

*How to play*

# BACKGAMMON

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PaRRagon

Bath • New York • Singapore • Hong Kong • Cologne • Delhi  
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# Backgammon History

Backgammon is one of the oldest games in existence alongside Go and Chess. It is probably about 5,000 years old and originated in what is known today as Iraq.

The board with its 24 points has been around for a long time but the game has not always been called backgammon. In Roman times it was known as 'tables'.

No one knows for sure where the name came from — the word backgammon first appeared in print in 1645 — but most likely it comes from the Middle English 'baec' meaning 'back' and 'gamen' meaning 'game'.

The game flourished throughout the last three centuries of the second millennium but it had constant battles with the clergy and the authorities who wanted to ban it because of the gambling element. It became so popular during the Crusades that soldiers below a certain rank were banned from playing. It is mentioned in early literature, both in Chaucer's *Canterbury*

*Tales* and by Shakespeare in *Love's Labour's Lost*.

Its popularity continued through the 19th century, but it wasn't until the introduction of doubling that backgammon really took off. By the 1920s it was losing its appeal in the fast-paced society of the day because each game took too long and it was difficult to wager large amounts of money. Then in the mid-1920s an unknown genius in Paris introduced the concept of doubling. At a stroke it solved the problems of the day and introduced a whole new level of skill that wasn't immediately understood at the time, and indeed is still not fully understood today.

The game flourished in the US and Europe until the Wall Street Crash of

1929 removed the availability of ready cash and the dice cups fell silent. For the next 35 years the game entered a fallow period.

It was revived in the mid-1960s when Prince Alexis Obolensky, exiled from Russia, created the international backgammon tournament circuit that still flourishes around the world to this day and culminates with the World Championship, held in Monte Carlo every July.

In the 1980s and early 1990s, a group of strong players, including US experts Paul Magriel and Bill Robertie, worked hard to gain a better understanding of the game. Books began to appear on backgammon theory but progress was relatively slow.

The real advances in theory and playing practice came from 1990 onwards when computers began to have an increasing influence, particularly with the introduction of neural network technology. After pioneering work by IBM, commercial programs began to appear and today 'Extreme Gammon' is the strongest backgammon-playing computer program in the world.



A backgammon set including a board, two sets of 15 pieces, two pairs of dice and a doubling cube.

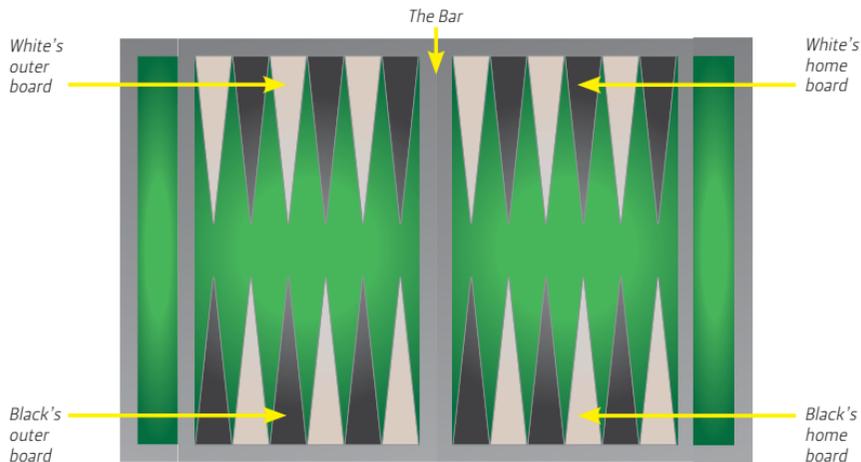
# The Equipment

Learning the rules of backgammon may be difficult at first, but it is actually simple to understand and play. So, to begin, what do you need to play backgammon? Just four things.

## Backgammon Board

Backgammon is played on a board consisting of 24 narrow triangles called 'points'. The triangles alternate

in colour and are grouped into four quadrants of six triangles each. The quadrants are referred to as the player's home board and outer board



and the opponent's home board and outer board. The home and outer boards are separated from each other by a ridge down the centre of the board called 'the bar'.

Backgammon boards come in many different sizes, colours and styles and you can spend as little or as much as you like. The world's most expensive board (made of gold and inlaid with 60,000 tiny diamonds) was recently on sale for £2 million.

## Men (Checkers)

Generally referred to as 'men' in the UK but called 'checkers' in the US, these are 30 round stones, 15 each of two different colours.

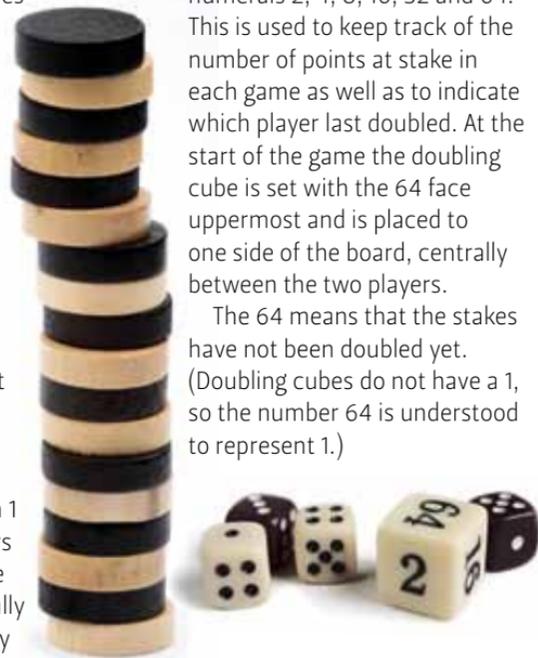
## Dice

Six-sided dice, numbered from 1 to 6. For convenience, two pairs of dice of different colours, one pair for each player, are generally used. Precision dice (commonly

used in casinos), specially machined for fair rolls, are often used in major tournaments.

## Doubling Cube

A six-sided die, marked with the numerals 2, 4, 8, 16, 32 and 64. This is used to keep track of the number of points at stake in each game as well as to indicate which player last doubled. At the start of the game the doubling cube is set with the 64 face uppermost and is placed to one side of the board, centrally between the two players. The 64 means that the stakes have not been doubled yet. (Doubling cubes do not have a 1, so the number 64 is understood to represent 1.)



# Starting and Objective

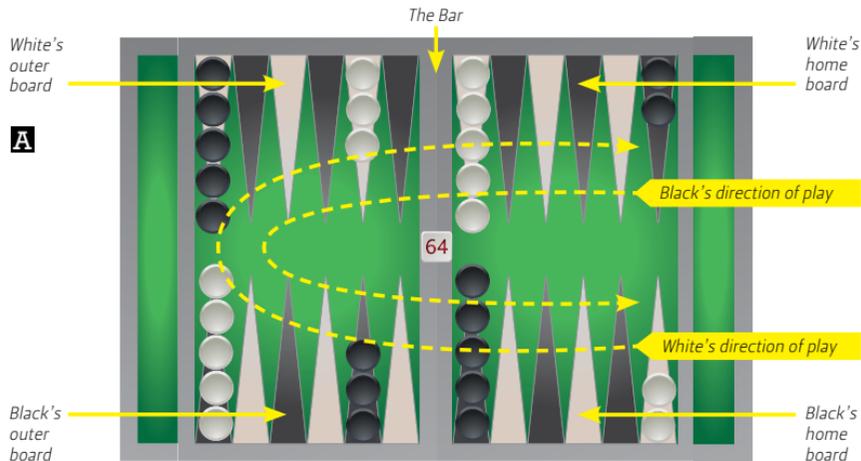
So now we have our board, men and dice, how do we set up the board at the start of the game?

## Starting Position

The 30 men are placed on the board as shown in the diagram below, **A**, and the doubling cube is placed in the centre of the board midway between the two players (it is often placed

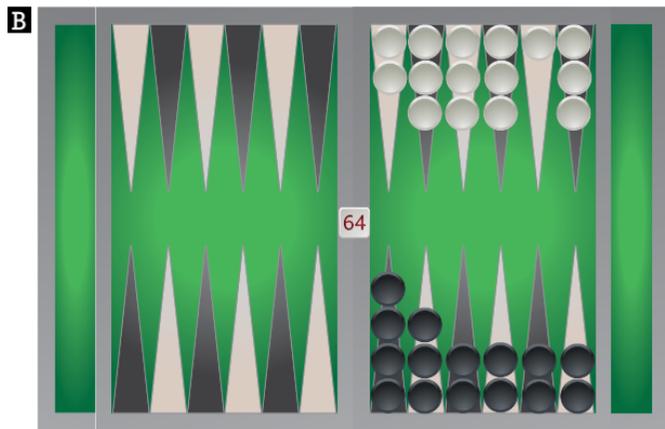
to one side of the board). The home and outer boards that were discussed previously are shown in the diagram as is 'the bar' — the ridge down the centre of the board.

Throughout this book the two



players will be known as 'Black' and 'White' based upon the colour of the men they are moving.

Notice that one player moves his pieces clockwise and the other anticlockwise, one player's home board is on his right and for the other player it is on his left.



