



*Proudly Present*

# *The Rules of Backgammon*

*by Phil Simborg*

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"The only athletic sport I ever mastered was  
backgammon" - *Douglas William Jerrold*

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# *1. WHAT IS BACKGAMMON?*

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**B**ackgammon is considered to be the world's oldest board game - over 5,000 years old. It is a combination of skill and luck, but tournaments played all over the world prove conclusively that the more skill you have, the more you will win. Backgammon is essentially an obstacle race between two armies. The first player to get all his checkers around the board and then off the board is the winner.

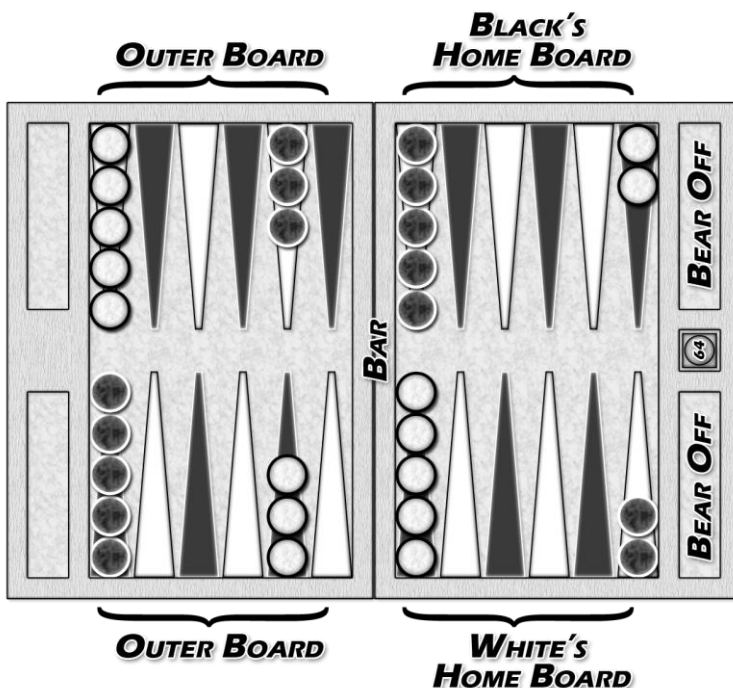


## 2. *BASIC RULES OF BACKGAMMON*

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Each player starts out in a set position with 15 checkers.

Diagram 1:



The object of the game is to move your checkers around the board and take them all off before your opponent does. Bearing off your checkers can only begin once all your checkers are safely in your home board.

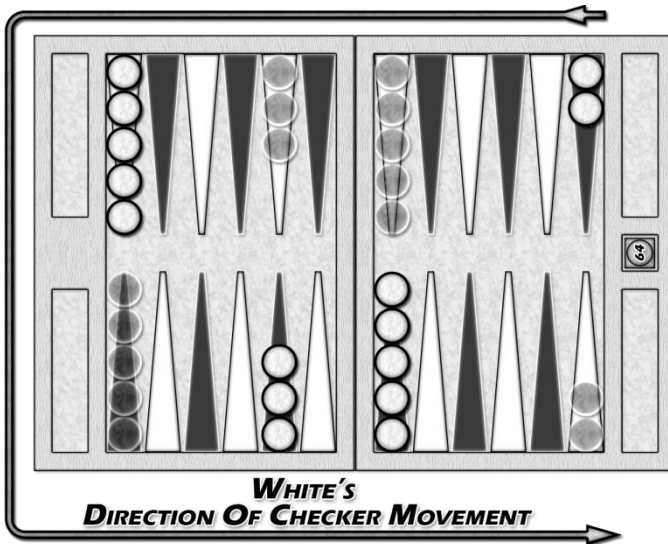
## **A. Opening Roll**

At the beginning of the game, each player rolls one die. The player with the higher roll plays the combination of the two dice. For example, if White rolls a 4 and Black rolls a 2, White gets to play a 4-2. The turn ends when White completes his move and picks up his dice. Then, Black gets to roll 2 dice and can play his roll. If doubles are rolled on the opening roll, both players simply roll again.

