

Counting Hammers

By Martin Shapiro

An essential part of proper shuffleboard strategy is always knowing if you are ahead or behind in the game against your opponent(s). It determines your correct tactics for the current shot and frame.

CourtShuffleboard.com scope note: Examples in this article include common Florida 75-point doubles and hammer-sequence conventions. Other points totals, frame formats, singles play, and hammer sequences require corresponding adjustments to the calculations.

Have you ever heard the expression, “The scoreboard is your Silent Captain?” Same thing. You need to know at the beginning of every frame who is ahead. You also need to know every time a score is placed on the board, yours or your opponent’s, how that scoring disc will affect who is ahead if it remains scoring. ‘Who is ahead’ determines your best shot, your best tactic, your best strategy.

But how do you know who is ahead? It’s not necessarily who has the higher score at the moment. You have to be able to count hammers to determine who is ahead, because you have to determine who is going to have more hammers, and in a points game, the order of who is going to have the hammer shots. Shuffleboard is a game of scoring hammers. Scoring more than your hammer shot in a frame is an unanticipated bonus that you don’t take into account when counting hammers to determine your tactics.

In a frame game, to determine who is ahead, you add eight points per upcoming hammer to the current scores (including any currently scoring discs when mid-frame), as a way to see who would have the higher score when the game ends at the final frame. In a points game, you add eight points for upcoming hammers to the current scores (include any currently scoring discs mid-frame), until one player or team reaches the winning points total, to see which team gets there first. That’s all well and good, but who is going to do all that math during play? Fortunately, there are easy shortcuts.

FRAME GAMES: COUNT THE CURRENT BRACKET

In a frame game, it’s simple: every two frames in singles, first one for Yellow and then one for Black, gives an even number of hammers to both players, making a “bracket” of singles play. If it’s a doubles game, every four frames is a bracket of play – two Yellow hammers and two Black hammers. To see who is ahead, you only need to calculate the upcoming hammers that complete the current bracket of play. Whoever will be ahead at the completion of the bracket is who will be ahead at the completion of the game, all things being equal (all players just scoring their hammers and nothing else). Beyond that, take into consideration how many more frames until the end of the game to know how long you have to maintain your lead when ahead, or how much risk to take when behind (the further behind or the closer to the end, the more risk to try to gain the lead).

POINTS GAMES: COUNT TO THE WIN

A points game is much more complicated as you need to calculate who will get to the end point first, which seldom occurs exactly at the end of a bracket of play. You can do this by counting hammers, adding eight points for each upcoming hammer until you reach the end point for one player or team. For instance, at the start of a 75-points game with Yellow out, after four brackets of play (two Yellow

hammers and two Black hammers for each bracket) the score will theoretically be 64-64, counting 8 points for each hammer. Black has the next two hammers, reaching 80 points, while Yellow doesn't get to play their next two hammers to complete the bracket of play. Black wins before Yellow hammers complete the bracket. So right at the start of a 75-point game, black is ahead, that is, black will theoretically get to 75 points first based on hammers.

THE MODULAR SYSTEM SHORTCUT

That's all well and good, but does that mean you have to add up the hammers every frame, every shot, for a points game? Fortunately, thanks to Wilbur L. Estes and his fine book *Modular Shuffleboard*, we know an easy substitute for counting hammers in a doubles 75-points game, the common format for Pro tournaments in Florida (and often elsewhere): the points-bracket system (a different use of the word 'bracket'), also called the Modular System. If you count down from 75 points in 16-point brackets (16 points is two hammers), you get 75-59-43-27-11-negative5. Reverse those numbers and take off the first one (negative5) and the last one (75), to end up with: 11-27-43-59. These are the bottom limit points value of each 16-point bracket: 11 is the 11 to 26 bracket; 27 is the 27-42 bracket; 43 is the 43-58 bracket; 59 is the 59-74 bracket. Whichever bracket you are currently in, two hammer eights will always land you in the next bracket up. So if both teams are in the same bracket when shooting from the head, the team who has the hammer will get to the next bracket first as long as they score both their hammers (if at the bottom limit of the bracket, both hammers have to be an 8). It's easy to see that if both teams have 59 or above with play out at the head, the team with the hammer will win by scoring their two hammers. That's also true at any earlier time during the game if both teams are in the same bracket with play out at the head – the team with the hammer will eventually get to 75 first if everyone just scores their hammers, so that team with the hammer is ahead and the team without the hammer is behind. If one team is in a higher bracket than the other with play out at the head, that team will theoretically get to the 59-74 bracket before the other team, and then the next time that team has their hammers, that team will win with their scoring hammers. So anytime one team is in a higher bracket than the other with play out at the head, that team is ahead.

