

Life and Backgammon: Strategy or Chance?

by [John Henry](#) (April 2023)



Two Men Playing Backgammon, Robert Lotiron, 1920



Ancient Greek Backgammon variant board etched in marble

I am exhausted. And I don't care anymore if I win or lose. Is this a reflection of my life? After coming home struggling with an ancient board game I've played with a newfound friend over the last month, I pondered life's choices, effort, and the idea of pure coincidence, fate, or chance. As every game progressed, I spotted some obvious analogies. How much does chance have to do with how I live and whether I live or die?

I determined at least that time was of the essence. What could I do to reduce things that eroded my time? More time allowed effort to have its fullness. I have nearly dropped all TV viewing but still scroll through news feeds at least. I thought seriously: what if I pushed the speed limit everywhere I drove. We spend a lot of time driving back and forth. A total waste. I quickened my car down a residential street, and of course there was a traffic policeman.

Ah, there are limits.

I lived in a land where fatalism was part of their religion. "If God wills." The idea of self-motivation and 'getting ahead' was not the most important thing in life. You accepted your place and did what was available or possible and if God willed you might find yourself eating better, living in a nicer house, and owning a car—the Western concept.

As for our place; no doubt you can find yourself in a life of ease or abject despair depending on where you were born, and

into what economic situation. It is a roll of the dice and so we realize that we are either the 'haves' or 'have-nots.' But even those in first world economies have other issues that poor countries may not have. The West has pollution, many types of stress, and medical conditions mostly brought on by poor eating habits and lack of exercise, etc. Simpler lifestyles and fresh foods tend to allow longer lifespans. Religion nourishes the soul while the first world is losing contact with a higher force.

There is a feeling of guilt about all this. I was fortunate to be raised by an American family whose father served in the military. We lived in Turkey and Greece. While a child I was the happiest kid in the world. We had everything. When I came back to visit after a year in college, I became fully aware of the level of poverty others were experiencing compared to my flush prospects.

There is a saying: "Luck is what happens when preparation meets opportunity." This was not uttered by Tony Robbins but written over 2,000 years ago by Roman senator Seneca. There is no doubt that when preparation (schooling, contacts, work ethic) is presented with opportunity, things will click. You will tend to succeed in achieving your goals. A medieval example, below:



Ah goals. Should we have them? Are they required to be part of our preparation? Probably. I didn't have great goals, just simple ones, but followed the basic academic schedule and steps to follow, and mostly achieved what I had set out to do. I feel somewhat chagrined at my choices though and although this has chafed my conscience, I dare not dwell on this line of thought.

There are two ancient board games that most of us have played. During the action between a formidable foe who I met recently, we started talking about how the game was a reflection of life. This had sparked my thinking about the idea of chance or luck versus an action plan or strategy. There is also a scientific element of probability in the roll of the dice.



Women playing Backgammon – Miniature from 'Libro De Los Juegos' (The Book of Games), Alfonso X, 1283

Backgammon is the oldest known board game. Evidence of its origins, over 5,000 years old, come from ancient Persia. The Romans picked it up and forbade the lower ranks to play, as it tended to bankrupt many. It is said that Nero wagered over \$10,000 a game. Archaeologists have found dice made of human bone. Fresco paintings show the board game being played by Romans. The game is a favorite in many Mediterranean countries to this day.

I was intrigued during my childhood, watching men play 'tavla' in the Turkish coffee shops. The affable climate of camaraderie shone through as a happy pair of dice scattered across a smooth parquet of wood species arranged in triangular strips. Coffee and tea, and copious smoke emanated from these happy places. The Arabic is 'Tawlah,' in Iran, it is

'Takhteh.' There are over 64 variants in the play. The idea of a board game of this type originates in the Roman idea of tables or tabula, as in this Roman fresco below:



The same tingling in grabbing the one-armed bandit occurs in the roll of two undersized die making a loud clatter on a wooden board. I prefer pinball to any sophisticated video game. Like the pachinko machine, the sound of the clinking ball, the change dropping in the gutter, are mesmerizing and the psychology of winning and the motivation to continue while losing, even in a rigged system, is the same. A 'reward' meted completely by random moves, is an addictive system.



Unlike chess, backgammon (above, a Damascan design) is played with dice. You can say that chess is total strategy. One is in total control of their actions. I am not sure of that because your opponent can make unexpected moves and strategy constantly changes. But when dice are introduced in any board game, it becomes clear after a while that there is an indeterminate aspect that sullies the play. Two equally competent players have the same chance of winning as a toss of a coin. That is disconcerting. In life, things can happen outside of our well-kept plans. There is a biblical verse addressing the 'making of plans,' as plans that are made without a connection to God are useless.

After playing about 100 games, I feel that life is too close to backgammon rather than chess. There are salient moves, opening plays that can be protective, or the throw of the dice

may leave you vulnerable. It is too open to chance whether you will win or lose in the end. Your action is a random toss, and the response is the same. Too much depends on the pure luck of the draw. I first thought that the game was 50% chance and 50% strategy. The argument with my opponent is that it is 70/30. He does not agree. I played some more and have completely lost interest. It is a waste of time to go through the motions doing something that has such a high rate of uncontrollable risk.

But I retain a lifelong friend!

[Table of Contents](#)

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