



## Tournaments

### How to Run a Backgammon Tournament

Oswald Jacoby and John R. Crawford, 1970

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Backgammon, like most games and sports, is easily adapted to tournament play. As a matter of fact, backgammon is so versatile a game that it is adaptable to a number of different kinds of tournaments. The first step in running a tournament is to get together a group who want to play in one; the next step is to establish tournament rules and conditions of play.

Of course you will follow the regular laws of backgammon whenever possible but you'll certainly want to eliminate [automatic doubles](#) entirely, and possibly restrict doubles and redoubles. If your tournament is run on a [match-play](#) basis, in which a match is either won or lost and the size of the victory is of no importance, there is no need to restrict regular doubling. If a man wants to lose an eight-, sixteen-, or thirty-two-point game, that is his privilege. In round-robin or other events where actual scores are counted, you should usually allow only one double and one redouble. In some cases you may also want to limit the plus score a player may win in one match without limiting the minus score of his opponent.



Contestants in the Fourth Annual International Backgammon Tournament at Lucaya, Grand Bahama Island. Tim Holland (right), winner of the 1967 and 1968 Las Vegas tournaments.

[Round-robin](#) tournaments are most suitable for one-session and club events, or for a group of people at home. Any number can play. Thus, if you have twenty players together for an afternoon or evening, you might divide them into two groups of ten

each and have each player in group A play three-game matches against each of six players in group B. After each match, the players in group A remain seated and the players in group B move forward one player, until six matches have been played. Then, as a finale, the player with the best score in group A could play a longer match (i.e., more than three games) against the player in group B with the best score; the winner wins the championship.

Another type of round-robin event is used by the Metropolitan Inter-Club League of New York. Some ten clubs get together twice a year; each club has a five-member team, and each man plays against one man from every other club. Automatic doubles are barred, and regular doubles are limited to one double and one redouble, but full plus and minus scores are kept. The winning team is the one with the highest total plus score. More on round-robin tournaments [later](#).

## Elimination Matches

The standard procedure in other tournaments is a tennis-type series of [elimination](#) matches, with the matches getting longer (i.e., more points are needed to win) as the finals are approached. Elimination tournaments are best run for groups of 16, 32, 64, 96, 128, 192, or 256 players (though it's usually preferable to have a few less than these numbers, giving several players a "bye"). Tennis-type scoring is also used, except that there are no deuce matches. Thus, in an eleven-point match the first player to reach a total of eleven wins, even though his opponent may have scored ten points.

To make the selection of players impersonal, each player is usually numbered and the numbers put into a hat and pulled out to see who plays whom. After playing the first round, winners go through the same process to pick their opponents in the second round, and so on, each round reducing the number of players by half until the finals produce the winner. Depending on how much time you have for the tournament, the number of points each round is played for is usually increased after the first round.



A typical game for a local tournament.

(Lauderdale Backgammon Club. Photographs by J. Henry Fichner.)

Since (at tournaments, at least) the average backgammon game usually takes from six to eight minutes, the number of points a match is played for varies according to the number of players in relation to the time available for the tournament. Thus if you have only one afternoon or evening and there are sixteen players, the first match might be played for seven points (i.e., the first man to win at least seven points takes the match). With sixty-four players, two additional rounds of matches are played, so the first round might be played for five points. Large tournaments that go on for four or five days usually start the first round at thirteen or fifteen points; each round thereafter increases by two points.

The higher the number of points you're playing a match for, the more skill you need to win; the lower the number of points, the more that lucky rolls or the dice will help you win.

The typical tournament held in an afternoon or evening might have sixty-four players. It will usually take three to four hours if the first round is played for five points, and the semifinals and finals are played for seven or possibly nine points. Usually these events begin at two o'clock in the afternoon or nine in the evening; players who don't show up after a ten-minute grace period are defaulted. Often a time limit is set for each round; the rules committee might stipulate that no match can last longer than forty-five minutes. If two players are still tied, the player rolling high dice might become the winner; or if the score indicates that the current game could produce a tournament winner, the rules committee might allow the game to continue to its end.

