THE GAME OF SWEDISH TABLES

A short introduction to the game.—The rules were adopted at the annual meeting of the Swedish-Tables Association of the Vasa Museum (Vasamuseets Brädspelsvänner), Stockholm, on February 26, 2003.

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Swedish Tables is played on a standard backgammon board, with two dice, fifteen white checkers and fifteen black checkers. The board has twenty-four triangular fields, so called *points*, along the border. The fields are alternately dark and light, to make moves easier. The board usually has a *wall* or *bar* in the middle, which divides the board into four *quarters* with six points each quarter.

The artistic appearance of traditional Swedish boards is slightly different from that of modern backgammon boards, see the figure below. The checkers are usually around 50 millimetres (2 inches) in diameter. The board is rectangular, with the long sides twice as long as the ends. The bar is split in two separate parts. The dark triangular fields are usually red, the light ones yellow, and the background of the board green.—On backgammon boards, up to five checkers may be placed on a triangular field before they must be stacked, but in Swedish Tables, no more than two checkers should be placed in a field before stacking the checkers (except when the number of checkers on one point is very large, e.g. in the home in the beginning of the game). Additional checkers are arranged in stacks of equal height on the two bottom checkers, with odd checkers placed centred on top of the two stacks.

The game is played by two players sitting with the board between them, and with the sides of the board facing the players. Each player piles his checkers on the rightmost point on the opposite side of the board. These points are called the *home* or *house*.

In the first game of a match, each player rolls a die to decide who starts. The one who rolls the lowest number starts. If they roll the same number, they roll again. If more than one game is played in the match, the looser starts the next game.

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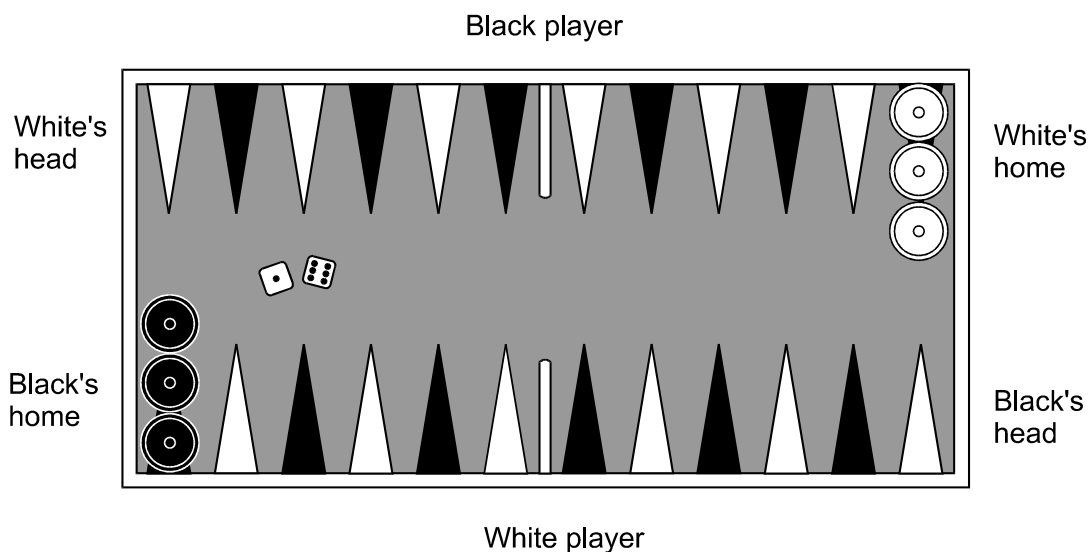
1   Moving checkers

The two players alternately roll the dice and move their checkers counter-clockwise around the board. Each player moves the checkers from his home in the first quarter, through the second and third quarters, to the fourth quarter. Eventually, he bears the checkers off the board.

If a player rolls, for example, 6-4, he may choose to move one or two checkers. If he moves just one checker, the checker lands on the tenth point from where it started. Along the way, the checker must make a touchdown on either the fourth or the sixth point. If the player moves two checkers, they will end up on the fourth and sixth points from where the checkers started. There is no other way to make use of the throw. It is illegal to split the number of eyes on one single die between two different checkers.

If both dice show the same number of eyes, the player has rolled a *double*. Each die in a double counts twice, which means that the player must move four times for the number of eyes shown. For example, if a player rolls double five, he moves a total of four fives, not two fives, and the player may choose to move one, two, three or four checkers. If he moves only one checker, it must make three touchdowns before it lands on the twentieth point from where it started.

