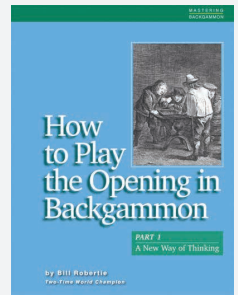


Book Review

HOW TO PLAY THE OPENING IN BACKGAMMON: PART 1 A New Way of Thinking

By Mary Hickey



Readers of the Gammon Press e-newsletter and visitors to the website have anticipated publication of Bill Robertie's series on the backgammon openings for some time, and the first book is now available. Those who have been watching for it will not be disappointed, and will find it was worth the wait.

With any book, one must ask, "Who is the intended reader?" The section on the opening rolls, obligatory in the first volume of a series on the openings, may appear intended for beginners. The response portion that follows will appeal mostly to early intermediates, but the three later sections will add value for players of all levels. From this progression, it's reasonable to predict that Books 2 and 3 will also appeal to the full range of backgammon students and players.

Prospective buyers are rightly leery when backgammon authors offer what they claim will be the first of a series. Book One or Book A frequently leads to Book Two or Book B either many years later, or never! But smart money gives the nod to Robertie's ability to

complete this series that starts with "Part 1" in timely fashion. For this review, he tells us that both the remaining books are already written, with proofreading and typesetting in process. Part 2 should be available in late July or early August, and Part 3 is scheduled for the end of 2020. Put that one on your Christmas wish list!

What about students of backgammon who have already purchased Michihito Kageyama's *Opening Concepts*? Robertie's book approaches the opening so differently that there's plenty of room on your bookshelf for both of these volumes. Mastering the opening is an ongoing process, and gaining different perspectives can't hurt. To keep his project independent and avoid unintentionally derivative elements, Robertie confides that he didn't read Michy's book until he had completed this one.

Robertie's approach is more methodical, suitable for both learning and later reference, while Michy's is more anecdotal and heuristic. Both can help you master this important part of every backgammon game you will ever play.

How to Play the Opening in Backgammon: Part 1

Regarding the responses to opening moves, Robertie has chosen to organize them by roll, with a table at the end of each section showing how to play them depending on your opponent's opening move. That's certainly reasonable, and can give the reader a feel for what the defaults tend to be. He includes a note when there is a "toss-up," where eXtremeGammon's (or XG's) current rollouts make another play very close. A wise policy, given that some future version of XG may reverse the decision in favor of the other play. It also makes sense to allow for matters of style, even in a book that doesn't focus on human factors relating to either the player or the opponent.

A potential reader may ask, "Why not just use XG?" Yes, XG will provide rollouts for response plays, and if you know where to look, you can find them tabulated for each opening roll. But you won't find them tabulated the way Robertie has done it, nor will you find his explanations for why you should make one response after some opening rolls, but do something different after ones that may look superficially similar.

Even an experienced player may also find an occasional surprise that jumps out from the response chapter in a way it might not from the dry and comment-less tables in XG. For example, if the opponent plays an opening 43: 24/20 13/10, Bill's rollout, the current XG book, and a rollout I performed to confirm it, all say that the right response with a 61 is the sharp and tactical 24/18 6/5* rather than quietly making the bar point. Who knew? Not me — until I read this book, that is.

A book covering all the nuances of replies to the opening rolls would likely balloon to the size of MCO. (That's Modern Chess Openings, for those who came to backgammon from somewhere else.) To avoid producing a book that large and also that esoteric, an author must decide when the work is finished enough. Too many digressions from the main themes can produce a thicket of verbiage that in the end obscures rather than clarifies. Robertie

chose to leave out special match scores, and extensive discussions of unconventional opening rolls, such as double-slots and the "Becker" two-downs with 64, 63, and 62. Fair enough on both counts: the foundation of good match play is good money play, and regarding the hot-dog opening moves, we don't see them often for good reason. He concentrates on the ones we expect to see most frequently.

More fair-enoughs for this part of the book: Conventional and easy-to-understand notation for rolls and responses — good! A sufficient number of clear and precise diagrams for good flow, but no more — this part of the game is easy enough to visualize for almost any reader, even those pestilential sorts who set up at least two alternatives for every play. (You know who you are, and also why your opponents like clocks so much.) And a fair-enough for the entire book: No cartoons. Cartoons add little if any value to backgammon books, although I admit I did laugh at one where an alien swims frantically to escape from a shark. But that was in another book, not this one.

Note about the rollouts: These are money game problems, with the Jacoby rule in force. The Jacoby rule can disproportionately affect the size of a difference between two close plays when said difference is small. Even then, though, it seldom swings the decision at this early stage of the game, so that's yet another "fair enough."

On to the remaining chapters!

