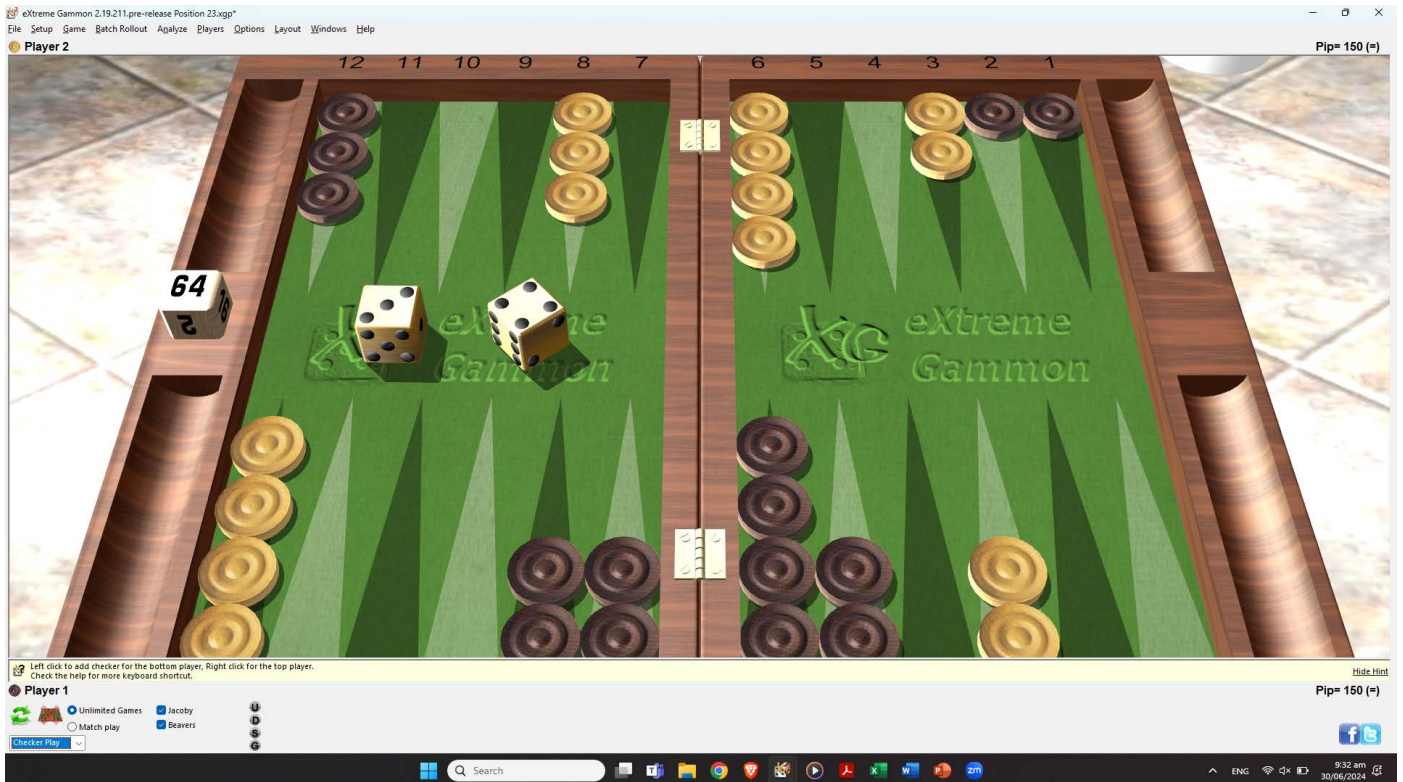


Just Sit Still

Or

Mastering Backgammon Through Fairy Tales

By Itzhak Solsky



Pulled from a money game played at the end of a long backgammon day...

As usual, consider this position without reading further. Decide what you would have played if you had to wear white's rather uncomfortable shoes here...

Then read on.

