

**Playing on for Gammon in Albion: The 2013 British Open Final**

14 May 2013

by Jason Pack

[http://www.gammonvillage.com/backgammon/magazine/article\\_display\\_print.cfm?resourceID=6495](http://www.gammonvillage.com/backgammon/magazine/article_display_print.cfm?resourceID=6495)

Since the bot revolution of the 1990s, all major aspects of backgammon theory have been explored and our understanding of key concept such as the race vs. timing, the price of gammons at different match scores, and the play of backgames and blitzes have all been transformed. Not only has big-picture theory progressed at breakneck speed, but these developments have rapidly trickled down from World Class players and theoreticians to large sections of the backgammon community via the staggering quantity of excellent educational backgammon literature published over the last twenty years. First Bill Robertie and Kit Wolseley explained the "real meaning" of the bot revolution with Robertie elegantly describing the concepts of connectivity, robustness, and non-commitment, and Wolseley bringing matchscore-influenced checker play to the masses. Now with websites like GammonVillage and authors like Steve Sax and Stick pushing our knowledge ever forward, few key tactical, theoretical, or match score dependent issues remain to be solved. In fact, it seems that top quality backgammon literature has simply become the juxtaposition of a few positions connected via a theme, such as Prime vs. Prime, 3-away 4-away cubes, or holding games at different scores, and drawing some conclusions about this position "type" . Some -- such as Ryuichi Shiina -- believe that now that we have found the holy grail of rollouts, analysis and grand concepts are no longer necessary. Yet, with all this wealth of potentially edifying and money-making knowledge at our finger tips, even the most diligent student of the game can only learn so much from study alone. Backgammon will always remain as much of an art as it is a science. And that is what makes the game truly great.



Jason Pack

Simultaneously to these great strides forward that the bot revolution has caused, the "subjective" side of backgammon has fallen into comparative neglect, as most of the best literature deals almost exclusively with "the right move" and high level theory rather than with the psychology of the game or how it is actually played at tournaments all over the world. Yes, at times Stick or Steve tell us that they prefer against a weaker opponent to drop a certain gammonish cube that is technically a take so as to decrease volatility and outplay them later, but they tend not to put forth cohesive conceptual insights or "systems of play" in this realm, like the ones that characterize their writings on more quantitative issues such as when to break anchor. In short, it is in the subjective field of match play psychology that I believe the biggest conceptual gap in modern backgammon lies. Danny Klienmann and Chris Bray have written humorous and wildly useful books about the psychology of chouette play and how one should modify cube and checker play against different typologies of opponents. In fact, No one has yet succeeded in doing for match play what they have already done for money/chouette play. Potentially this is because the belief exists that, in a match, one should play as much "by the book" as one can.

It is with this identification of a true gap in the literature that I propose to make my own very modest

contribution by analyzing the final of the 2013 BIBA British Open which pitted me (Jason Pack) against Paul Christmas on April 14th. As usual in backgammon (the cruelest of games), the 11-5 score line is quite deceptive as the match was highly contested, very exciting, and both Paul and I played at a decent and evenly matched level throughout.

XG analysis of the match confirms that both Paul and I suffered big match jitters making certain obvious blunders and yet still performed at around a 5.5 XG PR; that is to say a high expert or nearly world class level -- a better performance than quite a few of the non-Giants who have reached the finals at either the Nordic or Monte Carlo in recent years. And yet, rather than analyzing some of our most illustrative blunders (and I made quite a few and seemed to suffer far worse early match jitters than Paul), I think it would be worthwhile to dedicate an article to looking exclusively at certain psychologically influenced checker play and cube decisions. The more I play and study the game, I discover that this is the realm which separates the Champions from the rest. Neither Falafel, Mochy, nor Ray Fogerland choose to make the bot move in a whole range of positions when they are facing non-World Class opposition. Similarly, most of us have not fully tamed our flawed human emotions and are bound to make certain wrong moves in the heat of battle that we would never make in the calm of our studies. Understanding how and why to make creative 'errors' that give your opponent the chance to make even bigger errors, while simultaneously minimizing our own psychological failings seems to be (along with luck) the key to consistently winning matches.

In studying the match files, I have learned many things, in particular (1) that due to nerves I had particular trouble playing a series of 65s that raised pay-now-or-pay-later problems and (2) the difficulty of effectively using the cube when one is ahead in a long match, such that psychology and match play dynamics must come into play.

