

The Language of Backgammon

A Northstar Backgammon Reference Guide

The terms you'll hear over the board — defined clearly.

The Language of Backgammon

Backgammon has a vocabulary all its own — precise and colorful. Knowing the language helps you think more clearly over the board, follow coaching and analysis, and communicate with players anywhere in the world. This glossary covers the terms you'll encounter most in Northstar sessions and in the wider backgammon community.

A

Ace-Point: Another name for your 1-point, the deepest point in your home board.

Ace-Point Game: A strategy that keeps you in the game right to the end. You aim to win with a hit from your anchor on the opponent's ace-point.

Activate Back Checkers: Split or run back checkers to make an advanced anchor or avoid being trapped against the prime.

Advanced Anchor: An anchor made on the opponent's 4-point, 5-point, or 7-point. Also called a High Anchor.

Anchor: A point secured by two or more back checkers. The name implies stability and safety.

Anti-Joker: A low-odds dice roll that is severely detrimental to your game plan — the opposite of a Joker.

Attacking Game: See Blitz.

B

Back Checker: Any checker or checkers in your opponent's inner board, usually on the 24, 23, 22, 21, or 20 points. However, the term can refer to rearmost checkers, whatever point they happen to be on.

Backgame: A deeper form of holding game where you own at least two points (preferably three) in your opponent's home board. You become a favorite in a well-timed backgame; considerable skill is needed to pull it off.

Backgammon: If your opponent bears off all her checkers while you are still in her home board (including on the bar), you lose a Backgammon and forfeit three times the number on the cube.

Bar: The raised divider in the middle of the board where checkers that have been hit are placed. Checkers which have been hit go to the Bar and must re-enter before that player can move any other checkers.

Bar-Point: Another name for the 7-point — the outfield point that lies next to the bar.

Bear In: The process of bringing home checkers safely to your inner board.

Bear Off: Taking checkers off the board from your inner board during the final stages of the game.

Beaver: In a money game, a redouble immediately after accepting a double while retaining possession of the cube.

Blitz: (Blitzing Play) An aggressive strategy that aims to hit and close out your opponent in the game's early stages.

Blocking-Point: A point that hosts two or more checkers. An opponent's checker may never be placed there.

Blot: A single checker on a point. It is vulnerable and may be hit by an opponent's checker.

Blot Hitting Contest: A sequence of exchanges in which hitting and being hit takes place repeatedly.

Blunder: An ill-advised move that severely reduces your equity or winning chances.

Boxes / Boxcars: Slang for rolling 6-6.

Builder: A checker used as material for making new blocking points.

Buried Checker: A checker moved deep into your home board, often on the ace or deuce point, with limited usefulness.

C

Cash: To cash a point by cubing out your opponent — offering a double that the opponent should drop.

Chouette: A way of playing backgammon with more than two players. One player plays against all the other players in the game.

Clear: When the player on roll makes a play that removes all checkers from a point.

Closed Board: A home board with all 6 points occupied, preventing your opponent from re-entering from the bar. See also Closeout.

Closeout: Filling all the points in your inner board so your opponent cannot enter. Also called a closed board.

Cocker Dice: Dice that do not land flat and must be rolled again.

Combination Shot: Any shot that requires two dice to hit. It can be smaller than 6 (like 2-1, 3-2, etc.) or bigger than 6. Any indirect shot is a combination shot.

Contact: A situation in which both sides have the possibility of hitting blots. Generally, a player leading the race tries to minimize contact.

Containment: Preventing your opponent from escaping contact.

Coup Classique: A last-chance reversal of fortune in which the player with the ace-point game hits checkers on the 23-point and 24-point to win the game after the opponent has borne off 13 checkers.

Cover: To make a point by putting another checker over your blot.

Crawford Game: In match play, the game immediately after one player reaches match point minus one. The cube cannot be used in this game.

Cross Over: To move a checker from one board quadrant or sector to another, such as moving a checker from your opponent's outer board to your own outer board, or moving a checker from your outer board to your home board.

Crunch / Crash / Trash Your Board: Where your back checkers are restricted and you are forced to collapse the prime or home board you have painstakingly assembled.

Cube: The doubling cube and the act of using it.

D

Dance: (Dancing) Not being able to re-enter a checker into play after being hit, so it remains on the bar. Also called Fanning.

Dead Checkers: Checkers so far advanced that they can no longer contribute to making a point. A third checker on the 1-point is said to be dead.

Deep-Point: A point in your home board — usually the 1- or 2-point — which you would not normally make in the early stages of the game (unless blitzing).

