How to Play Backgammon

A Beginner's Guide

Movement · Contact · Timing · Racing

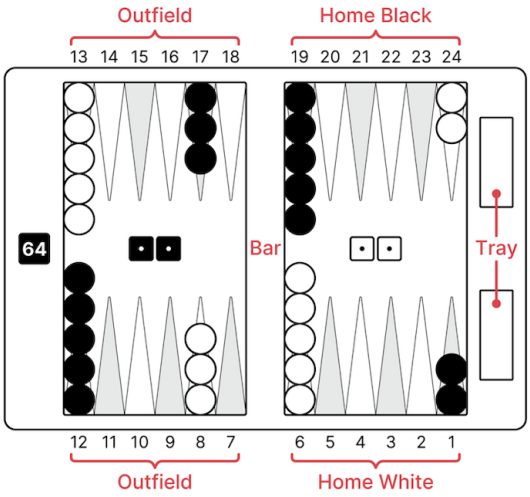
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How to Play Backgammon

Backgammon is a game of movement, timing, contact, and racing. Two players compete to move 15 checkers around the board, into their home board, and off. The dice provide the numbers; your decisions determine the result.

1. Components

Each player has 15 checkers and a pair of dice. One doubling cube is shared. The board has 24 narrow triangular shapes called points, numbered 1 through 24 from each player's perspective. Each player's point 1 is in their home board, and point 24 is in their opponent's home board. The board is divided into four quadrants of six points each, giving the board its total of 24 points. Two quadrants are home boards and two are outer boards. The center divider is called the bar. The trays on each side of the board are used for bearing off checkers. The diagram below shows the starting position, how points are numbered, and the four quadrants of the board.



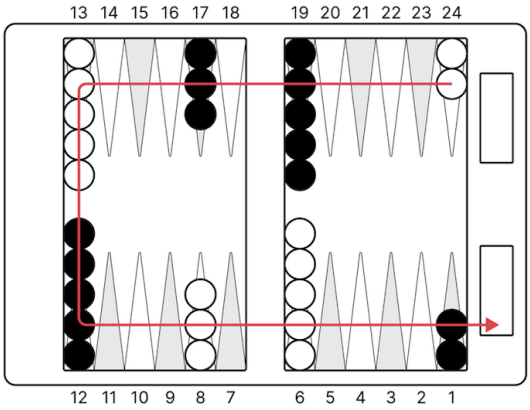
2. Setup

Each side begins with the same four-point structure, placed mirror-opposite across the board. White places 2 checkers on the 24-point, 5 on the 13-point, 3 on the 8-point, and 5 on the 6-point. Black's checkers are placed opposite. Think of the two sides as opposing armies. One army moves clockwise around the board, and the opposing army moves counter-clockwise — always toward their own home board. Both players start with a pip count of 167. There is no limit to how many checkers may occupy a single point.

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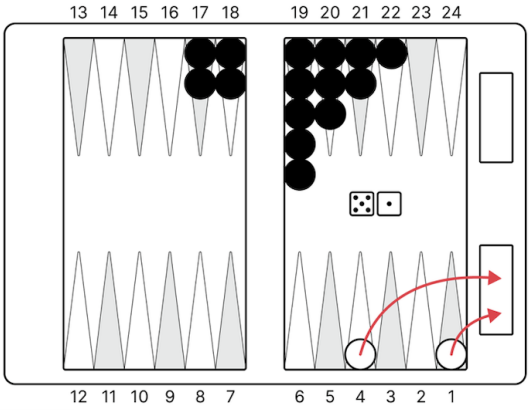
3. Direction of Movement

White moves counter-clockwise and Black moves clockwise. Both players bear off to the tray on the right-hand side. The diagram shows the path each player follows from their 24-point all the way around to their home board.