Let us begin our investigation with my embarrassing plays of 65:

In the first game of the match, I played quite amateurishly, apparently on account of the pressure-filled occasion -- unsurprising as it was my first major international final and I knew the match was being recorded. I faced the following 65:

### BRITISH OPEN 1:



1.	XG Roller+	13/8 13/7	eq: +0.514
	Player:	65.59% (G:5.67% B:0.12%)	
	Opponent:	34.41% (G:5.59% B:0.06%)	
* 2.	XG Roller+	7/1* 6/1	eq: +0.208 (-0.306)
	Player:	57.43% (G:7.45% B:0.18%)	
	Opponent:	42.57% (G:10.60% B:0.21%)	

[eXtreme Gammon](#) Version: 1.21, MET: Rockwell-Kazaross

Although I could play it entirely safely by playing two down from the midpoint 13/8, 13/7, I foolishly thought it prudent "to pay now" by making the 1-point 7/1\*, 6/1 on Paul's head. I reasoned that now was the right time for such a play because he has a blot in his board and he can only hit indirectly on the bar-point. Moreover, I envisioned that later I would likely be forced to leave a shot if I could not get Paul's backman off the 1-point so that I could play behind him. Psychologically, I was woefully overthinking the play, haunted by thoughts that Paul's board was bound to get stronger, and that my play might quite soon lead to a difficult cube decision for Paul (as it did) whereas the simple clearing play 13/8, 13/7, would lead to a holding game where it might be difficult for me to achieve a semi-efficient cube (I will lead by only twenty pips after the roll if I don't hit, Paul has his best anchor, and full coverage of my inner and outerboards) without first either fully clearing the mid or building an attack on Paul's backman. In retrospect, I am shocked to see how tremendously wrong my play is. XG rates it a triple blunder at 0.306 and fortunately it was my largest error of the match. Now that we know why I woefully overthought the position leading me to play this atrocious move, let us investigate why it is so wrong:

Well, in the calm of my study, rather than the pressure cooker of filmed, high stakes clock play, it becomes immediately clear that after the attacking play, on Paul's nine return hits I am in quite a lot of trouble even though I am shooting at a blot in his board (except for after his 22 joker). Paul has a four and a half prime; if I dance he has a cube that is a massive drop, whereas if I enter without hitting back, escaping, or rolling double-ones or twos, he has a strong cube that I must grudgingly take. On the other hand, if after my making the one point, Paul dances (only 4 numbers and my best sequence), even though I lead by 21 pips and he is on the roof, I still am not close to a cube as Paul is anchored and I have a lot of work to do to clear the midpoint. Moreover, on Paul's entering and non-hitting numbers (23 numbers in total) I am only marginally better off than if I had brought two down from the midpoint to start with. In short, my hit risks a great deal when it fails (i.e. the whole game), to gain very little when it succeeds and this combined with the fact that after the safe play of two down only 63 and 31 leave shots on my next turn, which explains why it is so massively wrong.

I strongly doubt that I would have played 65 this way in a normal first round match and I actually struggle to believe that it was genuinely me that made this play, but this speaks a lot to the psychological/human dimension of the game that we must always consider in our opponents and in ourselves! This may be principle number one of studying the psychology of match play. Try to guess how the dynamics of the match are affecting you and counteract them. Only then should you devote mental energy to thinking about how they are affecting your opponent. Many of us think 'I will just play the same as normal' independent of the occasion and yet watching many finals of major international tournaments both in Europe and the USA, one learns that big match jitters affect all but the very best.

In the next game leading 2-0, I had a more challenging 65 and fortunately my misplay of it was only a slight 0.021 error.

## BRITISH OPEN 2:



XGID=B-bBC-D---dB-aBacb-b-0:0:1:65:2:0:0:11:10

to play 65

is Player 2

score: 0  
pip: 140

11 point match

pip: 122  
score: 2

is Player 1

1.	XG Roller+	13/8 13/7	eq: +0.429
	Player:	63.52% (G:10.58% B:0.22%)	
	Opponent:	36.48% (G:5.43% B:0.10%)	
* 2.	XG Roller+	8/3 8/2	eq: +0.383 (-0.046)
	Player:	62.81% (G:9.21% B:0.15%)	
	Opponent:	37.19% (G:6.95% B:0.13%)	

