



How to Participate in an ABT Event

The BOSTON OPEN backgammon tournament is a terrific opportunity for local players to get a taste of wider national-level backgammon competition. Like all American Backgammon Tour (ABT) events, the Boston Open is a multi-day tournament including a wide variety of individual events you can engage in, so the nature and the timing of these choices can be bewildering for a newcomer. This guide will help you understand your options for participation.

As you read, it would be best to have the Boston Open or other ABT brochure in front of you. Each stop on the ABT tour has unique features and variations on the basic formats described here, but the following explanations should help you make sense of any of them.

I: The Main Event: Three Divisions of Play

The core of any ABT event is a main event, in which virtually everyone participates in a traditional-format tournament very similar to the ones we hold each month at NEBC. There will typically be a Main draw, and then a Consolation bracket, but also an additional third "Last Chance" draw on the final day. So you'll get to play at least 3 matches, with opportunities to earn cash prizes until you've lost 3 times. (A very few ABT tournaments employ a totally different format such as Chicago's 'Swiss' format.)

Your first task is to determine your appropriate level of play. Terminology varies between ABT events, but there are usually three levels of play:

1) **Open / Championship** – This is the top level. The term "Open" means that anyone willing to pay the entry fee is welcome to play. In contrast, top-level players are not permitted to play in lower divisions, which are "Limited" to players of lesser expertise in the interest of fair competition.

2) **Advanced / Intermediate** – This is the middle category. Players in this grouping are typically at ease with all the fundamentals of backgammon including use of the doubling cube and may be highly experienced, or even

expert in some areas of the game, but have not put together the depth of all-around knowledge or a record of tournament success that would require their promotion to the Open level.

3) **Novice / Beginner** – This is the least experienced category. Players should bring a basic familiarity with the rules of normal play but may be new to the doubling cube or to keeping score in match play. Tournament directors generally try to provide a good learning and playing experience for novices, but depending on attendance, this may not take the form of a bracketed tournament but may take the form of a ‘Round Robin’ or similar contest.

So where do you fit in?

If you play Intermediate at our monthly NEBC events, either the Novice or Intermediate division might be appropriate for you. If you have yet to develop specific tools for playing strategically or tactically – if your play does not yet feel very “purposeful” – or if you are still needing to count out numbers by tapping the points of the board, a Novice-level experience may be most comfortable. But if you have enough experience to have some sense of backgammon terminology and technique, you should be right at home in the Intermediate division. Some ABT tournaments, such as the NY Metro Open, enjoy a large turnout of novice players, but to date the Boston ABT has not had enough novice interest to run a ‘bracketed’ contest.

If you play in the Open Division at our monthly NEBC events, you probably have your choice of playing in either the ‘Open’ or ‘Advanced’ division. Players of a strength to be barred from lower rungs of competition generally know it – though some require a little prodding. Unless you have regularly finished in the top 10 of the NEBC points race, or notable tournament successes outside of town outside of town, or a top-flight online rating at one of the competitive sites, you should feel welcome playing ‘Intermediate.’ But the “Open” Division is called the “Open” because *anyone can play in it!* Given the substantial degree of luck in the game, many people enjoy “playing up” for the thrill of the higher prize pools and also because of the opportunity to play against a world-class, or even world-famous opponent.

Take careful Note of Registration Deadline & Starting Times

The Open, Advanced, and Novice events at multi-day tournaments usually start at different times – even different DAYS. And unlike our monthly tournaments,

you cannot expect to show up a half hour before the draw is to be posted and expect to be included. *The registration deadline for a main event that begins on Saturday may be Friday night* – so make sure to read your ABT brochure carefully so you don't miss out.

II: Jackpot Events: Super / Masters / Limited / Novice

Jackpots are another standard event in every ABT tournament. Jackpot events are single-elimination events (no consolation), and since there are no consolation winners to pay, the payoff for the winners (typically 2-4 spots) tends to be larger than in the main event, where a larger proportion of participants "cash." A "Super" jackpot is for elite masters and "high-rollers" who are willing to pony up a substantial fee in the neighborhood of \$1000. The "Masters" is aimed at the upper half of the Open field, while a "Limited" jackpot typically mixes players in the lower third of the Open with Intermediate players. (Playing in the 'Open' division of the Main does not require you to play in a Masters-level jackpot).

Entry for these events is usually on a rolling basis, with players signing up as they arrive and a bracket of 8 or 16 being drawn once enough people have signed up, starting on the first day of play (often Thursday). Re-entries are often permitted if you should lose in an early round and slots remain open. If you want to be sure of getting into a Jackpot, you should come Thursday or early Friday, as depending on how many people show up at what time, these events may well be closed sometime on Friday. Sometimes entries continue into Saturday -- to complete a perfect 32 draw for example, or to make up an overflow mini bracket of 8 -- but you can't count on it. If in doubt, contact the tournament director in advance to ensure a place in your desired jackpot.

Doubles – Mixed skill levels

Any two people of any experience level can form a team and participate in this event, which typically begins on a Thursday or Friday evening. Doubles events always require clocks in order to keep a reasonable limit on the amount of conversation between teammates. Doubles can be a fun way to experience competition, as you can learn a lot by consulting with a partner -- and also by paying attention to the discussion of your opponents.

