

Chapter 1

Tackling the Basics of Backgammon

In This Chapter

- ▶ Finding out what backgammon is all about
 - ▶ Familiarising yourself with the backgammon board
 - ▶ Understanding the basic ideas
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Are you one of the thousands of people who have a backgammon board kicking around at home but have never actually played the game? Or perhaps you've played a couple of games with a friend or relative and had your interest whetted? Maybe you've played the game quite a bit and feel yourself to be invincible? Let me assure you that absolutely anybody can play backgammon and get many hours of enjoyment and mental stimulation from the game.

In this chapter, I define the game of backgammon and discuss the basics of how you play and the equipment you need.

Looking at the Basics of the Game

Backgammon is a board game in which players on two opposing sides use the roll of two dice each in a race to get 15 playing pieces around a board with 24 points, bear them off, and thus win the game.

The game requires at least two players, although variations, which I explain in Chapter 12, allow more than two players to take part.

At its simplest, backgammon is a racing game, but because the pieces of the two opposing sides come into conflict while racing, the strategy and tactics can become very subtle. So, although the objective of the game is very straightforward and can appear deceptively easy, the many dangers and obstacles the pieces encounter as they make their journey around the board provide the game with infinite variety and challenges.

You're awarded a different number of points for different ways of winning. I explain the types of wins in Chapter 2.

Setting Up the Board and Arranging the Pieces



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 points each. The quadrants are referred to as the player's *home board* and *outer board* and the opponent's home board and outer board. Your home and outer boards are the quadrants nearest to you. A ridge down the centre of the board called the *bar* separates the home and outer boards from each other. Figure 1-1 shows a backgammon board with the four boards and the bar identified.

Backgammon boards typically come as little briefcases that fold out flat to create the board. This space-saving feature makes them easy to carry.

Each player has 15 pieces. Unlike chess, where the two players most commonly have white or black pieces, in backgammon the pieces – or stones or men or *checkers*, which is the term I prefer and use throughout the book – can be any two colours.

Figure 1-2 shows the starting position for both the player's and opponent's 15 checkers.

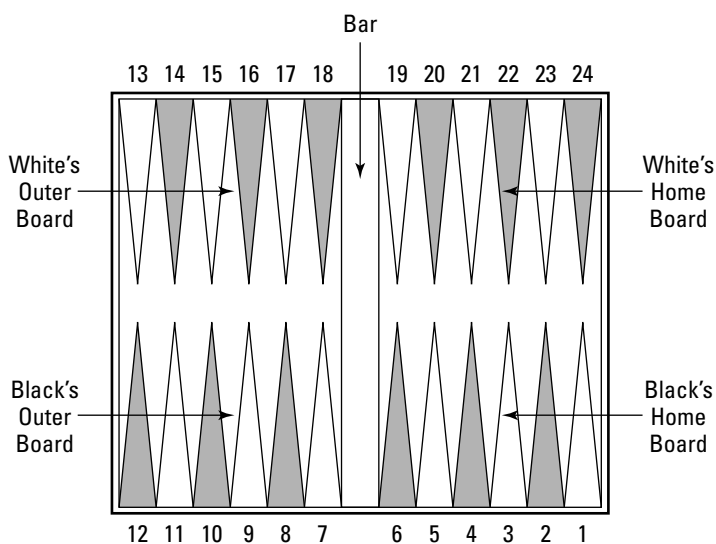


Figure 1-1: The basic backgammon board.

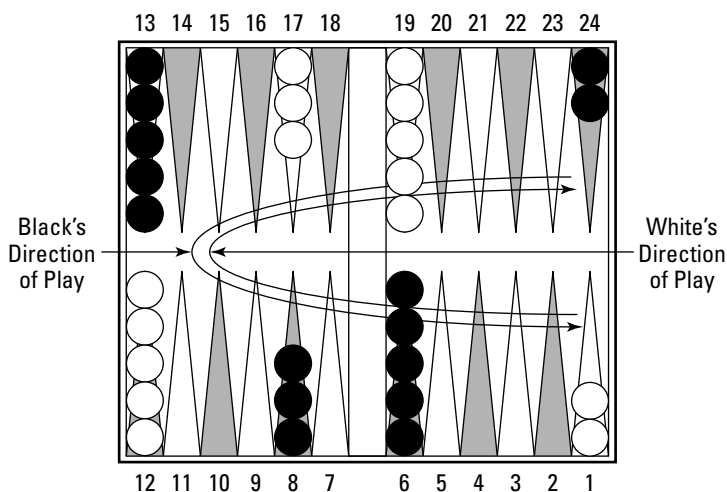


Figure 1-2: The board with checkers in the starting position.

On a real board the points aren't numbered, but I did it here so that I can refer to the points by number in the text.

Before starting the game, you place your checkers in their starting positions:

- ✓ Five checkers on your 6-point in your home board
- ✓ Three checkers on your 8-point in your outer board
- ✓ Five checkers on your 13-point in your opponent's outer board
- ✓ Two checkers on your 24-point in your opponent's home board.

