

BACKGAMMON

Winning Strategies



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**BACKGAMMON
WINNING
STRATEGIES**

A Backgammon Book that will make a
weak player victorious.

Includes a 100 question quiz to assess playing ability

Acknowledgements The Author would like to thank all those people who read the preliminary draft and made so many valuable suggestions to improve the book. In particular I would thank Roger Porter and Roy Hollands for the many hours of use on their computers checking and rolling out the positions. Jane and Adam Rolland, Donald Hatt, John Thomas and Martin Lee who all came up with many valuable suggestions; Cliff Connick who tested the book on his Backgammon Club members; and finally Paul Lamford and Roy Hollands for checking and proofreading the revised drafts with such care and efficiency.

INTRODUCTION This book is written for the weak player with a desire to become **successful**. It deals with many common situations that, with the correct move, enable the player to create a situation where, with the help of the doubling cube, a victorious gammon or backgammon may be won.

The mysteries of probability that accompany any game where dice are used are fully explained with simple graphs and diagrams and the reader will be shown how to make his own luck once backgammon probability is mastered.

Backgammon can be a cruel game with fickle dice that let you down when you most need their help, but when you become a **winner**, rather than a **loser**; when you have mastered probability and the use of the doubling cube, it can give the most exquisite pleasure and considerably enhance the bank balance!

Whilst giving a series of seminars for the British Isles Backgammon Association it became apparent that there was a need for this book aimed at the mass of players in the beginner to intermediate category.

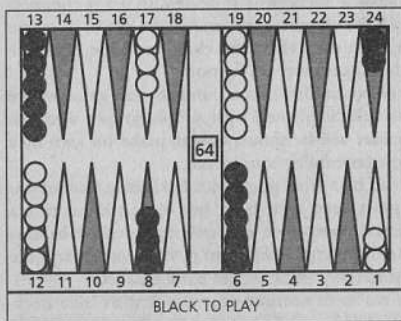
The fundamental principles of backgammon are explained in the first part of the book and the second part is in the form of a self-scoring questionnaire for the reader to self-assess playing ability and to ensure mastery of the basic theory of modern backgammon.

All the secrets of chouette, a version of backgammon played by three or more players on the same board at the same time, are fully revealed so that the newcomer to chouette is aware of the dangers and rewards that lie in wait.

Although this book is primarily written for straightforward money backgammon there is a chapter on the most complex form of backgammon – tournament backgammon. The information provided will enable a player to move into this field and partake in these popular tournaments.

At the end of the book there is a list of organizations that run backgammon tournaments, supply backgammon magazines, computer programs and books for the advanced student of the game.

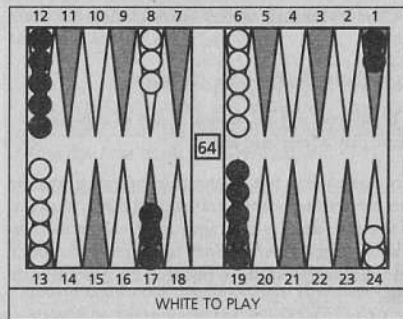
THE 24 POINT NUMBERING SYSTEM



The 24 point numbering system for designating moves in backgammon is now standard throughout the world. In the above diagram the points are numbered for Black to play next. The diagram on the facing page shows the points numbered for White to play. It can therefore be seen that each point has two numbers. Black's 5 point becomes the white 20 point when it is White's turn to play.

The numbering of the points is dependent on which player is on roll. When Black is on play the moves are designated by the numbering shown in the above diagram. When it is White's turn to play the moves are designated using the numbers shown on the facing page.

In this book almost all moves are made by Black and as a consequence none of the diagrams (other than the one on the facing page) are shown numbered for White.



In a game of backgammon the two armies fight their way through each other and finally reach a position where it turns into a race to remove all the chequers from the board. When a potential racing position arises the players need an accurate method to assess the racing position. This is done by using the same point numbers that also designate the moves. If, in this starting position, White wanted to know his 'pip count' he would add it up as follows:

2 chequers on the 24 point	=	48
5 chequers on the 13 point	=	65
3 chequers on the 8 point	=	24
5 chequers on the 6 point	=	30
TOTAL PIPS		167

Having added up his own pip count White would need to do the same for his opponent's position. The player with the lower pip count would be ahead in the race. Pip counting and the easy short cuts are fully explained in the chapter on probability.

