

2018 Revisions – USBGF Tournament Rules: Substantive Rule Changes

The following summarizes the substantive rule changes contained in the proposed revision for 2018 of the USBGF Tournament Rules (the Rules) as compared to the prior USBGF rule set (Fall 2016) and the prior ABT rule set (2009). The rule set(s) from which the noted rule differs are noted in [square brackets]. There are several rules which codify practices that were generally followed by Directors on the ABT, though not specifically mentioned in the rules. Those rules are not mentioned here, as they do not represent a real rule change in practice.

INTRODUCTION

There are many philosophical arguments surrounding backgammon tournament play that divide opinion on rules between two camps: a) “players should take full responsibility for all of their actions” and b) “good sportsmanship means that we should all make the right call, even if it works against us”. It is often argued that you can’t legislate or enforce ethics, and this is true. However, you can set clear expectations for players. These Tournament Rules have generally adopted the latter philosophy (b). This approach will not please everyone, but it is consistent and a choice of approach must be made. It is also the choice that has been emerging internationally in other rule sets. There is another, more practical reason to make this choice. Given increasing transcription and analysis of live backgammon tournament matches, the Tournament Rules generally work towards preventing actions from happening in live play that cannot happen in computer-based play.

1.0 GENERAL

[USBGF] All statements here and elsewhere in the Rules pertaining to USBGF policy with regard to the application of the rules, and statements regarding variations in rules that directors may choose, have been eliminated.

Intent/Rationale: The Rules are intended to be suitable as a baseline for general use in tournaments anywhere in the world, such that players understand the rules and conditions applicable for a tournament if the tournament director otherwise says nothing. Policy regarding application and variation for any employer of the Rules is to be documented separately. The Ruling Guide will follow at a later date once the final form of the Rules becomes clear. It will likely emerge as a predecessor document to the substantially longer 2016 USBGF Tournament Rules, updated to reflect any rule changes that may be adopted from the proposed rules now under consideration. The Rules Options will clarify what changes to the default rules a Tournament Director may make, and how they must disseminate notice regarding any such changes. Those two documents will be prepared by the USBGF and made available for directors in the USA to use at their discretion. Any other employer of these Rules may adopt/copy either or both of those documents as their own, or revise/rewrite them as they see fit for their tournaments. Neither of those two documents are therefore required in order to review or understand the Tournament Rules, which is intended to stand on its own.

[ABT, USBGF] Directors may make narrowly tailored exceptions.

Intent/Rationale: While it has always been common practice for Directors to make exceptions in applying various rules, it has never previously been clarified in the rules whether they had this right, and if so whether there are any limitations on exercising that right. The intent here is to make clear that Directors do in fact have discretion to make exceptions, but that those exceptions must be limited in scope based on the particular circumstances of the situation and as tightly constrained as possible so as to solve the particular problem at hand without broadly undermining the rule at large. In other words, this does not give Directors license to rewrite or generally ignore rules they do not like by calling it an exception in every case that arises. The motivation here is to ensure as much consistency in application of the rules as possible, while recognizing that special circumstances will arise that demand some flexibility.

1.2 ETIQUETTE

[ABT] Requires compliance with the Standards of Ethical Practice

Intent/Rationale: This long-standing USBGF policy document establishes clear expectations for the kind of behavior expected from tournament participants and organizers. It is specifically noted in the Rules so that nobody can claim ignorance of these expectations. Any other employer of these Rules may adopt/copy this document as their own, or revise/rewrite it as they see fit for their tournaments.

1.6 SPECTATORS

[USBGF] Spectators are no longer permitted to point out clock expiry during a match.

Intent/Rationale: Anything that disrupts a game in progress should be avoided. This is particularly important with the encouraged use of non-expiring game clocks in untimed match play with two dice. The concerned spectator can point out an expiration to the director; the clock is not going to unexpired if we wait another minute or two.

[ABT, USBGF] Spectators are allowed to point out between games an error in setup or that the game clock is running.