## **B. Checker Movement**

Rolling the dice determines how you are allowed to move your checkers. See Diagram 2 for direction of checker movement.

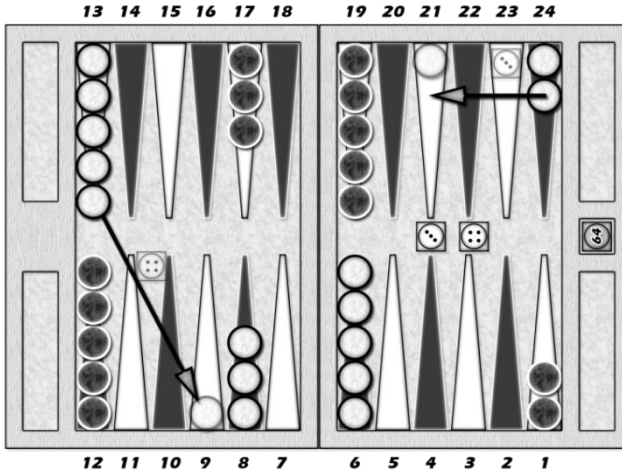
**Diagram 2:**     *Direction of Checker Movement.*



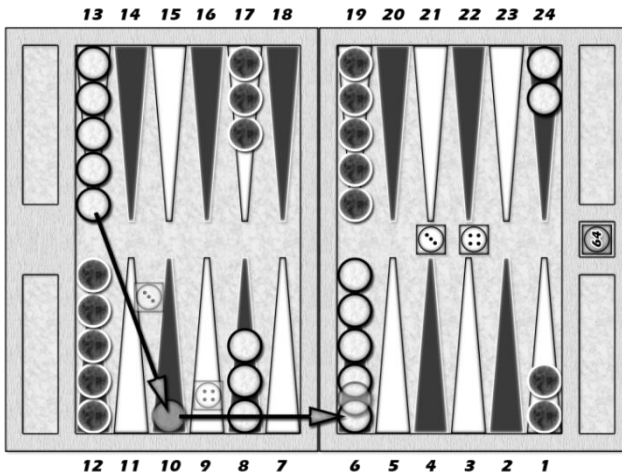
## BASIC RULES OF BACKGAMMON

If you roll a 3 and a 4, you may move one checker 3 “pips” or 3 points, and another checker 4 pips; or you may move the same checker 3 and then 4 or 4 and then 3. Note that the center bar is not counted when moving the checkers (see Diagram 3 & 4).

**Diagram 3:** *White moving 3-4 by moving two separate checkers.*



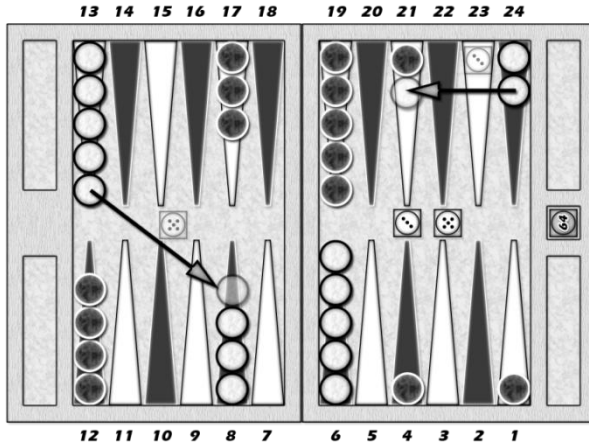
**Diagram 4:** *White moving one checker 3 and 4.*



