



backgammon

Mike Giordano

of the Cavendish North backgammon club

It has been almost 400 years since Shakespeare through the passage of one of his three health honeys, uttered the fateful words, "Fair is foul and foul is fair." During the centuries that followed, it seems these words have inspired military and political leaders as well as baseball umpires and tax lawyers, but backgammon players have known it all along. All experienced backgammon players know that when they roll double sixes, they will be on the bar, and when their opponents get the same

roll they will win a hope-less race. Consequently, good backgammon players have learned to cast a jaundiced eye on what appears to be a perfect roll or an obvious play. In the diagrammed position, white rolls 4-2. Many players would make their 4 point while congratulating themselves on their fine rolling. Indeed, the 4 point is a valuable asset and will substantially improve white's position, but making it would leave black too much counterplay. If black is able to secure his 5 or even 4 point

while white still has two men on the black 1 point, the advantage in the game would swing over to black's side. This is so because black has capped one of his back men and now has 14 of his 15 men available for use in blocking in the white stragglers. If both sides are able to build a prime and contain the opponent, black should be able to maintain his blocking position two or three rolls longer than white by virtue of the fact that he has the extra man to play his numbers with. So what should

white do? If black rolls a perfect (3-1, 1-1, 3-3 or 4-4), he will make his 5 point and there is nothing white can do about it. If black rolls 2-2 or 4-2, he will make his 4 point and again white is helpless to prevent it. The only other numbers that are good for black are 6-4 and 6-5, which will leave him well placed to enter a winning race. This accounts for one-third of the possible rolls black may get on his next turn. In other words, it is twice as likely that black will get some other

roll, which he will probably play by bringing two men from the white 12 point into his outer table where they will be poised to make his 5 or 4 point on subsequent rolls. There is certainly something that white can do about this. By playing a four from black's 1 point to his 5 point and a two from the black 12 to the white 11 point, white threatens to accomplish three objectives, any one of which would neutralize the timing advantage that black currently enjoys:

- Hit any loose man black brings into his outer table.
- Escape from the black 5 point, thereby equalizing his position.
- Make the black 5 point, thereby eliminating the threat of being blocked in.

It is important that white make this play now. If black can play just one man to one of the vacant points in his outer table, he will be just about even money to make his 5 point on the next roll and will be a de-

ecided favorite to make either his 5 or 4 point next time. It is therefore imperative that white split to the black 5 point before his opponent can mobilize the men stacked on the white 12 point. Note that if black already had one additional builder in his outer table, the risks of coming up to the black 5 point would outweigh the potential gain and white would be well advised to make the "automatic" play of building his 4 point.

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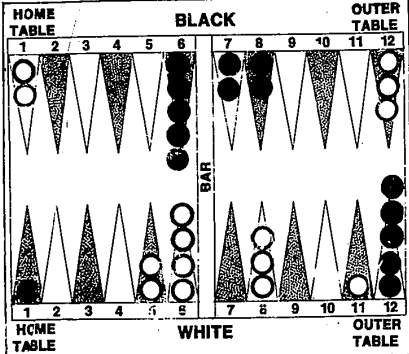
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