## The Objective of the Game

The objective for each player is to move his men around the board, the moves being governed by the roll of his two dice, until all fifteen of his men are in his home board. Once he has all his men in his home board he can then start to take them off the board. Once again the dice govern his choice of moves.

The diagram above, **B**, shows both players with all their men in their

respective home boards and ready to start taking men off the board.

The first player to take off all fifteen men wins the game.

Sounds simple doesn't it? However, if it was the game would not have survived for 5,000 years. As the two armies of men move around the board they come into contact with each other and, as we shall see later, skirmishes can, and do, occur, meaning games can become long and complicated.

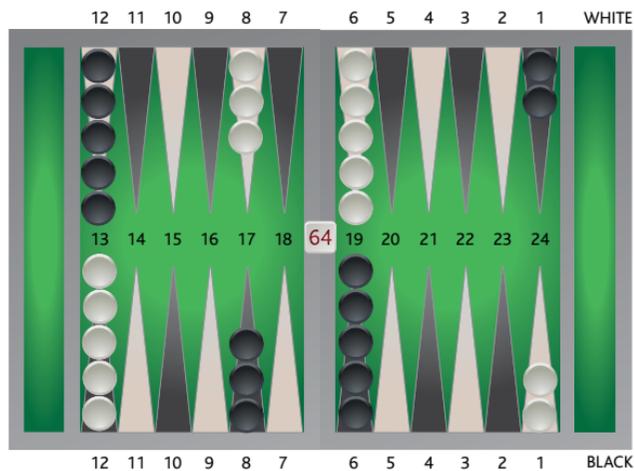
# Notation

We are nearly ready to start moving the men around the board but first we need a method of notation to describe the movement of the men.

For many years there was no agreed notation but that problem was solved about 30 years ago, and there is now a universally agreed notation.

Dice rolls are shown as simply two numbers next to each other. If, for example, the two dice show a 6 and a 4 this is represented as 64. If a player rolls a double then the same method is used, for example, double 2 is shown as 22.

In our starting position you will see that the points (abbreviated to 'pt') on the board are numbered (this only happens in diagrams, backgammon

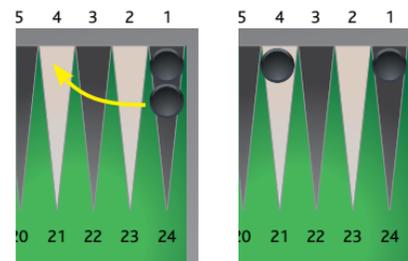


boards do not have numbers on the points) from 1 to 24, no matter which side of the board you are looking from.

For each player the numbers on his side of the board refer to his home and outer boards, and the numbers in the centre of the board refer to his opponent's home and outer boards. In this start position both players have two men on their 24-pt, five men on their 13-pt, three men on their 8-pt and five men on their 6-pt. As a reminder your home board has the points numbered 1 to 6. The direction of play runs from 24 down to each player's home board.

When men move from one point to another we give the start and end points of the move so, for example, 24/21 describes one man moving from the 24-pt to the 21-pt. Sometimes the men move in pairs and thus 24/21(2) describes two men moving together from the 24-pt to the 21-pt.

This simple system of notation covers the vast majority of moves. There are a couple of things to add:



The diagrams above show a section of the board and a man moving from point 24 to 21 as a result of a dice throw. This would be abbreviated to 24/21 in the notation style.

- We will see later that a man can be sent to the bar and it then has to re-enter the board from the bar into the opponent's home board. As an example, consider bar/21. This move describes a man starting on the bar and landing on the 21-pt.
- When we bear men off the board the destination is shown as 'off'. Thus, 5/off describes a man being taken off the board from the 5-pt in the home board. Once a man has been taken off the board in backgammon it can never come back on again.

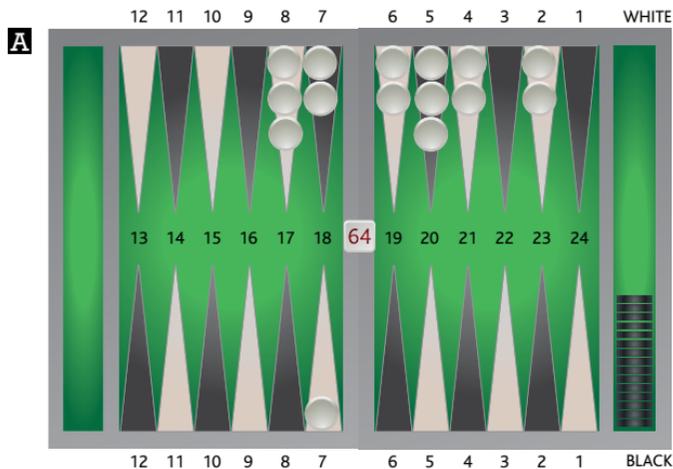
# Gammons and Backgammons

When one player takes all his men off the board he wins the game and he wins one unit of whatever stake has been agreed. (Backgammon is often played for a stake, however small, as it adds to the excitement of the game.)

The above statement is true provided his opponent has also taken some of his men off the board. What about the

case where the opponent hasn't taken off a single man? Does he suffer any extra penalty for being so tardy? Yes he does!

Black has taken off all his men in diagram **A** — you can see them in the tray at the right-hand side of the board — but White still has all fifteen of his men on the board. In this situation Black has won what is known as a 'gammon' and



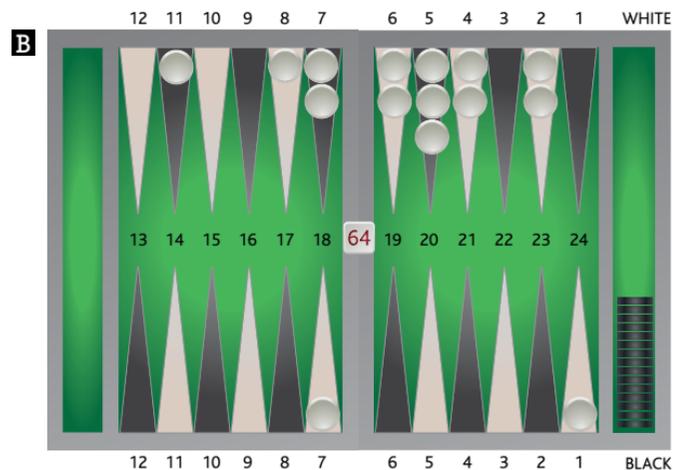
he wins twice the nominal stake so if, for example, the stake per game is £1 then he will be awarded £2 for winning a gammon.

Can it get any worse for the loser? Sadly, yes.

Consider the end to a game shown right, **B**.

Once again Black has taken off all his men but this time White still has a man in Black's home board. In this circumstance, and also if White still happened to have a man on the bar (and yes that can happen), then Black has won the ultimate prize; a 'backgammon'.

For this he is awarded three times the nominal stake. Extending our game situation example above, that would now be £3.



How often do gammons and backgammons happen? As a very rough guide one in every five games (20 per cent) ends in a gammon and one in every hundred games (1 per cent) finishes in a backgammon.

When the game is played for high stakes gammons and backgammons can be expensive, especially when we add in the doubling cube as we will see later.

# The First Move

So how do we start the game? Each player rolls one die and whoever gets the higher number wins the honour of playing first.

If both players roll the same number, then they roll again until the two dice show different numbers.

When rolling the dice each player rolls on his right-hand side of the board. The dice must come to rest flat and within the confines of the board.

However, if:

- Either die lands outside the board or
- Either die lands at an angle or
- Either die lands on top of one of the men.

Then this is known as ‘cocked dice’ and both dice must re-rolled.

The player who wins the opening has to use the numbers on his die and that of his opponent. Some people play that if you don’t like the numbers you have,

**FACT:** if both players roll the same number then, provided both players agree, the stakes are doubled — this is known as an ‘automatic’ double. In the 1970s, players used to play unlimited automatics but nowadays only one ‘automatic’ is allowed.

then you can re-roll but that is not the case — you must take the numbers as shown on the two dice.

So let’s say that Black rolled a ‘5’ and White rolled a ‘3’. Black then has to use these two numbers to make his move. We represent this by including the dice in our diagram **A**.

The rules for moving this 53 are quite simple: the player can move one of his men five points (also known as

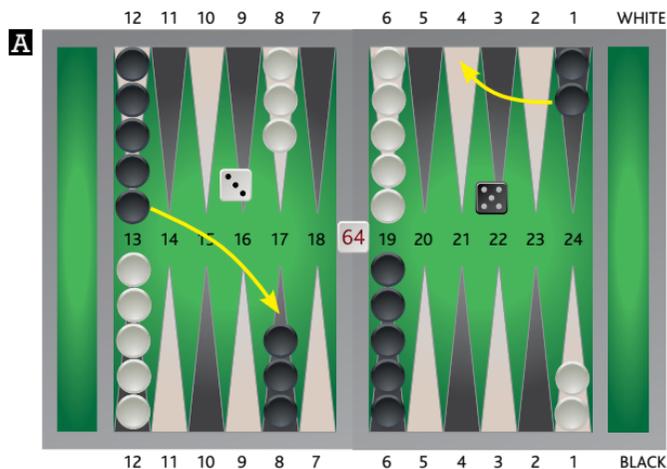
‘pips’) along the board and one of his men (or the same man again) three points PROVIDED that his opponent doesn’t ‘own’ the point he wants to move to. He can play the numbers in either order.