In this position white, who rolled 43, recognizes two things -

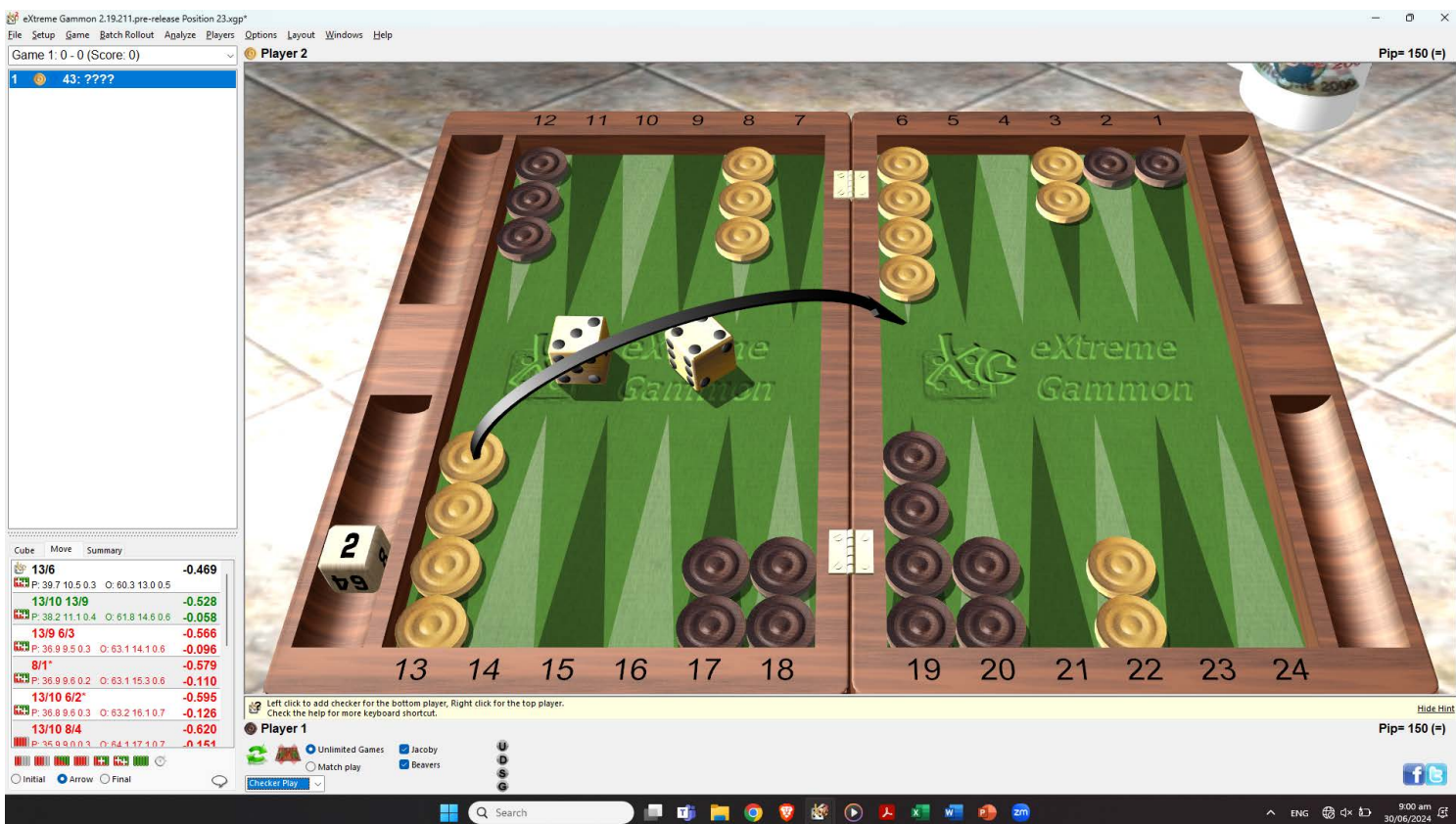
- 1) Here it is her opponent who is the clear favorite. Though the race is very close (equal pip count before the roll), her front structure is disorganized - the points mean nothing to each other, and otherwise she's stuck behind a considerable priming structure and her opponent is flexible enough; to make things worse -
- 2) She also didn't exactly get the roll of her dreams.

