

How to Avoid Your Worst Blunders

By Itzhak Solsky

Blunders. Let's talk about Blunders.

As a chess player venturing into backgammon, one of the first things you notice is the transformation of what "blunder" means.

In chess, a blunder changes the likely result of the game. You suddenly drop a big advantage. You suddenly go from equal to losing. Most of the time it's some crazy oversight, like dropping a piece in one move (which is a big deal if you play chess).

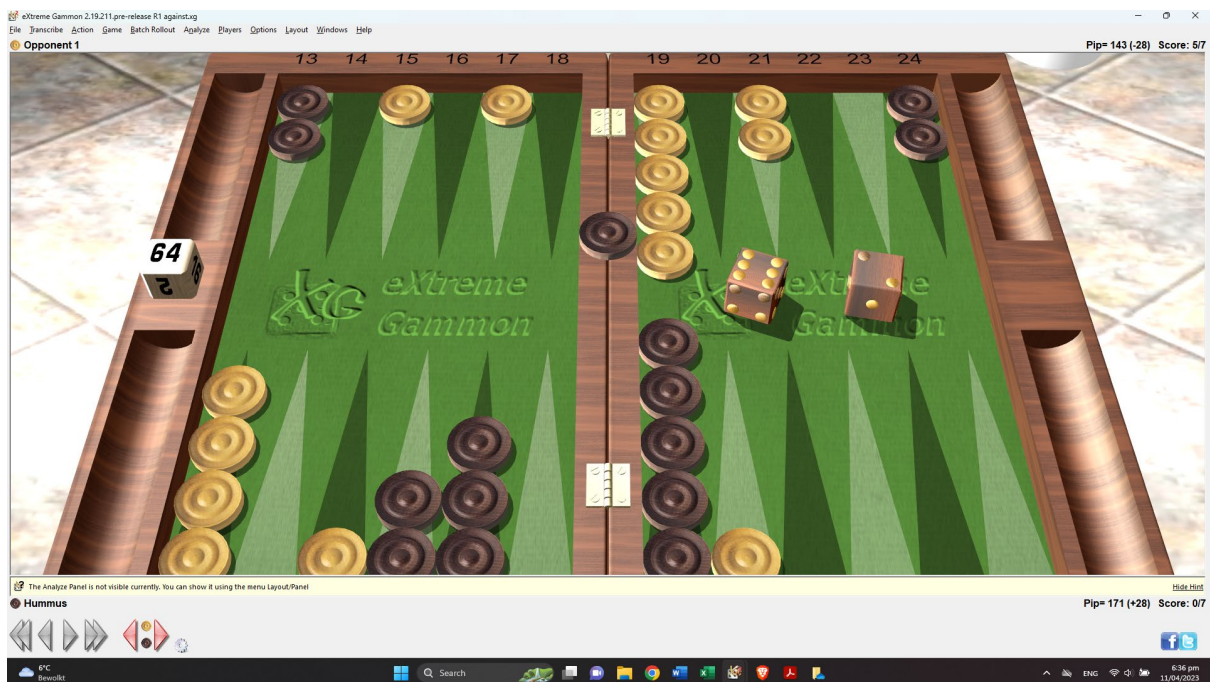
In backgammon, with -0.08 or -0.10 counting as a blunder, we're down to micro-territory by comparison. Sometimes (depending on the importance of cubing prospects in a given position) you commit a blunder by simply going from 53% to 52% winning chances – I've seen this happen!

Maybe that's the way it should be... as backgammon players, our influence over the actual result of a specific game is very minor when compared to chess. It's mostly decided by the dice anyway, so it's up to us to use what little influence we have as optimally as possible – and imprecision is punished severely – by the "all-knowing" software, if not always by our opponents. Ding!

But this article is about those huge, game-changing blunders. The really big ones. Those that immediately change the likely result of the game – like in chess. Those "Oh my God" blunders; those "How could I miss this?" blunders.

How do we avoid them?

