

# Box-ball systems, RSK tableaux, and the Motzkin numbers

Emily Gunawan, UMass Lowell

based on joint projects with

B. Drucker, E. Garcia, A. Rumbolt, R. Silver (UConn REU '20)  
M. Cofie, O. Fugikawa, M. Stewart, D. Zeng (Yale REU '21)  
S. Hong, M. Li, R. Okonogi-Neth, M. Sapronov, D. Stevanovich, H.  
Weingord (Yale REU '22)

Dartmouth Combinatorics Seminar  
Tuesday, October 24, 2023

## Solitary waves (solitons)

### Scott Russell's first encounter (August 1834)

“I was observing the motion of a boat which was rapidly drawn along a narrow channel by a pair of horses, when the boat suddenly stopped.

[The mass of water in the channel] rolled forward with great velocity, assuming the form of a large solitary elevation, a rounded, smooth and well-defined heap of water, which continued its course along the channel apparently without change of form or diminution of speed.

I followed it on horseback, ... and after a chase of one or two miles I lost it in the windings of the channel.”



Soliton on the Scott Russell Aqueduct on the Union Canal (July 1995)

([ma.hw.ac.uk/solitons/press.html](http://ma.hw.ac.uk/solitons/press.html))

Two soliton animation: [www.desmos.com/calculator/86lop1pajr](http://www.desmos.com/calculator/86lop1pajr)

# Permutations

Let  $S_n$  denote the set of permutations on the numbers  $\{1, \dots, n\}$ .

We will represent permutations in *one-line notation*, as

$$w = w(1) w(2) \cdots w(n) \in S_n.$$

## Example

A permutation in  $S_6$  in one-line notation: 452361

## (Multicolor) box-ball system, Takahashi 1993

A *box-ball system* is a dynamical system of box-ball configurations.

- ▶ At each configuration, balls are labeled by numbers 1 through  $n$  in an infinite strip of boxes.
- ▶ Each box can fit at most one ball.

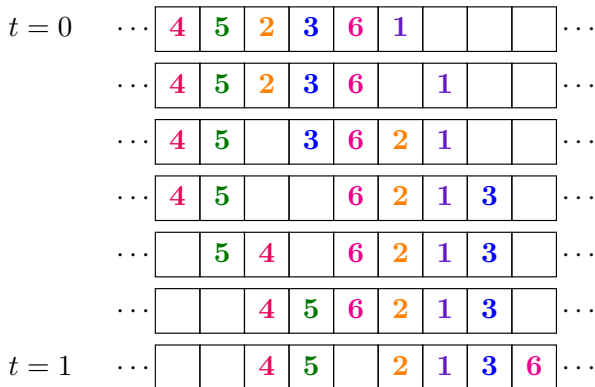
### Example

A possible box-ball configuration:

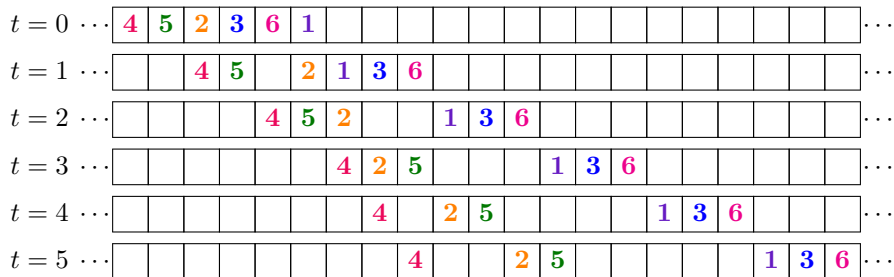


## Box-ball move (from $t = 0$ to $t = 1$ )

Balls take turns jumping to the first empty box to the right, starting with the smallest-numbered ball.



# Box-ball moves ( $t = 0$ through $t = 5$ )



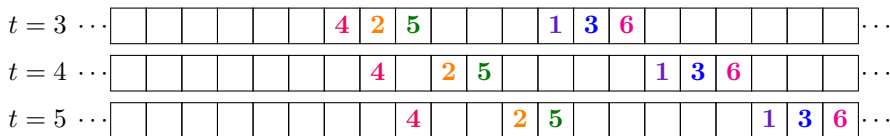
# Solitons and steady state

## Definition

A *soliton* of a box-ball system is an increasing run of balls that moves at a speed equal to its length and is preserved by all future box-ball moves.

