

# All about Cribbage



## History

Cribbage is traditionally supposed to have been invented in the early 17th Century by poet (and alleged fraudster) Sir John Suckling. It evolved from the earlier game Noddy. It is basically a game for two players, though adaptations for 4 players in fixed partnerships, and for 3 players also exist.

## Players and cards

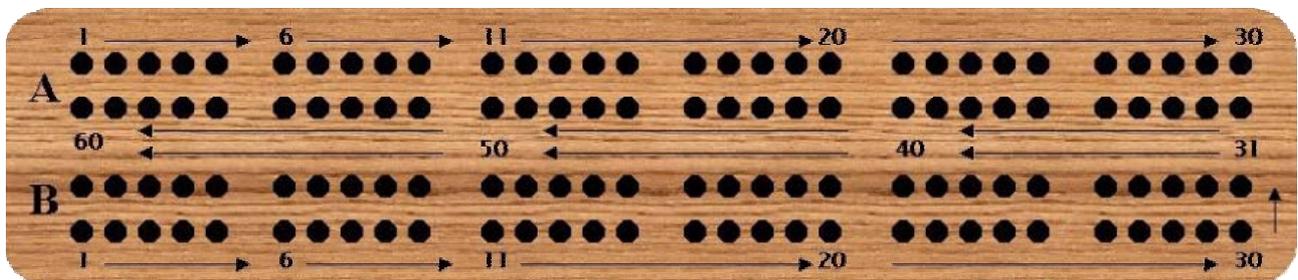
Two or four players using a standard 52 card pack. Cards rank K (high) Q J 10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 Ace (low).

## Object of the Game

To be the first (or first team) to score 121 points or more accumulated over several deals. Points are scored mainly for combinations of cards either occurring during the play or occurring in a player's hand or in the cards discarded before the play, which form the "crib" or "box".

## Board and Pegs

The points are recorded by means of a board and pegs. The holes in the board represent scores from 1 to 60 – a second circuit gives you 120. Therefore first player to peg off the board and reach 121 wins.



Each player (or team) has two pegs: the forward peg shows the player's score to date, and the rear peg shows the previous score. When a player scores points, the rear peg is moved in front to show the new score. The distance between the pegs therefore shows the amount most recently scored, and the opponent can thereby check it has been scored correctly.

## Deal

The first deal is determined by cutting the cards. The player cutting the lower card deals and has the first box or crib. If the cards are equal – (including both players cutting a *ten card* (10, J, Q or K) – there is another cut for first deal. The deal then alternates from hand to hand until the game is over. It is usual to play best of three: for the second game first box and deal alternate, but for the third game – if a decider is needed – there is a fresh cut.

The dealer shuffles, the player on the dealer's right cuts the cards and dealer deals 6 cards face down to each player one at a time (or 5 cards for "pairs" play). The cards which are not dealt, are placed face down on the table. At the end of each hand, the played cards are gathered together and the whole pack is shuffled by the new dealer before the next deal.

## Discard

Each player must choose two cards to discard face down to form the "crib" (or one card for pairs). These four cards are set aside until the end of the hand. Any card combinations in the crib will count for the dealer, so non-dealer will try to throw cards that are unlikely to make valuable combinations.

## Start Card

The non-dealer (or the player on the dealers left) cuts the pack of remaining cards, lifting the upper part without showing its bottom card. The dealer takes out the top card of the lower part, turns it face up and, after non-dealer replaces the upper part, places it face up on top of the pack. This turned up card is called the "start" card. If the start card is a jack, the dealer immediately pegs 2 points – this is called "two for his heels". Starting with the player on the dealers left, the players take turns to play a single card face up in front of themselves. In this stage of the game the total pip value of the cards played by both players must not exceed 31. The values of the cards are: Ace = 1; 2 to 10 = face value; jack = 10; queen = 10; king = 10. As each card is played, the player announces the running total. If a card is played which makes the pip total exactly 31, the player pegs two points. This ends the play.

## Play of the cards

Beginning with the player on the dealers left, the players take turns to play single cards. You play your own cards to form a face-up pile in front of yourself, keeping them separate from the other player's cards. In this stage of the game the total pip value of the cards played by both players is counted, starting from zero and adding the value of each card as it is played. This total must not exceed 31. When no more cards can be played without going over 31, the count is restarted from zero. The pip values of the cards are: Ace = 1; 2 to 10 = face value; jack = 10; queen = 10; king = 10. As each card is played, the player announces the running total – for example the non-dealer plays a king and says "10", the dealer plays an 8 and says "18", the dealer plays a jack and says "28", and so on. If a card is played which brings the total exactly to 31, the player pegs 2 claiming *Thirty one for two* as he does so.

