



Backgammon

BOOT CAMP



Backgammon
BOOT CAMP

by
Walter Trice

The Fortuitous Press
San Francisco

The Fortuitous Press

www.fortuitouspress.com

San Francisco

Copyright 2004 by Walter Trice.

All rights reserved. Published 2004.

Printed in the United States of America.

ISBN: 0-943292-32-8

Chapters 1-57 were originally published online at *www.GammonVillage.com*, in somewhat altered form.

Cover illustration by Andrew Webster.

To Donna

Contents

Introduction	11
Preface	13
Notation	16
Basic Training	
1 Backgammon Is Not War, It's . . . Roller Derby!	23
2 Primes And The Closeout	28
3 Blitz!	32
4 Anchors	39
5 The Defensive Ace Point	44
6 High Anchors And Holding Games	49
7 The Opening Roll	55
8 Blots, Shots, And Odds	61
9 To Hit Or Not To Hit?	67
10 Moving On Up	72
Advanced Training	
11 Game Plan	77
12 Premature Burial	81
13 Staying Connected	87
14 Bringing It Home	93
15 Gaining Time	97
16 Duplication	102
17 Diversification	106

Cubes And Races

18	And You Didn't Hedge? (An Introduction To Equity)	113
19	Let's Go Visit Mr. More!	118
20	Two-Roll Bear-Off Positions	123
21	Racing Off The Ace	128
22	From Pipcount To Cube Action	134
23	Pips And Rolls	139
24	Adjusted Pip Count Methods	144

Cubes And Contact

25	End-Contact Positions	149
26	One-Checker Closeouts	153
27	Two-Checker Closeouts	157
28	33 Opening Blitz Doubles	162
29	The Cube And The Ace Point	167

Backgames

30	Basic Backgame	175
31	Backgame Tactics	181
32	Proto-Backgame Tactics	187
33	Backgame Bear-In	192
34	Forward Or Backward?	196
35	Backgame Cube Action	202
36	Backgame Cube Action II	210
37	Backgame Cube Action III	217
38	Please Don't Eat The Checkers!	222

Primes

39	Prime-Vs.-Prime	229
40	Escape Or Crash?	235
41	Prime And Variations	240
42	Prime Time	245
43	Build Or Split?	250

Attacking Play

44	Middlegame Attacking Play	259
45	Attacking Doubles	264
46	Attacking Doubles II	271
47	Attacking Doubles III	278
48	Attacking Priorities	287

Match Play

49	Match Play Basics.....	295
50	The Mysterious Two-Point Match.....	300
51	Racing Cubes In The 3-Point Match.....	304
52	Gammons And The 3-Point Match.....	310
53	Four Points To Go.....	314
54	How To Win Four Points.....	320

Graduation

55	Staying Alert.....	327
56	How To Be A Winner.....	332
57	Final Exam.....	336

Introduction

Backgammon Boot Camp is for anyone wishing to get real good, real quick. The next three hundred pages contain more clear, concise, and essential information on every aspect of the game than has ever before appeared in one volume. Accessible to beginners; essential for experts.

Boot camp is where raw recruits become elite competitors. Recruits come in all varieties: experienced, inexperienced, knowledgeable, naïve. What they have in common is a willingness to work and a desire to achieve.

Make no mistake—this is not “Backgammon Made Overly Simple.” You’ll find very little hand-holding in these pages. Drill Sergeant Trice starts from scratch, and makes it his personal job to mold you into a lean, mean, winning machine. The going may be rough. But like any good drill sergeant, Trice has your best interests at heart.

* * *

The New England Backgammon Club of the early nineties suffered no shortage of talent. “Name” players showed up regularly for monthly events and I got to meet them all: Rick Barabino, James Colen, Herb Gurland, Bill Robertie, Doug Roberts, Marty Storer, David Wells. And, of course, Walter Trice. I had first encountered Walter in Roy Friedman’s *World Class Backgammon: Move By Move*, wherein he has a cameo playing the role of Bear-off Authority. In the flesh, I found him an intimidating figure—six feet something, dour, terse, often accompanied by that time-tested duo of coffee and cigarettes. Until I got to know him and discovered

what lies within: a friendly, folksy, bear of a man, who actually lives the role of Bear-off Authority.

It's been a privilege and honor to work with Walter in reshaping his columns into a book. Special thanks go to Michael Strato and the folks behind GammonVillage for commissioning the series in the first place, for making the transition to press so comfortable, and for consistently being the most complete backgammon resource on the Web. Visit them at www.gammonvillage.com.

I must admit, when I heard the editors of GammonVillage had invited Walter to write a weekly column for beginners, my first thought was: Is this the right guy for the job? Sure, a column on technical bear-offs. Perhaps something on match strategy, or mathematical models of obscure reference positions. But a weekly column for *beginners*? From the man most famous for discovering that an n -roll ace-point stack has an effective pip-count of $7n + 1$?

I was wrong; they were right. Walter has not simply written a book for beginners, he has written *the* book for beginners—and for anyone wishing to get real good, real quick. I hope that includes you.

Enjoy. Win all that you can win.

