To progress from beginner to intermediate to champion, you have to master the basics of the game. They may seem complex, but are as easy as one, two, three.

By that I mean that there are three basic tasks which you should always be looking to execute. They are: (1) Can I make a new point? (2) Can I hit one or more of my opponent's checkers? (3) Can I escape one or more of my back checkers?

Let's analyze each of these tasks.

**Making a New Point**

The first task of checker play is, “Can I make a new point?” For those of you who are absolutely new to the game, a point is formed by putting two of your checkers on the same triangle. Interestingly, the space occupied by that triangle is also called a point, but that's beside the point.

There are many reasons to make points and I’ll go over a few of them now.
(1) If you make a point in your home board it can block your opponent's forward progress. Additionally, a home-board point can prohibit entry of an enemy checker from the bar.

**Position 1 – Black has played 42: 8/4, 6/4**

Pip: 167
White
Unlimited Games

(2) Points outside your home board can block your opponent's forward progress, but can't keep him from entering from the bar.

**Position 2 – Black has played 61: 13/7, 8/7**

Pip: 167
White
Unlimited Games

Unlimited Games
Black
Pip: 161

Unlimited Games
Black
Pip: 160
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(3) If you assemble enough points in a row you can severely restrict your opponent's forward progress; and if you build a wall or "prime" of six points in a row, he can't escape at all until later in the game when you elect, or are forced, to disassemble that prime.

Position 3 – Black has a "prime"

(4) Points can also be used as landing spots for you to safely move your checkers from one quadrant of the board to another.

Position 4 – Black on roll to play 64
(5) Finally, points made in your opponent’s home board are “anchors”: defensive bastions that impede your opponent as he tries to come home. These anchors can also serve as landing spots for bringing checkers back into battle.

**Position 5 – Black on roll to play 54**

**Pip: 120**
**White**
**Unlimited Games**

**Unlimited Games**
**Black**
**Pip: 129**

1. **XG Roller+**  **Bar/20  24/20**
   
   **Player:**  54.21%  (G:8.94%  B:0.24%)
   **Opponent:**  45.79%  (G:6.87%  B:0.13%)
   
   **eq:**  +0.151

2. **XG Roller+**  **Bar/16**
   
   **Player:**  40.88%  (G:9.20%  B:0.34%)
   **Opponent:**  59.12%  (G:23.69%  B:0.53%)
   
   **eq:**  -0.439  (-0.590)

**YOUngest Member!**

At age 5, Joey Nelson, grandson of Chicago’s Lucky Nelson, became the youngest member of the U.S. Backgammon Federation in 2015.
Backgammon is as Easy as 1-2-3

Hitting Your Opponent’s Checkers

The second basic task of checker play is, since backgammon is, like Parcheesi or Sorry!, fundamentally a racing game, you gain ground in the race by sending your opponent’s checkers back to the bar. That, for a checker, is like a player being sent to the penalty box in hockey: he cannot come back to play in the game until the penalty is over.

Here are some reasons why hitting your opponent’s checker(s) can be beneficial.

Since backgammon is, like Parcheesi or Sorry!, fundamentally a racing game, you gain ground in the race by sending your opponent’s checkers back to the bar. That, for a checker, is like a player being sent to the penalty box in hockey: he cannot come back to play in the game until the penalty is over.

Position 6 – Black on roll to play 31

The substance of that penalty is that your opponent cannot play until he rolls a number that corresponds with a point in your home board not occupied by two or more of your checkers.

The ultimate penalty occurs when you have a closed board and you hit one of your opponent’s checkers. In that case, he can’t enter until you elect to, or are forced to, break your home board.
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Position 7 – Black on roll to play 62

Usually you will not have a closed board, but the more points you have in your board, the more difficult it will be for your opponent to bring checkers in from the bar and back into the battle.

A second reason for hitting your opponent’s checkers is that they cannot then be used to make points, primes, and closed boards to block you!

