# PROBLEM OF THE WEEK #9 – FEBRUARY 10, 2021

After taking a week off last week, we'll try an example from a game I played in a match in the USBGF's online tournament circuit.

This position comes from my match in the finals of an FTH Board Blitz (tournament winner gets an FTH Backgammon Board). I've managed to take a big lead in the match (9-2 in an 11-point match) and we're down to just a few checkers late in the bear-off stage. Of course, as is so often the case for our weekly problems, the Dice Gods have elected to punish me by delivering my worst possible roll.

How should I play my 21?

GAME POSITION

XGID=---BAA--------------a--a--:1:1:1:21:9:2:0:11:10
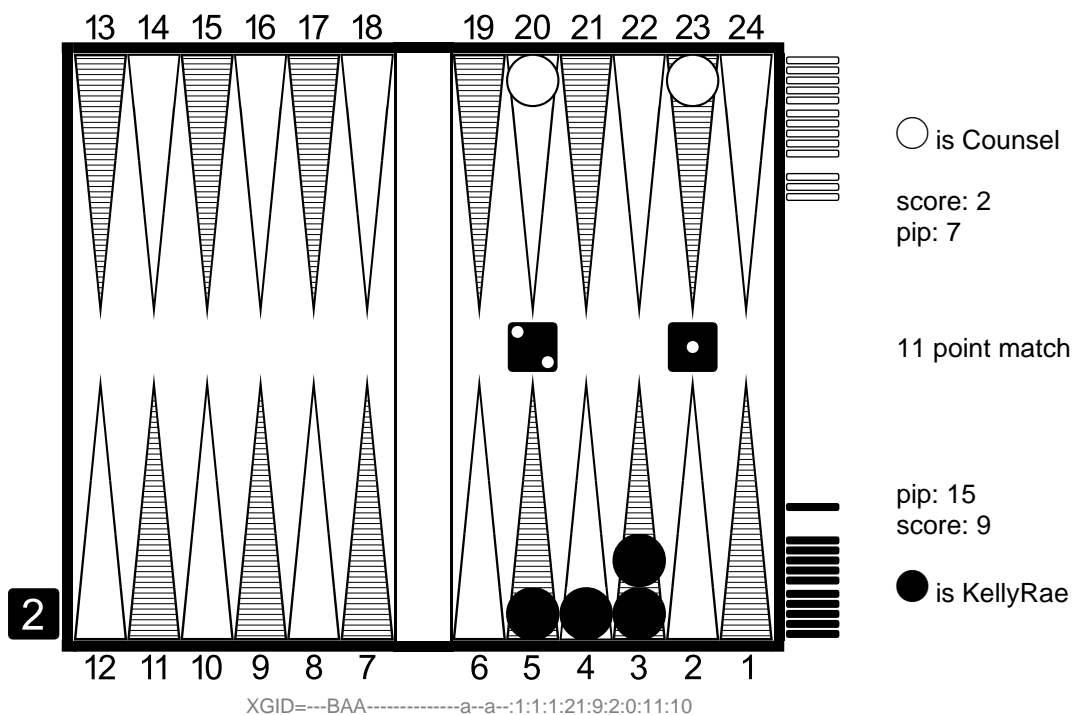
⬤ to play 21

HINT

How many more rolls is Black likely to get in order to bear off all of his checkers? With this in mind, how should Black position his checkers to maximize his chances of being able to bear off all of his men off before White does?

SOLUTION

Unless White rolls specifically 21 followed by another 21 (which is fairly unlikely), the only way Black can win is if he can bear off all of his men on his next roll.

Black's current pip-count is 15. After he plays his roll his pip-count will be 12. The only rolls that provide 12 pips of movement are double-3's, double-4's, double-5's and double-6's. Clearly 66 and 55 will work to take all of Black's checkers off regardless of how he plays this 21 roll. It is also fairly easy for Black to make a 44 roll work on his next turn – he just needs to either take a checker off or advance his checker on the 5-point – if he does either of these things, he will be able to complete his bear-off with a 44 roll on his next turn.

That leaves the possibility of a 33 roll on his next turn. The only way to make that roll work is to stack all of the checkers on the 3-point. Thus, in order to maximize his chances of getting all of his checkers off on his next roll (if he gets the opportunity to do so), Black MUST play 5/3 4/3 with this 21 roll. That will make all of the big doubles work for him. It is the best play.

Best Play: 5/3 4/3.