NOTATION The following system of notation is used throughout the book:

- All moves throughout the book are for Black.
- The dice to be moved will be shown as 4:3 to indicate that Black must play a four and three.
- All moves are made using the 24 point numbering system. Each diagram carries the point numbers for Black to make the move. If the dice are 3:1 the move will be described as 8/5, 6/5 to show Black moving from the 8 point to the 5 point with one die, and from the 6 point to the 5 point with the second die.
- When doubles are involved the move of 3:3 will read 2 x 8/5, 24/21, 13/10. This indicates that two chequers were moved from the 8 point to the 5 point, one chequer was moved from the 24 point to the 21 point and the last chequer was moved from the 13 point to the 10 point.
- * will indicate that a blot has been hit and placed on the bar.
- Re-entry from the bar will be shown as bar/23 to indicate that the chequer was re-entered on the 23 point.
- When chequers are removed from the board during the bear-off stage 5/off, 3/off will indicate one chequer was removed from the 5 point and one from the 3 point.
- The doubling cube is shown in the centre of the bar with 64 on the upper side. This indicates that the cube has not yet been turned. When a double or redouble takes place the cube will be moved to either the black or white end of the bar to show which player has possession of the cube.

SUGGESTIONS To gain the maximum benefit from this book the Author suggests:

- 1 Set out each position illustrated on your own backgammon board before reading any of the text. Then decide how to play the move. Experiment with all the alternatives until satisfied that the best move has been found.
- 2 Having made the decision turn to the text to see if the correct play has been made.
- 3 It is very difficult to read a book like this and to retain the information in the mind for more than a few hours! If the player thinks out the move first, and then checks to see how it should be played, the correct principles are more likely to be remembered.
- 4 Some players might like to turn to the quiz before reading any of the chapters explaining the fundamental principles of modern backgammon. This will enable your standard of play before reading the text to be assessed. Then study the text and retake the quiz to see if your standard has improved.

BACKGAMMON TERMINOLOGY This book uses modern backgammon terminology that may not be familiar to inexperienced players. Explanatory footnotes will be found and the glossary at the end of the book contains a list of backgammon terminology.

COMPUTER PROGRAMS have been used to assist with the analysis of positions in the book. They are Jellyfish™ 2.1 (≠), Expert Backgammon™ 2.1 (+), Hugh Scoyners data base (\$) and Position Analyzer© 4.0.(‡). The symbols in brackets will be found in the text wherever these programs have been used.

Chapter 1

THE OPENING The opening is the most important stage of the game. Unlike many difficult situations that may occur only once or twice in every hundred games, the opening problems arise every single game so that opening errors can become very damaging.

An incorrect move may put the player at a 3 or 4 per cent disadvantage. This may not sound much, but if incorrect moves are repeatedly selected throughout the game, these small errors quickly accumulate and turn into a major disadvantage with the loss of the game.

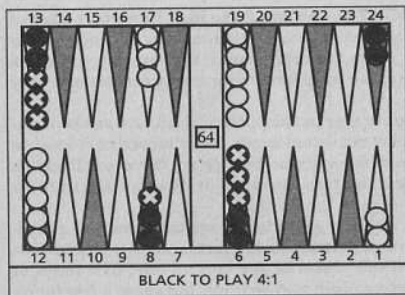
Backgammon, being a game based on mathematical probability, has few absolute certainties. It is rarely possible to state that the move selected will always be the correct one. In a series of 100 games the wrong move may well win the game a few times, but the player will find that moves selected in accordance with the modern theory of backgammon will produce considerably more wins than losses. When the wins are combined with the correct use of the doubling cube a good player can expect to win the majority of points.

This chapter therefore deals with the fundamental principles of the opening stage. It is about laying the correct foundations that will enable the player to proceed into the middle game with the right structure on which to build a winning position.

Understanding the correct principles for the opening is straightforward but when two principles clash the player has to balance one against the other and judge which principle should take priority.

In this chapter diagrams are used to demonstrate some of the principles for the opening moves. The point numbers shown on the diagrams are always numbered for Black, and all moves throughout the book are for Black.