Deuce-Point: Another name for the 2-point.

Deuce-Point Game: A strategy where you have two checkers on your opponent's deuce/two-point, wait for a shot, and try to hit your opponent's checkers when bearing in or bearing off.

Direct Shot: The ability to hit with a single die — so the distance must be 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, or 6.

Diversification: A technique where your checkers are placed so as to make most numbers you are about to roll beneficial.

DMP: See Double Match Point.

Double Hit: To put two checkers on the bar in one turn.

Double Match Point: (DMP) Both sides need a single point to win. For example, in a 5-point match at a score of 4-4. The cube has no use.

Double Shot: A double shot can be either a single checker shooting at two blots or two shooters shooting at a single blot. Can be direct or indirect, but usually direct.

Doubling Window: The right time to offer a cube — not too early (when it's too risky) and not too late (when it's too risky for the opponent to take).

Drop: To decline a double offered by your opponent and concede the game.

Duplication: A technique that duplicates good numbers required by the opponent, limiting the number of her good rolls.

E

Early Game: The early phase of the game after the opening roll, when positions are fluid.

Edge of the Prime: When trapped behind a prime, moving checkers to the highest point will allow them to jump over the prime and escape more easily.

Enter: To bring a checker into play from the bar to the opponent's inner board.

Equity: The average amount of points you would expect to win or lose in a given position.

Exchange: A situation where both players successively hit blots. See Contact.

F

Fan / Fanning: See Dance.

Flexibility: Having many rolls that work well, usually by maintaining a good balance and distribution of checkers (builders).

Fly-Shot: Another term for an Indirect Shot. Often a specific 1-in-18 shot, but also a shot with a 10 or 11.

Force Contact: When behind, you must try and generate checker contact by creating bad rolls for your opponent — since you are very unlikely to win the race.

Forced Move: When there is no choice of move available, according to legal play.

Free Drop: A strategic pass in match play that costs little match equity.

Full Prime: Another name for a 6-prime. A checker trapped behind a full prime is unable to escape. See Prime.

G

Gammon: If your opponent bears off all her checkers before you have borne off even a single checker, you lose a gammon and forfeit twice the number on the cube.

Game Plan: What strategy to adopt, or how to proceed to win the game.

Game Type: To identify which type of game you are engaged in — running game, holding game, blitzing, priming — to adjust your strategy and game plan accordingly.

Gap: An empty point sandwiched between points with checkers. If there are several non-adjacent points, this is a break in a blocking prime, sometimes called a skeleton-prime.

Golden Point: Another name for the opponent's 5-point (your 20-point).

H

High Anchor: See Advanced Anchor.

Hit: To land on an opponent's blot, sending it back to her starting point by placing it on the bar.

Holding Game: When trailing in the race, you hold point(s) that hinder your opponent's bear-in.

Home Board / Inner Board: The region from your 1-point to your 6-point.

I

Illegal Move: A move that does not reflect the value of the dice just rolled.

Indirect Shot: A shot that requires both dice to hit and is always bigger than a 6 — a single die is insufficient to reach it.

Inner Board: The region from your 1-point to your 6-point.

Inner Gap: A gap of spares: a point without spare checkers situated between points that do contain spares. Important when bearing off.

Inner Point: The 6 points closest to your own goal — specifically, a block of points from the 1-point to the 6-point.

J

Jacoby Rule: In money play, gammons and backgammons count only if the cube has been turned.

Joker: A very good roll. For example, throwing 6-6 in the bear-off.

L

Lead in the Race: A situation in which you will need fewer rolls to clear all your checkers from the board first and win the game.

Leaving a Shot: Making a move that exposes a blot to being hit by the opponent.

Loose Hit: To hit in your inner board with a single checker. It offers the opponent a lot of return shots.

Lover's Leap: A classic opening move made with a roll of 6/5, where a back checker is moved from the 24-point all the way to the 13-point.

Low Anchor: An anchor on the opponent's 1-point or 2-point.

Low Point: The points closer to the goal — your own 1-point or 2-point.

M

Major Split: A split is when you move one of your back checkers off the 24-point to create a new position. A major split uses a large number — a 3, 4, or 6 — moving your back checker to the 21-point, 20-point, or 18-point respectively.

Match Play: Backgammon played to a target odd number score.

Midpoint: Another name for the 13-point.

Mountain: A stack of 5 or more checkers on the same point.

N

No Board: A condition in which no points have been made in the inner board, except for the 6-point which is already made from the starting position.

No Contact: An ending phase of the game where checkers from both sides have passed over one another, so there is no possibility of hitting.