eXtreme Gammon Version: 1.21, MET: Rockwell-Kazaross

This time I chose not to pay-now and played 8/3, 8/2, hoping to build my board. My rationale was that Paul does not have a blot in his board and paying now with 13/8, 13/7 appears to strand my backmost point, decrease my connectivity, and create a liability of a blot on my bar that I must safety next turn. However, further investigation reveals that in addition to Paul's board getting stronger next turn (another reason for my paying-now), I am running out of spares if I play my way. After both plays, I am likely to need doubles to clear my men on the 17-point (after the building play the only non-double I can clear with is 64), yet after the flexible 13/8, 13/7, if not hit, I am likely to be able to wait three or four turns for the right double, whereas after my brittle play of 8/3, 8/2 I have at most two and possibly only one turn before I am forced to run from one of my backpoints or bust my board and I may expose two blots if I roll particularly poorly. In this case, a little danger now is well worth the gains in added flexibility later. Psychologically, my overestimation of the clock pressure I was under made me reluctant to fully consider all the implications of nuanced plays such as this one -- a tendency I should have spotted and corrected for, just as I should have corrected for my tendency to overthink simple plays because of the nature of the occasion.

In the next game ahead 4-0 and having found my groove mentally, I craftily chose not to cash the following positions

### BRITISH OPEN 3:



XGID=aBb-BBC-A--cC-a-c-e--AA-:0:0:1:00:4:0:0:11:10

on roll, cube action?

is Player 2

score: 0

pip: 174

11 point match

pip: 132

score: 4

is Player 1

### Analyzed in ????

Player Winning Chances: 70.61% (G: 39.28% B: 2.01%)

Opponent Winning Chances: 29.39% (G: 4.37% B: 0.18%)

### Cubeless Equities

No Double: +0.787

Double: +1.522

### Cubeful Equities

\*No Double: +0.930 (-0.070)

Double/Take: +1.133 (+0.133)

Double/Drop: +1.000

Best Cube action: Double / Drop

[eXtreme Gammon](#) Version: 1.21, MET: Rockwell-Kazaross

**BRITISH OPEN 4:**



### Analyzed in ????

Player Winning Chances: 71.54% (G: 38.52% B: 2.40%)  
Opponent Winning Chances: 28.46% (G: 4.28% B: 0.15%)

### Cubeless Equities

No Double: +0.803  
Double: +1.542

### Cubeful Equities

\*No Double: +0.963 (-0.037)  
Double/Take: +1.151 (+0.151)  
Double/Drop: +1.000

**Best Cube action: Double / Drop**

[eXtreme Gammon](#) Version: 1.21, MET: Rockwell-Kazaross

XG calls it a serious error .070 not to cash the first and a minor error .037 not to cash the second, but I suppose that against all human opponents it is correct to play on for a gammon unless you have a supposition that they are particularly skilled at defending such positions or more importantly, *that they might take now*. My primary rationale behind this is that it will be very difficult for your opponent to evaluate if they should take or pass a subsequent cube especially because of the lopsided match score and hence you can likely bluff them out if you ever regain your market or trick them into taking a huge pass under the idea that trailing four to nil they can take as massive underdogs even in a highly gammonish position. Secondly, it is very difficult to determine when and how black should hit loose or slot to build his board when he is so badly outboarded and his position is so disjointed.

True to my supposition in BRITISH OPEN 3, when Paul did enter from the bar after I had made my 8-point, he did so with a 62 that he played Bar/23, 8/2\* bringing us to position BRITISH OPEN 4. Clearly the reason he played to the two point was an attempt to take away a tempo by denying me my full roll. Yet Bar 23, 10/4 is a superior move as it leaves one blot instead of two, slots the better point, and actually leaves fewer shots (19 instead of 21). Later after I hit, Paul entered with a 63 and instead of jumping out, he entered bar/22 and covered up the blot on the 2-point. I am not sure if I would have played the same but these were significant errors (both blunders in XG's view) that rendered Paul's game highly disconnected and of no real threat to me, enabling me (with a healthy dose of luck) to play on for and win an undoubled gammon. The psychological lesson appears to be that in a very difficult to defend modified blitz-style position in which one knows his opponent will pass, it is frequently right to play on for gammon when the bot recommends cashing, because you can hope to benefit from your opponent's checker play errors, or if things go slightly south, get him to make a cube error later. Whereas conversely, attacking in this position, one is unlikely to make any errors. This piece of match psychology comes up all the time and it is a key way to benefit from the many more opportunities to play on for gammon afforded by match play rather than money play.

Then in the 6-1 game, Paul had me behind a prime, missed a marginal cube, and elected to stay on the defensive 3-point (despite being ahead in the race and partially primed), after which his board cracked and he was unable to escape his back men. I built a prime and was faced with the following 51.

