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Petko Kostadinov vs. Lars Trabolt: Two of the Sport's Best in the Semi-Final of the World Backgammon Championship

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Many in the backgammon community feel that the World Championships at Monte Carlo are a bit of a misnomer. The World Championships no longer usually feature the majority of the world's best players and its Championship division field is not the strongest field of players on the international circuit, as the top flights at Chicago and Copenhagen are arguably quite a bit stronger. And yet, in some years the World Championship manages to live up to its billing. Its longer matches and relaxed format can produce stunningly high quality play, dramatic matches, and psychological fireworks. 2013 was such a year. In this article and in another next month, we will investigate the two most important, well-played, and exciting matches of Monte Carlo 2013. These matches also happened to be the only two displayed on the big screen in the main playing room, accompanied by insightful live commentary by Falafel: the Semi-final between Petko Kostadinov (USA) and Lars Trabolt (DEN) and the Final between Vyacheslav Pryadkin (UKR) and Lars Trabolt (DEN).

Both of these matches illustrate how even the world's best players are affected by the pressure of the occasion, exhibit certain tendencies, and sometimes deliberately forgo the "XG" play. Some of the most interesting cube and checker play decisions revealed subconscious trends or players consciously deviating from the XG play so as to exploit a unique situation or an opponent's perceived weakness. In the first match, Petko took a huge early lead even though he played too cautiously. Then Lars staged a brilliant comeback while Petko ran low on his clock as the match became protracted. Both men were tired due to the late hour, but Petko appeared the more fatigued. Lars later exploited this in a series of highly complex backgames. The majority of Petko's large blunders ensued over the course of these complex high-pressure backgame situations, where he was starved for time to reflect and appears to have been under significant psychological pressure.

In the second match, which I will analyze in November, Pryadkin knew he was

the underdog, but relied upon his mental toughness and gambler's instincts. Consequently, he sought to increase volatility and redouble whenever he had the opportunity to win 4, 8, or even 12 points at a time. This strategy capitalized on Lars's supposed desire to prolong the match where his greater technical skill and knowledge of match score dynamics might give him an edge. In fact, all players in the 4-7PR range should study Pryadkin's performance; it provides many insights into what match strategies may be successful in defeating the world's best.

In this article, I will now delve into some positions from the 23 point match between Petko Kostadinov (Giant # 20) and Former World Champion Lars Trabolt (Giant #12)-- two of the world's technically very best players. In fact, each has advocates who believe that either Petko or Lars is the best match backgammon player in the world. Until the 2013 World Championships, Petko had never played a single tournament outside the United States, while Lars is not higher up the Giant's list because he concentrates on only two major tournaments a year, is mild-mannered, modest, and avoids self-promotion. In short, both players are arguably among the top ten best long match players in the world and their match illustrates this (Lars played at 3.79, while Petko played at 6.38). Close study of the match reveals -- something which was not immediately obvious to the live spectator caught up in the drama of the action -- that Petko Kostadinov was suffering from nerves, fatigue, hesitation to cube/timidity, and poor time management skills. We shall now look at some of the most technically interesting checker play and cube decisions with a special focus on blunders and psychological issues. As Petko and Lars are such good players with great reputations as competitors and gentlemen, I need not be shy in criticizing their errors. I will apologize in advance to Petko, as I am highlighting many of his worst errors, as well as pontificating about his tendencies. I have great respect for Petko and know he is a far better backgammon player than I. One assumes he will take my comments in the detached academic spirit in which they are intended.

In the first game of the match to 23 Petko won a single point with a 61 joker that hit and partially escaped his last checker. Lars then fanned and Petko cashed. In the second game after a sound positional middle game double from Lars and correct take, Petko threw a series of jokers to equalize the game and was then faced with these double sixes, which he misplayed for the first blunder of the match.

Position 1:

XGID=a-BaBBBBA---AAb--bcbbbA-A-:1:1:1:66:1:0:0:23:10

to play 66

1.	XG Roller+	22/16 12/6 7/1(2)	eq: +0.339
	Player:	50.16% (G:30.55% B:0.27%)	
	Opponent:	49.84% (G:10.49% B:0.60%)	
* 2.	XG Roller+	22/4 12/6	eq: +0.203 (-0.135)
	Player:	46.34% (G:24.57% B:0.42%)	
	Opponent:	53.66% (G:9.84% B:0.46%)	

eXtreme Gammon Version: 1.21, MET: Rockwell-Kazaross

Even though this throw of double sixes escapes one checker from behind Lars's five prime, it is actually not a good shot as Petko would have preferred a number which closed the three point or switched points such as 22, 11, 45, 44 or a number such as a 42, 64, 52 or 65 that would allow him to attack on the 3-point while also either escaping or anchoring. Studying Petko's aforementioned good shots reveals that that he doesn't want to gain too much ground in the race which could strand his back man or wreck his timing. It is for this reason that double fives and double sixes are not great shots despite, respectively, closing the 3-point and escaping. With these double sixes Petko has many different options but two primary strategies: he could fully escape his back man and bring builders in range for the 3-point, while leaving his checkers on the bar as potential attackers for the 3-point or he can partially escape his back man, make the 1-point building his board, and then decide about the last six.

