

# LARS TRABOLT VS. SLAVA PRYADKIN WORLD CHAMPIONSHIP FINAL

## Part 3: The Art of Seizing the Moment

By Jason Pack



After a rather long hiatus, this column returns to the 2013 Backgammon World Championship final match between Lars Trabolt and Vyachslav (Slava) Pryadkin. Although Slava's epic performance in Monte Carlo has faded into memory — and Akiko is now the talk of the town and heart throb of the (mostly male) backgammon world — this epic contest remains of intrinsic interest to all serious students of match backgammon, because of the contrasting strategies employed by its world-class pro-

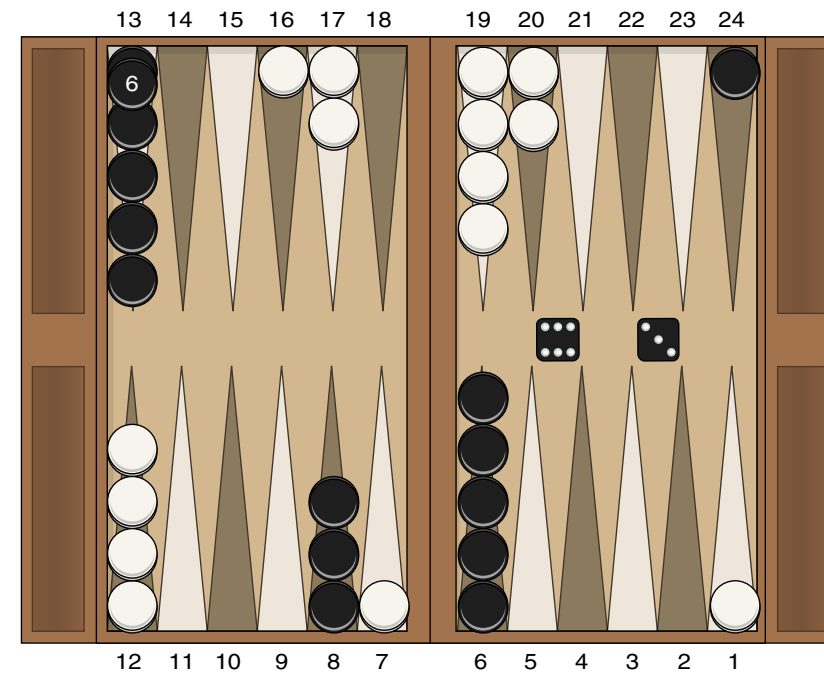
tagonists. At the end of our last installment in the May-June 2014 edition of *PrimeTime Backgammon* magazine, we saw how Slava redoubled slightly early (according to XG) in a gammonish position with the idea of “doubling in” his technically-superior opponent. Slava was rewarded for this pragmatic and psychological decision by scoring a gammon on a four cube, to pull ahead 13-6 to 25.

Trailing by a significant margin, Lars had difficulty deviating from his predetermined

match strategy of grinding it out (i.e., conservatively doubling and redoubling, while eschewing gammonish volatility). His checker play continued to be better than Slava's, but he was not able to really use the cube to his advantage. This was partly the fault of the dice and partly the result of Slava's counter strategy of seeking to increase volatility.

In the following position, Slava made one of his characteristic connectivity mistakes:

Position 1



Pip: 153  
Lars Trabolt  
19-Away

12-Away  
Slava Pryadkin  
Pip: 156

Game 10, Move 2: Black (Pryadkin) to play 63

1. XG Roller++	24/21 13/7*	eq: -0.333
Player:	45.03% (G:10.46% B:0.48%)	
Opponent:	54.97% (G:17.12% B:0.61%)	
2. XG Roller++	24/15	eq: -0.372 (-0.039)
Player:	44.25% (G:5.99% B:0.21%)	
Opponent:	55.75% (G:14.99% B:0.36%)	
3. XG Roller++	13/10 13/7*	eq: -0.380 (-0.047)
Player:	43.95% (G:10.78% B:0.49%)	
Opponent:	56.05% (G:17.83% B:0.90%)	

With this 63 Slava has three legitimate choices: he can forgo hitting and attempt to capitalize on his slight race lead by running with 24/15; or he can use the six to hit Lars' checker on the bar point. If he hits, he has a choice of threes — both of which can be considered “thematic”. He can bring another man down, unstacking the heavy midpoint 13/10, 13/7\*; or he can advance his last back man to the 21 point with 24/21, 13/7\*, which pursues the themes of connectivity and seeking to break contact when ahead in the race.

As we saw in the last installment, Slava frequently chose attacking plays, while not placing enough emphasis on connectivity. By playing two down, he increases his chances of making his own bar or another offensive point, but leaves his back man stranded and disconnected from the rest of his army. I must confess that I would have made the two-down play as well. At first blush, hitting and stepping up (24/21, 13/7\*) appears too bold, giving Lars a plethora of return hits from the roof — all sixes except for boxes and all sevens hit on

the bar point, while twos, fours, and fives without a six attack on the 4 point.

Despite the increased shot risk, 24/21, 13/7\* is superior to running 24/15 or playing two down, because it works on both sides of the board and keeps Slava's men connected and working as one army. Moreover, if Lars enters and hits on the bar point, Slava will be able to anchor on the 21 point with any four or to enter and hit on the 16 point with 54, 53, 52, and 51. This gives Slava twenty-three (44, 22, 11, 64, 63, 54, 53, 52,

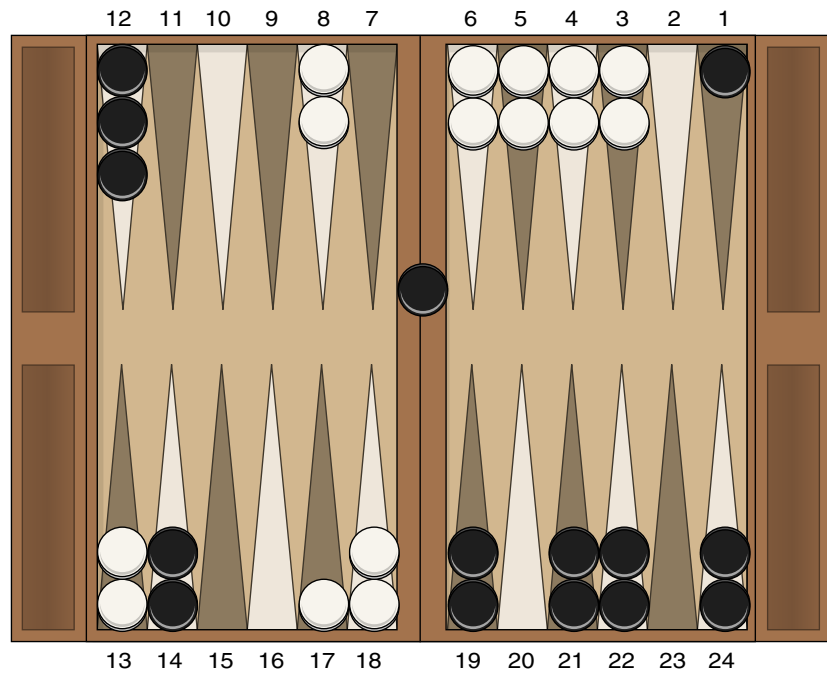
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51, 43, 42, 41, and 31) good entry numbers — while playing two down and getting hit on the bar leaves only thirteen (43, 32, 63, 54, 21, 33, 22, 11). It is by looking two rolls

ahead that we see why 24/21, 13/7\* is the superior play. Four rolls later, Lars missed a borderline

double from the roof. Then after a series of hits, Lars threw a hitting joker from the roof and Slava fanned.

Position 2



Pip: 131  
Lars Trabolt  
19-Away

12-Away  
Slava Pryadkin  
Pip: 138

Game 10, Move 12: White (Trabolt) on roll. Cube action?

Analyzed in XG Roller++	No double	Double/Take
Player Winning Chances:	77.92% (G:34.72% B:1.45%)	78.44% (G:34.55% B:1.53%)
Opponent Winning Chances:	22.08% (G:5.84% B:0.16%)	21.56% (G:6.05% B:0.19%)
Cubeless Equities	+0.854	+1.803
<b>Cubeful Equities</b>		
No double:	+1.088	
Double/Take:	+1.742 (+0.654)	
Double/Pass:	+1.000 (-0.088)	
<b>Best Cube action: Too good to double / Pass</b>		
Percentage of wrong take needed to make the double decision right: 11.9%		

This position has all of the classical features of a position which is too good to double: Slava is on the roof; he faces significant gammon danger; his forward position — although strong — is overextended; and

most crucially, it is difficult to imagine how Lars will lose his cube over the next sequence. In fact, if he plays on and Slava enters, he will likely be able to cube him out next turn anyway. Furthermore, the match

score indicates that even if Slava improves his position, he must be very careful in taking any subsequent cube where he still faces gammon danger. This caution must apply even if he is able to anchor on the

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ace or deuce.