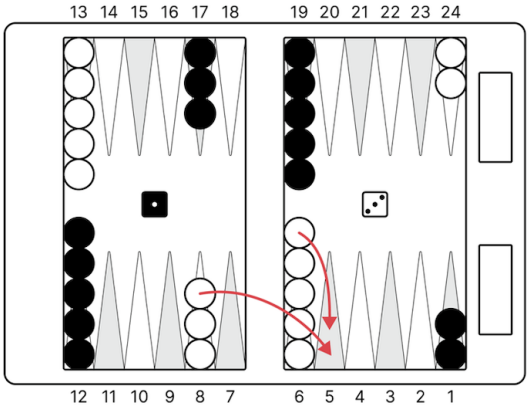
4. Objective

Move all 15 checkers into your home board, then bear them off. You cannot begin bearing off until all of your checkers are in your home board — every single checker must be inside points 1 through 6 before you may remove any. The first player to bear off all 15 checkers wins.



5. Opening Roll

Each player rolls one die. The player who rolls the higher number goes first and must play both dice showing as the opening move — there is no re-roll of the dice for the opening player. If both players roll the same number, both must roll again. After the opening roll, each player rolls two dice on every turn.



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6. Moving Checkers

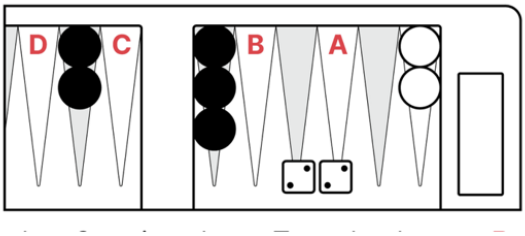
Each die moves one checker that many points in your direction. You may combine both numbers to move a single checker the total distance, or split them to move two separate checkers. When you combine both numbers on one checker, that checker must be able to land on an open point after the first number is played — if the intermediate point is blocked, the combined move is not legal even if the final destination is open. Both numbers must be used if either can be played legally, even if the only way to use both requires playing them in a specific order and even if the result is a position you would rather avoid. If only one number can be played, it must be the higher one. You cannot land on a point where your opponent has two or more checkers. You are allowed to try out moves before committing — your turn is only final when you pick up the dice.

7. Dice Etiquette

Roll both dice onto the right-hand side of the board. Both dice must land flat on that side. If a die lands on the other side of the board, in a bear-off tray, off the board entirely, or comes to rest tilted against a checker or the edge of the board, both dice must be re-rolled. Your turn is not over until you pick up your dice. Until then, you may reconsider and adjust your move. Once you pick up the dice, the move is final.

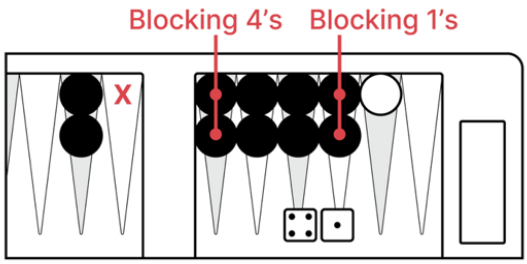
8. Rolling Doubles

When both dice show the same number, you play that number four times, not twice. All four moves must be used if legally possible. In the diagram, the labels A, B, C, and D mark four separate landing points, each one checker-width apart, showing the four individual moves available on a roll of double-2.



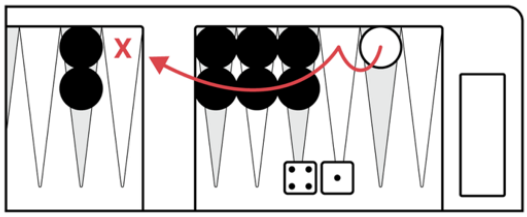
9. Anchors, Primes, and Blots

A point occupied by two or more of your checkers is called a made point — your opponent cannot land on it. A made point in your opponent's home board is called an anchor, giving you a defensive base from which to re-enter from the bar and wait for a shot. When made points sit next to each other in sequence they form a prime, a wall of consecutive blocked points that traps your opponent's checkers and prevents them from escaping — a six-prime is completely impassable because no single die shows more than six. A single checker sitting alone on a point is called a blot; an opponent who lands on it hits it and sends it to the bar, where it must remain until it re-enters the board.