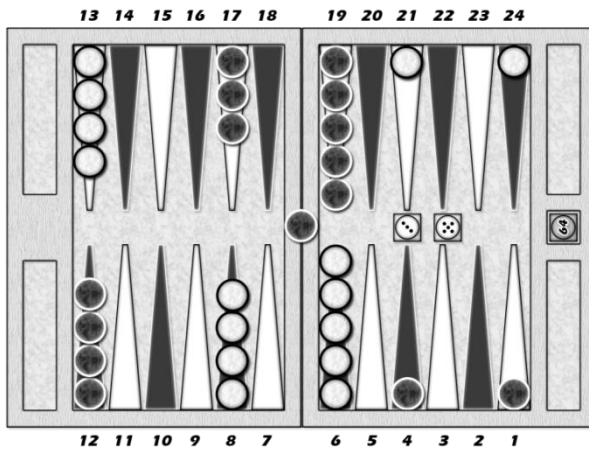


A player may not land on a point that is occupied by 2 or more of the opponent's checkers. If a player lands on a point occupied by only one of his opponent's checker, that checker is "hit" and must be placed on the center bar and starts all over (see Diagram 5 & 6).

**Diagram 5:**     *White hitting with the 3.*



**Diagram 6:**     *How the board looks after White has hit with the 3.*

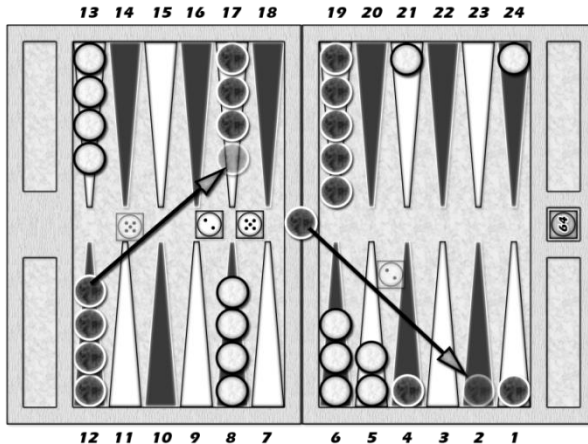


(Black has one checker on the bar)

## BASIC RULES OF BACKGAMMON

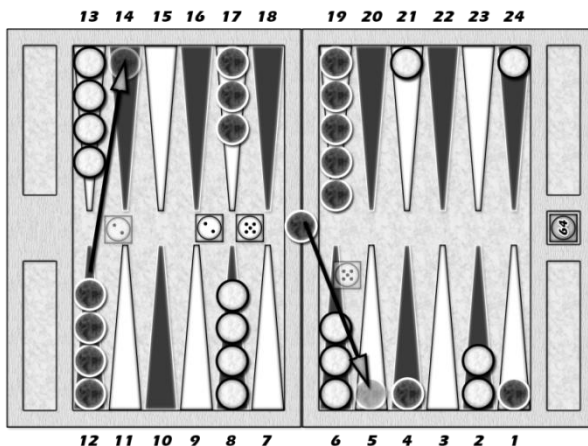
Once a checker is on the bar, it must enter into the opposing player's "home board" (see Diagram 7) before any other checkers can be moved. A player may not move any checkers on the board while there is still one or more checkers on the bar.

