PROBLEM OF THE WEEK #7 – JANUARY 20, 2021

THE POSITION:

XGID=-AbaBCCBB---------Bb-bcbc-:1:-1:1:42:0:0:0:5:10

⬤ to play 42

THE TOURNAMENT AND THE PLAYERS:

For this week's problem, we continue taking positions from games played by members of our regular player pool in the "For The Glory" online tournament circuit. This position comes from last Monday's weekly tournament (January 11, 2021). Bill "KellyRae" Lonergan is playing the Black checkers in a consolation round match against Ralph "Double A Red" D'Onofrio, who is playing the White checkers.

THE GAME SITUATION:

It's the first game of a 5-point match, and Bill has found himself in quite a nice position, having found a spot to double earlier in the game and with White having three checkers trapped behind a solid five-prime. Bill now has the task of determining how best to play this relatively non-descript 42 roll that the dice Gods have presented him with.

THE QUESTION:

This week, we'll try a slightly different tack for our Problem of the Week – a two-part question:

1. What play did Bill actually make in this position?
2. What is Black's best play in this position?

The first part is different in that it is more a question of knowing the playing style of a player that you play with on a regular basis in our weekly tournaments. The second part follows our usual routine, and requires you to use your best backgammon skills to try to determine the best play; it differs from the first part in that for the first part you must take into consideration the very real possibility that today's protagonist has no clue what he is doing.

SOLUTION – PART 1

What play did I make?

If you guessed **18/14 5/3***, you would be correct! While breaking the five-prime is unthinkable with the game so well in hand, I really like to hit checkers when the opportunity presents itself. With White having a five-point board, though, the hit comes with some risk.

<u>**What Happened Next?**</u>

The hit didn't work out very well for me. I was punished severely for my overly aggressive play.

Ralph rolled 61 from the bar, entering his checker with a hit on the ace-point (and having no play for the 6). I danced and Ralph followed up with another 61! He hit the checker on the 3-point and escaped the hitting checker over the five-prime. While I languished on the bar for what felt like an eternity, Ralph proceeded to pick up a third blot and escape all of his back men over my five-prime.

Lamenting over my choice of play, and cursing myself for failing to make a simpler move, I helplessly watched Ralph race his checkers home and win a gammon from a position that I had previously had well in hand. Ralph then proceeded to finish me off in the Crawford game, winning the 5-point match by the score of 5-0.

Such is life.

SOLUTION – PART 2

<u>**What Was the Correct Play?**</u>

I ran the match by our esteemed expert, Extreme Gammon, fully expecting to get "dinged" for my overly optimistic play in the first game of this match. Much to my surprise, though, the omniscient bot concluded that 18/14 5/3* is actually the best play! In fairness, the simpler and safer alternative, 18/16 5/1, finishes a very close second (and some other alternatives that maintain the five-prime also perform reasonably well). Those who opted to play 18/16 5/1 made only the smallest of mistakes.

The rollout (below) shows that the aggressive play wins some more gammons while only losing a few extra single games. The thing to realize is that Ralph's main equity comes from playing a holding game – he can expect to have a VERY difficult time getting three checkers out from behind my five-prime before he has to crunch his board; his main path to victory relies heavily on hitting a shot later in the game. With my position being as strong as it is, the hitting play is actually worthwhile for three reasons:

- First, I want to try to prevent Ralph from upgrading his defensive anchor from the 23-point to the 22-point. If he can make a better anchor, his winning chances will improve.
- Second, I also want to keep all three of Ralph's back men stuck behind the prime; hitting prevents Ralph from escaping immediately with any 6.
- Third, there are also some short-term tactical benefits to making the aggressive play. By putting Ralph on the bar while leaving two blots in my inner board, I benefit from a number of rolls that will force Ralph to hit one of my blots while simultaneously breaking his home board (14, 15, 33, 34 and 35). When this happens, I might be able to send a fourth checker back behind the five-prime. Note that several of Ralph's entering 2's will also force him to break his home board immediately.

All things considered, the risk isn't that great here, since Ralph will seldom be able to get more than a relatively weak deep anchor game. As such, it is worthwhile to make the aggressive play. Of course, it never feels that way when you make an aggressive play with a strong position and then get punished for it. Backgammon is a dice game, though, so you can only play the percentages and hope for the best. Sometimes it is necessary to take some risk in order to allow for the possibility of greater rewards – even though there will be many an

occasion where an aggressive play comes back to bite you. Ultimately, you need to view making these kinds of plays much like investing in the stock market for your retirement – it's best to think long term, where you can expect the ups to overshadow the downs over time, but the short-term fluctuations can be painful at times.

