

THE OPENING MOVES

You must bear two main goals in mind as you start the game. Firstly you must try to prevent your opponent's back men on your R1 point from escaping from your inner table by setting up blocked points and even a prime if you can. Remember a prime is the impenetrable six blocked points in a row. Secondly, try to get your own back men (the two on the B1 point) out of his inner table and into safer territory. The way that you play your opening roll can do much in assisting you to achieve these ends.

THE TWENTY-ONE OPTIONS

This chapter will consider all the twenty-one opening rolls, my recommendations for playing them and a few alternatives that you may, at times, find useful. I will start with the best, most favourable roll and work down the line until we arrive at the worst. In order of preference the rolls are: 1-1, 6-6, 3-3, 4-4, 2-2, 3-1, 4-2, 6-1, 6-5, 3-2, 4-3, 5-3, 6-2, 6-4, 6-3, 5-5, 2-1, 4-1, 5-1, 5-4 and 5-2.

In the contest to see who moves first you will have already read that ties are re-thrown, so doubles are not possible as initial opening moves. However, they are possible as initial opening moves for the player who "loses the toss" and plays second. The opening set-up of the board has hardly been affected. Let us look at each opening roll now in more detail.

THE 1-1 ROLL

Move two men from your R8 to your R7 point and two men from your R6 to your R5 point (1). This is really a tremendous opening for you. In one roll you have captured your R5 and R7 points and with the R6 point you now have three in a row. Already you have built quite a formidable obstacle for your opponent's back men on R1. You have left a blot at R8 but for the gain in position it is well worth the risk. Besides, Black can only hit it by rolling 6-1, 5-2 or 4-3. That is six rolls in 36 or 6-1 against hitting you.

This is the only 1-1 opening worth considering.

THE 6-6 ROLL

Move two men from B1 to B7 and two men from B12 to R7 (2). In one fell swoop you have captured both bar points, your back men are free of Black's inner table and on their way home and you have set up a three-point block to hamper Black's back men on R1. What more can one ask of a single roll of the dice?

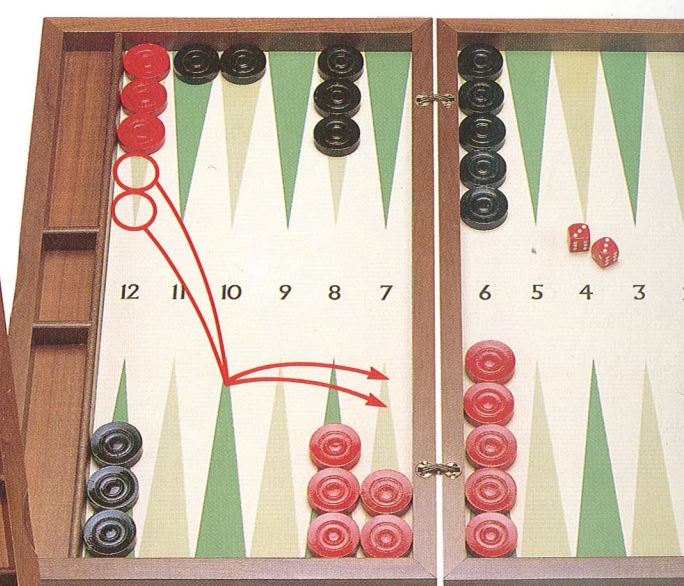
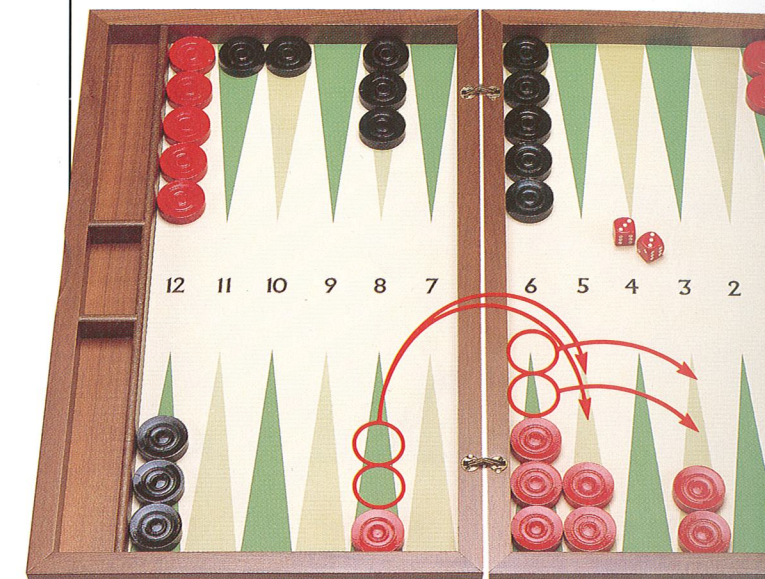
There is no better alternative.

THE 3-3 ROLL

Two men from B1 to B4 and two from R8 to R5 (3). The longer you play backgammon the more you realize the importance of the 5 points. The way I have recommended that you play this roll achieves two goals. First, it establishes your own 5 point, an "aggressive" move. Should your opponent establish his own 5 point, your two men now on his 4 point greatly lessen its strength and usefulness as a blocking point. It prepares the way for the eventual escape of your back men.

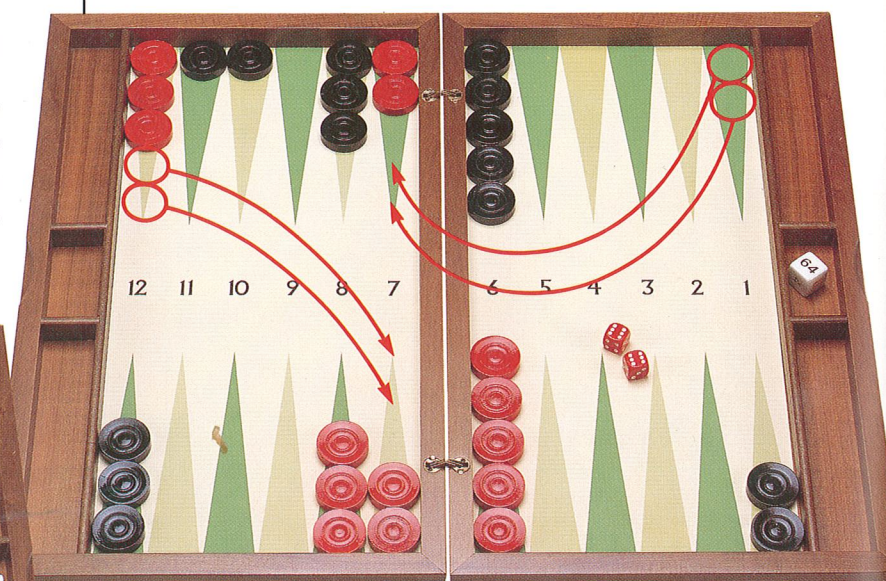
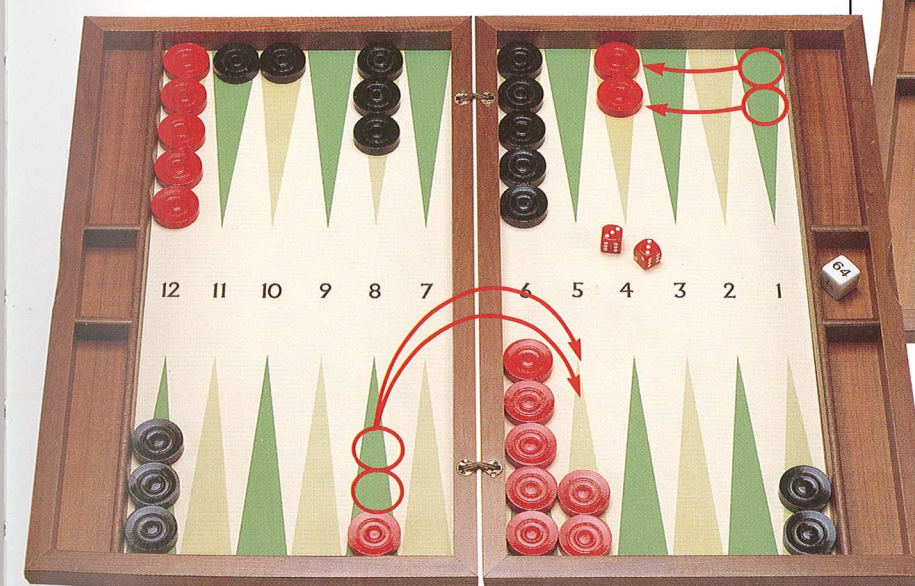
There are, of course, other ways to play this roll. You could move two men from R8 to R5 and two men from R6 to R3 (4). This is an alternative but not as good as my first recommendation. Played this way, you make your 5 point and your 3 point. This gives you three blocked points in your inner table and is a very "aggressive" play. Its one drawback, however, is that it does nothing to improve your defensive position.