**Diagram 7:** *Black entering with a 5-2 when the 5 point is blocked.*



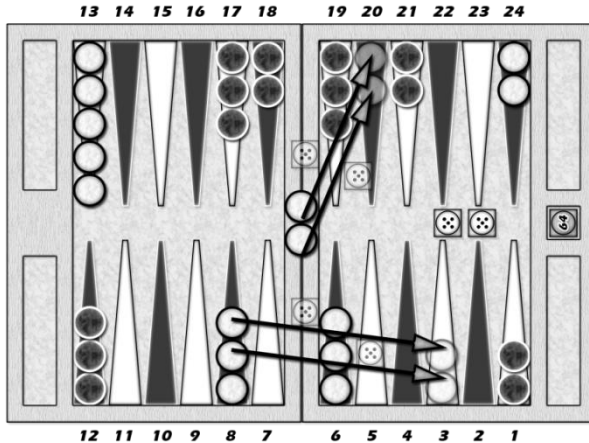
*(Black must use his 2 to re-enter)*

**Diagram 8:** *Black entering with a 5-2 when the 2 point is blocked.*



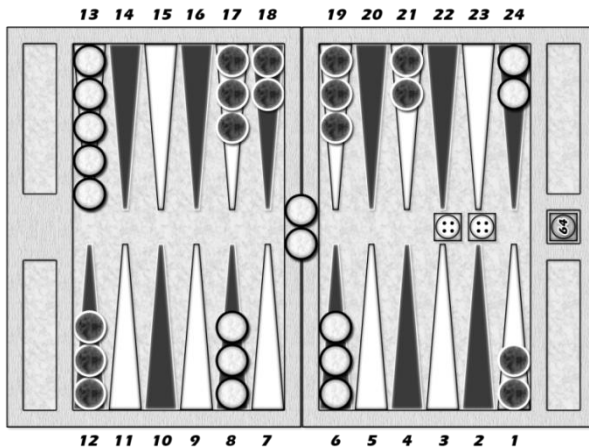
*(Black must use his 5 to re-enter)*

**Diagram 9:** *Entering with doubles.*



(First, White must bring both his checkers off the bar and onto the 5 point. Once White has done that, White has 2 more moves of 5 remaining as indicated.)

**Diagram 10:** *Dancing with doubles.*



(White cannot re-enter the game)

When the player on the bar rolls doubles and there is no free spot to re-enter, he is said to be "dancing". Since the 4 point is blocked, White cannot enter on this roll, and must wait for another turn. If White rolled a 6 and 4, he would also be "dancing".

To summarize, if a player rolls the dice and there is a legal move that can be made, it must be made, and if only one checker can be legally moved, the higher number on the dice must be played. If it is not possible to move or re-enter from the bar, the turn is forfeited.

For a roll to be legal, both die must land flat on the player's right side of the board. If either die goes off the board, lands on top of a checker, or is not entirely flat, the entire roll goes over.

### ***C. Doubles***

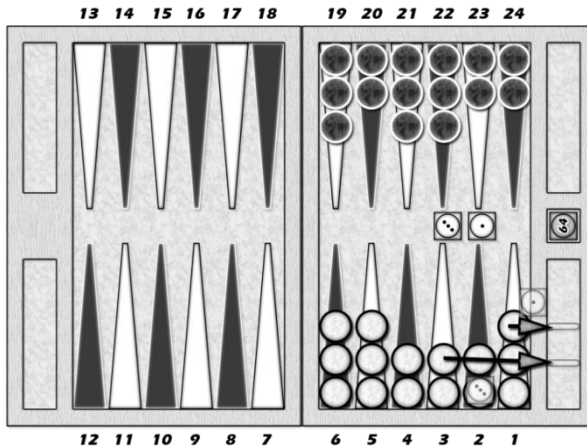
When doubles are rolled, the move is doubled. Therefore, if you roll a 5-5 you get to move 4 times ( $4 \times 5 = 20$  pips in total). Again, you can move one checker all four times, or 4 different checkers, or any combination of checkers.

### ***D. Bearing Off***

Remember, the goal of the game is to get all of your checkers off the board before your opponent gets his checkers off. You cannot remove checkers from the board until all of your checkers are in your home board. Once they are in your home board, you may remove checkers as dictated by the dice.

For example, if you roll a 3 and you have one or more checkers on the 3 point (the third point from the end of the board), you may take a checker off from the 3 point. You could also move a checker 3 pips from a higher point (e.g. from point 4 to point 1, from point 5 to point 2, or from point 6 to point 3) if you choose to, however, you cannot move a checker that is on a lower point.