Intent/Rationale: Between games, however, there is no harm in pointing out these irregularities since play cannot be affected.

1.7 AIDS; OTHER EQUIPMENT

[ABT, USBGF] In Clocks Preference events, players may not take pictures unless a clock is in use.

Intent/Rationale: Events are Clocks Preference to encourage the use of clocks and to protect the tournament schedule. This rule either makes players wanting to take pictures also want to use a clock, or protects the tournament schedule against unregulated picture taking if they opt out from using a clock.

2.2 START TIMES AND BREAKS

[ABT, USBGF]

Fixed/rigid break schedule eliminated.

Each player is entitled to breaks between games, in general not to exceed 6 minutes per hour. Breaks during the first hour of any match should be limited to urgent need only.

Intent/Rationale: Establishes a more flexible break policy in which break time during a match by each player is in general expected to be less than 10% of the match time (6 minutes per hour), with the additional expectation that players will make every attempt to complete shorter matches or get started on longer matches without taking breaks. A rigid breaks schedule was not practical in reality and both directors and players believed that greater flexibility was needed. Restroom breaks are often needed more frequently for many players, but only 2-3 minutes are needed. Meanwhile, under a rigid schedule that limited breaks by quantity, players would simply take breaks and just not call them breaks, whether going to get a cup of water, fixing their camera or a quick phone call to confirm dinner plans. This rule provides the necessary flexibility by giving the player a time budget for break time, while also setting the expectation that in short matches, or at the beginning of long matches the players will make a best attempt to play through without taking breaks.

[ABT, USBGF] Grace period before first penalty point reduced to 10 minutes from 15.

Intent/Rationale: In general, a 15-minute grace time is unnecessarily large. For posted start times, players should simply leave for the tournament 5 minutes earlier if they are concerned about being late. For unposted start times, players should have a clear expectation set as to when they should return and be ready to play for their next match, or as noted elsewhere, to obtain Director permission or provide proper sign-out information if their next opponent's match has not yet finished and they wish to leave the playing area for longer than 10 minutes. As for delays, a delay is a delay whether it occurs at the beginning or in the middle of a match. A player delaying the match by arriving late and receiving a grace time before their first penalty point should not expect additional grace time when they delay the match again later on. The one grace time is their one warning to pay attention to time.

[ABT, USBGF] Matches with unposted start time shall have a start time 10 minutes after both preceding matches are done.

Intent/Rationale: Intended to set a clear expectation to players that their next match is not "whenever you get around to it", but rather that every match has an official start time and it is the player's responsibility to ensure they do not delay the tournament. Perhaps 10 minutes between matches might seem a bit short in some cases, but in this situation, the player actually has 20 minutes between matches before a penalty point is assessed, which is surely enough, and a director believing that more time is needed between long later rounds has a legal remedy – they can simply post different start time instructions on the draw sheet for a single match, an entire round, or everything past a particular round. The rule is meant only for the case where the director otherwise gives no instructions.

3.5 and throughout – PREFERENCES, CLOCKS

[ABT, USBGF] Default preferences and clock settings are clearly stated for relevant cases where prior rules were vague or silent. Most notably – use of two dice is preferred over four dice, even for untimed matches.

Intent/Rationale: The rules should not leave the settings and policy undefined if a director says nothing. Directors can be given the option to change the defaults, but there must be a default stated in case they say nothing. The explicit preference for the use of two dice over four dice arises out of the years of experience with clock play. Many disputes over the rolled number, illegal plays, fast rolling, etc. are avoided simply by having one set of dice. These advantages should be available to all matches, not just those played with a clock. Furthermore, the additional advantages of using a clock, if only for the purpose of ending turns should be available to all matches, even if the match is untimed (you are always sure who's turn it is by looking at the clock), so the Rule makes clear that non-expiring clocks are preferred for untimed matches. This may

