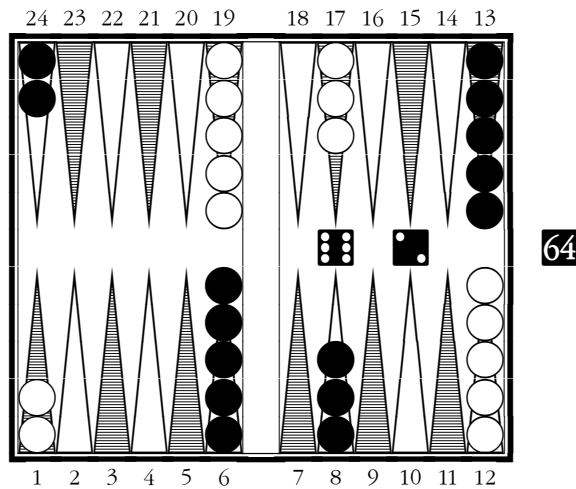


Opening Rolls Part 2: 62, 63, 64

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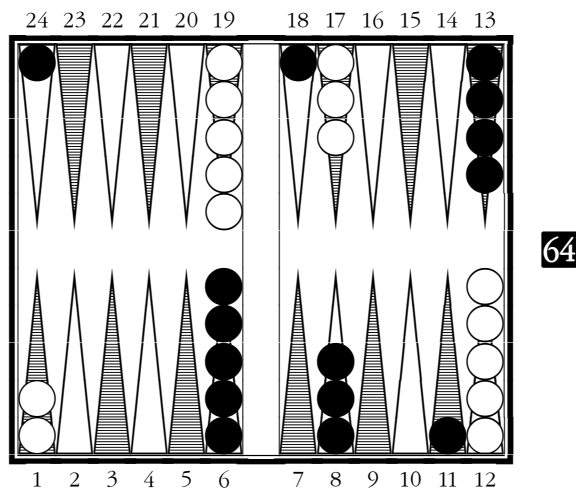
This is the second article in the Opening Rolls series. It covers three rolls: 62, 63, and 64. In contrast to the Easy Ones analyzed in the first article, these three are more difficult to play. There are several reasonable alternatives that are hard to evaluate. Based on much discussion, some help from the bots, and years of collective experience, we now think we know how to play 62 and 63. But we're still not sure about 64!

(1)



Black to play 62. Choices, choices!

(1A)



After 24/18 13/11: *Out and down.*

This play is considered best. You start to mobilize your back checkers by moving to the 18 point. At the same time you unstack your midpoint and put a useful builder on your 11. (Refer to the first Opening Rolls article to refresh your memory about terms like *midpoint* and *builder*.)

White can hit that builder with 64, but her 64 is *duplicated* because it can also be used to hit on her bar point.

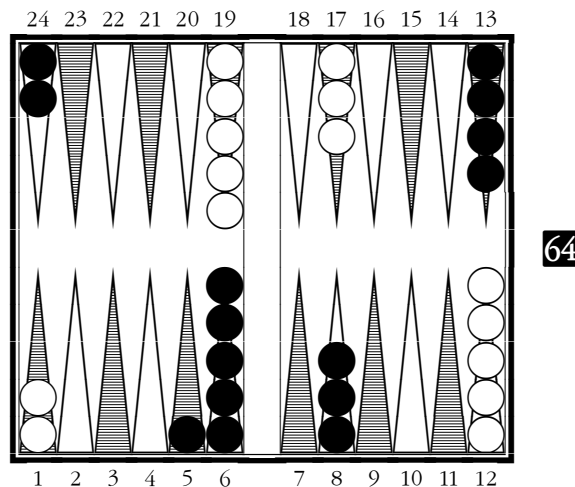
You should be willing to take the chance of being attacked on the 18 point (White's bar point). If White hits there, you will often hit her back. In that case you will have gained 11 pips in the exchange: seven lost by being hit, but 18 gained by hitting back. If you miss, that's usually not so great, but you still have plenty of play—especially if you make an advanced anchor with 54 or 32, or roll a useful double like 55, 44, or 11.