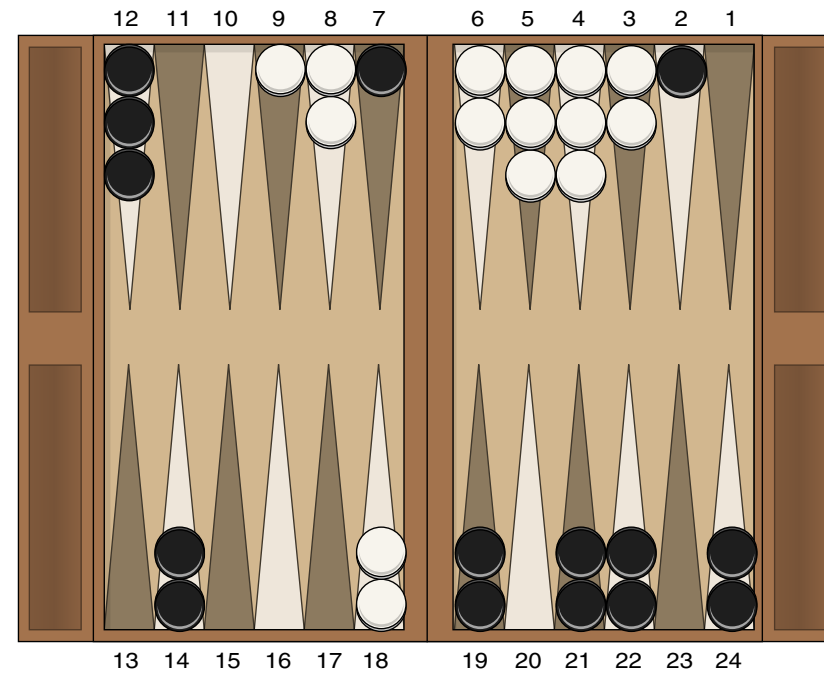
Lars wisely played on. However, a few turns

later, when Slava finally entered, Lars had not yet been able to clear his bar anchor.

He was faced with another challenging

cash-or-play-on choice:

Position 3



Pip: 106  
Lars Trabolt  
19-Away

12-Away  
Slava Pryadkin  
Pip: 130

Game 10, Move 14: White (Trabolt) on roll. Cube action?

Analyzed in XG Roller++	No double	Double/Take
Player Winning Chances:	76.43% (G:49.77% B:0.82%)	76.45% (G:50.80% B:0.84%)
Opponent Winning Chances:	23.57% (G:6.31% B:0.24%)	23.55% (G:6.64% B:0.26%)
Cubeless Equities	+0.961	+2.052
<b>Cubeful Equities</b>		
No double:	+1.124	
Double/Take:	+1.983 (+0.860)	
Double/Pass:	+1.000 (-0.124)	
<b>Best Cube action: Too good to double / Pass</b>		
Percentage of wrong take needed to make the double decision right: 12.6%		

Lars incorrectly chose to cash. This is a blunder and likely indicative of his conservative match strategy. Here Lars has the ability to attack both of Slava's back checkers, with a very high likelihood of achieving a closeout and a gammon. At first glance,

it appears that Lars should be reluctant to leave multiple blots by double-hitting loose, because of Slava's decent four-point board. Moreover, it appears that if his attack fails, Lars will have difficulty clearing his bar-point anchor. But both of these worries

are mirages. This is not a racing or holding position, and Lars' cube access means he can usually cash if things go wrong. He can therefore attack with reckless abandon. On this shake, Lars has ten excellent num-

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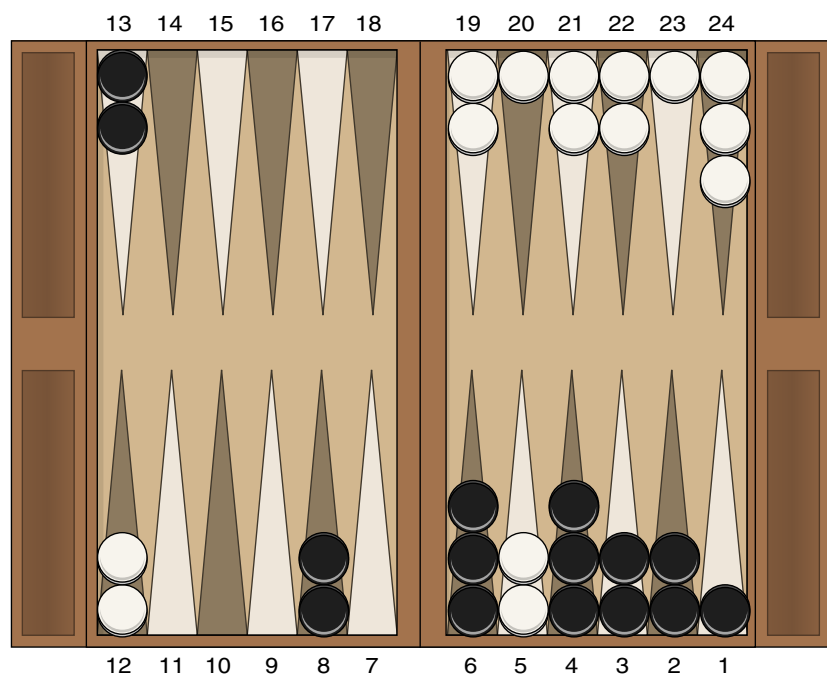
bers that make the 2 point or switch to it. And on numbers that double hit loose (21, 31, 51, 61, and 52) Lars' superior structure means he need not fear leaving a blot on the deuce. Even Lars' worst numbers, which do not hit at all (53, 54, 55, 64 — hitting with 53 or 64 would be an error), leave him with a healthy cash if Slava fails to

anchor. All of this adds up to a massive play-on — especially when trailing in the match. It also teaches that even when there are some sequences where you can lose the game, it may still be correct to play on for a gammon. Now for the psychological dimension of this play: it seems impossible that Lars thought there was a chance that

Slava would take this cube. Therefore, we must deduce that Lars was simply playing conservatively and choosing to take the sure point rather than take the risk to go for two.

In the next game, Slava pulled ahead in the race and missed a couple of holding-game cubes.

Position 4



Pip: 102  
Lars Trabolt  
18-Away

12-Away  
Slava Pryadkin  
Pip: 83

Game 11, Move 10: Black (Pryadkin) on roll. Cube action?

Analyzed in XG Roller++	No double	Double/Take
Player Winning Chances:	75.49% (G:6.16% B:0.25%)	75.52% (G:6.55% B:0.26%)
Opponent Winning Chances:	24.51% (G:1.29% B:0.02%)	24.48% (G:1.24% B:0.02%)
Cubeless Equities	+0.564	+1.158
Cubeful Equities		
No double:	+0.854 (-0.086)	
Double/Take:	+0.940	
Double/Pass:	+1.000 (+0.060)	
Best Cube action: Double / Take		

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In Position 4, Slava leads by 19 pips. This is usually just enough of a race lead to cube against a five-point holding game. However, here Slava's position is weaker in some ways than a standard five-point holding game reference position, but significantly stronger in others. Slava's primary weakness is that he lacks spares and timing. Indeed, Slava will be forced to leave an immediate shot on 61 and 63 and should volunteer with a slew of other numbers because "paying later" will almost certainly be more painful.