encourage more players to obtain clocks and get used to their use. The 2/15 default for non-Open skill divisions reflects the need to give less skilled players more delay time to find each move. There is a reason why these skill divisions usually have shorter matches than Open – they play a bit slower. In Doubles, 3/15 was chosen as default over 2.5/18. This effectively moves the extra 3 seconds per move into the bank, but only a fixed number of them (10 units of 3 seconds are added to the reserve per point of match length). The intent here is that it is more important to cap the amount of time that the longest doubles matches can take rather. With 3/15, if a match runs longer and the players have used much of their reserve already, then must now speed things up rather than get 18 seconds forever. It has also been a persistent complaint having to either program clocks with fractions of minutes, or to have to specify a total reserve time for the entire match rather than the more generally understood minutes-per-point. 3/15 avoids those issues.

4.1.1-4 VALID ROLLS; DICE ON CHECKERS

[ABT, USBGF] Dropping dice into baffle box from hands permitted. Cups Preference over hands.

Intent/Rationale: With baffle boxes being designed for portability, some of them are small and using a cup can be difficult. Additionally, players have broadly ignored the cups-only rule when using baffle boxes. A rule change here is widely supported. However, any player uncomfortable with this may still insist on the use of cups.

[ABT, USBGF] Clarify handling of opening roll when using baffle box.

The opening roll with baffle boxes has been a source of confusion, and potential dispute if the second die rolled separately through the baffle box alters the first die. The two opening roll methods now allowed eliminate this problem, but would not technically have been legal in the absence of an explicit statement authorizing them.

[ABT] Dice landing on top of checkers are generally valid rolls

Allowing dice-on-checkers speeds up the game by allowing certain classes of rolls that were previously invalid to stand while having no ambiguity in determining validity. Aside from speeding play by reducing rerolls, this was in part motivated by the inherent disadvantage that the player rolling on the home board side has when playing with a clock due to the larger number of cocked dice they tend to incur. This disadvantage required mitigation. One method was to allow the reset of delay time when cocked dice occur. However, this actually slows the game. The other was to allow dice on top of checkers to be valid rolls. Substantial play-testing of dice-on-checkers has revealed no problems. This method has been used in the Middle East and Armenia for centuries, so while this may seem new and unproven in the West, it is neither new nor unproven. Due to the potential benefits to all backgammon events and not just clocked ones, dice-on-checkers was adopted.

[ABT/USBGF] Valid rolls – reformulated language to eliminate use of the word *flat* that has created confusion. (unchanged intent)

Once players were exposed to dice-on-checkers, confusion arose due to the requirement for “flat dice” in the traditional Valid Rolls rule due to contoured checkers, especially finger dips. To eliminate this confusion, the rule was recast to eliminate this word. Rather than focus on what makes a roll valid, the focus has shifted to what makes a roll invalid. The only new test that potentially invalidates a die on top of checkers that doesn’t apply to a die on the playing surface is whether the die is falling between the checkers – in other words, descending below the top surface of the checkers on which it rests. Note that the word “flat” has necessitated rulings in the past without dice-on-checkers, particularly in cases where one of the points is peeling up and a die lands straddling the playing surface and the slightly raised point – not flat as we normally understand it. The new Valid Rolls language eliminates that uncertainty as well.

4.1.7 PREMATURE ROLLS

[ABT, USBGF] Expands fast roll rule to include occurrences with one set of dice.

Intent/Rationale: It was realized that when once set of dice are in use, a player may still grab the dice before the turn has ended and roll them. There seems to be no good reason why the same penalty and deterrent should not apply here as well.

[ABT, USBGF] Makes explicit that player shall point out that their opponent has rolled prematurely on each occurrence.

Intent/Rationale: Intended to address the problem where a player may say nothing, effectively encouraging continuation of premature rolling, and then once a bad roll comes out prematurely, they insist that it stand. Since the rule goes on to state that the option to allow a premature roll to stand may be revoked, the explicit requirement to point them out sets up a clear justification for imposing that penalty – the penalized player repeatedly failed to comply with the explicit requirement in the rule. It had been reasonably argued that a right allowed by the rules can't simply be taken away if the player has not done anything against the rules.