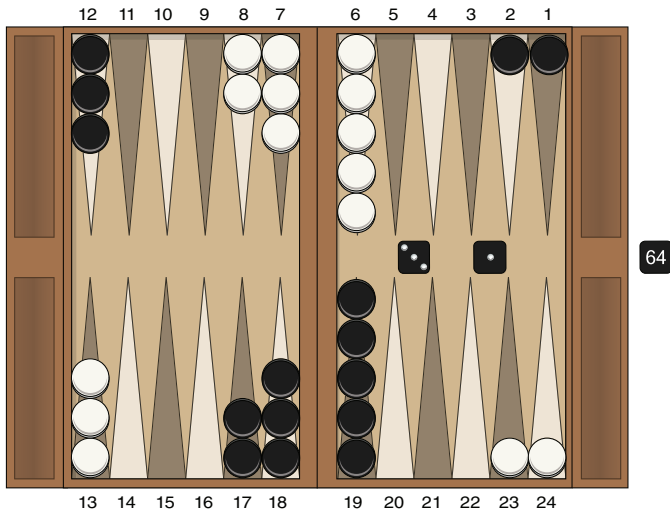
Robertie's third chapter concerns the all-important 5 point, and when to make it. Sometimes you should opt for an even stronger alternative, such making another valuable point or hitting, and other times the price of making the 5 point is too high. Making it can be wrong when it leaves your opponent too many good follow-up options, as in Position 1:

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How to Play the Opening in Backgammon: Part 1

Position 1

Robertie's Diagram 3.8.2, from p. 91



Score		Pips
Money	White	153
Money	Black	153

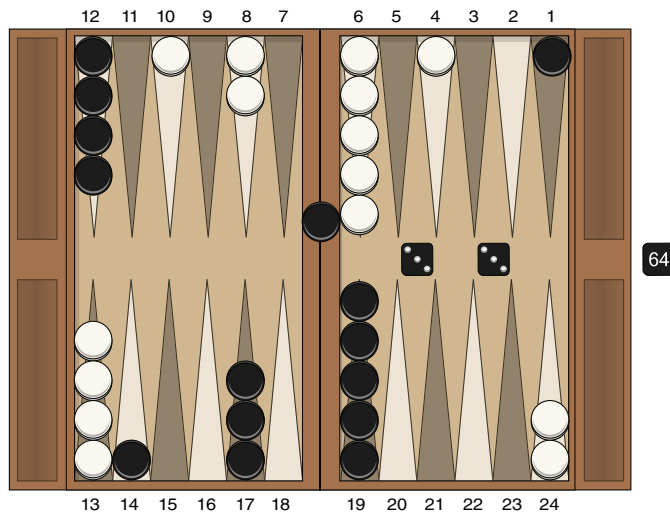
The 5 point sure looks good, especially because it rolls your awkward protoprime forward using a checker from that immobile stack on the 6. But when you set it up, you may observe a yellow caution light blinking because of the direct 6-shot it leaves. Pay attention to that alarm, because making the 5 point here is a serious error. As Bill notes, your split back men give your opponent ways to attack even if he misses the shot on the 8 point this turn.

The right approach is the quieter 24/21 23/22, avoiding the added weakness of a third blot while setting up to run or gain a decent anchor next turn.

Later in the same chapter, we find an example where hitting twice beats out the 5 point because of the value it adds in the race, and also once again cuts down the opponent's good options:

Position 2

Robertie's Diagram 3.11.1, p. 99



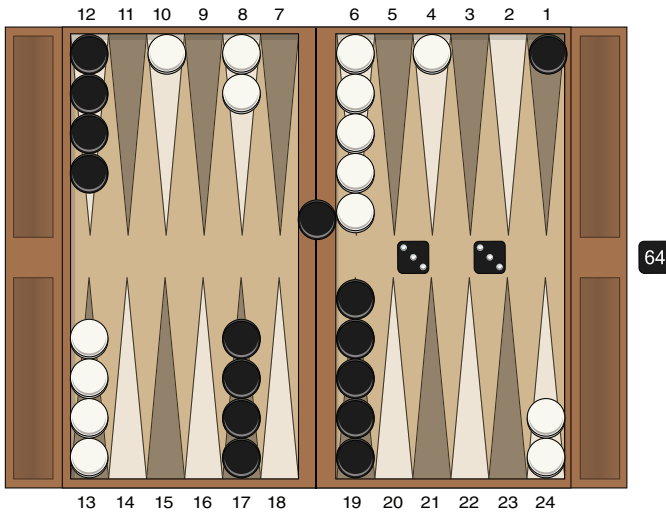
Score		Pips
Money	White	160
Money	Black	166

As Bill notes, "Bar/22 and 24/21*/15 accomplishes an awful lot with just one shake." It gains big in the race, knocks off an enemy builder, and provides you with a potential builder for your own outer board. The rollout shows it beating out bar/22 24/21* 8/5(2) by .027, a small but significant margin.

