

Backgammon Scenes and Tales

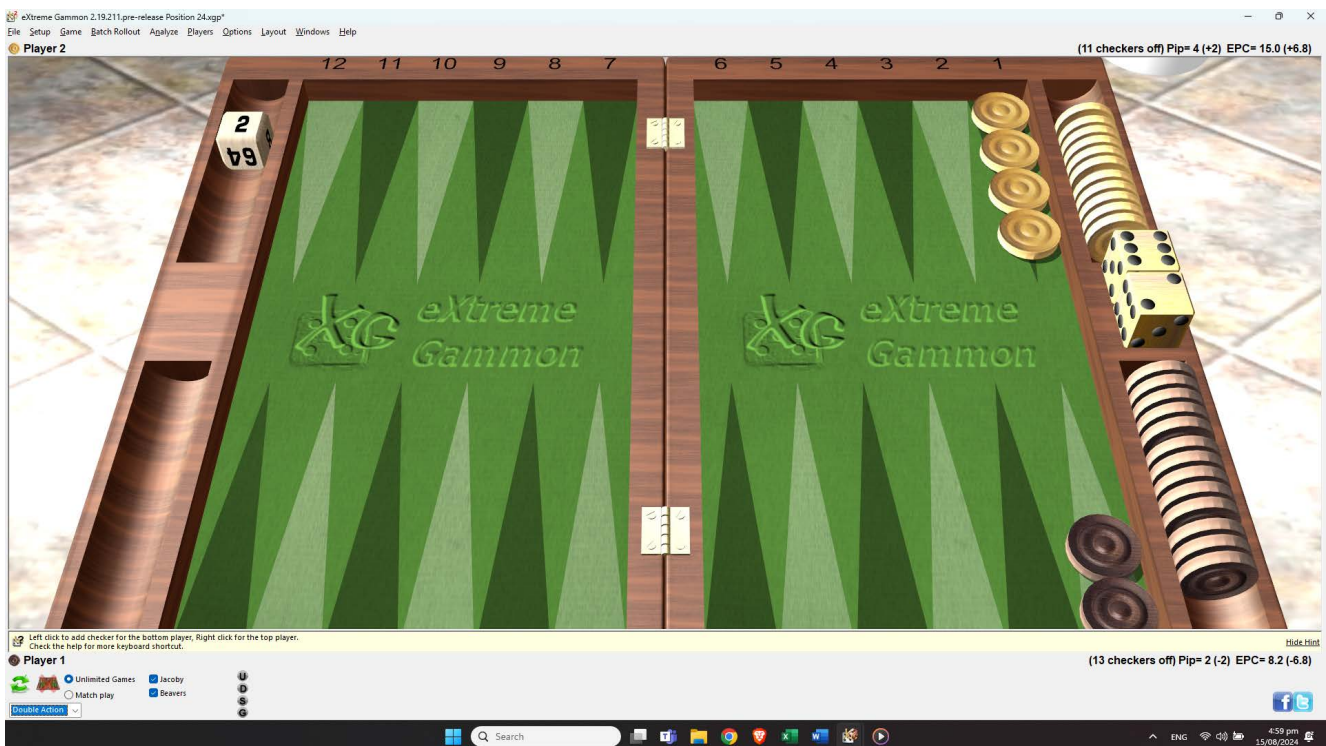
Chapter 1: How Backgammon Imitates Blackjack

By Itzhak Solsky

Blackjack?

It imitates blackjack?

I always thought it was more like Russian roulette... I mean - who wouldn't love to be in this situation here as black?



This obviously needs no introduction...

Just a friendly game, or perhaps a high-stakes game, maybe the decisive game in a tournament or a championship match...