A player ‘owns’ a point if he has two or more men on it. So in the starting diagram both players own their 24-pt, their 13-pt, their 8-pt and their 6-pt.

So in our diagram below, Black can’t

play 24/19 with his 5 because White ‘owns’ Black’s 19-pt.

However, he can move 24/21 with the 3 because the 21-pt is free. He could then move the same man again by moving 21/16 with the 5 or he could move a completely different man with the 5. For example, he could move one man from his 13-pt to his 8-pt and then there would be four black men on the 8-pt.



Here we show two of the numerous possible moves available to Black resulting from a dice throw of 5 and 3, represented as 53. These moves would be abbreviated to 24/21 and 13/8 following the notation style.

# Making Points

To recap: you cannot land on a point where your opponent has two or more men already there. Having two or more men on a single point is known as 'owning' a point.

Although Black could make either of the moves we looked at in the last chapter, he actually has a much better move that he can make with his opening roll of 53.

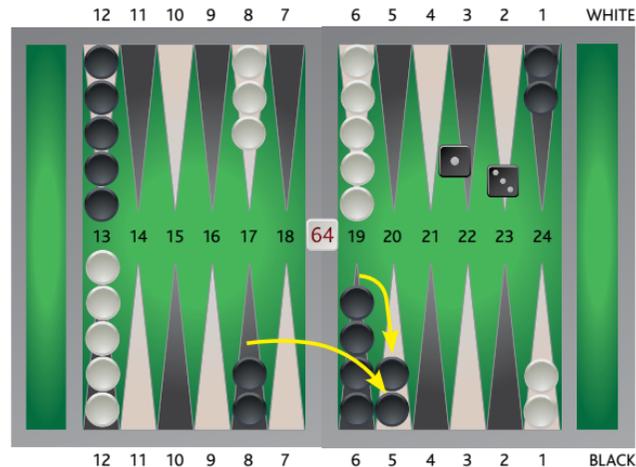
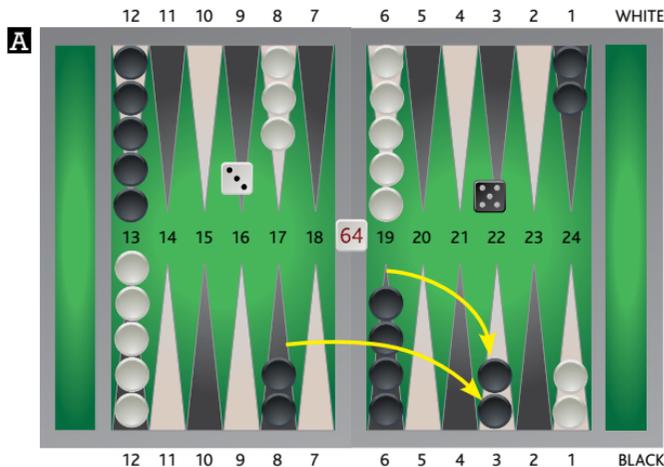
That play is 8/3, 6/3, and the result of that move is shown below in **A**.

Why is that a better play?

The answer is that Black has made a

new point; in this case, his 3-pt. Points are good because they provide safe landing places for a player's men as they move around the board.

REMEMBER: If you have two or more men on a point, you 'own' it and your opponent can't land there.



*QUESTION: Which new point can you make with an opening roll of 31?  
ANSWER: You should play 8/5, 6/5 leaving the position shown right. In fact, 31 is the best of all the possible opening rolls because it makes the most important new point you can make in your home board — your 5-pt.*

In general, making new points is a good idea because it helps you, and hinders your opponent, both at the same time.

At the start of the game there are five men on each of the 13-pt and the 6-pt. We have seen that we only need to have two men on a point to own it and so those stacks of men are inefficient. Ideally, we want to use those spare men to make new points.

In fact, there are three things we try to do during the first few moves of a game:

- Make new points.
- Unstack the 13-pt and 6-pt.
- Get the rear men (the two on our 24-pt) moving, as they have the furthest distance to travel to reach the home board.

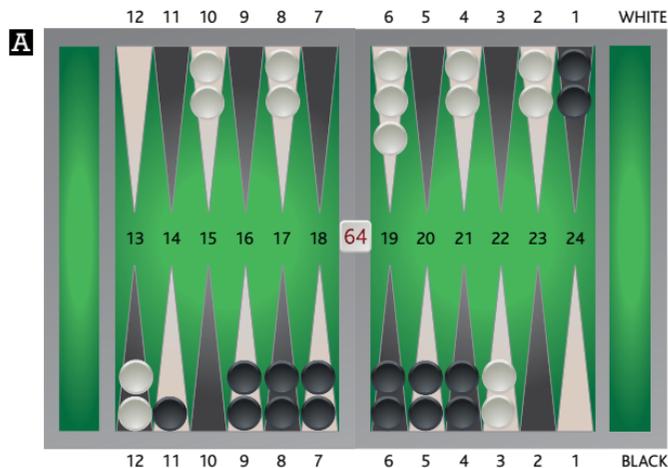
We'll look at this in more detail later.

# Points Make Primes

Making one new point is good. Making lots of points in a row is very good. Why is that? Let's use another example to explain.

In the diagram below, **A**, first look at Black's side of the board. White has two men on Black's 3-pt but no matter what number he rolls on the dice he cannot move them because Black

owns all six points that White would like to move to. Until Black moves some of those men, White will have to stay where he is. This gives Black a huge advantage.

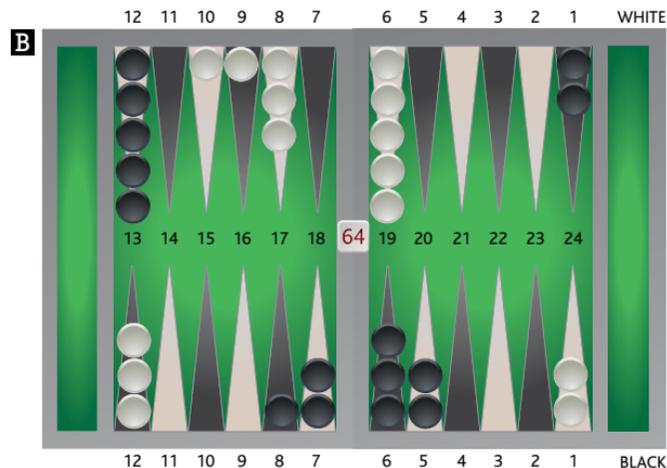


*Primes are only useful if you have enemy men trapped behind them. In the diagram, left, if the two White men on Black's 3-pt were on Black's 10-pt, then the prime would be pretty but ineffective as the White men would be on the wrong side of the prime!*

Backgammon Master Kent Goulding coined the phrase 'four is more than you think', meaning that even four-point primes can significantly influence the outcome of a game.

When a player has a number of points in a row it is called a 'prime'.

Building a prime often starts at a very early stage in a game.



Below, **B**, is a position that shows the very early stages of a game. The game is only two moves old but Black already has a three-point prime (his 5-, 6- and 7-points). If he can cover the single man on his 8-pt on his next turn, he will already have a four-point prime — a very powerful early advantage.

Always be on the lookout to see if you can make a prime, even a small one, and position your spare men so that you increase your chances of making points in a prime on subsequent rolls.

Many games are won by the player who manages to build a prime and trap some of his opponent's men behind it.

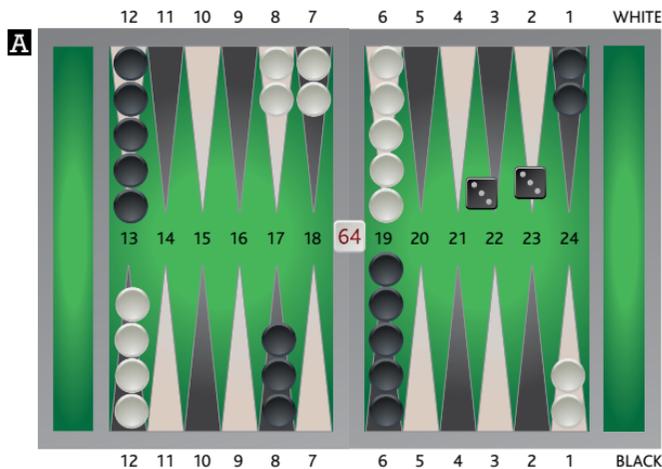
## Rolling a Double

Somewhere in the lost history of the game some enterprising fellow decided to spice up the game a bit. He did this by changing the rules about what happens when you roll a double.