This is a tough problem and key to figuring out the correct move is grasping that once Lars anchors, if Petko's back man also remains stranded away from the edge of the five prime, Lars would become a favorite. This may even apply if Lars anchors on the 1-point after being hit on the three and reentering both men on the ace. Therefore, the first six is needed to jump the prime 22/16, then two more

should be used to make the one point 7/1 (2), and the last six is almost a toss-up between bringing another man in direct attacking range for the 3-point with 12/6 or further safetying the escaping back man 16/10. Playing 22/16, 7/1 (2), 12/6 is best because it accomplishes so many objectives at once: escaping a back man, bringing another builder in range, and giving Lars more dancing and fewer anchoring numbers (without the 1-point made, 21 also anchors). As such it wins more gammons and is more likely to lead to an efficient cube and possibly a redoubled gammon. However, Petko chose not to make the 1-point at all, playing 22/4, 12/6. This move understandably concentrates on maximizing builders for the 3-point presumably thinking that the two men on the bar point are more valuable as attackers for the 3-point than as an inner board point. This logic is quite flawed as, after Petko's move and a fan by Lars, Petko is slightly not good enough to double, while after the correct move 22/16, 7/1 (2), 12/6 and a fan by Lars, Petko has an efficient recube to four that Lars must grudgingly take. Although in the actual match Lars would fan and Petko would cash three moves later, he was implicitly punished for his checker play mistake, as he didn't cube until he had both closed the 3-point and advanced his back man to the edge of the prime, hence becoming slightly too good to double. Below we see, his error in cashing.

Position 2:

XGID=aaCBCBB-A----Ab--bcbbbA----:1:1:1:D:1:0:0:23:10

○ double to 4 take ?

Analyzed in XG Roller+	
Player Winning Chances:	73.55% (G: 51.50% B: 0.59%)
Opponent Winning Chances:	26.45% (G: 3.22% B: 0.14%)
Cubeless Equities	
No Redouble:	+0.966
Redouble:	+1.899
Cubeful Equities	
No Redouble:	+1.070
Redouble/Take:	+1.659 (+0.589)
Redouble/Drop:	+1.000 (-0.070)
Best Cube action: Too Good to Redouble / Drop	

eXtreme Gammon Version: 1.21, MET: Rockwell-Kazaross

In the next game, we would see that Petko was tending to overshoot his market by doubling too late. Here he missed a double after Lars danced on his one point board with double sixes.

Position 3:

XGID=aa----ECCAA-d-----cBdb------:0:0:1:00:3:0:0:23:10

● on roll, cube action?

Analyzed in XG Roller+	
Player Winning Chances:	69.88% (G: 25.49% B: 0.68%)
Opponent Winning Chances:	30.12% (G: 5.47% B: 0.19%)

Cubeless Equities	
No Double:	+0.609
Double:	+1.196

Cubeful Equities	
No Double:	+0.829 (-0.100)
Double/Take:	+0.930
Double/Drop:	+1.000 (+0.070)

Best Cube action: Double / Take

eXtreme Gammon Version: 1.21, MET: Rockwell-Kazaross

Here Petko has what Stick calls a pointless double. He leads in the race by 29 pips, has 13 men in the zone, 34 numbers which make a point and 4 numbers (66,55,65) which lead to an all out blitz. In fact he only has one bad number, 61. It is very easy to forget to double positions like this, but again doing so cost Petko, as he ended up overshooting his market and later cashing. If cubed here, Lars can take because he has his 5-point, all his checkers in play, and because even if attacked, he is likely to have many chances to anchor and have lots of

play against Petko's bar point. Overrating Lars's chances for counter play may have spooked Petko from the cube.

Fascinatingly, the trend of missing his market would continue in the next game. Knowing as we do that Petko is one of the world's best students of the game, we must conclude that he was either having early match jitters, deliberately holding back his cubes hoping that Lars would take passes or, as frequently happens in tournament play, he had not correctly adjusted to his current opponent. In the previous five rounds, he had mostly faced opposition of inferior quality and had perhaps deliberately withheld his cubes either in an attempt to get his opponent to take passes or to decrease volatility. Continuing this style of play was not a wise strategy against Lars.

Position 4:

XGID=-b---BEBCaA-e----c-dAA----:0:0:1:00:4:0:0:23:10

on roll, cube action?

Analyzed in ????

Player Winning Chances:	68.21% (G: 29.05% B: 2.95%)
Opponent Winning Chances:	31.79% (G: 4.91% B: 0.16%)

Cubeless Equities

No Double:	+0.642
Double:	+1.315

Cubeful Equities

No Double:	+0.893 (-0.107)
Double/Take:	+1.002 (+0.002)
Double/Drop:	+1.000

Best Cube action: Double / Drop

eXtreme Gammon Version: 1.21, MET: Rockwell-Kazaross

Here Petko has a nearly perfectly efficient double but he declines to toss the cube. Petko's hesitancy may come from a perceived need to have his back men anchored to assure against mishaps. That is a wise idea in some position types, but largely irrelevant here. He leads in every stage of the game: he has Lars outboarded two to one, he has a four prime while Lars has no development, he has split his back men while Lars remains anchored on his ace, and most crucially he has an attacking threat to extend his prime on eight numbers (22, 11, 62, 42, 64) or can use an ace to choose between attacking the blot on the nine or anchoring on the twenty. It is frequently said that a significant edge in two out of

three of race, position/development, and threats is double/take while leading in all three aspects is double/pass. This is a perfect example of that adage. At an even score or for money it would be a small blunder to take this cube; even leading 4-0 to 23 this is a clear double and a bare pass.

In Game number 5, trailing 0-5, Lars made his first blunder of the match.

Position 5:

XGID=-aB--BC-C---dD-A-dae-----:0:0:-1:65:5:0:0:23:10

⬤ to play 65

|				eq: -0.769
1.	XG Roller+	24/13		eq: -0.769
	Player:	26.08% (G:0.04% B:0.00%)		
	Opponent:	73.92% (G:0.11% B:0.00%)		
* 2.	XG Roller+	13/7 8/3		eq: -0.914 (-0.145)
	Player:	26.64% (G:2.72% B:0.06%)		
	Opponent:	73.36% (G:12.74% B:0.15%)		

eXtreme Gammon Version: 1.21, MET: Rockwell-Kazaross

65 is a decent shot for a miss and Lars must decide between fleeing his last man even though he will be trailing in the race by 11 pips, or making his bar point and slotting his inner board with 13/7, 8/3. Lars chose the latter following the adage, "when behind in the race, don't race." This is an understandable and seemingly reasonable play, yet XG++ calls it a .145 blunder. Lars is hoping to benefit from the contact by staying back, not attributing enough weight to his underdeveloped forward position. But in reality, the contact favors Petko. He has many threats: to further build his board, to attack Lars's back man, or prime him in by building the bar point. Moreover, Lars is likely to only get indirect shots for many turns to come while Petko may be able to attack as Lars's board is very weak. Another way of determining that Lars should run is to notice that after either play Petko has a double. Once he breaks contact into a straight race, Petko's double is quite