No Double: A position where doubling the opponent would be premature.

No Move: Where neither roll of the dice can result in a legal move — either when closed out, unable to re-enter from the bar, or all moves are blocked by the opponent's checkers.

O

On the Bar / On the Roof: A hit checker which lies on the bar until it can be re-entered into play. Slang: 'fan' or 'Hit the fan.'

Outer Board / Out-Field: An area or sector which lies from the 7-point to the 12-point inclusive.

Outfield Point: A point in the outer board. See Outer Board.

P

Pass: To decline a double offered by the opponent. See Drop.

Passive Play: A move that leaves no shots to the opponent even though a certain risk is normally taken.

Pick and Pass: Using one part of a roll to hit an opponent's blot and the second to move the same checker onto the safety of a point.

Pip: The unit used to represent the total required to bear off. For example, the checker on the 24-point needs 24 pips (or a double-6 if it is not blocked) to bear off.

Pip-Count: The result of adding the pips for all fifteen checkers compared to the opponent's checkers — to ascertain who leads the race.

Point: Each of the 24 triangular shapes on a backgammon board are known as points. When a player moves two or more checkers onto a point, it is known as Pointing or Making a Point.

Point On: To hit a checker occupying a point while making that point at the same time.

Precision Dice: Well-made dice which have no bias. Usually expensive.

Prime: A structure in which blocking points are made in a row without any gaps. A completed 6-prime is known as a Full-Prime.

Prime versus Prime: A game in which both players have priming or blocking structures.

Q

Quadrant: A section of the board with 6 points. There are four quadrants on a backgammon board, each with 6 points, making 24 total points.

R

Racing Game / Running Game: A simple strategy to play a pure race, avoiding contact after an early lead — for example, opening with a 6-5.

Recube / Redouble: After accepting an initial double, a later offer to the opponent to play for an increased stake.

Response: The second roll of a game.

Return Hit: To hit back from the bar.

Rhino: A strong position in the early and middle stage of the game where the 4, 5, and 6 points in a home board are all occupied.

Roll: To throw the dice. There are 36 possible outcomes.

Rollout: To gather accurate equity by playing from a specific position over and over, many times. A computer can quickly emulate more than 10,000 trials.

Runner: One of the two checkers on the 24-point at the start of the game.

S

Sector / Quadrant: The four areas of the backgammon board. Those four areas are your home board, your outer board, your opponent's outer board, and your opponent's home board.

Semi-Dead Checker: A spare checker that passes through a gap. For example, a gap between the 6-point and 4-point. A 4-point spare checker (semi-dead) is never material for the 5-point.

Single Shot: A single blot that is being shot at by another single blot.

Slot: A tactical play that places a checker on a point you want to make, with the intent of covering it on the next roll. It often gives the opponent a direct shot.

Spare Checker: A third checker on the same point. Spares are useful because you can use them without breaking points.

Speed-Board: A home board with checkers piled up on the low 1, 2, and 3-points that can quickly complete bear-off.

Split: Separating your back checkers to increase favorable rolls, usually in the early and middle stages of a game.

Squeeze Out: To force your opponent out through careful timing. Often she will lose an anchor, and the remaining blot becomes vulnerable to attack.

Stack / Mountain: A stack of 5 or more checkers piled up on the same point.

Strip: A point is stripped when there are only two checkers left on it.

Switch: Moving or upgrading an anchor — sometimes hitting in the process, often by upgrading to a better point with doubles.

T

Two-Point Board: A formation that contains only 2 made points in the home board.

Take: To accept the cube.

Tempo Hit: (Tempo Play) Hitting a checker to rob half your opponent's subsequent roll and thereby diluting her attacking power or preventing her from making a new blocking point.

Timing: A situation (often present in holding games) where a player is behind in the race yet can hold out without breaking his board for some duration. This term is known as 'good timing.' The better your timing, the more games you win (but the more you get gammoned when you lose).

Too-Good: A position that is so strong you should play on instead of doubling.

Trap-Play: Purposely squeeze out your opponent from the relative safety of her anchor to create contact, push towards a gammon win.

Triple Shot: A situation in which you have three different direct numbers to hit. It should guarantee a minimum of 27 numbers that hit.

Turn the Tables: To change the situation relative to your opponent by turning a position of disadvantage into one of advantage.

U

Under the Gun: The threat of being pointed on by your opponent on the next roll.

V

Volatility: A position which can dramatically change for you or your opponent on the next roll.

W

Winning Chance: The probability you win the game. Usually described as a percentage. The sum of your winning chance and the opponent's winning chance is always 100%.