THE SURPLUS CHEQUERS



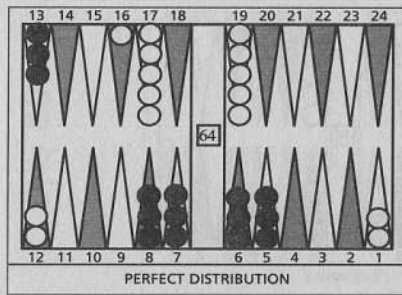
At the start of any game notice how there are three surplus chequers on the 13 and 6 points and one on the 8 point marked with an X in the above diagram. These are like having money in the bank in a current account that earns no interest. The player needs to earn interest with these surplus chequers so one of the top priorities is to turn the surplus chequers into points¹ to trap the opponent.

This is the stage of the game where risks are taken (before the opponent closes any points in his home board) to get the surplus chequers into positions where they have the potential to make valuable blocking points.

Typically a player with a 4:1 to play will not make the safe move 13/8 but elects to play 13/9, 6/5, hoping, if he is not hit, to make the 5 and/or the 9 point. The alternative would be 13/9, 24/23, splitting the rear chequers to increase their power to hit any blots White might leave on his inner or outer boards and to improve the probability of making a forward anchor.²

¹ When a player places two or more chequers on a point he is said to have 'made a point'. A player is not permitted to land on a point 'owned' by his opponent

CHEQUER DISTRIBUTION



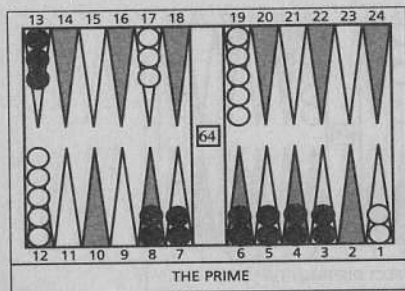
To achieve maximum power to make future points at the lowest risk, the surplus chequers should, ideally, be distributed evenly over each point. Here Black is shown with perfect distribution having one surplus chequer³ on each point.

In contrast White is shown with all surplus chequers stacked on two points and therefore with a far lower probability of being able to make a new point next turn.

² An Anchor is a point held by a player in the opponent's home board, on which it is always possible to re-enter a chequer from the bar.

³ A spare chequer on a point which can be used to make another point, without breaking the point from which it has come, is often called a 'builder'.

CONSTRUCTING A PRIME



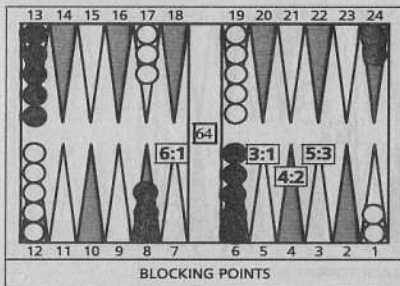
Set out with a plan to construct a prime⁴ by making six consecutive points to trap the opponent's runners. In the above diagram Black has achieved this desirable objective.

Notice how, at the start of the game, the player already holds two points in his potential prime – the 8 and 6 points. By filling in the 7, 5, 4 and 3 points the prime is completed.

The 2 point should not be made at the start of the game. It is positioned outside the desired prime which starts with the 8 point and ends with the 3 point. If the 2 point is made with 6:4 as the opening move the player will still only have two points in his prime. A prime that includes the 8 and 2 points would have to be seven points in length so these two points cannot belong to the same six-point prime.

⁴ A continuous block of six consecutive points. An opponent cannot escape from a prime.

THE OPENING 6:1, 5:3, 4:2 AND 3:1

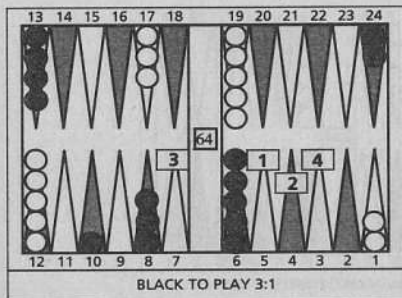


These are the four opening moves that are almost always used to make blocking points in the home board as illustrated in the above diagram.

- 6:1 play 13/7, 8/7
- 5:3 play 8/3, 6/3
- 4:2 play 8/4, 6/4
- 3:1 play 8/5, 6/5.

Notice how they take surplus chequers from the 6, 8 and 13 points and turn them into blocking points. It is these four points which, when made, complete the prime illustrated on the previous page.