marginal .021 (on XG++) and Lars has a massive take of .223 as Petko's lead in the race is just under 9%. However if Lars stays back Petko has a decent- sized double of .060 while Lars has only a .070 take. Unsurprisingly, after Lars's misplay Petko again missed the double, then next turn missed another much bigger double in an attacking position which combined racing threats with a chance to hit Lars's fleeing back man. (Fascinatingly, these errors from Petko may actually have made Lars's play 'correct' in as much as Petko would have been unlikely to miss the cube after the racing play.) Finally after hitting, Petko cashed the subsequent turn when he was slightly too good.

In the next game leading 6-0 Petko would miss three straight cubes in succession.

Position 6:
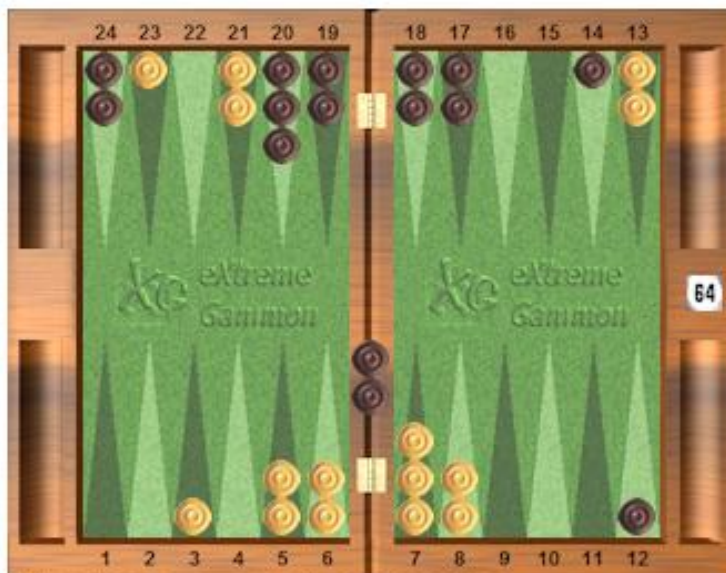
XGID=b--A-BBCB---aBa--bbbcB-Ab-:0:0:1:00:6:0:0:0:23:10

○ on roll, cube action?

Analyzed in XG Roller+

Player Winning Chances: 73.15% (G: 33.23% B: 3.43%)
Opponent Winning Chances:26.85% (G: 8.41% B: 0.43%)

Cubeless Equities
No Double: +0.752
Double: +1.465

Cubeful Equities

No Double: +0.897 (-0.103)
Double/Take: +1.169 (+0.169)
Double/Drop: +1.000

Best Cube action: Double / Drop

eXtreme Gammon Version: 1.21, MET: Rockwell-Kazaross

Position 7:

XGID=a-aB-BBBB---aBa--bbbcB-Ab-:0:0:1:00:6:0:0:23:10

🟡 on roll, cube action?

Analyzed in XG Roller+

Player Winning Chances: 73.87% (G: 31.57% B: 2.93%)
Opponent Winning Chances:26.13% (G: 7.79% B: 0.37%)

Cubeless Equities

No Double: +0.751
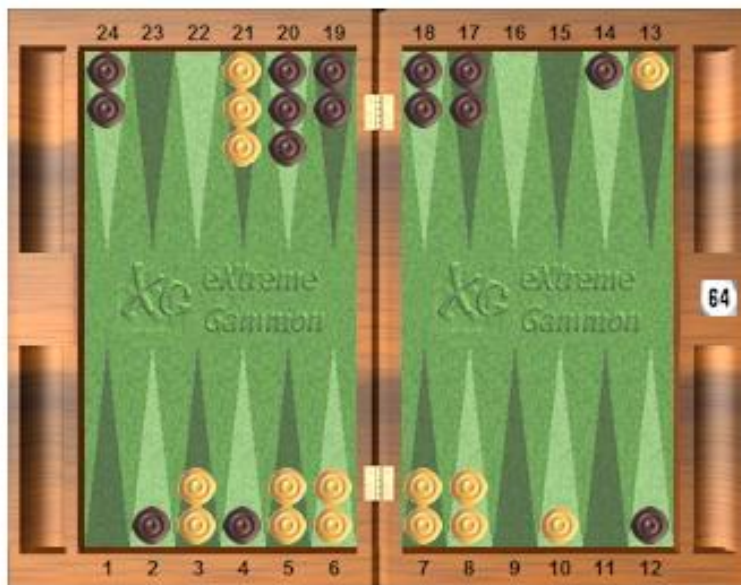Double: +1.460

Cubeful Equities

No Double: +0.889 (-0.111)
Double/Take: +1.168 (+0.168)
Double/Drop: +1.000

Best Cube action: Double / Drop

eXtreme Gammon Version: 1.21, MET: Rockwell-Kazaross

Position 8:

XGID=--aBaBBBB-A-aAa--bbbcC--b-:0:0:1:00:6:0:0:23:10

🟡 on roll, cube action?

