

**Igor Erovenko: Winner of USBGF Masters Divisional VI**  
**Interviewed by Karen Davis**

Igor Erovenko won the online USBGF Masters Divisional VI tournament in November 2014. The tournament is single-elimination and is restricted to those with an online Elo rating of 1650 and above. There were 32 entrants. Igor defeated Narvy Goldman in the 21-point final. Finishing 3/4 were Michael Klein and Michael Flohr in the 19-point semi-finals. The Masters Divisional requires players have a Circuit Elo rating between 1650.00 or above, Congratulations to all!

**When and why did you start playing backgammon?**

My first encounter with backgammon was around age of 7. I was spending part of the summer with my mother in the Republic of Georgia on the coast of Black Sea and that particular year our local host turned out to be an avid backgammon player. Naturally, this was the version of backgammon played in the Middle East without the doubling cube. He quickly taught me how to play and we spent many an evening at the table enjoying the game. A child's memory is pretty short, so it didn't take me long to forget about backgammon once we came back home. However, several years ago I stumbled upon a backgammon icon on one of the play sites and decided to try it again. Granted, I was a terrible player, but it seemed fun and the next thing I know is GNU Backgammon finds its way to my computer. Some time later I decided that I would like to learn more about the game and this is where it became interesting.

**How have you tried to improve your game?**

I believe one of the most efficient ways for quick initial improvement is to stand on the shoulders of the giants. Therefore, absorbing standard material in classic books provides a basic framework for the decision-making process. Once I decided to become serious about the game, I put in a couple of big book orders with Carol Joy Cole and started reading. I also regularly revisit the books since I'm still a long way from absorbing everything they have to offer. Readers of Stick's forum may recognize my "book series" project which I started two years ago. I have learned a great deal from the forum discussions of the positions and some of those made it into my reference library. This brings me to another important source of improvement -- Stick's forum. The forum archives contain such a wealth of information that anyone willing to dig deep will come out a much better player in the end. For those too lazy to peruse the entire archives I suggest going back to October 2009 when Nack Ballard started contributing regularly. Everybody was awed by Nack's depth of understanding of the game, especially its opening phase. Nack was extremely generous with sharing his immense knowledge and his posts provide food for years of thought and study by students of the game. Of course many other top players, including Stick and Neil, still volunteer their feedback and the backgammon community benefits greatly from this open exchange of ideas.

I also believe it is important to break the game into pieces and then study each piece systematically. For example, one can start by learning and understanding opening replies -- since they occur in every single game there is no excuse to lose equity on a regular basis by not knowing opening theory. Besides, understanding the logic behind second and third roll moves often helps one to find the proper game plan several moves deeper into the game. One can also

learn how to handle cube in races in a fairly short period of time; the most difficult part would be mastering EPC. Add to this repertoire basic reference positions for holding games and blitzes and we have an open level player ready to hold his own against some serious competition.

With all that said, the biggest factor by far in my improvement as a player was joining USBGF in the fall of 2013. This is probably one of the best decisions I have ever made in my life. First of all, I got access to wonderful instructional videos by Phil Simborg. Second, I got an opportunity to participate in USBGF Online Circuit tournaments, which provide regular practice against formidable competition. And last, but not least, I took full advantage of the USBGF mentorship program. Phil assigned David Presser as my mentor, and my (relatively) rapid improvement in the past year is mostly due to David's help. David is well known in backgammon circles as one of the fastest improving players in the history of the game, and seeing an actual example of what one can achieve with hard work serves as a great motivation to my meager efforts.

### **Do you play in live tournaments as well as online?**

So far I played in only one full live tournament – the Carolina Invitational -- in 2014. Jeb Horton and family run an amazing tournament. The format and schedule are, for lack of a better word, perfect. I also attend once in a while weekly meetings of Durham/Chapel Hill backgammon club, directed by Ken Larsen. The club venue is some 60 miles from my home, so I can't attend on a regular basis. I do hope to make it to more tournaments in the future, so you might be seeing my mug again.