If White does not hit on her bar, as with 54, 53, 52, 43, and 32, you have good prospects next turn. You may make White's bar point, or else you may make your own bar point or your 5, perhaps with the help of the new builder in your outfield. Finally, even your bad rolls are a little bit helpful; you can escape from White's bar point, or make your lowly 11. The 11 point is an asset: a safe landing spot for blots, and a base from which builder-attackers can operate.

Also, notice that this 62 play leaves you with checkers in every quadrant of the board, ready to hit any blot White may leave. That means she can't play as freely as she'd like. For example, how should she play 32? If she puts a builder-blot in her outfield, you may easily hit from the 18.

The bottom line is that 24/18 13/11 is an excellent, balanced way to play an opening 62.

(1B)



After slotting the 5 point. Maybe White will miss the blot!

An alternative, no longer popular, is to slot the 5 point. If White misses, you're a favorite to make that point.

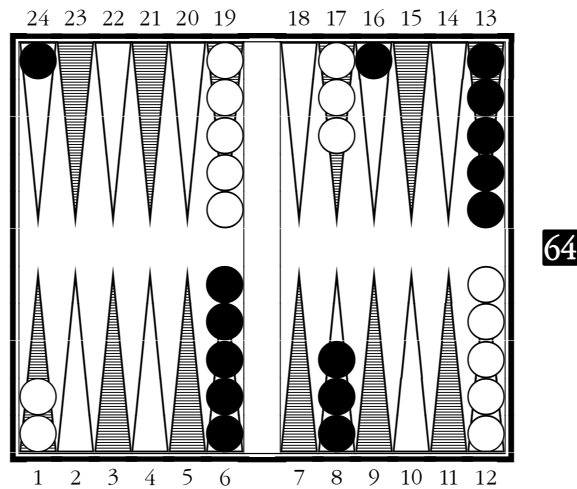
There are some problems with this move. The first is that it gives White 14 ways to hit and send you back 20 pips (she makes her 5 and bar points with double 1). Also, you are not a *huge* favorite to cover if White misses. There are 24 covering numbers out of the total 36; that's pretty good, but not as good as you'd like in return for the great risk you take by slotting. (You may have noticed that 52 "covers" the 3 point—but of course that point is less valuable than the 5).

Another problem is that you must often cover with a 3 or an 8, perhaps *stripping* your 8 point of spare checkers, and in any case remaining with the ugly stack of checkers on your 6 point. *The best way to slot your 5 point early in the game is with an unstacking 1, 6/5.* Be suspicious of slotting alternatives that do not unstack your 6 point.

Finally, the slotting play is committal. In general, you don't want to constrain yourself strategically; you want flexibility of game plan. Slotting your 5 point with opening 62 is not super-committal in the long run, but it's a bit restrictive. After slotting, you must cover the blot right away if you can, and you may have the same obligation next turn and even the turn after that. If you don't cover, that blot will be quite a thorn in your side.

You can try the 62 opening slot from time to time, just to help yourself get used to the complexities of priming and tactical games. But these days the play of choice is out and down.

(1C)



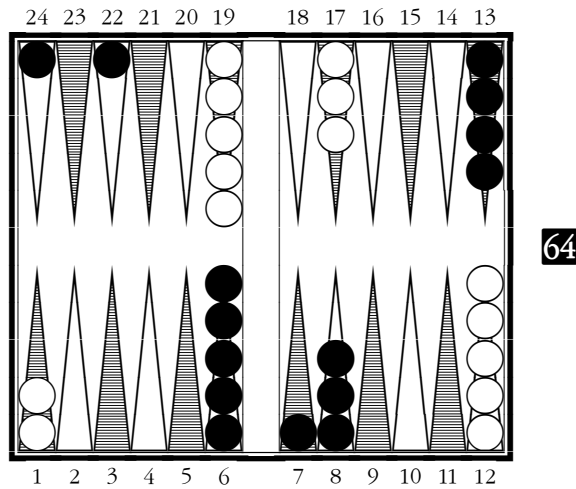
After running to the 16 point. Maybe White will miss the fleeing blot!