### BRITISH OPEN 5:



1.	XG Roller+	6/5 6/1	eq: +0.643
	Player:	70.29% (G:9.68% B:0.21%)	
	Opponent:	29.71% (G:1.65% B:0.02%)	
* 2.	XG Roller+	16/11 6/5	eq: +0.550 (-0.093)
	Player:	68.00% (G:5.57% B:0.14%)	
	Opponent:	32.00% (G:1.27% B:0.01%)	

[eXtreme Gammon](#) Version: 1.21, MET: Rockwell-Kazaross

This might be the only position in the match in which I totally failed to even consider the correct play and again this was caused by the psychological element of overestimating my clock pressure and just wanting to play simply to avoid mistakes. This 'Prevent' defense is almost always the wrong strategy! Even under clock pressure, one must pause to consider all possible plays. I play with a clock at other tournaments, yet the more important the match the more I become rushed. As for the position, the play of the one is obvious; it must be played 6/5 to diversify my attackers, planning for the moment that Paul will get a 6 and escape. Then with the 5, I played 16/11 in an attempt to bring my last man home. This turns out to be a genuine blunder (0.093)! The right move with the 5 is 6/1! By staying back on the 16-point, I cover many of Paul's

escaping sixes much better while taking away from him the 62 joker that my play volunteers. Moreover, this correct play gives me more timing to build my board by covering the slot on the 1-point or getting a joker which makes the 4-point. The key to understanding this position is that Paul will be running with ANY SIX *but that he may not get the six this turn or even next turn*. Therefore, the slot on the ace is an asset as it is likely to be covered by the time Paul escapes one checker and I am attacking him. This nuance is very difficult to see when one is rushed over the board. Furthermore the uninitiated may think that in the scenario where Paul immediately rolls a six the blot on the ace is a serious liability, but that is entirely chimerical because Paul's board is so weak that I'm happy for him to enter on the ace hitting me and simultaneously getting trapped back there behind my prime. Lastly, there is an added psychological reason to make the correct play here. It complicates my opponent's position: It may scare the opponent into avoiding running out with a six into a direct shot allowing him to make the uber blunder of wasting pips from his bar point instead.

In the actual game after my 6/5, 16/11 Paul threw 42 which he played 7/1. I was then faced with a very interesting cube decision.

**BRITISH OPEN 6:**





Analyzed in XG Roller+	
Player Winning Chances:	72.35% (G: 6.15% B: 0.13%)
Opponent Winning Chances:	27.65% (G: 1.01% B: 0.01%)
Cubeless Equities	
No Double:	+0.497
Double:	+0.952
Cubeful Equities	
No Double:	+0.710
*Double/Take:	+0.681 (-0.029)
Double/Drop:	+1.000 (+0.290)
<b>Best Cube action: No Double / Take</b>	

[eXtreme Gammon](#) Version: 1.21, MET: Rockwell-Kazaross

It is 5-away, 10-away. It goes without saying that despite the fact that I can use the full 4 points of any doubled gammon or of a redouble to 4, *my initial cube at this score* should be quite constrained as cubing allows Paul a quick way back into the match by giving him a very powerful redouble to 4 should he turn the game around. It also goes without saying that this position is a strong cube and clear take at money, at an even score, or *even at a score where I have a modest lead like 7-away, 10-away*. I am winning 72% of the games with 6% gammons thrown in and am getting gammoned less than 1% of the time. All in all, usually a strong cube.

In the match, I cubed it as I hoped Paul might have become frustrated with his ill-luck to date and simply pass the cube. (XG says if there is an 8.5% chance he will pass then this is a good cube. I certainly thought there was at least that much over the board. Yet, this was a psychological misplay from my part as Paul took all of my cubes during the match and I should have realized that he is in fact more of a taker than a dropper.) I hoped also he might genuinely evaluate it as a pass -- aside from the emotional/psychological factors. Superficially, it appears he will need either double-sixes or a six, then an anti-joker from me which would prevent me from attacking his remaining backman, and then another escaping number usually a six (the latter scenario is essentially what happened over the board). Paul impressed me throughout the match but especially so with his good take here and then his understanding of the position by running at his earliest instance and then stepping up with his remaining man in an attempt to escape even though it exposed him to more attacking and pointing numbers.

After Paul escaped, we raced. A few rolls later, I threw a horrific 21 (.613 antijoker on a two cube) in the bearoff and he recubed to four. I should have dropped but I made a very frustrated take adhering to the psychological principle that it is harder to drop a recube in a game that you had nearly won just a few turns ago...). All in all, this sequence showed the tremendous wisdom of Paul's take!

