

Until then I bid you adieu from England. Stay Calm and Roll Double Sixes (when not on the bar).

My thanks go to Raymond Kershaw and Bob Wachtel for helping proofread the article. They gave excellent advice about issues of both style and content. I am also

grateful to Lars and Slava who talked with me about their decisions both immediately after the match and then many months later over email. ♦

### - JASON PACK



### ⬆️ JASON PACK

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