

## PROBLEM OF THE WEEK #5 – JANUARY 6, 2020

### THE POSITION:

○ is JBNY  
 score: 0  
 pip: 142  
 7 point match  
 pip: 139  
 score: 1  
 ● is Double A Red

XGID=---b-E-D--CbB--abcd-A--a:0:0:-1:62:0:1:0:7:10

● to play 62

### THE TOURNAMENT AND THE PLAYERS:

For this week’s problem, we’ll continue to take positions from games played by members of our regular player pool in the “For The Glory” online tournament circuit. This position comes from the final round of the 2020 year-end online backgammon tournament for the Long Island Backgammon Club, which was hosted on the Backgammon Galaxy website. This week’s protagonist is our very own local hero, December Man of the Month and all-around gentleman, Ralph “Double A Red” D’Onofrio (above, playing the Black checkers). In today’s problem, he is pitted against backgammon superstar, preeminent tournament director, and true legend in his own mind, John “JBNY” Barnett (above, playing the White checkers). For those that don’t know, John was once almost elected to the board of directors of the prestigious United States Backgammon Federation.

### THE GAME SITUATION:

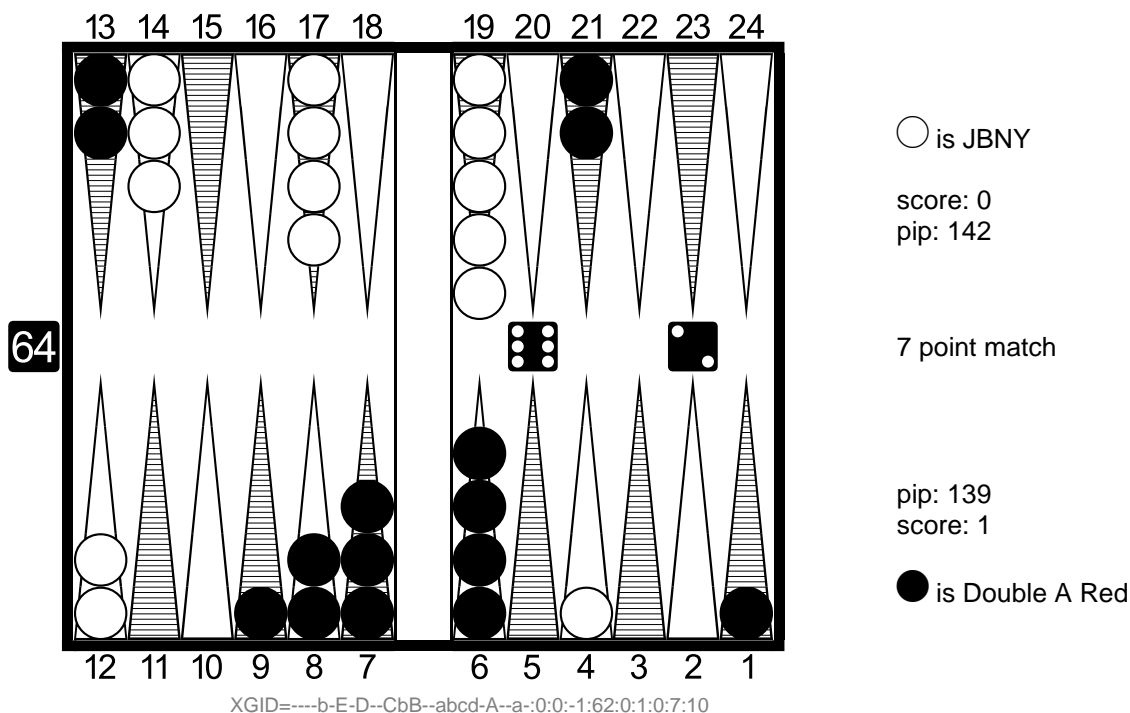
It’s the second game of a 7-point match, and Ralph (with the Black checkers above) is on roll, leading 1-0 in the match. He was hoping to point on White’s blot in his inner board, and any roll containing a combination of 2, 3, 4 or 5 would have allowed him to do so. Sadly, though, he rolled a 62 – obviously not one of his better rolls. He takes his time and carefully weighs his options, aiming to find the best play for this non-ideal roll.

### THE QUESTION:

So, my loyal readers, what should he do here?