It is always best to have a general list of tournament rules available to all players at the registration desk. Here is a list of widely used rules:

1. All entries are subject to approval by the tournament (rules) committee.
2. Players should move their men with only one hand.
3. Players should begin each round punctually and play at a "comfortable" pace.
4. The tournament committee may impose a time limit on any round.
5. Players should play in relative silence.
6. Judges may be assigned to any round; all rounds in the Championship Flight will be assigned judges from quarterfinals on up. Any player may request that a judge supervise any round.
7. At the start of any game either player may ask to mix the dice. In this case he shakes the four dice together in one cup and rolls them out. The opponent selects a die — then the roller — then the opponent — with the roller then taking the last one.
8. If any difference of opinion develops, all men will be left frozen on the board until a judge is sent for. He, with at least one member of the tournament committee, will make the necessary ruling, and their decision will be final. But

no play can be contested once the next throw of the dice has been made.

9. Both dice must be thrown again if either die is not rolled out flat on the board; if a die lands flat on a man, it is still considered cocked and both dice must be rethrown. A player may not offer a double before recasting, however, since play is considered to have started once the dice are thrown, cocked or not.
10. If a player throws his dice prematurely, before his opponent has finished his move, the dice must be rethrown.
11. Both players should keep score, unless they agree in advance that only one of them need do so.
12. Spectators are expected to be silent during play, and any spectator may be barred from watching a match.

## Prizes

Before the tournament, the chairman should meet with the tournament committee to decide on how to interpret the rules, so that each ruling can be given quickly and decisively.

Prize money, if any, should be distributed according to the number of players and they type of tournament. It is gathered either by paying part of the entry fees into a pool, by special contributions from the players, by an auction pool of some sort, or by a combination of the three.

With sixteen players there should be four prizes, with thirty-two there should be six; with sixty-four at least eight, and so on.

In elimination events it is advisable to have a “[consolation](#),” so that first-round losers will have something to do.

At large tournaments the most common seating arrangement is to set up rows of long tables. On each table backgammon boards are placed about a foot apart. Ashtrays, a score pad, and a pencil are provided each player. At one end of the room, near the middle so that everyone can read it, is the scoreboard. Nearby is the registration desk.

Some groups or clubs that hold weekly tournaments increase interest and attendance by giving an additional prize at the end of the year to the player winning



A typical scoreboard for a local tournament.  
(Lauderdale Backgammon Club.  
Photographs by J. Henry Fichner.)

the most rounds during the year. A small percentage of the tournament's prize money is held in reserve each week. Each player receives one point for every round won, and the player who has won the largest number of individual matches at the end of the year wins this bonus prize.

## **Match Play**

Doubling is usually allowed in elimination tournaments. Since it makes no difference what you win or lose by, you must vary your doubling and redoubling tactics with the score. Thus, if you need only one point to win the match, there is no reason for you to double under any circumstances — you can win a match only once.

Conversely, if your opponent needs only one point to win, it behooves you to double at your first legal opportunity. If he accepts, you are playing for two points; he is playing for the same two points, but the extra point can do him no good.

You should also watch the gammon situation most carefully. For instance, if your opponent has doubled you to 2 and needs four points to win the match, be careful not to make a play or plays that will risk a gammon.

## **International Backgammon Tournaments**

In 1964 Prince Alexis Obolensky of Palm Beach conceived the idea of an international backgammon tournament to be held in the Bahamas, where gambling is perfectly legal and the weather perfectly fine. The first tournament attracted thirty-two entries, most from that portion of international society known as the jet set. It was won by Charles Wacker of Chicago, who beat Porter Ijams of New York in the finals. There was a fair-sized Calcutta Pool, and everyone had a good time.