Best Play: 18/14 5/3*

Extreme Gammon Rollout Results:

XGID=-AbaBCCBB---------Bb-bcbc-:1:-1:1:42:0:0:0:5:10
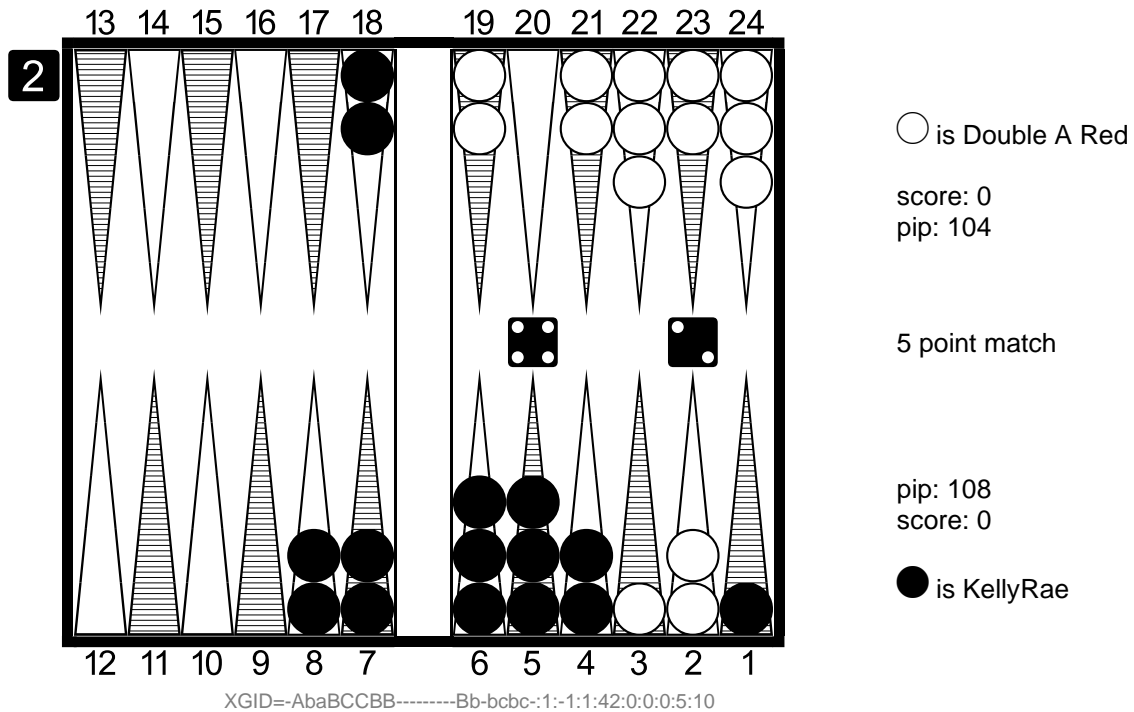
⬤ to play 42

1.	Rollout[1]	18/14 5/3*		eq: +1.010
	Player:	87.72% (G:24.44% B:0.99%)	Conf.: ± 0.006 (+1.004...+1.017) - [100.0%]	
	Opponent:	12.28% (G:2.99% B:0.07%)	Duration: 1 minute 22 seconds	
2.	Rollout[1]	18/16 5/1		eq: +0.995 (-0.015)
	Player:	88.91% (G:20.03% B:0.65%)	Conf.: ± 0.005 (+0.991...+1.000) - [0.0%]	
	Opponent:	11.09% (G:0.66% B:0.01%)	Duration: 48.4 seconds	
3.	Rollout[1]	18/16 18/14		eq: +0.989 (-0.021)
	Player:	88.51% (G:20.32% B:0.68%)	Conf.: ± 0.005 (+0.984...+0.994) - [0.0%]	
	Opponent:	11.49% (G:1.05% B:0.02%)	Duration: 52.4 seconds	
4.	Rollout[1]	18/14 6/4		eq: +0.981 (-0.029)
	Player:	88.21% (G:20.49% B:0.71%)	Conf.: ± 0.005 (+0.976...+0.986) - [0.0%]	
	Opponent:	11.79% (G:1.00% B:0.00%)	Duration: 51.4 seconds	
5.	Rollout[1]	18/12		eq: +0.974 (-0.036)
	Player:	88.18% (G:19.93% B:0.68%)	Conf.: ± 0.005 (+0.969...+0.979) - [0.0%]	
	Opponent:	11.82% (G:0.93% B:0.01%)	Duration: 56.3 seconds	
6.	Rollout[1]	6/4 5/1		eq: +0.967 (-0.043)
	Player:	88.16% (G:19.28% B:0.67%)	Conf.: ± 0.005 (+0.962...+0.972) - [0.0%]	
	Opponent:	11.84% (G:0.80% B:0.01%)	Duration: 48.0 seconds	
7.	Rollout[1]	7/3* 5/3		eq: +0.828 (-0.182)
	Player:	83.04% (G:21.27% B:0.83%)	Conf.: ± 0.006 (+0.822...+0.834) - [0.0%]	
	Opponent:	16.96% (G:5.86% B:0.04%)	Duration: 1 minute 18 seconds	
8.	Rollout[1]	7/3* 3/1		eq: +0.768 (-0.242)
	Player:	81.69% (G:18.01% B:0.62%)	Conf.: ± 0.006 (+0.763...+0.774) - [0.0%]	
	Opponent:	18.31% (G:3.09% B:0.09%)	Duration: 1 minute 06 seconds	

[1] 1296 Games rolled with Variance Reduction.
Moves: 3-ply, cube decisions: XG Roller