

# Madison Backgammon News



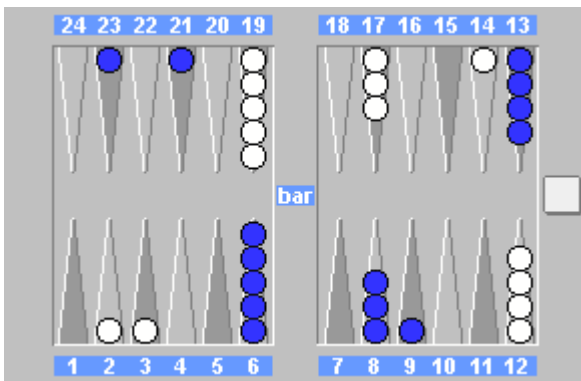
Number 31

September/October 1999

## Answers to Quiz Problems

By Sam Pottle

### Problem 1



- (a) Money game, center cube. Black to play 31.  
(b) Double match point. Black to play 31.

Black has several useful ways to play his 31. What are they?

Kent Goulding claims that many, if not most checker play mistakes result from never considering the best play at all, rather than rejecting it in favor of some other play. **You should get in the habit of finding all the reasonable plays in a position before trying to choose from among them.**

In Problem 1, Black can make his own 5 point (with 8/5 6/5), his 9 point (13/9), or the defensive 20 point anchor (23/20 21/20), or he can hit twice (6/3\*2\*). These are all reasonable plays (each one does something useful), and they are the only reasonable plays (no other play does as much).

Now that we've narrowed it down to four plays, which is best? We can discard the double-hit play, because the alternatives are so strong. Double-hitting in the opening is sometimes right, but usually only when the roll does nothing much otherwise, or when the opponent has strong

attacking threats. The main thing the double hit play accomplishes (besides leaving a blot on the deuce point) is to make White spend a turn or so entering his checkers. Making a strong point (like the 5 point) creates a permanent asset for Black's position, which will make itself felt for the rest of the game. If you like the double-hit play, ask yourself this question: what are you hoping to accomplish, during the turn or two that your play buys you, that is better than making the 5 point?

Should Black be working on offense (5 point, 9 point) or defense (20 point anchor)? In fairly equal positions, it's usually right to work on offense when there's a choice. In this position, White just isn't threatening Black's back checkers with anything much yet. Black is better off making progress on his own side of the board.

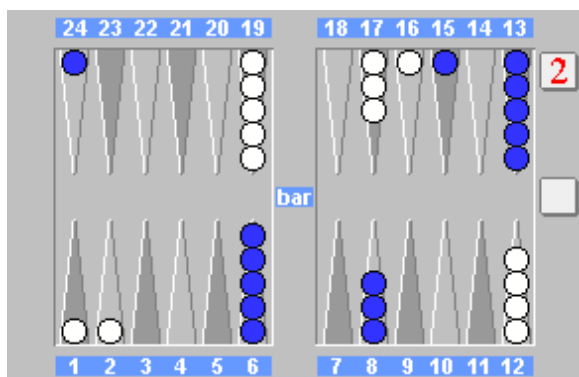
Now we're left with the choice of making the 5 point or the 9 point. The 5 point is a much better point to own. It is an inner board point, which makes Black's future attacks stronger, since more inner points means more dancing numbers for White. The 8/5 6/5 play also unstacks the 6 point and leaves a better distribution of builders for making more points. The big drawback of the play is the direct shot it leaves at the blot on the 9 point. Is making the stronger point worth the risk of getting this blot hit?

At DMP (double match point), the answer is no. Black wins the most games by simply covering the 9 point. Attacking plays (and plays that prepare to attack) are less attractive at DMP because the extra gammons they win aren't worth anything extra -- you either win the game or lose it. In other words, the difference in quality between the 5 and 9 points is smaller at DMP, and so it's not worth leaving a direct shot in order to make the better point.

For money, the picture is different. Having the five point made wins enough extra gammons for Black that it more than compensates for the extra losses that result from the blot exposure.

In part (a), score 2 points for 8/5 6/5. In part (b), score 2 points for 13/9.

## Problem 2



- (a) Money game, center cube. Black to play 66.  
 (b) 5 point match, Black trails 4-1 post-Crawford, White owns a 2-cube. Black to play 66.

Black's options in Problem 2 fall into two groups: plays that hit one or both of White's back checkers (I'll call these the "attacking" plays), and those that don't, avoiding putting men deep in Black's home board (I'll call these the "positional" plays).

