

PROBLEM OF THE WEEK #17 – APRIL 6, 2021

THE POSITION:

○ is JBNY
score: 0
pip: 118

7 point match

pip: 145
score: 0

● is KellyRae

64

XGID=--a-BBBAB---bD---bccBc-a--:0:0:1:43:0:0:0:7:10

● to play 43

THE TOURNAMENT AND THE PLAYERS:

For this week's problem, I've taken a position from a match I played in the 2020 year-end online backgammon tournament for the Long Island Backgammon Club, which was hosted on the Backgammon Galaxy website. I ("KellyRae") am playing the role of protagonist in in this week's problem, and I am playing the Black checkers in the problem position above. In this week's problem I am 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 first game of a 7-point match, and I am on roll, with the cube remaining centered. Of course, I would have liked to roll a 6, allowing me to complete a five-prime and leaving White's last back checker stranded on the 23-point. Sadly, the dice Gods have refused to cooperate, and I am left with a roll of 43 to play.

THE QUESTION:

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

SOLUTION

Some of you may recall that I covered Paul Magriel's famous safe-versus-bold criteria in a previous Problem of the Week.¹ Those of you that recalled that previous problem, and took Magriel's criteria into consideration in evaluating this week's problem position, would have been aptly rewarded by facing little difficulty in identifying the correct play here.

To briefly recap, back in the 1970's, the venerable Paul Magriel set forth criteria that should be considered in assessing the question of whether you should play safely or boldly in any particular backgammon position; he identified these criteria in his seminal work on the game, *Backgammon*.² 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. As we did in Problem of the Week #5, we'll address this week's problem in light of these criteria. Specifically: 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:³

- 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."⁴

¹ See Problem of the Week #5.

<http://www.backgammononlongisland.com/wp-content/uploads/2021/02/Problem5Solution-January6-2021.pdf>.

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

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ *Id.*, p. 218.

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 White's inner board? Answer: White has a two-point board, which is an improvement from the starting position, but not a particularly large one. Black won't have much difficulty in reentering from the bar against a two-point board (only 4 out of 36 numbers will dance).
 - Edge – this slightly favors Bold Play.
- Does Black hold an anchor in White's home board? Answer: Yes, he has made the 20-point, the best possible defensive anchor.
 - Edge – this favors Bold Play.
- How strong is Black's inner board? Answer: Black has a three-point board, consisting of the 6-point, the 5-point and the 4-point. This is a very strong formation.⁵
 - Edge – this favors Bold Play.
- Does White have blots in his own inner-board? Answer: Yes, he has a blot on his deuce-point.
 - Edge – this favors Bold Play.
- How many men does Black have back? Answer: He has two men back.
 - Edge – this is a relatively neutral factor in this position.
- How many men does White have back? Answer: He has only one man back.
 - Edge – this strongly 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, five of the criteria favor Bold Play, one is Neutral and none favor Safe Play. It is evident that the criteria strongly point in the direction of making a Bold Play.

Given the direction of Magriel's criteria, Black should definitely be looking to make a bold play. Of course, he should be prudent in his choice of play. 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. Black trails in the race and it is critical that he contain White's last back checker. The best way to do that is to make his bar-point – if he makes that point, he'll have White's last checker stuck on his deuce-point behind an imposing five-point prime (one that White hasn't even managed to get to the edge of yet – to escape, he'll need to roll first an ace, and then a six). The best way for Black to maximize his chances of making his bar-point is to play 13/10 13/9, bringing two builders down so that he can cover his bar-point blot on his next roll with any 2, 3 or 6 (only six rolls – 55, 54, 44 and 41 – will fail to complete the five-prime). While this play leaves the blot on the bar-point vulnerable to hitting 5's from White, White is still an underdog to hit, and when he does, Black will usually have plenty of return shots – remember that White has a blot in his inner board that he won't always be able to cover. In addition, Black's ownership of the Golden Anchor ensures that he'll always have an entry point for any of his checkers that get hit.