A very common way of playing 3-3 is B12 to R7 (two men) (5). The drawback of playing the roll this way is that it does not put the same degree of pressure on your opponent as do the other two alternatives. There is really no wrong way to play 3-3. It is just that some ways are more right than others!



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3-3

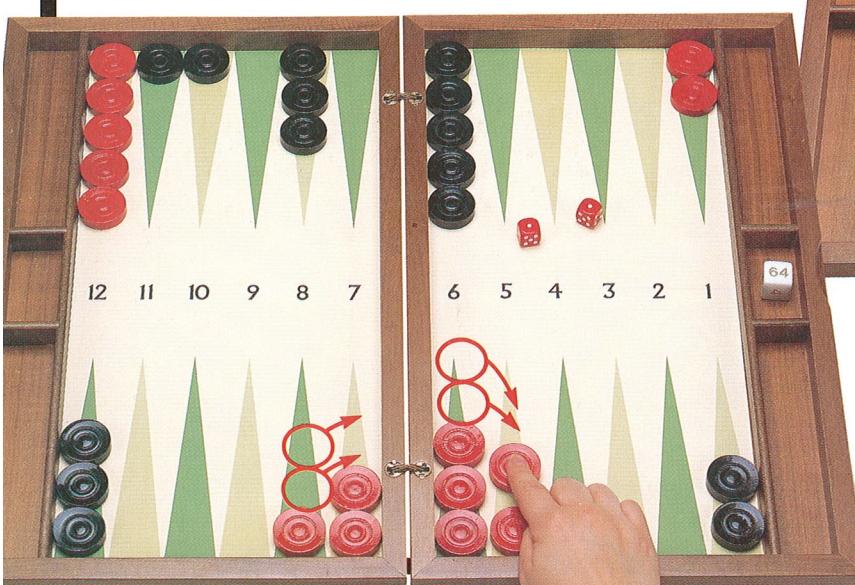


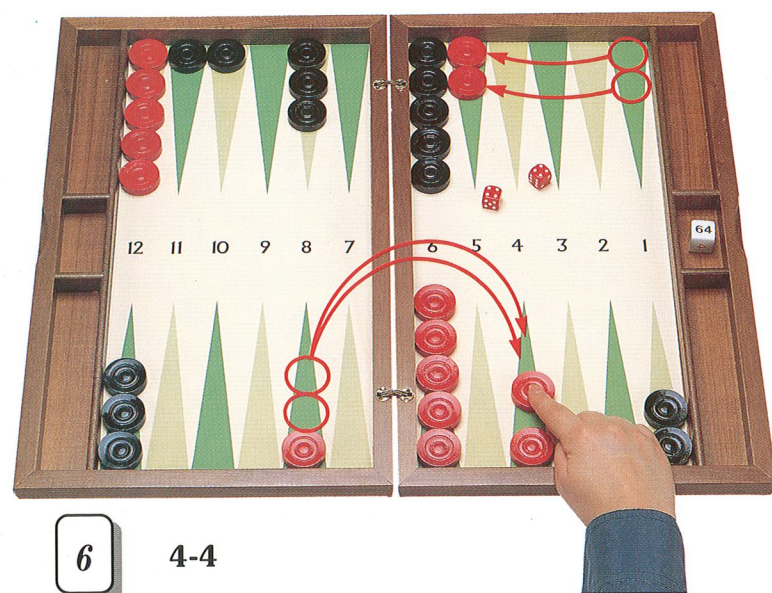
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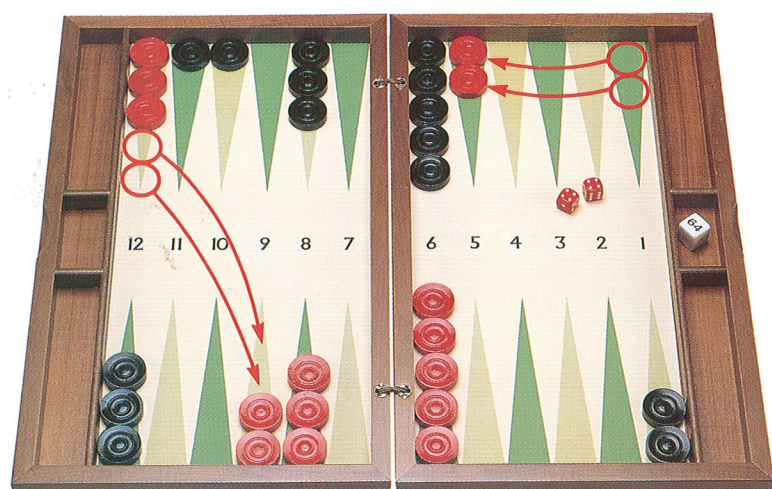
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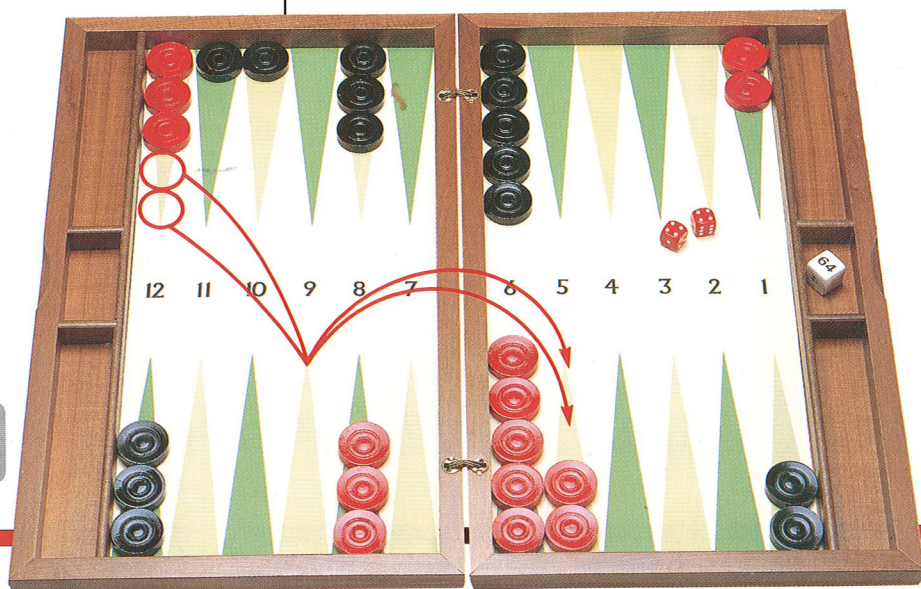
6

4-4



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8



THE 4-4 ROLL

Move two men B1 to B5 and two men R8-R4 (6). I am very happy when I roll 4-4 at the onset of the game. The way I play it establishes my 4 point and, more importantly, captures my opponent's 5 point, thus putting a spoke in the wheel of his attack. This is another roll where there are really no bad ways of playing. My recommendation combines good attacking play with good defensive play. But what about the blot that you have left on R8? It is now vulnerable to any 7, a 5/1 chance of being hit. Not a serious risk and, if he throws 6-1 and chooses to hit my blot on R8, rather than play R12 to B7 and B8 to B7 making his own bar point, you will not hear me complaining!