If a player is able to move the number shown on both dice, he must do so. In some cases, this is not possible. The player is then obliged to make use of as many eyes as possible. If he only can move for one of the two dice, he must make a move for that die and give up the other die. If he can move for either one of the two dice, but not for both, he must move for the one showing the largest number of eyes. If he rolls a double, he must make use of as many of the four moves as possible.

A player who is not able to move at all must pass his turn.

2   Blots and closed points

A single checker on a point is called a *blot* or a *singleton*. Blots are vulnerable in the sense that they can be hit and sent off the board by the opponent. If a player puts more than one checker on a point, that point has been *closed*. (The player *makes the point*.) Closed points are, under normal circumstances, not vulnerable. If the checkers on a closed point are split into several singletons, all of them are again vulnerable. Checkers of different colour may never rest on the same point.

3   Hitting blots and re-entering checkers

A blot is *hit* when one of the opponent's checkers either lands, makes a touchdown or re-enters on that point (see explanation below). The checker is removed from the board and placed on the bar. A player who has a checker on the bar may not move any other checker on the board before the checker on the bar has been re-entered.

The checker should be re-entered in the player's first quarter, where his home is located. For example, if the player rolls 3-2, he may choose to re-enter the checker on either the second or the third point. From the point where he puts the checker, he may advance to the fifth point (for the other die), or may move another checker on the board. The player is not allowed to add the numbers on the dice and re-enter on the fifth point directly.—Note that a checker that is moved from the home with, for example, a three lands on the fourth point in the first quarter, whereas a checker that re-enters with a three lands on the third point.

It is only possible to re-enter a checker on a point if that point is accessible, i.e. if it is un-occupied or is occupied by an enemy blot. In the latter case, the opponent's checker is hit and is sent off the board. A player may not re-enter a checker on one of his own blots, in his home as long as it is still occupied by his own checkers, or on a point that has been closed by the

opponent (unless the closed point is vulnerable, see section 5). If a checker on the bar cannot be re-entered, the player must pass his turn.

If a player has several checkers on the bar, all checkers must be re-entered before he is allowed to move checkers on other parts of the board. Note that checkers block accessible points as they enter the first quarter, which makes it more difficult to re-enter remaining checkers on the bar. If the player rolls e.g. double four, he is only able to re-enter one of the checkers (on condition that the fourth point is accessible, of course).

4   Points that may be closed—and points that may not

On the opposite side of the board (the first and second quarters), a player is only allowed to close the leftmost point, which is called the player's *head*. The player may not close any other points on that side of the board. It is obvious that the head, therefore, plays an important role in the game. The checkers stacked in the home in the beginning of the game form a closed point, but the player may never return any checkers to that point as long as it is occupied by his own checkers. It is, therefore, impossible to close the home once it has become a blot. On the side of the board where the player is sitting (the third and fourth quarters), the player is allowed to close any point.

Checkers may freely pass over closed points, but a player is not allowed to land, re-enter, or make a touchdown on a point that has been closed by the opponent. If the opponent has closed three or four consecutive points, the player usually has some difficulties to pass this obstacle. If someone has made five consecutive points or more, it is called a *prime*. A five prime, i.e. a prime with five closed points in a row, is even more difficult to pass. The player must place one of his checkers on the first point in front of the prime, and then roll a six. It is, therefore, an important strategic goal in Swedish Tables to establish a five prime.

A six or seven prime would in principle be impossible to pass, but the rules of Swedish Tables punish players who make impenetrable structures, a topic that will be explained in the next section.

5   Forcing closed points

In two special situations, closed points are as vulnerable as if they were singletons. If a player lands with one of his checkers on a vulnerable enemy point, *all* checkers on that point are sent off the board and must be re-entered by the opponent. The closed enemy point has in that case been *forced* by the player.

The first situation when closed points are vulnerable and may be forced is when the opponent has a prime with more than five consecutive points. The player can force any closed point in the prime, where he lands, re-enters, or makes a touchdown with a checker. The player is not obliged to force a point, if he is able to make other moves on the board.—Note that the checkers in the prime must form an unbroken obstacle in the path of the player. If the opponent has a prime consisting of his own head and the first five points in his third quarter, the player may not force any of these points. The prime is not a consecutive obstacle, as the player never is allowed to move from the opponents head (his last point) to the first point in the opponent's third quarter (his home).