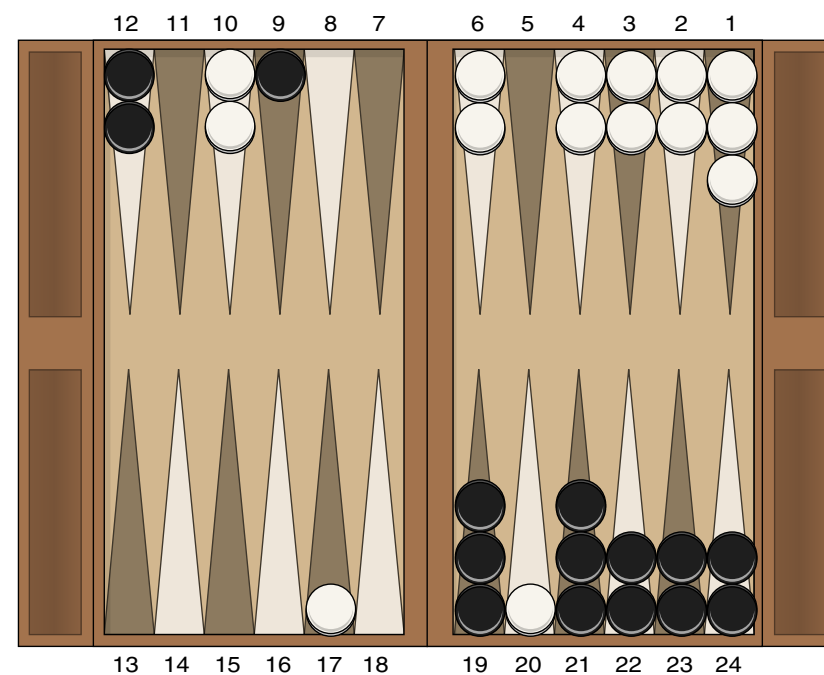
On the positive side, Lars' weak board, with two blots and a killed checker on

the ace, more than makes up for Slava's lack of timing. After this comparison to the standard reference position, the cube should be fairly clear, and it is Lars' take which seems the more challenging decision. In fact, I think it would have posed a difficult decision for Lars as many of his subsequent hits will not be winners (due to his weak board) and might even expose him to significant gammon danger if he is hit back. It is possible that Slava didn't double because he felt that he needed to be conservative with the cube leading in the match 13-7 to 25. However, with a long way to go in the match and this being a

relatively gammon-free position for him, Slava can give an initial double as if it were a money game. As such he should have cubed here and given Lars the opportunity to err by conservatively passing.

But Slava's mistake actually benefited him. He immediately blotted and Lars hit with his best number, double 3s, which allowed him to hit and cover. Slava then entered with a 54 played bar/16, giving Lars nineteen shots at Slava's blot. Double sixes would also let Lars bring his back men home into a very favorable race.

Position 5



Pip: 90  
Lars Trabolt  
18-Away

12-Away  
Slava Pryadkin  
Pip: 84

Game 11, Move 12: White (Trabolt) on roll. Cube action?

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Analyzed in XG Roller++	No double	Double/Take
Player Winning Chances:	57.01% (G:5.60% B:0.04%)	57.47% (G:5.94% B:0.04%)
Opponent Winning Chances:	42.99% (G:5.00% B:0.10%)	42.53% (G:5.38% B:0.15%)
Cubeless Equities	+0.143	+0.304
<b>Cubeful Equities</b>		
No double:	+0.250	
Double/Take:	+0.117 (-0.133)	
Double/Pass:	+1.000 (+0.750)	
<b>Best Cube action: No double / Take</b>		
Percentage of wrong pass needed to make the double decision right: 13.1%		

We can treat boxes plus Lars' hitters as market losers. However, on the remaining 16 numbers, he will be a significant underdog as they either allow Slava to attack him next turn or create a mutual holding game where he has the superior board and timing. As such, Lars' only advantage in this position comes from the fact that he is on roll. With only twenty good numbers, this first-strike opportunity is not nearly enough to double on. Perhaps Lars doubled here because he overestimated the score factor or his own gammon chances. Or possibly he was growing impatient and wanted to get his points two at a time.

Slava took and Lars missed, but he then threw two sets of doubles to break contact and win the race. Now leading 13-9, Slava executed an early blitz with double 5s; Lars fanned and Slava correctly cashed on the fifth roll.

At 14-9, the match appeared to have developed a certain ebb and flow. Aside from the one big game, the two opponents seemed equally matched. Lars had played the checkers extremely accurately and had been cautious with the cube to start — but once he had fallen behind he had been willing to throw it around on occasion in an attempt to catch up. Slava had demonstrated that he was a world-class player who was not at all fazed by the occasion. He sought volatility, doubling and redoubling aggressively, while curiously choosing to take cautiously if he lacked an anchor. Although some aspects of his checker play betrayed an inferior understanding of modern backgammon theory, he knew how to attack. Far weaker players have won the World Championships over the last two decades!

What Slava, unlike most other competitors in recent years (possibly except for Nevzat

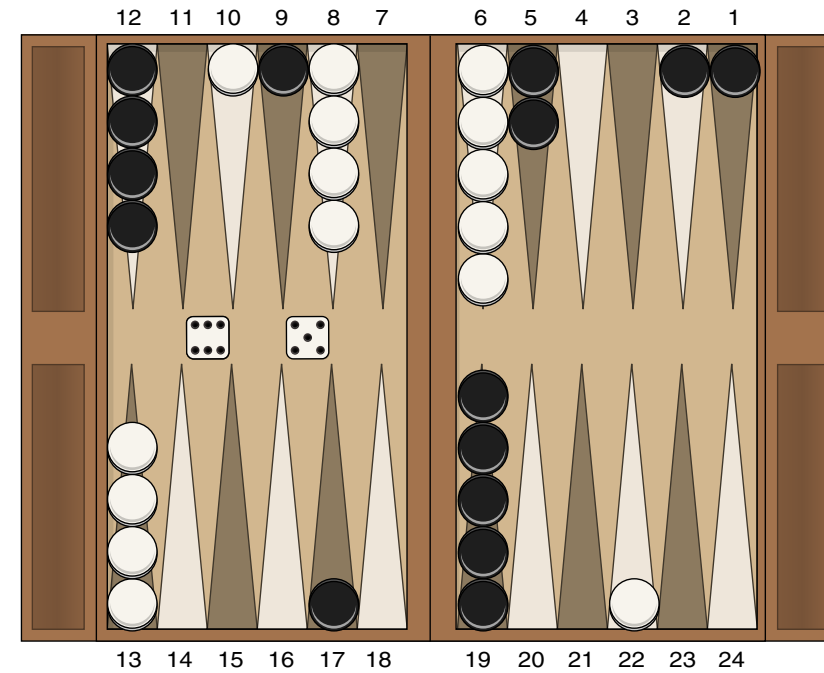
Dogan), appeared to have was an amazing sense of the occasion and an ability to use his underdog status to his advantage. His psychological presence made Lars hesitate to double and redouble aggressively, while also fearing being forced to take marginal cubes in gammonish situations.

Then, on that humid mid-August afternoon, the slow back-and-forth pattern characteristic of most high-quality, World Championship finals matches was abruptly shattered. Those of us lucky enough to be in the playing room in Monte Carlo were treated to the backgammon equivalent of a fireworks display.

The game opened in the 1970s style with many hits, slots, and counter hits. By the fifth move, Slava had five men back and Lars had a 65 to play.

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Position 6



Pip: 146  
Lars Trabolt  
16-Away

11-Away  
Slava Pryadkin  
Pip: 193

Game 13, Move 5: White (Trabolt) to play 65

1. ✓	XG Roller++	22/17* 8/2*	eq: +0.604
	Player:	57.74% (G:26.11% B:1.52%)	
	Opponent:	42.26% (G:8.83% B:0.37%)	
2.	XG Roller++	22/17* 17/11	eq: +0.525 (-0.080)
	Player:	57.26% (G:23.11% B:1.21%)	
	Opponent:	42.74% (G:8.94% B:0.34%)	
3.	XG Roller++	22/17* 13/7	eq: +0.463 (-0.141)
	Player:	56.19% (G:22.05% B:0.97%)	
	Opponent:	43.81% (G:9.46% B:0.38%)	
4.	XG Roller+	8/2* 6/1*	eq: +0.497 (-0.107)
	Player:	56.66% (G:23.44% B:0.86%)	
	Opponent:	43.34% (G:10.30% B:0.41%)	

Lars is way ahead in the race. It seems natural to hit on the 17 point, but, after doing so, believe many top players would have continued with 17/11. Instead Lars made a world-class play: the double hit, 22/17\*, 8/2\*. This move breaks with the conventional wisdom of not attacking deep behind an enemy anchor, especially in the early game. Yet it actually leaves many fewer return hits (13 — all 2s, double