Let's say you roll double 3 (both dice show a 3). Instead of moving just two 3s, you get to move four 3s! This is true of any double – you get 4 moves of the

number displayed. Let's look at this in practice **A**.

White has started the game by making a new point – his 7-pt (also known as his 'bar-point'). Black has rolled double 3 in reply. He has four 3s to play. He has a lot of choices but in the opening, and actually much of the time, you tend to move men in pairs when you roll a double. Why? Because you move safely from one point to



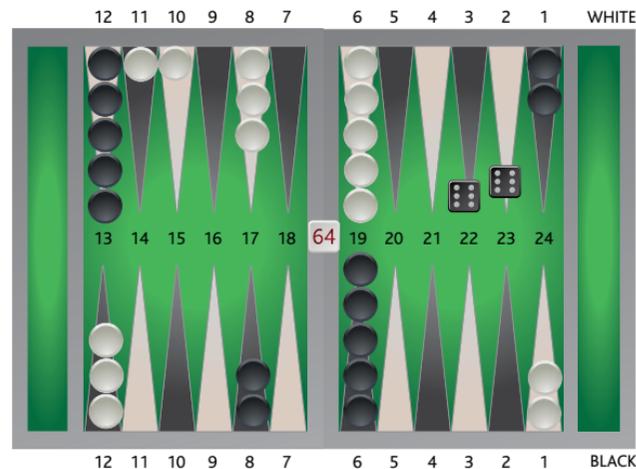
another and you will still 'own' a point after the men have moved.

With this double 3, Black could play 24/21(2) (remember this is how we show men moving in pairs) with the first two 3s and then either 8/5(2) or 13/10(2) with the other two.

Alternatively, he could move 13/10(2) and then continue those men on their journey with 10/7(2). This move would be written down as 13/7(2).

**Tip:** In the opening it is normally best to achieve two good things with a double, rather than one. In this case 24/21(2), 13/10(2) is a better move than 13/7(2).

While it is common to move men in pairs with a double, it is perfectly legal to move one man four times if you decide that is the best play.



*QUESTION: The game is only one move old and Black has rolled a double 6, often the best roll in backgammon. Take a couple of minutes to decide how you would play it.*

*ANSWER: The best option is 24/18(2), 13/7(2).*

*When you roll a double it is always worth taking a little more time to think than usual. After all you have more moves to make, so why not take a bit longer.*

# Hitting and Entering

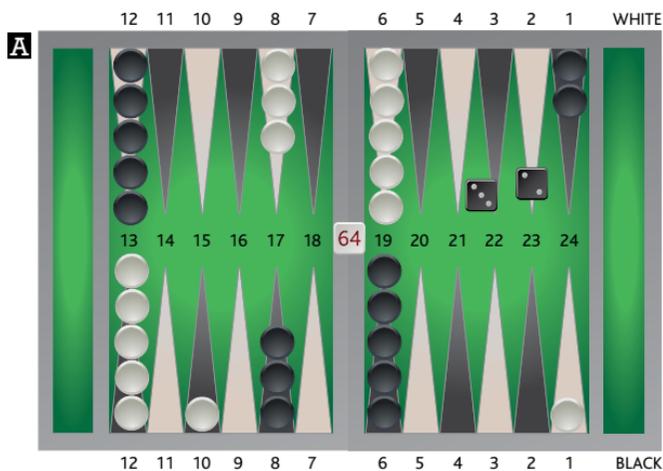
**H**itting and entering are two fundamental backgammon concepts that every beginner in backgammon should understand to move forward in their game.

A single man is known as a 'blot'. If you land on the point where the blot is, you are said to have 'hit' it and it leaves the board and is placed on the bar.

A player cannot move any of his men until all his men from the bar are back on the board. This is one of the more important backgammon rules.

So far we have moved our men safely around the board by making points, but the dice don't always

cooperate and you can't always make new points. Sometimes the men have to travel alone, as seen in this example starting from diagram **A**.



This is another early game position. White won the opening roll and has played his roll of 63 by moving 24/18/15.

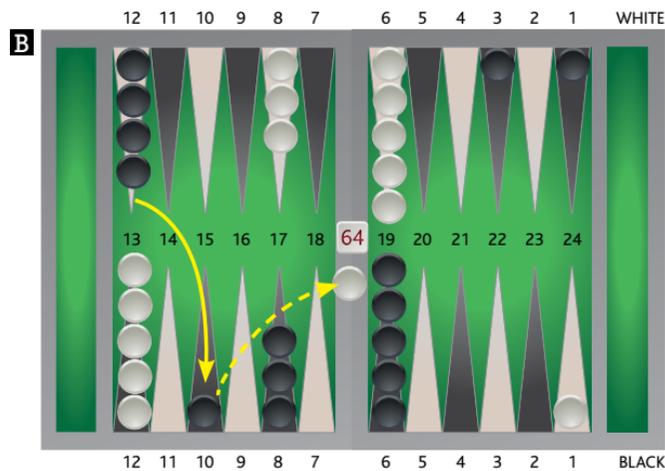
White has two single men, or blots — one on his 15-pt and one on his 24-pt.

Black now has a roll of 32 to play. He could advance both his rear men with a move such as 24/21, 24/22 but he has a much better play with the 3. He can 'hit' White's man on his 10-pt.

This is shown in the notation as 13/10\*, where the asterisk denotes that a blot has been hit.

What happens to the blot? Sadly for White, it must go back to the beginning. The hit blot is placed on the bar in the centre of the board as shown in the diagram below, **B**.

The next page shows how to get the man back into the game, known as 'entering'.



*White's hit man languishes on the bar. His priority now is to get it back into the game.*

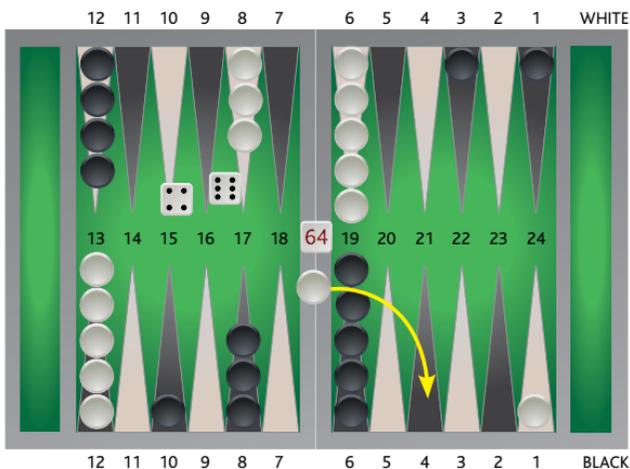
How does White get the man off the bar and back into the game? The rules of backgammon state that before he does anything else he must re-enter the man into Black's home board.

Where he enters is governed by his next roll of the dice. He must enter on the point number equivalent to the number shown on at least one of his dice. He cannot enter on a point owned by his opponent.

To demonstrate this, following on from the position on the previous page, let's suppose that White's next roll is 64, **A**. This means that he could try to enter on either Black's 4-pt or Black's 6-pt. However, Black owns his 6-pt (he has five men on it). Luckily for White, Black's

4-pt is open so he can enter there. Remember this is shown as bar/21 (Black's 4-pt is White's 21-pt and moves are always shown from the perspective of the player making them). He must then move another, or the same man, 6 points to complete his roll.

As chance would have it, if he moves the same man that he has just entered with bar/21 by moving 21/15\* can you see what happens? He hits the Black



man that has just hit him and now the Black man must go on to the bar. The resultant position is shown below in **B**.

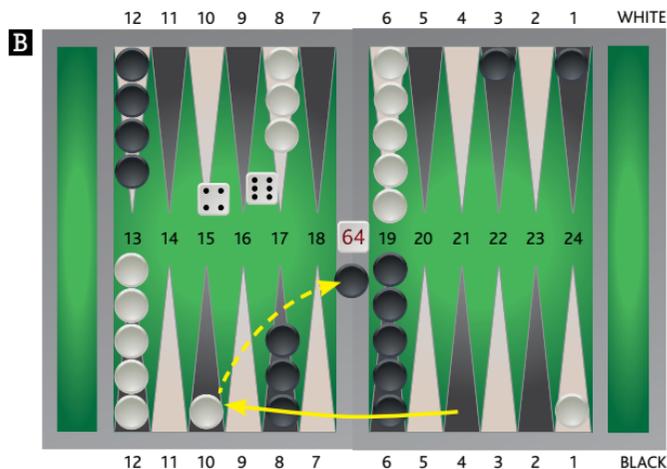
As you can see, what started out as a simple game has suddenly become a lot more difficult! Hitting blots is the very lifeblood of backgammon and creates much of the excitement of the game.

In this position can you now work out what Black's worst roll would be? It is double six! Normally a great roll, here it

is a disaster. The rules state that if you cannot enter from the bar then you forfeit your turn — a heavy penalty indeed.

Two more points about hitting:

1. In the early game it is usually relatively easy to re-enter from the bar but, as both sides make more home board points as the game progresses, being hit becomes more dangerous.



2. If having one man on the bar is bad, having two or more men on the bar can be catastrophic, as you must enter all the men that you have on the bar before you can move anywhere else on the board!