The second situation when a player can force closed points is when he has checkers on the bar, and the number of accessible points in the first quarter is less than the number of checkers on the bar. Accessible points are unoccupied points and points with enemy blots. Any checker that is re-entered on a closed point sends all checkers on that point off the board.— The closed points are vulnerable, because they block the checkers on the bar. Note, however, that the player is not obliged to fill out all accessible points in order to make this rule apply.

As soon as he is unable to simultaneously re-enter *all* checkers on the bar, the opponent's points in his first quarter become vulnerable.

The figure below shows black's first quarter. He has three checkers on the bar, but only two accessible points where they may be re-entered (2 and 3). Therefore, he is allowed to force one of the opponents closed points, but as soon as that is accomplished, the number of checkers on the bar no longer exceeds the number of accessible points, and black is not allowed to force any more closed points. If he rolls 6-2, he forces the sixth point with the six and re-enters a checker on the second point with the two. If he rolls 5-3, he forces the fifth point and hits the blot on the third one. If he rolls 6-5, he forces the sixth point with the six and gives up the five. He may not force the fifth point instead, because he must use the larger die. If he rolls 2-1, he re-enters a checker on the second point and gives up the one.
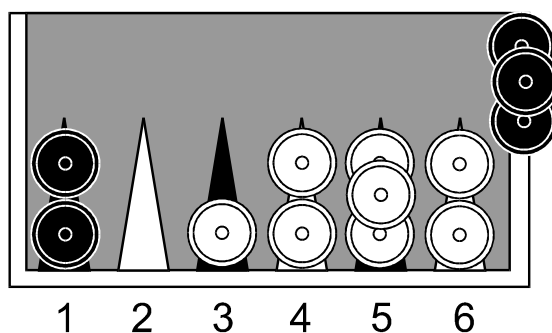
There is one exception from the two rules above: If a player only has one checker left on the board, closed points may no longer be forced. This exception becomes relevant when the last checker of a player who is bearing off is hit and sent off the board. The opponent then has the right to block the player with a six prime or a seven prime, and thereby prevent the last checker from being re-entered or crossing a certain point on the board. If the player becomes completely blocked and is not able to move his last checker regardless of what he rolls, he must pass his turn. A player who passes his turn is called *junker* (English *idler*).

6   Bearing checkers off

A player can win a game of Swedish Tables in different ways. The most simple victory is to bear all of the checkers off the board (to an imaginary twenty-fifth point outside the board). A player is only allowed to begin bearing off when he has rounded up all his checkers in the fourth quarter. Moreover, only checkers on the most backmost point occupied by the player may be born off (i.e. checkers that have no other checkers of the same colour behind them). If it is impossible to bear checkers off from that point, the player must advance checkers within the fourth quarter instead. If that also is impossible, he must give up one or both dice.—If a player moves only one checker for both dice and if that checker is born off, it must still be on the backmost position when it touches down. It is illegal to directly bear a checker off for the total sum on the dice.

If a die shows exactly the number of eyes necessary to move the most backmost checker to the imaginary point outside the board, that checker must be born off (there is no other way to make use of the throw). The checker is said to *go out evenly*. If the die shows a larger number, the most backmost checker is born off anyway. In this case, all eyes on the die are not used. The number of eyes has been *reduced*. If several moves are possible, the player is obliged to keep the total reduction in the move as small as possible.

If a checker is hit by the opponent when the player has started to bear off, it must be re-entered and returned to the fourth quarter before the player can resume bearing checkers off the board.

The rules for bearing off are slightly different in Swedish Tables than in backgammon. Since many readers probably are more familiar with the latter game, it may be worthwhile to exemplify the rules and point out some consequences. In the figure below, white has started to bear off and does not have any checkers in his first, second, or third quarter.

A player who bears off must expect to leave more blots than in backgammon. In diagram 1, white rolls 3-2. White may not bear off, neither from point 22 nor from 23, as there are checkers on point 21. There is only one way to make use of the three: to move a checker from point 21 to 24. White must then advance a second checker for the other die, either from point 21 or point 22. In any case, he will leave a blot. In diagram 2, white rolls 5-2. He must bear off two checkers, one from point 22 and one from 24. The total reduction is three eyes. Again, one blot is left behind. It would be illegal first to move from 22 to 24 and then bear off, as the resulting reduction is four eyes.