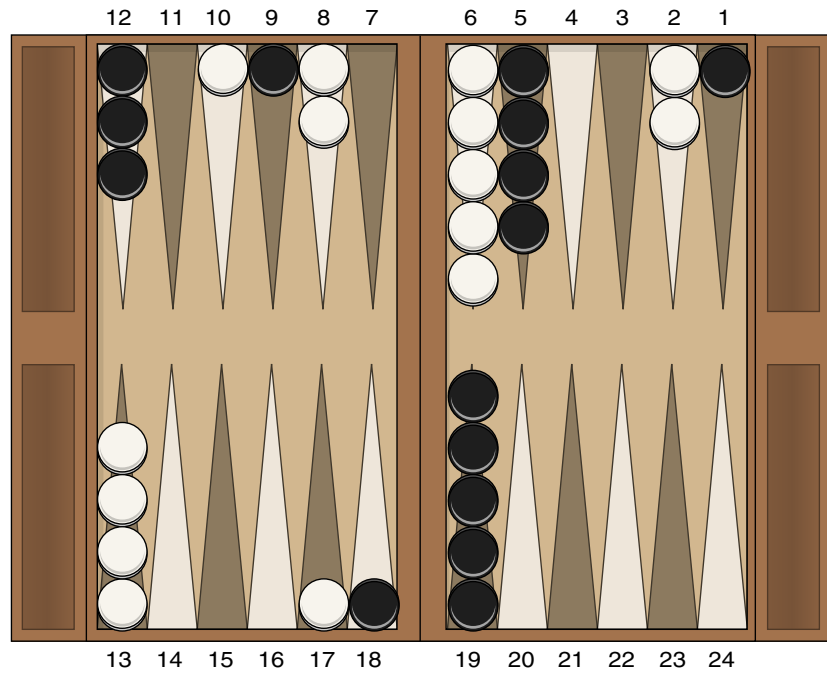
aces, and double fives) than the pure play of 22/17\*/11, which leaves 22 returns (it is an error to break anchor and hit with 53, 54, 62, 63, 64). This shot differential, combined with the fact that the double hit makes it more difficult for Slava to establish a second anchor and a 2-5 backgame, makes it massively correct, although quite difficult to spot over the board. Although it would be correct even at DMP, the match

dynamics can also point to the move: it goes for the gammon and seeks to reach an efficient early cube.

Over the next few rolls, Lars pressed his attack, denying Slava a second anchor. Lars' strategy appeared to pay off: he avoided giving a borderline cube that would have been an easy take on move 6; but then, after Slava entered awkwardly, Lars doubled.

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### Position 7



Pip: 129  
Lars Trabolt  
16-Away

11-Away  
Slava Pryadkin  
Pip: 196

Game 13, Move 7: White (Trabolt) on roll. Cube action?

Analyzed in XG Roller++	No double	Double/Take
Player Winning Chances:	65.90% (G:32.85% B:0.95%)	66.19% (G:32.93% B:1.08%)
Opponent Winning Chances:	34.10% (G:6.35% B:0.23%)	33.81% (G:6.10% B:0.19%)
Cubeless Equities	+0.591	+1.277
Cubeful Equities		
No double:	+0.960 (-0.040)	
Double/Take:	+1.129 (+0.129)	
Double/Pass:	+1.000	
<b>Best Cube action: Double / Pass</b>		

I believe many players would sleepwalk through this position and not even consider cubing. There doesn't seem to be much volatility: Slava is anchored and Lars only has only a two-point board. It barely looks like Lars has any threats — yet the position is already a clear pass at this match score! Slava trails by 67 pips and has absolutely no structure and barely any chance of developing one anytime soon. This means that

Lars can hit loose or leave indirect shots as he builds his board or hits checkers that Slava might try to activate. Kudos to Lars for spinning it here. It is not a pass at money and Lars may have hoped to capitalize on Slava's aggressive tendencies and lack of understanding of the match score. He may also have realized that the weakness of Slava's stacked posi-

tion is not immediately apparent. In the post-match interview, Slava told me that he has a tendency to take when he has an anchor as he underrates gammon danger in such positions. This makes perfect sense and applies directly to this type of position, where Lars' attack is more latent than immediate.

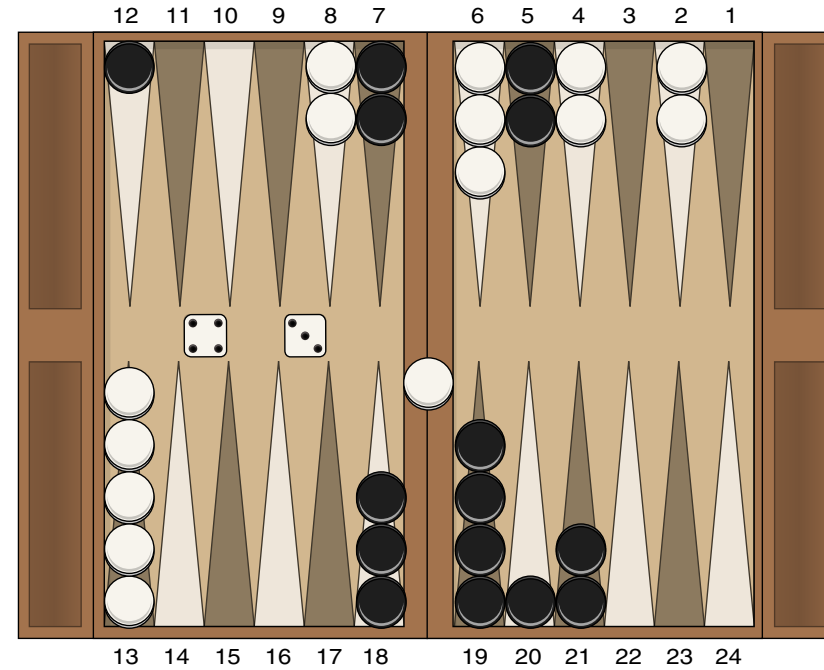
Slava did take, but Lars answered with a

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series of subpar numbers. Slava hit a shot and made Lars' bar point. Subsequently, Lars had difficulty bringing his hit checker to safety. His gammon threat evaporated and Slava went on the counterat-

tack. Shooting from the roof at Slava's blot on the five point, Lars threw an anti-joker 43 which he played like a true champion:

### Position 8



Pip: 136  
Lars Trabolt  
16-Away

11-Away  
Slava Pryadkin  
Pip: 147

Game 13, Move 12: White (Trabolt) to play 43

1. ✓ XG Roller++	Bar/22 13/9	eq: -0.163
Player:	47.88% (G:10.95% B:0.40%)	
Opponent:	52.12% (G:15.83% B:0.47%)	
2. XG Roller++	Bar/22 6/2	eq: -0.245 (-0.082)
Player:	45.62% (G:9.09% B:0.24%)	
Opponent:	54.38% (G:17.03% B:0.42%)	

Lars must use the three to enter. He then lacks a good four. The only safe play, 6/2, is an abomination — it strips the six point, creates a dilly builder and leaves Lars' position with an awkward combination of stripped points and a midpoint stack. The only other reasonable play, 13/9, voluntarily walks into a double direct shot. Getting hit here is scary, too. Lars would instantly lose his racing lead — and with two men back

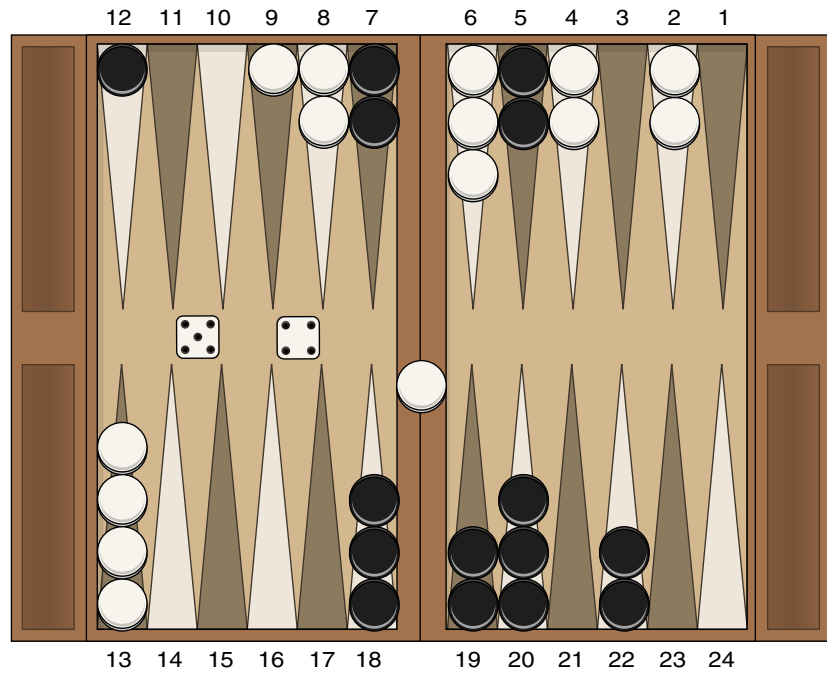
he easily might get primed or attacked. However, volunteering is far-sighted. It duplicates Slava's twos (they both hit on the 16 and cover the five point) and his fours (they hit on the 16 and the 3 points). Additionally, it gives Lars tremendous flexibility if he is missed. This is another example of a play that is easy to see after XG has pointed it out, but exceedingly difficult to play in a high-pressure situation. World-class

players are good at weighing short-term tactical dangers against long-term strategic ones— and killing the builder to the two point is a greater long-term liability than the risk of having two men back.