Let us look at the alternatives: B1 to B5 (two men) and B12 to R9 (two men) (7). This is also good and most experts on backgammon recommend it. It establishes command of your opponent's 5 point and also makes your own 9 point. I sometimes play this way but, all things considered, I prefer my first recommendation. It is more aggressive.

Speaking of aggression – if I know that my opponent is a much weaker player than myself – I usually pander to my sadistic streak by playing the roll B12 to R5 (two men)! This move (8) is guaranteed to shake the confidence of an inexperienced player but, be warned, it is not as strategically sound as our two other alternatives. You have made your 5 point admittedly – but that is all.

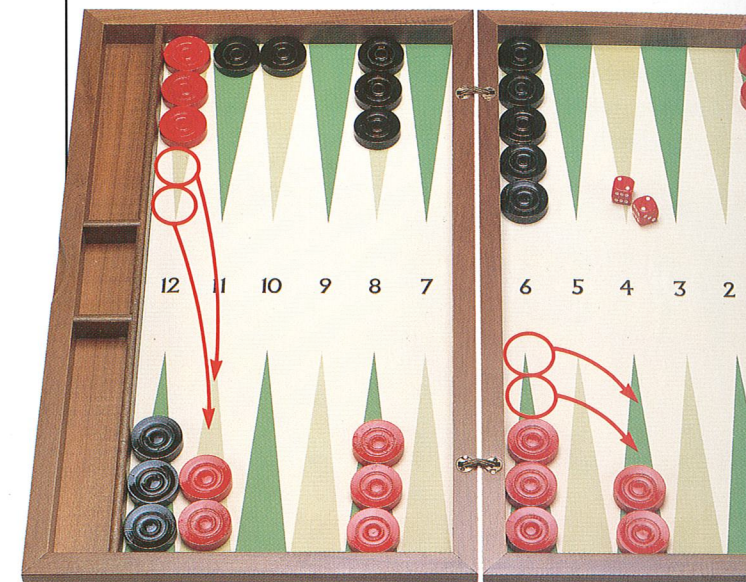
THE 2-2 ROLL

Move two men B12 to R11 and two men R6 to R4 (9). This is a useful roll. See how, on your next roll, many combinations will now fill either your bar or 5 point – which should be your primary consideration in these early stages because they are the backbone of a prime. This is sound attacking play.

Alternatives? You could have made your 9 point with B12 to R9 (two men). Not as aggressive. Or B1 to B5 (two men) would have made your opponent's 5 point. Strong defence admittedly but you have done nothing to prevent your opponent's back men from escaping.

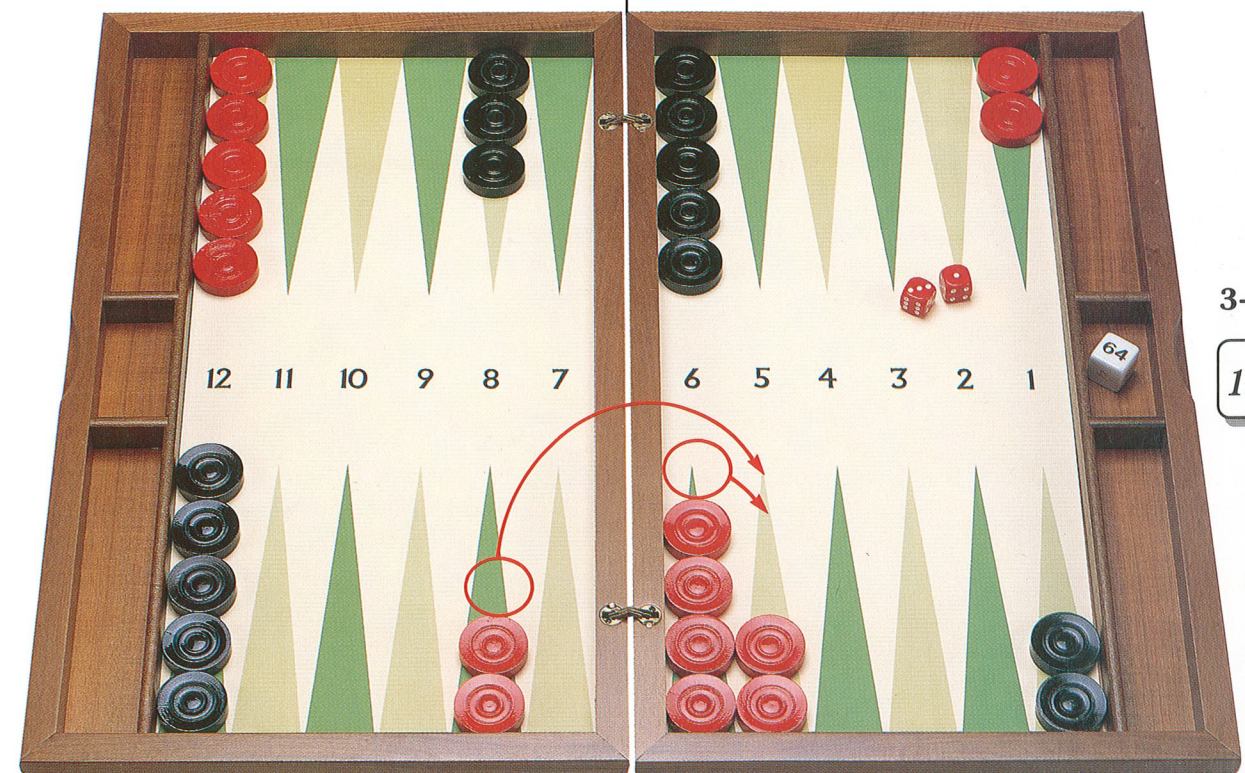
THE 3-1 ROLL

A great opener. Play R8 to R5 and R6 to R5 (10). You make your 5 point. Fine play and a good attacking move. This is, barring doubles, the best opening roll and a little prayer of thanksgiving would not be out of place if you roll it. You see, the two 5 points are crucial. Whoever controls both 5 points also controls the game. With this roll you are half way there.



