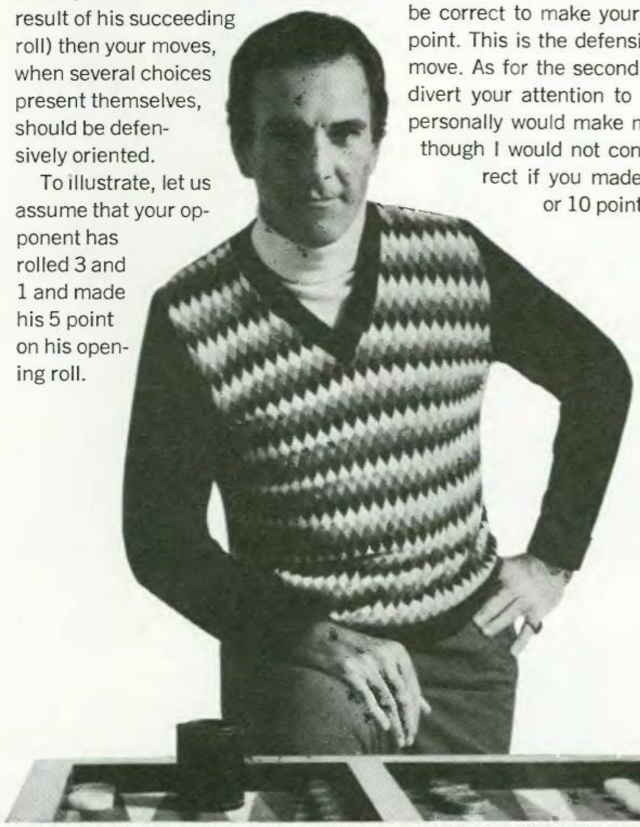
Your opponent opens. Now what? Byford and Tim Holland reveal a rule for the right response.

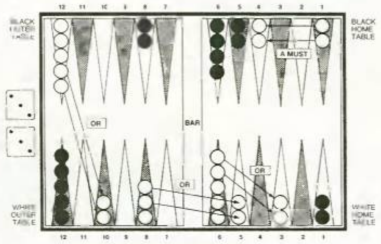
The area of Backgammon which is perhaps most neglected in instruction and least understood by players, is what is known as the "response to opening moves"—that is, the move which directly follows the opening roll.

Fortunately, after suffering the pangs of indecision for countless games, I discovered a "general rule" that could be applied to all responses to opening rolls. Although I inherently dislike general rules in Backgammon, this one does have definite value and I use it constantly: When, because of an opponent's play of an opening roll, the escape routes for your two men on his 1 point are threatened (or about to be threatened as a result of his succeeding roll) then your moves, when several choices present themselves, should be defensively oriented.

To illustrate, let us assume that your opponent has rolled 3 and 1 and made his 5 point on his opening roll.



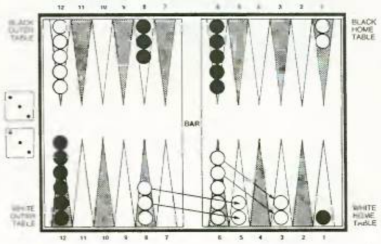
Black's opening roll was 3 and 1. White rolls double 3's.



Your response is double 3's. Obviously you have several choices. Without some criteria to help in your decision you might or might not make the right selection. By using the "general rule" you know that for half of your move it must be correct to make your opponent's 4 point. This is the defensive part of the move. As for the second half, you can divert your attention to the offense. I personally would make my 5 point, although I would not consider it incorrect if you made your 3 point or 10 point.

This problem illustrates what, by inference, is the rest of the "general rule":

Black's opening roll was 6 and 5. White rolls double 3's.



The correct play is to make your 5 point and your 3 point. Your decision in this case is rather simplified. Since at this moment there is no threat to your men in your opponent's home board, you need not be concerned at this juncture in the game with defensive measures. The emphasis should be on the "attack."

The slight risk of your resulting blot on your 8 point being hit (you can be hit only with the rolls of 6 and 1 or 4 and 3 —4 chances out of 36) should be disregarded for your board has become an imposing threat to your opponent.

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The next Byford Backgammon lesson will appear on September 30th.

Don't make hit-and-miss moves. Byford and Tim Holland show you how to bag that blot!

Backgammon is not an exact science. Therefore one can merely say that certain moves or plays are correct only so far as the laws of probability are concerned.

So often a player will select a move which will succeed only 30 per cent of the time, versus one which will be 60 per cent successful and yet, because dice are inanimate and know no home, the inferior play's rewards will be victory and the correct play's rewards—disaster. Nevertheless, in the long run, the "percentage plays" will always prove to be more profitable.