Bearing off is usually slower than in backgammon, partly because the player must advance checkers at an early stage instead of bearing off, and as a result will loose more eyes in reductions at the end, when most checkers are piled up close to point 24; and partly because the player will have to pass his turn or give up one die more frequently. In diagram 3, white rolls 5-3. He may not bear off, but must move from point 19 to 24 for the five, and then advance one of the checkers on point 21 to point 24. In diagram 4, white rolls 4-4. He must pass his turn, as it is illegal to bear off from point 21 and impossible to advance the checker on point 20.
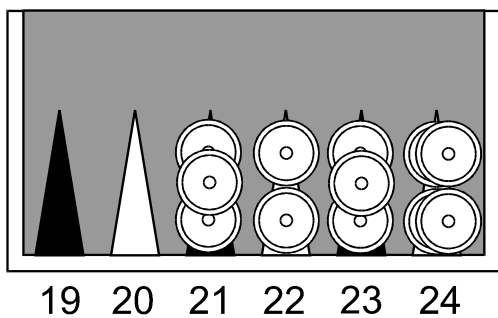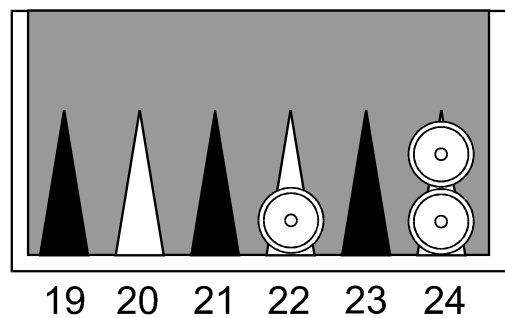
Diagram 1:

19 20 21 22 23 24

Diagram 2:

19 20 21 22 23 24

Diagram 3:
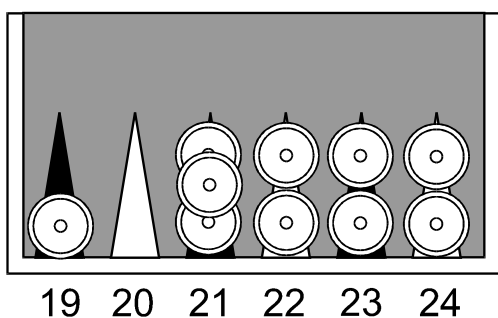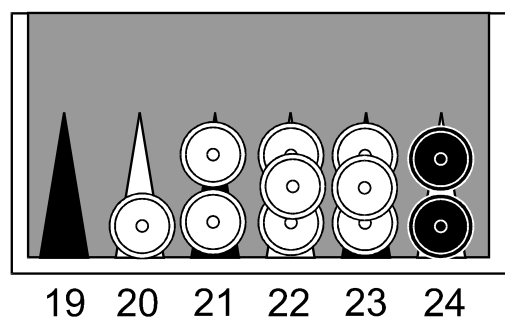

19 20 21 22 23 24

Diagram 4:

19 20 21 22 23 24

7   Handsome game

A player can win the game if he manages to arrange all his checkers in one of four predetermined patterns in the last quarter. This is called winning a *handsome game*. These four patterns are:

Single crown game:	Three checkers on each one of the last five points (20-24).
Double crown game:	Five checkers on each one of the last three points (22-24).
Staircase:	Seven checkers on the last point (24), five checkers on the second last point (23), and three checkers on the third last point (22).
Tower:	All fifteen checkers on the last point (24).

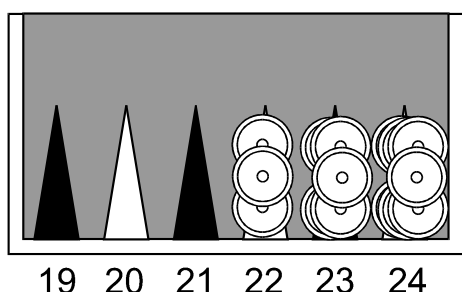As soon as a player has born off a checker, he has missed the opportunity to win a handsome game.
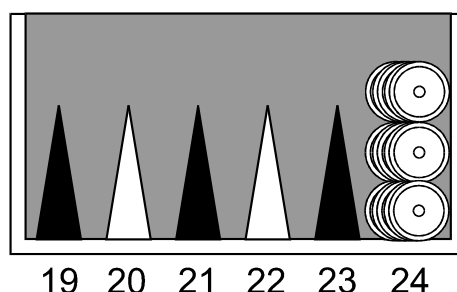
Single crown:

19 20 21 22 23 24

Double crown:

19 20 21 22 23 24

Staircase:

19 20 21 22 23 24

Tower:

19 20 21 22 23 24
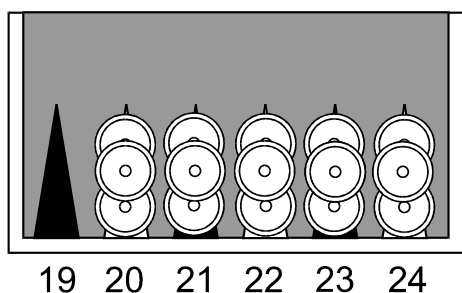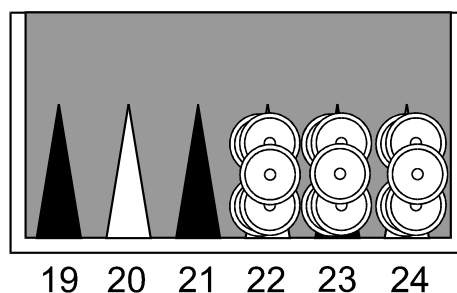
8   Monk

If the opponent has one or several checkers on the bar when a player bears off his last checker or finishes a handsome game, the reward for the victory is greater. This is referred to as bearing off or making a handsome game *with monk*. The name monk also applies both to the defeated player (who *becomes monk*) and to the checkers on the bar (*monk checker* or *monk checkers*).

9   Jan

A player makes his opponent *jan*, if he sends so many checkers off the board that it is impossible for the opponent to re-enter all of them, i.e. if the number of checkers on the bar becomes larger than the number of points in the opponent's first quarter that are either unoccupied or occupied by the offensive player. Note that it would be the opponent's own checkers

that eventually blocked the last checkers on the bar, if the opponent were allowed to continue the game and re-enter as many checkers as possible.

Jan is a prestigious victory in Swedish Tables, and skilful players always focus their efforts on making the opponent jan. Normally, the way to proceed is to establish a five prime as quickly as possible, which makes it difficult for the opponent to move checkers from the first quarter to closed points on the other side of the board, or to the head where they are safe. The opponent sooner or later must split closed points, or move an excessive amount of checkers from home, which end up as blots in his first quarter. When the opponent exposes his seventh blot, or his sixth blot if his home still is closed, he has taken out his *jan blot*. The player then can finish the game off by hitting all blots outside the first quarter.

10 Forced jan

A player can make his opponent jan not only by hitting his blots, but sometimes also by forcing closed points in the first quarter when he re-enters a checker, which sends many enemy checkers off the board in one go. This is the most prestigious way to win a game in Swedish Tables and is called *forced jan*.

Forcing a closed point does not necessarily result in forced jan. If the opponent still can re-enter all checkers, he has not lost the game—at least not yet. Sometimes it can be advantageous, or even part of the strategy in making a forced jan, to let your opponent force one of your closed points.