Another possibility with opening 62 is to run to the 16 point. This is an attempt to gain a racing advantage by escaping a back checker. White hits the fleeing blot with 14 numbers (including 31 and 42), but if she misses, you can cover with an 8 or come around the corner with most other numbers.

The main drawback is that your running attempt is often set back by those 14 immediate hits, or by some later. Another is that this move is too committal. At least in the short term, it biases you toward a running plan. You're committed to moving from the 16 point or suffering bad consequences. So if White misses and you then roll a good point-making number, 31, 42, or 61, you must either forgo the forward point or leave the 16-point blot vulnerable a second time. You should make the point, but you're not happy about repeating the 14-number shot.

Still, the bots consider this play somewhat stronger than slotting the 5 point. It duplicates White's point-making 31 and 42, and a hit sets you back only nine pips, not 20.

(1D)

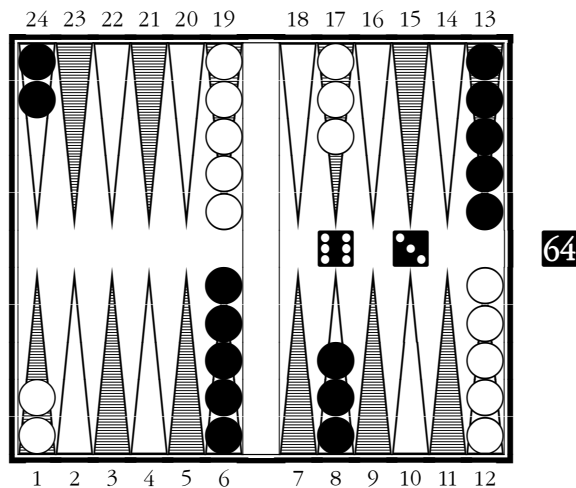


After 13/7 24/22. A risky *splot*!

An interesting alternative is 13/7 24/22, which may look similar to 24/18 13/11. Both moves split the back checkers and leave a blot in your outfield. But 13/7 24/22 is inferior. White has 17 numbers to hit on your bar point, setting you back 18 pips. A few rolls that miss on the bar point hit one or both of your back checkers: besides the devastating 55, six other rolls, 53, 52, and 32, force you to enter one or two checkers before you can make a forward point.

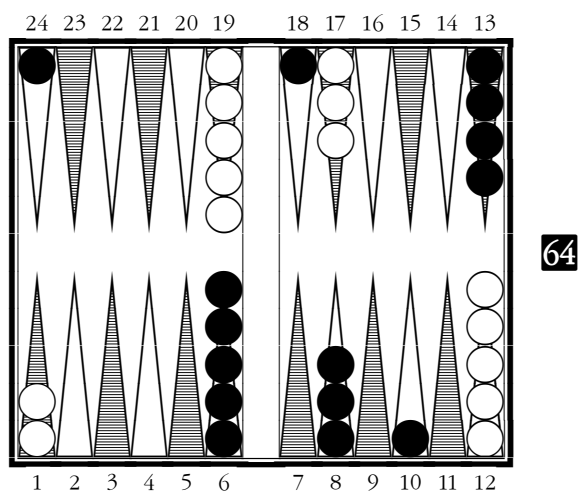
This kind of opening move is known as a *slot and split*, or *splot* for short. Early-game splots are almost always wrong, and this position is no exception. If you splot, prepare to be hit anywhere and everywhere. When splots are correct in the opening phase, it's usually because alternatives are terrible.

(2)



Black to play 63. The choices here are like those for opening 62.