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2-2

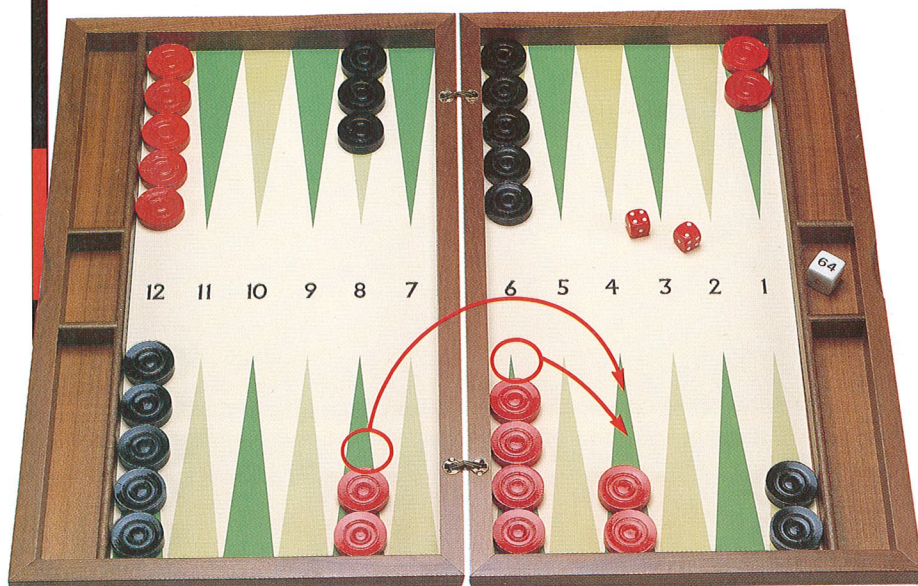


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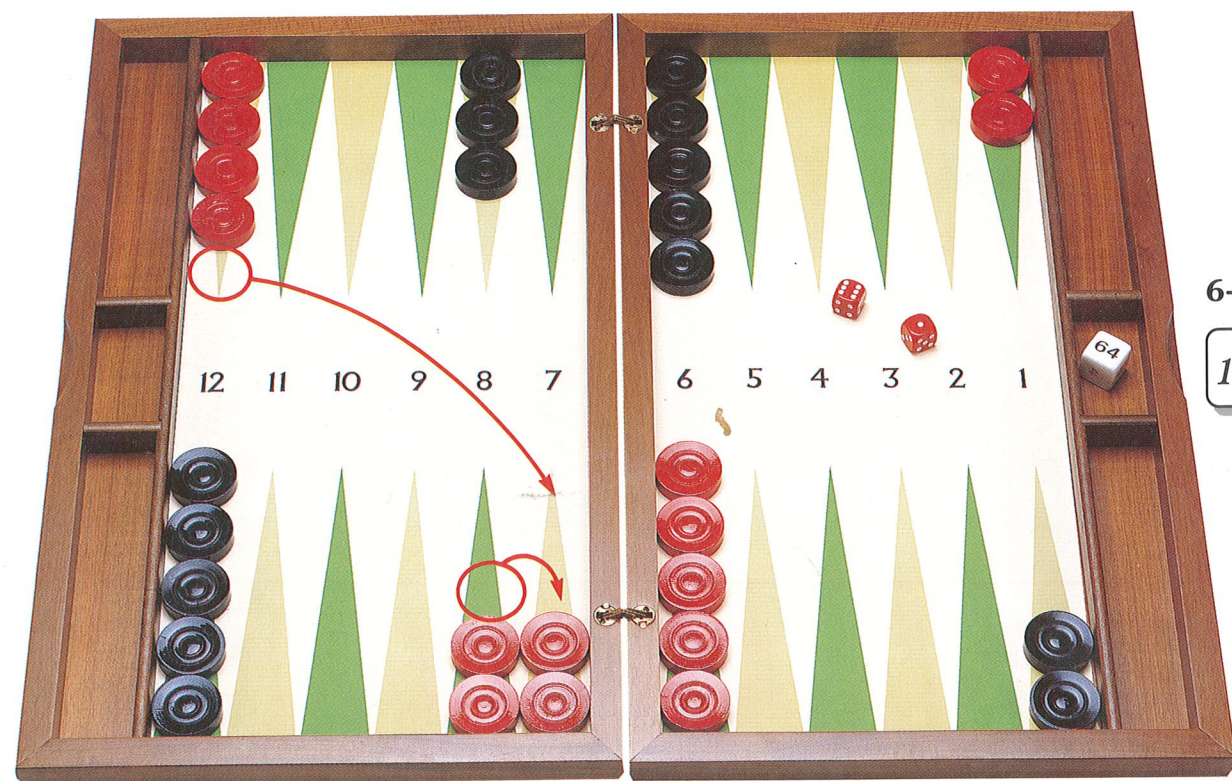
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THE 4-2 ROLL

I recommend R8 to R4 and R6 to R4 (**11**). This makes your 4 point – the “spearhead” of your attack. You now aim to build up a prime behind this point. A very good roll.



11 4-2



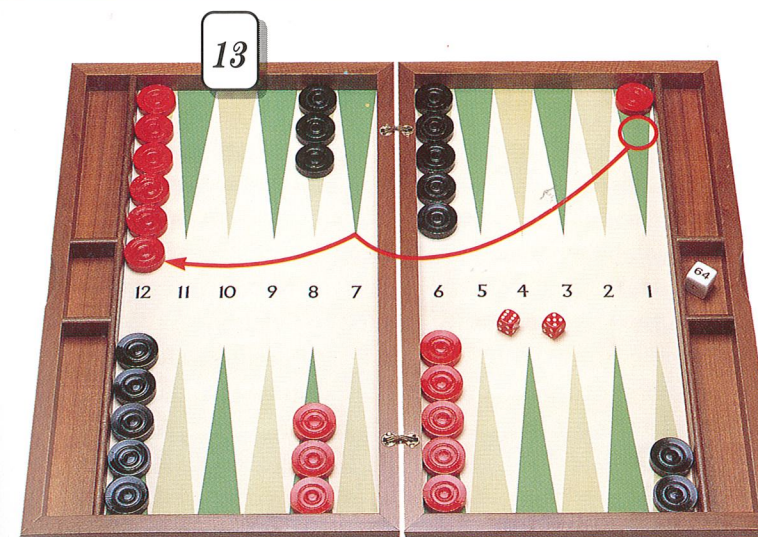
6-1

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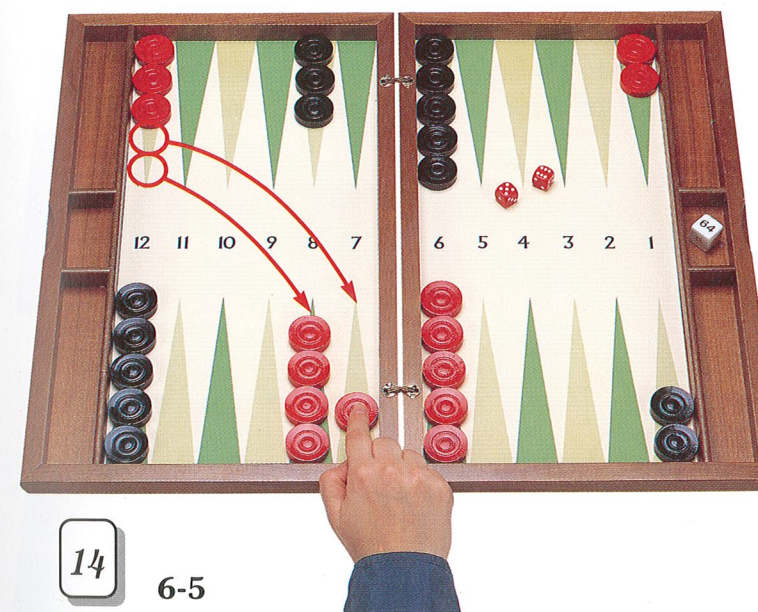
THE 6-1 ROLL

The classic move on which all backgammon experts agree: B12 to R7 and R8 to R7 (**12**). Making your bar point is the only way to play this move. It is a most fortunate roll because it establishes three points in a row for you and makes Black's exit from your inner table just that much more difficult. He must throw 4-4 to get *both* men out next roll (35/1 against) and you, of course, will be striving to extend your prime. The pressure is on.

These first eight rolls are the most favourable ones. They are all definite body blows to your opponent. The next four are “builder” moves – threats and warnings to your opponent that if he does not take action immediately something nasty is likely to happen to him.



14 6-5



THE 3-2 ROLL

The play of B12 to R11 and B12 to R10 (**15**) puts a lot of pressure on Black's back men. The threat is that on your *next* roll it is *odds on* that you will make either your bar or 5 point and it is a whopping 17/1 in your favour that you will be able to make a point *somewhere*.

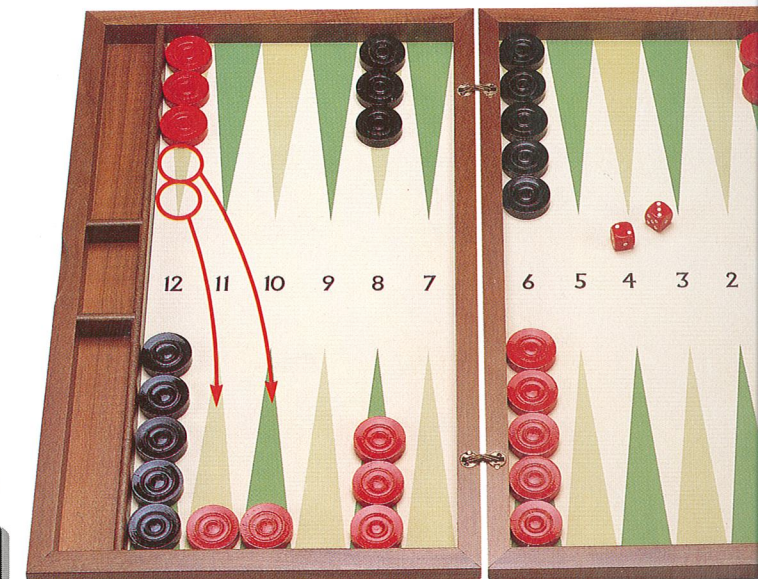
Your blots can only be hit with a 9 or 10 combination shot. The odds are 31/5 he will not hit the 9 and 11/1 he will not hit the 10. It is 7/2 against him hitting either.

