

Introducing **Access**

By Itzhak Solsky

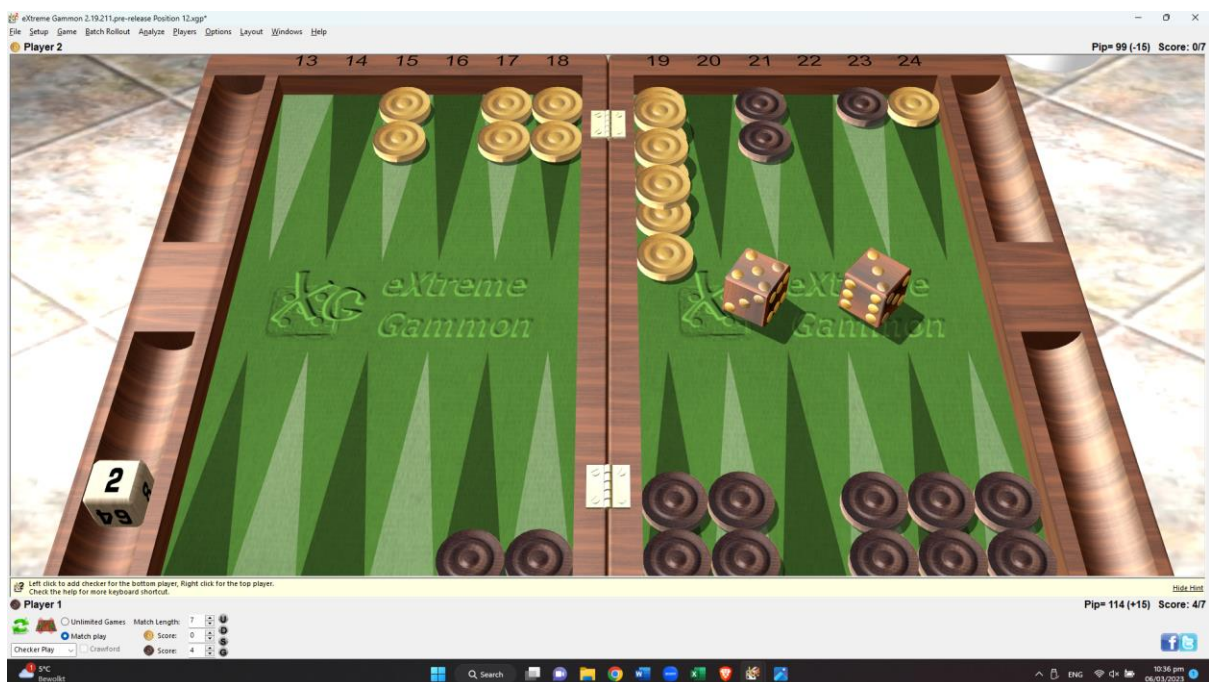
The concept is simple. In backgammon the checkers only move forward.

Much like chess pawns – they can never go back.

Most of the time, going back would be a bad idea anyway. We tend to be shy of being hit in most positions, as we would lose ground in the race, or worse – how do you feel about getting stuck behind a prime and seeing your front position crunch – or even being closed out due to especially frustrating opponent dice sequences, as you miraculously find the dancing numbers again and again... weren't you supposed to be a favorite to enter?

But sometimes we are **eager** to be hit – and not only when playing a back game.

Sometimes a checker looks back and goes “mmmm... delicious!! If only I could get my hands on that!”



Black to play 53, leading 4:0 to 7 and owning a 2-cube.