Nothing is ever absolute in backgammon... in many cases we hear that in inferior positions we should fight for our rights, fight for equality, mess things up, raise hell with our opponent... just do something!

In Peter and the Wolf (a symphonic tale by Russian composer Sergey Prokofiev), this was exactly the way white (the duck!) felt – overwhelmed as it saw black (the wolf!) approaching, it panicked, ran straight out of the lake and handed to its adversary a very satisfying lunch...

While still In the lake, the presence of the predator lurking outside was certainly intimidating, but truth be told – in its natural habitat, at least for the time being, the duck was untouchable. Wolves don't swim...

Don't make the situation worse by panicking, white duck. Stick to your guns and stay alert for opportunities, for they might well appear later.



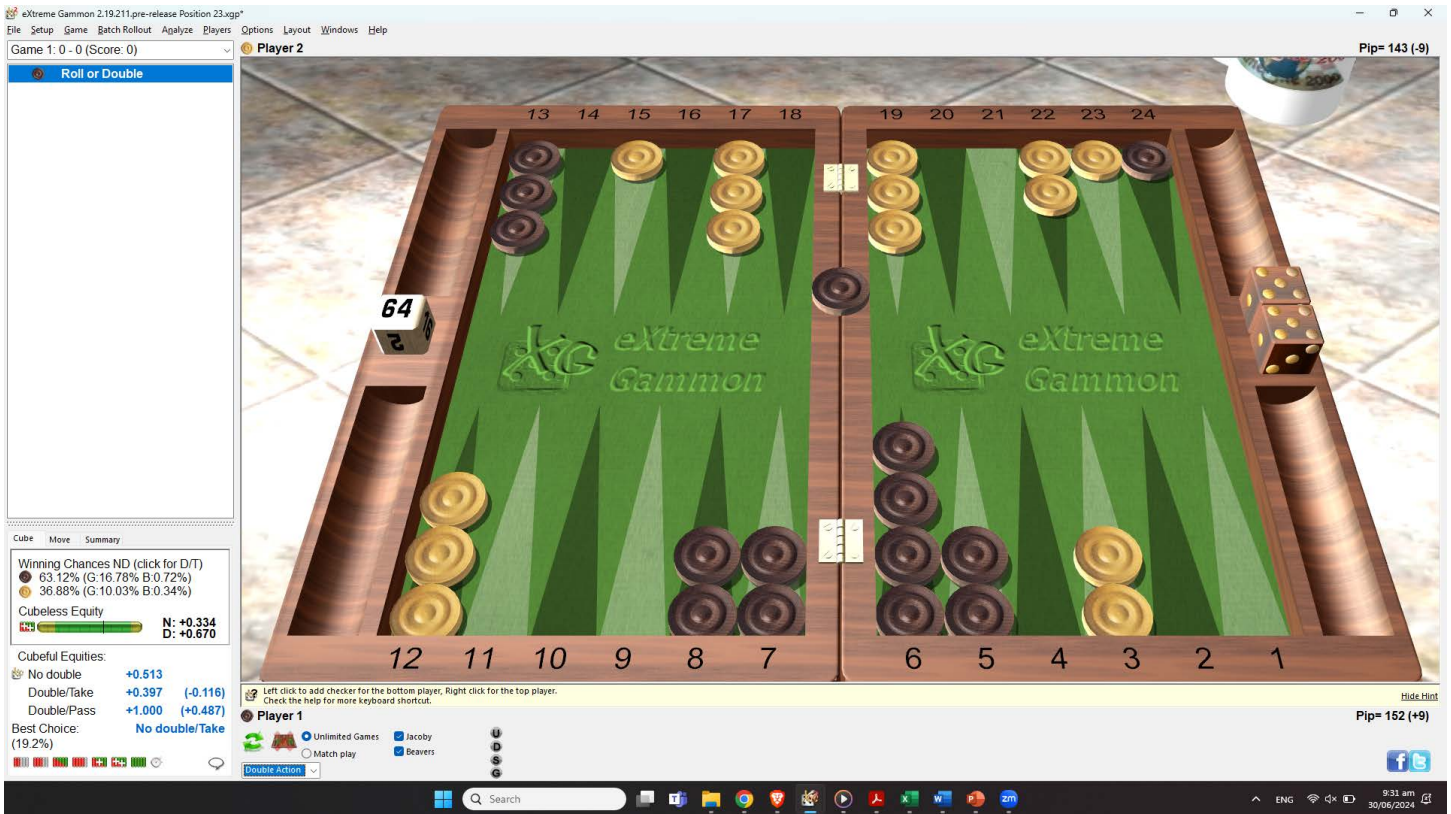
Here the duck should quietly play 13/6.