# Play as Much as You Can

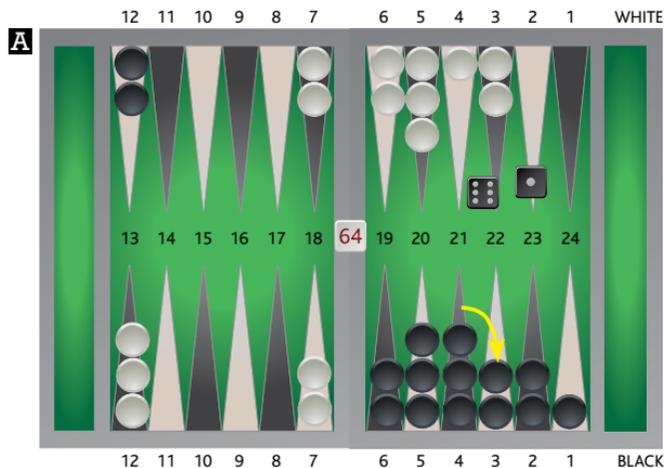
The rules of backgammon state that a player must use both numbers of a roll if it is legally possible to do so or all four numbers of a double.

When only one number can be played, the player must play that number.

Below is an example, **A**.

Black is trying to bring his last two

men into his home board and has rolled 61. However, he has no legal way of playing the '6' because White owns Black's 7-pt. He can therefore only



*Black has no legal way to play his '6'. Both 13/7/6 and 13/12/6 are not allowed because White owns the relevant points and therefore Black can only play his '1'.*

move the '1' and will do this by moving 4/3. Notice that had Black rolled 62 he could have played 13/11/5, thus playing his full roll.

## Play as Much as Possible

If either number can be played, but not both, the larger number must be played.

In the case of doubles, when fewer than four numbers can be played, as

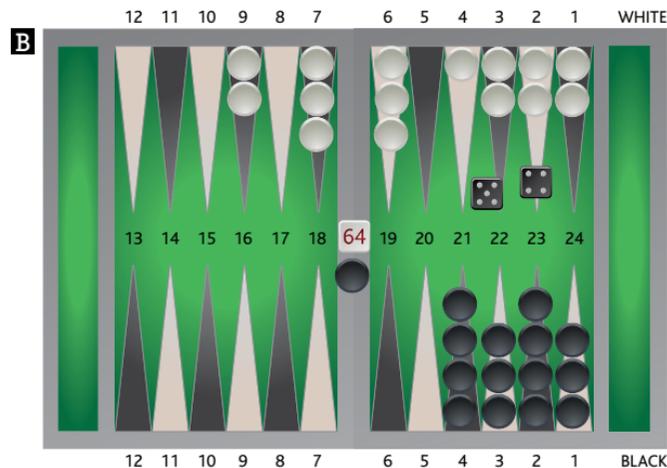
many numbers as possible must be played.

To demonstrate this point it is best to give an example, shown below in **B**.

Black is on the bar and has rolled 54. Both points are available for entry as the White's 5-pt is completely open and his 4-pt has a blot on it. Black would like to play bar/21\*, hitting White's blot and sending it to the bar, but if he does then he has no legal '5'.

If he enters with bar/20 he has no legal '4' to play.

Although Black would much prefer to hit, the rules state that he must play the larger number and he is forced to play bar/20 and in this case the rules have worked against Black.



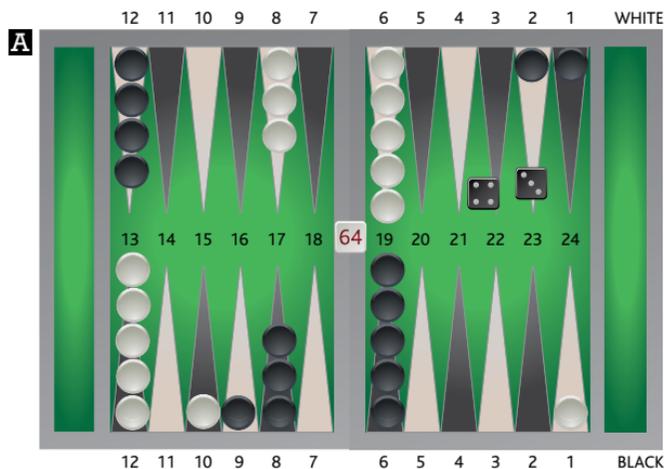
## Choosing a Move

The greatest challenge in backgammon is in consistently finding the 'right' play. One of the reasons it took computers so long to become good at the game is that on every turn there are so many possible moves and until sophisticated techniques came into existence computers were useless at the game.

Below is a simple example of this, **A**. We know that making points is good so Black has thrown, and has to play 43. he could make a new point in his home board with 9/5,

8/5. He could make a new point in his opponent's home board by playing 24/20, 23/20.

We know that hitting is good because it sends your opponent's men back to the start and so Black could play 13/10\* with the 3 and then play 13/9, 10/6 or 24/20 with the 4.



These aren't the only legal moves but they are the only sensible ones and in fact the best move is 13/9, 13/10\*. This play makes a new point (the 9-pt) and sends one of White's men to the bar. In the opening stages of the game it is often correct to hit an opponent's man, and here you can actually do both with a single move!

How do you choose which is best? The answer is that there is no easy solution. You learn from a combination of playing and instruction (starting here, but then from a good player and/or further reading) and it takes time. Nobody becomes an expert overnight but, as with any other game or sport, practice is vital. As the great golfer Gary Player once famously said: 'It's funny but the more I practise the luckier I become.'

The key is to identify possible plays (known as 'candidates') and then choose between them. After all, if you don't 'see' a move you can't play it.

There's another old adage in

backgammon: 'When in doubt, hit.' As we have seen, that applies in the example, where we saw that the best move was 13/9, 13/10\*.

One more piece of advice: when you roll a double, particularly a small one like double 1 or double 2, then take a little more time than usual to move as you will have a lot of moves to choose from.

When thinking about how to play a double always remember that although the men often move in pairs that is not always the case. There will be instances where the best move will involve moving all four numbers with one man.

Unlike chess, where if you touch a piece on the board you must move it, in backgammon you are allowed to move the men to try out plays, replace them and then try another play. It is much easier to evaluate plays once you can see the results so I recommend that for difficult moves you adopt this approach.

Your move is finished only when you have picked up your dice.

# It's a Race

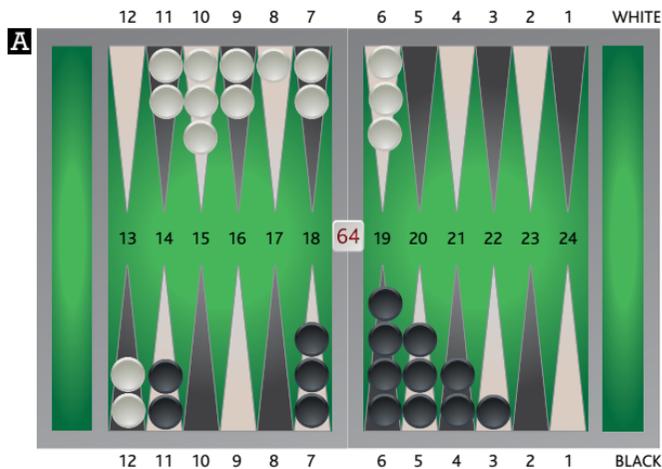
How do you know if you are winning the game? For all its complexity backgammon is basically a race and whoever wins the race wins the game.

In the example below, **A**, it is clear that Black is winning the game. He has ten of his men already in his home board while White has only three. The two

armies have disengaged from each other and so the game has become a simple dash for the line.

In many games such a lead would

guarantee victory but backgammon is a dice game and the outcome will be determined purely by the dice. Most of the time Black's advantage will see him home to victory but every so often White will roll a lot of big doubles (remember you



move four times for each double), overtake Black and win the game.

This possibility of a last-minute turnaround is one of the things that makes the game so much fun. In backgammon you have to wait until the game has literally finished before you can be sure of victory!

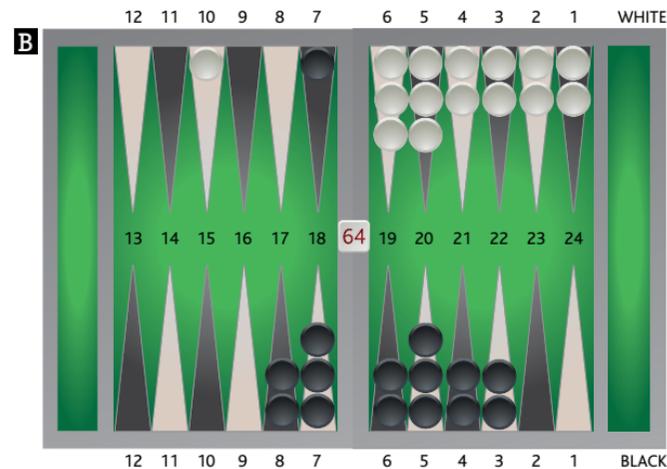
In the position as shown in **A**, it is easy to tell who is winning because there can be no further hitting.