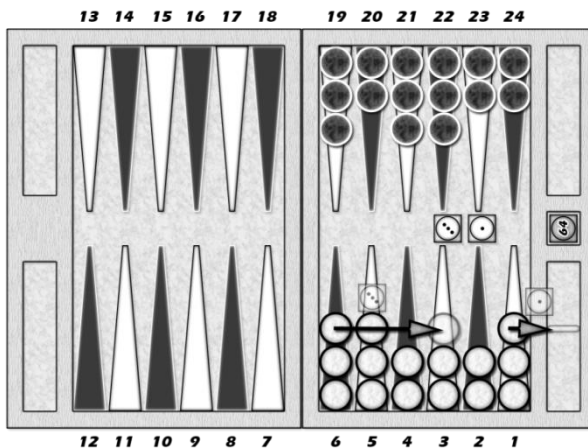
**Diagram 11:** *Bearing off with 3-1 rolled.*



*(White removes 2 checkers)*

## BASIC RULES OF BACKGAMMON

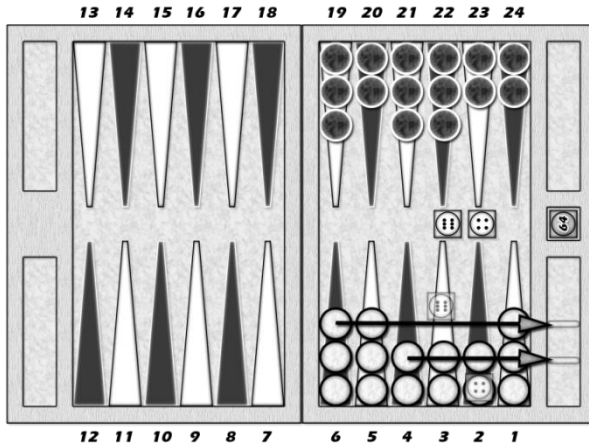
**Diagram 12:** *Bearing off play with 3-1, optional play.*



*(White removes only one checker)*

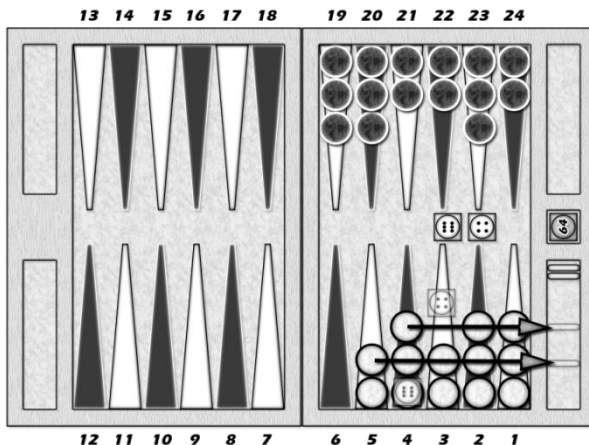
If you roll a 6 and have one or more checkers on the 6 point, then you can take a checker off from the 6 point. If you do not have any checkers on your 6 point and roll a 6, then you must move a checker from your 5 point, and if you have no checkers on your 5 point, then you must move one from the 4 point and so on.

**Diagram 13:**     *Bearing off 6-4.*



*(White removes two checkers)*

**Diagram 14:**     *Bearing off 6-4.*



*(White removes two checkers)*

***E. Single, Gammon, Backgammon***

The player who gets all of his checkers off first wins 1 point (single). It does not matter whether his opponent has 1 checker off or 14 checkers off, the win is still a single and worth 1 point. The point is doubled to 2 points if you win a “gammon.” A gammon is when a player gets all of his checkers off before his opponent gets any checkers off. The point is tripled to 3 points if you win a “backgammon.” A backgammon is when a player gets all of his checkers off before his opponent gets any checkers off, and there is one or more of the opponent’s checkers either in the player’s home board or still on the bar.