THE 6-5 ROLL

Move B1 to B12 (**13**). This move has the quaint name of “The Lovers' Leap”. I can't imagine why. I thought that lovers leaped *together*! However, Lovers' Leap it is and always will be. You take the opportunity to run one of your back men all the way to the safety of B12.

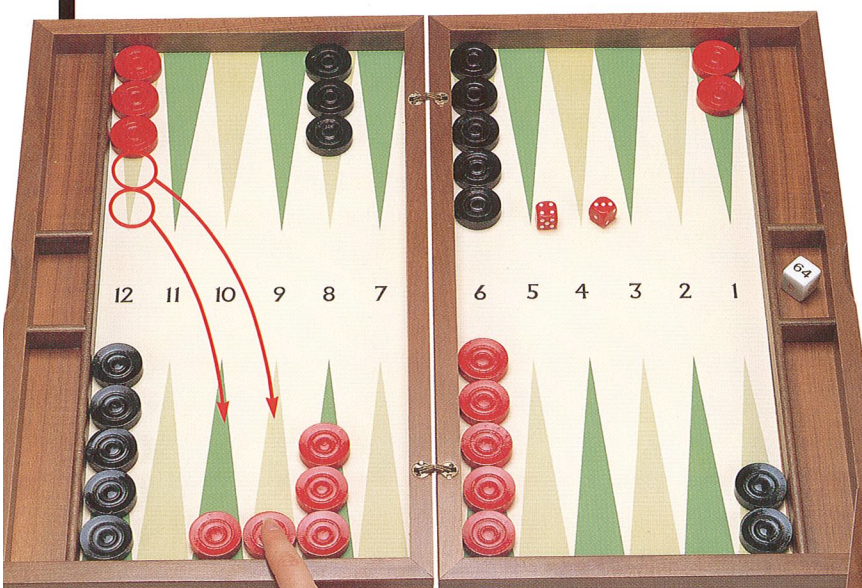
3-2

15



THE 4-3 ROLL

Move B12 to R10 and B12 to R9 (16). This play is similar to the 3-2 move, and the logic behind it is the same. There are no better alternative plays.

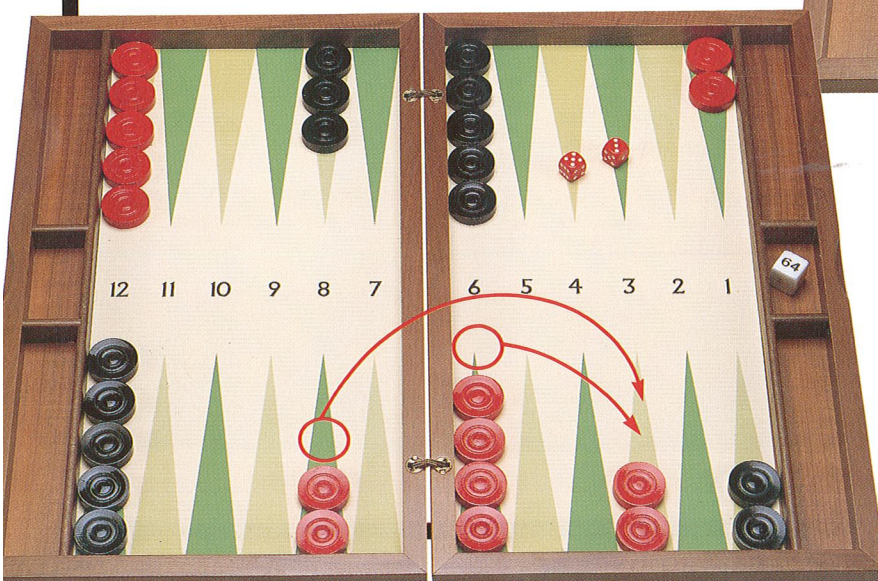


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4-3

17

5-3



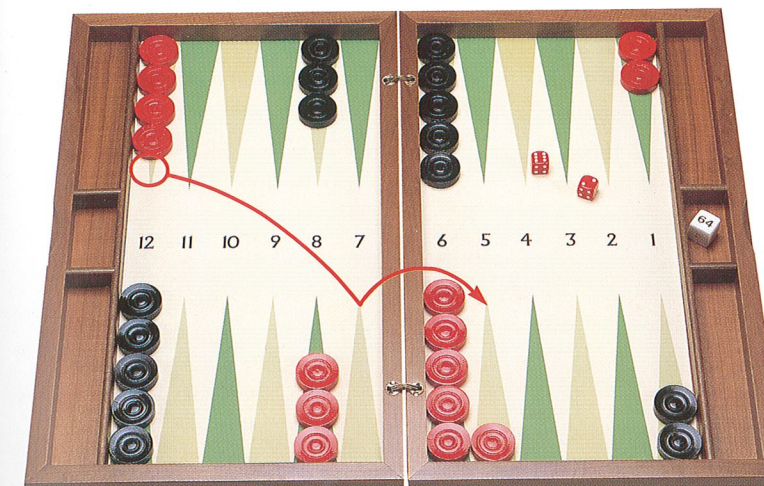
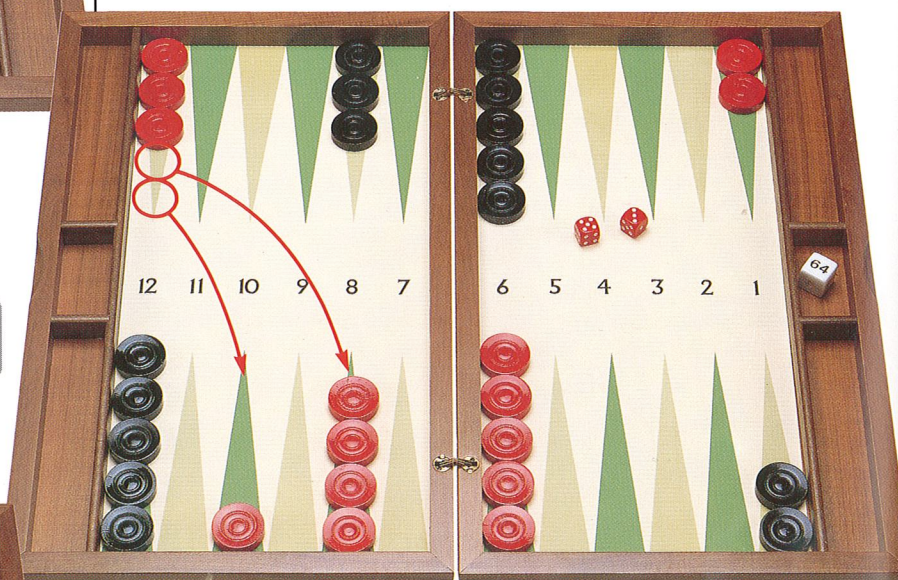
18

THE 5-3 ROLL

For this roll, two plays are worthy of our attention. I usually select the first example but the second is always a useful alternative.

My recommendation is B12 to R8 and B12 to R10 (17). Here again your chances of making a valuable point next throw are very good. Your blot is a 31/5 favourite not to be hit. I like this play because of the increased chances you have next throw of making your bar or 5 point.

The alternative is R8 to R3 and R6 to R3 (18). This establishes a point in your inner table. The trouble with this play is that establishing your 3 point this early in the game is a bit of a waste. Black will have little problem hopping over it. Its usefulness only takes effect when you have also established your 4 and 5 points. Until then your two men on the 3 point are, to all intents and purposes, out of play.



