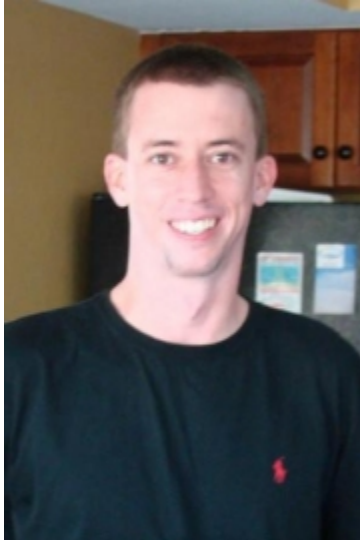# Rules of Opening Play

by Stick
30 September 2010

Stick

When I started playing backgammon roughly 5 years ago now I was taken aback at the lack of opening game theory available. Other games are often compared to backgammon such as chess or poker, and even though in general I hate most comparisons, these other games had thoroughly stressed how important the beginning of a game or a hand is. When I started reading through backgammon book after backgammon book there were mention of reference positions, early game blitzes, or how certain early game positions should be played but there was nothing definitive. Enter me and [my web site](#)

At the time I had even less of an idea of what I was doing than I do now but I started pouring my computer time into early game rollouts. I remember some of the first rollouts I performed using Snowie and I did 1296 trials thinking this was awesome. (ask Mary Hickey or Chris Yep, I remember showing them the printouts) It was rather time consuming for the computer power at the time but I didn't yet understand how few trials that was or how meaningless these figures were. Still, they gave me a much better idea than I had before the rollouts and I continued down that path.

I learned the opening because I did all the rollouts, I recorded all the data, I posted the data for others to see. I looked at this information time and time and time again. The first couple of moves in backgammon are etched into my brain like a kind of LCD burn in. Thanks to this I started to notice patterns and create my own set of rules for opening play. I have never before tried to rigidly define any of them but that's just what I'm going to do in this article. A few of these rules were in existence before I came along but I discovered them all by my lonesome. Others are wild and should only be applied by those who understand them. I write this because so often I'm asked "Stick, what's the best way to learn about opening play?" I honestly don't

know, I didn't take your standard route to get to where I am but hopefully some of these rules will help you have a better grasp in the early phase of the game.

> **Rule #1:** When your opponent splits with an opening 6X [62 63 64] and you reply with a hitting 1X [21 41 51] you should play the other number (the non ace) down from the midpoint.

I list this rule first because it is already known, easy to understand, and the only possible exceptions will cost you next to nothing in equity if you follow the rule blindly. To make sure you get the visual look at the position below where your opponent opened with a 62 and played the normal splitting play. You can now reply with any of the hitting aces, 21, 41, or 51 and per Rule #1 know how to play your roll. The most common misplay I see here is with the roll of 51 a lot of people will overdo it by trying to blitz and hit two checkers. This is a clear over play. I also sometimes see people split with a 41 trying to get their back men moving and duplicating sixes. This isn't the worst idea, at least it had thought behind it, but the key to this rule is that you have 5 men stacked on the midpoint and you want a better distribution. In none of these cases is there an urgent need to split and playing one off the mid gives you more covering numbers, more point making numbers, or more return shots if your blot is hit. It also brings more men in the zone.
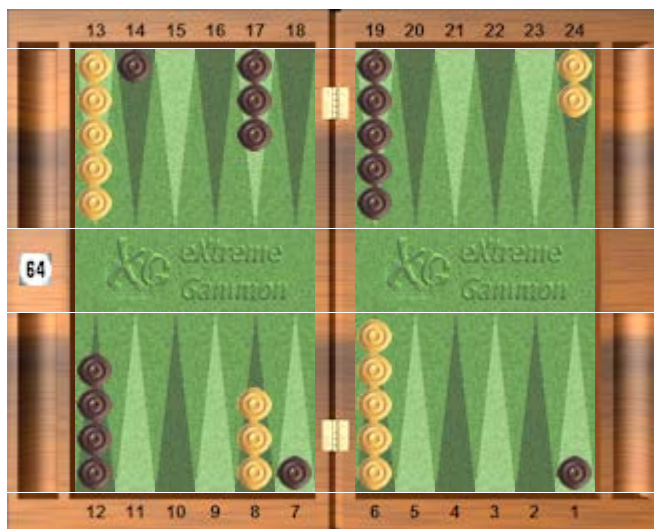
XGID=-a----EaC---dEa--c-e----B-:0:0:1:00:0:0:3:0:10