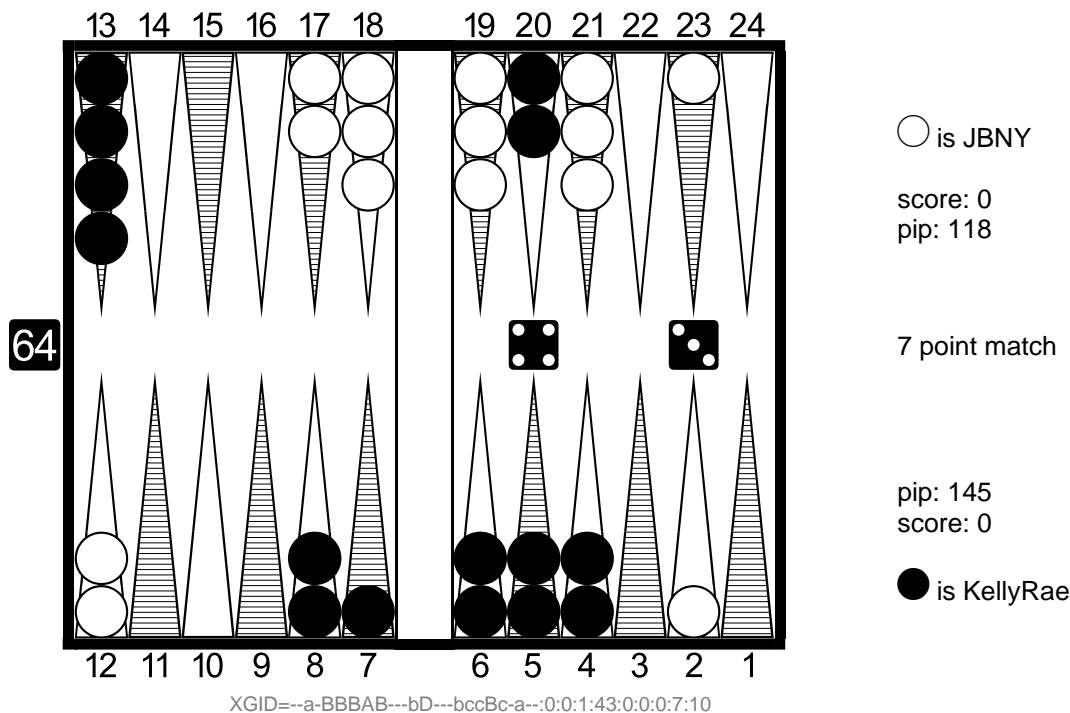
From a risk vs. reward perspective, Black's potential upside is large (just the threat of being able to make the bar-point is huge – if White fails to hit one of Black's blots after Black plays 13/10 13/9, Black will usually have

⁵ Bill Robertie refers to this formation as "the rack," noting that it is "torture to play against it." See Robertie, Bill, *How to Play the Opening in Backgammon: Part 1 – A New Way of Thinking*, The Gammon Press, 2019, p. 79.

a strong double, one that White will frequently have to pass). Also, as noted above, the potential downside is mitigated by the existence of potential return shots from the bar, together with the strong defensive anchor that Black has established in White's board. All things considered, Black's potential rewards in playing the bold 13/10 13/9, leaving the bar-point slotted, outweigh the potential risks that are associated with it.

Conclusion: The best play in this position is **13/10 13/9**. All other plays are very large blunders.

Extreme Gammon Rollout Results:



● to play 43

1.	Rollout ¹	13/10 13/9	eq: +0.467
	Player:	62.84% (G:11.91% B:0.42%)	Conf.: ± 0.010 (+0.458...+0.477) - [100.0%]
	Opponent:	37.16% (G:9.90% B:0.24%)	Duration: 2 minutes 24 seconds
2.	Rollout ¹	13/6	eq: +0.248 (-0.219)
	Player:	56.43% (G:11.73% B:0.39%)	Conf.: ± 0.012 (+0.236...+0.260) - [0.0%]
	Opponent:	43.57% (G:8.76% B:0.23%)	Duration: 4 minutes 16 seconds
3. ✓	Rollout ¹	13/9 7/4	eq: +0.217 (-0.250)
	Player:	55.38% (G:11.30% B:0.37%)	Conf.: ± 0.011 (+0.206...+0.228) - [0.0%]
	Opponent:	44.62% (G:8.50% B:0.20%)	Duration: 4 minutes 56 seconds
4.	Rollout ¹	13/10 7/3	eq: +0.092 (-0.376)
	Player:	52.20% (G:11.05% B:0.34%)	Conf.: ± 0.012 (+0.079...+0.104) - [0.0%]
	Opponent:	47.80% (G:11.39% B:0.23%)	Duration: 5 minutes 18 seconds

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

www.eXtremeGammon.com Version: 2.19.211.pre-release, MET: Kazaross XG2

EPILOGUE

As it turns out, I botched the play badly, and lifted my blot on the bar-point, playing 13/9 7/4. I went on to lose that game, and then went on to suffer an ignominious defeat in the match, getting blanked 7-0. 😞