Your opponent sets her checkers opposite to yours in a mirror image.

From your opponent's point of view, the point numbers are reversed. Your 13-point is your opponent's 12-point, your 3-point his 22-point, and so on.



You can set up the board with your home board on your right or left. If your home board is on your right-hand side, you move your checkers anticlockwise, as Black does in Figure 1-2. If your home board is to your left, you move in a clockwise direction, as White does in the illustration.

You may be more comfortable with one set-up or the other when you first start to play, but you soon get used to playing either way round. In the days before electricity, the board was always set up with the home boards nearest to the strongest source of light. In the twenty-first century, we no longer have that particular problem!

Examining the Rest of the Equipment

What else do you need other than the board and the checkers before you start to play? The following sections tell you.

Dice

In backgammon, the moves are determined by the roll of dice. Each player has two standard dice with six faces each bearing a number from 1 to 6. The dice are normally, but not always, the same colour as the checkers.



Opposite sides of a die always add up to seven, so the 6 faces the 1, the 4 faces the 3, and the 5 faces the 2.

In good quality backgammon boards, you find what are known as *precision dice*, the same as used in casinos. They're called precision dice because they're machined in such a way that each face of the die has an identical weight and so the die gives what is known as *true rolls*, which means that if you roll the die thousands of times, each of the six numbers land face up approximately the same number of times.

Dice shakers or dice cups



In backgammon, you're not allowed to throw the dice from your hand onto the board. Like the majority of games (other than craps) that involve dice, you must use a dice shaker to eliminate cheating. Amazingly, a good dice mechanic can cheat and roll a specific number if he's allowed to roll from his hand. Shakers eliminate this possibility.

A dice shaker is a cup (like a drink holder) normally made of leather or plastic. The best dice shakers have a slight ridge just below the lip on the inside so that the dice catch the ridge as they're projected onto the board and then they roll rather than slide. The shakers aren't always perfectly round because they need to fit into the board when the board is folded up.

Doubling cube

Finally, but most importantly, when you buy a backgammon board you find the doubling cube inside. This six-sided die is marked with the numbers 2, 4, 8, 16, 32, and 64, although you occasionally find a doubling cube marked with a 1 instead of a 64.

The doubling cube keeps track of the number of points at stake in each game as well as indicating which player last doubled. At the start of the game the doubling cube is set with the 64 face uppermost and is placed in the centre of the board and to one side.



I explain all about the doubling cube and how this cube is used in Chapter 6 but for now just remember this – of all the pieces of equipment, the doubling cube is by far the most difficult to master.

Digging into the Underlying Concepts

I'm often asked, 'What skills do I need to be good at backgammon?' The answer to that question gives you an idea of what lies ahead in this book.

Buying your own board

Literally thousands of backgammon boards are available from all sorts of retailers. No standard size or colour exists and so buying a board is very much a matter of personal style, taste, and, needless to say, budget.

The most expensive board I ever saw cost just a fraction under £2 million! Made of solid gold and inlaid with 60,000 tiny diamonds, I suppose its price was not unreasonable – but it was totally impractical to actually play on.

Back in the real world, you can buy a board for as little as £10 or as much

as £2,000 or even more. I recommend buying a board of a reasonable size (very small boards strain the eyes); ideally about 45 centimetres by 28 centimetres when folded in half (nearly all backgammon boards fold in half for transportation). The colours of the checkers and the points I leave entirely to you. If you can afford them, I also encourage you to buy precision dice.

One final point is that I advise against a wooden board unless you want a very noisy game! I provide useful sources of equipment in Chapter 16.

Backgammon is known as a game of *total information*, meaning that you can see everything on the board in front of you, as you do when you play chess. Having total information is very different to *partial information* card games such as poker and bridge, in which you have to spend considerable time and mental energy trying to work out what cards your opponents hold. Some games players excel at one type of game or the other. A few very good players excel at both game types.

I cover the three basic skills required to play backgammon in the next three sections.

Making use of arithmetic

How you move your checkers is governed by the numbers that come up when you roll the dice. As in any game involving dice, arithmetic and understanding numbers are pretty significant in playing backgammon.

As in all great games, you can apply skills at different levels and if you're a wizard at arithmetic, you may be able to do things that some of your opponents can't.

If you haven't got a mathematical mind, don't worry in the slightest. I have many friends who don't concern themselves about the arithmetic at all and still get hours of enjoyment from playing backgammon. I give you the basics and then you can decide how much effort you want to put into this aspect of the game.

Practising pattern recognition

In your daily life, you do certain things again and again. After you've done something once or twice, you remember how to do it the next time without thinking; this is *pattern recognition*. You can apply the same principle to backgammon.

Comprehending the vast number of possible backgammon positions is almost impossible. If you had to analyse each position from scratch every time you played the game, it wouldn't be much fun. Luckily, positions and types of positions constantly recur, so if you can remember the strategy you used last time you had a similar position, then you can

make use of that knowledge to accelerate your decision-making process in your current situation.

Over time you build up a mental library of positions and make increasing use of that library every time you play. The very best players have a huge library and the ability to recall information from it.

Don't worry if this process sounds quite daunting. You can quickly build up your own mental library and start to use it almost immediately. This book provides you with the first entries!

Being mindful of psychology

Backgammon has swings of fortune unlike nearly any other game. You must be able to cope with the adrenalin surge that takes place when you go from zero to hero in the time it takes to roll the dice. The reverse is also true – you have to be able to cope with losing from the most unlikely positions. More importantly, you have to understand and make use of the impact of such swings of fortune on your opponent.

Understanding your opponent's mental make-up can be very useful in backgammon; in this book I show you how to apply pressure on your opponent to your advantage.



Never forget that you're playing another human being. Unlike computers, human beings make mistakes, sometimes technical in nature, sometimes emotional. A calm temperament is a huge asset when playing backgammon!

Combining Three Parts into a Whole Game

Players divide the game of backgammon into three phases – opening, middle game, and end game. You need to understand each part in its own right but also how the three combine to make the whole. Playing backgammon is a little like listening to a symphony – you enjoy the whole thing but you also understand the contribution that each movement makes to the overall effect.

Here's a quick breakdown of what each phase entails:

✓ **The opening:** The main objective of the opening move is to activate your forces (checkers). Unlike chess, you rarely find comprehensive analyses of opening backgammon moves and subsequent responses but I cover this crucial area of the game in detail in Chapter 4.

✓ **The middle game:** The middle game is the most complex area of the game where the two armies seek to gain the upper hand and skirmishes and full-blooded battles are the order of the day.

To help you understand the middle game, I break it down into different types and then create broad principles for each type. Chapters 7 and 8 address the middle game.

✓ **The end game:** Finally the armies (largely) disengage and each player seeks to bear off his checkers as quickly as possible and win the game. This phase may seem simple, but often contact between the opposing forces late into the game adds to the complexity of the end game. I cover the end game in Chapters 9 to 11.

Choosing among the Different Ways to Play the Game

You can play backgammon purely for fun and without the doubling cube. This style of play is common in the Middle East. But more often, playing backgammon involves using the doubling cube and playing for some sort of stake. I talk about the various styles in the next sections.



A single game of backgammon can take anywhere from 30 seconds to 30 minutes, so often players define a session by number of games (best of three, for example) or period of time (games won in an hour, for instance). I like to play for three to four hours at a time. (My personal record is 27 hours!)

Wagering one-on-one

Normally you play head-to-head backgammon for a stake, however nominal, which adds a level of interest to the game. The two main styles when money is involved are:

- ✔ **Money play:** Each game is treated separately and played for an agreed stake. At the end of each game, the loser pays the winner the agreed initial stake multiplied by the value of the doubling cube and further multiplied by 2 for a gammon or 3 for a backgammon (I explain these terms in Chapter 2).
- ✔ **Match play:** The players agree that the winner is the first to reach an agreed number of points. So, a seven-point match is one in which the first player to score seven points wins the match.

Match play is more complex than money play because you have to factor the score into your decisions as to how to move the checkers and, more importantly, how to handle the doubling cube.

Entering the chouette

The final and most exciting way to play the game is known as *chouette* (shoo-et), which I explain in detail in Chapter 12. In this form of the game, one player plays against two or more other players who are allowed to consult with one another over their moves. The single player and the numerous opponents together form a *chouette*.



Playing chouettes is a great way to pick up the game quickly. If you listen to a group of good players discuss a difficult position, you can discover more in five minutes than you'd get from five hours of play against a weak opponent.

I've spent countless hours of my life playing chouettes and enjoy this form of the game most. Three (or four or five) heads are generally reckoned to be better than one but I have proof that this assumption is not always the case!



The origins of backgammon

Backgammon is one of the oldest games in existence. Its history can be traced back nearly 5,000 years to its origins in Mesopotamia (modern-day Iraq). The world's oldest set of dice (made from human bone) were recently discovered in that part of the world.

Backgammon first became popular under the Romans, who called it *Duodecum Scripta et Tabulae* or 'Tables' for short. Emperor Claudius had a board built on his chariot.

The word *backgammon* first appeared in writing in 1645, although nobody knows for sure where the name originated. The game itself appears frequently in art and literature, perhaps most famously in Hieronymus Bosch's painting *The Garden of Earthly Delights* and Shakespeare's play *Love's Labour's Lost*.

Although popular during Victorian England, by the 1920s backgammon was losing its appeal. Luckily two things happened more or less in

parallel: the concept of doubling was introduced and the variation of play known as the *chouette* arrived. From these developments, backgammon has never looked back and indeed with the advent of online play is again growing in popularity. Unlike chess, significant advances in backgammon theory have happened only in the last 20 years and can be traced directly to the arrival of powerful computers using neural net technology.

Neural net technology enables computers to play at the same level as the best players in the world. Because of their processing power computers are able to perform analysis impossible for humans. This processing power has enabled humans to test theories that were impossible to test 20 years ago and as a result today's expert is light years removed from his 1970s counterpart.

In time, no doubt, computers will be the strongest players in the world!