Before we continue, let me take you on a tour of some of my own worst blunders:



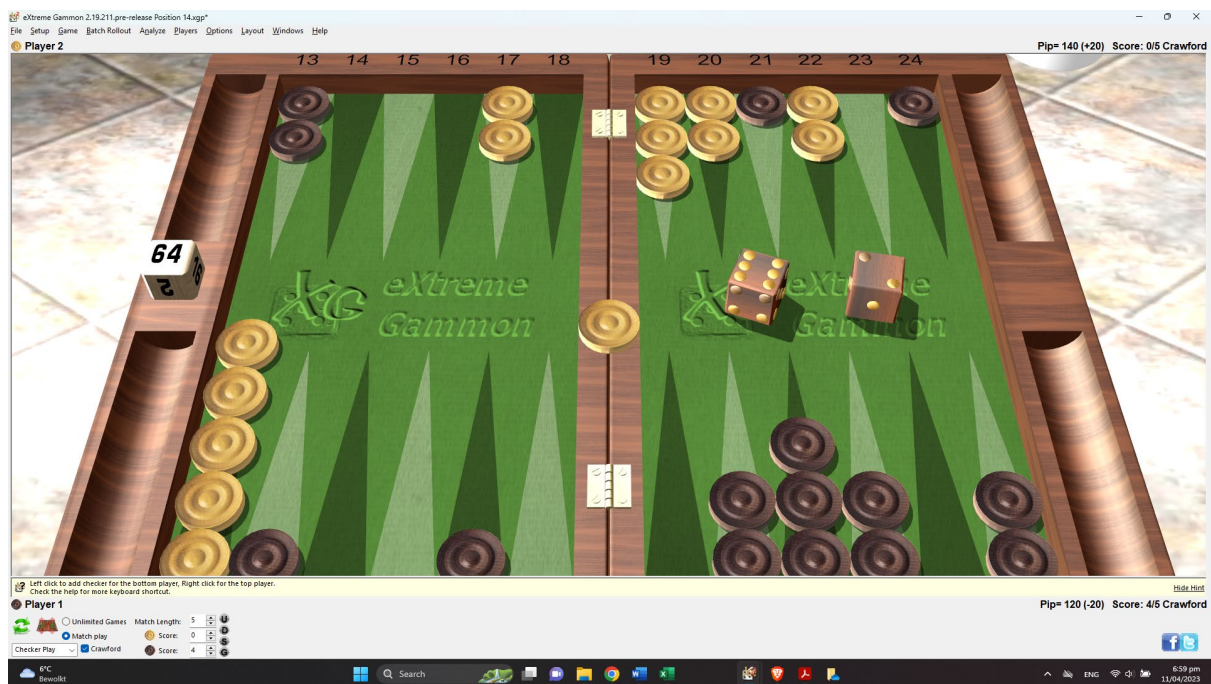
What would you play here, trailing 0:5 to 7 with a 62 roll from the bar?

Later, when transcribing this match at home, I had to rub my eyes. Was there really an opponent blot on my 17th?

Oops!! I played Bar/23 24/18 – trying for an anchor, or at least seeking a good exchange of hits. The “invisible” blot cost me 0.384 in equity.

I was still lucky enough to win the match 7:5, but talk about playing with fire!