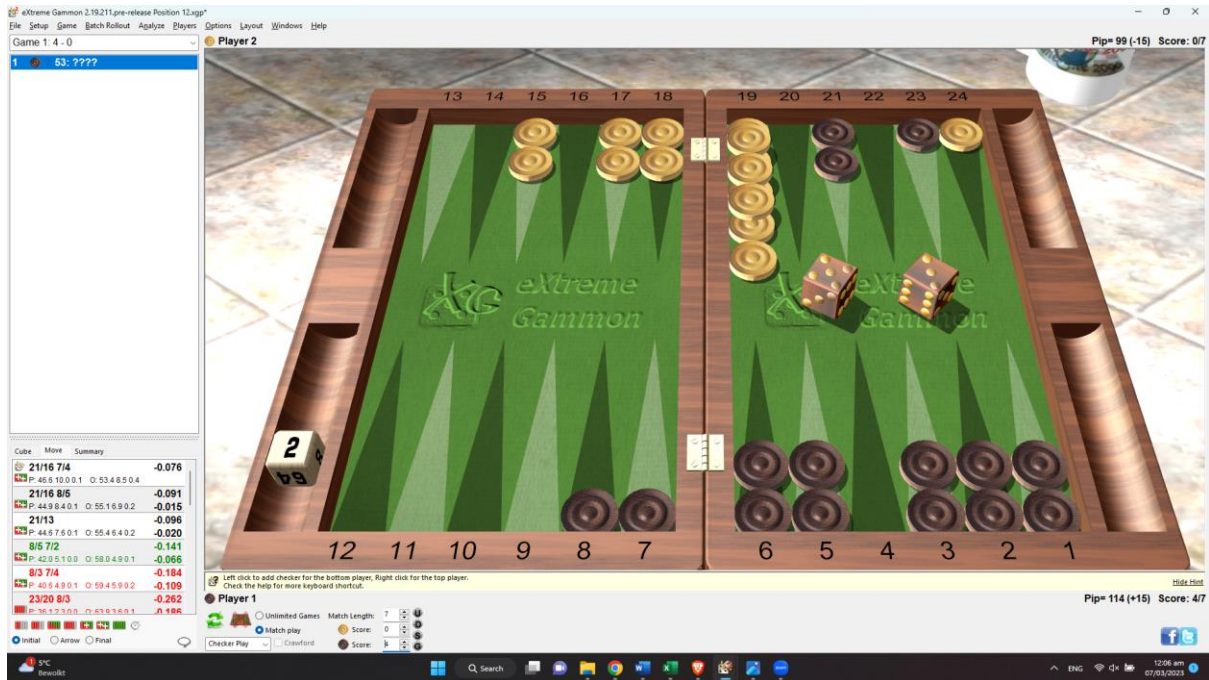
It is true, at this score and with this cube position, when you find yourself with three checkers back, you would generally be extra careful about scattering blots all over the place...

But we're behind in the race here, the opponent is stuck with eight (eight!) checkers on his only home-board point, and then there's this juicy morsel waiting just behind our rearmost checker, on the coveted 24 point!

How to get there?

Or how to maximize our chances to get there?

Or better still – how to get under his skin and into his veins by maximizing contact to a point where he cannot move a limb without running into one of our blots and granting us – you guessed it – **access**.



21/16 7/4!

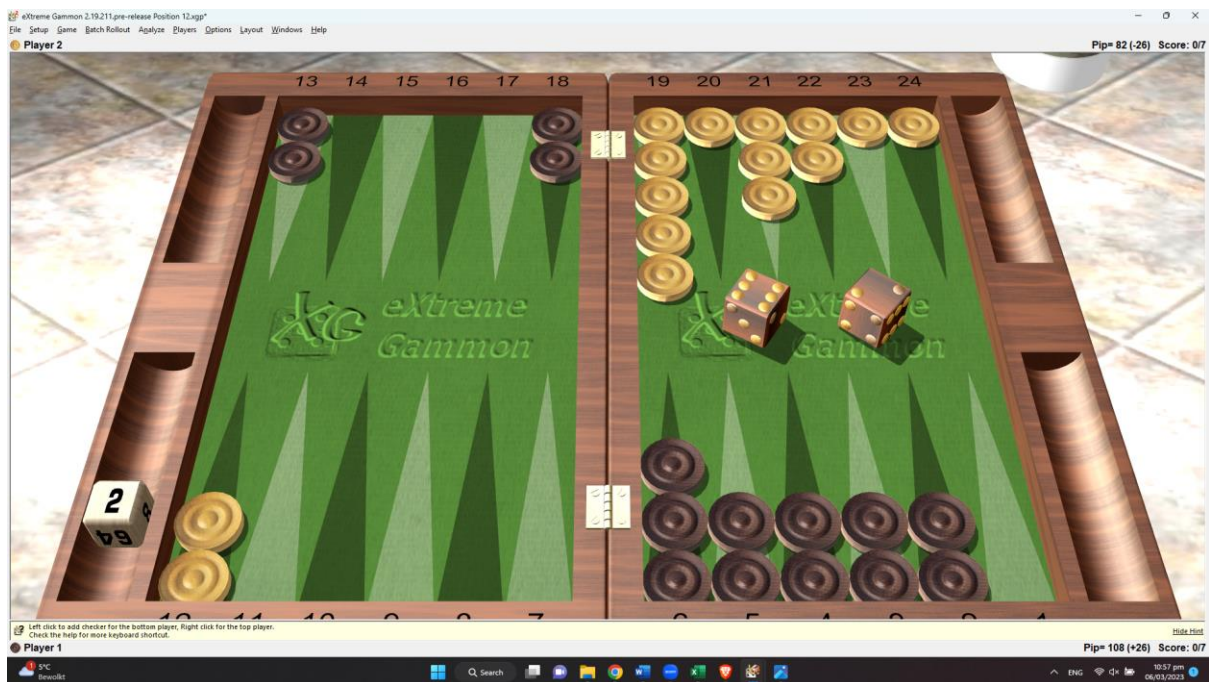
We semi-escape a checker, we slot our remaining home-board point, and we wait.

