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- Get into the swing of tournament backgammon

Chris Bray

*Backgammon correspondent,
The Independent*



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by Chris Bray



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About the Author

Chris Bray has been playing backgammon for over thirty years. He is a multiple tournament winner and plays regularly on the European circuit. Chris writes the only backgammon column published in a national newspaper, *The Independent*, where his words have graced many a breakfast table on a Saturday morning for the last fifteen years.

Chris is also a prolific author and *Backgammon For Dummies* is his fifth book. His other works include *What Colour is the Wind?* and *Second Wind*.

Chris lives in south-west London with his wife Gill and daughter Kate.

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Firstly I would like to thank all at Wiley who have been involved with this book and given me help and guidance along the way. The backgammon community has complained for years that having no *For Dummies* book was a serious omission. I am pleased to say that oversight has now been corrected.

I would like to thank my technical reviewer, Ray Kershaw, for the accuracy of his work and his helpful insights.

Finally, I would like to thank my wife and daughter for their patience while this book was being written. Authors tend to write at strange times of day and I am no exception – I have often seen the dawn break as I wrote!

Dedication

For Gill and Kate.

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We're proud of this book; please send us your comments through our Dummies online registration form located at www.dummies.com/register/.

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Introduction

Thirty years ago I was an avid chess player. My girlfriend (now wife) taught me to play backgammon but I didn't take it seriously. Then one night I was working through the small hours testing some software (computers weren't quite as fast in the late 1970s as they are today) and a colleague challenged me to a game of backgammon while we waited for the electronic abacus to perform.

In 45 minutes I lost £10 and discovered that I knew absolutely nothing about the game. That really annoyed me and the next day I bought two books on backgammon. I read the books (more than once), practised with a friend, and a month later challenged my work colleague again. I recovered my £10 and won some more besides. Justice!

I've loved the game for 30 years now and play nearly every day, either live or on the Internet. Backgammon continues to fascinate and astound me and some of my closest friends have come from the world of backgammon. I hope the game gives you as much pleasure as it has given me.

About This Book

The ideal way to discover backgammon is to combine tuition and study with playing the game. I can't be your playing partner but I can pass on my knowledge to you for you to study and that's why I've taken so much pleasure in writing *Backgammon For Dummies*.

Over the years I've introduced a lot of people to backgammon by approaching the game in a relatively logical fashion but at the same time (hopefully) I've made it fun for my students. I hope this book comes across in the same way.

I cover every aspect of backgammon in this book, so if you're a novice you'll find sufficient information to get you acquainted with the game and able to play at a reasonable level. If you

already know how to play, you'll find plenty of information to help you improve your game and gain a greater understanding of it.

Whether you're a complete beginner or an experienced player, I hope you'll find this book really useful in improving and enjoying your game.

Conventions Used in This Book

No, not backgammon conventions yet! (Although you can find where to play tournament backgammon in Chapter 16.) The conventions I use enable you to navigate this book as easily as possible.

I designate the two players Black and White and whenever I ask you to assess a position or calculate a play, you'll be playing as Black.

I alternate between male and female pronouns in odd and even chapters to be fair to both genders. So White swaps between being male and female!

The action parts of numbered steps are in **bold** and web addresses are in `mono font`. When I introduce a new term, it appears in *italics*.

I include many illustrations of backgammon boards. You'll find explanations of these along the way.

Foolish Assumptions

I assume, perhaps wrongly, that you:

- ✓ Have never played a game of backgammon in your life.
- ✓ Are keen to discover a game that's fascinated humankind for 5,000 years and continues to baffle people despite help from computers.
- ✓ Aren't that accustomed to using dice.
- ✓ Aren't a maths genius when it comes to the arithmetic that's part of the game.

I hope that this book answers all your backgammon questions.

How This Book is Organised

The great thing about *For Dummies* books is that you don't have to read them all the way through. You can simply turn to the bit you want – a chapter, a section, even just a paragraph. The table of contents and the index can help you out. Of course, the various elements of backgammon are all linked to each other and I sometimes make reference to one chapter from another (mainly as a reminder) but in the main how you navigate is up to you.

Here's a taster of what lies ahead.

Part I: Starting and Playing the Game

This part covers all the basics that you need to start playing backgammon. I start with how to set up the checkers on the board, and look at the basic rules of the game including the different ways of playing. I describe some of the very basic tactics you need to understand to enjoy playing the game. Finally in this part, I look at how to play the opening moves. Like many games, the first few moves in backgammon are crucial to later success.

Part II: Handling the Middle Game

Part II is all about the complex area known as the middle game. The part starts with a couple of chapters on doubling, probably the most difficult area of the game and one that still causes arguments whenever players discuss the game. The rest of the part is devoted to handling all the possible types of middle game that can occur.

Part III: Bearing Off (The Last Lap)

After the opening and the middle game, the next logical step is the ending and Part III looks at how to bear the checkers off the board – the final stage in any game of backgammon. Apparently simple at first sight, I explore some hidden subtleties in this stage of the game.

Part IV: Varying the Play

Backgammon is a game that's infinite in its variety. Chapter 11 looks at complex endings. After that I explore the multi-person version of backgammon known as chouette, which is great fun to play and also great to pick up tips from. Finally I look at tournament play – the most difficult form of the game. In the last chapter, I give advice and guidance about venturing onto the Internet to play online.

Part V: The Part of Tens

Here, in a concise and information-packed part, you'll find my personal list of recommended books for further study, a list of useful backgammon resources, and my ten backgammon commandments. Perhaps not quite as strict as the original commandments, these help you to remember some of the key points from the book.

Icons Used in This Book

The icons in this book highlight particular points to remember, be cautious of, or take on board (no pun intended) to improve your game.



You'll find the doubling cube next to interesting backgammon facts and history – the lore that makes the game so fascinating.



Whenever I use a word or phrase specific to backgammon, I let you know with this icon.



I help you to get to grips with backgammon by including heaps of examples of games in progress.



This icon draws your attention to an important point to bear in mind.



The target symbol highlights tips to help you become a better player – always assuming you can put the hint to good use!



As in all games you have pitfalls to steer clear of. This symbol indicates something you need to avoid or at least give considerable thought to.

Where to Go from Here

Enough of the preamble. The time has come for you to start to play the greatest game in the world. If you're not sure where to begin, why not be logical and have a look at Chapter 1, which makes the necessary introductions, and starts you on the road to backgammon mastery?

Part I

Starting and Playing the Game

The 5th Wave

By Rich Tennant



'The object of backgammon is to get all of your checkers on this side of the board without me screaming and tipping your chair into the pool.'

In this part . . .

I equip you to get started in playing backgammon, by knowing how to set up the board and the checkers, and the basic rules and tactics of the game, especially the opening moves.

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
-

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.

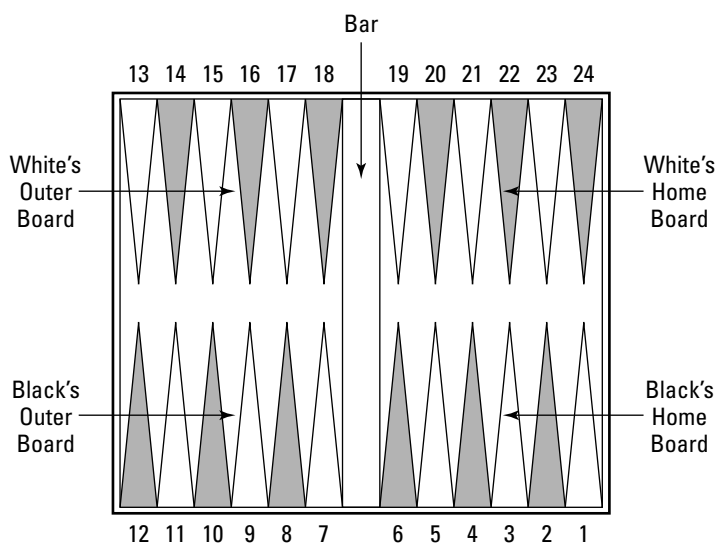


Figure 1-1: The basic backgammon board.

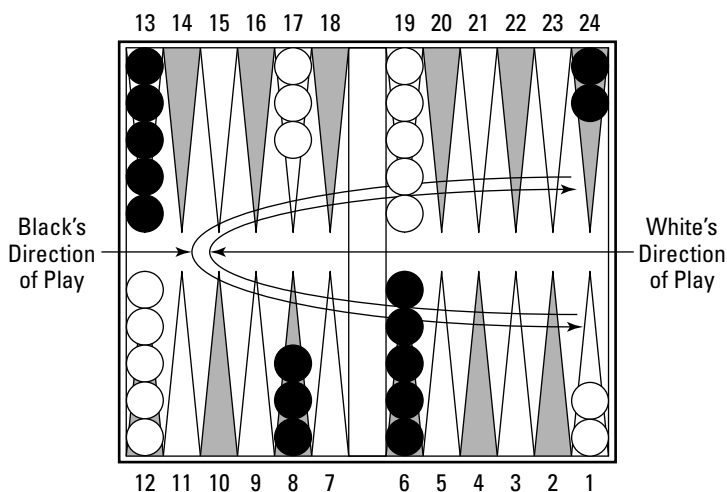


Figure 1-2: The board with checkers in the starting position.