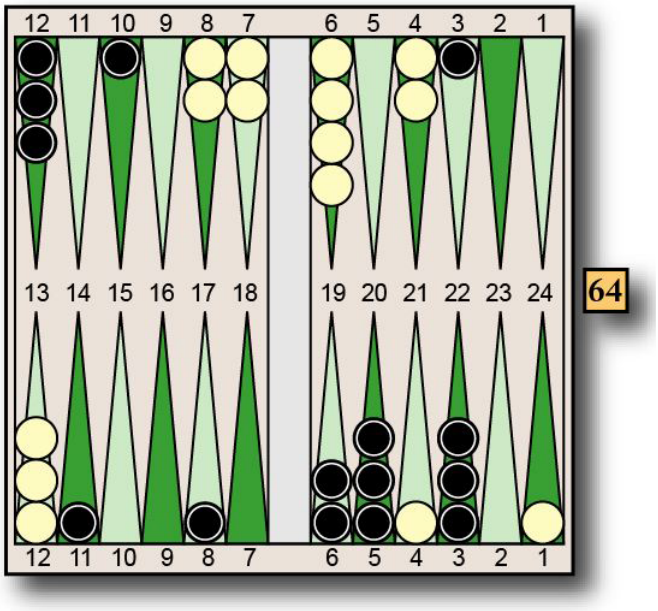
Problem #371 Analyed

By Steve Sax

When longtime Chicago Point editor Bill Davis asked me to do a problem from his last published issue I said I would be honored. And this problem is a great one as I found no less than seven candidate plays for consideration.

Money game. **BLACK TO PLAY 6-1**



A few of them I rejected as reasonable fairly quickly as they didn't do enough towards winning the game and still kept Black in jeopardy to some extent but most of the others had positive aspects that could be traded off against their liabilities keeping me in an ever present quandary as to the best move.

As always when I do a problem for Bill, I make a choice of what I think is best before putting it into the computer for analysis and I'm here to report that my choice came in at third best play among seven candidates moves that I rolled out.

The play that I liked was (15/9, 5/4*). The reason I liked that move is that it gives Black nine immediate winners if White fans.

However if White stays out then it is a claim for Black (1.38), but since you can't earn a gammon unless you turn the cube it is inefficient to take the risk of putting five blots in jeopardy when you can't earn the gammon when White dances.

It's not that Black is in immediate gammon jeopardy when they are hit back, but you want to be as efficient as possible in terms of risk versus reward.

Coming in at seventh best was (13/7, 8/7). It does make the bar-point, but it leaves Black in jeopardy of being hit, pointed on or having White anchor up on 25 out of 36 numbers. Even the fact that threes are efficiently duplicated is not enough to push this move past seventh place.

In sixth place is 15/8. This move is nearly as constructive as making the bar-point, but entails a bit less risk as only 23 of 36 numbers either anchor up, hit or point on Black. Also this play leaves only two blots in jeopardy instead of three.

The fifth best move was 11-/4*. It does win nine times when White fails to enter, but it leaves four blots in jeopardy and is hit on 18 of 36 numbers which can result in quite a mess when it happens.

Fourth on the list is something different in (8/2, 3/2). It doesn't address the issue of tempo or priming but it does tackle boardage priorities, leaves three blots in jeopardy and gives White 25 numbers to hit, point on Black or anchor up.

My play (15/9, 5/4*) as I stated before comes in at third best. It is counter-hit 18 times but the five blots in jeopardy make the fewer times you are hit, more devastating when you are hit.

In the end, it came down to two plays with diverse strategies. Coming in at a close second is (22/16, 5/4*). This play is also hit 18 times and leaves five blots in jeopardy, but when White comes in with 1-5 and 1-6, or 2-5, Black has a marginal double. The risk is approximately the same, but the gain is slightly greater since Black has accomplished one of its goals by escaping his lone back checker.

The number one play, but a very small amount is to escape the back checker 22/15. This play does not address the issue of tempo and it leaves two blots in jeopardy. Also it doesn't win when White stays out since it's not a hitting play, so why is it the best play?

Once again, it comes down to risk versus reward. In money play your objective should be to be as efficient as possible and to analyze this position in a quantitative way alone doesn't necessarily answer the question as to what the best move is.

After 22/15, White will either anchor or hit on 26 numbers out of 36 which is a higher ratio of numbers that accomplish that feat after other plays, but to try to distill such a complicated position down to a ratio of 36 numbers on White's first counter strike would be a mistake as it addresses the issue in a quantitative way, but not in a qualitative way which is more the point.

First of all, being hit is more disadvantageous than having your opponent anchor up. After 22/15, you are hit 17 times, but only 4-3 hits two checkers and only two blots are in jeopardy. Black's ability to recover after having a single checker hit is quite strong as he still has White out-boarded three to two.

Additionally, some numbers are duplicated such as 6-1 which hits either blot or 4-3, 3-1 which could be used to anchor or to hit Black.

The most compelling point which makes 22/15 best is that when Black has one of his outfield blots hit and sent back, he will (barring a 4-3) have

only one checker back. After most of the other candidate moves, Black has elected to leave a checker back, so to some extent by making the fifteen-point, you're on a "free roll."

That is after the 15 numbers where White hits a single checker, Black will have the same number of back checkers (one) that he will have had after plays three through seven, but after 19 numbers he has escaped all of his checkers.

And while he might not have a cube if White doesn't hit him or anchor up, he's approaching that goal slowly and in money play that is what you want to do in an in volatile position.

After Black plays (22-15) he is up 22 pips and if you subtract an average eight pips for White's roll, Black will be up 14 pips with all of his checkers clear of White's home-board.

Depending on what White rolls after Black escapes 22/15, Black then can proceed to further his advantage by hitting loose, making outfield points or safetying his outfield blots.

The second best play of (22/16, 5/4*) also benefits from escaping Black's last checker from White's home board, and while this play is more volatile than the conservative 22/15, at least you have accomplished part of your mission which is to escape your back checkers.

In the end this is not an easy play to make as it is quite a difficult task to determine risk versus reward in when comparing all candidate plays as all plays meet one of the three basic tenants of backgammon which are to "hit checkers," "make points," or to "escape back checkers."

Weighing which of those plays has the most benefit against risk is the hard part and in attempting to analyze how to play this most difficult 6-1.—*Steve Sax* ▲