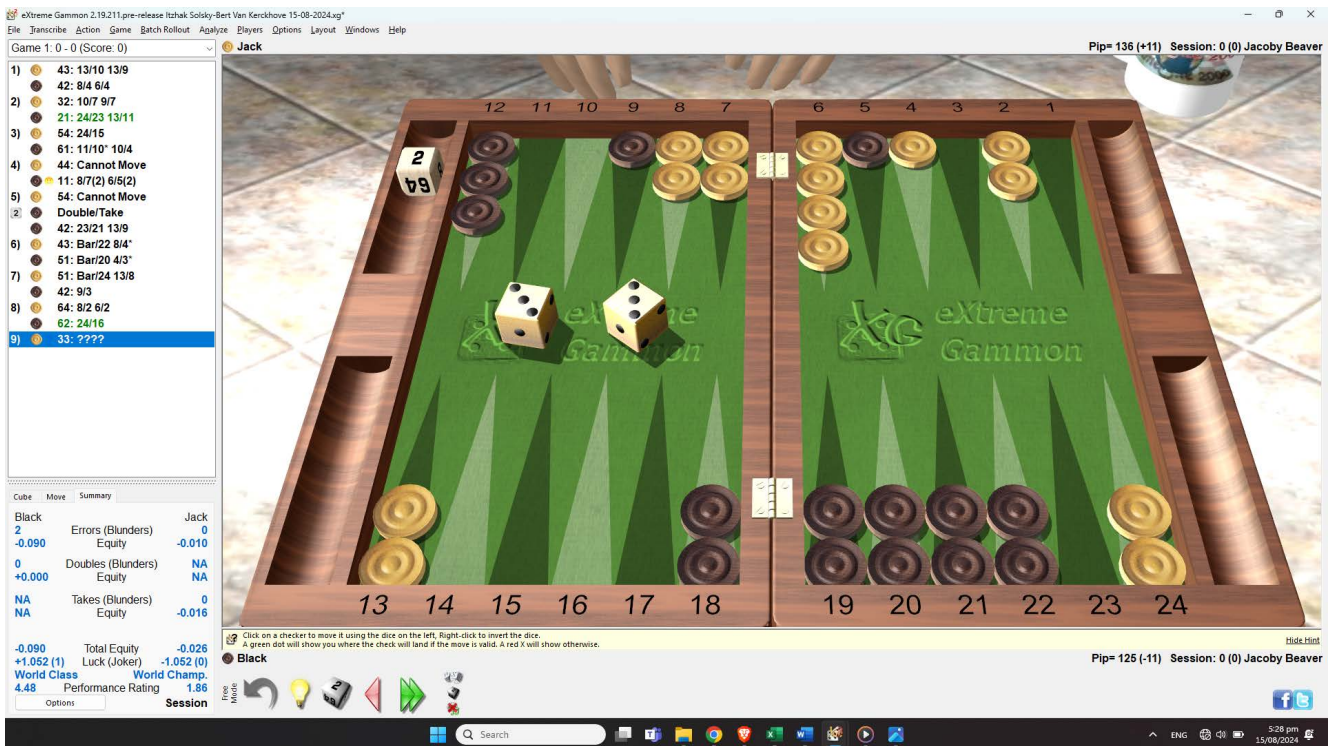
We'd love to reach this position, wouldn't we? We wait for our opponent to roll and we're basically ready to collect.

There's just this thing though, that he might roll doubles on occasion... the bullet in one of the six chambers.

Will it happen this time? Or are we spared until the next time our heart flutters and the opponent sees that frozen sense of panic in our eyes as he meaningfully delays the inevitable, shaking the dice tauntingly as it's basically all he can do...

So Russian roulette. Bearing in mind that such situations (not necessarily this simple) generally occur several times every game, backgammon is more easily comparable to that much more dangerous "sport". We deal with those frequent changes and upsets by a positive and friendly attitude, keeping the risk level reasonably low – but it still stings, of course.

But backgammon has many faces, and here's a really common situation – I wonder how nobody's ever noticed how much it actually resembles that popular casino card game known as blackjack:

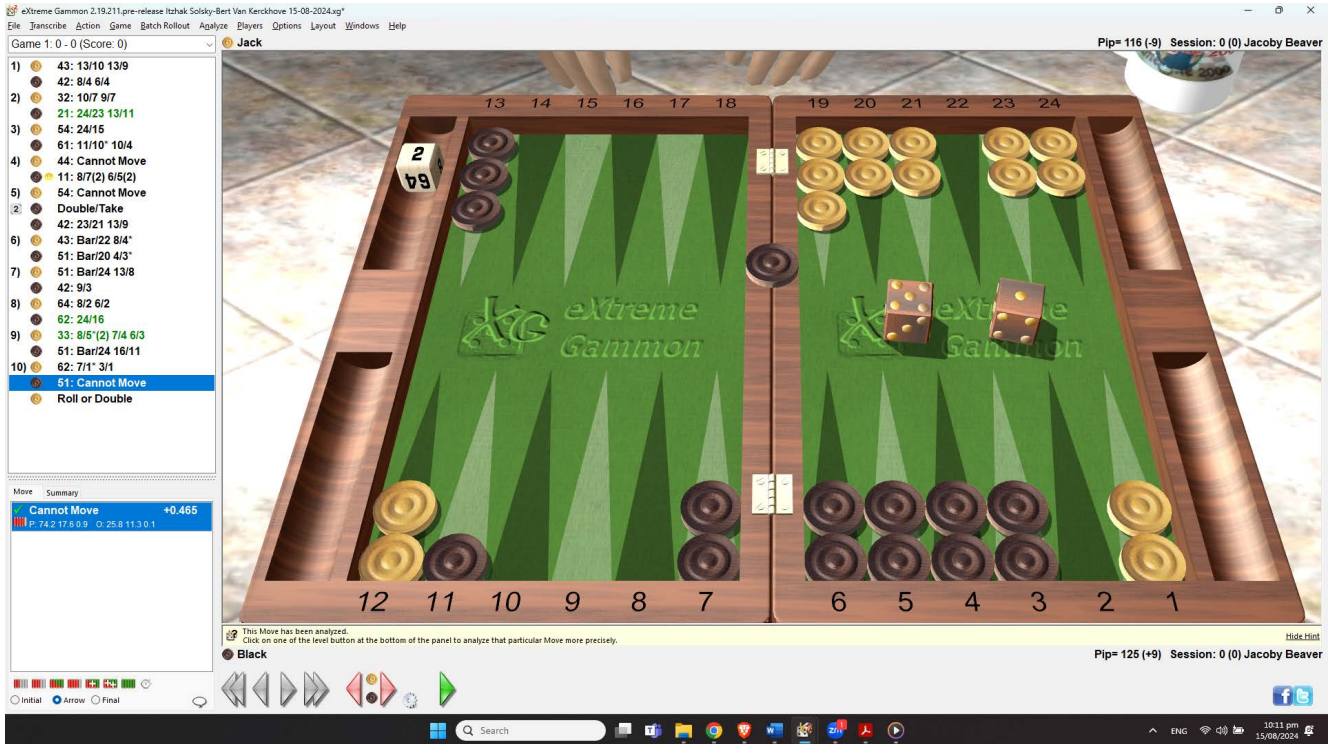


Here our opponent is stuck behind a 5-prime, not even at the edge...

To come out, he will of course need a pair of aces (unwittingly we even start speaking the language of cards...) and a pair of sixes.

Instead, he gets a pair of wild-eyed threes, transforming his remaining checkers into a herd of buffalo. They will storm and trample, crushing everything in their path, not heroically but rather helplessly as they can never ever stop!

(Note: I was always fascinated by this quality of the checkers, their ability to suddenly transform into a single gooey mass and perform a sudden act of mass migration as the opponent enjoys a prolonged stay on the bar).



And sure enough, two moves later the heat is on!

From our previous diagram, White had a beautifully original (if not completely accurate) play for his double threes – making the five on my head, closing the four and **slotting** the three, thereby creating a potentially beautiful structure without a care in the world.

I rolled 51, entered on his ace (again!) point and cleared a blot (16/11).