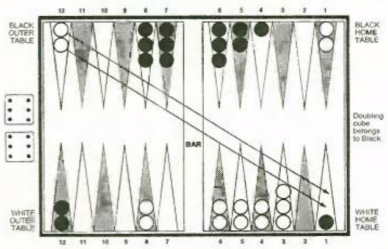
This problem illustrates the fact that Backgammon is not an exact science. To prognosticate in the middle of a game and say that one will win X number of times with one play, versus Y number of times with another is totally impossible due to the fact that succeeding rolls are unknown. One can merely say that one move is superior to another because of the laws of probability.

In the problem at right, the correct move is to make your 1 point hitting Black's blot. If Black does not enter on his next roll (25 to 11 against), you hope to pick up his additional blot on his 4 point or close your board. If you are able to hit this second blot and escape, there is an excellent chance for you to win a gammon. If Black enters but is not able to make his 4 point (only 2 and 2, 2 and 3, 2 and 4) you will still have the opportunity to hit his blot on his 4 point, and failing this or including it, you will be able to hit his blot on your 2 point; or your bar in the event his roll is 2 and 5 and he elects to move your bar point. If Black rolls 2 and 6, he will be forced to leave an additional blot.

If you made your bar and 2 points, thus making a prime, Black will have 28 out of 36 chances to make his 4 point. If he succeeds in doing this, his position now would be so strong (because you would be forced to break your prime unless you free one of your two men on his 1 point) that he will have become a prohibitive favorite to win the game.

NOTE: Assuming you made a prime and assuming that Black makes his 4 point, there are only 8 numbers that you might roll that would not cause you to break your prime—double 1's, 2's, 3's, 6's, 2 and 6, 2 and 1.

White rolls double 6's



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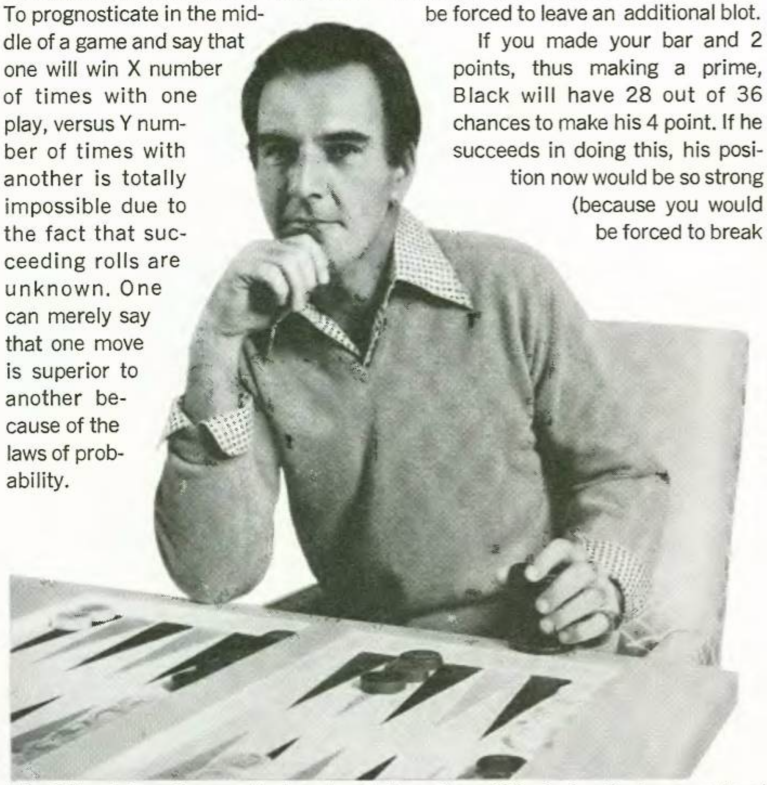

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The next Byford Backgammon lesson will appear on October 14th.

To double or not to double? That is the question. Byford and Tim Holland give you the answer.

The doubling cube is the object around which the greatest divergence of opinion exists among the experts. On many occasions when several good players are involved in a chouette (one person playing several opponents), the single player ("the man in the box", in Backgammon terminology) will double his several opponents; half of them will accept the double while the other half will decline. It stands to reason that one group or the other must be wrong.

Depending upon the final results of the game, those players who dropped the double will laugh at the others and say, "How could you possibly have accepted that double?"—or those who accepted will say, "How could you not have accepted that double?" It is only natural that this dichotomy of opinion exists, for Backgammon is not an exact science and one must rely on personal judgement and experience in this area of the game.

There is one category in the use of the doubling block, however, in which individual opinions have no bearing on the acceptance or rejection of doubles, and where it can be proven that one's decisions are correct or incorrect. This occurs where only straight mathematical probabilities are concerned. An illustrative problem is at the right.