However, where there is contact there is always the possibility of a change of fortunes. How about this?:

In the position below, **B**, White is well ahead in getting his men home but it is Black's turn. Can you see what might happen? If Black rolls a '3' he will hit White's man on the 15-pt and it will be sent to the bar. Even if the man enters into Black's home board it will be trapped behind Black's full prime and

so it will be Black who is winning, not White. What a swing in one roll of the dice — what a game!

The point here is twofold: it's not always that easy to tell who is winning; the dice will nearly always give you a chance to turn the game around — don't despair.



# The Opening Roll

We have already looked at some of the opening rolls. Because it is so important to start the game well we are going to quickly look at how to play all possible fifteen opening rolls.

Here's a list of them:

21, 31, 41, 51, 61, 32, 42, 52, 62, 43, 53, 63, 54, 64, 65

Of these fifteen, five of them can be used to make a new point. What are they? Answers at the end of this section.

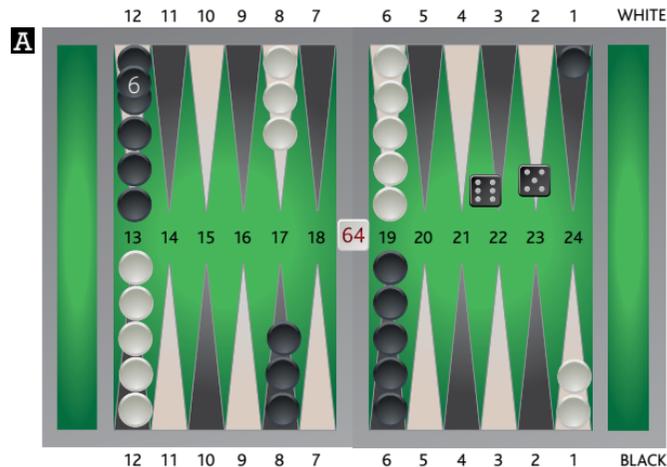
A reminder of what we are trying to achieve in the opening:

- Make new points.
- Unstack the 13-pt and 6-pt.
- Get the rear men (the two on our 24-pt) moving as they have the furthest distance to travel to reach the home board.

**Fact:** There is an old wives' tale that you cannot have more than five men on one point. This is completely untrue. You can have all fifteen men on one point if you wish!

So if we can't make a new point with the other ten rolls, we should be following the other guide points.

One roll is very easy to play and that is 65. It's a great roll because it allows us to safely escape one of the rear men all the way to our 13-pt (the 13-pt is known as the 'midpoint') by playing 24/18/13. This move is called 'Lover's Leap'. The result, with six men on the midpoint is shown in **A**.



This move is called 'Lover's Leap', on a roll of 65, shown with six men on the midpoint. This roll is very easy to play. It's a great roll because it allows us to safely move one of the rear men all the way to our 13-pt.

What about those point-making numbers? They are:  
31 played 8/5, 6/5; 61 played 13/7, 8/7;  
42 played 8/4, 6/4; 53 played 8/3, 6/3  
and 64 played 8/2, 6/2.

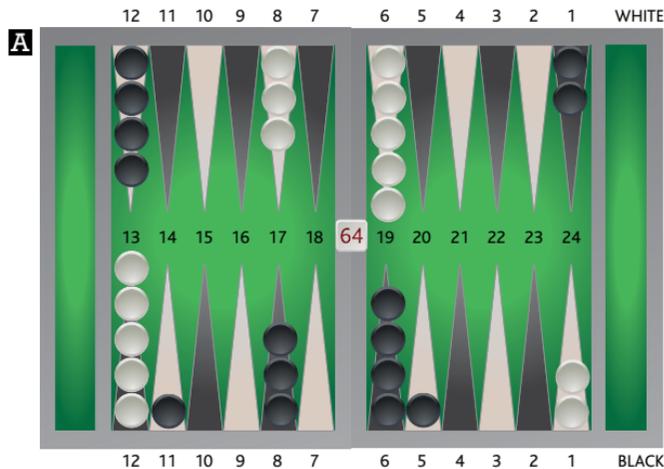
Of these rolls 31 is by far the best because it reaches the 5-point. Backgammon legend Paul Magriel christened this point the 'Golden Point' because of its importance. A lot of

backgammon tactics centre around the two golden points (yours and your opponent's). The 4-pt is known as the 'Silver Point'. Any new home-board point will improve your chances of keeping your opponent's men on the bar when you hit a blot.

What about the other nine numbers? Those are more difficult so let's deal with those next.

With the other nine rolls you have choices. For example, with a roll of 21 you could simply move 13/10 but there is an old saying in backgammon that it is better to achieve two things, rather than 1. The '2' should certainly be played 13/11 but the '1' should be played either 24/23, getting the rear men moving, or perhaps strangely 6/5 — this move is shown below in **A**.

It might seem odd to expose a blot where White can hit it with any '4' on his next turn but this move demonstrates one of backgammon's most fundamental ideas: if you can't make a point immediately then you 'slot' it on one turn with the objective (if it hasn't been hit) of covering the slot on your next turn, so that you then own the point.



*Black takes a calculated risk with his opening roll with the hope of making his 5-pt on his next turn.*

The idea is not without risk but backgammon is a game of risk and reward and the very best players know when to take risks and when to play safe. The opening is a time to take risks because hit men can usually re-enter the board without much problem.

Listed below are the best moves that can be made from the other opening rolls.

- 21:** 13/11, 24/23 or 13/11, 6/5;
- 41:** 13/9, 24/23 or 13/9, 6/5;
- 51:** 13/8, 24/23 or 13/8, 6/5
- 32:** 13/11, 13/10 or 24/21, 13/11;
- 52:** 13/8, 24/22, or 13/8, 13/11;
- 54:** 13/8, 13/9 or 13/8, 24/20.
- 43:** 13/9, 13/10 or 24/20, 13/10;
- 62:** 24/18/16 or 24/18, 13/11;
- 63:** 24/18/15 or 24/18, 13/10

Note also that although 64 can be used to make a point it can also be played either: 24/18/14 or 24/18, 13/9.

You might find it surprising that after 5,000 years we still don't know the 'best' way to play some of the opening rolls! However, your choice of opening roll will determine the type of game that evolves.

In general, moves that split the back men will lead to simpler games than those that either make or slot home board points. As you increase your backgammon knowledge you will learn how to steer towards the type of game with which you are comfortable — there are a couple of different examples in the section on the middle game.

Any other moves with any of the opening rolls are significantly inferior to the ones listed here.

For example, you could play an opening 43 by moving 13/9/6. That move is completely safe but it doesn't do anything to improve your position. As noted above, backgammon is a game of risk and reward and if you take no risks you rarely reap a reward!

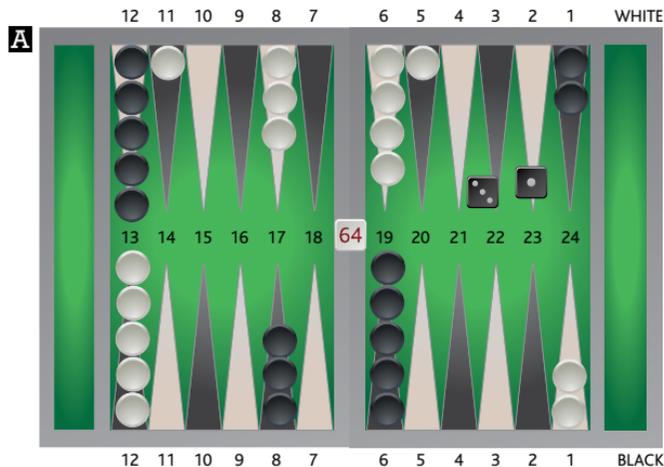
# The First Response

Once the opening move has been made, battle has commenced and the second player must join the fray.

In replying to his opponent's first move, his objectives are very similar to the opener but must obviously take account of where his opponent has moved. If his opponent has exposed a

blot, then the responder will normally gain an advantage if he can hit it. A classic example is shown below in **A**.

White has opened with 21 played 13/11, 6/5. Black replies with 31. If this



*Black has to hit the blot to stop White making his 5-pt on his next roll. This is a better play than simply making his own 5-pt.*

was his opening move he would make his own 5-pt by playing 8/5, 6/5. However, he must take note of White's play and Black actually does better to play 24/21/20\*, hitting White's blot and putting it on the bar.

Black has done two good things: got one of his back men moving and hindered white's plans. If he had passively played 8/5, 6/5, White would have had the advantage; as it is, Black has a small edge.

Of course the responder can roll a double, something the opener cannot do. Imagine in the position above that Black had rolled double 2 instead of 31. That would be a tremendous roll because he could play 24/22/20\*, 6/4(2), not only hitting the White blot but making a point in his home board as well, giving him a really good advantage.