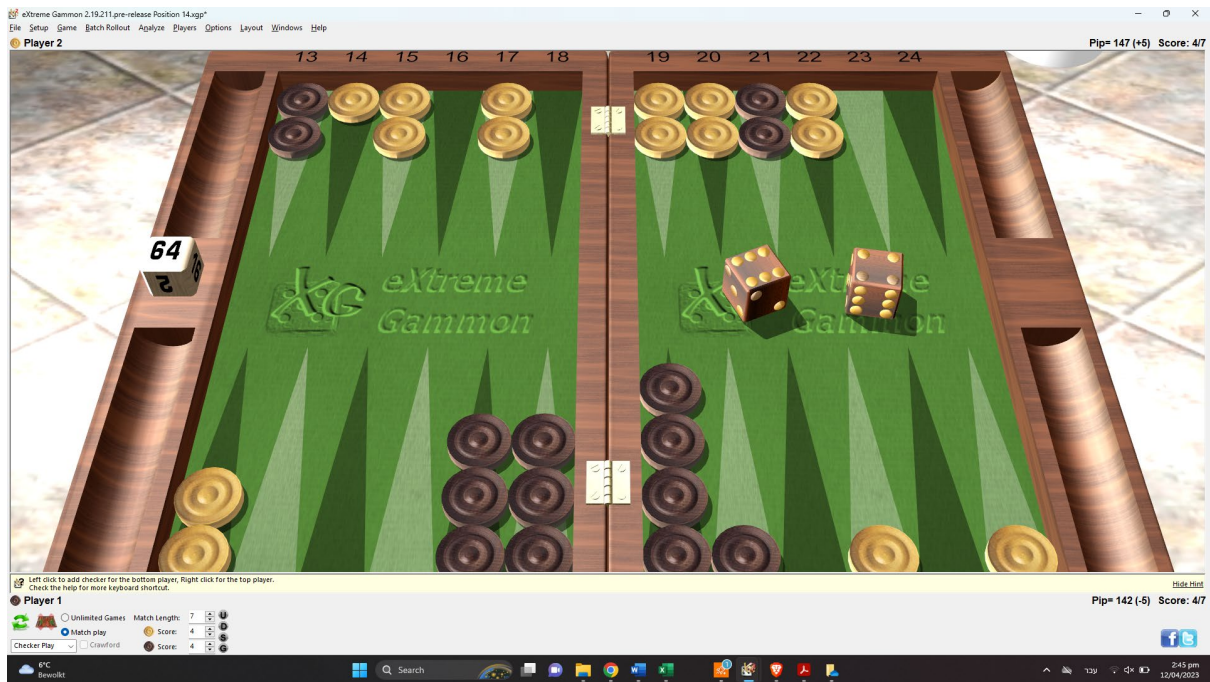
Or take this one –



Another misplayed 62 roll, against one of Belgium’s best players (back in 2019). I was leading 4:0 Crawford...

Indeed, you don’t usually get an opportunity to close exactly your 2 point in this type of position, with the opponent on the bar...

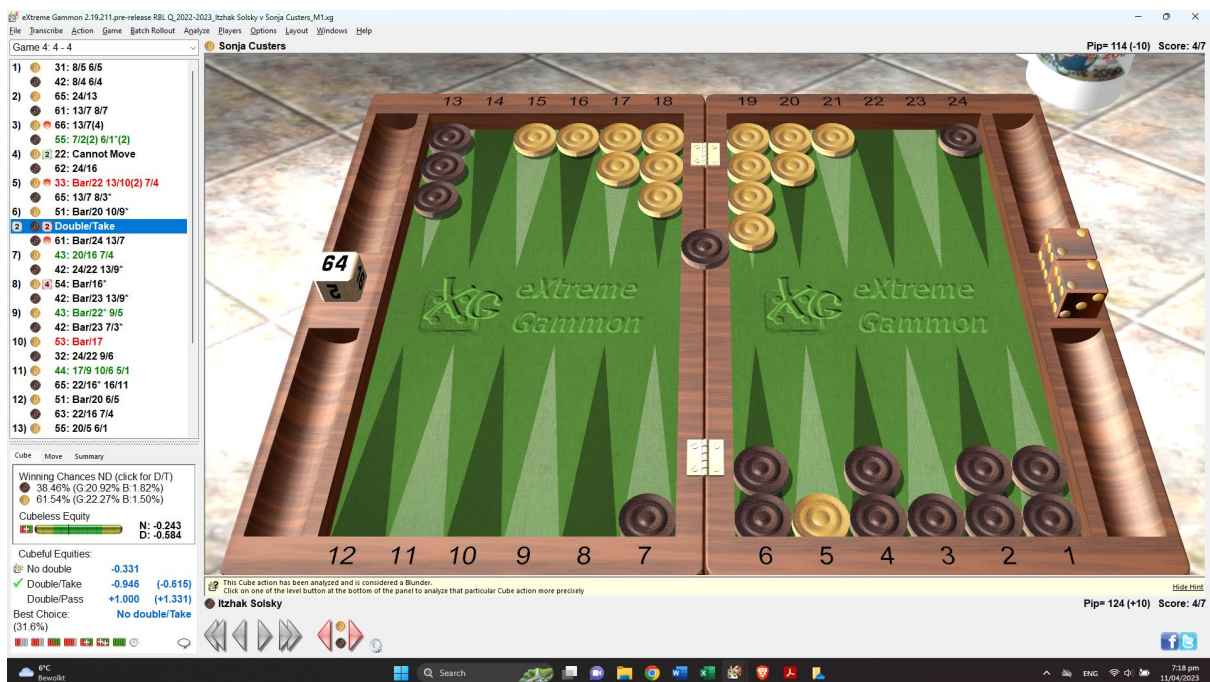
But nothing comes close to playing 8/2 4/2. I played elsewhere on the board (dropping loads of equity, of course), the opponent rolled a 62 of his own, hitting me from the bar. I danced (talk about instant karma!) – and ultimately managed to lose the entire match.