Of course, this move is rather counter-intuitive as normally we wouldn't like to play "like a beginner"... but here we should carefully keep the hungry wolf on a low-blot diet. Give him nothing further to work with. You're already in trouble, so at least don't make things worse.

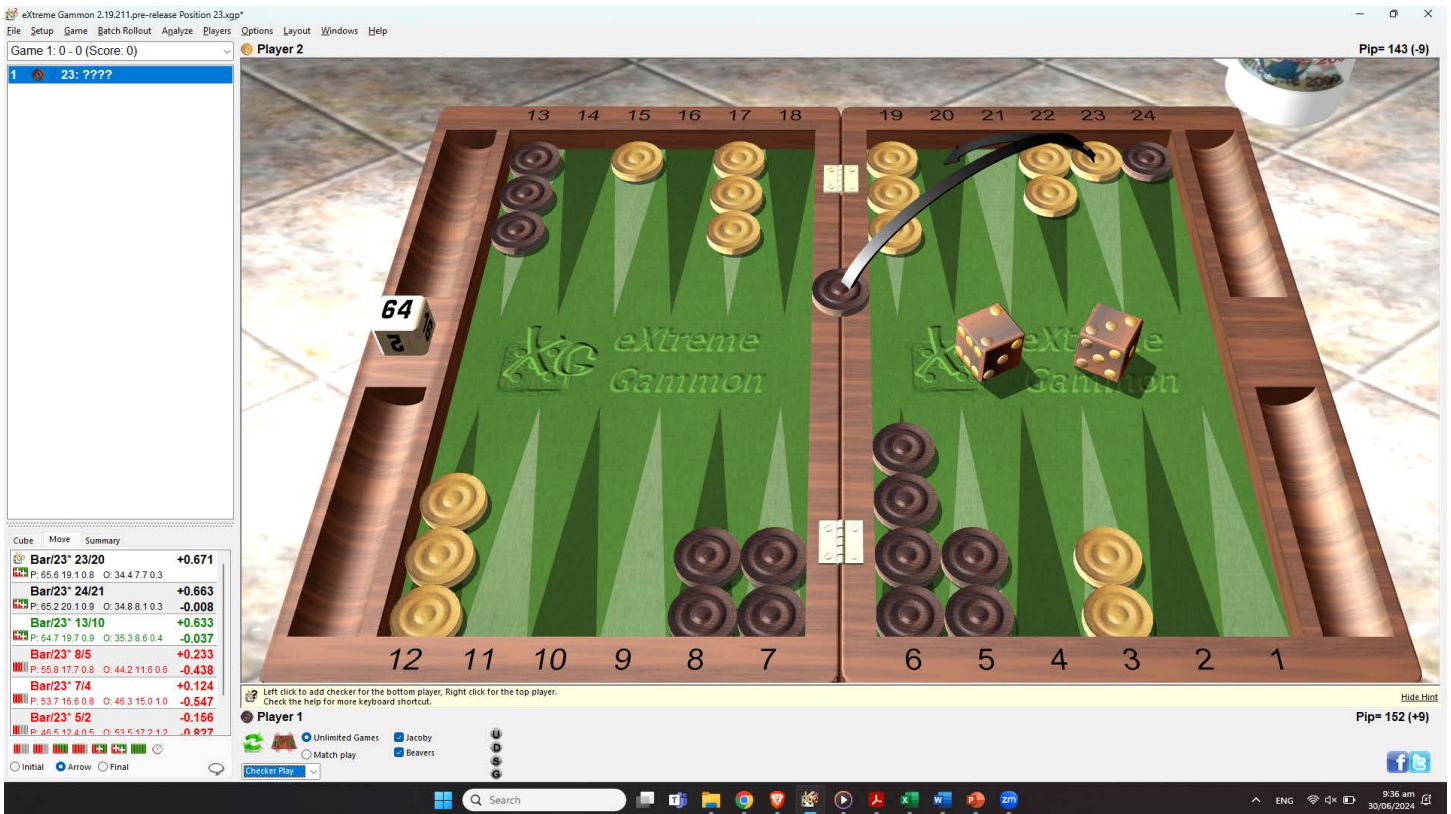
Don't let him growl at any exposed checkers, keep the race even and wait for better rolls (the future 66s, 11s, 63s and a bunch of constructive doublets and pointing rolls later).

If we take it from the wolf's perspective – how often do we recognize our own superior position and think – "if only I had something nice to shoot at, I would make her face the cube!". So don't provide black with targets. Don't panic. Don't run out of that lake...

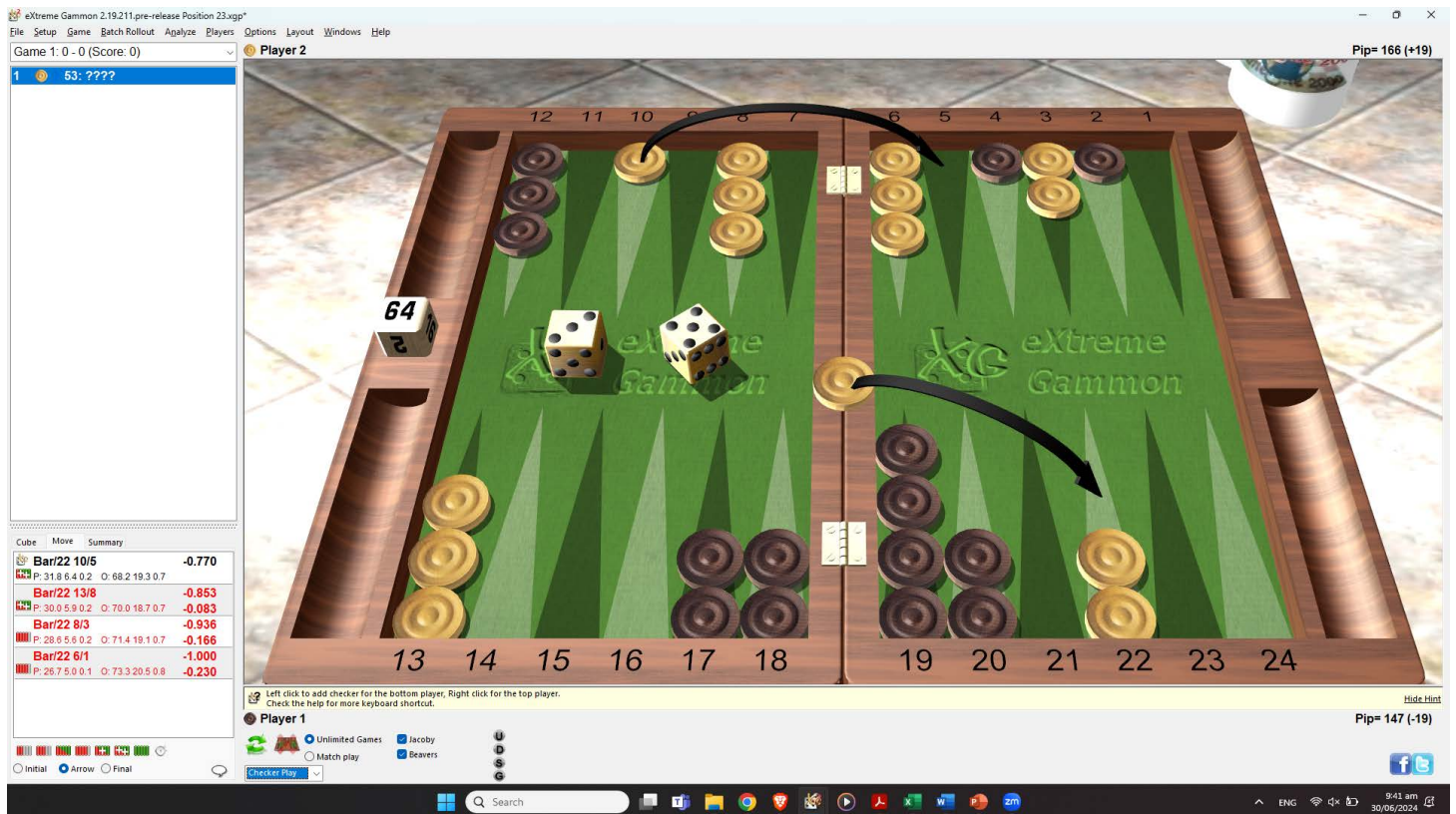
And how did our little game continue?