We wait for him to roll pretty much anything (anything other than doubles...).

In this match my opponent rolled 65, playing both checkers from the bar point (was there even anything better?). I rolled a deuce and was actually lucky enough to win a doubled gammon from this position.

The concept of **access** gives rise to some very aesthetic plays. It takes you out of “automatic playing mode” and invites you to look deeply into the opponent’s position, and identify the right moment to instill a creeping scare in your opponent’s heart...

The effect can be quite dramatic –



Black to play 62, at 0:0 to 7 and owning a 2-cube.

Here we were doubled from a holding game with a healthy race lead.

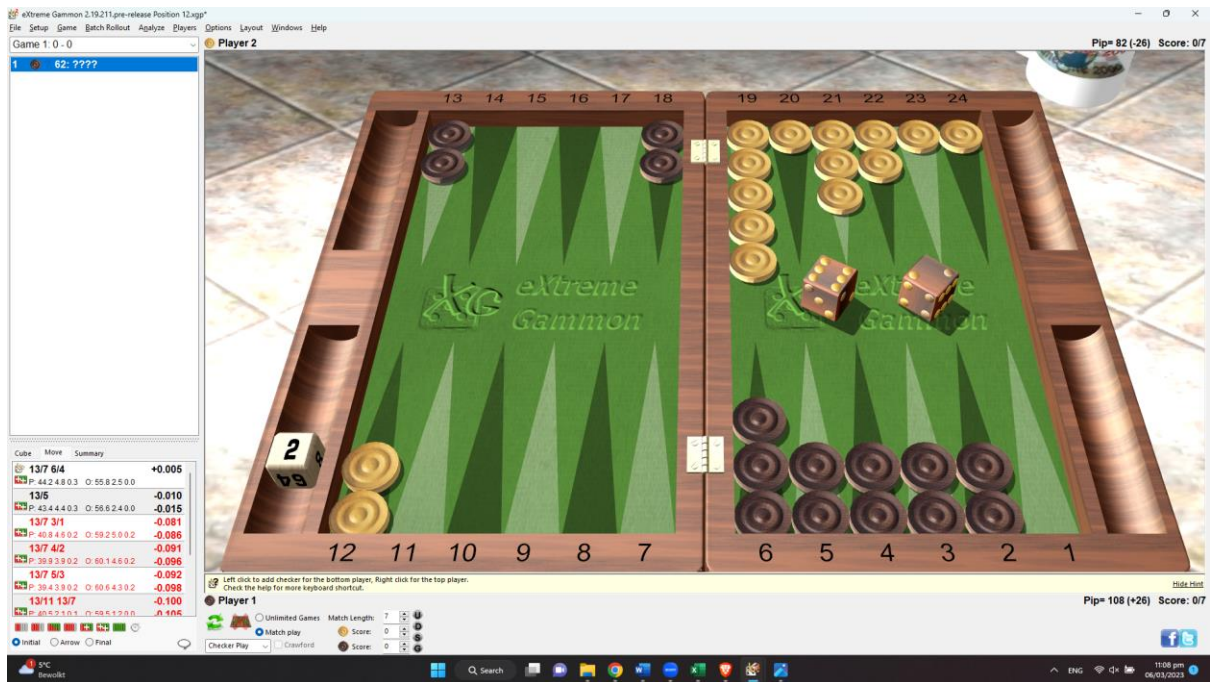
Our opponent failed to roll the doubles he needed, had a couple of blots in his home-board and his last roll, 62, forced him to create a third one while vacating his 8-point.