Analyzed in XG Roller+

Player Winning Chances: 70.27% (G: 28.98% B: 2.93%)
Opponent Winning Chances: 29.73% (G: 8.63% B: 0.30%)

Cubeless Equities

No Double:	+0.645
Double:	+1.256

Cubeful Equities

No Double:	+0.757 (-0.171)
Double/Take:	+0.928
Double/Drop:	+1.000 (+0.072)

Best Cube action: Double / Take

eXtreme Gammon Version: 1.21, MET: Rockwell-Kazaross

The above positions are all highly complex middle game positions and, just glancing at them, it is difficult to immediately tell if these are no doubles, double/takes, or double/passes. A few players may even experience an impulse to judge the first two positions as too good. Personally, I wouldn't dream of taking in the first two positions, which seem like clear double/pass. As I watched the match live, I was astounded Petko didn't cube, but wondered if he thought that the positions were too good. At home after further study of the whole match and

Petko's play until this point, it is almost certain that he didn't think any of the positions were good enough to cube. He may have been spooked by having three men back behind a four prime or by having a lopsided 6-0 match lead. But in a very long match (23 points in this case) it is far too early for Petko to hesitate with his initial cube due to the score (recubes would be another matter).

In the first position (Pos 6) Petko has two of Lars's men on the roof and threatens to make a third inner board point or to pick up a third checker and then later possibly a fourth. Volatility is sky high and XG says it is a monster cube and an equally big pass. The second position (Pos 7) is remarkably similar in terms of the equities as Petko has rolled an average number making his third inner board point, while Lars has also thrown a middling number entering only one man on the deuce. Neither position is too good because white may throw a bad number leaving a shot or being forced to hit loose, or black may hit back or anchor. In the third position (Pos 8), Petko has eight shots to make the four point on Lars's head and likely win a gammon, and an additional 17 shots to send back a third man. Volatility is enormous and white clearly wins a heaping ton of gammons. Now is clearly the time to double if you thought you were too good the previous turns. But since Petko clearly didn't think he was 'good enough to cube' previously, then it makes perfect sense why he didn't double here as well. Additionally, it should be obvious that the position isn't too good now because a failure to execute one of white's threats would allow black to anchor up or hit back after a loose hit and thus equalize. This is exactly what happened in the match. After not cubing, Petko threw an air-ball 53, and Lars anchored with a 62. (NB: Position 8 is only a take because Lars trails 23-away, 17-away. For money or if Lars were more level in the match, he would have to pass.)

I have heard from professional backgammon teachers that most intermediate and advanced players' errors are fairly random, while the errors of world-class players display a pronounced pattern revealing their tendencies, mindset on the specific day, or their match strategy. There appears to be much wisdom in this view as Petko's first ten cube errors remarkably all illustrate the same theme/cast of mind. In the continuation of the game in question, Petko finally got in a perfectly efficient cube as Lars board had busted and his straggler was open to attack. Bizarrely, Petko threw a hitting number and failed to attack, then Lars escaped into an even race and outrolled Petko to reach an excellent recube to four.

Position 9:

XGID=--A-AA------------aa-a---:1:-1:-1:D:6:0:0:23:10

double to 4 take ?

Analyzed in ????
Player Winning Chances: 60.76% (G: 0.00% B: 0.00%)
Opponent Winning Chances:39.24% (G: 0.00% B: 0.00%)

Cubeless Equities
No Redouble: +0.215
Redouble: +0.485

Cubeful Equities
No Redouble: +0.344 (-0.074)
Redouble/Take: +0.418
Redouble/Drop: +1.000 (+0.582)

Best Cube action: Redouble / Take

eXtreme Gammon Version: 1.21, MET: Rockwell-Kazaross

This is a dastardly little recube from Lars that many a lesser player would miss. He trails by 3 pips and is not favored to be off in two rolls, while white is slightly more likely to be off in two. However, Lars has two immediate winning numbers and huge market loss if he throws a big number (53 or better) and Petko fails to win immediately with high doubles. At money this would not make Lars good enough, because Petko would have an immediate recube after Lars's low numbers (32 or worse). But at this match score the cube to 4 is quite correct.

After Lars's low numbers, Petko must not turn to 8 because of his match lead. In fact, it would be a horrific blunder for him to redub to eight even after Lars's worst number, 21!!! In the match, despite this clever cube, Lars lost by rolling low twice in a row. This put him down 10-0 in the match despite the fact that his error rating was below 3 at this point.

Then his dice were jolted out of their stupor. He won a rather uneventful doubled racing game to reach 10-2. In the next game, Lars missed a reasonable sized cube (.071) when Petko's board had crumbled, and he was about to be squeezed off his anchor and vulnerable to attack. Petko escaped being squeezed with low doubles and the game turned into a race where Lars led by a small margin for many turns. He missed two further smaller cubes, finally cashing after Petko threw a two which failed to bear off a checker.

On the third roll of the 10-3 game, Petko had a 6 and a 4 to play.

Position 10:

XGID=-a--ABD-Ba--dD--ac-e----B-:0:0:1:64:10:3:0:23:10

to play 64

|			
1. XG Roller+	24/18 8/4		eq: +0.391
Player:	60.04% (G:23.77% B:1.29%)		
Opponent:	39.96% (G:9.48% B:0.38%)		
* 2. XG Roller+	24/18 13/9*		eq: +0.246 (-0.145)
Player:	57.67% (G:21.08% B:1.37%)		
Opponent:	42.33% (G:12.26% B:0.73%)		

eXtreme Gammon Version: 1.21, MET: Rockwell-Kazaross

The six should be clear, Petko must split to the 18 point to get his back men moving. But with the four, Petko must choose between hitting on the nine or

making his 4-point. The hit, which was chosen, is far too loose. The positional play builds a solid long term advantage, while the hit gives the opponent the opportunity to equalize immediately with a return hit. Again, punishment was swift. Lars entered with a 54 -- double hitting and seizing the advantage. He would later correctly double Petko in as he was attempting to clear his midpoint against a well-timed bar and 3-point double anchor holding game. Lars would clear the mid without leaving a direct shot by rolling double fives twice, bringing the score to 10-5. In the next game, Lars got a shot from the roof that if he hits he has a good chance for the gammon and even if he misses he is a favorite in the game as he is likely to get subsequent shots. He correctly doubled and Petko correctly took. But luck was quite a fickle mistress in this match. It deserted Lars promptly after joining him; he fanned on Petko's three point board and then missed a second shot to be recubed out bringing the score to 12-5.