Sort of complicated, but really all you have to do for the Modular System is memorize the four bracket-limit numbers: 11-27-43-59. Then apply these three rules:

1. When play is out at the head, if both teams are in the same bracket, the team with the hammer is ahead.
2. When play is out at the head, if one team is in a higher bracket than the other, that team is ahead.
3. When play is out at the foot, add 8 to the score of the team with the hammer, then apply the same rules: (counting the added 8 for the team with the hammer) if both teams are in the same bracket the team with the hammer is ahead; if one team is in a higher bracket, that team is ahead.

For doubles points games other than 75-points, add in or take out some 16-points-bracket limits accordingly (e.g., for a 100-points doubles game, the bracket limits are: 11-27-43-59-75-91). For singles points games, add in additional points-bracket limits accordingly: (e.g., for a 75-points singles game, the bracket limits are: 3-11-19-27-35-43-51-59).

POINTS OR FRAMES?

What about games that are points or frames, whichever comes first? You still use the two shortcut methods above to determine who is ahead, but first you have to determine if you are currently playing for points or for frames. For that, you have to count all the hammers left, a value of 8 for each hammer, to see if the game reaches the points win or the end of the frames first.

As an example, for a 75-points or 16 frames (8 rounds) game, multiply 8 times 8: 8 points for 8 hammers, which is the total number of hammers that each team will get. 8 times 8 is 64, less than the 75 points win, so at the beginning of that game, you are playing for frames.

Let's say that both Yellow and Black score some extra discs in the first three frames, bringing the score to 23-29 at the start of frame 3, Yellow's hammer at the foot. From a frames perspective, when Yellow scores the hammer, the score will be at least 30 for Yellow and 29 for Black, Yellow leading in scores against Black. But Black will get their remaining six hammers before Yellow gets to their last two hammers of the 16 frames. Six hammers times 8 points = 48 points; add that to Black's current 29 points = 77 points – a winning score! Those extra points scored by Black in the first three frames changed the game from a frame-game to a points-game. If instead the score is 30 for yellow and 21 for Black at the end of Frame 4, you might be tempted to figure it is now a points game – the 48 points for Yellow's remaining six hammers gets Yellow to a winning 78 points. But don't forget to notice that the 78 points is reached in the last frame of the game, not before. So it's still a frames game.

Bottom line, in a points-or-frames game, every time one team scores an extra disc beyond their hammers, you have to recalculate to see if the game changed from a frames game to a points game. And every time a player fails to score their hammer, or gets a negative score from a kitchen, you have to recalculate to see if the game changed from a points game to a frames game. You don't have to recalculate if all that happens is a team scores their hammer. To recalculate, count the remaining hammers for each team, multiply by 8 for each, and add to the current scores for each to determine if the game is currently for frames or points, and then use the shortcuts to determine which team is ahead. Why bother? You'll be surprised how often you can slip in a win by letting your opponent score one disc to your two discs on your hammer, or even their two discs to your two discs, to hit the points win, because they didn't pay attention and was only thinking about the frames.

WHY IT MATTERS

So that's how to count hammers. Or rather, how to shortcut counting hammers to know who is ahead and who is behind at any given time during a game. What difference does it make? Sure, a game is almost never perfect – players don't always just score hammers and nothing else. But it tells you who is going to win if that is all that happens. If you are ahead, you follow a strategy to keep it that way. If you are behind, you follow a strategy to get ahead. The tactics for each are different. Playing the wrong tactics can risk your lead when you are ahead or keep you down when behind.

Rules-based tactics, such as “go on the board if you are two or more discs down” lacks the nuances to consistently win your games. For instance, if you are playing Black in a 75-points doubles game, score is 42-28, your hammer at the head, you may be two discs down but you are ahead – you'll get to 75 first if everyone just scores their hammers! How do you know? Apply the Modular System: you are both in the same points-bracket, but you have the hammer, out at the head. Think about it. Do you want to risk your lead by playing on the board? If your opponent knows the brackets system they will be looking for any opportunity to get you in the kitchen. Don't hand it to them on a platter.

Determining who is ahead determines your best tactics for the current frame or shot. When ‘who is ahead’ changes, you change your tactics. When ‘who is ahead’ changes again, change your tactics again. Besides shooting technique, that's all there really is to shuffleboard. Except for the hundreds of pages of detailed tactics and strategy explained in the various books and articles, that is.