We are now rolling a 62 of our own. We will move from the midpoint of course, and sixes (other than 66) are going to hurt.

But we can make one of his sixes especially painful if we only play a **single** checker from our midpoint (1).

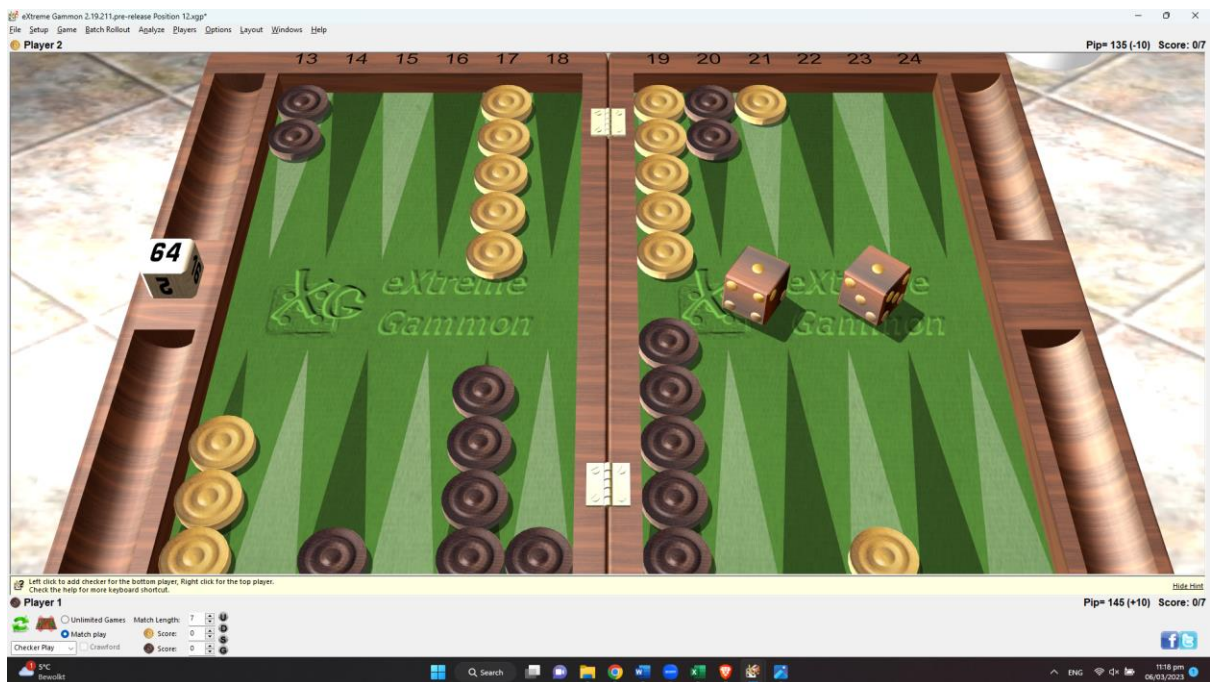
The remaining blot will gain us **access** into his board if he hits us (against his will!) after rolling 61. This will happen often enough to be worth it – and the play costs us nothing when he rolls something else.

Failing to execute this idea is actually a blunder in the above position! It is even better to banana-split with 13/7 3/1 than to play both checkers down.



13/7, and then 6/4 is a bit more flexible than going all the way with 13/5. Anything else is just wrong.