I will mention any exceptions as best I can. I will not state things in the rule itself that should be understood by everyone such as for this rule I didn't list 61 in the list of rolls that follow the rule even though it does. Everyone should know how to play 61. The two possible exceptions in all of these variations is after your opponent opens with a 64 and split 24/18 13/9 and you roll a 21 or a 41. According to the latest and most powerful rollouts after you hit with the ace the splitting plays are tied with the plays that come down from the midpoint. While you don't need to know this for money play and can blindly follow the rule, it's good to know when these decisions are close because often the match score will lead you to the correct play. For example, if you're ahead 8-3 in a match to 11, your opponent opens with a 64 and splits and you roll either 21 or 41 and you know it's tied in the rollouts it'll be clear at the score to split. If the scores were reversed and you were trailing in the match, it would be clear to bring a man down from the midpoint.

Again, I see a lot of over aggressive play in the opening and Rule #2 addresses another subset of these plays. Watch any chouette where this set of positions comes up and you'll see the good ole rip two down from the midpoint. Bringing two down from the midpoint in this situation can range from slightly wrong to making me want to lose my lunch. What makes this position different from the positions discussed in Rule #1 is that we now have already unloaded the stacked midpoint and already have two clean covers for the bar point.

There are no exceptions to this rule. The closest decisions is a 62 to play after your opponent opens with a 62. It is *still* correct by .010 to split the back checkers but this is as close as the two down play gets. Again, this information could come in useful at scores where your gammon value is noticeably increased. (and your opponent's gammon value is typically decreased)

There are two different main ideas running through this rule. The first that is illustrated after your opponent opens with the point making 31 or 42 is that you are worried about getting hemmed in as he has made a good offensive point. You are already able to anchor up significantly reducing your gammon losses and also stopping your opponent's game plan of priming you in dead in its tracks. Shown below is the rollout of a 22 to play after your opponent's opening 42. Another common misplay I see.
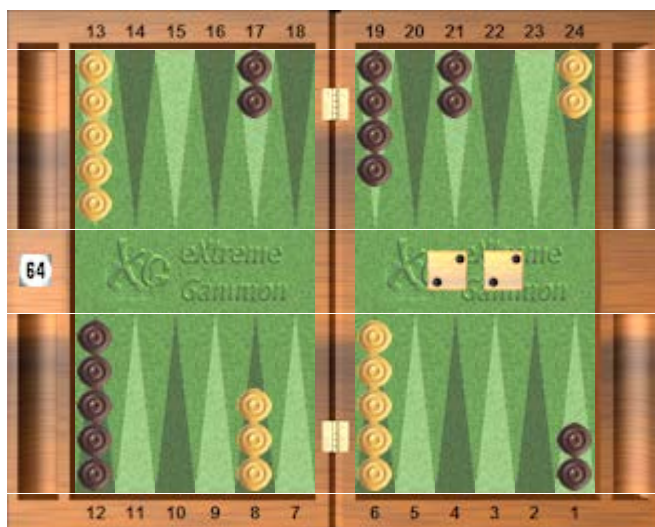
🔴 is Player 2