Next, in a highly complex broken sort of game, Lars made his second biggest checker play error of the match.

Position 11:
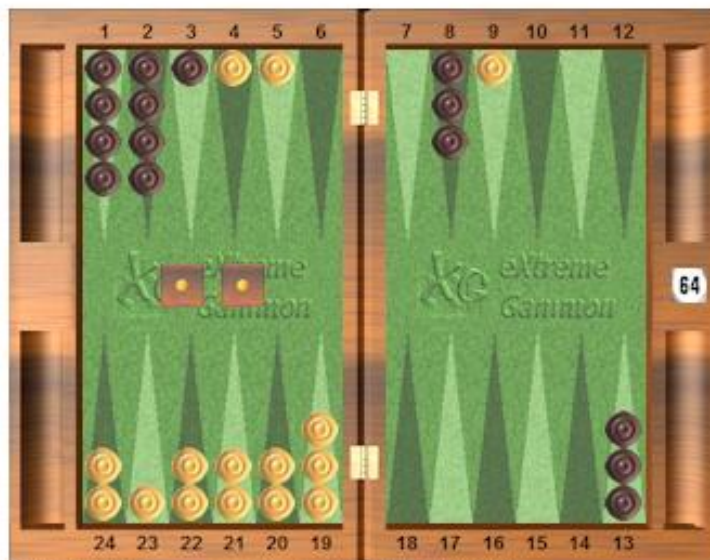
XGID=-BABBBC——c---Ac--AAadd-:0:0:-1:11:12:7:0:23:10

⬤ to play 11

1.	????	13/12(3) 2/1	eq: -0.136
	Player:	46.27% (G:1.66% B:0.01%)	
	Opponent:	53.73% (G:10.84% B:0.19%)	
2.	????	13/12(3) 3/2	eq: -0.262 (-0.126)
	Player:	42.85% (G:1.04% B:0.00%)	
	Opponent:	57.15% (G:11.39% B:0.17%)	
* 3.	????	8/7(3) 2/1	eq: -0.328 (-0.191)
	Player:	41.99% (G:1.78% B:0.01%)	
	Opponent:	58.01% (G:16.01% B:0.27%)	
4.	????	8/7(3) 3/2	eq: -0.470 (-0.334)
	Player:	38.49% (G:1.45% B:0.01%)	
	Opponent:	61.51% (G:16.96% B:0.25%)	

eXtreme Gammon Version: 1.21, MET: Rockwell-Kazaross

XG roller++ dings Lars for a .191 double blunder. Initially, I had no idea why Lars's move is that big an error. As analyzing this position is definitely beyond my pay grade, I reached out for advice. According to my friend and backgammon sage Peter Bennet, it could be that nines (54 and 63) are the swing numbers making shifting to the 12 point so much better. After 13/12 (3), nines clear a man to safety, while after Lars's play they blot. Talking to Lars over email and presenting him with the rollout, he pointed out that "assuming Petko flees his checker from the 16 point next turn, after my play of 8/7(3) I immediately leave a shot on 32,43,53,63 and 54 (10 numbers), while after the bot-play only 33,44,43 and 53 blots (6 numbers). Additionally, there may be a significant long term advantage to being only six pips away from the home board [presumably by making small doubles significantly better]" I would be very happy for comments from the peanut gallery on this one and will restrain my instinct to further

speculate where I am sure I do not fully comprehend.

A few moves later, Lars was able to cash after throwing a joker, bringing the score to 12-8. Then in a series of nine fairly uneventful games, all cashed for a only a single point, Lars leveled the score 14-14. From this point forward the excitement grew in the main playing room as over fifty people were watching and kibitzing the match -- frequently clapping, cheering, and ordering drinks from the cash bar outside which sadly closed at midnight even though the action continued well past 2am.

After a wrong pass from Lars which was a slight tendency of his constituting his only two cube blunders for the whole match (presumably resulting from his wanting to lower volatility and prevent himself from being gammoned), Petko led 15-14 and, returning to his pattern earlier in the match, again overshot his market -- something he would do a staggering 15 times, nine of which were blunders. Such errors were actually the only kind of doubling error Petko made -- as he never once doubled too early. In fact if we consider marginal cubes (i.e. places where Petko was within .025 of a proper cube according to XG++ and hence not cubing is not considered an error but is actually a practical necessity, especially against an opponent like Lars) Petko missed, overshot, or cashed when he should play on, no fewer than 23 times over the course of a 30 game match to 23, while never once cubing too early or playing on when he should cash. How is that for a tendency! Too bad all of my opponents aren't so categorizable and ruthlessly consistent, it might actually allow me to break even once and a while :-)

Position 12:

XGID=-ba--BDBC---bCa--a-cabb-A-:0:0:1:00:15:14:0:23:10

(o) on roll, cube action?

Analyzed in XG Roller+

Player Winning Chances: 70.22% (G: 26.60% B: 3.13%)
Opponent Winning Chances:29.78% (G: 6.89% B: 0.23%)

Cubeless Equities

No Double: +0.656
Double: +1.362

Cubeful Equities

No Double: +0.874 (-0.126)
Double/Take: +1.073 (+0.073)
Double/Drop: +1.000

Best Cube action: Double / Drop

eXtreme Gammon Version: 1.21, MET: Rockwell-Kazaross

Here Petko has a lead in the three primary aspects needed for a middle game cube: the race, position/development, and threats. He has 17 numbers to send back a fourth checker but, if hit, Lars is unlikely to have the timing for a backgame. Petko also has 5 other numbers to extend his prime. Although black wins a fair amount (almost 30%) he loses too many gammons ~26% and must drop the cube. Moreover the match score (leading 8-away, 9-away) makes this a bigger pass than it would be at money because at 8-away Petko can benefit

enormously from doubled or re-doubled gammons. Watching the match, I again wondered if Petko thought the position might be too good. Studying at home this seems unlikely because of what we have learned so far. Also a basic analysis of the position reveals that failure to hit or build the prime would allow Lars to cover his five point making a prime of his own, temporarily averting a future cube, and staying in the game. In short, positions of this type should strike even the intermediate player as a clear double and if we apply Woolsey's law we know it is critical to spin here as the opponent may misdiagnose his take/pass decision, hence forfeiting equity.