Access is not always a dramatic concept. It can also be quite subtle – but still good to notice and execute; this concept deepens our understanding of the game as we learn to always consider the entire board before making a play:

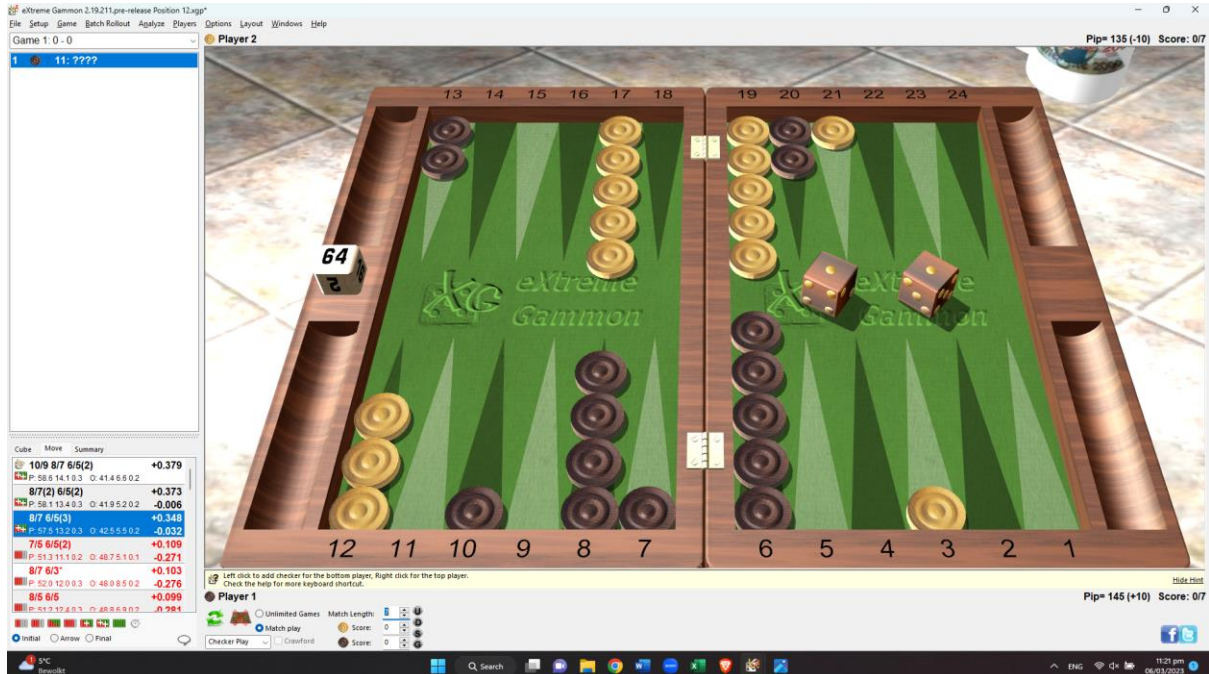


Black to play 11, at 0:0 to 7, centered cube.

There is really nothing wrong with the usual play, 8/7(2) 6/5(2). Of course we cannot prevent his last back checker from escaping with a 6, but the play is safe and sound, holding him in after most of his rolls next turn...

... but don't you sometimes get the feeling that the opponent's position is a bit too inflexible (check the candlesticks on his 6 and 8), and that you might have advanced your back checkers a bit too early?

What if you could just go back a pip? There's this juicy blot waiting there, with a misleading sense of security...