score: 0
pip: 161

Money session
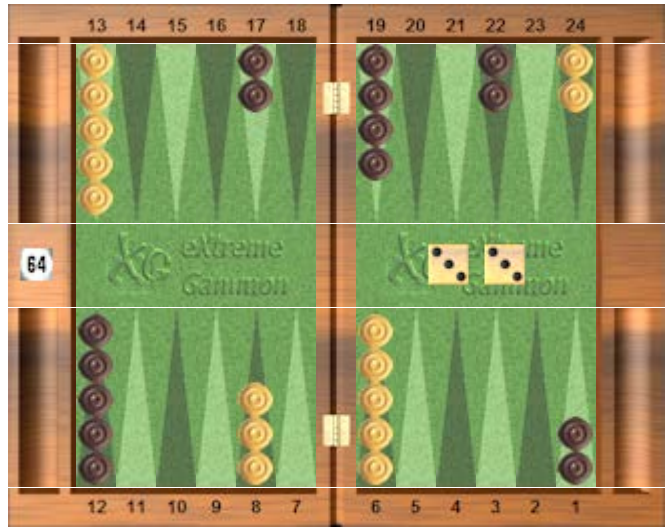Jacoby Beaver

pip: 167
score: 0

🟡 is Player 1

XGID=-b----E-C---eE---b-d-b--B-:0:0:1:22:0:0:3:0:10

🟡 to play 22

#	Ply	Move	Equity
• 1	R	24/22(2) 6/4(2)	+0.0934
		0.5183 0.1397 0.0057 - 0.4817 0.1108 0.0045 +0.0667 +0.0934	
		0.0005 0.0005 0.0001 - 0.0005 0.0005 0.0001 0.0011 0.0031	
		Full cubeful rollout with var.redn. 15552 games, Mersenne Twister dice gen. with seed 1024877696 and quasi-random dice Play: 2-ply cubeful prune [world class] keep the first 0 0-ply moves and up to 12 more moves within equity 0.16 Skip pruning for 1-ply moves. Cube: 2-ply cubeful prune [world class]	
2	R	13/11(2) 6/4(2)	+0.0793 (-0.0141)
		0.5195 0.1600 0.0083 - 0.4805 0.1506 0.0077 +0.0491 +0.0793	
		0.0005 0.0005 0.0002 - 0.0005 0.0005 0.0002 0.0013 0.0033	
		Full cubeful rollout with var.redn. 15552 games, Mersenne Twister dice gen. with seed 1024877696 and quasi-random dice Play: 2-ply cubeful prune [world class] keep the first 0 0-ply moves and up to 12 more moves within equity 0.16 Skip pruning for 1-ply moves. Cube: 2-ply cubeful prune [world class]	
3	R	24/20(2)	+0.0735 (-0.0199)
		0.5131 0.1066 0.0035 - 0.4869 0.0839 0.0031 +0.0492 +0.0735	
		0.0004 0.0005 0.0001 - 0.0004 0.0004 0.0001 0.0010 0.0026	
		Full cubeful rollout with var.redn. 15552 games, Mersenne Twister dice gen. with seed 1065468160 and quasi-random dice Play: 2-ply cubeful prune [world class] keep the first 0 0-ply moves and up to 12 more moves within equity 0.16 Skip pruning for 1-ply moves. Cube: 2-ply cubeful prune [world class]	

On the other end of this rule is your opponent opening with a 53 or 64 and making a deeper point in his home board. Now while the rule holds true it does so for a different reason. The reasoning here has more to do with transforming the point your opponent just made into dead checkers instead of a useful point. When you anchor up in front of such a deep point it really hinders the power of the point.

People understand to anchor up with double fours in these positions but give them double threes and it's a different ballgame. While the decisions tend to be closer with double threes, especially after an opening 64, it is still correct to anchor up. It can also be a huge error not to do so as in the following example:

XGID=-b----E-C---eE---b-d--b-B-:0:0:1:33:0:0:3:0:10

🟡 to play 33

With the 33 to play above it would be a gross error costing you around .050 in equity should you make the overly aggressive play of 8/5(2) 6/3(2). When it comes to how to play 22 and 33 after an opening 64 the plays are a lot closer but even the latest eXtreme gammon rollouts using the highest settings to date (4 ply checker, 4 ply cube) confirm it is still best to seize the anchor and permanently put your opponent's checkers out of play.

> **Rule #4:** If your opponent makes a big split in your inner board on the opening roll [32 43 52 54] and you reply with a roll where you will hit loose from either your 8pt or 6pt, use the other die to play down from the midpoint if possible.