# SOLUTION

## Extreme Gammon Rollout Results:



● to play 62

1.	Rollout <sup>1</sup>	7/1 6/4*	eq: +0.158
	Player:	51.37% (G:19.26% B:0.33%)	Conf.: ± 0.015 (+0.143...+0.172) - [100.0%]
	Opponent:	48.63% (G:8.50% B:0.44%)	Duration: 6 minutes 37 seconds
2.	Rollout <sup>1</sup>	9/1	eq: +0.123 (-0.035)
	Player:	52.17% (G:12.36% B:0.19%)	Conf.: ± 0.013 (+0.110...+0.135) - [0.0%]
	Opponent:	47.83% (G:5.97% B:0.32%)	Duration: 6 minutes 37 seconds
3.	Rollout <sup>1</sup>	9/3 7/5	eq: -0.078 (-0.236)
	Player:	47.13% (G:10.51% B:0.18%)	Conf.: ± 0.012 (-0.090...-0.067) - [0.0%]
	Opponent:	52.87% (G:7.02% B:0.37%)	Duration: 7 minutes 25 seconds
< Many Other Plays >			
	Rollout <sup>1</sup>	21/13	eq: -0.279 (-0.437)
	Player:	42.86% (G:9.87% B:0.39%)	Conf.: ± 0.011 (-0.290...-0.268) - [0.0%]
	Opponent:	57.14% (G:12.01% B:0.43%)	Duration: 6 minutes 55 seconds
<sup>1</sup> 1296 Games rolled with Variance Reduction. Moves: 3-ply, cube decisions: XG Roller			

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The play of the 6 is pretty clear – having left a blot on his ace-point, Black should cover it with 7/1. Any other play of the 6 is awkward and/or non-constructive.<sup>1</sup> For the deuce, though, there are really 2 choices. Ralph can safety his blot on the 9-point, playing 9/7, or he can make a loose hit on the White blot in his inner board

<sup>1</sup> Note that breaking the defensive 21-point is the wrong idea in this position. As the race is about even, the anchor is more of an asset than a liability. In fact, if Black runs one of his back checkers, he'll be converting an asset (the made 21-point) into a liability (a vulnerable blot on the 21-point which will be subject to attack by the 11 checkers that White has in his own attacking zone). A future Problem of the Week will discuss considerations relating to anchor-breaking plays, but generally speaking you should be reluctant to break a defensive anchor absent a compelling reason.

by playing 6/4\*. The first choice, 9/7, is very safe, and preserves Black's small racing lead. The second choice, 6/4\*, is bolder, putting White on the bar, hoping to be able to make the 4-point next turn, and subsequently play an attacking and/or containment game against White's last back checker. Essentially, the question is: Should Black make a Safe Play or should he make a Bold Play in the problem position?

It turns out that back in the 1970's, the heyday of Backgammon, the venerable Paul Magriel set forth criteria that should be considered in assessing the safe play-versus-bold play question, in his seminal work on the game, *Backgammon*.<sup>2</sup> While this book was published in 1976, more than 40 years ago, the criteria that he then espoused have survived the test of time quite admirably. To address this week's problem: first, we'll outline Paul's famous criteria; second, we'll apply the criteria to the particulars of the problem position; and third, we'll review the conclusions from the application of these criteria in an attempt to arrive at the best play for Black in this position.

### Paul Magriel's Safe-versus-Bold Criteria:<sup>3</sup>

- How strong is your opponent's inner board? If your opponent has a strong inner board, favor a safe play; if your opponent has a weaker inner board, favor a bold play. When your opponent has a strong inner board, bold plays become more costly, since it will be harder to reenter from the bar if you get hit.
- Do you hold an anchor in your opponent's inner board? If you have a defensive anchor, favor a bold play; if you don't have a defensive anchor, favor a safe play. Similar to the first point above, an anchor in your opponent's board allows you to play more aggressively because you can't get closed out and you have some protection against a possible disaster in the form of your defensive anchor.
- How strong is your own inner board? If you have a strong inner board, favor a bold play; if you have a weaker inner board, favor a safe play. In particular, if you're inner board is stronger than your opponent's, you have the advantage in any ensuing blot-hitting contest.
- Does your opponent have blots in his own inner board? If he does, you should favor bolder play, since you will often have return shots from the bar if you get hit and placed on the bar.
- How many men do you have back? The more men that you have back, the more aggressively you can play, since having additional men sent back is less costly.
- How many men does your opponent have back? This is the flip side of the previous item – when your opponent has few men back, he will strive to play more safely, so you can afford to play more boldly. In particular: "If he has no men back or one man back, you place a high priority on hitting him and keeping him from escaping his last man."<sup>4</sup>