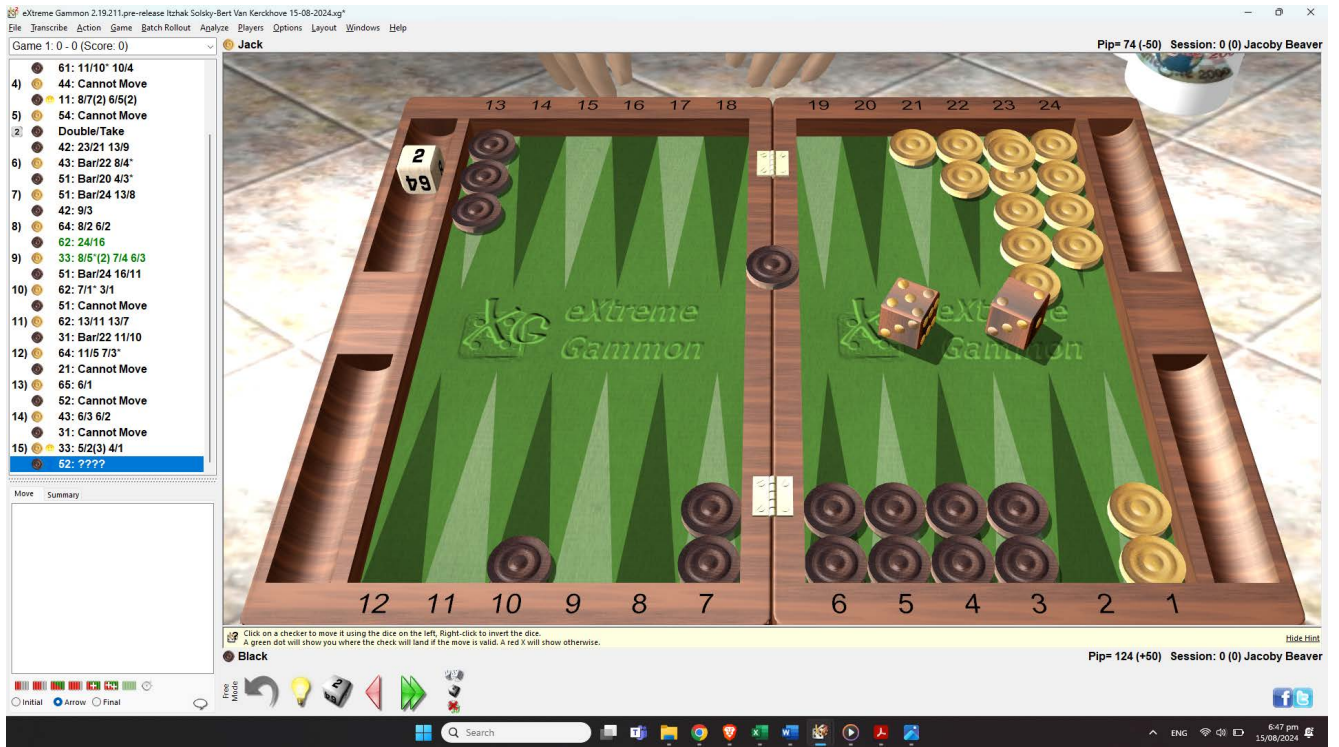
He rolled 62, which made his deep blots very useful as again, he pointed on my head – and now I danced.

Just between the two of us – what exactly could I do?

Nothing. Only watch things unfold from the bar and wait for developments.

Will the enemy war machine, like a train out of control, just crush, trample and run all over my checkers, then slam head-first into the wall (the lower board points)?