## A Couple More Guidelines

If your opponent has made a home-board point, then it is often correct to split the back men. For example,

if your opponent opens with 42 and makes his 4-pt with 8/4, 6/4 and you roll 43 then you should play 24/20, 13/10.

If your opponent has started by splitting to your 5-pt, for example, by playing 13/8, 24/20 with a 54, then it is correct to hit the blot on your 5-pt with rolls such as 21 (13/11, 6/5\*) or 32 (13/11, 8/5\*). This starts a battle for one of the key points on the board and it may initiate a flurry of hits and counter hits that then continues for several rolls.

These opening exchanges are vital in defining the future of the game, and if there was one overriding principle to remember it would be this: 'Be aggressive'.

As you become familiar with the game you will learn the correct responses to the opening moves so you won't need to work it out each time. As with many games you will build your own database of 'known' positions and thus your play will improve over time.

# The Middle Game

Once the opening skirmishes have been completed we enter the middle game — the most complex area of backgammon.

Most middle games fall into about half a dozen categories. Space does not permit us to examine these in any detail but to take your game to the next level, you can study these middle

game types from books or through tuition as there are different tactics and strategies that apply to each category.

To give you some idea of what middle-game positions can look like,

here are a couple of examples, starting with **A**.

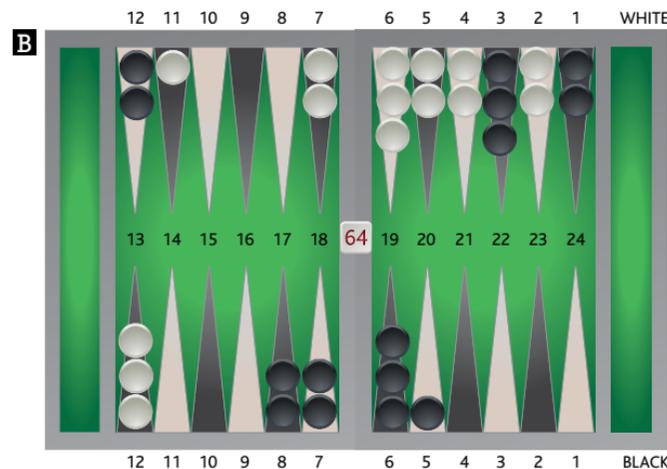
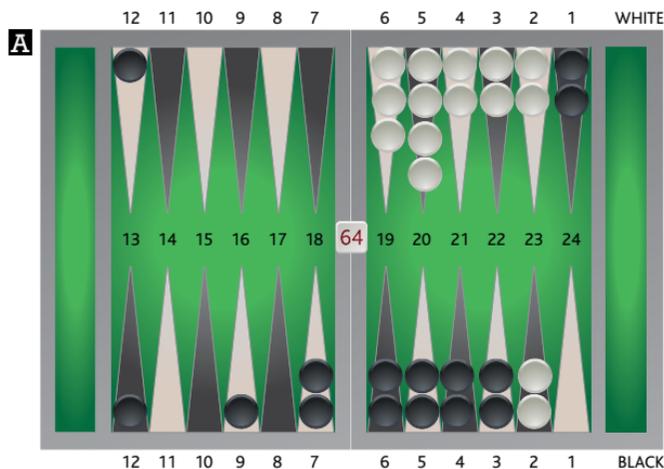
This is what's known as a 'prime versus prime' position. Both sides have a five-point prime constraining opposing men. At the moment the game is finely balanced but whoever manages to free their rear

men will win the game. Imagine how happy either player will be if they roll 66 (double 6)!

And what about the position below, **B**? White is obviously well ahead in the race for home but Black owns two points in White's board and it will be difficult for White to get all his men home safely and then take them off the board without leaving some blots exposed. If Black can hit a blot at the right time he may well

win the game despite being so far behind at the moment. This type of position, where one player owns two or more points in his opponent's home board, is known as a 'back game' and it is amongst the most difficult to play well.

It is a challenge to provide generic middle-game rules or pointers because of the variety of games that can evolve, but overleaf there are a few useful guidelines outlined.



*Back games are amongst the most difficult to play — they are likely to be long and complex. Despite appearances Black stands quite well in this position!*

### Middle Game Useful Guidelines

- Try to keep all your men in play, i.e. don't end up with a stack of men on your 1- and 2-pts early in the game as they will effectively be out of the game until the bear-off.
- Don't give up the midpoint (your 13-pt) while you still have men in your opponent's half of the board as it provides a vital link. History tells us

that an army split in two does not fight well.

- When your opponent has a weak home board you can take risks; if he has a strong home board (four or more points made), then exercise caution as a hit blot could cost you the game.
- If you are ahead in the race then simply race for home — don't complicate things when you don't need to.

Conversely, if you are behind, mix it up and play for complications.

Finally, don't be afraid to take risks!

Shown left is a classic example, **A**.

The game is reaching a climax and Black must play a roll of 51. He could play safely (leaving no blots) by moving 6/1, 2/1. The race for home is roughly equal and so he could expect to win the game half the time after making this play.

Alternatively, he can play 11/5\*, putting White's man on the bar but if White rolls a 5 he will win the game because Black will then be on the bar and White has a perfect home board (all six points made). 11/5\* might seem like a huge risk but when White doesn't roll a 5 (and that happens 70 per cent of the time), Black will nearly certainly win the game.

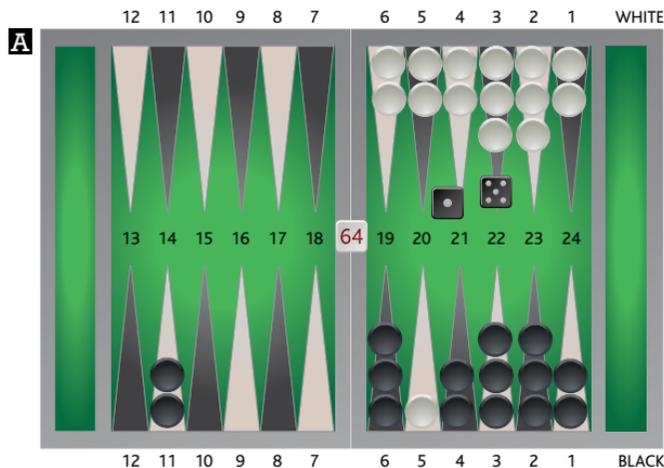
So what do you prefer, winning 70 per cent of the time or just 50 per cent? Pretty obvious really. What started as an exercise in risk

and reward has been solved by the application of logic. Decisions like this are the lifeblood of the middle game and make backgammon the fascinating game that it is.

Another interesting type of middle game worth mentioning is called the 'blitz'. This is where one player launches a violent attack on his opponent with the objective of very swiftly creating a strong home board with one or more of his opponent's men languishing on the bar.

A simple example of this is where Black starts the game with a 52, played 13/8, 24/22. White then rolls double 5 and plays 8/3(2)\*, 6/1(2)\*, putting two men on the bar and creating a 3-pt home board. If White doesn't quickly re-enter those men the game could be over very quickly.

Black's plan is to keep attacking any blots that do manage to enter and the perfect result is a closed board (all six home-board points made) with White men still on the bar.



*By hitting with the apparently risky 11/5\* Black makes himself the favourite in the game and its outcome will very likely be decided on the next roll.*

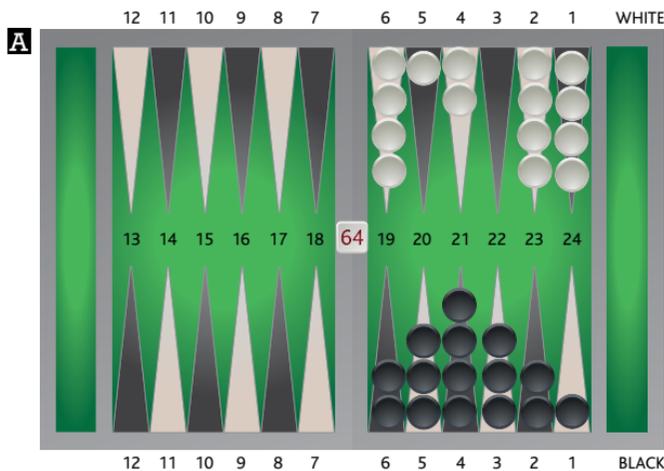
## The Endgame – Bearing Off

Now let's turn our attention to the end of the game. Once all a player's men are in his home board he can bear them off. Once off they can never return to the field of play.

When moving the men into the home board the idea is to have more men on the high-numbered points rather than the 1-pt and 2-pt. Try also to avoid

having gaps in the board, i.e. points with no men on them.

The diagram below, **A**, shows the two players ready to bear-off:



Black has done a much better job than White, who has failed to follow the guidelines above. Doesn't Black's board just look nicer than White's?

Bearing-off rules are simple. You may take off a man from the point(s) corresponding

to the numbers shown on the dice. In position **A** Black can bear men off with any number but if White rolls a '3' he will have to play 6/3 as he has no men on his 3-pt.

If you roll a number bigger than the highest occupied point then you may take a man off the next lowest number. If Black has no men on his 6-pt and rolls a 6 he may take a man off his 5-pt. If there are no men on the 5-pt then he

takes one off the 4-pt and so on.