(2A)

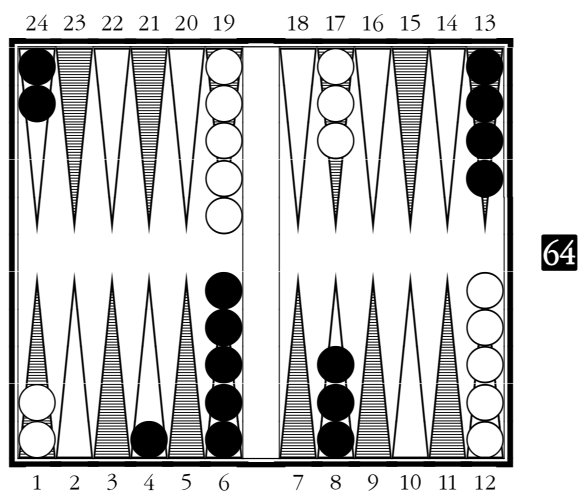


After 24/18 13/10. Out and down is also best with opening 63.

Out and down is considered best with opening 63. The rationale is similar to that for opening 62, which is best played 24/18 13/11. But there are several differences between the rolls.

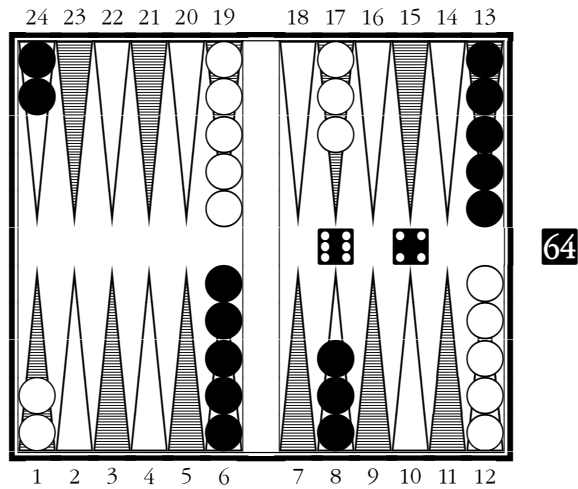
One difference lies in where the builder is placed. Although a builder on the 10 point gets hit more often than a builder on the 11, the 10 point has advantages. From that point, the builder places *direct pressure* on three valuable target points (the 7, 5, and 4) instead of just two (the 7 and 5). So you gain more ways to make one of those points. And it's now more dangerous for White to split to your 4 point, as she may want to do with the poor replies of 43 and 32. On the 4 point, she can be hit with direct 6s, 4s, and 2s. When a blot is vulnerable to three or more direct numbers on a point the opponent wants to make, we say that blot is *under the gun*.

(2B)



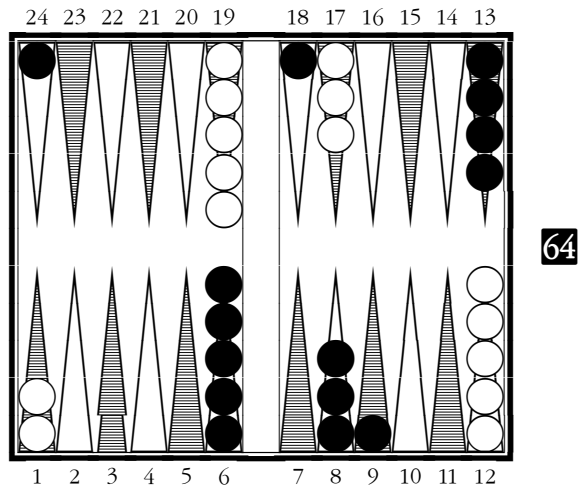
After 13/4. Slotting the 4 point with 63 is worse than slotting the 5 with 62.

(3)



Opening 64: A difficult choice.