Extreme Gammon Rollout

XGID=---BAA--------------a--a--:1:1:1:21:9:2:0:11:10

● to play 21
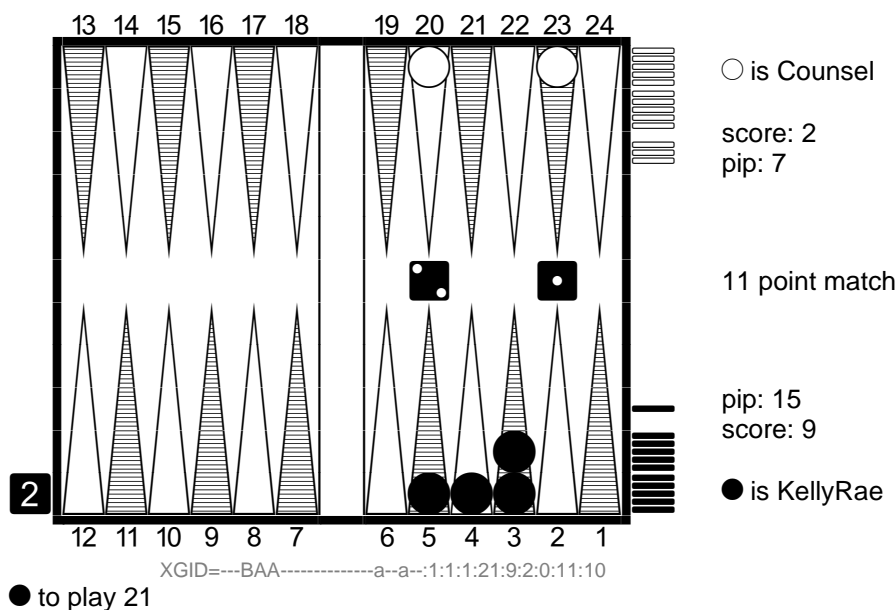
|			
1.	Rollout[1]	5/3 4/3	eq: -0.894
	Player:	5.32% (G:0.00% B:0.00%)	Conf.: ± 0.000 (-0.894...-0.894) - [100.0%]
	Opponent:	94.68% (G:0.00% B:0.00%)	Duration: 0.0 second
2.	Rollout[1]	3/Off	eq: -0.917 (-0.023)
	Player:	4.14% (G:0.00% B:0.00%)	Conf.: ± 0.000 (-0.917...-0.917) - [0.0%]
	Opponent:	95.86% (G:0.00% B:0.00%)	Duration: 0.0 second
3.	Rollout[1]	5/4 3/1	eq: -0.918 (-0.025)
	Player:	4.09% (G:0.00% B:0.00%)	Conf.: ± 0.000 (-0.918...-0.918) - [0.0%]
	Opponent:	95.91% (G:0.00% B:0.00%)	Duration: 0.0 second
4.	Rollout[1]	5/2	eq: -0.919 (-0.025)
	Player:	4.07% (G:0.00% B:0.00%)	Conf.: ± 0.000 (-0.919...-0.919) - [0.0%]
	Opponent:	95.93% (G:0.00% B:0.00%)	Duration: 0.0 second

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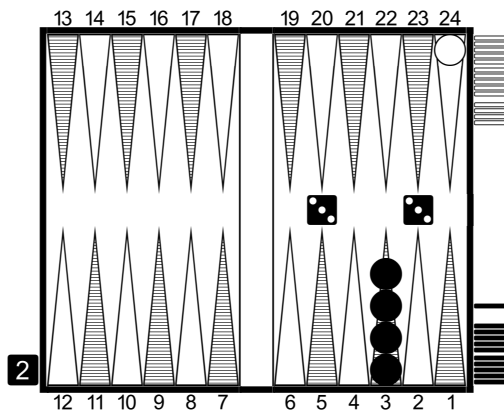Moves: 3-ply, cube decisions: XG Roller

EPILOGUE

While my initial reaction was to grab a checker on the 3-point and bear it off, I stopped myself and looked more carefully at the position. I actually "clicked" twice to bear off a checker and then I clicked "undo" and changed my play to 5/3 4/3.

My opponent's next roll:
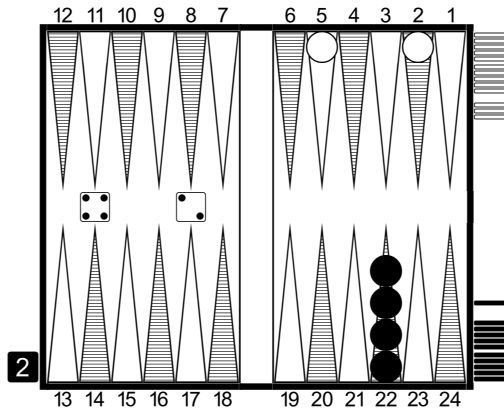
And my next roll after that:

BOOYAH!!!

A FINAL WORD OF WARNING

A lot of online backgammon play-sites have an option that you can check which will allow the game software to do an "automatic bear-off" or a "speedy bear-off." While this is aimed at speeding up the play through automation, you need to be careful in selecting this option. As this problem shows, it is not always best to bear-off as many checkers as you can (which is what a speedy bear-off approach will often do). In fact, taking a checker off with 3/o in the problem position would have been a pretty serious mistake (the error that Extreme Gammon computes is small only because Black is already a very big underdog in this position – note though that Black's winning chances are reduced by about 25% if he makes the wrong play). In point of fact, if I had played 3/o in the problem position I would have lost the game!