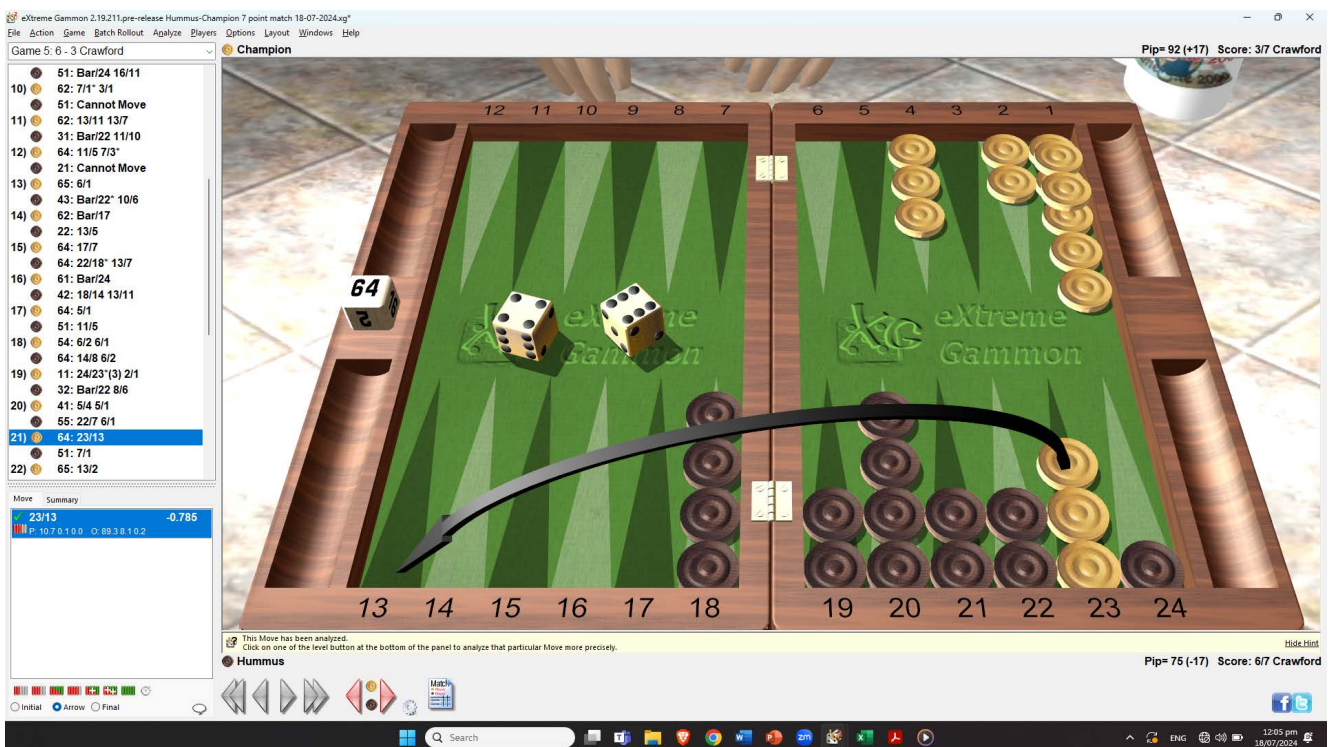
And would I then, after all the ceremony and clamor, finally enter from the bar, slowly recover from the noisy stampede, and be like – “wait, what was that?” as I remove some rubble and dust from my clothes?



Phew! I guess I survived that...

...or perhaps, would he miraculously roll the exact numbers he needs to escape my prime, and I would watch with a mix of wonderment and astonishment - I just can't believe it! how did that happen? It was so unlikely... (Actually it wasn't THAT unlikely... in our last position, after I danced, white still wins a good 26% of the time, including 11% gammons. I bet that would feel unlucky!)

In case you're curious - here is how our little game actually ended up, not so successfully for the buffaloes this time...



Crash against the wall they did... and of course, the rest was easy.

Blackjack is a simple casino card game, in which we draw cards, hoping not to exceed 21 points, and at some point we stop, lean back on our chair and wait for the dealer to collect his own cards.

Will he beat us? Will he go over 21 and “bust”? This is completely outside our control. Like in the above dramatic game, at some point we can only watch in wonderment, hoping for the best while fearing the worst (basically another variation on the Russian roulette theme after all...) But we meet this same situation in many other games. We do have control, of course, otherwise it's just a theatre show – but we reach a point where we've done all we could and can only watch.

Even take tennis, where our opponent often hits a fast ball in an unlikely direction that we're never going to reach. We are completely helpless against our opponent's ingenuity – but the ball often ends up outside the lines.

If this situation arises in so many different games, it must mean that it reflects a deeper truth. In both life and other games, there are quite often situations in which we realize that we can't stop a certain process from running its course. For good or worse – this has nothing to do with us, and it might or might not be dangerous.

Once we realize that there's nothing we can do about it, we might as well sit back, relax and watch the show. It might well turn out in our favor.

The good players know the chances of success linked to many of these “out of control” scenarios *before* they occur, so they can often choose which one to enter. There's no guarantee of success, but it's all about improving our chances.

Belgian Champion (2024), UBC contender (2023, 2024) 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.