## Example

The strings **4**, **25**, and **136** are solitons:



After a finite number of box-ball moves, the system reaches a *steady state* where:

- ▶ each ball belongs to one soliton
- ▶ the lengths of the solitons are weakly decreasing from right to left

## Question (steady-state time)

The time when a permutation  $w$  first reaches steady state is called the *steady-state time* of  $w$ .

- ▶ Find a formula to compute the steady-state time of a permutation, without needing to run box-ball moves.



# Tableaux (English notation)

## Definition

- ▶ A *tableau* is an arrangement of numbers  $\{1, 2, \dots, n\}$  into rows whose lengths are weakly decreasing.
- ▶ A tableau is *standard* if its rows and columns are increasing.

## Example

Standard Tableaux:

1	2	4
3	5	
6	7	

1	3	6
2	5	
4		

1	3	4
2	7	
5	8	
6		

Nonstandard Tableau:

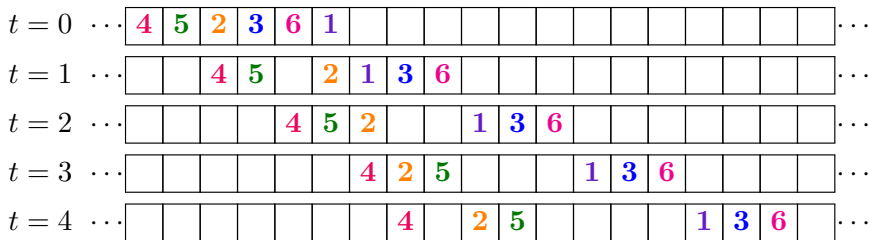
1	2	3
5	6	7
4		

# Soliton decomposition

## Definition

To construct *soliton decomposition*  $SD(w)$  of  $w$ , start with the one-line notation of  $w$ , and run box-ball moves until we reach a steady state; the 1st row of  $SD(w)$  is the rightmost soliton, the 2nd row of  $SD(w)$  is the next rightmost soliton, and so on.

## Example



$$SD(452361) = \begin{array}{|c|c|c|} \hline 1 & 3 & 6 \\ \hline 2 & 5 & \\ \hline 4 & & \\ \hline \end{array} \text{ with shape } (3, 2, 1).$$

## RSK bijection

The classical Robinson–Schensted–Knuth (RSK) insertion algorithm is a bijection

$$w \mapsto (P(w), Q(w))$$

from  $S_n$  onto pairs of size- $n$  standard tableaux of equal shape.

### Example

Let  $w = \mathbf{452361}$ . Then

$$P(w) = \begin{array}{|c|c|c|} \hline 1 & 3 & 6 \\ \hline 2 & 5 & \\ \hline 4 & & \\ \hline \end{array} \quad \text{and} \quad Q(w) = \begin{array}{|c|c|c|} \hline 1 & 2 & 5 \\ \hline 3 & 4 & \\ \hline 6 & & \\ \hline \end{array}.$$



$Q(w)$  determines the box-ball dynamics of  $w$

**Theorem (2021)**

If  $Q(v) = Q(w)$ , then

- ▶  $v$  and  $w$  first reach steady state at the same time, and
- ▶ the soliton decompositions of  $v$  and  $w$  have the same shape

**Example**

$$v = 21435 \text{ and } w = 31425$$

$$Q(v) = Q(w) = \begin{array}{|c|c|c|} \hline 1 & 3 & 5 \\ \hline 2 & 4 & \\ \hline \end{array}$$

Both  $v$  and  $w$  have steady-state time  $t = 1$

$$SD(v) = \begin{array}{|c|c|c|} \hline 1 & 3 & 5 \\ \hline 4 & & \\ \hline 2 & & \\ \hline \end{array} \quad SD(w) = \begin{array}{|c|c|c|} \hline 1 & 2 & 5 \\ \hline 4 & & \\ \hline 3 & & \\ \hline \end{array}$$

## Questions (steady-state time)

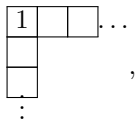
Two permutations are said to be *Q-equivalent* if they have the same Q-tableau.

- ▶ Given a Q-tableau, find a formula to compute the steady-state time for all permutations in this Q-tableau equivalence class.
- ▶ Find an upper bound for steady-state times of all permutations in  $S_n$ .

# L-shaped soliton decompositions

## Theorem (2021)

If a permutation has an L-shaped soliton decomposition



then its steady-state time is either  $t = 0$  or  $t = 1$ .