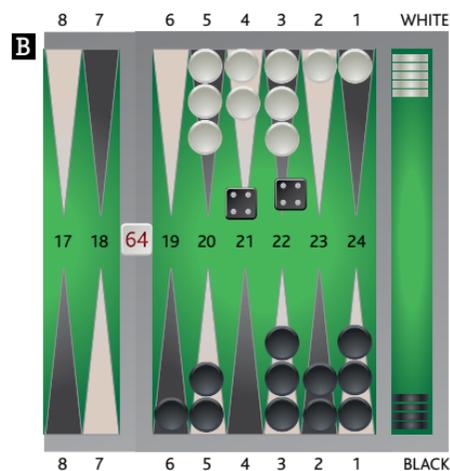
You don't have to take a man off (though this is normally correct). If Black rolls a 5 he could play 5/off but 6/1 would also be a legal play.

If you roll a double then you may take four men off the corresponding point. If there aren't four men on the point then you can take men off the next lowest occupied point (but not if there are men on higher occupied points) or move men within the home board. This is quite complex, so to demonstrate how this works in practice look at this example, **B**.

In the position, with the first three 4s, Black must play 6/2, 5/1(2) clearing the high points and then with the final 4 he must play 3/off as he now has no men on the 4-, 5- or 6-pts.

Only when the higher points have been cleared can you take men off the lower points.

Rolling doubles in the bear-off is very, very useful and many a game is won by a last gasp double — great for the winner, infuriating for the loser!

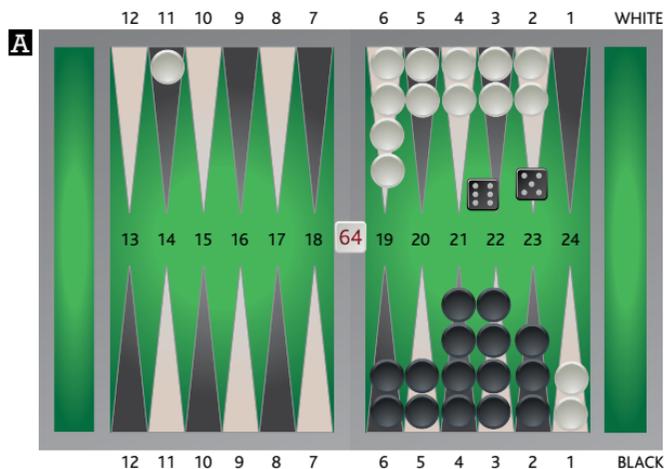


# Bearing Off Against Contact

As we saw when we looked at the middle game, sometimes you are ready to bear off but your opponent still has men in your home board. That makes life much more difficult.

Black is obviously way ahead in the game below, **A**, but disaster can still strike! Look at the effect of Black rolling 65. He will play 6/off with the

6 and then his only legal 5 is 5/off. This exposes two blots and if white rolls a '4' or a '5' next turn he will be winning the game! An example of victory snatched



*Black seems to be well ahead in this game, but disaster can strike with a single roll of the dice.*

from the jaws of defeat indeed. Of course if White misses, Black may go on to win a gammon.

Such is the very nature of the game and why it is so exciting to play.

There is nothing Black could have done to avoid this but there are some simple guidelines to follow:

- Try to keep an even number of men on your highest occupied point.
- Try to keep an even number of men

in total on your two highest occupied points.

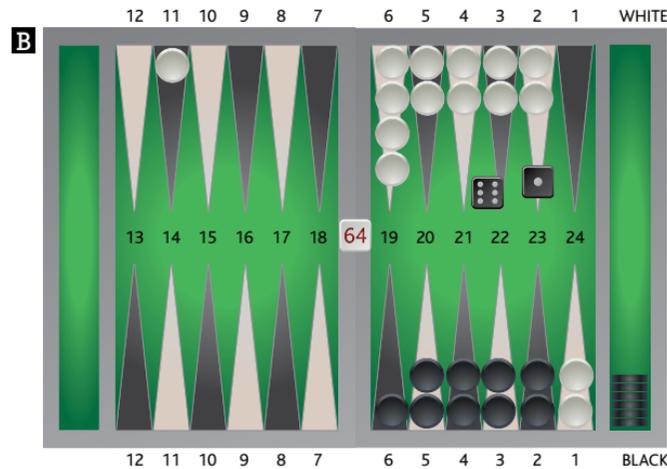
## Move Order Can Be Important

There is one more rule to let you know about. Look at the diagram **B**.

It looks as if Black must play 6/off with the '6' and then however he plays the '1', for example 5/4, he will leave a blot for White to try to hit.

Note: The rules of backgammon

allow you to play your moves in any order. That means that black can play 6/5 with the '1' and then, as he has no men on his 6-pt, he can bear a man off the 5-pt with the six by playing 5/off. By taking his moves in this order he avoids leaving a shot — clever stuff!



# The Doubling Cube

If you are a beginner, or relatively new to backgammon, and you are not playing with the doubling cube, that's okay. For starters.

Playing without the cube allows you to concentrate strictly on basic board play and allows you to complete every game and see how it plays out.

But once you play a little more, you can add the doubling cube to your game. It is a lot more fun and exciting and you will enjoy the game even more.

Why was it invented? Two reasons: to speed up the game and to add a bigger gambling element. In many games one side gets an early advantage but still has to play the game to the end. As we will see, doubling can be used to quickly finish such games. The other reason was that although backgammon is usually played for a stake it takes a long time to win large amounts. But what if you could increase the stake during the game by a factor of 2, 4, 8 or even more? Instead of

playing for £1 per game, you could find yourself playing for £8 or more. This appealed to the players of the 1920s and doubling caught on like wildfire.

Doubling is actually the most difficult part of backgammon to play well and even today, thanks to computers, we are learning more and more about this aspect of the game.

## The Basics of Doubling

So how does it work? At the start of the game the doubling cube sits in the centre of the board. After a few

rolls if one player believes he has the advantage, *before he rolls his dice*, he can say to his opponent 'I double' and places the doubling cube in the middle of his opponent's home board with the '2' uppermost.

The opponent then has two choices:

1. He can decline the double. In this case he pays his opponent one point, they reset the men and start a new game.
2. He can accept the double in which case he moves the doubling cube to his side of the board and the game continues. He now 'owns' the cube and only he has the right to make a subsequent redouble.

This last point is important. If the game now turns in his favour the owner of the cube can 'redouble' to 4 – doubling the stakes once again. Of course the game can turn yet again and the original doubler could redouble to 8 (and so on).

At the end of the game the winner pays the loser the nominal stake multiplied by the value of the doubling cube multiplied by the type of game (remember 1 for a single, 2 for a gammon and 3 for a backgammon). So a gammon win with the cube on 2 will net you 4 times the original stake.

Why, you might ask, would you ever accept a double if you were losing the game? The answer is in the arithmetic and although not showing it here, it can be proven that if you believe you have a 25 per cent chance of winning the game (i.e. if you played the game out to a conclusion four times from the position you are in, you would expect to win once), then you should accept the double.

How do you estimate if you have 25 per cent winning chances? A very small number of endings can be calculated exactly. However, most of the time it's down to your knowledge of similar positions which you accumulate over time. Your journey starts here – have fun and good luck!



# Glossary

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Here's a quick and helpful reminder of the various terms used to play Backgammon featured in this book.

**Backgammon:** A game won while the loser still has a man in the winner's home board or on the bar. The winner is awarded three times the number of points indicated by the doubling cube.

**Bar:** The centre section of the board where men are placed when they are hit and where they must remain until they re-enter.

**Bear off:** To remove men from the board.

**Blot:** A single man on a point. Blots are vulnerable to capture by your opponent.

**Double (1):** To obtain two identical numbers when rolling two dice, allowing you to play the number four times.

**Double (2):** To offer to double the stakes of the game. Subsequent doubles in a game are known as 'redoubles'.

**Doubling cube:** A six-sided die, which is numbered 2, 4, 8, 16, 32, 64. Rather than being rolled, it is simply placed and used to double the stakes of the game being played. Often abbreviated to 'the cube'.

**Gammon:** A completed game in which the loser has failed to bear off any men from their home board. The winner pockets twice the

value of the doubling cube.

**Hit:** When moving to a point occupied by an isolated opposing man (blot), this man is then captured (hit) and placed on the bar in the middle of the board.

**Home board:** The quadrant of the game board to which the player must move their men before bearing them off.

**Outer board:** The other quadrants of the game board on the player's side.

**Point (Pip):** One of the 24 points on the board.

**Point (Ownership):** When a player has two or more men on one point he 'owns' that point, and his opponent may not place men there.

**Prime:** A set of continuous points owned by one player that creates a barrier to progress for the opponent. A 'full' prime is six points in a row.

**Quadrant:** Quarter of the board consisting of six triangles (points). Each player owns the two quadrants positioned in front of him.

**Slot:** To place a single man on a point with the intention of forming a new point on the next turn.