In 1965 there were sixty-four entries, including a few from Europe. The winner was John Crawford and Judd Streicher of New York was runner-up. There was the same number of players in 1966, when Oswald Jacoby won for the first time, beating runner-up Tony Vincent of Miami. Jacoby won again in 1967, when there were 128 entries, and again in 1968. Runners-up were Walter Cooke (1967) and Oakleigh Thorne (1968), both of New York. In 1969 and 1970 Walter Cooke won, and the runners-up were Oswald Jacoby (1969) and John Geary (1970).



Fourth Annual International Backgammon Tournament at Lucaya: Tobias Stone (right) congratulates Oswald Jacoby, who has just won their match. Jacoby went on to win the tournament. (Photograph by David Workman.)

Obolensky also conducted similar tournaments at the Sands Hotel in Las Vegas in 1967 and 1968. There were approximately 128 players in each, and Tim Holland won both the 1967 and 1968 tournaments. Porter Ijams was runner-up in 1967 and Reginald Kernan of Paris was runner-up in 1968.

In London the Clermont Club has run tournaments annually since 1966. The first was won by Tim Holland; the others by Charles Jardine, Greville Howard, The Honourable Michael Pearson, and in 1970, Claude Beer. Crockford's Club also ran a tournament in 1966, and the winner was Tobias Stone of New York. A tournament was held in Estoril, Portugal, in 1969. It was won by Lynn Madliner of London, and Owen Traynor of Fort Lauderdale was runner-up.

In the 1970 Bahamas tournament the matches started with thirteen points for the first round and increased two points a round to a final match of twenty-five points.

The British clubs played shorter matches all the way down the line. From the standpoint of skill, this does not result in as good a tournament since the longer the match, the greater the advantage to better players — but it does get the tournament over a great deal more quickly.

## Consolation Flights

The Bahamas and Las Vegas tournaments all lasted for four days, with two elimination matches played each of the first three days and the finals played on the fourth day. It was essential that something be done for the players eliminated, so there were two consolation flights and one “[sympathy flight](#).”

Here is how these events were handled in the 1970 tournament in the Bahamas: There were slightly fewer than 128 entries, so about 90 players (i.e., those eliminated

in the two rounds held on the first day) became eligible for the first consolation. Four matches were played the first day of this consolation, narrowing it down to eight players. First-round consolation matches were played for eleven points; second-round matches for twelve; third-round matches for thirteen, and fourth-round matches for fifteen points. Players were allowed to play a fourth-round match on the morning of the next day, but no one had to.

The last three rounds in the first consolation were seventeen, nineteen, and twenty-one points.

The second consolation was open to all players eliminated from either event by the end of the second tournament day. This meant that all but the sixteen players competing in the quarterfinals of the tournament and the first consolation were eligible.

Seven rounds were again necessary, but with only two days left to play, an effort was made to get through six rounds on the first day. The matches were played for seven, eight, nine, eleven, thirteen, and fifteen points, with the seventeen-point final round scheduled for the last day. Actually, only five rounds were completed on the first day, so there were four players left in this event on the last day of the tournament.



Prince Nicholas Tumanoff and his wife, the California designer Marusia. (Photograph by Patrick Fisher.)

The sympathy flight on the last day was open to everyone except the eight players remaining in the other events. Seven rounds were played, each for five points.

In dividing the pool, prizes were given to the last eight in the tournament, the last four in each consolation, and the finalists in the sympathy flight.

## **Beginners' Tournaments**

There were so many novice players in attendance at these tournaments that beginner's events were held at the same time. These attracted almost as many players as the championship contest. They consisted of very short matches, and no doubling cube could be used — the theory being that a beginner could not be expected to understand how to use the cube properly. Gammons counted, of course.

There were consolation flights in the beginners' events, as well.

## **How to Vary Your Play in a Tournament**

As we've said, in the usual elimination match the score is all-important. If you are playing a match to thirteen points, it doesn't matter if you win thirteen to nothing, thirteen to twelve, or twenty-one to ten. You still have won your match. It also doesn't matter to the loser if his opponent winds up with a total score of fifty; he has lost only that one match.