On the next turn, the below position was reached.

Position 13:

XGID=-ba--BDCC---bB---aabbbb-A-:0:0:1:00:15:14:0:23:10

on roll, cube action?

Analyzed in XG Roller+

Player Winning Chances: 65.36% (G: 26.07% B: 2.64%)
Opponent Winning Chances: 34.64% (G: 8.29% B: 0.34%)

Cubeless Equities

No Double:	+0.533
Double:	+1.110

Cubeful Equities

No Double:	+0.703 (-0.080)
Double/Take:	+0.783
Double/Drop:	+1.000 (+0.217)

Best Cube action: Double / Take

eXtreme Gammon Version: 1.21, MET: Rockwell-Kazaross

Here again, Petko missed a cube. But this is a notoriously difficult example of a prime-vs-prime position where the conventional wisdom suggests doubling out one's opponent rather than doubling him in. Yet Petko, seemed not to have grasped Lar's psychology. If Petko had applied Woolsey's Law taking into account Lars's tendencies and cubed it seems distinctly possible that Lars' would have made a wrong pass. This example shows the importance of 'pressuring' one's opponents and applying the Simborg law of giving them cube decisions that they do not enjoy.

After hitting Lars's blot on the bar point, he then cashed the subsequent turn to go ahead 16-14 to 23. Then Lars won two straight races, the first game with the cube and the second game after doubling Petko in to take the lead for the first time in the match at 17-16. Then, a succession of fascinating, fast-paced high-pressure games ensued. The match began to resemble the seventh game of the World Series with intriguing pitching match-ups shaping both long term strategy and short term tactics. It is not an exaggeration to say it was the most thrilling live backgammon I have ever had the pleasure to watch.

Trailing 17-16, Petko gave a sound aggressive double and executed his threats pinning Lars into a well timed ace-deuce backgame. Petko threw a succession of excellent numbers clearing all but two of his points. Lars looked like he was likely to be gammoned and possibly backgammoned to bring Petko to crawford, but Lars hit a last ditch shot when Petko had 11 men off. This got him off the gammon.

Now leading 18-17, with less than three minutes on his clock Petko began to crack and Lars exploited it to the hilt showing why he is truly one of the best active match backgammon players. His actions in the closing games combined technical accuracy, table-feel, and an uncanny sense of what types of cubes and positions would cause Petko to err. On the fourth move of the game Lars achieved this position.

Position 14:

XGID=--b--aD-BA--cD---bbc-b-ABA:0:0:-1:D:18:17:0:23:10

double to 2 take ?

Analyzed in ????	
Player Winning Chances:	67.49% (G: 34.33% B: 5.16%)
Opponent Winning Chances:	32.51% (G: 5.31% B: 0.22%)

Cubeless Equities	
No Double:	+0.719
Double:	+1.643

Cubeful Equities	
No Double:	+1.017
Double/Take:	+1.366 (+0.349)
Double/Drop:	+1.000 (-0.017)

Best Cube action: Too Good to Double / Drop

eXtreme Gammon Version: 1.21, MET: Rockwell-Kazaross

Black has a fairly overwhelming attack. And white has a man on the roof. Black leads in boardage, has fewer men back, is shooting at a new blot, has a broken four prime, and with it a solid positional edge. At money the position is a solid double and a clear pass. Trailing 6-away, 5-away Lars is slightly in the too good zone. However, he correctly reasoned that due to psychological and time pressure Petko might take. Lars calmly thought about the double for a few moments, and then Petko snatched the cube and proceeded to butcher the

position. He soon found himself with seven men back in a backgame while Lars constructed an elegant prime and made daring moves to bust Petko's timing. Petko had the opportunity to establish a third anchor but did not seize it. Then a moment arose where Petko should have abandoned the backgame as his timing had evaporated after successive high doubles brought him to the below position.

Position 15:

XGID=-aB--cDB---AA-a-bb-bbbCB--:1:1:1:51:18:17:0:23:10

⊙ to play 51

1. XG Roller+	23/18 12/11		eq: -0.746
Player:	25.10% (G:5.20% B:0.20%)		
Opponent:	74.90% (G:31.86% B:1.64%)		
* 2. XG Roller+	12/7 11/10		eq: -0.996 (-0.250)
Player:	18.14% (G:2.69% B:0.12%)		
Opponent:	81.86% (G:36.93% B:2.13%)		

eXtreme Gammon Version: 1.21, MET: Rockwell-Kazaross

This is an exceedingly difficult position and one that is tough to diagnose under the pressure of the occasion, especially when also facing time pressure. I am fairly certain that most experts would make Petko's play in similar circumstances. Yet, in the calm of the study we see that Petko trails by only 12 pips after the roll. He is therefore unwise to continue playing an inflexible backgame if, and when, a better opportunity presents itself. Additionally, as the backgame option now looks very weak, it should be obvious that the bar point (Petko's 18-point) is now the most important square on the board. If Lars were eventually to make that point, he would have a six prime, whereas if Petko can make it he guarantees safe passage for his back men into the outer boards where they may either go forward or be recirculated. In short, if Petko can make the 18-point his game will not bust. Whereas, without that key square, he is very likely to bust because he lacks

timing, is highly disconnected, and trapped behind a broken five-prime. Therefore, Petko must seize the opportunity to 'step up' to the bar point. After seeing that that is the correct use of the 5 and that Petko is no longer seeking to go backwards, it is clear that the 1 should be used to make the 11-point. Making the eleven blocks Lars's sixes giving him awkward rolls in the turns to come.