This rule sounds a little confusing, perhaps it could more easily be stated by "if you hit loose on the second roll play the other die down from the midpoint". There are many examples that will clarify this. I'm not going to shove in all the rollout results, you can get them off my site if you need them. A few of the more commonly misplayed positions are shown below.
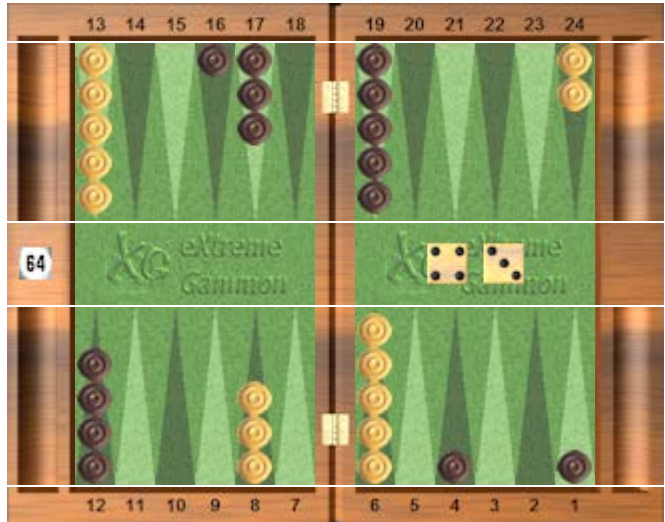
XGID=-a--a-E-C---dE--ac-e----B-:0:0:1:43:0:0:3:0:10
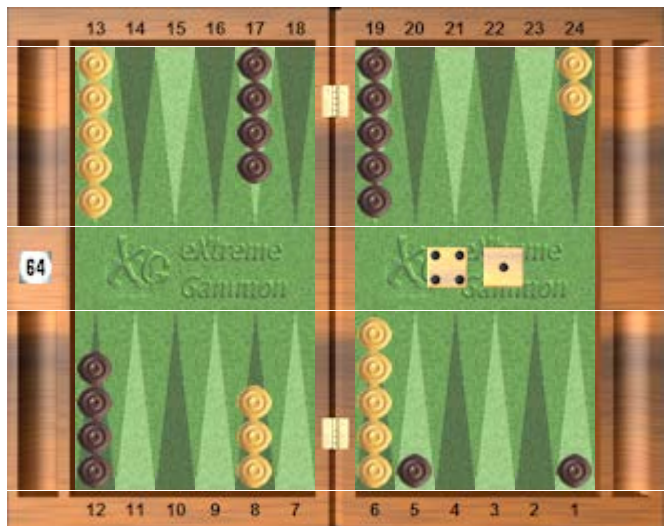
to play 43

eXtreme Gammon Version: 1.21

XGID=-a---aE-C---dE---d-e----B-:0:0:1:41:0:0:3:0:10

to play 41

eXtreme Gammon Version: 1.21
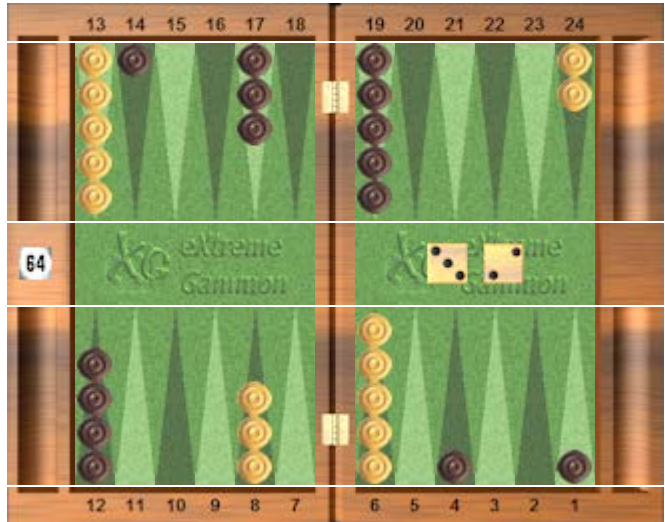
XGID=-a--a-E-C---dEa--c-e----B-:0:0:1:32:0:0:3:0:10

🟡 to play 32

You will quickly see that all of these plays have one thing in common, they unstack the midpoint. Again, this allows more covers for when the blot isn't hit. When the blot is hit this extra checker will allow more return loose hits from the bar in the early game fight for the high inner board points. Another common theme that you will also see in a lot of these positions and two of the examples I used above are **good sixes**. I see this creep up time and time again in the early going. Giving yourself good sixes is another way of saying diversifying your good numbers or not leaving yourself awkward.

The last thing you should note in the above three positions is if you follow the rule you will see again, you are not hitting two checkers here! It is more important to work towards long term goals by unstacking and evenly distributing your position than to try a blitz at this stage in the game when you have no extra home board points yet made, no more men in the zone, nada.