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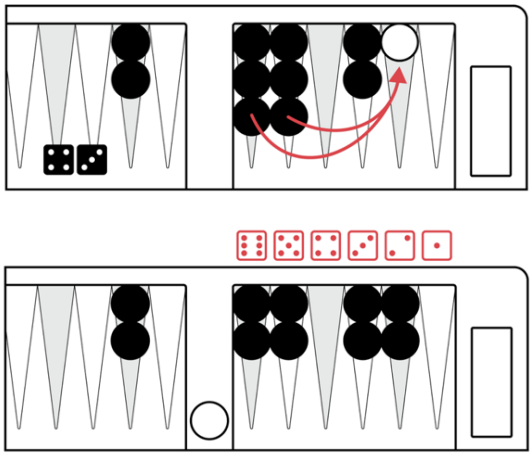
When a prime has a gap in it, the order in which you play your dice matters. In the diagram, playing the smaller number first creates an intermediate landing point inside the gap, which then allows the larger number to reach a point on the other side. Playing the larger number first would land on a blocked point and the move would be illegal.



10. Hitting and the Bar

When one of your checkers is hit it goes to the bar — the divider in the center of the board. You cannot move any other checker until that checker re-enters. To re-enter, you must roll a number that corresponds to an open point in your opponent's home board. An open point is any point not occupied by two or more of your opponent's checkers. If all six points in your opponent's home board are closed, you lose your entire turn. This is called dancing.

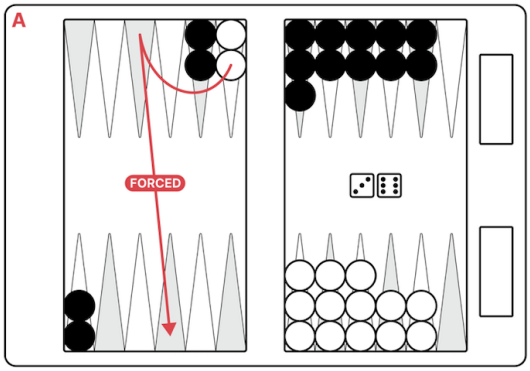
Hitting matters because a checker on the bar must travel all the way back around the board before it can re-enter — you have lost ground in the race. The more of your opponent's home board is closed, the longer your checker sits idle and the harder it is to get back in. The first diagram shows a checker being hit and sent to the bar. The second shows a four-point home board where re-entry is difficult.



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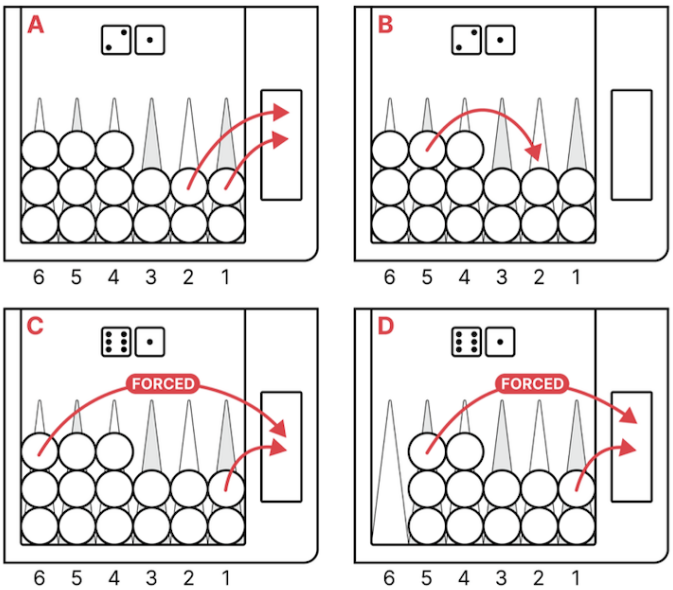
11. Forced Moves

You must use both dice if it is legally possible to do so. You cannot choose a move that wastes one die when an alternative exists that uses both. If only one die can be played, you must play the higher number. In diagram A, the checker must take the move that uses both dice even though it looks awkward — there is no choice. In diagram B, the lower die is played first in a bear-off situation, which then creates a forced bear-off with the higher die from the highest occupied point. Note that during a bear-off you are not required to play the higher die first.