On the next move, Slava threw double aces, switching points with 4/3\*(2) and covering with 6/5(2). Now Lars carried the theme too far, making a truly surprising move.

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### Position 9



Pip: 132  
Lars Trabolt  
16-Away

11-Away  
Slava Pryadkin  
Pip: 143

Game 13, Move 13: White (Trabolt) to play 54

1. XG Roller++	Bar/21 9/4	eq: -0.195
Player:	47.16% (G:9.04% B:0.24%)	
Opponent:	52.84% (G:14.18% B:0.34%)	
2. XG Roller++	Bar/16	eq: -0.309 (-0.113)
Player:	43.96% (G:8.10% B:0.29%)	
Opponent:	56.04% (G:18.85% B:0.57%)	

He rolled a 54, which could enter and safety his outfield blot — yet Lars chose to play with two blots by moving by playing bar/16. Coming all the way out has a certain appeal as it duplicates fours and prevents Slava from both hitting and making a point. On one level the choice of which five to play is strikingly similar to Lars' choice of fours last move. Then, Lars volunteered so as to achieve a far more flexible position. Here, volunteering also leaves Lars with more flexibility should he be missed. However, in this instance playing with one blot (bar/21, 9/4) does not decrease Lars' flexibility should he get hit, which was decidedly

not the case last move. Furthermore, in this position having two blots sent back may lead to Lars entering awkwardly or getting primed. This was a surprising error from Lars, as in this instance he didn't err on the side of caution and limiting gammonish volatility as he had done early in the match. Bar/16 gives Slava a staggering 26 shots — and after the first blot is hit, it will be increasingly easy to pick up the second blot. Possibly Lars was focused on escaping and he imagined that after Slava's ten misses he would likely be able to clean up all the blots. XG says Lars' play gives Slava 3% more wins, 4.5% more gammons

and nearly doubles his backgammons from 0.34% to 0.57%. Sometimes little moves like this, combined with an opponent's lucky rolls, can be turning points.

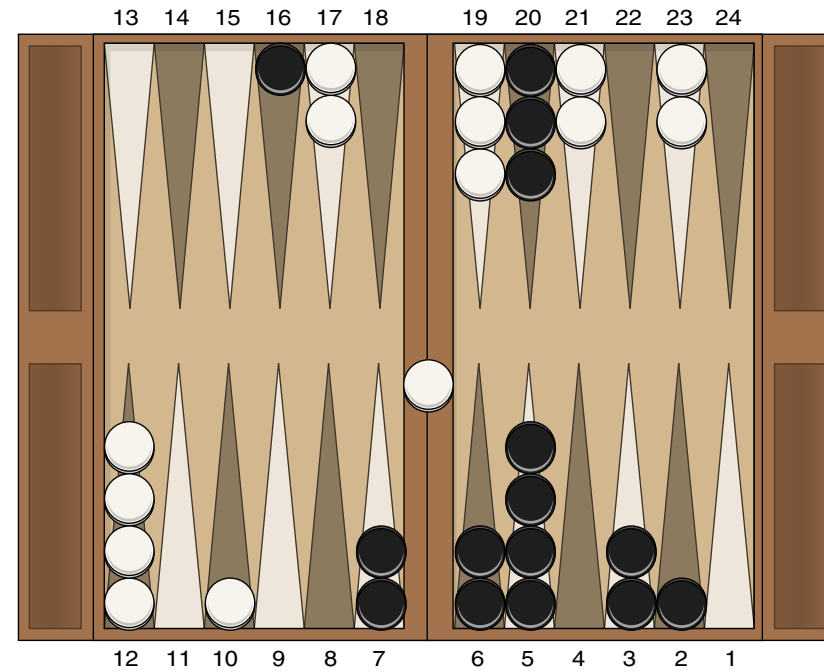
Slava answered with double deuces, double hitting with 18/16\*(2), 13/9\*. Now he was firmly in the driver's seat, as the possibility of a redoubled gammon hovered over the board. Had Lars played safely with bar/21, 9/4, double deuces would have only switched points and left the game in a dead heat. In the match, Lars entered both men immediately and a few rolls later the two were exchanging hits. Then Lars fanned

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on Slava's three-and-a-half-point board, reaching this position. I knew what was coming, as, I suspect, did most of the audience. Slava pumped his fist once more across the board for the audience

to see on the screen. Then he very genteelly placed a four cube in front of the former world champion.

### Position 10



Pip: 138  
Lars Trabolt  
16-Away

11-Away  
Slava Pryadkin  
Pip: 130

Game 13, Move 17: Black (Pryadkin) on roll. Cube action?

Analyzed in XG Roller++	No redouble	Redouble/Take
Player Winning Chances:	70.33% (G:41.54% B:0.73%)	70.46% (G:41.79% B:0.72%)
Opponent Winning Chances:	29.67% (G:5.42% B:0.21%)	29.54% (G:5.36% B:0.21%)
Cubeless Equities	+0.749	+1.208
<b>Cubeful Equities</b>		
No redouble:	+0.816	
Redouble/Take:	+0.707 (-0.109)	
Redouble/Pass:	+1.000 (+0.184)	
<b>Best Cube action: No redouble / Take</b>		
Percentage of wrong pass needed to make the double decision right: 27.2%		

The position quite eerily resembles the earlier cube to four (discussed in the May-June issue of *PrimeTime*) which was also reached after Slava had sprung from an overloaded 20-point anchor into an attacking game, threatening to steamroll Lars' blots.

Even more eerily, the position is not technically a double at this score according to XG — but due to its extreme volatility and very high number of gammons, this is a brilliant cube. In my opinion, it was a stroke of once-in-a-lifetime genius from Slava. A piece of pure backgammon poetry.

I would like to think that had I been in Slava's shoes I would have had the courage to throw this cube too.

For this decision alone — inasmuch as any backgammon player deserves to be called "World Champion" in a game where luck,

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geography, and the tournament draw largely determine who triumphs — Slava Prayadkin deserves to be called World Champion in my book. This cannot be said of some of the other winners of the storied tournament held in the Fairmont Hotel.

Now back to the cube. At money it would be an obvious double and a huge drop (1.333 on XG++). At this score, were the cube in the center and Slava was cubing to two, it would be a trivial drop (1.12). But being doubled to four at this score, Lars has to bite his lip and take. Slava had clearly grasped that Lars was trying to reduce volatility and the last thing he wanted was to take a four cube in a position where Slava is winning 70% of the time with a staggering three-fifths of those wins being gammons. Moreover, he may likely have recognized that even if Lars took, he would be highly reluctant to cube to eight, even when doing so would be essential to capitalize on the lopsided score.

Let's analyze the position. Slava has a range of short-term and long-term threats as well as some positional deficiencies. His immediate threat is to hit with sixes and to cover the blot on his deuce, making a 4 point board, with threes and fives. His long term threats are to prime or blitz Lars after having picked up a second checker. Priming is actually a major variation here as Slava may not be able to immediately execute a blitz, while his ownership of the bar point could prove very useful if Lars enters on the ace. Furthermore, Lars' position is quite stiff — and even if he hits back

from the roof, he may not be able to stop Slava's attack as his board is filled with gaps and he lacks playable spares. On the other hand, Slava's weaknesses are that he still has four men back, has only a very small race lead, and has an awkward structure, with two spares on the five point and a gap on the four point. These deficiencies notwithstanding, Slava is a clearly big favorite in the position, with more than half of his wins being gammons.

However, Slava leads 11-away, 16-away — and spinning to four gives Lars huge recube vigorish should the game turn his way. In fact, if Lars draws the game to near level and he has even a smidge of a gammon threat, he can recube to eight, partially killing Slava's gammons while creating perfect match-winning efficiency on his own gammons. Over the board, it is exceedingly difficult to balance all these positional and match score factors. Therefore, the opponent factor becomes all the more important. As a psychologically-astute player, I imagine that Slava applied Simborg's Law, asking himself, "Does Lars want to see a cube here?"

One need not be a master of empathy to answer this question: if Lars takes, a whole lot of the time he will end up with a fairly insurmountable 16-away, 3-away deficit. And this result, moreover, would be just the kind that Slava's whole match strategy — of winning points in big clumps — was tailored to achieve. Therefore, Lars must be very hesitant to give Slava the opportunity for a redoubled gammon here. In Slava's

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own words in an email to me: "About my 'premature' double, I had very strong position, gammon threats and both the golden points as well. What more do I need?"