Thus, you should use the doubling cube with great care, with one conspicuous exception, as we've mentioned before. That is when your opponent needs just one more point to win the match. In this spot you should double immediately. Don't wait until your position would warrant a double under ordinary circumstances; make your opponent play for two points right from the start.

## The Crawford Rule

At the Bahamas and Las Vegas tournaments it was felt that this doubling privilege was rather unfair. One proposed solution was to forbid doubles once a player got within one point of victory, but it was agreed that this might lead to an interminable series of dull single games in the event that one man had something like a twenty-to-ten lead in a twenty-one-point match.

John Crawford, who is always chairman of the tournament committee at these events, devised a rule providing that once a player gets within one point of victory, there can be no double in the first game after that; however, doubling would be allowed in the match from then on. This gives the player who has come so close to victory a *one-game* safety in which his opponent cannot double immediately and then happen to win a lucky gammon or backgammon to snatch away the victory.

## Playing for Gammons

In regular backgammon games you play for gammons when the position is appropriate, as a matter of course. In tournaments you should give far more thought to gammons.

At one tournament Tim Holland was leading seventeen to twelve in a nineteen-point match; we watched him play the next game for gammon right from the start. He obtained an early advantage but knew that, if he doubled, his opponent would quite the game and leave Tim one point shy of victory in the match. So Time went ahead and took a couple of extra chances to get into gammon position. Of course he risked losing that game, but he has a healthy lead and wanted to try to end the match — and he did.

We also saw Barclay Cooke refuse a double under very unusual circumstances. Barclay was leading sixteen to thirteen in a seventeen-point match. In the next game his opponent's first roll was 3-1 and he made his five point. Barclay rolled 5-4 and moved men to his eight and nine points. His opponent then made one of those "I have nothing to lose" doubles, and Barclay refused.

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His reasoning was that “If he follows with a couple of good rolls, he’ll be able to play for a gammon. I can refuse this double and still get to play two more games; if I accept and he gammons me, he wins the match with this one.”

When you’re leading in a match, be very careful about offering your opponent an early double. You may not be prepared for his redouble that may come right back at you. On the other hand, when you’re behind you can and should double quite freely; you’ll be surprised to see how often your opponent will refuse and give you the game. There is an important exception here: don’t make an unsound double when your opponent needs only two points to run the match out.

### **Playing Your Opponent**

At the time that Tony Vincent reached the finals of the Bahamas Tournament against Oswald Jacoby in 1967 he was a comparative newcomer to backgammon. So he felt that his best chance against Jacoby was to get the doubling cube rolling. He doubled early and often. Jacoby, on the other hand, refused to get into that trap; he wanted to keep the match from being decided quickly, on the theory that the more games it took, the better his chance to win the match.

Both were correct. If you feel that you play better than your opponent, avoid hasty doubles and don’t be quick to accept them from your opponent. If you think you have the worse of the skill, take more chances and hope the doubling cube is used often. You can be lucky for a few games, but it is unlikely that your luck will hold over a long series of games against a more skilled opponent.

As an example of this theory in action, Gordon Leib refused a double in a first-round match that he would surely have accepted from any but a very poor player. The match was for thirteen points, and Gordon was trailing six to five. His opponent obviously knew little about the game, but in spite of that he had a one-point lead going into this key game. He doubled early in the game, and Gordon accepted. In the running game Gordon found himself far enough ahead so that the odds in his favor had to be at least four to one. He redoubled to 4. His opponent accepted and proceeded to roll such good dice that he became a two-to-one favorite, and redoubled to 8.

Gordon had a choice between refusing, and therefore trailing ten points to five in the match, or accepting and letting that one game decide the match. Against a player of equal ability Gordon would have accepted the double; against this player he figured that he would have a very good chance to win the match even though he was then trailing ten points to five. He refused the double. His theory was why let the fickle dice beat him in a running game when skill in all-around play would help decide the next games?