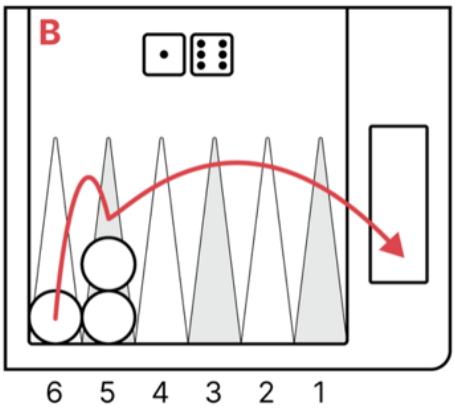
12. Bearing Off

Once all 15 of your checkers are inside your home board (points 1 through 6), you may begin bearing them off. On each turn, roll and remove the checker on the matching point number. If that point is empty, you must move a checker from a higher point toward the 1-point rather than bearing off. If your roll is higher than your highest occupied point, you must bear off from that highest point. You are not required to bear off a checker on every turn — if a legal move exists within the home board, you may choose it instead. Diagrams A through D show four different bear-off scenarios illustrating these rules.



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You may play your dice in either order during a bear-off. Diagram B shows a case where playing the lower die first creates a position where the higher die then forces a bear-off from the highest remaining point — a move that would not have been available if you had played the higher die first.

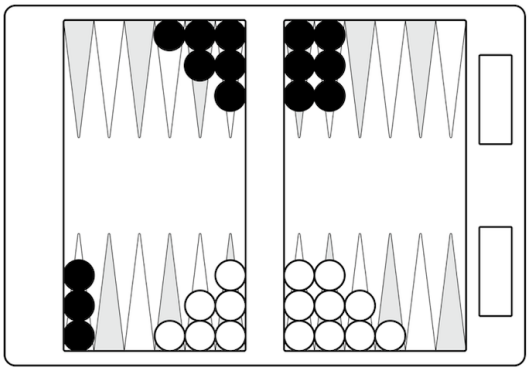


13. Four Core Game Plans

Backgammon is a strategic game that involves identifying and pursuing one of four core game plans. The pip count is the key indicator: when you are ahead in the race, racing and blitzing press the advantage; when you are behind, priming and holding give you the best chance to recover.

Race

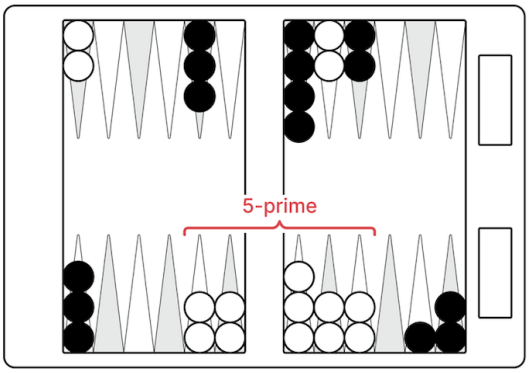
Escape your back checkers, avoid contact, and bear off as fast as possible. If your opponent still has an anchor in your home board, your position becomes too rigid if you have limited flexibility, and you will struggle to bear in and bear off against such an anchor without leaving a shot. You should try to retain flexibility if possible, meaning you should keep an extra checker on key points until you can safely move your checkers past your opponent's anchor.



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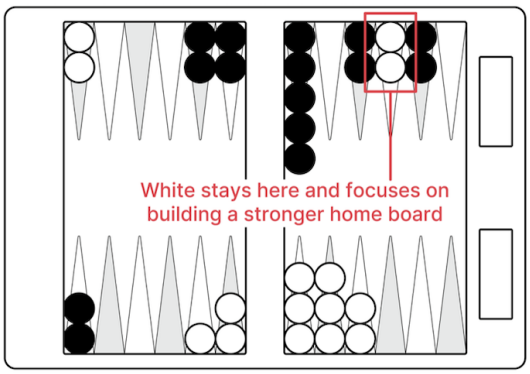
Prime

Build consecutive blocking points to trap your opponent's back checkers behind a wall they cannot escape. Even a four-prime is a serious weapon that can strand checkers for many rolls. A prime is most effective when you are not too far ahead in the race — if you are significantly ahead, you will likely have to break the prime before your opponent's checkers are truly trapped, and the prime loses its value. A prime is only useful when enemy checkers are actually behind it.