To sum up, redoubling to four in a gammonish position while leading in a long match is a dangerous proposition as it allows your opponent a short cut to beat you. As such, the correct doubling window is very small and the recube to four is usually used only to cash the game. Marc Olsen, this year's Nordic Open Champion, says in his book *Backgammon: From Basics to Badass* that the leader in a match must be "extremely cautious" in this situation (Lars' 5% gammons here make a huge difference and allow us to consider the position mutually gammonish). Yet if you fancy yourself an underdog in the match, it may be appropriate to throw caution to the wind and see a mutually gammonish position as an opportunity to practice *carpe diem*. As a big-money player, Slava clearly relished the chance to play one game for the world championship and to let the matter be decided by the dice, rather than having to grind it out against Lars. XG++ calls the cube a .109 blunder, but I call it the move of a world champion. Slava knew that his strengths were his gambling instincts, courage, and sangfroid. All forms of mental and physical competition are about handling the pressure and applying pressure to your opponent. This cube should be seared in the mind of every advanced and low-open-level player. This is the kind of cube you need to give to beat the Neil Kazz, Sticks, and Trabis of the world. It is such a clear

take that — especially when the match is being recorded and streamed — they cannot drop. Yet the last thing any Giant wants to do is take this cube against a non-Giant.

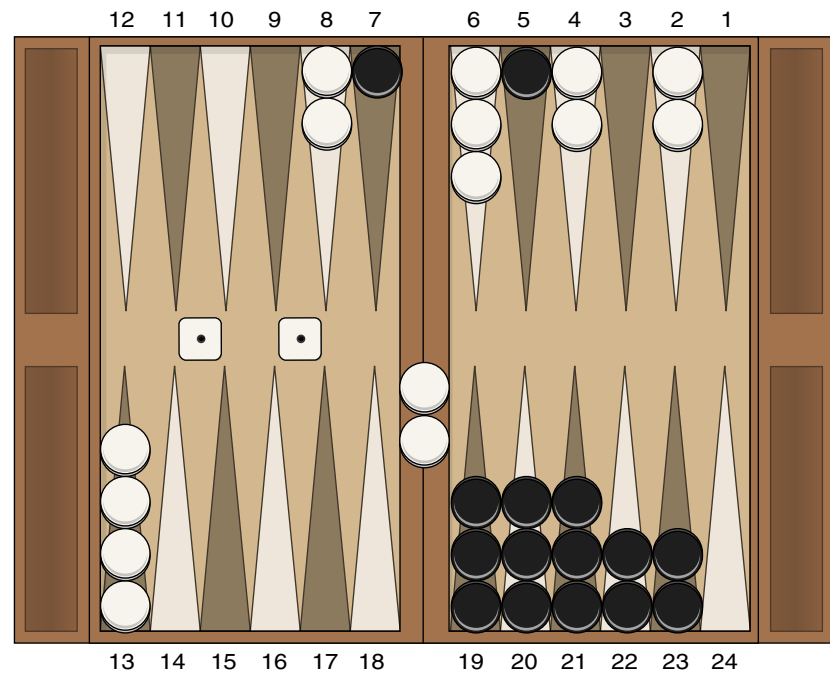
If you are hesitant to redouble such a volatile position, you must realize that a golden opportunity like this is unlikely to repeat itself. If Slava rolls well or Lars fails to enter, Slava will have lost his market by a country mile. Therefore, thinking about the cash game concepts of the desirability of 'doubling the opponent in' as opposed to 'out' is a very useful tool for assessing the correct psychology for the cube action. I have no doubt that Slava sought to double Lars "in" and knew that this was his best opportunity.

Lars, as he had to, took. He would have had to be playing a much weaker opponent — say a 200 Elo point difference and not the approximately 50 Elo point difference between him and Slava — to consider dropping. Slava covered and Lars fanned. Slava then threw double threes, making his four point and completing the best five-point board. Lars continued to fan until his other checker on the 15 point was hit. Slava continued bringing his checkers around.

Then the pendulum miraculously swung back in Lars' favor. He threw a set of double aces that entered both men from the roof. His bold and correct take appeared to have justified itself with this roll, but he still had to decide how to play the two remaining aces.

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Position 11



4 Pip: 148  
Lars Trabolt  
16-Away

11-Away  
Slava Pryadkin  
Pip: 93

Game 13, Move 22: White (Trabolt) to play 11

1. ✓	XG Roller++	Bar/24(2) 8/7* 6/5*	eq: +0.115
	Player:	42.16% (G:7.79% B:0.24%)	
	Opponent:	57.84% (G:32.14% B:5.64%)	
2.	XG Roller++	Bar/24(2) 8/7*(2)	eq: -0.072 (-0.188)
	Player:	36.13% (G:5.88% B:0.16%)	
	Opponent:	63.87% (G:26.13% B:3.12%)	

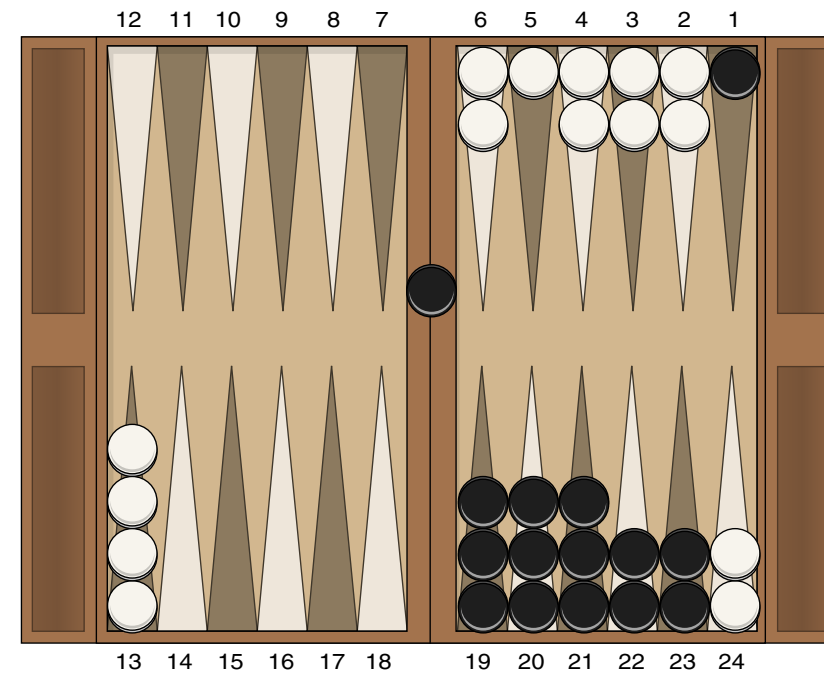
Lars can go for gold by double hitting on the bar and five points with bar/24 (2), 8/7\*, 6/5\*. This play is the only surefire way to fight for the five point — which will be essential if Lars is going to contain Slava's back men. It is also the pure play, inasmuch as it uses Lars' few spare checkers efficiently by putting them on the points he wishes to make. On the downside, it is terribly risky. If Slava hits back with a five, Lars will be in severe gammon or backgammon danger, as he has three blots strewn across the board and is likely to end up with five men on his ace anchor, while Slava cruises around the board and begins bearing off. I doubt that I

would have had the nerve for the play and would have moved bar/24 (2), 8/7\*(2): a play that clearly wins less, but gets gammoned and backgammoned significantly less as well. The key to solving this problem is the score. At dmp, double hitting would be clear; at gammon save they would be tied. Here we must realize that Slava's gammon value is depressed and that Lars seeks to get in an efficient recube to 8. Therefore, since he is quite likely to lose the match if he loses this game, he must go all out to win. Another consideration: if he can recube to 8, he will effectively kill Slava's gammons and backgammons. Hence going

for the gusto is what is required. Bar/24 (2), 8/7\*, 6/5\* will more likely lead to efficient redoubles and also a smattering of match-winning gammons with the cube on 8.

Slava missed, and it initially appeared that Lars' bold play had paid off — yet Lars rolled a series of supremely unlucky numbers. On his next four shakes he was unable to cover the five point. But Slava continued to fan until the combatants reached Position 12:

Position 12



4 Pip: 135  
Lars Trabolt  
16-Away

11-Away  
Slava Pryadkin  
Pip: 104

Game 13, Move 24: White (Trabolt) on roll. Cube action?