Among the positional plays, 13/7(3) 15/9 stands out. This makes the important bar point, moves the outfield blot to a safer place, and leaves an excellent builder distribution for making inside points in the next few turns, either lengthening the prime or attacking White's back checkers as the dice dictate. It also leaves Black's back checker on the 24 point, out of harm's way. As in Problem 1, Black should concentrate on his own side of the board first. If he gets a good offensive position, he shouldn't find it too difficult to extricate his back man later.

What about the attacking plays? There are many possibilities. Black can hit either or both of White's back men, and can make the deuce point, the ace point, or neither. Hitting loose without making an inside point doesn't seem like such a good idea: it leaves the equivalent of a double shot without really getting anything for it. Plays that point on a checker include 13/1\*(2) and 13/7(2) 8/2\*(2), and the most aggressive play, 8/2\*(2) 13/1\*, hitting twice. I like the aggressive play; if you're going to attack, ATTACK! Two checkers in the air, and only 4 rolls out of 36 make an anchor for White, compared to 17 out of 36 for each of the other attacking plays. Also, hitting two men makes Black's outfield blot safer: only 55 and 33 hit it.

So, which is better, the elegant positional play or the violent attacking play? For money, the attack looks premature. Black gets only a two point board, and his builder distribution is lousy (look at the big stack on the 6 point), making it more difficult to carry out a successful blitz. If the attack fails and White makes an advanced anchor, the men on the deuce point will effectively be out of play for the rest of the game. Black will be unable to contain White's back men, while White, with all his men still in play, may build a winning prime on his side of the table.

This is the reason that strong players are reluctant to take checkers deep into their home boards; it's much harder to build a prime that includes the 2 point than one that includes the four point. Look at the positional play: Black could easily have a 5-prime in two rolls.

So, score two points for 13/7(3) 15/9 in part (a).

What's going on with the match score in part (b)? Black needs four points to win the match, so gammoning White here will put him out exactly. This makes gammonish plays more attractive to Black than they would be for money. Here's why.

Suppose you take a risk in order to win a gammon, for example by making the 5 point (instead of the 9 point) in Problem 1, or by attacking (instead of making the positional play) here. The big plays win a gammon more often and lose the game more often. How do these gammons and losses trade off?

For money, anytime you win a gammon instead of a plain game (on a 2-cube, say), you win 4 points instead of 2, a gain of 2 points. Anytime you lose the game instead of winning it, you lose 2 points instead of winning 2, a loss of 4 points. So each extra loss costs you twice as much as each extra gammon gains you. For a risky play to be justified, it has to win at least twice as many extra gammons as it loses extra games.

This ratio (actually its inverse, 0.5) is called the **gammon price**. It is always one-half in money play, but in match play, the gammon price varies with the score and the size of the cube.

With Black trailing 4-1 post-Crawford, if he wins a plain game the score will be 4-3 post-Crawford, essentially a DMP situation. His chance of winning the match will then be about 50%. If he loses the game instead, he loses the match, costing him the 50% match winning chances. If he wins a gammon instead of plain game, he wins the match, going from 50% to 100%. So Black gains just as much from an extra gammon as he loses from an extra loss. His gammon price is 1.0.

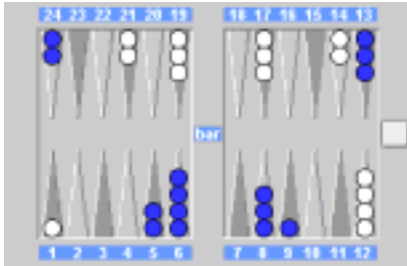
In a sense this means that Black's gammons are worth twice as much as they would be for money. The gammon price can be used as an indicator of how aggressively one should try for a gammon. (Conversely, it can also be used by the other player to judge whether to risk losing a gammon in order to try to win the game.) With a gammon price of 1.0, Black should launch a blitz attack on almost any excuse, and the 66 he just rolled qualifies. Black needs only moderately good luck to close White out, win a gammon and steal the match.

If you don't care for the mathematics of gammon prices, you don't really need them. Just look at the score -- Black is trailing, and a gammon will win the match exactly for him, so gammons are very valuable and Black should play aggressively.

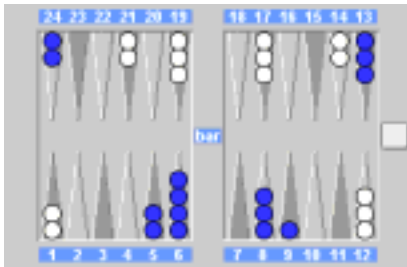
Score two points for 8/2\*(2) 13/1\* in part (b).