There are a couple of exceptions to this rule but they both involve your opponent rolling a 6X. Also, as with the other exceptions, if you were to follow the rule the errors you would be making are small. One exception comes after your opponent opens with an opening 43 and plays the big split, 24/20 13/10, seen less and less nowadays. (rightfully so imnsho) Now you roll 61, what to do? I could refurbish a decent explanation or direct you to a post by Nack Ballard with comparison positions that already does an excellent job of it. Nack's post. The other exception to the rule is after an opponent opens with a 32 and plays the big split, 24/21 13/11. You now toss 62, what to do? You of course hit loose with the deuce and then playing out to the 18pt or down to the 7pt are tied according to GNU and Snowie rollouts.

Rule #5: The only second roll where you hit in the outfield with double twos is after your opponent splits with an opening 64. (shown below)
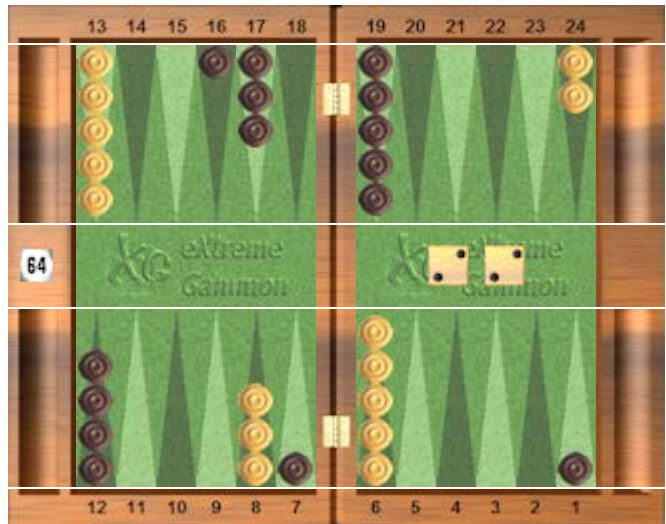
XGID=-a----EaC---dE--ac-e----B-:0:0:1:22:0:0:3:0:10

to play 22

That's right, an entire rule written for one play. What this rule does though is eliminate the option of you ever having to consider playing 24/16* with double twos on the second roll. It is generally wrong to 'waste' double twos by hitting in the outfield because you pass up on unstacking points, making strong offensive or defensive points, but here is not your standard position. There's a combination of things going on here that makes it clearly correct to hit in the outfield. The first thing is the strenght of the 9pt builder. Commit that to memory. The 9pt builder provides the most point making numbers for the points one wants to make most, the five point, the four point, and the bar point. If not used to make one of these points it is also generally the best 'other' outfield point to own so the possibility of making the 9pt itself is worth something. I'm comparing the 9pt builder to the 10pt and 11pt builders of course. While the others may provide a shade more coverage in the outfield, they pale in comparison to what the 9pt builder can accomplish offensively when left unfettered.

Aside from the 9pt builder, which exists in other variations on the second roll where you won't hit 24/16* (like 41S-22) we also have the opponent's checker on our bar point. Our opponent in this variation thus has the biggest racing lead in any second roll variation where we'd have this consideration and the most ways to do something very productive either offensively or defensively.

> **Rule #6:** You only hit twice in your inner board on the second roll if you rolled 41 and your opponent split with 21, 41, or 51.

Another rule that exists not for the usefulness of the plays it encompasses, but the plays that it does not. This rule lets you know that all those other double hit to the ace point plays are wrong. Your opponent opens with 32 and plays 24/21 13/11 and you reply with 32 or 43 you know what you don't do thanks to this rule? Hit twice. Your opponent splits with an opening 52 and you roll a 32 or 52 in reply you know what you don't do thanks to this rule? Hit twice. Your opponent

splits with an opening 54 and you roll 43 or 41 you know what you don't do thanks to this rule? Hit twice. This rule is trying to break the habit of players who hit everything they see without taking the time to think about why they're doing it. Some of these double hits are straight up horrific and even make my blunder scale. The only reason you can hit twice with a 41 in the mentioned scenario is because of how poorly it plays otherwise. It's not that hitting twice is good but it's better than the other not so good options.

> **Rule #7:** After your opponent opens with a 31 or 42 you will be moving the back checkers with any non natural point making number.

This rule is self-explanatory. Your opponent has made one of his best inner board points and it's critical that you start moving your back men. You can no longer rip two down from the midpoint as those shots are more costly and you're already behind in the priming and attacking battle. Playing two down attempts to play catch up and you just can't catch up. You want to get your back men moving before your opponent's offense gets any stronger than it already is. It should be noted that although 64 is a 'natural point making number' it should not be used to make the 2pt after an opening 31 (you should run 24/14) and after an opening 42 it is basically tied as to whether you should make the 2pt or run 24/14.