### **What have been your most memorable experiences playing live, online?**

I learned to be emotionally detached from my online games as I simply try to find the best move in every position no matter what is happening. In the end I come out with positive experience regardless of the outcome of the match. If I win, then I'm happy I get to continue playing in the tournament, while if I lose, then my wife is happy I have one fewer tournament to play in (which means fewer matches to schedule) and I get the benefit of learning from my mistakes. My best online experience would be playing regular practice matches with David Presser, after which I analyze the match in detail and send it to David, who then adds his insight and shares his systematic approach to certain types of positions. These matches usually bring the best in me since I know I would have to explain why I made any particular decision after the match. I also enjoy occasional help from Dmitriy Obukhov who watches some of my matches and provides quick feedback right after. Most of his pointers are amazingly simple yet amazingly effective in practice.

Live play is hugely different. Having read all the horror stories about despicable behavior by certain players in Monte Carlo, I was somewhat cautious to attend my first ABT tournament. I was not sure what to expect. However, it turned out that the atmosphere was amazingly positive and welcoming. Last year in Charlotte I came down to the playing room on the night of the first day of the tournament to register and pay my entry fees. As soon as I put a name badge on my shirt, a man rushed across the room yelling "I know that name!" He shook my hand and explained that he knew my name from reading some of my posts on Stick's forum and now he has a face to associate with that name. This is how I met Bill Riles. Where else do you get that

kind of treatment by the president? Phil's lectures are always great and he knows how to make every presentation fun. I also had the pleasure of facing Phil over the board in one of the USBGF East qualifying brackets.

However, my most memorable experience was meeting and talking backgammon with Paul Weaver. Paul graciously approved some of my work and offered valuable suggestions for potential improvement and future expansion. He then shared samples of his own work and I was duly impressed with how systematically and meticulously it was organized. Paul had several binders filled with reference positions printed neatly in a uniform pattern that made it very handy for studying purposes. I slowly started to convert my previous work to a similar format.

My overall impression also wasn't hurt by the fact that I won something in my first tournament. Actually, my wife told me that she wouldn't let me back home without a trophy, so I didn't have much choice. It just goes to show that having the love and support of family and friends can inspire us to great achievements.

### **Which do you prefer and why?**

I like both online and live play since they require somewhat different skill sets to be successful. When playing online you can schedule matches to be played at a time that is convenient for you, and you don't have to play several matches in a row, whereas in live play you also need stamina and the ability to keep focus and concentration for extended periods of time. It is for that reason that one needs significant tournament experience to become a solid tournament player. It is something you simply cannot learn playing online. I wish I had more opportunities for regular competitive live play. As part of my pre-tournament practice routine I play matches against myself on a physical board. I record the matches and transcribe them. It turns out I make some stupid errors playing on a board which I would never make playing online, since I haven't yet developed a good vision of the physical board.

### **How did you find your experience participating in the USBGF Online Circuit?**

The USBGF online tournaments are great. Almost all of the players are very considerate and responsible and it's fairly easy to arrange and play a match. This is nothing like some of the online leagues I used to participate in. A significant portion of the population in those leagues is extremely difficult to arrange a mutually agreed time with. Some of them then simply don't bother to show up for the scheduled time and will act as if nothing happened. I used to waste literally hours every week waiting online for these non-shows until I decided to quit such leagues altogether. With the addition of USBGF divisional tournaments I now enroll in enough USBGF tournaments to play several matches per week.

### **Tell us a little about your life outside backgammon?**

In everyday life I'm an associate professor of mathematics at the University of North Carolina Greensboro. So, most of my waking time is spent on some kind of fun and engaging mental activity -- be it mathematics or backgammon. I'm also a wine connoisseur; I started studying wine in 2008 and I visited Napa Valley and Oregon, in addition to numerous vineyards in

Virginia and North Carolina, for wine tastings. I also regularly attend weekly wine tastings held by several local stores.

**What suggestions would you have for USBGF to enhance playing opportunities for members?**

I think the current system of assigning an initial online USBGF rating is somewhat flawed. Players who already have a GridGammon account can simply bring their existing GG rating into USBGF, while members who did not have a GG account must start with the rating of 1500. The problem with this approach is that some good players can't get an account at GridGammon before signing up for USBGF. As a result, they have to labor for several years to build up their USBGF rating, while their GG rating will increase much faster due to an opportunity to play plenty of matches not associated with USBGF tournaments. One possible solution to this inconsistency is to allow a certain "grace period" of, say, six months or one year during which any player who started with "clean slate" can reset their USBGF rating once to their current GridGammon rating. This should more or less level the playing field and make everybody's rating more consistent with the actual skill level. The reason "proper" USBGF ratings matter is because divisional tournament assignments are based upon them.