Holding Game

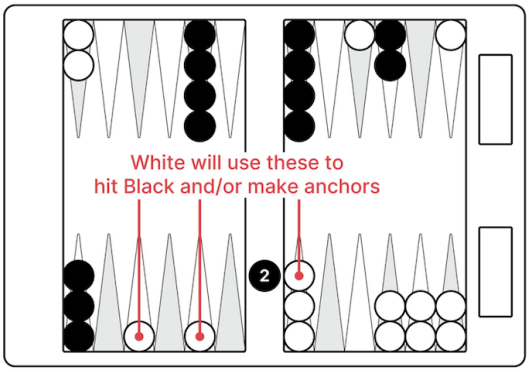
When you are behind in the race, anchor in your opponent's home board and wait for a shot — a chance to hit a blot as your opponent brings checkers home. While you wait, build your own home board so that if you do hit, your opponent's checker will face a difficult re-entry. An anchor in your opponent's home board always gives you a fighting chance to turn the game around, no matter how far behind you are in the pip count.



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Blitz

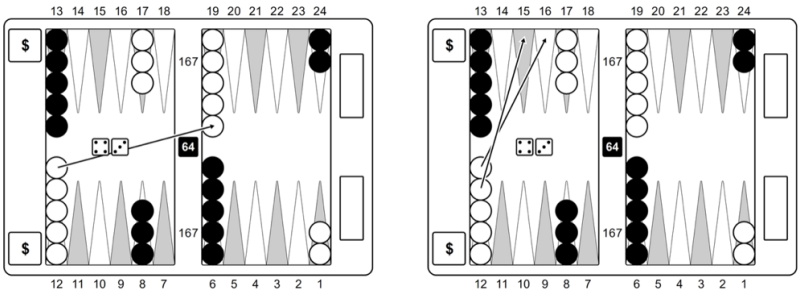
Hit your opponent's checkers repeatedly and close your home board before they can re-enter from the bar. A blitz works best early in the game when you lead in the race. Its success depends on having enough checkers in your home board and outer quadrant to follow up on every hit and close points quickly. As a rule of thumb: 10 or more checkers in position is strong, 9 is acceptable, and fewer than 8 is usually too thin to sustain the attack.



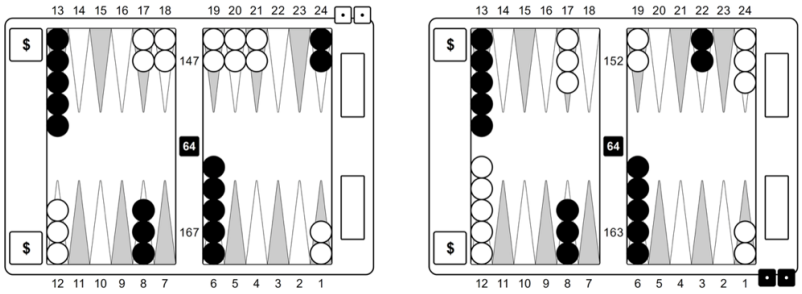
14. Flexibility and Efficiency

Flexibility means distributing your checkers across several points rather than stacking them deep on a few. A flexible position gives you more useful options on each roll because more dice numbers can reach meaningful targets. Deep stacks leave you with fewer options and can leave blots when you are eventually forced to move off those stacks. There is some risk in spreading checkers — isolated checkers can be hit — but the long-term benefit of staying flexible usually outweighs the short-term risk.

The two diagrams show the same position played two different ways. In the left diagram, White has stacked many checkers on a few points. The deep stacks look safe, but most dice numbers are wasted because there are no useful landing points available. In the right diagram, White has spread checkers more evenly. More points are covered, more dice numbers are constructive, and the position is easier to play going forward.