Should Black double?

Should White accept?

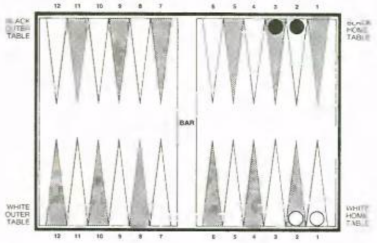
The answer to both questions is yes. This may seem paradoxical, for how can it be correct for one side to double and the other side to accept?

I will show you!

Assume this exact position is played 36 times, with the doubling cube in the middle at 1 (neither side has doubled). According to the laws of probability, Black will win 25 times and he will lose 11 times (11 rolls out of 36 will contain an ace, in which case he will fail to bear off both his men, thus, automatically losing the game). So, the results:

When Black fails to double:
Black wins +25, loses —11, for a net total of +14.
When Black doubles and White accepts:
Black wins +50 (25x2), loses —22 (11x2), for a net total of +28.
Proof that Black must double.

And now for White (once again assuming the game is played 36 times):
When Black doubles and White declines, White is —36.
When Black doubles and White accepts, White is —50 (the 25 times that Black wins at 2) and +22 (the 11 times that Black loses at 2) for a —28, a net gain of 8 points (the difference between —36 when White fails to accept).



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The next Byford Backgammon lesson will appear on November 11th.

Bear up while you bear off. Byford and Tim Holland teach you the tactics.

Of all the games which are lost at Backgammon, unquestionably the most irritating and exasperating are those in which you have a closed board, an opponent's man or men on the bar, and great expectations of not only winning, but perhaps of winning a gammon. How infuriating it is when all of a sudden you are forced to leave a blot while bearing off, your opponent hits it, and kaput! from a victory to a loss.

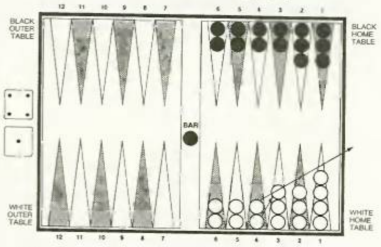
Many times this cannot be avoided regardless of how well you plan and anticipate. When this happens the best thing for you to do is get on to the next game without complaining too bitterly, but filing away, if it makes you feel better, the fact that the gods of fate "owe you one". You should not be concerned with the unavoidable, only with the unforgivable, which is when you lose a game because of a careless or incorrect play. The problem at the right is an example of this:

The correct play is to bear one man off your 4 point and to move one man from your 4 point to your 3 point.

If Black fails to enter on his next roll, only the roll of 6 and 2 will cause you to leave a blot. If you were to break your 6 point, by moving one man four to your 2 point and one man one to your 5 point, and Black did not enter, on your next roll you would be forced to expose with the rolls of 6 and 5, 6 and 4, 6 and 3, 5 and 4, 5 and 3, double 6's, 5's and 4's, which adds up to 13 possible combinations that will cause exposure versus only 2 with the correct move. If you were to break your 5 point, by moving one man to your 1 point and one man to your 4 point, then you would expose (again assuming Black did not enter) with rolls of 6 and 1, 5 and 1, double 6's, 5's and 4's, which totals 7 combinations. This is better than moving from the 6 point but hardly correct when you can make a move which will leave only 2 possibilities.

Note: When you break your 6 point and your opponent enters, your problems are over. When you break your 4 point and he enters, he is still a threat. This should not influence your decision.

White rolls 4 and 1



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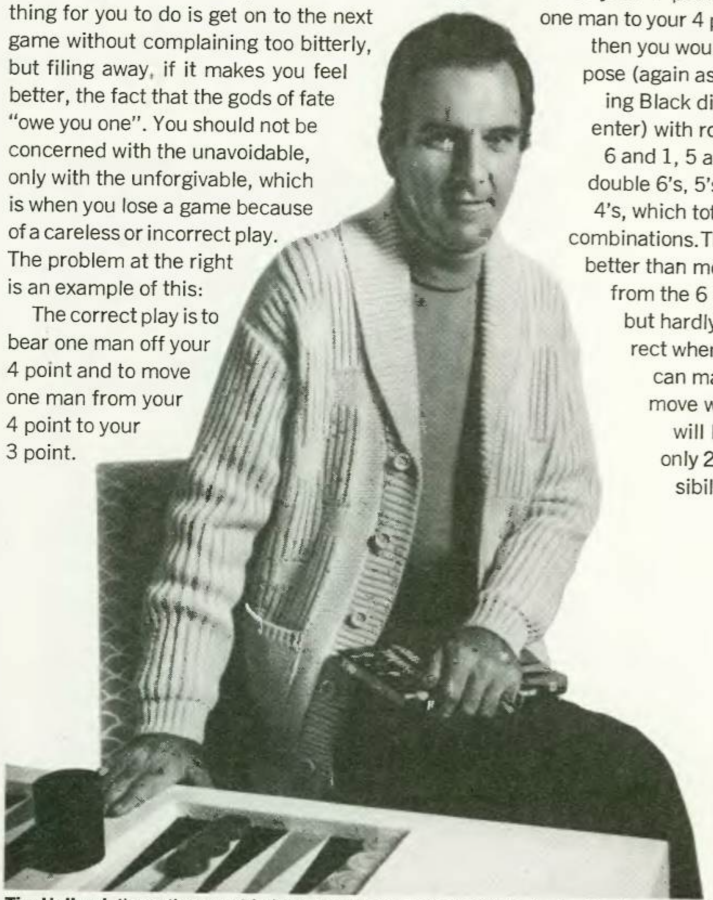