### Application of Safe-versus-Bold Criteria to the Problem Position:

Let's take another look at the problem position, through the lens of Magriel's safe-versus-bold criteria:

- How strong is John's inner board? Answer: John has not been able to create any new inner-board points – he only has the 5 checkers on the 6-point that he started with at the beginning of the game.
  - Edge – this favors Bold Play.
- Does Ralph hold an anchor in John's home board? Answer: Yes, he has made the defensive 21-point, a fairly good anchor.
  - Edge – this favors Bold Play.
- How strong is Ralph's inner board? Answer: Ralph will have two inner board points after he plays 7/1, making his ace-point. He doesn't have a super-strong inner board, but his board is still a touch stronger

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<sup>2</sup> Magriel, Paul, *Backgammon*, X-22 Publishing, 1976, Chapter 16, pp. 210-221.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>4</sup> *Id.*, p. 218.

than John's, and he is threatening to make his 4-point, improving to a three-point board if John is unable to hit the blot left on the 4-point.

- Edge – this slightly favors Bold Play.
- Does John have blots in his own inner-board? Answer: He does not.
  - Edge – this favors Safe Play.
- How many men does Ralph have back? Answer: He has two men back.
  - Edge – this is a relatively neutral factor in this position.
- How many men does John have back? Answer: He has only one man back.
  - Edge – this favors Bold Play. Whenever your opponent is down to his last man back, it is very important for you to take action to prevent that checker from escaping. The three main game plans that you can pursue in backgammon are racing, attacking and priming/containment. Once your opponent escapes his last back checker, the attacking and priming/containment game plans are generally no longer viable, so you are left with only racing – obviously something you should strive to avoid when possible.

### **Best Play/Conclusion:**

Looking at the application of Magriel's Safe-versus-Bold criteria to this week's problem, four of the criteria favor Bold Play, one is Neutral and one favors Safe Play. It is evident that the criteria point in the direction of making a Bold Play.

Given the direction of Magriel's criteria, Black can consider making a Bold Play. Of course, he shouldn't do so willy-nilly. Although the strategic and tactical positional features call for a Bold Play, Black needs to be mindful that a play that entails risk should also have an appropriate likelihood of realizing commensurate gains. That is the case here with the loose hit on the 4-point. First, Black has 11 checkers in the attacking zone positioned to launch a blitz – that's a lot. Second, as noted above, it is important that White not be given free rein to escape his final back checker – a common backgammon maxim is that you should seek to attack a single back checker and prime an anchor.<sup>5</sup> Third, since Black does have a defensive anchor and White only has a one-point board, Black will have no difficulty reentering his checker if White hits it from the bar (*i.e.*, all things considered, the risk is relatively small); on the other hand, when White misses the blot, Black will be left with a very strong attacking position (*i.e.*, if Black makes the bold play, his potential gain is considerable).

Conclusion: The best play in this position is 7/1 6/4\*. As the rollout shows, it wins a few less games than the safe alternative, but wins more gammons.

### **EPILOGUE**

As it turns out, Ralph played 9/1, covering his blot on the ace-point and failing to hit White's blot in his inner board. Not surprisingly, the Extreme Gammon Rollout indicates that this play – the Safe Play – was an error on his part. Nevertheless, in spite of this, Ralph did go on to win the game, and then the 7-point match, propelling him into a USBGF sponsored tournament for local club champions!!

Of course, I'll be pulling for our local club hero, December Man of the Month, true gentleman, and now – **Local Club Champion** – Ralph D'Onofrio, in this prestigious tournament! I congratulate Ralph and wish him the very best of luck!

Most of the players that are participants in the "For the Glory" Tournament Circuit have also congratulated Ralph on his win in the club championship, expressed their support for his future endeavors, and are most hopeful that he'll be able to continue his online success with a strong performance in this upcoming USBGF event. I'm confident that his very gracious opponent has already done the same, expressing similar sentiments.

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<sup>5</sup> See, *e.g.*, Robertie, **501 Essential Backgammon Problems**, Cardoza Publishing, 3rd Ed., 2017, Problems 47 and 48.