Analyzed in XG Roller++	No redouble	Redouble/Take
Player Winning Chances:	50.70% (G:11.31% B:0.39%)	51.29% (G:11.58% B:0.43%)
Opponent Winning Chances:	49.30% (G:24.83% B:4.09%)	48.71% (G:25.89% B:4.24%)
Cubeless Equities	-0.020	+0.535
Cubeful Equities		
No redouble:	+0.450 (-0.074)	
Redouble/Take:	+0.524	
Redouble/Pass:	+1.000 (+0.476)	
<b>Best Cube action: Redouble / Take</b>		

One needs to be a match-score genius to grasp that this is a proper 8 cube. Lars is winning only slightly over 50% of games with only 11% gammons — while Slava is winning 49% of the games with 25% gammons and 5% backgammons. With the cube in the center and even trailing 4-away, 2-away, this would be a horrendous cube. The only reason it is a correct double in this case is the way that the super-high value of

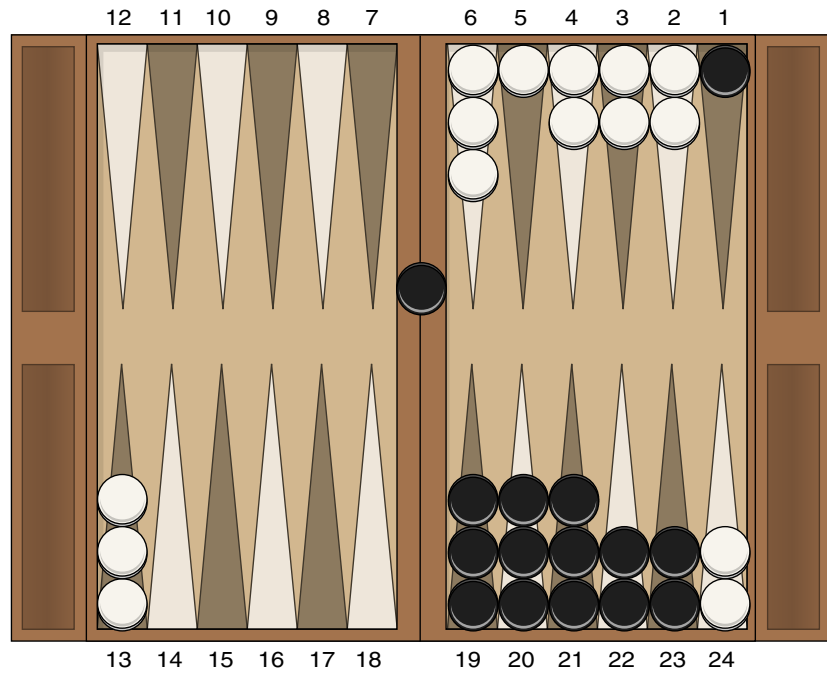
the cube combines with the lopsided score and the gammonish nature of the position, making Lars' gammons perfectly efficient while mostly killing Slava's gammons. Even knowing these structural factors about the score and the position type, most good players would conclude that Lars doesn't really have enough threats. It therefore seems like a fine decision not

to cube here if one is Lars facing Slava, despite XG's saying otherwise — especially since a more efficient cube, or one more likely to provoke an opponent mistake, may arise later. Lars threw 61, playing 13/6, and Slava fanned. Now Lars took some time to contemplate redoubling.



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### Position 13



4 Pip: 128  
Lars Trabolt  
16-Away

11-Away  
Slava Pryadkin  
Pip: 104

Game 13, Move 25: White (Trabolt) on roll. Cube action?

Analyzed in XG Roller+	No redouble	Redouble/Take
Player Winning Chances:	57.66% (G:14.36% B:0.56%)	57.22% (G:15.46% B:0.45%)
Opponent Winning Chances:	42.34% (G:18.76% B:2.05%)	42.78% (G:20.69% B:2.53%)
Cubeless Equities	+0.207	+0.868
Cubeful Equities		
No redouble:	+0.661 (-0.193)	
Redouble/Take:	+0.853	
Redouble/Pass:	+1.000 (+0.147)	
<b>Best Cube action: Redouble / Take</b>		

In the few seconds before Lars rolled, Falafel told the crowd that Lars absolutely has to cube here, as he faces tremendous market loss and now has a very significant chance of getting eight points or winning the match this game with a gammon. The math bears out Falafel's analysis: Lars has 17 numbers to cover, 54 to attack on the ace point, double sixes to make both bars, and many other numbers to lift the blot to safety. In short, he has nearly three times as many market losers as last turn. Of

course, these threats would not be nearly enough to cube at a roughly even score or for money (where the position would still be a large beaver) as Lars may have great difficulty escaping his back men — and, if he doesn't cover and is hit, will face severe gammon and backgammon danger. But in these circumstances, the redouble, though still tough to spot over the board under the pressure of the moment, is huge. Moreover, Lars has very little to lose by redoubling, as if he doesn't cube and loses, he will still

be massively behind in the match.

And Slava might have passed. Falafel, while berating Lars for his timidity in not cubing, said so — and corresponding with Slava after the match, he admitted that he indeed might have: "Now about Lars' possible recubes," wrote Slava, "First one I would definitely take, I even decided to myself. But the second one I decided I would pass and would have been very happy to have opportunity to continue playing the match

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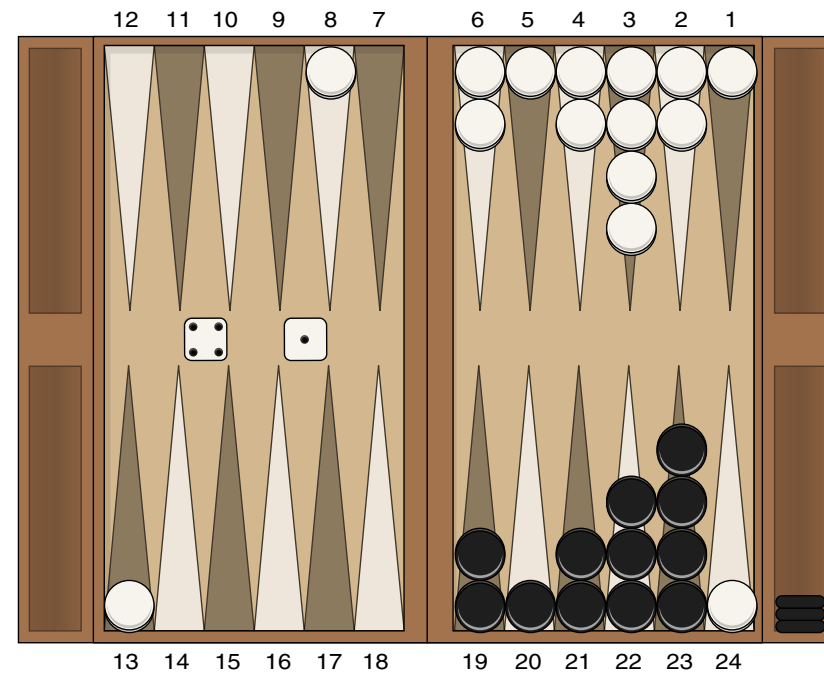
[at a roughly even score]." Of course, we will never know what would have happened. Thinking you might drop is quite different from dropping when you are winning over 40% of the time in a rather skill-free position against one of the best players in the world.

Again, Lars' cube behavior here provides a window into his tendencies and psychology. Lars Trabolt is clearly a bold and brilliant player. His play of double aces in the last position clearly demonstrates that.

Therefore his hesitancy to cube here reveals an aspect of his match strategy and not a lack of nerve. But that strategy may not have accurately judged Slava's tendencies. Some aggressive players (like Slava) are happy to up the stakes and increase the volatility when they have the advantage, but may be loath to put the whole match on the line through a bold take when they are at a disadvantage. Getting a feel for your opponent's psychology can be the difference between glory and despair.

Unfortunately, Lars' missed cube turned out to be a fatal error. After not redoubling, he threw his worst number, double 5s, which he correctly played 13/3, 13/8(2). Slava then entered and hit with a five and was able to break contact and begin bearing off against Lars' ace anchor. The fireworks were far from over, however. Slava blotted and Lars threw a hitting 41. But hitting was no walk in the park, as Lars had two inner board blots.