## Remark

Such permutations include “noncrossing involutions” and “column words” of standard tableaux.

## Example

Both  $v = 21435$  and  $w = 31425$  have steady-state time  $t = 1$ .

$$\text{SD}(v) = \begin{array}{|c|c|c|} \hline 1 & 3 & 5 \\ \hline 4 & & \\ \hline 2 & & \\ \hline \end{array} \quad \text{SD}(w) = \begin{array}{|c|c|c|} \hline 1 & 2 & 5 \\ \hline 4 & & \\ \hline 3 & & \\ \hline \end{array}$$

$v = (12)(34)$  and  $w = 31425$  is the column word of 

1	2	5
3	4	

.

# Maximum steady-state time

## Theorem (UConn 2020)

If  $n \geq 5$  and

$$Q(w) = \begin{array}{|c|c|} \hline 1 & 2 \\ \hline 3 & 4 \\ \hline n & \\ \hline \end{array} \dots \begin{array}{|c|c|} \hline n-2 & n-1 \\ \hline \end{array},$$

then the steady-state time of  $w$  is  $n - 3$ .

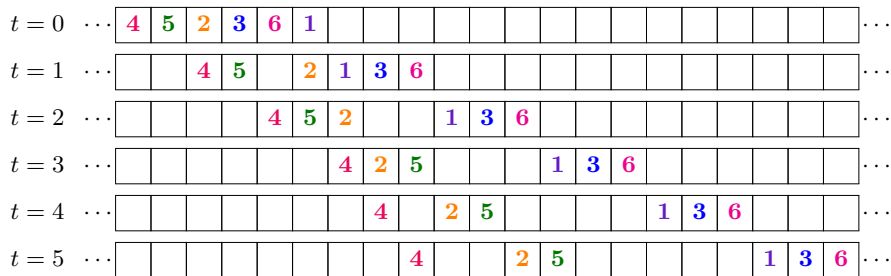
## Conjecture

For  $n \geq 4$ , the steady-state time of a permutation in  $S_n$  is at most  $n - 3$ .



# A permutation with steady-state time $n - 3$

Let  $w = 452361 \in S_6$ . Then  $Q(w) = \begin{array}{|c|c|c|} \hline 1 & 2 & 5 \\ \hline 3 & 4 & \\ \hline 6 & & \\ \hline \end{array}$  and the steady-state time of  $w$  is  $3 = n - 3$ .



## Question (soliton decompositions)

- ▶ When is the soliton decomposition SD a standard tableau?

## When is $SD(w)$ a standard tableau?

### Example

$$SD(452361) = \begin{array}{|c|c|c|} \hline 1 & 3 & 6 \\ \hline 2 & 5 & \\ \hline 4 & & \\ \hline \end{array} \quad SD(21435) = \begin{array}{|c|c|c|} \hline 1 & 3 & 5 \\ \hline 4 & & \\ \hline 2 & & \\ \hline \end{array} \quad SD(31425) = \begin{array}{|c|c|c|} \hline 1 & 2 & 5 \\ \hline 4 & & \\ \hline 3 & & \\ \hline \end{array}$$

### Theorem (2020)

Given a permutation  $w$ , the following are equivalent:

1.  $SD(w)$  is standard
2.  $SD(w) = P(w)$
3. the shape of  $SD(w)$  is equal to the shape of  $P(w)$

### Definition (good permutations)

We say that a permutation  $w$  is *good* if the tableau  $SD(w)$  is standard.

$Q(w)$  determines whether  $w$  is good

### Proposition

Given a standard tableau  $T$ , either

All  $w$  such that  $Q(w) = T$  are good,

or

All  $w$  such that  $Q(w) = T$  are not good.

### Definition (good tableaux)

A standard tableau  $T$  is *good* if  $T = Q(w)$  and  $w$  is good.

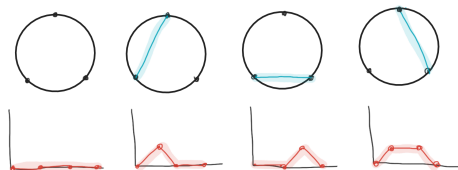
- ▶ Question: How many good tableaux are there?

Answer: Good tableaux are new Motzkin objects!