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The next Byford Backgammon lesson will appear on November 25th.

Hone your game to a fine point. Byford and Tim Holland show you how.

Throughout your future in Backgammon, you will discover that certain games will be impossible to win, others impossible to lose! This usually occurs when a preponderance of good fortune accrues to one player only.

There is no doubt in my mind that over any length of time, this good and bad fortune will even out. Therefore, the final balance sheet, whether it shows red or black, will be more greatly affected than one would assume by how you handle those seemingly innocuous moves where, by using the correct play, you will greatly increase your winning or losing percentages.

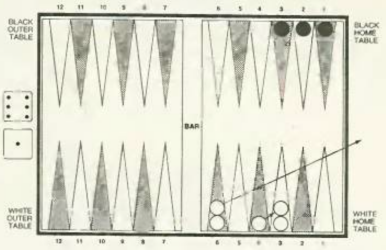
A rather concise illustration is given in the problem at the right. There is only one correct move. You bear one man off your 6 point and move from your 4 point to your 3 point.

It is obvious, assuming that your opponent does not roll a double (in which case the game would end), that you will need to roll a double of your own on your next roll in order to win the game.

Double 6's, 5's and 4's will win for you regardless of how you choose to play your 1. A close inspection will reveal that with the correct move, you also will be able to win with the roll of double 3's. Thus you have increased your possibilities of winning by 33⅓%. Certainly nothing to be sneezed at!

It is not necessary for you to memorize positions such as this —only that you must be aware of them when they occur and thus give yourself the best chances to win.

White rolls 6 and 1



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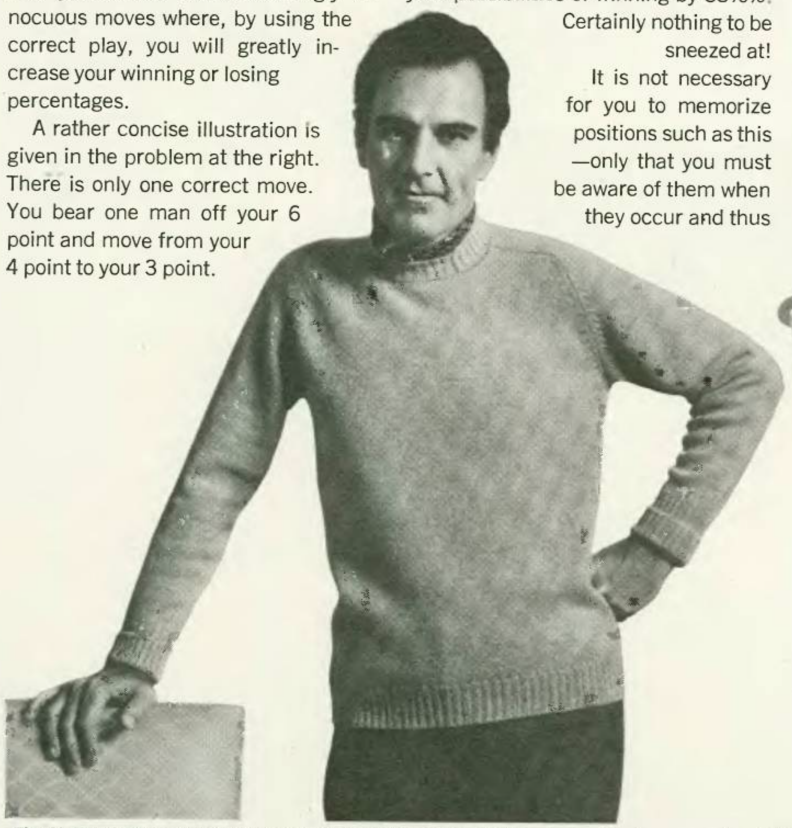

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