But as is often true in small-difference problems, this one can turn on a dime, especially any dime that enables you to make the 5 point without abandoning the 8 point, as shown here:

How to Play the Opening in Backgammon: Part 1

Position 2a



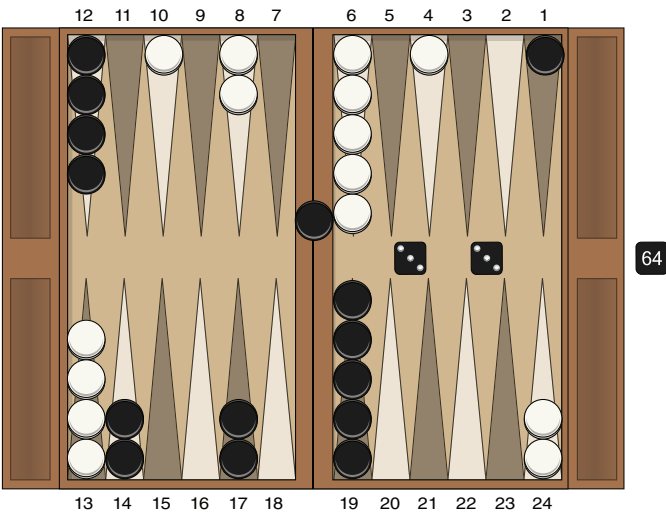
Variant of Position 2, with fourth checker on the 8 point taken from the 11

Score		Pips
Money	White	160
Money	Black	163

It's now a blunder to double-hit, and this remains true (though by a lesser amount) if we "steal" the fourth checker for the 8 point from the mid or the 6 instead of picking up the blot from the 11. But we still aren't sure whether this is about the much better

structure we get with both the 8 and the 5, and we don't know how much we hurt our position by leaving two outfield blots in the base problem. Let's look at some more variants.

Position 2b



Variant of Position 2, with stripped 8 point

Score		Pips
Money	White	160
Money	Black	169

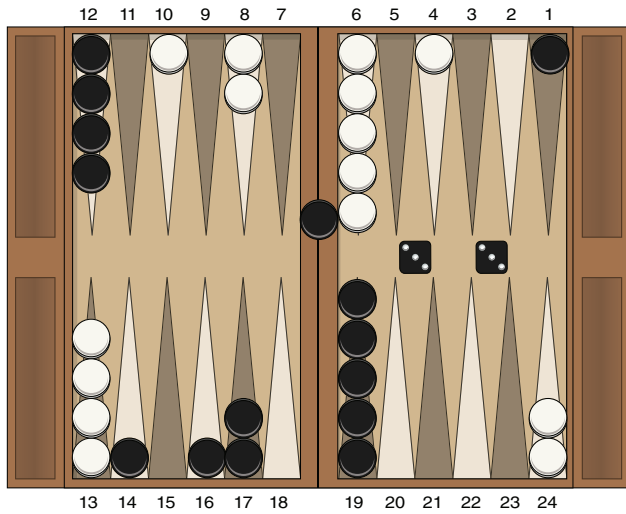
If instead we strip the 8 point so that making the 5 abandons the 8 entirely, the choice becomes a close call slightly favoring the double hit when we take the 8 point's spare to the 11 point. If we instead take the spare to the midpoint, it becomes a dead heat, with the rollout showing a tiny and likely insignificant pull toward making

the 5 point. Now we know that the better structure weighs quite heavily in the decision to make the 5 point or hit another checker. But an additional blot in our outer board is also a negative factor that pushes the decision back toward the double hit, as shown by this final variant:

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How to Play the Opening in Backgammon: Part 1

Position 2c



Variant of Position 2, with stripped 8 point and outfield blots

Score		Pips
Money	White	160
Money	Black	169

If we drop that spare onto the 9 or 10 instead, it represents a lingering liability just as it did when left on the 8 point. In both those cases the double hit emerges as clearly best, though it's still nowhere near a blunder to make the 5 point.

Conclusion: Adding another point to a good forward structure is much better than a mere upgrade, and too many blots that require our attention are no help, either. As Robertie intended, we see that sometimes making even the all-important 5 point comes at too high a price in both liabilities added and opportunities missed, and other plays may turn out to be better.

I like the way the original problem encourages flexible thinking when presented with many options, and so supports the book's intent of providing "a new way of thinking." But overall, I didn't feel the analysis reached the heart of the rollout's meaning.