'Side' Events: Seniors / Juniors / Speedgammon / Blitzes / Quickies etc.

A variety of additional events can be entered on a rolling basis whenever you have spare time and interest. You can generally re-enter these events any

number of times throughout the course of the tournament weekend. Entries will be cut off at some point Saturday when it's judged that there isn't enough time remaining to fill further draw sheets. The idea is for all participants in event Finals to be determined by Saturday night so they can be played Sunday morning. Unlike the Main/Jackpot events, these are all mixed-ability contests, so you could wind up playing one of your backgammon heroes (if you have any). Since point-lengths are usually shorter, though, a less-experienced player has a better chance than he or she might in a longer match.

TIME COMMITMENTS — Managing your Tournament Time

With all of the many events going on, the tournament director needs to keep all the brackets moving forward, so participants who are "alive" in any events need to be available to play at virtually any time. There are scheduled 2- to 3-hour breaks for dinner that allow players to escape to town for some local color, but *there are occasional circumstances that can require players to play into a break, or late into the evening, or early Sunday morning.* Usually this will only happen if you are 'alive' in several events and there has been a logjam of some kind. On the other hand, there can also be long gaps in play if you win a couple of quick matches and another part of the draw is slow (just like in our NEBC monthlies). Part of the reason for all the 'side events' is so you can fill up the gaps in your day with more backgammon. But you can also take the opportunity to watch matches, have a drink, or read a book if you like! If you just want to play in the Main event, it's possible your whole tournament could be a 1-day event — but if you make it deep into the tournament, you might have to play Sunday morning — certainly if you make the finals! Same with the side events — *some* finals might get played by Saturday night, but you should expect most Finals to take place on Sunday. So don't arrive on a Saturday expecting to play in a bunch of events and finish them all before driving home — that only works if you *lose*.

What About Clocks?

You'll note that Main (ABT) events often require the use of clocks, and many other events are "Clock Preferred," which means that if your opponent wants to play on time, you're playing on time. Don't be intimidated! It typically takes just one game to get used to the back and forth flow of clock play. It's just a matter of tapping the clock rather than picking up the dice, and then picking up the dice after your opponent taps his clock. As for running out of time, so long as you have reached a level of comfort where you don't need to count out your potential plays 1-2-3-4... every time you roll the dice, you should find the

standard time controls quite comfortable. The way it works is that when your opponent taps his clock, you have 12 seconds to pick up the dice, roll, make a legal play, and tap the clock. That's actually quite a bit of time for most plays. When you do happen upon a difficult play, you may take additional time to play from your "Bank," which will begin to count down after your 12 seconds are up. You start the match with a Bank of 2 minutes per point of match length, so if you're playing to 9 pts, you get 18 minutes of bank time for the whole match. You need to keep an eye on your bank, but it's actually very unusual for most players to get in real time trouble. And playing with a clock is actually to your *advantage* if you are playing a highly skilled opponent capable of doing a lot of mental calculations that require a lot of time for "deep thinks."

One Pair of Dice

It is by now virtually universal that players are required to use a single pair of dice rather than two pairs for all events at ABT tournaments. If you are not using a clock, you will be tapping the frame of the board to signal you have completed your play. The main reason for this new-ish approach is that it eliminates disputes where there is disagreement over what was rolled, since the dice should not be disturbed until your opponent picks them up, signaling his agreement that you made a legal play. This takes a little getting used to, but you'll get used to it.

"Dice on Checkers"

A few years ago, the USBGF attempted to impose a new tradition of allowing dice that land flat on checkers to "stand" rather than requiring a re-roll. The change proved highly controversial, and the result has been that some ABT tournaments allow "Dice on Checkers" while others stick to the traditional "flat on the table" rules regarding cocked dice. The Boston Open, like the NEBC, employs the traditional standard, so a die landing on a checker requires a re-roll.

Legal Moves

There has been a movement in the 21st century toward requiring illegal plays to be reversed and played legally, so you must be aware what the standard is for any backgammon tournament you are attending. The Boston Open, like the NEBC, requires Legal plays, so if you note an illegal play, you must bring it to your opponent's attention and require that it be played legally, even if that correction is not to your own advantage -- as a matter of personal honor and sportsmanship. At a tournament that does not require Legal Moves, players may, by mutual consent, agree to play by Legal moves anyway.

Bringing Equipment

You aren't required to bring anything to tournaments, but if no one did, we'd have a big problem! So bring what you've got. Some players like 'Baffle Boxes' instead of cups, and it's okay for one player to use a cup and the other one to use a baffle box. Some people like to use a cup *and* a baffle box! It's a wonderful world.

Drop on By!

Even if you don't have time to devote to playing in the tournament, you're welcome to drop by and take in some of the action and get a feel for what an ABT event is like. And in particular if you're looking to buy backgammon equipment, there will be sets on sale there, and you can also treat the entire room as a showroom of backgammon equipment! Have a look at the options, ask people about cost, and satisfaction with various makes — even take pictures of the checkers and color schemes you like best.

Further questions are welcome if you've got 'em — see you at the Open!

Albert Steg
NEBC