4.1.8 END OF TURN

[ABT] A player who doesn't hit their clock when their opponent is closed out or has no legal moves is entitled to restoration of their lost delay time.

Intent/Rationale: Players are obligated to always hit the clock to end all turns and their opponent is also obligated to then hit their own clock in response, even if they have no possible move. Legal moves are also required. If the opponent considers that the player is making multiple moves while the clock runs, then the opponent is failing on their obligation to hit their clock between each move. Alternatively, if the opponent considers that the player has never completed their original turn, then they are playing illegally and the opponent is failing on their obligation to point out the illegal move when first noticed. Either way, the opponent is equally responsible for the situation as the player and should not benefit from the irregularity, and certainly should be given no incentive to allow the irregularity to continue. The question of exactly how lost time should be restored is a separate matter on which the rule is silent, but does cover nevertheless. In general, when the rules are silent on a matter, the players will simply work it out themselves. If there is a dispute, or simply uncertainty, then they should call the Director, who is authorized by the rules to consider the facts of the circumstance and to make a fair resolution. That is the intended approach for resolution here.

4.2 CHECKER HANDLING

[ABT, USBGF] Added moving of hit checker above original point as alternative to covering (this allows for handling of situations such as pick and pass).

Intent/Rationale: In general, in contrast to prior ABT rules, USBGF Rules state explicitly how players testing candidate plays should move checkers so as to minimize the risk of a dispute over restoring the original position or an illegal play. This includes instructing players not to move hit checkers to the bar while doing such testing. It was observed that placing the hitting checker on top of the hit checker was not possible for pick and pass plays. So, an alternative method for dealing with the hit checker has been added.

[ABT, USBGF] An explicitly hit checker that is not moved to the bar is an illegal move.

However, this raised the problem that a player who faithfully complies with this best practice in a pick and pass situation, but then forgets to move the hit checker to the bar when finalizing the move could be punished and not be able to move the checker to the bar if the play were otherwise legal. It is ambiguous in

the rules of backgammon whether this type of play is illegal or not. However, we wish to indemnify the player who is trying to do the right thing rather than discourage good behavior, and thus we state explicitly that this result is an illegal move; thus, it must be corrected.

4.2.3 LEGAL MOVES

[ABT] Illegal plays must be corrected. Opponent does not have the choice to let the illegal play stand.

Intent/Rationale: See INTRODUCTION.

4.2.4 ERRORS IN STARTING POSITION

[ABT, USBGF] Complete change to correction method: corrected by moving all misplaced checkers to the point from which they were missing at the start of the game (regardless of any effect on the game).

Intent/Rationale: The previous ABT rule was silent on how a correction was to be made. The previous USBGF rule was observed to have difficulties that could not be readily rectified. In particular, it relied on the answer to the murky question of whether the moves played were affected by the error in starting position. It potentially required the game to be replayed in some cases, but not in others. This was judged as being too likely to result in a dispute between the players, with the director, and probably due to the subjectivity, to result in an appeal by the player coming up on the short end. The new rule eliminates the uncertainty by always requiring correction, with all pieces that started the game in the wrong location being moved to their original starting position, regardless of any impact. It was felt that situations where this correction might have a big impact on the game are also situations in which the error should have been spotted sooner. While there are some scenarios where it may be less clear how the correction should be done, these scenarios are well defined and not subjective. These details are best left to the Ruling Guide.

[ABT, USBGF] Players may make later corrections by mutual agreement.

Intent/Rationale: Like with illegal moves, allowing a correction to take place after the notice period if both players agree harms nobody and is just common sense.