Chapter 4 concerns making the 20 point versus competing plays that work in other ways toward your noble goal of winning your opponent's money. Here is one that shows how keeping both your game plan and the immediate needs of the position in mind can prevent mindless plays:



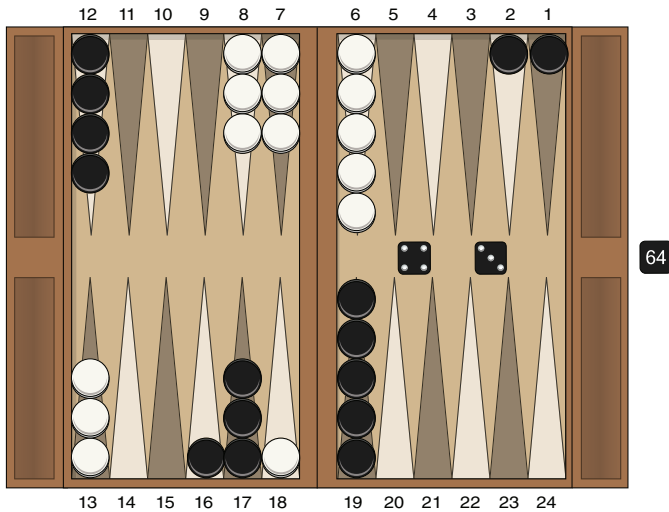
About Mary

Mary Hickey is an internationally known backgammon champion and teacher. She won the U.S. Open in 2010 and 2011, the final Carolina Open in 2016, and most recently the Steve Brown Memorial Masters event at the 2019 Viking Classic in Minneapolis. Her students have also won numerous championship trophies. In 2010 she produced a book in CD format titled *Chouette and More: The World's First and Only Backgammon Sci-fi Soap Opera*, and in 2011 she co-authored *What's Your Game Plan? Backgammon Strategy in the Middle Game* with Marty Storer. Many of her articles, reviews, news items and tournament reports remain archived at the online GammonVillage magazine.

Her writing experience outside backgammon includes work as a newspaper reporter, columnist, and photographer, and winning a Keystone Press statewide journalism award. Her fiction and articles have appeared in *The Griffin*, *Happy*, *Kalliope*, other literary and commercial publications, and several anthologies. She has also done technical writing, and might do something that boring again if the only alternative was living in a cardboard box without Internet.

How to Play the Opening in Backgammon: Part 1

Position 3



Robertie's Diagram 4.2.7, p. 110

Score		Pips
Money	White	132
Money	Black	162

Your opponent is up to no good, trying to extricate his last back checker that's already halfway out the prison door, and then coast on his advantage in the race. There's nothing truly awful about making the defensive anchor on the 20 point, but the sharper play (by .021) is 13/9 and 23/20, providing yourself with more coverage of Junior's path to safety while not allowing the opponent to use inconvenient rolls to dump checkers safely behind you. Also, if the action starts to pop during this next sequence, your made 9 point might prove a useful start for a containment structure.

You're not in super shape no matter what you do, but the resplit-and-down play has an added vig that it might hold off the cube. It's no big deal if Oppo sends it over, since his double is small and your take is huge in both cases. But wouldn't you rather he give you a free roll now, and lose his market after the most gammonish sequences?

Chapter 5 concerns the 4 point, when to make it and when some competing objective or need provides greater value. Robertie ends the chapter with a brief note regarding the late Barclay Cooke, a pioneering backgammon author whose work spanned backgammon's antiquity (pre-Magriel) and Middle Ages (post-Magriel but pre-bot). He describes Cooke as a "creative thinker who lacked the hard data that would validate or disprove his theories." This note's context is a

problem where Barclay's extreme distaste for splitting the back men early on would have led him to play correctly. Neither of the top plays is a split, and though they have different kinds of drawbacks, both are better than all the splitting alternatives.

As you read this book, feel free to disagree with the answers to problems where the differences are small, or to ask XG about additional alternatives you think should have been discussed. But don't ignore the reasoning Bill presents in those cases, because the thought habits you learn will help you navigate other close calls — and maybe some that aren't so close. Backgammon openings diverge so quickly down so many roads, that trying to memorize lots of fine-difference reference positions can't possibly be the best use of your presumably limited study time. Setting a good process in place, which the explanations in this book can help you do, beats out excessive emphasis on product.

So, who should buy this book? You should, no matter who you are or how long you've been playing. Even its author assures us, "If someone else had written this book, I'd have bought it." Good call, because paying someone else \$50 to do this much work for him would make perfect sense. Instead, Robertie himself is the one who has done the work for you. Save yourself months of time and effort, and pick up a copy of this book when you have a chance.

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