White erred with 13/10 6/2* and black couldn't quite cube just yet...



Black rolled 32, hitting from the bar and advancing the other back checker (the engine liked slotting the 20 a bit better),



White rolled 53, entered and started to consider the other part of her roll, at which point black exclaimed – “I don’t care how you play the 5... I’m cubing this!”

Compare this to the starting position – white still has each one of her original problems (stuck behind a prime plus an awkward, gappy structure) but her situation has now worsened: there’s a third checker back and a pesky outfield blot, while black’s stragglers are a bit further along.

After bar/22 13/8¹ black did send the cube. Though technically a take, in the heat of the battle nobody could blame white for wanting nothing further to do with this game...

The fact that the final position was still a good take points to the robustness and resilience of the 22-point anchor – “the mediocre anchor” or “the butterfly anchor”. It can often suffer quite a lot before ultimately throwing in the towel.

As white dropped the cube, black remarked “had you played 13/6 (in the original position), we would still be playing this game...”

Indeed! As there was simply nothing to shoot at.

¹ This isn’t really related to the main theme of this article, but note the correct move here, bar/22 10/5, where white says – “Of course this is far from enjoyable, but at least I’ll do something constructive. Who knows? it might become relevant”.

How to play the 5? 13/8 doesn’t really improve anything and the blot is still there, while 10/5 aims at creating a very valuable point that would greatly improve white’s cohesion. We will soon dedicate a new article to this theme.

Sometimes it's better to sit still, hold tight and hope for better days – which often do appear at the horizon, even though we still can't perceive them out of our gloomy state...

In backgammon as in life, when faced with tough conditions it's sometimes just about making it through another turn without getting cubed. When in doubt, ask yourself this question – after each of the plays I'm considering, how far is my opponent from cubing me?

This way of thinking would have led white to play 13/6, clasp her hands under the table and pray. It was the right decision.

Belgian Champion (2024), UBC contender (2023) and BMAB master Itzhak Solsky is a backgammon coach with the Backgammon Learning Center (www.backgammonlearningcenter.com), where you can learn backgammon through a systematic methodology conceived and arranged over many decades by such giants as Paul Magriel, Kit Woolsey, Phil Simborg, Mochy and others. Itzhak teaches in English, Hebrew, French, Spanish and Italian.