### Theorem (2022)

The good standard tableaux,  $\{Q(w) \mid w \in S_n \text{ and } SD(w) \text{ is standard}\}$ , are counted by the Motzkin numbers:

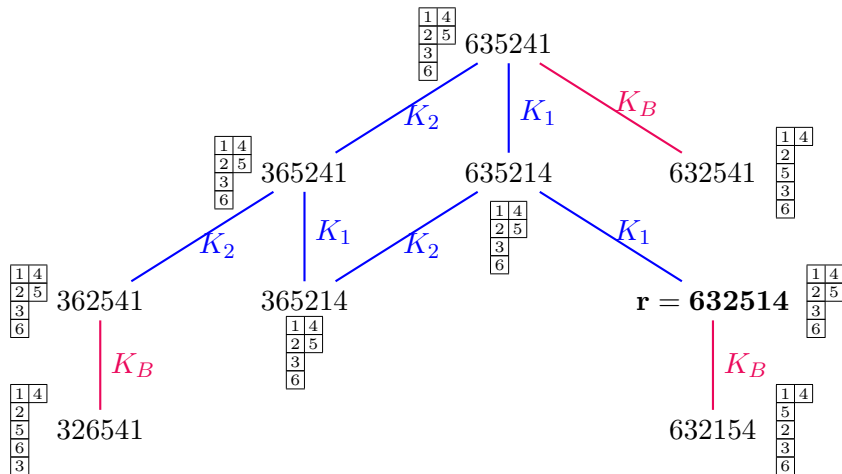
$$M_0 = 1, \quad M_n = M_{n-1} + \sum_{i=0}^{n-2} M_i M_{n-2-i}$$



$$M_3 = 4$$

The first few Motzkin numbers are 1, 1, 2, 4, 9, 21, 51, 127, 323, 835.

Question: Characterize permutations with the same soliton decomposition



Permutations connected by *Knuth moves* to  $\mathbf{r} = 632514$  and their soliton decompositions

## Knuth Relations

Suppose  $v, w \in S_n$  and  $x < y < z$ .

1.  $v$  and  $w$  differ by a Knuth relation of the **first kind** ( $K_1$ ) if

$$v = x_1 \dots yxz \dots x_n \text{ and } w = x_1 \dots yzx \dots x_n \text{ or vice versa}$$

2.  $v$  and  $w$  differ by a Knuth relation of the **second kind** ( $K_2$ ) if

$$v = x_1 \dots xzy \dots x_n \text{ and } w = x_1 \dots zxy \dots x_n \text{ or vice versa}$$

In addition,  $v$  and  $w$  differ by a Knuth relation of **both kinds** ( $K_B$ ) if they differ by  $K_1$  and they differ by  $K_2$ , that is,

$$v = x_1 \dots y_1 xzy_2 \dots x_n \text{ and } w = x_1 \dots y_1 zxy_2 \dots x_n \text{ or vice versa}$$

where  $x < y_1, y_2 < z$

**Example**  $326154 \sim^{K_1} 362154 \quad 362154 \sim^{K_B} 362514$

We say that  $v$  and  $w$  are *Knuth equivalent* if they differ by a finite sequence of Knuth relations.

# $P$ -tableaux and Knuth moves

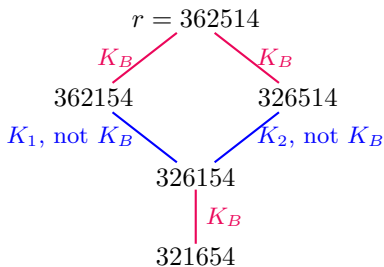
## Theorem (Knuth, 1970)

- ▶ *There is a path of Knuth moves from  $w$  to the row reading word of  $P(w)$ .*
- ▶ *Two permutations have the same  $P$  tableau iff they are in the same Knuth equivalence class.*

## Example

The Knuth equivalence class of the row word  $r = 362514$  of

1	4
2	5
3	6





# Soliton decompositions and Knuth moves

The soliton decomposition is preserved by non- $K_B$  Knuth moves, but one  $K_B$  move changes the soliton decomposition.

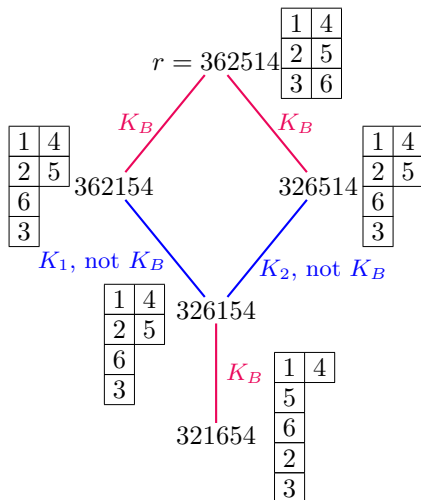
## Theorem (2020)

Let  $r$  denote the row reading word of  $P(w)$ .