To make a forced jan is difficult and quite often also hazardous. This can be accomplished in many different ways, but the main principle is the following: the offensive player manages to send two of the opponent's checkers to the bar at a time when the opponent has a strong position in the player's first quarter, e.g. three closed points with two or three checkers each. The player then tries to fill out all unoccupied points in his first quarter. If he manages to do this, he proceeds and splits one or two closed points in his third quarter. The opponent is likely to hit at least some of the resulting blots when he re-enters his checkers. As soon as one of the player's checkers ends up on the bar, the player has the right to force closed points in his first quarter, as there are no other entries. Quite often, it is necessary to force two closed points before a sufficient amount of checkers have been sent off the board to lead to a forced jan.—It is imperative that the opponent still has a minimum of two checkers on the bar when the player splits his closed points. Otherwise, the opponent may re-enter a checker for one die and split a closed point in the player's first quarter when he moves for the second die.
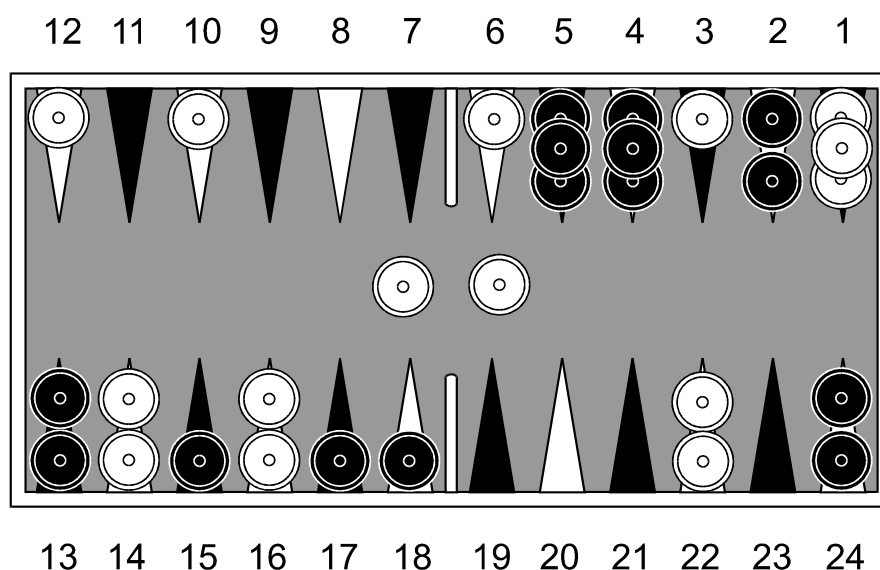
In the figure on the previous page, white is trying to make a forced jan on black. The points on the board are numbered from white's perspective, starting with 1 for white's home. White has two checkers on the bar and is completely blocked in the first quarter by black's closed points. If white rolls either a four or a five, he wins immediately by forced jan. If white rolls 6-2, 3-2, 2-2, or 2-1, he forces black's closed point at 2 but has to give up the other die. The two black checkers that are sent to the bar make all white's closed points in the third quarter vulnerable. Black is now favourite in the game: if he manages to roll a two or a four before white rolls a four or a five, he wins by forced jan. This sudden turn of white's position is not an unusual complication. A player who wants to launch an attack must plan several moves ahead, consider the consequences of various rolls of the dice, and must make sure that the overall odds are in his favour. Once he has exposed blots in the opponent's first quarter, many of the subsequent moves for either player will be forced moves. There is often little he can do to change the course of events, if the dice turn unfavourable.

If white misses all black's closed points with both dice, the situation is more complicated. Black has control of the board and no checkers on the bar, but he still has many checkers in white's first quarter. I leave it as an exercise for the reader to work out this last situation and figure out how black should move, for example, a roll of 3-1.

11 The last move in the game

The game is over as soon as either of the players has born off his last checker, has arranged his checkers in one of the four patterns for a handsome game, or has sent more checkers off the board than the opponent is able to re-enter. A player who can finish the game is not obliged to do so, if he is able to make another legal move on the board. However, a player may never continue a game once it has reached one of the final positions described above— even if the player only has moved for one die and still is able to make a legal move for the other die. It is, for example, illegal to arrange a single crown game for the first two moves in a double five, and then expose a blot on point 20 by bearing two checkers off for the remaining two fives (in order to return the last checker to the first quarter, which may give the player a chance to win by jan if the opponent has many blots).

A player who can finish the game by making a move for just one die may completely ignore the other die, even if it is the larger one. If he rolls a double, he may make one, two, three or four moves, at his own discretion.

A player is not obliged to keep the reduction as low as possible in the final move. For example, if a player rolls 6-2 and if he has one remaining checker on point 19 while the opponent has one blot on point 21, he may win the game with monk by first hitting the blot for the two and then bearing the checker off for the six. The reduction in the move is two eyes, whereas the reduction is zero if he directly bears the checker off with the six and gives up the two.

12 Points

A game of Swedish Tables can end in seven different ways. Five of these games can additionally be won with monk. The table on next page shows the points that are awarded to the winner.

When experienced players meet, between one third and one half of the games end with someone bearing off. About one fourth to one third of the games end with a handsome game or jan, respectively. Forced jan typically occurs in one game out of twenty. The most common handsome game is single crown, whereas tower is quite rare. The looser becomes monk in about one game out of ten.

13 Matches

A match consists of an odd number of games, usually three, five, or seven. If the players end up with the same total score, the winner is the player with the victory of highest value, according to the table below. Note that games in the same field rank the same, e.g. staircase and tower, whereas a game in a higher field always ranks higher than a game in a lower field even if the scores are equal, e.g. single crown ranks higher than bearing off with monk. If the highest-valued game for each player are of equal rank, the second best game is counted, and so on.

Game	Points
Forced jan	6
Jan	4
Single crown with monk	3
Double crown with monk	3
Staircase with monk	3
Tower with monk	3
Single crown	2
Double crown	2
Staircase	2
Tower	2
Bearing off with monk	2
Bearing off	1

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