4.3 CLOCKS; EXPIRATION

[USBGF] When noticing an expired clock, the player does not lose the match on time if they can validly claim game and match at that moment (position is gin). (ABT rule discusses valid claim with regard to expiration, but is ambiguous on this exact situation)

Intent/Rationale: This arose from an actual tournament situation where a player had reached a gin position that would win the match, but it was then noticed that their clock was expired and the director was forced by the rules to award the match to the opponent. The general consensus was that this was unjust. The new rule clarifies that the clock is presumed to have expired at the moment that its expiration is noticed, and that if at that same moment, the position is gin and a match winner, the claim of the game and match prevails over the clock expiration. This rule is consistent with a similar rule in chess that if you have checkmated your opponent and your time expires before you hit the clock, the checkmate prevails.

4.4.3-5 CUBE ACTIONS

[ABT] Reaching for the cube is not by itself evidence of an intent to double.

Intent/Rationale: While the ABT rules do not explicitly say that reaching for the cube equals a double, it leaves this to the "ambiguous action" rule and thus many directors have established their own rule that reaching is acting in case of a dispute. In general, it is desirable that there be a clear, unambiguous, non-

subjective moment at which we can definitively say that a specific cube action has occurred and that prior to that moment the action has not occurred unless intent was clearly conveyed. That will avoid the most disputes since the players themselves can readily apply that test. For offering a double, that moment is when the cube is touched by the player considering a double. Some have argued that an unscrupulous player can attempt to get a read on their opponent by reaching without touching. This is true. However, an unscrupulous opponent can also take any movement or gesture by the player on roll remotely in the direction of the cube and claim that they have reached and therefore must double. So, leaving the rule subjective does not prevent abuse; in fact, it opens the door to more abuse and more disputes. Ultimately, a clear and definitive test is necessary. Players who learn the rule will learn to follow it. They will learn not to react to a reach for the cube just as they learn not to fast roll when a player reaches for the dice. Players who are abusive are still subject to unfavorable rulings or penalties by the director since the general rule regarding ambiguous or confusing actions remains at their disposal and places such players on notice.

It is important to acknowledge that the Rules could seemingly avoid all questions of ambiguous intent simply by requiring a clear, verbal statement to be made by the players acting on the cube. Unfortunately, such a requirement would be unenforceable. If a player said nothing and placed the cube onto the board, we'd still need to rule on what that meant. Does it mean nothing because they said nothing? Or does it mean something? And whatever it means should be as consistently interpreted as possible. Furthermore, with an international backgammon community, full command of the official tournament languages by all players cannot be assumed. Such players may be better advised to say nothing and rely on clear physical actions rather than to speak words for which they lack fluency.

[USBGF] Absent other evidence of intent, touching a cube awaiting a take/pass decision does not constitute a take (it means nothing).

Intent/Rationale: What does touching a cube awaiting a take/pass decision actually mean? In the absence of words or other clear signals of intent, it cannot mean anything because a player facing such a decision is already obligated to respond, and because both possible non-verbal responses require touching the cube. It is not the touching that matters, but what is done with the cube after that.

[ABT, USBGF] Absent other evidence of intent, a take or pass occurs when the cube is placed down outside the playing field.

Intent/Rationale: This introduces a clear, definitive, non-subjective test for identifying the moment when a take/pass action has happened when no other verbal or physical evidence of intent is present. Whether that action is a take or a pass will be clear based on whether the cube is placed down in the center or on the player's side of the board. As always, a player whose actions with regard to the cube are unclear places themselves at risk in the event of a dispute.

4.4.9 DEAD CUBES

[ABT] The dead cube test of whether the cube will end the game at the current level is applied specifically to the player who is on roll rather than to both players.

Intent/Rationale: Match play is not money play and it needs to work differently. This is basic validation. A player needing 1 point to win the match should be disallowed from doubling to 2 just as they are disallowed from moving their own checker to the bar.

[ABT, USBGF] Also disallows dropping a cube that would lose the match.

Intent/Rationale: The very idea that the rules of match play should allow it to be possible to lose (or win) a match because a cube was dropped, seems anathema to the spirit and purpose of the contest.

4.5 COMPLETION

[USBGF] Players may claim the game in a gin position.