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6-2



6-4

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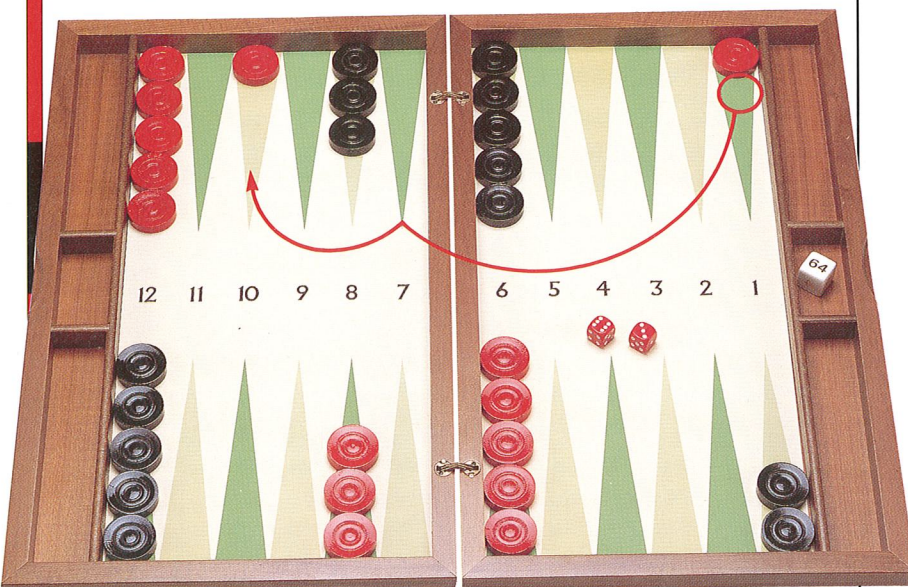
THE 6-4 ROLL

6-4 should be played: one man B1 to B11 (20) – the Lovers' Leap that slipped! It is not a good roll by any means, but this way leaves you only vulnerable to a 2 shot (2/1 against). If Black hits it, you have not lost much and re-entering is virtually certain on your next roll.

Making your 2 point should not even be considered, but there is an alternative that should be. Considered that is, not adopted! It is B12 to R7 and B12 to R9 (21). You would have to be feeling very lucky or very rich to play 6-4 this way! But I have seen it happen. If you get away without being hit, you are in a great position to make a strong point. It *can* happen, but the odds are against you. Do not give your opponent any advantage, however small!

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6-3



THE 6-3 ROLL

Another "nothing" roll. One of the worst. However, B1 to B10 is the best way to play it (22). Do not play B12 to R7; B12 to R10. You have troubles enough without going looking for more!

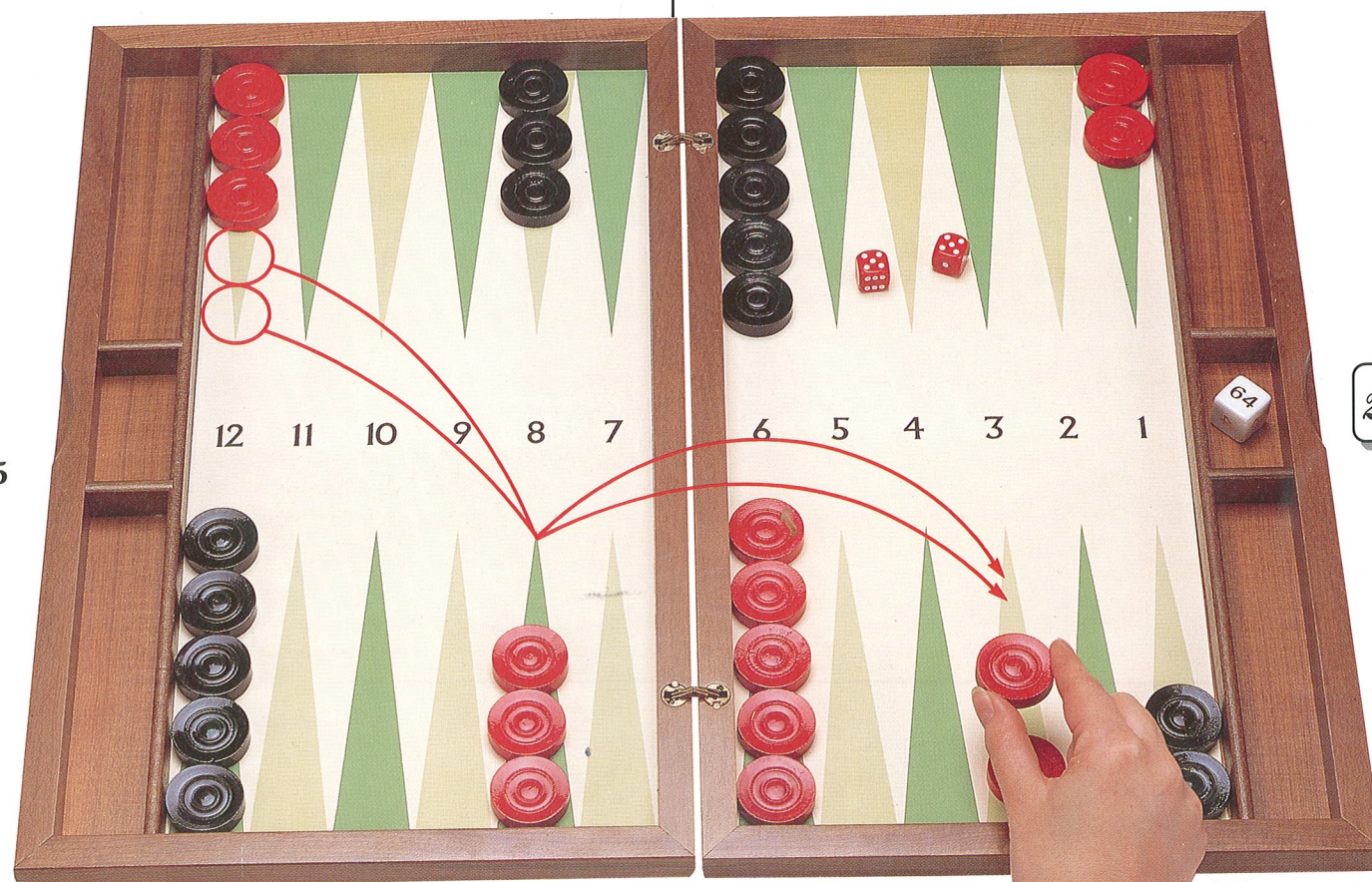
THE 5-5 ROLL

Here you play two men from B12 all the way to R3 (23). This is the least favourable of the doubles. It forces you to make your 3 point earlier than you would otherwise desire, but you have no sensible alternative.

THE 2-1 ROLL

The last five opening moves are all gambles. The first is 2-1. Move B12 to R11 and R6 to R5 (24). This play gives us the maximum potential if Black fails to hit us. It is the most constructive way of playing this poor roll. You stand a good chance of making your 5

5-5



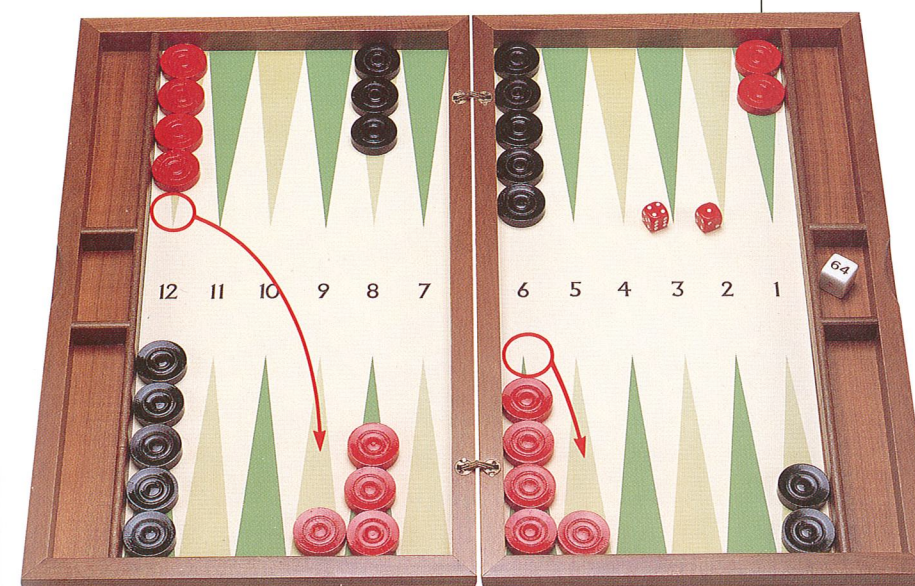
23

or bar points next throw. Do not be tempted to split your back men at B1. This will only serve to weaken your defence and is, in fact, a bigger gamble than dropping a builder onto your 5 point.

