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What Backgammon Can Teach Us About “Luck”



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Backgammon has been my favorite board game ever since high school. I’ve always felt that it hits just the right blend of luck and skill. There’s enough luck involved to make every game fresh and exciting, but enough skill to reward careful study of the game.

For anyone unfamiliar, backgammon is a dice and checkers game. Players take turns rolling two dice and use the results of their rolls to race checkers around the board. Along the way, they can capture their opponent’s pieces and defend their own. You can find a complete explanation of the rules on [Wikipedia’s backgammon article](#).

Even though backgammon is just a game, it actually teaches a few valuable lessons about luck — lessons that are applicable not just to board games, but life in general.

Creating Opportunities for Luck

When a beginner backgammon player watches an experienced player, it often looks as if the experienced player is getting incredibly lucky. Roll after roll seems to provide the experienced player with exactly the moves that they need to get their checkers into a perfect position.

Sometimes, the experienced player really is just having a lucky run, but more often their apparent luck is actually a result of their careful strategy. Experienced players know how to position checkers to maximize their opportunities.

Good players can’t control the dice, but they can set themselves up so that the widest possible variety of dice rolls will help them. As they play a round of backgammon, they choose the moves that will create the most opportunities for future “lucky” dice rolls.

A lot of other areas of our lives work in the same way. There will always be factors outside of our control — things that come down to “luck.” What we can control though is how many opportunities we create to be lucky.

For example, if you are looking for a new job and only apply to three companies, you’ve only given yourself three shots at getting hired. If you apply to six instead, you’ve doubled your chances. Landing a dream job may appear lucky to outsiders, but you can set the groundwork by casting a wide net.

Making the Right Moves and Still Losing

Another lesson from backgammon is that sometimes you can make all the right moves and still lose a game. It’s part of what makes backgammon so exciting. Sometimes, a player who just learned the rules that day can beat a player who has been playing the game for years.

Failures and setbacks, both in backgammon and in life, don’t necessarily mean you are doing anything wrong. Sometimes, luck just isn’t in your favor.

It’s important not to beat yourself up over everything that goes wrong. Instead, think carefully about whether you made a mistake, or whether you acted correctly and just didn’t have luck on your side.

The same point also goes in reverse. Sometimes you win a game of backgammon even when your opponent was playing better. And, sometimes in life, you succeed even when you’ve messed up. It’s important to try to recognize when your success is the result of a good strategy and when it’s just dumb luck. Otherwise, you can end up with false confidence that will lead you astray.

Staying Focused on Long-term Results

Building off the last lesson, the final important takeaway from backgammon is to stay focused on long-term results.

As I said before, in backgammon, sometimes a brand-new player can win a game against someone much more experienced. On the other hand, though, a brand-new player is extremely unlikely to win three games in a row against an experienced player. By the time you get to a 7-point tournament, it’s nearly impossible for the new player to win.

Luck can cause a lot of short-term variances, but in the long-run, it tends to even out. It’s important not to let a little bad luck shake your confidence. If you know that you have a solid strategy, push through until your luck evens out. Success typically comes from long-term persistence, not a single lucky event.