POINT PRIORITY



In the above diagram the importance of the different points in the potential prime are marked. The 5 point is labelled '1' to show that this is the most important point to make first, (if possible), the 4 point with a '2' as the second most important point, etc. Whenever there is a choice of which point to make first, the above priorities are used.

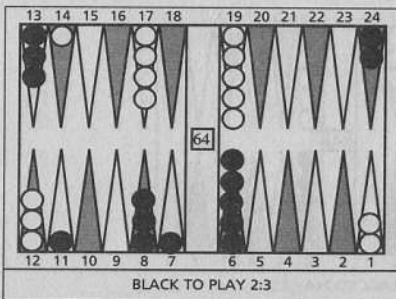
In this diagram Black should make his 5 point with 8/5, 6/5. The 5 point takes priority over the alternative move 10/7, 8/7 to make the bar point.

Both points are valuable blocking points but the 5 point has the great advantage that it makes re-entry more difficult and so is vastly superior.

It is important to make points in front of your opponent's two runners⁵ – NOT behind them. If White had moved his two runners forward to the black 4 point the value of the bar (7) point would change to become the second most important point.

⁵ The two chequers on the 24 point are known as 'runners'.

DISTRIBUTION VERSUS POINT PRIORITY

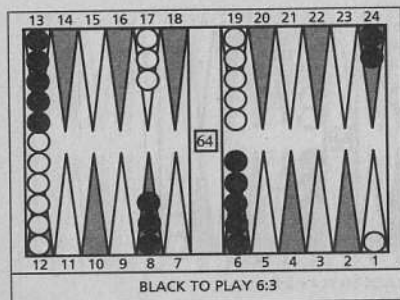


Black has a choice of making the all-important 5 point or the less-important 4 point. In this example distribution of the chequers dominates the point priority. If Black makes the 5 point there will be no surplus chequers on the 8 point and five chequers will be over-stacked on the 6 point.

By making the 4 point Black gets one of the surplus chequers off the overloaded 6 point and leaves a builder on the 8 point to enhance future point-making probability.

This is an example of 'value judgements' that constantly have to be made. Judging which principle should become dominant is not always an easy choice!

ESCAPED CHEQUER AMBUSH



White opened with 6:5 and ran one chequer to the safety of the mid-point.⁶ Black must now give priority to recapturing the escaped runner. This should be done by splitting the runners, placing one on the 18 point with the six so that it dominates the white outer board and makes any blots placed there vulnerable to attack. The other runner must remain on the 24 point to deter White from placing a blot in his inner board. Having set the ambush the three is played 13/10 to give Black a builder for a blocking point.

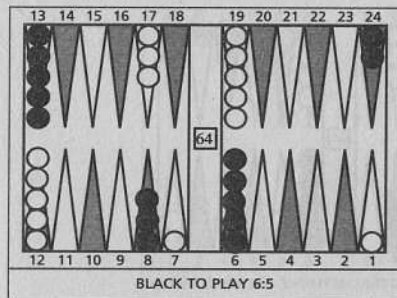
The black blot⁷ on the 18 point is of course vulnerable to attack with any six or one, but if, as is likely, White hits and fails to cover his blot, Black will have 16 return hits on re-entry and a number of dice, such as 5:4, that make a forward anchor.

Black should, if possible, always split his runners when White runs with one chequer. The 18 and 20 points are the ideal split because they dominate the outer board, but any split is better than no split.

⁶ The 13 point is known as the mid-point.

⁷ A single chequer on its own is known as a 'blot'.

1 AND 2 POINT OPENING MOVES



As the 1 and 2 points are outside the intended prime, opening moves are not normally made to these points. Here White has run to the black bar point with an opening 5:1. Black of course hits with the six moving 13/7*. There is nothing useful that can be done with the five to improve Black's position elsewhere on the board so Black should hit on the 1 point with 6/1* to put two white chequers on the bar.

This move protects the blot on the 7 point because White has no dice that will re-enter two chequers and hit on the 7 point. Black will now be able to make the valuable 7 point with any one or six on his next turn.

If White hits the black chequer on the 1 point Black will simply re-circulate it round the board or use it to make an advanced anchor in the white home board. A chequer on the 1 point is of little value to Black in the early stages so Black will not mind being hit as long as White has an open home board.