THE 4-1 ROLL

This move, B12 to R9 and R6 to R5 (25), is similar to my 2-1 recommendation and the thinking behind it is the same – a gamble for position.

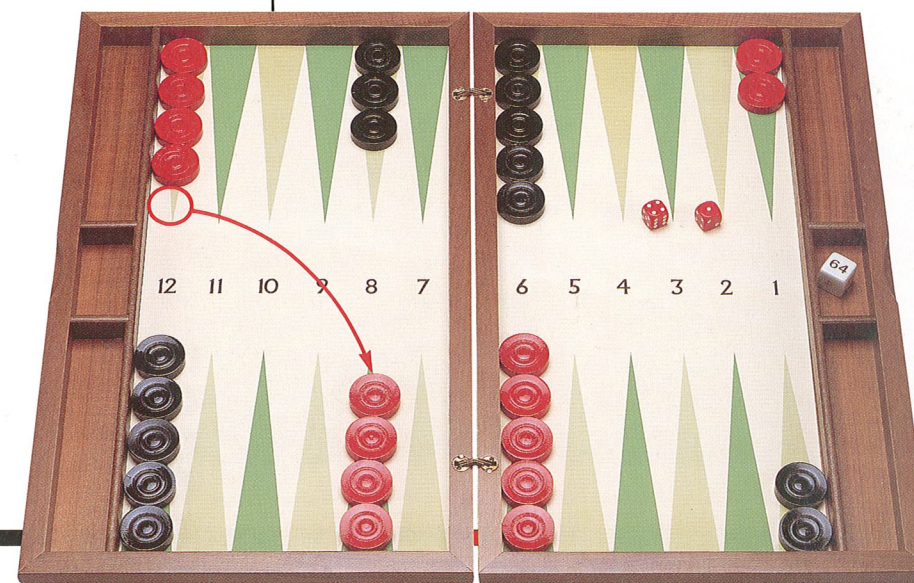
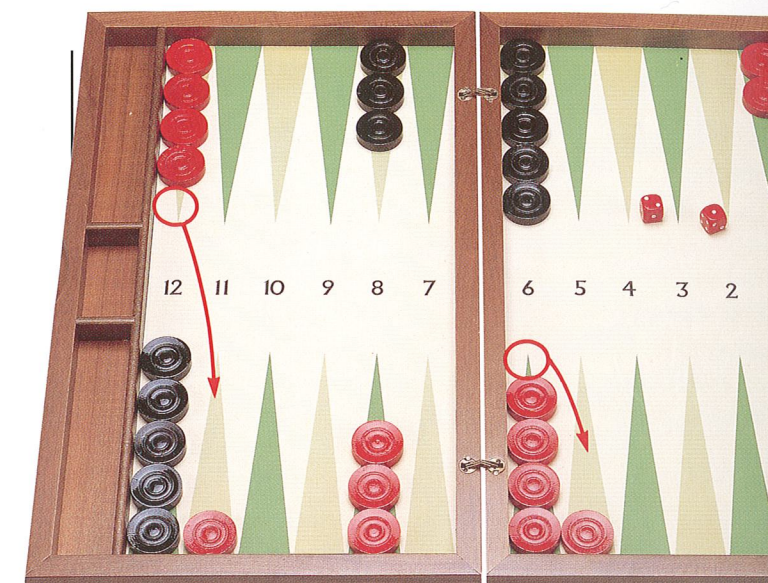
You could play safe by moving B12 to R8 (26) but what have you achieved by this? Nothing. Your position has not changed. You might just as well not have had the advantage of first roll. No! Difficult rolls, as 4-1 most certainly is, must be played adventurously so that, if the gamble comes off, you will have turned a poor roll into a useful one!



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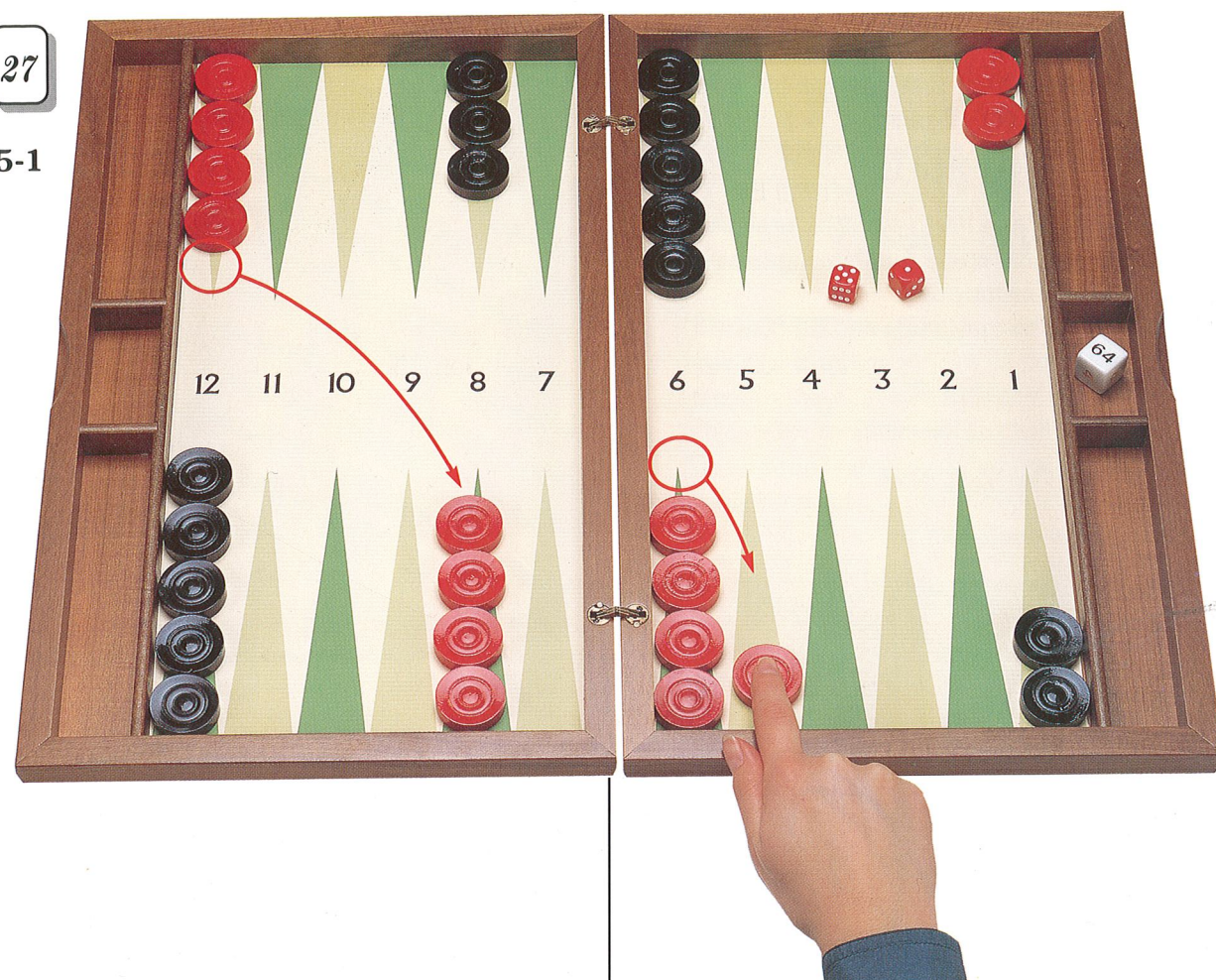
4-1