Jeremy Bagai
January, 2004

Preface

Boot Camp began with a query from Michael Strato, editor at GammonVillage.com: Might I be interested in producing a short series of articles for beginners? Not beginners needing instruction on how to set up the starting position or move the checkers, but rather casual and social players ready to move toward a strategic understanding of the game. I agreed to take on the project, and outlined a series of twelve articles covering the broad principles of backgammon strategy, the main game plans and positional structures, and basic tactics. To keep it simple, I decided to avoid discussing the doubling cube, gammons and backgammons, and match play. The twelve articles appeared weekly in GammonVillage, and constitute the first twelve chapters of this book, though in slightly different order.

Encouraged by favorable feedback, GammonVillage invited me to continue the series. Ensuing articles delved into the technical topics previously omitted, and treated a variety of different game plans more expansively. However, the continuation presented a conundrum: The series was still called “Beginners’ Boot Camp,” but someone who had read and understood the previous installments was becoming less of a beginner with every passing week. I tried to justify the title by keeping the focus on fundamental principles. The general pattern was to present a set of progressively more difficult problems on a common theme. The first would be very easy, perhaps even solvable by a true beginner—someone who just knew how to move the checkers and had read the introductory paragraph. The second would elaborate on the theme, introducing slightly more difficult concepts, and so on. I would conclude with a real challenge, sometimes a problem that had stumped a world champion in an important match.

After sixty installments of “Beginners’ Boot Camp,” we decided we had reached a good time to quit. I had covered most of the important facets of the game and all of those that I considered interesting. Had it gone on, I would have had to write about holding game cube action, for instance, and other relatively dry subjects. It would have been more work and less fun. I have continued writing for GammonVillage, annotating classic tournament matches, but my style and focus have been quite different.

As I was completing “Beginners’ Boot Camp,” Jeremy Bagai proposed turning the series into a book. I had been very much impressed by his production of his own *Classic Backgammon Revisited*, so I agreed to hand it over to him for editing, publication, and distribution. *Backgammon Boot Camp* is essentially “Beginners’ Boot Camp,” only on paper instead of the Internet. We have omitted three articles on neural-net technology that were somewhat of a digression from the flow of the series, deleted a few adverbs and redundant phrases, straightened out some terminological inconsistencies and some of my more dubious habits of punctuation, varied some repetitious expressions, corrected a couple of errors, and regrouped the articles into thematic categories; but most of the original is intact and unchanged.

The pages of *Backgammon Boot Camp* contain almost everything I know about the game. Not, of course, the innumerable positions rolled out, filed away, and forgotten; the formulas and calculations scribbled on a couple hundred legal pads; the many “brilliant” insights that turned out not to apply to the actual backgammon we play in this particular universe; nor even the various fine mnemonic techniques for match-equity table numbers that many players use and I don’t. You will also find here rather little about the theoretical and technical aspects of the game that are generally considered to be my strong suit. Everything else is covered. Indeed, in the year since the completion of Boot Camp, I have played in several tournaments, and after each I have tried to think of any concepts or facts I used that cannot be found within these pages. So far there have been none! This would mean little if I were not a pretty good backgammon player, but I believe that I am. I have played in the Open Divisions of major regional tournaments for a couple of decades and my efforts have been moderately profitable. (I consider my backgammon career a success simply because I have been able to have a grand time traveling to tournaments, meeting remarkable people, some of whom have become good friends, and playing my favorite game without going broke in the process.)

I could not have written this book without the support of the folks at GammonVillage. For those few who still don’t know, GammonVillage is

an online backgammon magazine with fresh news articles, tutorials, columns, and annotated matches every week. As far as I can tell, everything that has appeared so far during its five-year run has been archived and is still available. The volume of material is vast and the quality is high. GammonVillage columnists include Bill Robertie, Jake Jacobs, Paul Money, Mary Hickey, Doug Zare, Mark Driver, and Steve Sax. Editor Michael Strato does a terrific job of covering the backgammon world with up-to-the-minute tournament news and other features. If you have an interest in backgammon, GammonVillage alone would be reason enough to buy a computer and get connected.

I must thank my online readers as well. Having each article rated with one to five stars by those readers who chose to cast a vote helped me gain confidence that what I was writing had value. When my weekly ratings dipped now and then, I was usually able to figure out how I had strayed from the path of truth and clarity, and to adjust my orientation. Special thanks to Masayuki Mochizuki and Dean Chase, who caught significant errors, and to the Unknown Reader who pointed out a mistake in the article on diversification, but whose post somehow fell off the server.

I have read widely about backgammon over the years and have learned a lot from others. Given that, it is almost certain that I have borrowed a phrase or metaphor now and then, unconsciously and inadvertently. I'm sure, though, that the bit about how, when choosing an anchor from among the three low points the deuce can be "just right," came from Duane Jensen, who got it from Goldilocks. Also, it seems unlikely that I could be the first to compare one's own ace point to a Black Hole, and the fact that I have not been able to find the comparison within my shelves of books and stacks of magazines and newsletters does not mean that it doesn't exist. Of course, Black Holes are notoriously difficult to locate.

Walter Trice
January, 2004