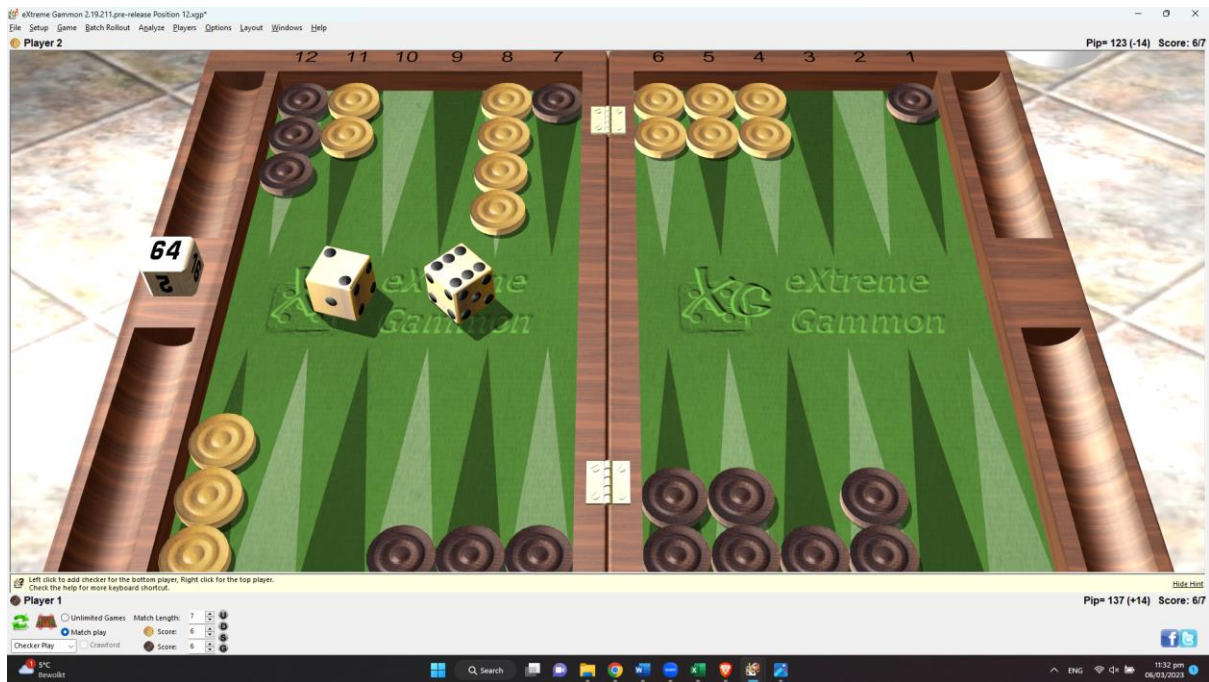
10/9 8/7 6/5(2) !!

It is suddenly a bit less appetizing to escape with a 6 (other than 62 and 64 of course). The play is creative and quite pleasing if you see it (I didn't).

He would grant us **access** if he only steps on this **landmine** that we're planting on our 9-point. Doomed if you do and doomed if you don't.

Of course, even though the term was never coined before, our grandmasters and theoreticians were perfectly aware of the idea; when Paul Magriel writes (in his Bold Play vs. Safe Play Rules from his groundbreaking 1976 book) that the presence of blots in our home board should discourage us from playing fast and loose, it is certainly **access** that he has in mind: blows will be exchanged, and enemy bombs will land inside our board from the bar, potentially sending us way back in the race. So we'd better play safe.

A word of caution, though – everything is relative, and one should not harbor exaggerated fears of **the ghost of access**:



White to play 62; it is DMP (6:6 to 7).