### 3. *THE DOUBLING CUBE*

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At the beginning of the game, the doubling cube is placed halfway between the 2 players (usually on the side of the board) with 64 facing up. Every game begins at a stake of 1 point per game. The doubling cube is used to raise the stakes, making the game worth more than 1 point, similar to making a bet in poker.

Either player, before his roll only, may decide to raise the stakes by offering the cube on 2 to his opponent. You cannot offer the cube prior to your opponent rolling the dice. When doubling, a player is said to be “doubling” his opponent.

The player who is doubled has two options: he may accept the cube and put it on his side of the board (usually the lower right or left corner, outside of the field of play), and now the game is played for 2 points. In this case, a single is worth 2 points, a gammon would then be worth 4 points, and a backgammon 6 points.

If the player who is doubled does not feel he has a strong enough position to risk the extra points, he may reject, or “drop” the cube, in which case the game is over and he loses 1 point.

If the cube is accepted, the player with the cube has the option of “redoubling” any time before he rolls the dice. He redoubles by turning the cube to 4 and offering it to his opponent. His opponent may drop the cube and lose 2 points, or he may accept the cube on 4 and put it on his side, raising the stakes of the game to 4 points. If the cube is on 4, a gammon would be worth 8 and a backgammon would be worth 12 points. The player holding the 4 cube has the option of “redoubling” to 8 at any time before his roll, and so on.

## THE DOUBLING CUBE

A player dropping a cube going from 2 to 4, cedes 2 points to his opponent. A player dropping a cube going from 4 to 8, cedes 4 points to his opponent, and so on.

Some common answers about the rules:

1. You must move the entire move if you can.
2. You can put as many checkers as you want on a single point.
3. The game can never end in a tie.
4. If you move one checker, you may move the lower number first or the higher number first, as you choose.
5. If you land on a point where your opponent has a single checker, that checker must be “hit” and put on the bar—the player does not have an option to not hit the checker.
6. If you cannot play both numbers, you must play the higher number if you can.
7. You may move your checkers and then put them back so long as you have not picked up your dice.
8. If your opponent rolls before you have picked up your dice, his roll does not count.
9. A player may not voluntarily “pass” his turn.
10. If a player moves illegally and then picks up his dice, the opponent may accept the play or may require the player to take back his move and move again legally. The second player gives up that option once he rolls the dice.

## 4. BASIC STRATEGY

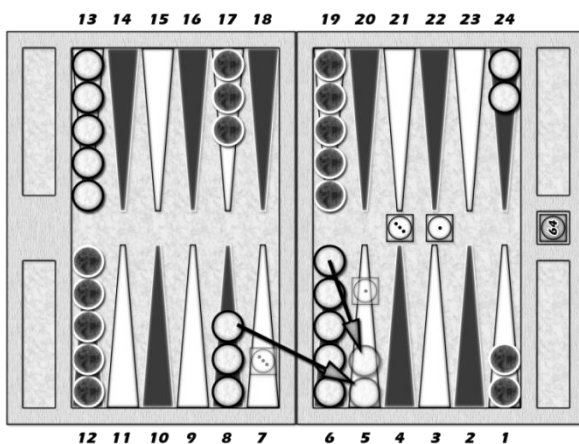
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The basic goal of the game is to move your checkers around the board as safely as possible, with the least chance of getting hit, while at the same time, make it as difficult as possible for your opponent to bring his checkers around the board. One of the best strategies is to make as many points as possible. A point is made when two or more checkers occupy the point.

When the game starts, you already have your 6 point and 8 point made. One of the major goals of the game is to try to make your 5 and 7 points so that you have several points made in a row, thus making it difficult for your opponent to “escape” his 2 checkers that start in your inner board.

For that reason, the best opening roll is a 3-1, and you would use that to make your 5 point and immediately have an excellent advantage in the game (see Diagram 15).