2-1



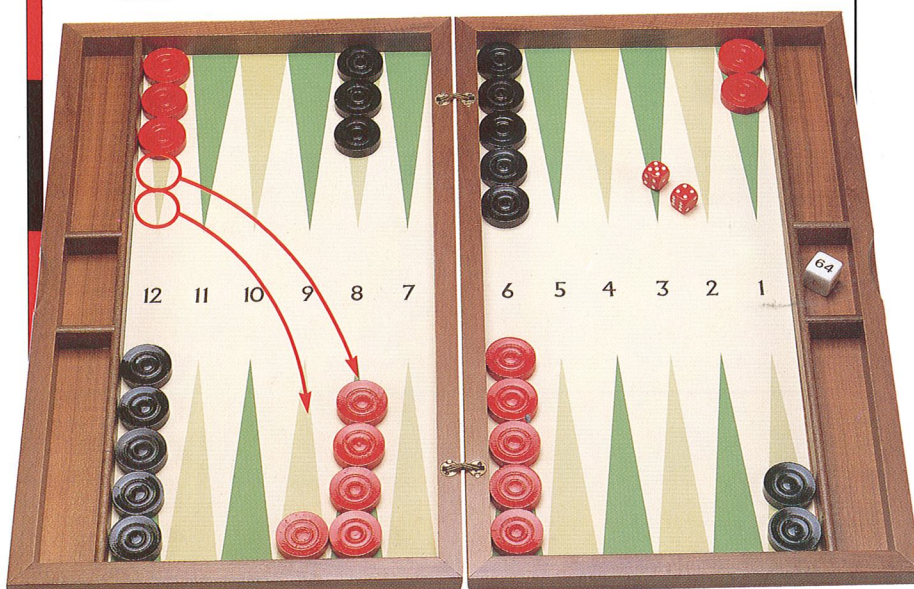
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5-1



28

5-4



THE 5-1 ROLL

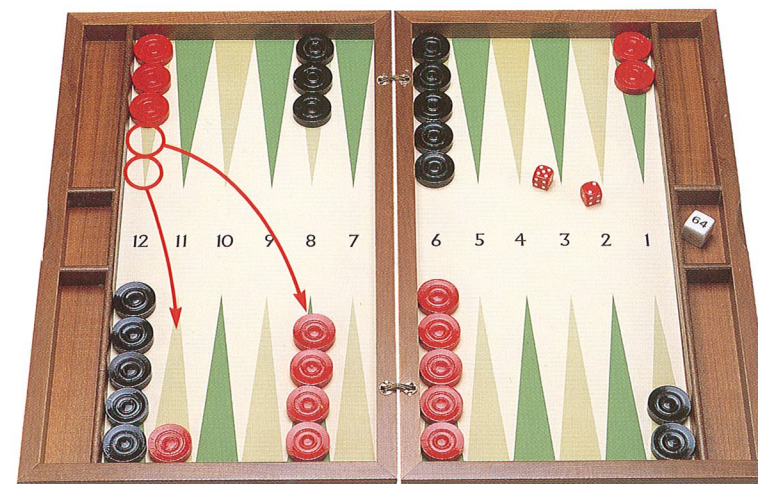
Here we have B12 to R8 and R6 to R5 (27). All "5" openers are ungainly and this one is no exception. The aim, of course, is ultimately to secure your 5 point by dropping the man from R6 to R5. Black may well hit it and, of course, should hit it if he gets half a chance. But if he fails . . . well, see if you can work out for yourself how many ways you can cover this blot on your next roll!

THE 5-4 ROLL

B12 to R9 and B12 to R8 (28) gives us the best chances here. Any alternative, such as splitting your back men, will be found to be inferior to my recommendation. Your blot on R9 is a firm favourite not to be hit and its usefulness next roll as an aid in making your bar or 5 point makes the gamble worthwhile.

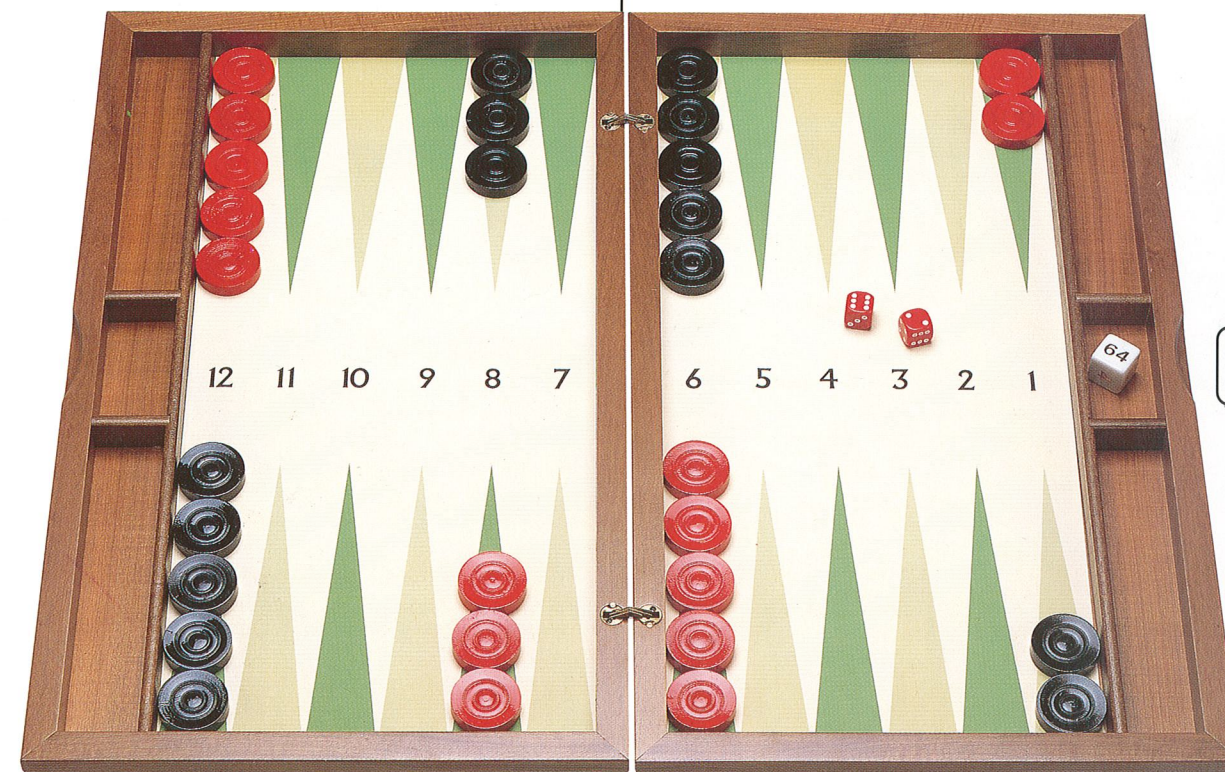
THE 5-2 ROLL

This move, B12 to R11 and B12 to R8 (29) is the last of the twenty-one possible opening rolls for us to consider. Another "5" opener but this time the "odd man out" is on R11 – ten points away from Black's men. This blot can only be hit by a 6-4 or 4-6. That is 17/1 against being hit, so it is comparatively safe. The blot is also in a useful position to assist you in making your 5 or bar points on your next roll.



5-2

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CONCLUSIONS

Well, there you have it – my recommendations for the twenty-one opening rolls. You will have already noticed that, in backgammon, men are never moved willy-nilly. Every part of every move is carefully considered, and the pros and cons assessed. You are fortunate that, as far as the opening moves are concerned, the weighing up has already been done for you. You only have to commit these moves to memory. So get your board out and practise these openers.

QUIZ QUESTION

Without referring back to the appropriate section in this chapter, tell me how you would play a 6-2 opener and why (30)? Once you have decided on your move, look back to page 27 to see if you got it right.