### Position 14



4 Pip: 87  
Lars Trabolt  
16-Away

11-Away  
Slava Pryadkin  
Pip: 42

Game 13, Move 32: White (Trabolt) to play 41

1. XG Roller++	24/20* 3/2	eq: +0.138
Player:	46.13% (G:0.00% B:0.00%)	
Opponent:	53.87% (G:24.05% B:1.46%)	
2. XG Roller++	24/20* 13/12	eq: +0.118 (-0.020)
Player:	44.61% (G:0.00% B:0.00%)	
Opponent:	55.39% (G:22.67% B:1.26%)	
3. XG Roller++	24/20* 5/4	eq: +0.052 (-0.086)
Player:	41.18% (G:0.00% B:0.00%)	
Opponent:	58.82% (G:12.40% B:0.51%)	

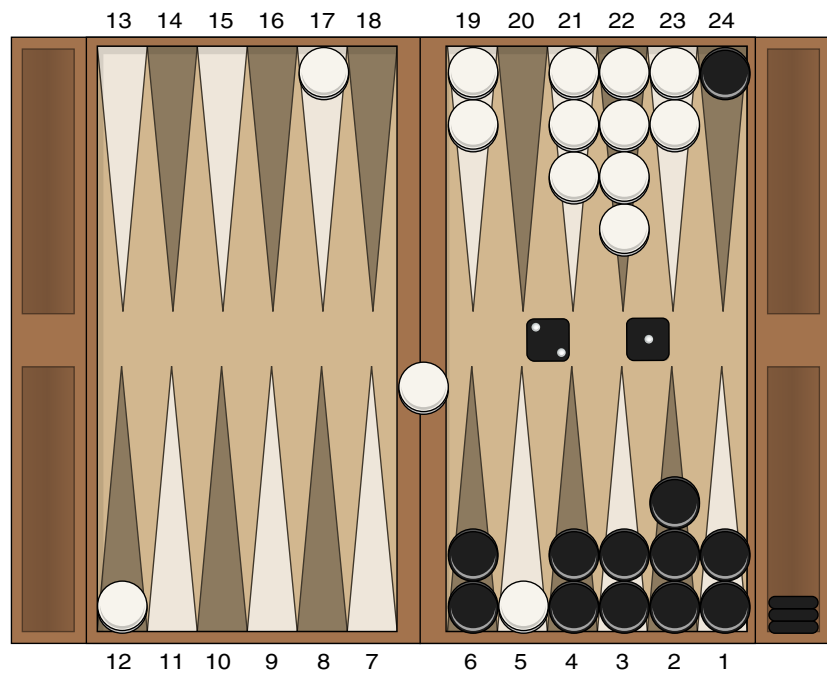
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Amazingly, it is correct to leave both the ace and the five point slotted after hitting, despite the great gammon risk this entails. The answer must be that, without the five point, Lars has no hope of containing Slava's checker. Again, I see this as a match-score

play. At gammon save, 5/4 would be clearly correct, while at dmp leaving the five point slotted would be obvious. The key to getting this position correct is appreciating that at this score and cube position, the play is closer to dmp than to gammon save.

After playing safe, Lars got hit by double aces, Slava's third best number, which also makes a five point board. Lars fanned and Slava rolled 21.

### Position 15



4 Pip: 106  
Lars Trabolt  
16-Away

11-Away  
Slava Pryadkin  
Pip: 58

Game 13, Move 33: Black (Pryadkin) to play 21

1. XG Roller++	6/4 6/5*	eq: +0.469
Player:	71.45% (G:37.20% B:1.63%)	
Opponent:	28.55% (G:0.00% B:0.00%)	
2. XG Roller++	6/5* 5/3	eq: +0.445 (-0.024)
Player:	70.16% (G:38.09% B:1.76%)	
Opponent:	29.84% (G:0.00% B:0.00%)	
3. XG Roller++	4/3 4/2	eq: +0.266 (-0.203)
Player:	66.60% (G:25.74% B:0.63%)	
Opponent:	33.40% (G:0.00% B:0.00%)	

The series of jokers and anti-jokers continued, with this one forcing Slava to bust his board. The “banana split” play of 6/5\*, 6/4 has the appeal that it will likely keep Lars busy entering for some time, hence

negating his outfield control in the short-to-medium term. Clearly if Lars misses and Slava escapes it is superior to either of the internal busting plays — of which 4/3, 4/2 is best. In Slava's words, “[My] last error [of

the match] was probably 21 when I could hit loose a second checker, but it is not so easy to create a second blot in the possibly last game of the World Championship final [and pay the immense consequences of

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being hit].” That puts it quite eloquently. One would truly need balls of steel to volunteer a potentially game-losing immediate shot for the longer-term payoff of greater ease getting through the outfield and an easier bearoff (now that the troublesome six point is broken).

After Slava's passive play, Lars continued to dance. Slava escaped and picked up more blots. Lars kept dancing, even when Slava got down to a two-point board. A world-championship-winning backgammon seemed increasingly likely, yet it didn't happen as anyone in the crowd would have expected. Slava got down to his last five checkers on the ace point. Lars still had two men on the roof. Absurdly, Lars threw double aces. I literally fell out of my chair. I can't fathom how Lars didn't burst

a blood vessel. Had it been me, I would likely have had a catatonic seizure on the spot. Yet by all accounts, he miraculously stayed composed.

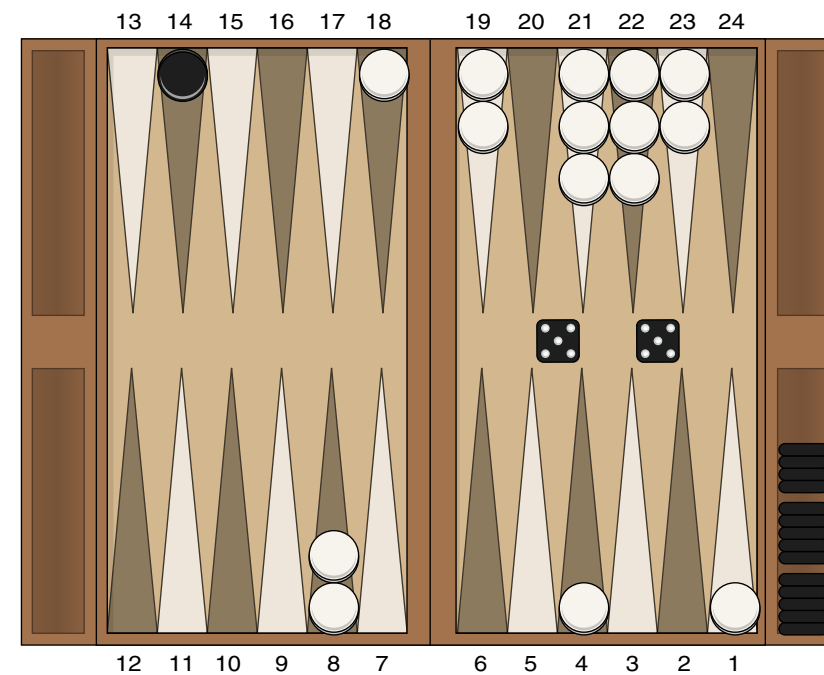
Slava rolled a non-double, bearing off his 11th and 12th checkers. Now, if Lars comes in with both checkers, he will have no further chance to hit Slava and will likely be backgammoned. Even with a “helpful” dance with one checker, an immediate double from Slava will bear off all his men, scoring a match-winning backgammon, while a non-double from Slava will win a backgammon if Lars does not throw an ace or a high double. In short, Slava's match-winning backgammon chances stood at more than 75%. But Lars did fan with one checker (a good roll), Slava rolled a non-double, and Lars hit him with double aces,

his eighth ace in the last six rolls! As I was watching, I was no longer thinking about backgammons and I even imagined that Lars might get off the gammon and begin his comeback from 16-away, 7-away. He had faced tougher match scores against Petko the previous day, and I considered him essentially unbeatable in big matches in Monte Carlo.

But such a comeback was not to be. The match was to end with another display of fireworks.

Lars was unable to contain Slava's lone checker with his gappy home board. A few rolls later, he chose to block Slava's double sixes. But then the last thunderclap sounded!

### Position 16



4 Pip: 123  
Lars Trabolt  
16-Away

11-Away  
Slava Pryadkin  
Pip: 14

Game 13, Move 46: Black (Pryadkin) to play 55

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1. ✓ 3-ply	14/4* 4/Off	eq: +1.922
Player:	100.00% (G:100.00% B:100.00%)	
Opponent:	0.00% (G:0.00% B:0.00%)	

For all of you readers who aspire to win the World Championship, Slava gave us a perfect example of how to do so in style: by throwing double fives, scoring 12 points by backgammoning one of the world's best players. This is certainly a glorious way to win. XG calls it only a .545 joker. I calculate that the roll was worth about 25,000 euros in equity for Slava. I doubt that Slava will ever forget the feeling he had when he saw the number come out of the dice cup.

Lars, of course, was a perfect gentleman, and within a few minutes was looking over rollouts and discussing with spectators like me if he should have recubed to eight earlier in the game. That is the greatest lesson we can learn from this match: how to handle victory and defeat with equanimity.

Now, I must bid you adieu from England. Stay calm and practice rolling fives to backgammon your opponents. You never know

when such a skill might come in handy.

My thanks go out to Lars and Slava for sharing their thoughts and analysis with me about the match and to Ray Kershaw and Bob Wachtel for their editing. Any errors that remain are my own responsibility. ♦

**- 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 and the UK Backgammon Federation's inaugural UK Open.



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