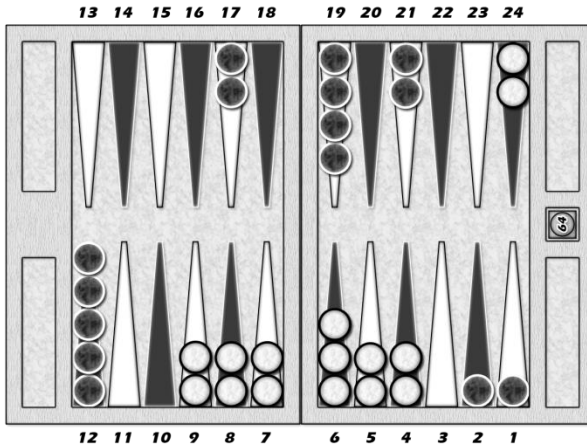
Diagram 15: *White makes his 5 point.*



## BASIC STRATEGY

If you can get 6 points in a row, that is called a 6-Prime, and it would then be impossible for your opponent to get by (see Diagram 16).

**Diagram 16:** *White establishes a "prime", trapping both black checkers for the moment.*



In the early game, players should do their best to make points, as those points not only serve to make it more difficult for your opponent to move his checkers around the board, it also provides more safe places to move your own checkers.

In the early game it is also generally a good idea to “hit” your opponent’s single checkers when you can, particularly those checkers that are on his side of the board. Hitting his checkers will put him farther behind in the “race” to get the checkers around the board, and also it will require him to use up part of his roll simply to bring the checker in from off the bar. When a player has a checker on the bar, he has less flexibility to make points or hit his opponent.

### **Match Play**

In backgammon tournaments, the winner is determined using a style of competition called Match Play. Competitors are paired off, and each round is played to a specified number of points. The winning players progress through the tournament, until there are only two players remaining in the finals. This is called Match Play, and generally the number of points required to win each level increases as you proceed to the finals. Matches are played to odd numbers of points, such as 5, 7 or 9, and major tournaments may have matches as long as 13 points or more.

### **In Match Play the Crawford Rule is used**

Crawford Rule: The Crawford rule states that when one player reaches a score that is one point short of the match, then neither player can use the doubling cube in the subsequent game. This one game without the doubling cube is known as the Crawford game. Upon completion of the Crawford game, if the winner has still not been decided, the doubling cube is active again in all future games until a winner is declared.

### **In Single Game (or “Money”) Play, the Jacoby Rule is used**

Jacoby Rule: If neither player has offered the doubling cube during the course of the game, gammons and backgammons count only as a single game.

This concludes the basic rules and strategy of backgammon, but please note that the game is far more complex than it first appears. You will soon discover various interesting strategies and opportunities that are a wonderful part of the game. The inherent "race" element of backgammon is exciting and victory is always a thrilling experience.

Playing backgammon takes only a few minutes to learn, but playing backgammon well takes many years to master.

*There are many fine books, articles, and teachers that can help you improve your game immensely.*

## ***5. BACKGAMMON RESOURCES***

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### **Websites:**

#### **GammonVillage Magazine:**

[www.GammonVillage.com/backgammon/magazine](http://www.GammonVillage.com/backgammon/magazine) - News, Articles, Tutorials

#### **GammonVillage Store:**

[www.GammonVillage.com](http://www.GammonVillage.com) - Boards, Accessories, Books, Software

#### **The Backgammon Learning Center:**

[www.thebackgammonlearningcenter.com](http://www.thebackgammonlearningcenter.com) - Tutorials, Lessons

#### **A Special Note About the Author:**

**Phil Simborg** is a professional Backgammon teacher and respected player and author. Information on his teaching methods can be found at [www.thebackgammonlearningcenter.com](http://www.thebackgammonlearningcenter.com).

Special thanks to Dean Kezan for booklet graphics and design.

*For more information, please visit:*



*[www.WycliffeBrothers.com](http://www.WycliffeBrothers.com)*