- ▶ If there exists a path of *non- $K_B$*  Knuth moves from  $w$  to  $r$ , then  $SD(w) = P(w)$ . In particular,  $SD(r) = P(r)$ .
- ▶ If there exists a path from  $w$  to  $r$  containing an *odd* number of  $K_B$  moves, then  $SD(w) \neq P(w)$ .

## Example

Soliton decompositions of the Knuth equivalence class of 362154:



## Further questions

- ▶ Characterize good permutations using consecutive permutation patterns. (Note: this is impossible to do using classical permutation patterns.)
- ▶ Define and study continuous box-ball system (on the real line with balls labeled by the real numbers)

<i>Y</i>	<i>O</i>	<i>U</i>	!
<i>A</i>	<i>N</i>	<i>K</i>	
<i>T</i>	<i>H</i>		



## Greene's theorem, slide 1/3

### Definition (longest $k$ -increasing subsequences)

A subsequence  $\sigma$  of  $w$  is called  $k$ -increasing if, as a set, it can be written as a disjoint union

$$\sigma = \sigma_1 \sqcup \sigma_2 \sqcup \cdots \sqcup \sigma_k$$

where each  $\sigma_i$  is an increasing subsequence of  $w$ . Let  $i_k := i_k(w)$  denote the length of a longest  $k$ -increasing subsequence of  $w$ .

### Example (Let $w = 5623714$ .)

- ▶ The longest 1-increasing subsequences are 567, 237, and 234.
- ▶ The longest 2-increasing subsequence is given by  $562374 = 567 \sqcup 234$ .
- ▶ A longest 3-increasing subsequence (among others) is given by  $5623714 = 56 \sqcup 237 \sqcup 14$ .
- ▶ Thus,  $i_1 = 3$ ,  $i_2 = 6$ , and  $i_k = 7$  if  $k \geq 3$ .

## Greene's theorem, slide 2/3

### Definition (longest $k$ -decreasing subsequences)

Similarly, a subsequence  $\sigma$  of  $w$  is called  $k$ -decreasing if, as a set, it can be written as a disjoint union

$$\sigma = \sigma_1 \sqcup \sigma_2 \sqcup \cdots \sqcup \sigma_k$$

where each  $\sigma_i$  is an decreasing subsequence of  $w$ . Let  $d_k := d_k(w)$  denote the length of a longest  $k$ -decreasing subsequence of  $w$ .

### Example (Let $w = 5623714$ .)

- ▶ The longest 1-decreasing subsequences are 521, 621, 531, and 631.
- ▶ A longest 2-decreasing subsequence (among others) is given by  $52714 = 521 \sqcup 74$ .
- ▶ A longest 3-decreasing subsequence (among others) is given by  $5623714 = 52 \sqcup 631 \sqcup 74$ .
- ▶ Thus,  $d_1 = 3$ ,  $d_2 = 5$ , and  $d_k = 7$  if  $k \geq 3$ .

## Greene's theorem, slide 3/3

### Theorem (Greene, 1974)

Suppose  $w \in S_n$ . Let  $\lambda = (\lambda_1, \lambda_2, \lambda_3, \dots)$  denote the RS partition of  $w$ , that is, let  $\lambda = \text{sh } P(w)$ . Let  $\mu = (\mu_1, \mu_2, \mu_3, \dots)$  denote the conjugate of  $\lambda$ . Then, for any  $k$ ,

$$i_k(w) = \lambda_1 + \lambda_2 + \dots + \lambda_k,$$

$$d_k(w) = \mu_1 + \mu_2 + \dots + \mu_k.$$

### Example

By Greene's theorem, the RS partition is equal to  $\lambda = (i_1, i_2 - i_1, i_3 - i_2) = (3, 3, 1)$ . We can verify this by computing the RS tableaux

$$P(w) = \begin{array}{|c|c|c|} \hline 1 & 3 & 4 \\ \hline 2 & 6 & 7 \\ \hline 5 & & \\ \hline \end{array}, \quad Q(w) = \begin{array}{|c|c|c|} \hline 1 & 2 & 5 \\ \hline 3 & 4 & 7 \\ \hline 6 & & \\ \hline \end{array}.$$

## A localized version of Greene's theorem, slide 1/3

Definition (A localized version of longest  $k$ -increasing subsequences)

Let  $i(u) :=$  the length of a longest increasing subsequence of  $u$ .