## New Quiz Problems

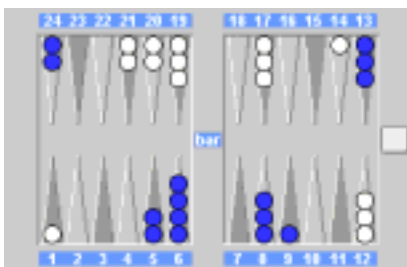
### Problem 3



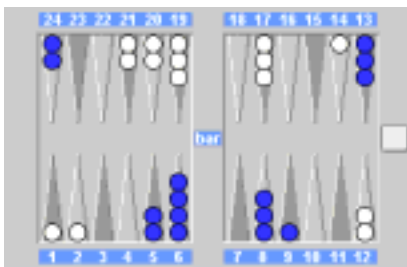
Part A: Money game, center cube.  
Black to play 11. (2 points)



Part B: Money game, center cube.  
Black to play 11. (2 points)

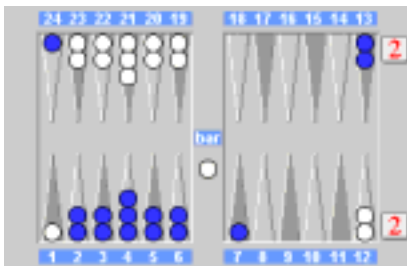


Part C: Money game, center cube.  
Black to play 11. (2 points)



Part D: Money game, center cube.  
Black to play 11. (2 points)

### Problem 4



Money game, Black to play 32.

- (a) White owns the cube. (2 points)
- (b) Black owns the cube. (2 points)

## Gary Hines Wins 1999 Madison Invitational Tourney

Gary Hines beat Mark Tremayne in the first of two possible 17-point matches for 1<sup>st</sup> place in the tournament. The last game of the match was a nail-biter with Gary leading with a match score of 15-14 at the onset. At one point in the game, Mark could have won the match with a gammon (had the dice been kind) while Gary held a 2 cube, forcing a second 17-point match to determine the tournament winner. Early in the month, Mark upset Sam Pottle in a stunning victory for the opportunity to play Gary in the finals.

Congratulations goes to Gary, Mark and Sam for their fine performance as well as a 1<sup>st</sup> place prize of \$500, 2<sup>nd</sup> place prize of \$300, and a 3<sup>rd</sup> place prize of \$100, respectively. An anonymous benefactor of the Madison Backgammon Club donated the prize money.

## MBC Members Cash at the 47<sup>th</sup> INDIANA Open

Sam Pottle won 2<sup>nd</sup> consolation in the Advanced Division of the main event. Bruce Russell and Gary Hines won overflow section of the MicroDoubles. John Brussel, a UW alumnus and former UW Marching Band member, won the Championship Division of the main event.

The Labor Day Weekend event was an outstanding success. The events were well-organized, the tournament staff was very courteous, and the host hotel was clean and conveniently located near many good restaurants.

## Advice to the Dicelorn

By Miss Lonelyblots

*Dear Miss Lonelyblots,*

*I have a big problem. My name is Lee and I've been playing backgammon with my friend, Bruce, for the last eight years. Additionally, I play chouettes with other members of our club, here in Madison. My problem, Miss Lonelyblots, is this. **Sometimes**, during the course of a game, **I do NOT get an absolute case roll** when I'm shaking the dice. Admittedly, this is quite a rare occurrence... but it does happen. And when it does happen, it can be very unsettling. It's almost as if I'm being required to think or something. And that makes me very uncomfortable. I go into a cold sweat. My heart rate triples. Why, Miss Lonelyblots, does this have to happen to me? Why can't **EVERY** roll of mine be a case roll? It just doesn't seem fair. I can't be expected to play this game of backgammon based on my skill alone... that would be ludicrous! I sure am hoping you'll have some suggestions, Miss Lonelyblots. If I get just one more average roll, I swear I'll give up this game.*

*Signed me,*

*"Perplexed Every Once Out of 973 Rolls"*

**Dear Perplexed,**

Welcome to the Planet Earth, Solar System, Milky Way Galaxy. This is your current locale. I'd be curious to know your native star system and galaxy. It turns out, *Perplexed*, we mere earthlings have to deal with "just average" rolls the great majority of the time when we are playing the game of backgammon. In fact, and this will really shock your socks off (or whatever you adorn yourself with), we even get our fair share of really stinky rolls. Doesn't that just make your "outer layer" crawl?!? My suggestion to you, *Perplexed*, is to simply be appreciative of your alien heritage. As long as you're toasting everyone you play, don't fret about that occasional (once in a "blue moon"? I don't know, you tell us) average roll. Just go ahead and make any old, random play that occurs to you. As regards actually engaging your brain, don't even go there... In the meantime, enjoy your stay on our planet. And, speaking from a personal point of view, there's this doubles tournament in about six weeks in Springfield, IL (USA). "You shake 'em, and I'll play 'em." Deal?