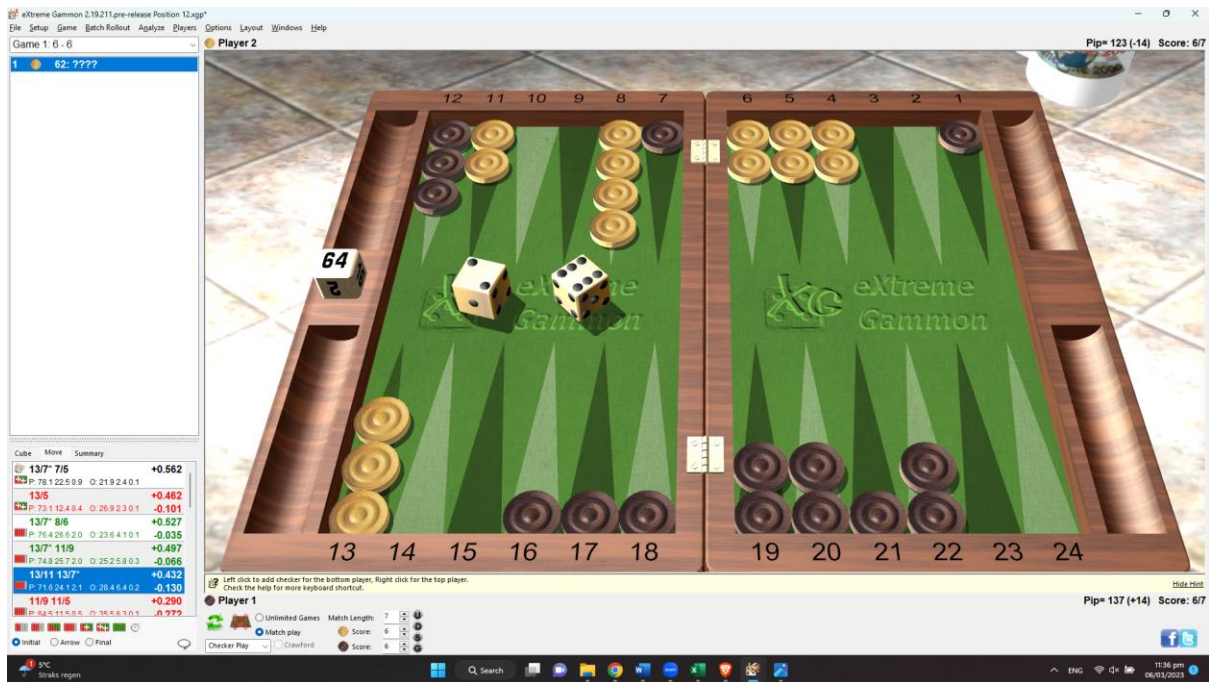
DMP means Double Match Point – when either player can win the match by simply winning the current game; the cube is dead and (back)gammons mean nothing.

White, a very strong master, thought long and hard on this position.

He knew he was getting a checker to his 5 from the midpoint – but to hit, or not to hit, that was the question.

I was astonished to see him pass on the obvious hitting opportunity (that would completely neutralize my idea of bothering him on the bar point while also maintaining contact from the 24). He later explained that he was afraid of me rolling an ace and **accessing** the 24 with a second checker. The hit would have gotten me out of a lot of his hair.

(The wrong plan for white here would be something like 13/7* 11/9, or 13/7* 8/6. White has no business seeking **access** into black's home board, as he is neither (a) considerably lagging in the race or (b) the owner of a much better board. You wouldn't complicate things for yourself if you had a race advantage to protect or might well risk getting stuck behind enemy lines. In this position white only needs to come home and bear off safely. He doesn't need to travel to far-away lands and pick up extra blots. Interestingly though, in gammon-go (2), 13/7* 8/6 is by far the best play.)



I was not afraid of gammons, of course, due to the score. A friendly word of advice though: should you find yourself in a similar situation and your following roll happens to be 61 – do yourself a favor and make the bar point. You get 29% winning chances, compared to 22% after 13/7 9/8. Speaking from experience.

(1) wait a minute – why should we make just **one** of his rolls hurt, and not play 18/10 where **all** his sixes land us inside his board?

Several reasons: (a) every time he rolls a six he gets to hit us and cover a blot or two. This is much better for him than having to run a checker without hitting (with 62, 63, 64, 65) or hitting with that awful 61.

(b) every time he **doesn't** roll a six (except for 11, which is played 13/12*(2) 6/5 2/1 and is his one big joker after our correct play) he repairs his board, leaving us with a blot on our own 18. If we don't clear it – we're suddenly vulnerable. If we do clear it – we're still losing badly on the race.

It's simply the wrong plan strategically – you do want to maintain the largest zone of contact when lagging in the race, and this you do with a point; a single blot doesn't cut it.

(c) but not least – the correct play allows **us** to hit him with sixes on the next turn when he rolls a six. Our 18 point stays there and keeps making life hard for him when he doesn't.

(2) Gammon-go is either the Crawford game when trailing 2 away – 1 away (5:6 to 7 for example), or when you trail 4 away – 2 away (3:5 to 7) and have already cubed your opponent. In this score you are much more willing to risk a loss for better chances of winning a gammon – as your gammons are worth much more than usual. You generally take more risks, also because when you lose, you don't mind if it's a gammon.