

PROBLEM OF THE WEEK #18 – APRIL 13, 2021

THE POSITION:

64

score: 1
pip: 99

7 point match

pip: 130
score: 0

● is KellyRae
● is bdarcohen

XGID=-BaBB-BBB-a----a---ccbbbC-:0:0:1:65:0:1:0:7:10

● to play 65

THE TOURNAMENT AND THE PLAYERS:

For this week’s problem, we’re covering a problem submitted by the November Man of the Month, December For the Glory Circuit Winner, and February For the Glory Circuit Runner-Up, Brian “bdarcohen” Cohen. This position comes from a match he played against myself (“KellyRae”) in a game from a match in the Main Bracket of the “For the Glory” online tournament circuit. Brian is playing the Black checkers in this week’s problem.

THE GAME SITUATION:

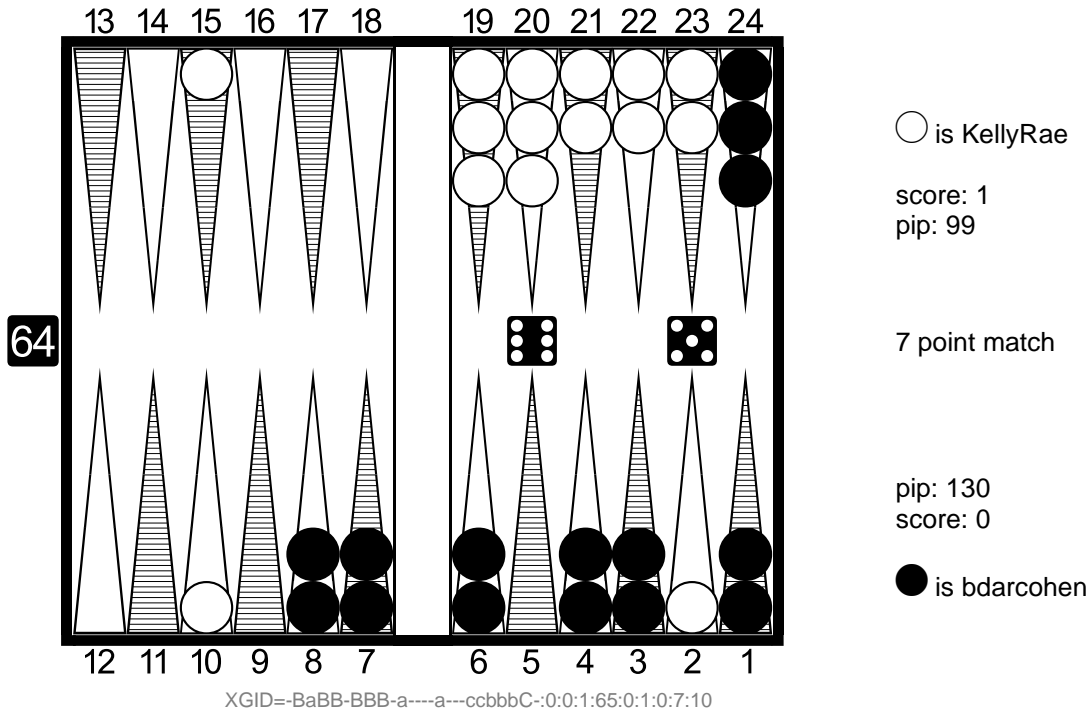
It’s the second game of a 7-point match, with Brian trailing 0-1 and the cube still centered. Brian is on roll, with three men trapped on the 24-point behind Bill’s five-prime and trailing in the race by 31 pips. He has rolled 65, which affords him a number of possible plays. He takes his time and carefully weighs his options, aiming to find the best play.

THE QUESTION:

So, what should he do here?

SOLUTION

Extreme Gammon Rollout Results:



● to play 65

1. 🎲	Rollout ¹	24/18 7/2*	eq: -0.897
	Player:	34.22% (G:13.34% B:0.70%)	Conf.: ± 0.020 (-0.916...-0.877) - [100.0%]
	Opponent:	65.78% (G:31.94% B:5.50%)	Duration: 1 minute 58 seconds
2.	Rollout ¹	8/2* 7/2	eq: -1.000 (-0.103)
	Player:	23.70% (G:9.58% B:0.43%)	Conf.: ± 0.000 (-1.000...-1.000) - [0.0%]
	Opponent:	76.30% (G:26.72% B:2.16%)	Duration: 1 minute 12 seconds
3. ✓	Rollout ¹	24/13	eq: -1.000 (-0.103)
	Player:	26.59% (G:3.03% B:0.12%)	Conf.: ± 0.000 (-1.000...-1.000) - [0.0%]
	Opponent:	73.41% (G:26.09% B:2.15%)	Duration: 1 minute 26 seconds
¹ 1296 Games rolled with Variance Reduction. Moves: 3-ply, cube decisions: XG Roller			

Analysis:

This week's problem involves a mutual containment game. Both sides are seeking to contain their opponent's back checker(s), while at the same time seeking to escape their own back checker(s) from behind an enemy blockade. White has a clear advantage here, as he has three Black checkers trapped behind a solid five-prime, while White has only one Black checker trapped behind a broken five-prime. As is often the case in these types of positions, timing is an extremely important consideration. Here, White has a significant timing advantage, since he has two checkers in the outfield that have movable pips to spare before White will be forced to start crunching in his home board; Black, on the other hand, has no outfield presence at all and he also has more men back and two dead checkers on his own ace-point. White's game plan is oriented toward priming play, while Black's best chances will come from an attacking or quasi-attacking game plan.

