



How to Participate in an ABT Event

The BOSTON OPEN backgammon tournament is a terrific opportunity for local players to get a taste of 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. This guide will help you understand your options.

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 similar to the ones we hold each month at NEBC. There will typically be a Main draw, and then a Consolation (or, sometimes a "Fighter's") bracket, but also an additional third "Last Chance" draw on the final day. So you'll typically 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 "Swiss" format, which also guarantees multiple matches for each entrant.

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 even be expert in some areas of the game, and yet 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 rather 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 Limited 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, enjoyed notable tournament successes 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 for 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 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 contests (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 in itself 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 typically permitted if you should lose in an early round and slots remain open to make up a perfect 16 or 32-player draw. 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 -- but you can't count on it. If in doubt, contact the tournament director in advance to ensure a place in your desired jackpot.

III: 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.

IV: "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. A special note about "Seniors" events: the definition of "Senior" varies widely among ABT tournaments – and may even change from one year to the next – so double check every time!

V: Pre-Tournament BMAB Events

Many tournaments on the ABT circuit now feature a day-long pre-tournament event, usually on Wednesday or Thursday, pitting players against each other in a round-robin format where the goal is playing well as measured by eXtreme Gammons "performance rating (PR). All matches are recorded and transcribed and submitted to the Backgammon Masters Awarding Body (BMAB), where players earn titles and work to climb the many rungs from Intermediate to Grandmaster status. BMAB participation is a way to leave the luck factor behind and gain an objective measure of one's quality of play. BMAB events are also excellent value for the entry fee, as all players are guaranteed 5 or 6 matches. An additional registration fee covers the cost of equipment and transcription services.

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Registration: In advance or in person?

ABT tournament directors encourage advance registration either by mail via a paper brochure or online, and often offer a small discount on the registration fee for early-registrants. Early registration helps them gauge likely attendance, and prevents a crush of arrivals lining up to register at the venue at the same time. If you register in advance and have to cancel, your money will be refunded so long as you didn't wait until after the draw was made.

If you are going to register in person at the event you must bring cash to cover all your entry fees. If you win a prize, you will be paid in cash, and the prizes come from the entry fees.

Variations in Rules and Practices

There are several variables in competitive practice that are up to the Tournament Director of each ABT. (1) The past 20 years has seen broad adoption

of the **“Legal Moves”** standard, by which each player is required to call for correction of any illegal play, regardless of whom the correction might benefit. (2) **The use of clocks** to keep tournaments moving at a predictable and enjoyable pace may be required for some or all events. If you are new to clocks, try playing a practice game with a willing partner sometime before your match time. It typically takes just one game to get used to the back and forth flow of clock play. (3) Even without clocks, most events require the use of a **single pair of dice**, with players tapping the board to signal completion of their move. This practice eliminates an entire class of argument where there is a difference of opinion over what number was rolled after a player picks up their dice. 4) The **“Dice on checkers”** rule variant allows dice that land flat on checkers to count rather than requiring a re-roll. The Boston Open, like the NEBC, employs the traditional standard, so a die landing on a checker requires a re-roll.

Time Commitment & Management

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, and you don’t plan to do *that*.

Meet New Players - including some greats!

There is a great deal of camaraderie among players who attend ABT events regularly. Between matches, make a point of talking to other players in your division, swapping stories and strategies for improvement. Try to get a feeling

for other people playing at your level and perhaps form some friendly rivalries that will spur improvement, perhaps swapping contact info so you can play against each other online or form study groups.

Don't be shy about introducing yourself to some of the top players in the room too. Most are very approachable and friendly if you catch them at the right moment (after they've just lost a tough match is generally the wrong moment). Do make a point of observing some top-level play, from a respectful vantage point — and pay particular attention to the *demeanor* of the best players in addition to their moves. Emulate those you most admire.

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. "Tournament size" boards with checkers measuring 1.5" to 2" in diameter are preferred, as are "precision" dice.

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!

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