For  $w \in S_n$  and  $k \geq 1$ , let  $I_k(w) = \max_{w=u_1|\cdots|u_k} \sum_{j=1}^k i(u_j)$ , where the

maximum is taken over ways of writing  $w$  as a concatenation  $u_1 | \cdots | u_k$  of consecutive subsequences.

### Example

Let  $w = 5623714$ . For short, we write  $I_k := I_k(w)$ . Then

$I_1 = i(w) = 3$  (since the longest increasing subsequences are 567, 237, 234),

$I_2 = 5$  (witnessed by 56|23714 or 56237|14),

$I_3 = 7$  (witnessed uniquely by 56|237|14), and

$I_k = 7$  for all  $k \geq 3$ .

## A localized version of Greene's theorem, slide 2/3

Definition (A localized version of longest  $k$ -decreasing subsequences)

Let  $D(u) := 1 + |\{\text{descents of } u\}|$ .

For  $w \in S_n$  and  $k \geq 1$ , let  $D_k(w) = \max_{w=u_1 \sqcup \dots \sqcup u_k} \sum_{j=1}^k D(u_j)$ , where the

maximum is taken over ways to write  $w$  as the union of disjoint subsequences  $u_j$  of  $w$ .

### Example

Let  $w = 5623714$ . For short, we write  $D_k := D_k(w)$ . Then

$$D_1 = D(w) = 1 + |\text{descents of } 5623714| = 1 + |\{2, 5\}| = 3,$$

$D_2 = 6$  (take subsequences 531 and 6274, among other partitions),

$D_3 = 7$  (take subsequences 52, 631, and 74, among other partitions), and

$D_k = 7$  for all  $k \geq 3$ .



## A localized version of Greene's theorem, slide 3/3

### Theorem (Lewis–Lyu–Pylyavskyy–Sen 2019)

Suppose  $w \in S_n$ . Let  $\Lambda = (\Lambda_1, \Lambda_2, \Lambda_3, \dots)$  denote  $\text{sh SD}(w)$ . Let  $M = (M_1, M_2, M_3, \dots)$  denote the conjugate of  $\Lambda$ . Then, for any  $k$ ,

$$I_k(w) = \Lambda_1 + \Lambda_2 + \dots + \Lambda_k,$$

$$D_k(w) = M_1 + M_2 + \dots + M_k.$$

### Example

Let  $w = 5623714$ . By the above theorem,  $\text{sh SD}(w) = (I_1, I_2 - I_1, I_3 - I_2) = (3, 2, 2)$ . We can verify this by computing the soliton decomposition  $\text{SD}(w)$ , which turns out to be the (non-standard) tableau

1	3	4
2	7	
5	6	

Note:  $\text{sh SD}(w) = (3, 2, 2)$  is smaller than  $\text{sh } P(w) = (3, 3, 1)$  in the dominance order.

## Examples: permutations with L-shaped SD

A permutation with L-shaped SD which is not a column reading word:

$w = 3217654 = (13)(47)(56)$  is a noncrossing involution.

$$P(w) = Q(w) = \begin{array}{|c|c|} \hline 1 & 4 \\ \hline 2 & 5 \\ \hline 3 & 6 \\ \hline 7 & \\ \hline \end{array} \quad \text{and} \quad SD(w) = \begin{array}{|c|} \hline 1 & 4 \\ \hline 5 & \\ \hline 6 & \\ \hline 7 & \\ \hline 2 & \\ \hline 3 & \\ \hline \end{array}$$

An involution which is neither noncrossing nor a column reading word:

$v = 5274163 = (15)(37)$  has a crossing.

$$P(v) = Q(v) = \begin{array}{|c|c|c|} \hline 1 & 3 & 6 \\ \hline 2 & 4 & \\ \hline 5 & 7 & \\ \hline \end{array} \quad \text{and} \quad SD(v) = \begin{array}{|c|} \hline 1 & 3 & 6 \\ \hline 4 & \\ \hline 2 & \\ \hline 7 & \\ \hline 5 & \\ \hline \end{array}$$

# Permutations connected by $K_B$ moves & have the same SD

Two permutations with the same SD which are connected by  $K_B$  moves:

