

## JAVEA U3A BACKGAMMON GROUP

### HISTORY OF BACKGAMMON

Backgammon in some form has been around for 5,000 years or more. Some suggest that it originated in the Persian Empire and others claim it for Iraq or Syria. It certainly appears to be the oldest known recorded board game in history.

Records show the game being played by Egyptians, Sumerians, Romans, and Persians. as a forerunner to the popular game of Parchesi, which is quite similar.

Senet was the name of the game played in Egypt with a board having 3 by 10 squares. The knowledge of the rules is vague though it was a gambling game moving and displacing opponent's stone pieces while moving in opposite directions. The dice are thought to have been made from bones.

A derivative of the Egyptian game turned up in Rome called Ludus Duodecim Scriptorum (it means twelve lines on a board) and had three lines of twelve points. It was played with three six-sided dice.

A later version was known as Tabula (table) with a famous exponent being the Emperor Claudius. He had a board attached to his chariot and wrote a history of the game, though this was sadly lost.

It arrived in the UK by the first century where it was called, naturally enough, Tables. It survived through the middle ages as a gambling game for the wealthy. It was banned for a time but later became popular again in taverns.

First reference to the name Backgammon appears to be in 1645. The name is from Middle English gam which unsurprisingly means game and back because of course when your blot is hit it goes back to the bar!

Edmund Hoyle then published the first official rules in 1743.

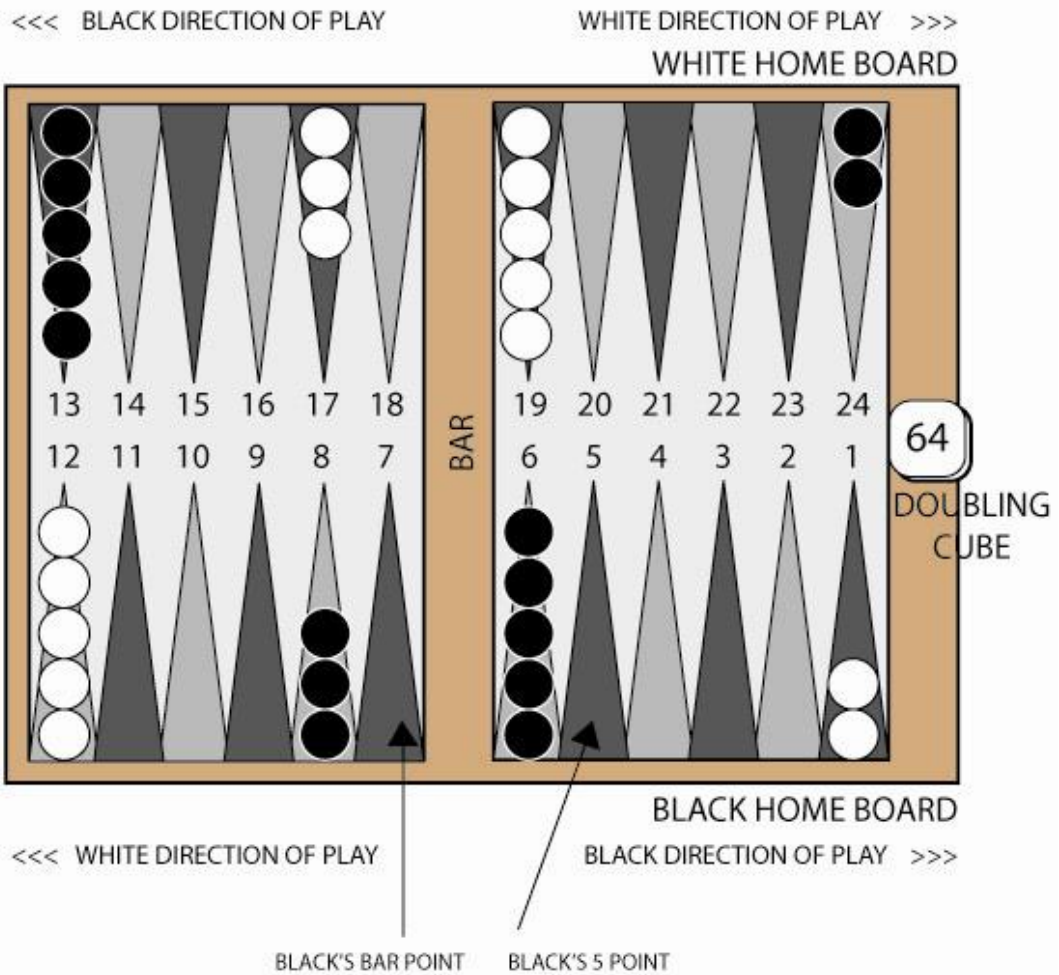
The doubling cube was introduced in New York in the 1920s, the general idea being to accelerate the stakes more quickly. It also favoured the more skilful player who was more capable of judging the chances of certain positions.

The first world championships were held in Bermuda in the 1960s. Bermuda remains a popular center of the Backgammon culture. In the 1970s backgammon became extremely popular with regular big money tournaments creating professional players who were able to live on their winnings.

In recent times the appearance of backgammon as a convenient computer-based game has also extended awareness. The current spread of online gambling sites has also expanded the audience considerably.

BOARD STARTING POSITION, DIRECTION OF PLAY AND NAMING PARTS

WHITE SITS HERE



BLACK SITS HERE

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## **EQUIPMENT**

Backgammon is a game, usually for two players, based upon a board that is arranged to have four quadrants, two inners and two outers, each bearing six elongated points.

The points alternate in colour to assist rapid assessment of the moves (you do need to work at this). The players' counters move in opposite directions to each other.

Down through the centre of the board is a raised section called the **Bar** this plays a key role in the game. However the bar is not counted as a point for any movements.

Each player has fifteen coloured counters (often called stones or checkers) and a pair of dice (often also in their colour).

The cup or box used for throwing the dice normally has an internal lip to ensure that the dice tumble from the cup rather than just fall out.

Finally, the piece that makes the modern game so interesting and challenging, is the doubling cube. This has the numerals 2, 4, 8, 16, 32 and 64 on its faces. Without this cube it could be said that Backgammon is **Ludo** for Adults with it the players can shape the success of their session by skilful use and acceptance or denial of the doubles.

## **SCORING - and GAMBLING**

Of course the game is often used for gambling, but within the group the points scored would simply be used to measure progress within league ladders and during daily and Group competitions. There would be no financial stake contemplated or permitted.

As backgammon is based upon the throw of a dice chance obviously plays an important role. But it is in the players' strategies, their opening moves, their use of the throws they achieve, their understanding of the probabilities and odds of certain throws and, in particular, the use of the doubling cube that does allow the more skilled to prevail.

## **MULTI-PLAYER GAMES and 'CHOUETTES'**

In chess the strategy is set several moves ahead, so to discuss your strategy openly in front of your opponent would usually be pretty foolish. But because each throw of the dice in backgammon changes the positions and strategies so completely this does not apply here. So two learning and playing opportunities exist:

Kibbutzing, or watching, backgammon should be encouraged and the kibbutzer should be permitted to ask a player of their thinking once they have made a throw. Though to point out something to the player that they have missed would not be acceptable.

A Chouette is a means of multiple players gathering around a board. One player, known as the **Box** plays against the rest, the **Team**. The team can discuss strategies, probabilities and reach agreement before moving, which will assist beginners in understanding the play, strategy and probabilities from the more experienced.

## SETTING UP THE GAME

The board has a predefined layout that players must learn and use for the set up, see the diagram provided.

Black is travelling from point 24 to 1 (these point numbers are just for guide and do not appear on the board!) and has two counters on point 1, five counters on each of points 13 and 8 and just three on point 6. White is travelling from point 1 to 24 and has two counters on point 1, five on each of points 12 and 17, two on point 19.

Because play is in opposite directions, moving in this U-shape, there are two distinct viewpoints and if you always play in one position it can be quite disconcerting to then sit on the opposite side. So play both ways regularly so this does not become an issue. You may elect to throw dice for the right to choose a seat or the colour you will play.

Note also that the doubling cube is showing the numeral 64 and sits at the half-way point between the two players. This is to signify that the game is currently being played for one point (there being no 1 on the cube, the 64 is used to do this). It is at the mid-point because neither player has control of the cube as yet.

## OBJECT OF THE GAME

By throwing the pair of dice in turn each player moves their counters according to the throws achieved. The counters are moved around the board until all of their counters are gathered into their home board. Once all of them are there, and provided none are hit and sent back to the bar, then that player can bear off their counters (in the case of black beyond point 1 and white beyond point 24).

The first player to have borne off all their counters has won the game, and wins by the number of points currently shown on the Doubling Cube. However if the winner has borne off all of their counters before their opponent has managed to bear off one then the value of the Cube is doubled . a Gammon. If the winner gets all of their counters off while the opponent still has a counter in the winner's home board or on the bar, then the value of the Cube is trebled . a Backgammon.

During the game if one player does begin to prevail and offers a double to their opponent (see Doubling below) and this is refused then the game ends at that point and the winner wins by the number of points on the Doubling Cube. Note by doing this the player has missed any opportunity of a Gammon or Backgammon . so you need to consider this matter before offering what may be a low-cost way for the opponent to exit the game.

There is no set target of points that determines the winner. In the Group we shall normally set a number of games (usually three) that the players will face each other and the eventual points tally will then determine the winner of that rubber. If it is a league ladder game then the winner will take the loser's place on the ladder if higher, or stay where they are if they were already higher up the ladder.

## PLAYING THE GAME

To start the game the counters should be set up in the start position and then each player takes just one die into their cup and throws it into their right hand board.

*ETIQUETTE RULE ONE:* You must always throw your dice into your right hand board.

*ETIQUETTE RULE TWO:* You must shake the cup vigorously, with your hand over the mouth to avoid spilling the dice, and cast the dice across the board so that they tumble on the board surface. The use of cups with an internal lip will assist with this process.

*ETIQUETTE RULE THREE:* If a die should jump out of your right-hand quadrant or become cocked (ie not lie flat to the playing surface, either by sitting against a counter or the edge of the board) then you must take up both dice and throw them again.

The outcome of the opening throw (each player throwing the one die) determines who will go first. The player who threw the higher number must use these first two dice thrown as their opening move. Thereafter players take turns and use their own pair of dice and cup for their throw.

If both players throw the same number then the doubling cube is turned to show the numeral 2 and the game is now being played for two points. The cube remains at the centre of the board because still neither player has control of it. Within the Group we will allow this automatic doubling to happen for a maximum of three times, ie to reach 8, then the players will continue to throw until a decisive throw is made to determine who will start.

After this initial throw the players take it in turns to throw both of their dice to determine their next move. A turn is completed when the player picks up the dice.

*ETIQUETTE RULE FOUR:* You must not throw your dice until the other player has picked up theirs and has therefore completed their move. This is not just etiquette, this can also be expensive for, if you do throw early then the other player will unilaterally assess the throw you achieved and has the choice as to either make you use it or to force you to throw again. NB: When both players are bearing off then this etiquette rule no longer applies.

*ETIQUETTE RULE FIVE:* There is however a quid pro quo in that if your opponent should pick up the dice before completing a move then you have the absolute right to force them to effect the missed throw or you can choose to make them forego it.

Your counters can only move forward along the direction that you are playing (except when hit when your counter moves back to the bar . see below).

You can move your counter to any open point or to one that bears a counter or counters of yours upon it.

To move the counters the player must consider the two dice as two quite distinct numbers, say a 3 and a 5, and the counter or counters must be moved to the relevant point. Note that if you throw an even number then it will move to the same coloured point, an odd number of course will move to a different coloured point.

You may choose to move one counter by one of the throws and another by the second throw, or move the same counter by the first throw and then again by the second (see note on **Blocked** below). The order in which you take the two throws is entirely free, you can move a 5 then a 3 or a 3 then a 5 in this example.

If a point to which you wish to move your counter bears two or more of your opponent's counters then it is **Blocked** and is not a permitted move. The player must therefore use the move from another location. This is why the two distinct numbers thrown was stressed above, because it might be that the point eight away from the player's counter is open, but if both the points three and five away are blocked then that move is not possible. So don't think of the throw as an 8, it is a 3 and a 5.

**ETIQUETTE RULE SIX:** Unlike chess it is permissible to touch and move counters, even to have removed your hand from them, but you are still allowed to move them back and make another move at any stage until you lift your dice and complete your move.

**ETIQUETTE RULE SEVEN:** The game is intended to be fast, so do take the time to learn how the alternating colour of the points can help you assess a move rapidly, do learn the opening moves, become familiar with the odds, so that you can make your moves with sufficient pace that the game flows smoothly and speedily. There will be a few situations in a game where the options are complex and you will need to take time, but not every move!

If a point to which you wish to move a counter bears just one of your opponent's counters then this is called a **Blot** and may be **hit**. You can move to this point and you remove the opponent's counter and place it on the Bar. For example if you are black then the opponent's white counter will sit up on the bar until they throw a number that allows them to enter into your home board (points 1 through 6). If they cannot enter then the throw is forfeit and may not be used elsewhere on the board. You will of course need to assess whether you want to hit a blot because often this might mean leaving a blot of your own. Further you need to consider if you want that counter back in your home board currently.

As blots are so vulnerable it is often the case that a player will use a throw to move a second counter to join a blot and **build** or block the point from the opponent. At some stages of the game a blot is deliberately created so that it is available as a **Builder** a location that can be built itself or from which the blot is moved to build elsewhere.

If a throw is a **doublet** the same number is achieved with both dice, then this earns a valuable bonus such that, for example if two 3s are thrown, this is doubled so that you have in fact four 3s to move (the same applies to all doublets so four 1s, or four 6s). Doublets are therefore very valuable both because they have the bonus throws but also because they will also allow you to **build** points as you can move two counters to an open point and block it immediately from your opponent.

If a situation emerges where you are not able to make both (or all) moves then you are obliged to move the larger thrown number as the priority. If your throw means that you cannot move with either (or all) of your numbers then the throw is forfeit and the other player takes their next turn.

If you have a counter (or counters) on the Bar then the first priority is to get it (them) back into play. If you are White then your counter must be able to come in on any of the points 1 through 6 that are open in Black's home board. Of course Black's strategy will be to block as many of these as possible to make your task difficult.

Once you have shepherded all of your counters into your home board you can begin to bear off. So as Black for example a throw of 2 and 4 while bearing off will allow you to bear a counter off from the 4 point and another from the 2 point. There is no obligation to do so, you may prefer instead to move one counter from the 6 point up by 4 and another on the 6 point up by 2. If you throw a number higher than any of your remaining counters then you bear off the furthest one. If you throw a number from an unoccupied point then you may not bear off, you must move a counter up.

## THE DOUBLING CUBE

In any particular series of games the element of luck, of fortunate throws, of blots that get a lucky escape, of getting back in when five of the six points were covered are all out of the control of the player. The doubling cube makes the difference for the more skilled, because knowing when to double and when to reject or to accept a double, or to ~~Beaver~~ (see below) will, over a series of games, tend to reward the more skilled player.

At the beginning of the game the doubling cube is set at 64 and placed halfway between the two players. This ~~64~~ rather confusingly means that the game is being played for 1 point (there being no 1 available on the cube).

As explained above, if on the opening throw the players get the same number then the doubling cube is turned to show 2, to indicate that the game is now being played for 2 points. But it stays at the middle of the board, neither player has control of it. A re-throw and both players get the same outcome again, it is moved up to 4. The Group has decided that this may only happen a maximum of three times so once the 8 is shown it does not matter how many more matching throws are achieved the cube stays at 8. The players keep throwing until a different outcome is achieved and proceed with the game.

At the game's end the winner earns the number of points shown by the cube. However if the winner has taken all of their counters off before their opponent has taken off a single one of theirs then this is called a ~~Gammon~~ and the number on the doubling cube is doubled as a bonus to the winner. If the winner has taken all of their counters off before their opponent has taken a single one of theirs off and further the opponent still has one of their counters on the bar or in the winner's home board then this is called a ~~Backgammon~~ and the number on the doubling cube is trebled as a winning bonus.

If at any stage a player thinks they have the upper hand, then when it is next their turn and before they throw their dice, they can offer a double to their opponent. (The maximum of 8 is for throwing doublets at the start, in the game doubles are unlimited)

*ETIQUETTE RULE EIGHT: In offering a double you should pick up the doubling cube turn it to the next level up and place it in front of your opponent to await their decision.*

Your opponent will assess their position and can accept or reject the double.

If they reject the double then the game is over and the points shown on the doubling cube before the offered double are conceded. Do therefore be aware that if you might have been able to achieve a gammon or backgammon then by your offering the double you have in fact let your opponent off lightly.

If they accept the double they acknowledge their acceptance and they keep the cube at their side of the table. For they now have control of the cube. If your position improves further you are not able to use the cube again. If however the game turns in their favour (which it often has a habit of doing) then they can of course offer you a double.

The Group does accept ~~Beavering~~ If you believe your opponent is offering you a double too early, misreading the situation, or feel that your luck is about to turn, (hopefully not chasing your luck!) then on accepting your opponent's double you may ~~beaver~~ and double the cube again. The benefit of the beaver is that you keep control of the cube! You must beaver before the opponent makes their next throw.

So from these comments you can perhaps see that the use of the Cube is something you need to consider carefully. You should usually do this ~~early~~ to be sure that the opponent does not feel the game is a lost cause and will still accept your double while a tad behind. You should also not do it too late, when your dominance is clear and perhaps let them escape a potential gammon or backgammon.

### **If offered a double, how do you assess where you are in a game?**

If you use any of the computer-based or online games then these very conveniently give you a point count that sums all the points that each of your counters must pass to get to home. But when playing live you don't have this opportunity to hand.

So here's what you do (assuming that you are playing Black):

- any counters on points 1 through 3 you count as half a throw because each die can come up as a 1 through a 6 so any here can be cleared with half a die
- any counters on points 4 through 9 you count as 1
- any on 10 through 15 you count 1.5
- any 16 to 21 you count as 2
- any on 22 to 24 and any on the Bar you count as 2.5

Now tot up yours and then your opponents to see who is ahead and don't forget that, if they are doubling you, then they will get the first throw.

## CHOUETTES

This is the name for a game where more than two players can participate.

The players will throw dice to determine who is in the Box. This individual will play against all of the others and stays in the Box while they keep winning, as soon as this person loses they have to join the Team as the last member.

All the other players are the Team and must use their combined best efforts to defeat the person in the Box. The team members throw dice to establish who will be the Captain and the order that the rest of the team will then follow into the Captainty.

The person in the Box and the Captain begin the game normally. Each time the Captain makes a throw the team is encouraged to comment on the way the throw might be used, though the Captain has the final word on this and actually moves the counters.

The game proceeds to a conclusion. If the person in the Box wins then the Captain is relegated to the back of the team and the next team member steps up to be Captain.

If the Captain and his team wins then the Captain goes into the Box, the next member of the team steps up to be Captain and the person from the Box is relegated to the back of the team to await their turn at captainty. Each and every member of the Team is playing the person in the Box for the same number of points as shown on the Doubling Cube.

If the person in the Box should offer the Captain a double then the captain and each of the team members must individually consider, without any team discussion, whether to accept or reject it. If the Captain and all of the team choose not to accept the double then the game is over and the Captain is relegated to the back of the Team and the next team member steps up. The person in the box wins the current Doubling Cube number of points from the Captain and from each of the team members.

If the Captain should refuse the double then the offer is passed on to each of the team members in turn and if one should subsequently accept the double then they will take up the Captainty and the game moves on, each team member that refuses the double loses the point count and is relegated down the team order.

When it is the Captain's turn, and before making that throw, the team can converse and decide that they wish to offer a double to the person in the box. Those of the team that do not want to double marks the current point count and waits to see if the Team wins, but sacrifices the right to be involved in any further discussions with the team members that agreed to the double, and they move to the back of the Team.

If the person in the Box accepts the double then the game proceeds, otherwise the game is forfeit, the Captain goes to the box and the Team all move up their order.

If there is to be a large team then it is valuable to give the person in the box a partner to assist. This partner stays a partner if the person in the Box wins, if not then the partner becomes the box, the Captain becomes the partner and so on...