> **Rule #8:** If on the second roll your opponent rolls double 4s or double 5s and uses the entire roll to make an offensive point do **not** touch your back checkers on the third roll.

Notice I said back checker<u>s</u>. This means you still have two men back. If you only have one man back it will obviously often be right to run the last checker even if you are behind in the race. Let me provide a couple of examples to get my point across. I have avoided nactation throughout this document but I can do so no longer. If you aren't familiar with nactation I suggest you check it out as it is useful in a variety of ways and I will be using it the rest of this article. Nactation Tutorial If you don't like it and don't want to deal with it you don't have to, just look at the diagram and figure out what you would play.

31P-44P-32?
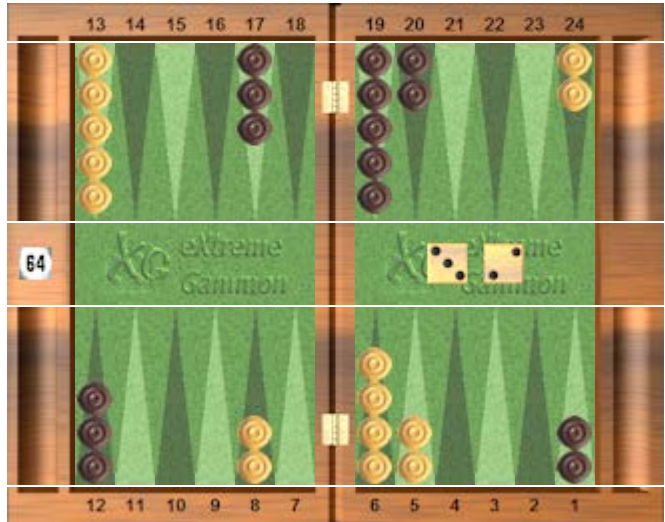
XGID=-b---BD-B---cE---c-eb---B-:0:0:1:23:0:0:3:0:10

🟡 to play 23

31P-55P-54?

XGID=-b---BD-B---cE---c-e--b-B-:0:0:1:54:0:0:3:0:10

🟡 to play 54

It is actually tough for me to find positions that I have saved that fit this rule. The reason being that the play is so dead obvious I don't waste time on rollouts of the positions. Dead obvious yet commonly misplayed. Splitting the back checkers in these type of positions is usually a blunder and sometimes even worse. Your opponent will have 10 men in the zone and a very awkward and stacked position. The last thing you want to do is give him the opportunity to unpile his stacks on your head. You are behind in the race, you want to prime him. His structure is also not

well suited to a priming game where you are more likely to have a smoother position. This concept can carry over into the 4th and 5th roll as well.

Exceptions ... maybe there are, maybe there aren't. As far as I know there aren't, not how I mean the rule. That's the toughest part about trying to convey these rules to other people. I know what I mean but actually getting the words to fit the meaning I have for every position is tough. For example, the wording of this rule doesn't explicitly state that on the first roll you didn't move the back checkers thus on the third roll you can't anchor up. I hope you are smart enough to realize that if you split the back checkers and can anchor up you obviously anchor up. I shouldn't have to explain the most obvious things but people like to nitpick. I have written some rules over the years for myself and am always happy to have someone else come along and re-write my rule so that it makes more sense for other people. These rules are also meant to deal with the standard openings. This doesn't include plays such as bringing two men up with an opening 43, 41, or any 6X. This doesn't include any of the other weird misplays I see, only the standard old boring according to the bot best plays.

> **Rule #9:** When in doubt on how to play an early 21, slot!

Talk about a loose rule, you've got it. This is meant to be slotting in the sense of 13/11 6/5 and applies to the very early game. Typically it's when you still have stacks on both points or possibly restacked these points and are unsure of how to play your 21. This is a very subjective rule and should be taken with a grain of salt. It's much like the adage of "when trying to decide between another play and making your 5pt, make your 5pt" but that expression is probably right a lot more than the 21 rule. Like 80% of the backgammon players out there I am stronger than whoever I'm playing at the moment so it makes slotting with the 21 an even more viable option. A few positions you could apply it to, esp. since you're the stronger player, and get away with it might be:

51S-21?
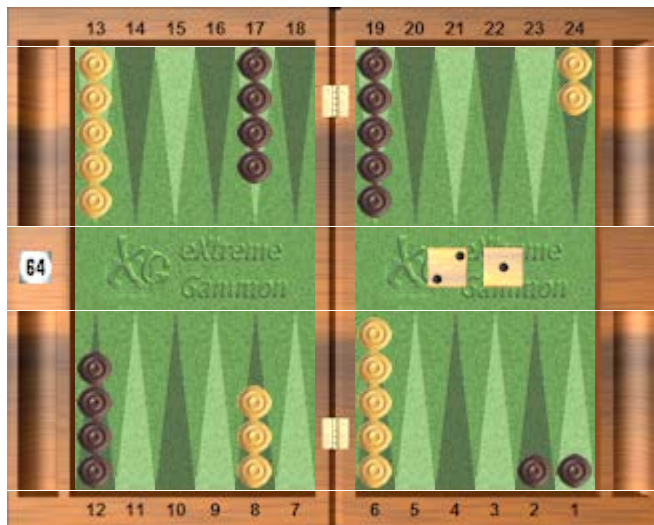
XGID=-aa---E-C---dE---d-e----B-:0:0:1:12:0:0:3:0:10

○ to play 12

41S-21?

XGID=-aa---E-C---dE--ac-e----B-:0:0:1:12:0:0:3:0:10

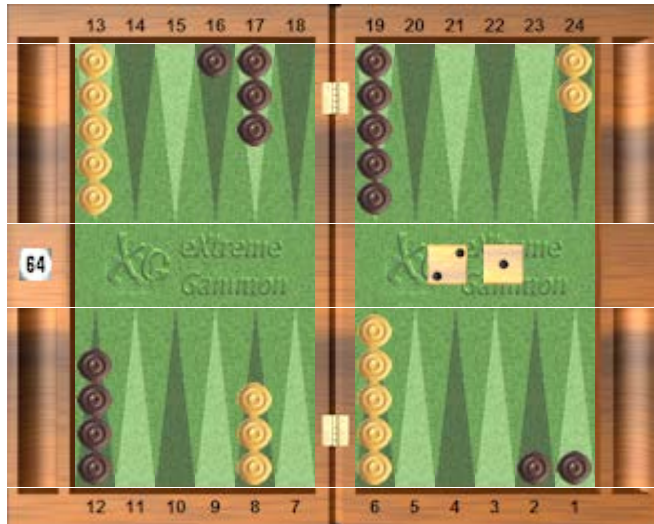○ is Player 2

score: 0
pip: 162

Money session
Jacoby Beaver

pip: 167
score: 0

○ is Player 1

○ to play 12

61P-21?

XGID=-b----E-C---dE---bbe----B-:0:0:1:12:0:0:3:0:10
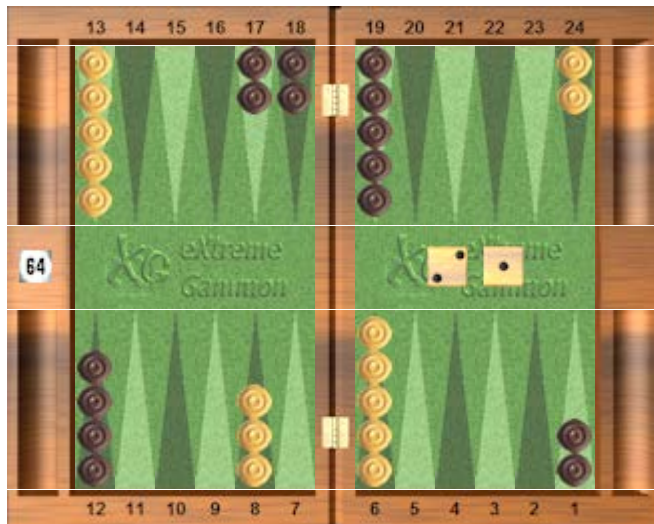
○ is Player 2

score: 0
pip: 160

Money session
Jacoby Beaver

pip: 167
score: 0

○ is Player 1

○ to play 12

Now in actuality the first problem listed, 51S-21?, the top plays are tied. 24/21 is on par with slotting right into the double shot, 13/11 6/5. The second problem, 41S-21?, has the more standard play of 24/23 13/11 ahead of slotting but it's not overwhelming. Also, remember ... you are the stronger player and this clearly swings it enough to be played. The last problem, 61P-21?, it is clearly correct to slot. To this day I still know a couple of people on the Giants 32 list who get this wrong even after I tell them time and time again. It is nearly a .030 error to not slot in the last position, you need to give yourself good sixes!