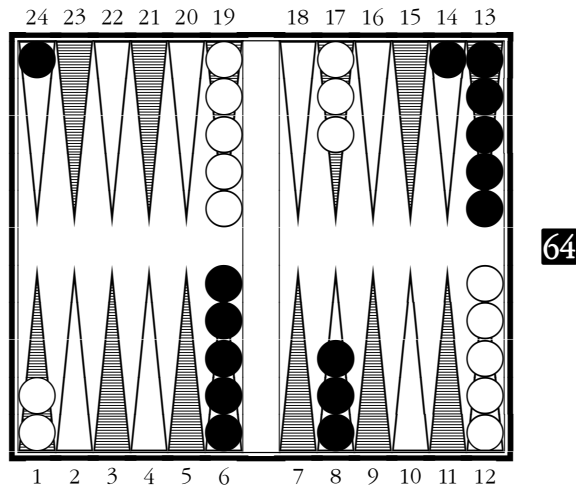
(4A)



Out and down with 64: Riskier, but more promising, than with 62 or 63.

Out and down is a fine play with opening 64. The builder on the 9 point is better placed than a builder on the 10 or 11. It bears on good blocking points, and may itself be covered for a good start at a prime. Unfortunately, it's also more likely to be hit on the 9 than on the 10 or 11.

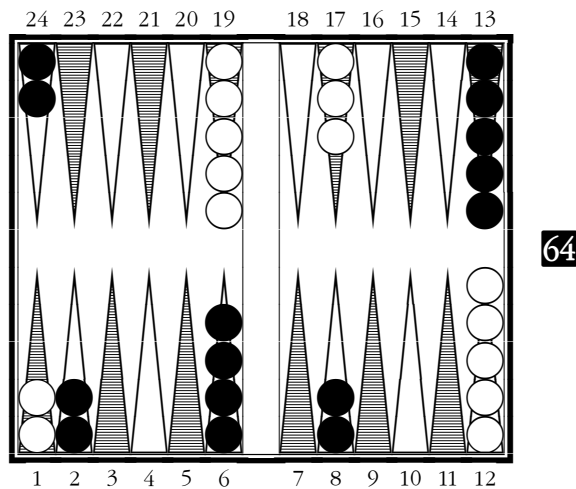
(4B)



After 24/14: The best opening running play besides 65.

The running attempt, 24/14, leaves fewer shots than the other running plays we've seen, and moves farther toward freedom.

(4C)



After making the deep, deep 2 point.

There are no reasonable slotting moves, but you can make your 2 point, improving your board and moving 10 pips forward in complete safety.

The trouble with making the deep 2 point is that the 8 and 2 points don't cooperate well. Both points cannot be part of the same six-point prime. Also, the move is committal, steering you away from blocking and toward a running-attacking game.

In return for those drawbacks, this play leaves no blots, and also gains a second inner-board point. That advantage in board strength can help if you are able to hit anytime soon.

What's the verdict on opening 64? In a money game or early in a match, these three alternatives are considered too close to call. But match play is difficult and interesting, and the score often changes the way you approach each game. Let's consider how to play opening 64 in different match situations.

Suppose you're far behind in the match. Then you really want to catch up, and you should take significant risks to do so. A won gammon will usually help you more than a lost gammon hurts, so you should try to create gammon chances. That advice applies even to the opening roll. With 64, you should make the 2 point to try to cash in on tactical variations.

There's a lot of hitting in the opening, and your 2 point keeps White on the bar more often. It also restricts her choice when she enters with a roll containing a 2. Finally, the two-point inner board gained by making the 2 point is only one step away from a three-point board. A three-point is *far* better tactically, because it keeps your opponent on the bar much more often, and restricts her choice to a greater degree. So the 2 point leads to more gammons for you, as the bots agree.

Do not make the 2 point at match scores where gammons don't count double for you—for example, if you need only one point to win. At double match point, run or split as you like. If you're ahead in the match and want to avoid being gammoned, you probably should run, hoping you don't get multiple checkers trapped in White's board. However, it's also good to play out and down. If you get hit and then hit White back, her attack is stalled. Likewise, if you make her bar point, you will have good long-term defense.

That concludes the second article in the Opening Rolls series. The next one will cover 21, 41, and 51. Should you slot your 5 point, or split?