Position 8 – Black on roll to play 62
A third reason for hitting is to take half of the opponent’s roll away. Once you hit him, he will be unable to make new points in his home board unless he happens to come in from the bar with a double.

Escaping Your Back Checkers
The third task of basic checker play is to escape your back checkers.

The reason this is important is that you can’t win the game until you bear off all of your pieces, and you cannot do that until you get all of your checkers home. You should usually try to complete this task early in the game before your opponent can “prime you in.”

If one or more of your checkers is trapped behind a prime and you don’t have a prime of your own to trap your opponent’s checkers, then you are likely to lose the game.
Weighing Choices

These three basic checker-play goals are each important; but none of them is more important than any other outside of a specific context.

One useful rule of thumb is that if you have a play that does more than one of these tasks at the same time as opposed to a play that does only one, there is a reasonable chance that the double-barreled play will be preferable.

In Position 10 Black has a 1 and a 3 to play. He can hit White’s checker on the 20 point or he can make his own five point. Both moves have benefits for Black, but making his own five point accomplishes two tasks (hitting and making a new point) whereas hitting on the 20 point only accomplishes one.

Position 10 – Black on roll to play 31

1. Book 1 8/5* 6/5
   Player: 56.01% (G:18.79% B:0.99%)
   Opponent: 43.99% (G:11.29% B:0.57%)
   Conf.: ± 0.010 (+0.278...+0.298) - [100.0%]

2. Book 1 24/20*
   Player: 52.02% (G:13.94% B:0.64%)
   Opponent: 47.98% (G:11.46% B:0.44%)
   Conf.: ± 0.008 (+0.091...+0.107) - [0.0%]
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In Position 11, let’s take a look at two of Black’s choices. He can either hit and escape (accomplishing two tasks), or he can make his own five point (accomplishing only one task). In this case, it’s right to hit and escape rather than to make a good point in your home board because you not only send your opponent back in the race, but you hamper his efforts to block you in his home board.

Position 11 – Black on roll to play 65

A third example of accomplishing two tasks versus one arises when you can escape and make a new point, as opposed to simply making a new point. An example is Position 12 below, which hits as well.

Position 12 – Black on roll to play 64
Some of the best possible rolls are ones in which all three tasks are accomplished in one move. Usually this occurs when you roll a double, as then you can move four different checkers in one play. In Position 13, Black rolls a 5-5: a fantastic roll, but how do we play it?

One choice is to close your board by making your three and one points; but then you still have to escape your back checker in order to win the game.

A better option is to run from the 23 point to the 13 point and make your own ace point. This play accomplishes all three tasks at the same time. And while it isn’t always correct to achieve those three tasks, a play that does so should certainly be on the top of your list of candidate moves.

**Position 13 – Black on roll to play 55**

![Backgammon board with positions 13 and 55 highlighted](image)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Move</th>
<th>Player</th>
<th>Opponent</th>
<th>Score</th>
<th>Pip</th>
<th>Win Percentage</th>
<th>Win Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1.</td>
<td>XG Roller+</td>
<td>23/13 6/1*(2)</td>
<td>eq: +0.893</td>
<td>Pip: 116</td>
<td>85.40% (G:24.41% B:0.07%)</td>
<td>14.60% (G:0.75% B:0.02%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.</td>
<td>XG Roller+</td>
<td>23/18 8/3(2) 6/1*</td>
<td>eq: +0.693 (-0.200)</td>
<td>Pip: 116</td>
<td>75.09% (G:35.72% B:0.17%)</td>
<td>24.91% (G:7.76% B:0.37%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.</td>
<td>XG Roller+</td>
<td>8/3(2) 6/1*(2)</td>
<td>eq: +0.660 (-0.233)</td>
<td>Pip: 116</td>
<td>73.31% (G:31.51% B:0.04%)</td>
<td>26.69% (G:2.19% B:0.06%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Unlimited Games
Black Pip: 98

Backgammon is as Easy as 1-2-3
That being said, there are times when it is incorrect to accomplish two tasks when one will do just fine. An example is Position 14 below.