Failing to grasp the importance of the bar and the precarious nature of his timing for the backgame, Petko remained wedded to his idée fixe of going backwards. This theme would re-emerge with a vengence in the penultimate game of the match. This is an all too common mistake and most of us can recognize similar moves we have made over the years at late night chouettes in the following triple blunder.

Position 16:

XGID=-BBA-bCA--a----bcBcbbBAA-:1:1:1:61:18:17:0:23:10

to play 61

1.	XG Roller+	24/18 7/6	eq: -0.744
	Player:	21.29% (G:3.05% B:0.06%)	
	Opponent:	78.71% (G:23.06% B:0.86%)	
*2.	XG Roller+	24/23 18/12	eq: -1.045 (-0.301)
	Player:	16.30% (G:1.95% B:0.05%)	
	Opponent:	83.70% (G:36.94% B:2.10%)	

eXtreme Gammon Version: 1.21, MET: Rockwell-Kazaross

If Petko holds the bar point he is unlikely to be gammoned or forced to bust, yet vacating that square he is in grave danger of both. Interestingly, even at DMP, it is best to reinforce the bar and safety the blot to the six point. We must assume that Petko had not realized how close the race was, and how bad his timing and position were for a backgame strategy. He was presumably just playing autopilot so as not to clock out.

Later after bizarrely and voluntarily abandoning his only remaining anchor on the three point, Petko got closed out and gammoned to trail 18-21. He had played the 56 moves of the backgame at a 21.46 error rating, which XG++ inappropriately dubs distracted. A better term might be harried, rushed, pressured, fatigued, or mentally inflexible. Lars had played the immensely complex game at the World Class level of 4.03. This should be a lesson in clock management for us all. Part of being a truly world class tournament backgammon player is leaving yourself enough of a time cushion to play a complex backgame at 2am to get to the finals of the World Championships.

Picking himself up from the debacle, Petko then played a highly competent mutual holding game, which after a joker or two he was able to cash, bringing the score to 19-21 or 4-away, 2-away, arguably backgammon's most exciting score. I remember vividly the tremendous energy in the playing room at 2:15am, a glass of Chablis in hand (which I was scolded by the Fairmont bar managers for bringing into the playing room from the lounge bar area). The atmosphere was truly rarefied as a group of die-hard backgammon fanatics were witnessing an historic match which illustrated everything about what makes our sport so gripping, invigorating, and tragic. It also proved to me that, if presented properly to an appropriate audience, backgammon is a fantastic TV spectator sport.

Lars rolled well in the opening of the 4-away, 2-away game and Petko never approached anything near a doubling threat. Striving to attack given the score, Petko was quickly thrust into a backgame as his attackers were hit. Just as Petko established his double anchor and spread his blots all over the board, Lars made an instinctual checker play decision which was likely his worst of the match.

Position 17:

XGID=aAA-BBBAA---aa--bc-cdBAB--:0:0:-1:31:19:21:0:23:10

to play 31

| 1.	XG Roller+	Bar/22 13/12		eq: +0.499
	Player:	68.42% (G:27.28% B:1.83%)		
	Opponent:	31.58% (G:6.48% B:0.14%)		
* 2.	XG Roller+	Bar/24* 6/3*		eq: +0.255 (-0.245)
	Player:	62.21% (G:33.83% B:2.68%)		
	Opponent:	37.79% (G:8.21% B:0.46%)		

eXtreme Gammon Version: 1.21, MET: Rockwell-Kazaross

Proving he was human, Lars decided to hit more men, presumably thinking it would increase his chance for a match-winning undoubled gammon. Clearly the double hit seeks to capitalize on Petko's blot-filled position by seizing the moment to attack inside, trying to make the 3-point. At first blush this seems logical and would have been my instinct as well. But it is anti-thematic for many reasons: Firstly, Petko's greatest weakness is his two blots stranded and essentially out of play on his ace and deuce point. Lars does not really want to hit either of these blots, especially not the ace point blot. Hence, he should let them languish there and allow ace-point suction to ruin Petko's chances of constructing a workable prime. Secondly, Petko's timing is poor. He trails by only 28 pips before the roll. If Lars can play safely and not allow Petko to go further backwards, Petko's timing will not hold up and he will likely bust before he gets a chance to hit a late-game shot. Thirdly, and less crucially, Lars wants to consolidate his outfield blots so that a surprise joker from Petko won't allow him to switch from defense to attack. Asked about the play over email after the match Lars pointed out to me how he hoped his play would seize the initiative allowing him to make the bar point by keeping Petko dancing also helping him win an undoubled gammon. This is an appealing prospective and Lars's play certainly wins more gammons. This

position shows that it is nearly impossible for humans to evaluate OTB the strength of an attacking play as opposed to a timing play, while XG++ is exceedingly gifted at spotting the timing plays even without a rollout.

Lars was not immediately punished for his mistake as Petko fanned. He did continue to inadvertantly improve Petko's timing by picking up more blots, but smartly allowed himself to be hit to dissipate Petko's timing. Eventually, Petko established a third anchor, but he didn't have the timing to sustain it, so he temporarily shifted to his 18 point to control the avenue through which he could recirculate his pieces.

Position 18:

XGID=---bCCB-------AaccBcc-BB--:0:0:1:42:19:21:0:23:10

🔘 to play 42
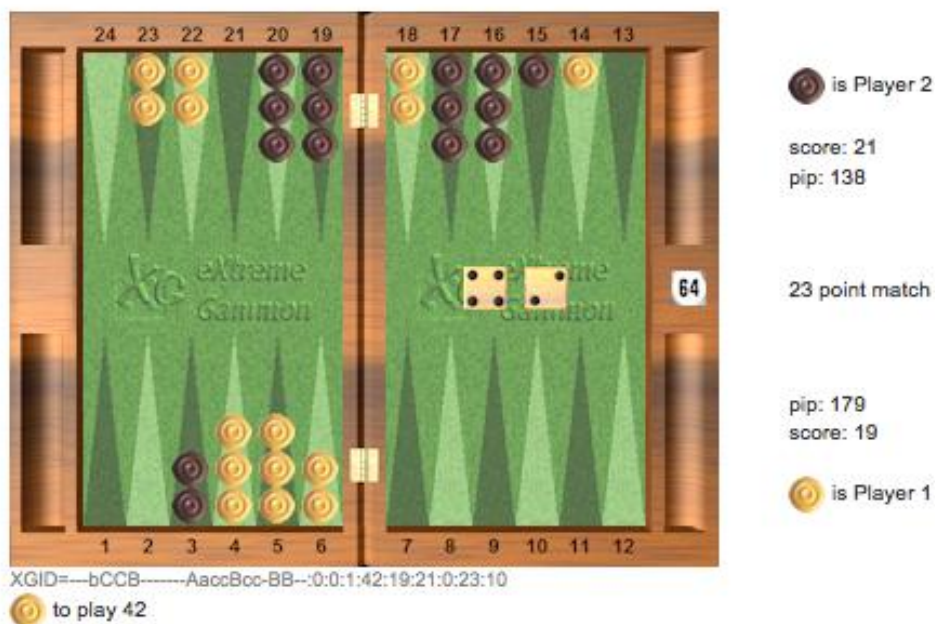
1.	XG Roller+	22/18 14/12	eq: -0.291
	Player:	38.15% (G:8.32% B:0.28%)	
	Opponent:	61.85% (G:23.40% B:1.46%)	
* 2.	XG Roller+	18/12	eq: -0.406 (-0.115)
	Player:	34.63% (G:7.75% B:0.33%)	
	Opponent:	65.37% (G:26.03% B:1.54%)	

eXtreme Gammon Version: 1.21, MET: Rockwell-Kazaross

Yet similarly to his blunders in the previous game, he promptly abandoned his bar point, rather than reinforcing it and abandoning his second backgame point instead, both of which are clearly indicated here. The Dice Gods' punishment for playing 18/12 was swift and super-painful (it might even have cost Petko something like 10,000 Euros in equity swing in only one sequence of rolls!) After the uber-blunder, Lars rolled 21 making the bar on Petko's head and establishing a five prime which he then extended to a full block of six in a row. The prime fully busted Petko's forward position. For about five minutes it looked like a match-

winning undoubled gammon was on the cards, but Lars left an early shot bearing in, and Petko hit. Then for two rolls, Petko surged ahead becoming a solid favorite as he managed to re-establish his board with a fleeing back checker. If Lars had not entered, Petko would have been close to a very scary but takeable double. At just the right moment, however, Lars threw a pair of 64 jokers, first entering and covering, then a couple of turns later escaping and hitting. During the bear-in phase, Lars even put two of Petko's back men on the roof, again making a match-winning undoubled gammon appear plausible. Yet, Petko managed to stay in the match for five more minutes with a well timed double 4 to comfortably save the gammon.

Further studying the blunder of leaving the midpoint, it seems inconceivable that any Open player, let alone a Giant, could make such an error in the crucial stages of a match with big money on the line. Knowing that Petko has withstood the pressure of other big match situations, it leads me to only one conclusion: it was 2:45 am and he was literally so fatigued that he was on autopilot. Therefore, I would like to place some of the blame for Petko's surprising blunders on... the tournament organizers! This may seem rash but the organizers forced the players to begin a 23 point backgammon match after 9pm even though both players were ready earlier and had asked to play in the afternoon. The organizers' justification for starting the match at night was so that it could be streamed live on the internet and not conflict with the streaming of the other afternoon semi-final. They presumably concluded that capturing a hundred more online views of the match would be more likely to bring players to future World Championships. However, in my opinion, the logic is flawed since adopting a player-friendly schedule -- which is more conducive to high quality play -- is more likely to promote the tournament and encourage higher attendance.

Given the actual match conditions, it is impossible to determine if Petko's poor performance reflects more on his innate ability, his nerves on the day, or on his inability to handle the organizers' preference for late starts, inconsistent timings, and late and long dinner breaks. I love the Monte Carlo tournament and look forward to returning annually; I write these potentially controversial words about its organization only because I want to make it better. In short, I hope this article will cause more players to lobby the Monte Carlo organizers to begin earlier in the day (and stop earlier in the night) and enforce the internationally recognized rules of backgammon, so as to preserve a high quality of play and respect for the rules that would bring honor to their otherwise great efforts and sacrifices in organizing the tournament, as well as to the backgammon community as a whole. Without these easily implemented changes, even such glorious matches as the Lars-vs-Petko semifinal are unlikely to lift the public perception of the World Championships to the level enjoyed by the Nordic or Chicago tournaments.

To conclude our story, at 22-19 Crawford, Lars rolled a few early jokers pinning Petko into a poorly-timed 2-point game from which he was forced off his anchor

before ever getting a shot. In over five hours and thirty games, Lars Trabolt had managed to come back from a 0-10 to 23 deficit to reach his third World Championship final in the span of six years. He had done so against a strong, yet clearly fatigued opponent whose tendencies he accurately diagnosed and ruthless exploited. Had Lars not played such brilliant backgammon, Petko's errors as highlighted in this article would likely never have transpired. Backgammon is a game of Ying and Yang, ebb and flow. Students of backgammon should study and re-study this match for its myriad psychological and positional insights. Fate would have it that many of the key areas of backgammon are amply covered in this match: attacking middle game cubes, backgames, recubes, racing cubes at uneven scores, and the exploitation of psychological dynamics.

In producing this article and its follow on, my thanks go to Lars and Slava who discussed their match play decisions with me afterward and to Peter Bennet who proofread this article and helped me fine-tune my analysis of some of the positions. I hope you have enjoyed my analysis and I look forward to analyzing the WC final next month. Until then I bid you adieu from rainy England. Stay Calm and Roll Double Sixes (when not on the bar).

You can download the match file here:

[PetkoKostadinov-LarsTrabolt23pointmatch10-08-2013replay.xg (438Kb)](#)
(Right click and "save as")

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