— Miss Lonelyblots

## Madison Backgammon News

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## ADDRESS SERVICE REQUESTED

### Carl Shines in Sweet September

Carl Jespersen moved up three notches in the club standing as a result of his stellar performance last month. Carl's 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> place finishes added 6.30 points to his total. Gary Hines opened up his lead on the scoreboard with a 8.35 point gain. Mark Tremayne closely followed Carl's ascension with a 5.80 gain. Even (Uncle) Bruce Russell decided to "shake-up those dices" with a 4.45 point gain.

### Recent Club Tournament Results

**August 17** – (9 players) 1<sup>st</sup> Gary Hines, 2<sup>nd</sup> Bruce Russell, Cons. Tom Machaj.

**September 7** – (8 players) 1<sup>st</sup> Mark Tremayne, 2<sup>nd</sup> Carl Jespersen, Cons. Gary Hines.

**September 21** – (9 players) 1<sup>st</sup> Carl Jespersen, 2<sup>nd</sup> Gary Hines, Cons. Sam Pottle.

### Club Standings As Of 9/21/99

Gary Hines	38.95
Tom Machaj	29.75
Sam Pottle	27.30
Mark Tremayne	26.65
Bruce Russell	22.25
Lenn Schneider	18.45
Bill Minser	18.25
Lee Pflugrad	14.90
Carl Jespersen	10.90
Bruce Garner	9.65
Rob Keast	9.10
Mark Kremer	6.70
Sonja Peacock	4.15
Jerry Neviaser	3.00
Marge Kirchoff	1.00
Paul Strasberg	1.00

### Upcoming Events

**October 5** – Club Tournament. JT Whitney's Pub & Brewery, 674 S Whitney Way, Madison, WI. (608) 274-1776. 6:30 p.m. Registration. 7:00 p.m. Play begins. \$6/entry, \$4/1<sup>st</sup> side, \$5/2<sup>nd</sup> side.

**October 10** – Chicago Bar Point Sunday Bimonthly. Anyway's Chicago Grill & Bar, 5 E Roosevelt Rd, Oakbrook Terrace, IL (630) 932-9323. 11:30 a.m. Registration. 12 p.m. Play begins. \$40/open, \$20/intermediate.

**October 19** – Club Tournament. JT Whitney's Pub & Brewery, 674 S Whitney Way, Madison, WI. (608) 274-1776. 6:30 p.m. Registration. 7:00 p.m. Play begins. \$6/entry, \$4/1<sup>st</sup> side, \$5/2<sup>nd</sup> side.

**November 2** – Club Tournament. JT Whitney's Pub & Brewery, 674 S Whitney Way, Madison, WI. (608) 274-1776. 6:30 p.m. Registration. 7:00 p.m. Play begins. \$6/entry, \$4/1<sup>st</sup> side, \$5/2<sup>nd</sup> side.

**November 7** – Milwaukee Bi-Monthly Tournament. John Hawks Pub, 100 E Wisconsin Ave, Milwaukee, WI. (414) 272-3199. 12 p.m. Registration. 12:30 p.m. Play begins. \$40/open - \$10/side, \$20/limited.

**November 12-14** – Illinois State Backgammon Championships. Springfield Hilton, 700 E Adams St, Springfield, IL. (800) 445-8667. 12:00 p.m. Friday registration opens. 10:30-11:30 a.m. Saturday final registration. 11:30 a.m. Calcutta auction, public drawing & play begins. \$100/championship - \$50/side, \$40/intermediate - \$20/side. Several side events. The Springfield Open begins at 1:00 p.m. on Friday.

**November 16** – Club Tournament. JT Whitney's Pub & Brewery, 674 S Whitney Way, Madison, WI. (608) 274-1776. 6:30 p.m. Registration. 7:00 p.m. Play begins. \$6/entry, \$4/1<sup>st</sup> side, \$5/2<sup>nd</sup> side.