**Position 14 – Black on roll to play 53**

You can accomplish two tasks by making your ace-point (hitting and making a new point), but it is a little better to simply make your five point.

Why? The reason is that the theory of tasks has to take into account not only the quantity of tasks you can accomplish but their quality as well.

In this example, you are better off making the five point because it starts a prime. By hitting and making your ace point, you do make a new point and put your opponent on the bar, but you have created a huge gap in your board and will be hard pressed to contain him.
Preparing for Next Time

This brings us to the last theme of this article. What if you can’t accomplish any of the three basic tasks? In that case, you must improvise — by which I mean you should prepare to accomplish one of the tasks.

For example: if you can’t make a new point, mobilize builders to try to make a new point on your next roll. Position 15 (below) is an example of this theme.

Position 15 – Black on roll to play 43

Black can’t hit, make a new point, or escape, but he can bring builders down from his midpoint to make a new point on the next roll. There is risk involved (those builders are blots which can be hit), but at least Black is preparing to fulfill one of his key tasks.
In Position 16, Black can't accomplish any of the three basic tasks, but he can prepare to accomplish one (escaping) by moving his back checker up.

Position 16 – Black on roll to play 21

To summarize: we have examined a number of examples where you should attempt to accomplish at least one of the three basic tasks of backgammon checker play: to hit; to make a new point; or to escape a back checker.

This doesn't address the difficult question of which one of these three you should choose if you can do only one. That is beyond the scope of this article.

I hope that this introduction to the basic concepts of checker play will add to your enjoyment of the game and improve your winning chances.

Until next time, play well and have fun.

- STEVE SAX

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**About Steve**

Steve Sax is the #9 rated Giant of Backgammon, and three-time winner of Gammon Associates ABT tournaments. He is a prolific author and master photographer. In 2002, he was the ABT Player of the Year. He was a finalist in the Dual-Duel event at the 4th Texas Backgammon Championships in February 2016 and the score-based winner.
Glossary of Terms

*: The asterisk represents the fact that one player is hitting the other player's checker. This is displayed at selected diagrams in the rollout data graphic beneath positions. For example, in Position 10 the correct move is (8-5*, 6-5). That means one Black checker was moved from the eight point to the five point with the 3, hitting White and sending that checker to the bar. And also one checker was moved from the six point to the five point with the 1.

**Advanced Anchor:** A point in your opponent's home board that is close to your opponent's outfield. Usually this would be the 20 or 21 point (your opponent's 5 or 4 point).

**Anchor:** Any point you hold in your opponent's home board.

**Bar:** The strip that bisects the board where checkers are sent after they have been hit. All of a player's checkers on the bar must be brought into play before that player can move any other of his own checkers.

**Blitz:** An effort to close all the points of your home board while trapping one or more of your opponent's checkers on the bar.

**Checker:** One of the fifteen disks which you must navigate around the board.

**Gap:** Any space in between points you have in a prime. Generally, the larger the gap, the harder it is to contain your opponent's checkers.

**Home Board:** The six points closest to your bear-off tray. Your goal is to get all fifteen of your checkers into your home board and then take them off the board into that tray.

**Point:** Any two (or more) checkers of the same color on the same triangle. Your opponent may jump over your point, but not land on top of it. A point is also one of the 24 triangles on the board which you must land your checkers on as you advance them around the board.

**Prime:** Any number of consecutive points assembled for the purpose of blocking your opponent in. The longer the prime, the more difficult it is for your opponent to escape. If you have six or more points in a row (a six-prime), your opponent can't escape until you break that prime.

**Quadrant:** One of four sections of six points on the board. They include your home board, your outfield, your opponent's outfield, and your opponent's home board.