> **Rule #10:** These positions aren't cubes.

I wrestled with any of a number of ways on how to word this rule and couldn't come up with anything satisfactory. You will see all the positions below relate and can be reached a variety of ways. I commonly see these positions doubled almost as a reflex. This is ok in a chouette, probably best since you'd be surprised at getting one drop out of 5 I'd guess, but in match play this kind of non chalance is costly. They all involve an early split by your opponent, you rolling aces and then him dancing on your 2 point board. You have no additional men in the zone and while you do have the start of a 4 prime it just isn't enough. The error range on cubing here is from ~.025 - .060 depending on the exact position of your opponent's outfield checker.

62S-11N-F-C?
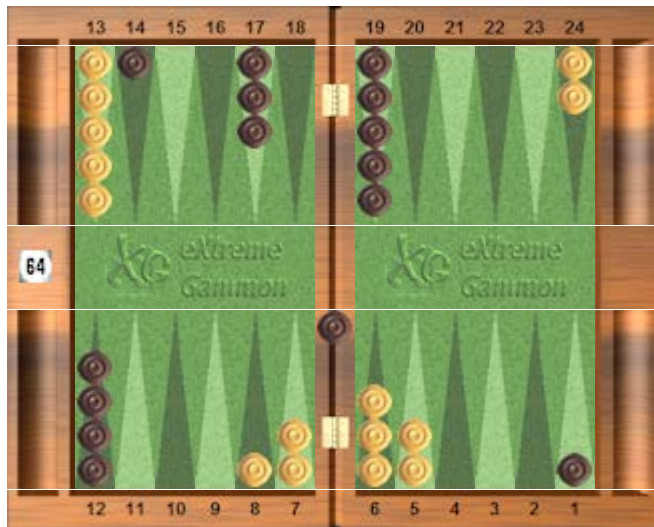
is Player 2

score: 0
pip: 166
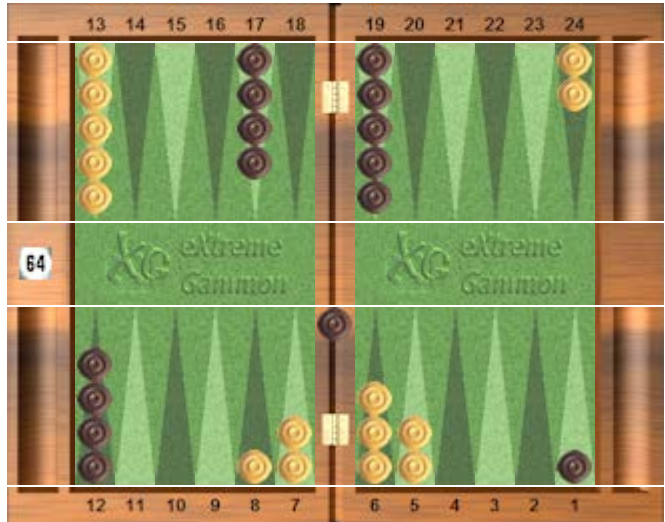
Money session
Jacoby Beaver

pip: 163
score: 0

is Player 1

XGID=aa---BCBA---dEa--c-e----B-:0:0:1:00:0:0:3:0:10

on roll, cube action?

54S-11N-F-C?

XGID=aa---BCBA---dE---d-e----B-:0:0:1:00:0:0:3:0:10

🟡 on roll, cube action?

The last rule is more of a reference position than I rule but I included it anyway. If you're angered by extra information I can remove it. This position and many other early blitzing positions can be built upon to help strengthen your cubes. I was sitting in on a lesson Phil Simborg was giving just yesterday and he was showing his student a position that strongly ressembled an early double 3s blitzing game with variables tilted for both players. (extra men in the zone for the blitzer, point made for the defender, etc...) I was very confident of my analysis and how much the position was worth thanks to these early reference positions.

If anyone has any other early game rules and would like to share them please add them on to this post. I'm sure many more exist and I can only remember them when they come up in actual play. I see a decision and think of one of the many random rules I've created to help me get through this game without blundering too much.

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