We can't tell what would have happened if Gordon had accepted — but we do know that he did pull out from that ten-to-five position and won the match. Of course, in a game for money he would have taken the double without hesitation.

## Round-Robin Play

As we've said, round-robin events are usually one-session affairs in which each contestant plays several short matches against different opponents and carries his net plus or minus score from each match.

In large round-robin tournaments each backgammon table is numbered and one side is labeled "North" and the other "South." North players remain stationary, while South players move after each match to the next higher number (players at the highest number move down to the lowest, keeping in rotation). Since there are many players and usually only three or four hours available, each player usually plays four to six matches, composed of three games each. The total number of points won is placed opposite each player's name on the scoreboard. If four matches are being played, the player with the most points accumulated at the end of the four matches wins the tournament.

It is customary at round-robin tournaments either to have no doubling or to allow just one double and one redouble. But even in a three-game match in which only one double and redoubled are allowed, it is possible for the match to be won by as much as thirty-six to nothing. This would occur if, in each game, the cube reached 4 and the loser were backgammoned. There won't be many of these scores in a three-game match, but you will on occasion see sixteen-to-zero scores, and we have even seen one score of twenty-four to zero.

In order to win a round-robin tournament you have to win some of your matches by big scores. It may be very gratifying to win all your matches by scores like two to one, four to two, etc., but a net plus of twelve after six matches is not going to win the tournament for you.

Since you have only one chance in each game to double, use the cube sparingly. However, you should take chances to win a gammon or backgammon whenever possible.

As we mentioned at the beginning of the chapter, round-robin play is used by the Metropolitan Inter-Club Backgammon League in New York City, made up of ten of the most prominent clubs in the city. Each club fields a five-man team, and they get together twice a year at the Metropolitan Club to play a complete round robin. Each team numbers its players from one to five, and all number ones on each team play the number-one player on each of the other nine clubs., all number twos play each of the other nine number twos, and so on down the line. Thus, if all ten of the clubs compete, nine matches of three games each, or twenty-seven games, completes the event. In each game one double and one redouble are allowed.

At the end, the winning club is the team whose total score of its five players is the greatest.

Another type of round-robin tournament is what might be called an "individual"

round robin. In this kind each participant plays every other player a match consisting of a specified number of points, often over several days. Doubling is allowed, but the scoring is a little different. No matter how high a score he may win the match by, the winner of each match is simply credited with a plus one, the loser with a zero. This serves a very important purpose: If you win a lucky match by a large number of points, you do not suddenly take a big lead in the entire field; instead you simply are credited with one winning match.

Let's take an example where you have fifteen players. If you have several days in which to run your tournament, you might play fourteen matches consisting of eleven points each (remember that an eleven-point match means that the first player to reach eleven points is the winner — not that one player must win by a margin of eleven points). If you have just one evening for the tournament, you would play no more than a three-point match. If you're playing a beginner's round robin, we suggest that each match consist of just one game, in which case you would not use the doubling cube at all.

At the end of the fourteen games in your fifteen-player individual round robin, the player with the most winning points is the champion. Remember that winning a match gives you only one point, so if the fifteen players are evenly matched, ten points is probably sufficient to win.

If there is a tie for first place after all matches are concluded, the final champion is determined by the result of the match that the two winners previously played against each other.

## **Duplicate Tournaments**

The duplicate variation of round-robin tournaments is particularly suited for less-experienced players. There should be fourteen or sixteen players at most, since with more players it would probably take too long to finish.

Let's say there are sixteen players. Eight backgammon tables are set up, each tabled numbered and labeled North and South. At one end of the room one person rolls the dice and calls out the numbers rolled in turn for North and South until all games are finished.

The great fun in this game is noting the diverse results. Sometimes the game will be identical for two, three, or even four moves, but by the sixth move the chances are that all positions will be radically different. As the game develops, you may even have gammons on both sides of the table!

When all games are finished, each South player moves up one table, as in a round-robin tournament.

Usually there is a limit of one double and one redouble per game.



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