This one happened against my computer... let's listen to my thought process after rolling this 64:

“Bummer! So many great rolls making nice points, priming, hitting, attacking – I can’t even do something about that sore blot on my 5” (yeah, right – because 7/1* 5/1 is obviously not a move...)

And finally this last one, from a very recent PR tournament here in Belgium:



Here, at 4:4 to 7, my thinking was – “wow, great! My board is so much better than hers, and look how many hits and double-hits I can score next move!! An obvious cube... I wonder if she can even take this?”

I was later horrified to see that I was actually a big **underdog** in this one... with merely 38% winning chances.

I totally misunderstood this, dropping almost two-thirds of a point with this decision – but does it even belong in this article? Let’s wait and see...

I spent many years playing tournament chess. Backgammon is a relatively fast-paced game, with time controls generally requiring you to play many games within a single hour. Indeed, you can stop and think for a few minutes here and there – but typically not more than once or twice in a match to seven points.

Not so in chess. Here, a “long think” would be 30 or 45 minutes for a single move, while 3–4 minutes is simply the average thinking time. **Per move.**

You only play one game per session, and everything depends on the result. The game typically takes many hours to complete.

If we also remember (from the beginning of this article) how costly a one-move blunder can be – well, just imagine the frustration of building a game, a position, a strategy for four or five hours – and then just dropping everything in one move! And some people say that backgammon is cruel – you have no idea...

So to reach any meaningful playing strength in chess and to have more enjoyable and less frustrating over-the-board experiences, one had to find a way to eliminate those especially painful, even silly blunders.



A chess master named Benjamin Blumenfeld (he looks quite nice in the photo!) once devised a system known as “Blumenfeld’s Rule”, to train a player to avoid –

you guessed it – his worst blunders. Let us quote Grandmaster Alexander Kotov, who presented it nicely:

"It often happens that a player carries out a deep and complicated calculation, but fails to spot something elementary right at the first move."

Indeed! I can relate...

I can still remember that chess tournament from 1999, in which I was sitting and carefully calculating a six-move variation with sacrifices, piece exchanges, checks, manoeuvres in different move orders...

I sat there for a long time, exploring the possibilities and then finally, decisively, I made my move – attacking the queen with my knight to set it all in motion.

Right after moving I realized that I started my “combination” from move 2... I should have exchanged rooks first.

My opponent took my rook with a check and a smile – and that was the end of it. I somehow managed to draw the game and win first prize – but you get the idea.

Now back to Mr. Blumenfeld, as quoted by Kotov:

"In order to avoid such gross blunders, the Soviet master B. Blumenfeld made this recommendation: "When you have finished your calculations, write down the move you have decided upon on the score sheet."

"Then examine the position for a short time 'through the eyes of a patzer'. Ask whether you have left a mate in one on, or left a piece or a pawn to be taken."

"Only when you have convinced yourself that there is no immediate catastrophe for you should you make the planned move."

A “patzer” would parallel what we call a “fish” in backgammon – the one that should taste twice as good...

So what would be the backgammon parallel of Blumenfeld’s rule? What type of mental discipline could save us from such mishaps as we saw earlier in this article?

I came up with this:

Before making your move, do the following:

- 1) Consider every possible way to hit a checker (or more)
- 2) Consider every possible way to make a point (or more)
- 3) Does your position call for the best hit or point-making play? Then go for it.
- 4) Otherwise – is your intended move actually stronger than the best hit or pointing play? So that’s the one.

It should be quite painful for a less experienced player to do these “mental gymnastics” before each and every move (exceptions exist, of course – you might be bearing off, or perhaps it’s a cube decision...) – but if you make it a habit, the

process will become faster and you will gradually eliminate such misfortune from your games.

I included here four examples from my own games. Indeed, the recurrence of such fun-spoiling blunders in my play was the inspiration for this article in the first place!

In the first example I missed an obvious hit. In the second one I should have quietly made a point that I never saw or suspected. In the third one it was hitting **by** making a point... but indeed, the fourth one doesn't belong.

The fourth example was about positional understanding and judgment. Blunders of this type might well be huge (as we saw) – but they are outside the scope of this article.

I hope this helps 😊