Black's first decision is whether he should leap one of his back checkers over White's five-prime with the 6. If he elects not to, then his best play would be 8/2* 7/2, creating his own five-point board and putting White on the bar. The hope would be that while White languishes on the bar, Black will be able to extract his back men by leaping over White's five-prime, possibly picking up one or both of White's outfield blots (which would, in turn, give him some additional time to get all of his back checkers out and around while White is stuck on the bar). Alas, this approach is asking way too much of the dice. Black doesn't have enough timing to expect to leap three checkers over a five-prime in relatively short order. In fact, unless he rolls the first escaping 6 real soon, he'll be crashing in his own home board.¹ So, Black must play 24/18 with the 6.

After playing 24/18, Black basically has two possible plays for the 5: he can continue on to the 13-point with 18/13, or he can attack on the deuce-point with 7/2* (of course, to play 8/3, exposing blots to direct 3's and 6's, as well as indirect 8's, would be just awful). Each of the two candidate plays leave White with a direct shot at a blot that Black leaves, but 7/2* has two clear advantages over 18/13.

First, if Black plays 18/13 with the 5, White will always be able to either hit the blot on the 13-point or get his own blot that's on Black's 10-point past it, leaving Black with only a few indirect shots at any remaining outfield blots that White may have. By contrast, if Black plays 7/2* with the 5, White will have 16 rolls that dance (any combination of 1's, 3's, 4's or 6's), and another seven rolls that fail to hit any of Black's blots (51, 54, 55 and 56). In most of these cases Black will have a direct shot at a White outfield blot, and he can also consider using any 5 or 6 to complete a five-point board.

Second, having escaped one man over the five-prime and into the outfield, Black may well want to play his next roll that contains a 6 by escaping a second back man with 24/18. This time, though, he'll be forced to leave a lone blot on the 24-point when he does so (unless he is lucky enough to roll 66). As we noted in Problem of the Week #16,² in this type of position, White will not hesitate to hit loose on Black's remaining blot on the 24-point (he also figures to have some shots at any blots that Black may leave as he moves out from behind the five-prime and into the outfield). To quote Walter Trice:

"In mutual attacking positions, *initiative* typically becomes paramount, and both sides will attempt to hit something, somewhere, at almost any cost. Often there is a series of rolls with back-and-forth hits, and then finally someone dances to give his opponent a big edge."³ (emphasis in original)

Hitting loose on the 24-point will be a particularly strong play for White in this position since he has a strong five-point home board. Right now, White has spares on his 6-point and 5-point that can be used to attack a lone blot that Black may choose to leave behind on the 24-point. White will also often be able to add another spare builder to the top of his prime over the course of his next roll or two. If Black plays 18/13, there won't be much he can do to thwart White's plans for attacking Black's last back checker when the time comes to do so. If instead Black plays 7/2*, though, he may be able to make a five-point board and perhaps pick up one or both of White's loose blots in the outfield. If White ends up stuck on the bar, he won't be able to effectively execute on an attacking game plan, and Black will have a much better chance of escaping his back checkers before White can mount a counter-offensive.⁴ With 7/2*, Black will be the one following Trice's advice by seizing the initiative. He'll even have decent gammon chances.

¹ Interestingly, if Black had already escaped even just one of his back checkers over the five-prime – *i.e.*, if one of the three checkers on the 24-point were instead stationed on the 18-point – then 8/2* 7/2 would be far and away Black's best play here.

² See Problem of the Week #16.

<http://www.backgammononlongisland.com/wp-content/uploads/2021/04/Problem16Solution-March30-2021.pdf>.

³ Trice, Walter, *Backgammon Boot Camp*, The Fortuitous Press, 2004, pp. 289-290.

⁴ Note that, unlike the original position, where Black had three men back and no outfield presence, after playing 24/18, Black will have only two men back and an extra checker in the outfield on the 18-point. These differences are sufficient to make attacking on his deuce-point a viable game plan, even though playing 8/2* 7/2 in the original position would be a mistake. See, also, the comment made in footnote 1 above.

Of course, 24/18 7/2* is a risky play insofar as Black is making a loose hit and exposing three blots around the board while White has a strong five-point home board. The thing to realize, though, is that Black is already in a fairly desperate situation here. He needs to take a risk in order to improve his overall winning chances. While this risky play results in Black getting gammoned more often, White will be able to win a gammon more than 25% of the time irrespective of what Black does in this position. The extra winning chances that Black gets from hitting loose on his deuce-point more than compensate him for the extra gammon defeats that he will suffer by making the loose hit.

Best Play and Cube Considerations:

The best play is **24/18 7/2***. Any other play would be a blunder, as the Extreme Gammon rollout shows. Note that after any of the three plays of 65 that have been discussed above (8/2* 7/2, 24/13 and 24/18 7/2*), White will have a clear double. After playing 8/2* 7/2 or 24/13, Black will have a proper pass, but after making the correct play, 24/18 7/2*, Black will be able to take a double.

EPILOGUE

As it turns out, Brian played 24/13. Bill missed a double here (incorrectly electing to play on for a gammon), and rolled 61, making his 9-point. He later doubled Brian out, and Brian ended up losing the match as well. 😞