With the match almost level at 6-5, I needed a break to clear my head. I felt I had made a series of small psychological errors in the cube decisions of the last game and was likely to steam in response or conversely become ultraconservative with the cube. Very quickly in the next game Paul had me on the ropes and got in a correct double that was a clear but scary take. Within two rolls, I hit him in the outfield by a great stroke of luck, after which we exchanged an exciting series of hits with the whole match literally hanging in the balance on each roll. It ended with me entering from the bar and hitting loose inside. Paul then fanned and I was faced with the following position.

**BRITISH OPEN 7:**



Analyzed in 4 ply	
Player Winning Chances:	59.77% (G: 33.81% B: 0.67%)
Opponent Winning Chances:	40.23% (G: 10.97% B: 0.44%)
Cubeless Equities	
No Redouble:	+0.479
Redouble:	+0.527
Cubeful Equities	
*No Redouble:	+0.522
Redouble/Take:	+0.161 (-0.361)
Redouble/Drop:	+1.000 (+0.478)
<b>Best Cube action: No Redouble / Take</b>	

[eXtreme Gammon](#) Version: 1.21, MET: Rockwell-Kazaross

This is a very juicy position, indeed. I recall that my eyes were positively bulging out of their sockets. Any six, 15, or 25 escapes and hits while any three, 21, or 11 covers. This means I have 27 great to fantastic numbers all of which put me on the road to victory, and likely a gammon win bringing me exactly to Crawford. (With so many good attacking numbers it should not come as a surprise that 65% of all my wins from here are gammons). However, with the nine numbers that I fail to escape or cover, my prime begins to bust and I become the underdog. Worse still, if I fail to escape for multiple turns in a row my whole board could start to crumble. Holding a two-cube up 5-away, 6-away, I hope it is clear to even the most casual match player that a redouble to four here is a catastrophic mistake. Despite serious market loss on 50% of all sequences (my roll and Paul's, i.e., when I throw one of my 27 good numbers and Paul doesn't hit back

or enter) the redouble would be a whopping .361 error! Moreover, psychologically it would be the wrong move, as there is near certitude that Paul would take as he demonstrated his understanding of match score influenced cube decisions and his psychology as a taker throughout the match, therefore, I would have no bluff factor here.

At money, the position is a double (largely due to the Jacoby rule), but not a redouble. That said, it is a clear redouble and pass when one is behind by certain lopsided scores in a long match and can very much benefit from all eight points of a redoubled gammon (like 11-away, 6-away) and a very efficient double/take at say 8-away, 7-away.

Now to the explanation of why this is such a horrible redouble at this score: Firstly, in the best case scenario, the recube to four mostly kills my own gammons. Then in the worst case scenario, where I fail to escape or cover, Paul may hit me and begin priming my backmen where he would get an efficient cube to 8 and we would play this game out for the match. In short, at this score there are barely any correct redoubles as I often quickly go from not good enough to too good within a single roll.

Well fortunately over the board, I realized that discretion is the better part of valour and after a few brief moments' contemplation, I realized that cubing would be an atrocious mistake. I then paused for two or three more seconds and prayed for a six or three knowing that either would put me in good stead to become British Open Champion. While thinking and praying, I very vigorously shook the dice and emphatically rolled them. I was miraculously rewarded not just with a six or a three but with the bonanza of a 63 -- my prayers had truly been answered. It hit, escaped, and covered. I was loving life. I paused yet again to reflect on the psychology of my opponent and of myself: I found myself to be an American playing on for gammon in Albion! There were no hiccups and I coasted on to an easy unredoubled gammon and the Crawford game That last game at 10-5 provided a climatic finish as in the last seven turns we threw six doubles.

My thanks go to Paul Christmas, who not only played quite well but was an excellent sportsman, Michael Crane the Director of the British Isles Backgammon Association who put on a lovely tournament, and to the Dice Gods who produced a glorious 63 for me at exactly the right moment!

*Jason Pack is a Researcher of Middle Eastern History at Cambridge University, president of [Libya-Analysis.com](http://Libya-Analysis.com), and editor of The 2011 Libyan Uprisings and the Struggle for the Post-Qadhafi Future (Palgrave Macmillan 2013). He is also an occasional opinion columnist for The Wall Street Journal, The Guardian, Foreign Policy, The Huffington Post and other publications.*

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