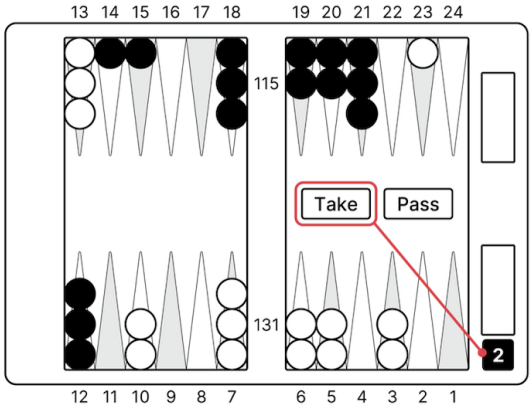


Efficiency means every checker is actively contributing to your game plan. A checker that is buried on the 1-point in the middle of the game cannot make anchors, cannot threaten hits, and cannot be used to build primes. It is simply out of the fight. The two diagrams contrast an efficient position, where all of White's checkers are doing meaningful work, with an inefficient one, where dead checkers on low points drain the position of strength.



15. The Doubling Cube

Before rolling on your turn, you may offer the cube to double the stakes. Your opponent has two choices: take the cube and continue playing at the new doubled value, or pass and concede the game at the current stake. The player who accepts the cube becomes its owner and is the only one who may offer the next double. The cube starts at 1 and can only double one level at a time (1, 2, 4, 8, 16, 32, 64). Passing costs only the current stake, so if you have any reasonable chance of winning, taking is almost always the correct decision. In the diagram, Black has offered the cube. White chooses to take, accepts the doubled stakes, and becomes the sole owner of the cube going forward.



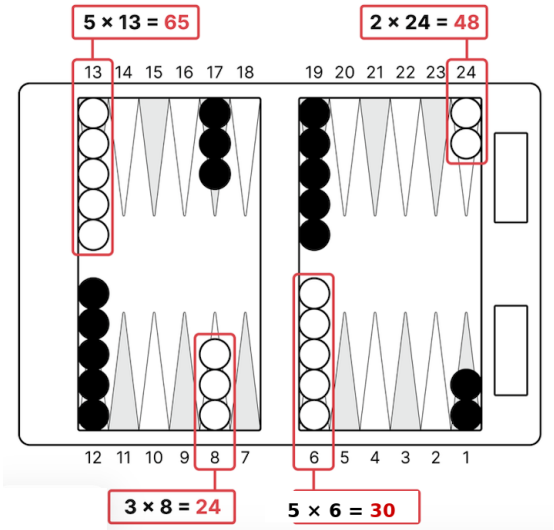
16. Points and How to Win the Game

There are three kinds of wins. A single (1 point) is when your opponent has borne off at least one checker. A gammon (2 points) is when your opponent has not borne off any checkers. A backgammon (3 points) is when your opponent has not borne off any checkers and still has a checker on the bar or in your home board. If you are playing with the doubling cube it multiplies the result. For example, a single win when the cube is at 2 yields 2 points, and a gammon win when the cube is at 2 yields 4 points.

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17. Pip Count

The pip count is the total distance all of your checkers still need to travel to bear off. To calculate it, multiply the number of checkers on each point by that point's number, and add up the results. Both players start at 167 pips. The player with the lower count is leading the race. In the diagram, the four highlighted groups of checkers each show the calculation for that group: 5 checkers on the 13-point equals 65 pips, 2 checkers on the 24-point equals 48 pips, 3 checkers on the 8-point equals 24 pips, and 5 checkers on the 6-point equals 30 pips. If you are ahead in the pip count, focus on avoiding contact and bringing your checkers safely home. If you are behind, look for opportunities to hit and disrupt your opponent — playing a pure race when you trail in pips will almost certainly end in a loss. For new players, a visual read of the board is usually enough; who is ahead is often quite obvious.



18. Quick-Reference Rules

Moving: Each die moves one checker that many points in your direction. Combine or split.

Owning a point: Two or more of your checkers on a point — opponent cannot land there.

Doubles: Matching dice give you four moves of that number, not two.

Must use both dice: Play both if legally possible. If only one can be played, use the higher.

Blots: A single checker on a point — vulnerable to being hit.

Hitting: Land on an opponent's blot and it goes to the bar.

Entering from the bar: Must enter before moving any other checker.

Bearing off: All 15 checkers must be inside your home board before you may start.

Forced bear-off: No checker on the rolled point? Bear off from your highest occupied point.

Winning: Single: 1 pt. Gammon: 2 pts. Backgammon: 3 pts. Cube multiplies all results.

Doubling cube: Offer before rolling. Opponent takes at doubled stakes or passes and concedes.

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