Intent/Rationale: A player who refuses to concede in a “gin” position slows up the match and the tournament. There needs to be a provision for their opponent to claim the game in these situations, for the greater good. There is also the secondary argument from the Clock Expiration rule. It would be inconsistent to award the game to a player with a gin position in that situation, but not do so in general.

4.8 INCORRECT MATCH LENGTH

[ABT] The result of a match played to the wrong match length will count if completed after finishing any game in progress at the time the error is noticed.

Intent/Rationale: The prior ABT rule was that the first player to reach the posted match length was the winner in all cases. While this rule is clear, general sentiment is that it was too rigid and harsh. Of course, players are not allowed to agree to play to different match lengths, so the real issue is when the situation occurs by honest mistake. It seems horribly wrong to almost everyone that if both players have accidentally played the entire match to agreed but incorrect conditions, shaken hands and report the winner, for the director to be obligated to potentially reverse the match result if it is revealed that they played to the wrong score. There was wide agreement that this needed to be corrected. The question remained about what happens if the error is discovered while the match was still in progress. Obviously, a tournament has a schedule to keep and cannot in general allow matches to continue longer than planned. But it did seem reasonable to allow the current game to be finished and if it decides the match, then to recognize that result, even if to the wrong length.

5. DISPUTES; APPEALS

[ABT, USBGF] Remove constraint on size of appeals committee.

Intent/Rationale: The most common appeals committee size has typically been 3 players, which was allowed under previous rules. Under this current rule, the Director faces the lowest likelihood of having their ruling overturned by an appeals committee of size 3. Therefore, if the Director wishes to convene a larger or smaller committee, we must assume that it is for a good reason, rather than due to any conflict of interest. There are competing concerns between the difficulty of finding available and qualified players, and the increased likelihood that the correct decision will emerge with more qualified voices available. Given these factors, there did not seem to be any valid reason for requiring the committee to be a specific size.

[ABT, USBGF] Director has the option to cast a vote after committee has voted. Absolute majority of votes cast needed to overrule.

Intent/Rationale: To be clear, the rule states the independence of the committee; it does not intend for the Director to participate in the discussions or deliberations of the committee. The Director of course must explain the situation and all known information to the committee and answer any questions they may have, but does not otherwise participate in the independent work of the committee, nor their voting process. The Director need not be told how anyone on the committee has voted, only the final tally. The Director may then add another vote to that tally to decide the outcome. Why was this new method chosen? To start, the goal of due process and the right to an appeal is to maximize the chance that the final decision is the correct one, not to give a player the best chance of reversing a decision that is not in their favor. The more qualified opinions that are considered, the more likely it is that the correct decision will emerge. Every ruling by a Director is eligible for appeal (there do not need to be grounds for appeal), so if the Director’s opinion is unconditionally set aside in the final decision, what voice does the Director actually have when a player

simply appeals everything? If the Committee is divided 2-1, then with the director's original opinion we actually have a 2-2 split in opinion. That does not seem sufficient to reverse the original ruling. To give deference to the Director's opinion, some other rule sets including previous ABT rules have required a super-majority on the appeals committee rather than an absolute majority; a 3-member committee must vote 3-0 to overrule rather than 2-1. That is a reasonable solution. However, that solution is, perhaps surprisingly, taking discretion away from directors. Some directors might prefer to simply defer to the committee, even for close decisions. Some directors might have been unsure of their original ruling, yet they were required to make one. Some directors may, upon hearing additional reasoning come to believe that their original ruling may have been incorrect. Giving the Director the option to vote when we could instead simply require the equivalent super-majority on the Committee without further involvement from the Director is not, then, actually giving them a vote – it is actually giving the Director the option NOT to vote and thus remove their original decision from the equation. Directors are thereby given more discretion to allow their original ruling to be reversed if in their judgment, that is the right thing to do. It does so without placing a Director in the awkward position of having to reverse their own ruling. This rule best serves its intent – to get the decision right.