A player who cannot play without exceeding 31 does not play a card but says *Go*, leaving his partner and opponents to continue if possible, pegging for any further combinations made (see below). Bringing the total to exactly 31 pegs 2, but if the total is 30 or less and neither player can lay a card without going over 31, then the last player to lay a card pegs *one for the go*.

The cards that have been played are turned over and a fresh round of play starts with the cards remaining in the players' hands in exactly the same way. The opponent of the player who played last in the previous round (scoring *Thirty one for two* or *One for last*) plays first in the new round. This second round of play starts again from zero and again continues until neither can play without going over 31. The last player again scores "1 for last" or "31 for 2", and if either player has any cards left there is a further round. Play continues for as many rounds as necessary until both players' cards are exhausted. Towards the end, it may happen that one player has run out of cards but the other still has several cards. In that case the player who still has cards simply carries on playing and scoring for any combinations formed until all his cards have been played.

It is **never** possible to score "one for last" and "31 for 2" at the same time. They are **alternatives**. If you make exactly 31 for two points just peg those two points – you do **not** get an additional "one for last" in this case.

## Scoring during the play

A player who makes any of the following scores during the play pegs them immediately.

- 15** If you play a card which brings the total to 15 you peg 2 claiming *Fifteen two*.
- 31** If you play a card which brings the total to exactly 31 you peg 2.
- Pair** If you play a card of the same rank as the previous card (e.g. a king after a king) you peg 2 for a pair. Note that a 10 and a king do NOT make a pair even though they are both worth 10 points.
- Pair Royal** If immediately after a pair a third card of the same rank is played, the player of the third card scores 6 for *pair royal*.
- Double Pair Royal** Four cards of the same rank, played in immediate succession. The player of the fourth card scores 12.
- Run** A *run* or *sequence* is a set of 3 or more cards of consecutive ranks (irrespective of suit) – such as 2–3–4–5 or 10–Jack–Queen. Ace is low so ace–king–queen is not a run. The player of a card which completes a run scores for the run; the score is equal to the number of cards in the run. The cards do not have to be played in order, but no other cards must intervene.
- Example** Cards are played in the following order 4–2–3–5–3. The player of the 3 scores 3 for a run (2,3,4) then the player of the 5 scores 4 (for 2,3,4,5). The player of the second 3 does not get a run as there is no consecutive run.
- Last Card** If neither player manages to make the total exactly 31, whoever played the last card pegs 1. Note that to score for pair, pair royal, double pair royal or run, the cards must have been played consecutively during a single round of play. If **one** player had to say "go" while the combination was being formed, the combination is still valid, but if **both** players are unable to play, causing a new round of play to be started from zero, all combinations are started afresh.

## The Show

Players now retrieve the cards that they put down during the play and score for combinations of cards held in hand. First the player to the left of the dealer's hand is exposed, and scored. The start card also counts as part of the hand when scoring combinations. All valid scores from the following list are counted.

- 15** Any combination of cards adding up to 15 pips scores 2 points. For example king, jack, ten, five would score 6 points altogether – 6 points for three fifteens, since the king, jack and ten can each be paired with the five. You would say *"Fifteen two, fifteen four, fifteen six"*.
- Pair** A pair of cards of the same rank score 2 points. Three cards of the same rank contain 3 different pairs and thus score a total of 6 points for *pair royal*. Four of a kind contain 6 pairs and so score 12 points.
- Run** Three cards of consecutive rank (irrespective of suit), such as ace–2–3, score 3

points for a run. A hand such as 4-5-5-6 contains two runs of 3 (as well as two fifteens and a pair) and so would score 12 altogether. A run of four cards, such as 9-10-J-Q scores 4 points (this is slightly illogical – you might expect it to score 6 because it contains two runs of 3, but it doesn't. The runs of 3 within it don't count – you just get 4), and a run of five cards scores 5.

**Flush** If all four cards of the hand are the same suit, 4 points are scored for flush. If the start card is the same suit as well, the flush is worth 5 points. There is no score for having 3 hand cards and the start all the same suit. Note also that there is no score for flush during the play – it only counts in the show.

**One For His Nob** If the hand contains the jack of the same suit as the start card, you peg *One for his nob*.

Note that when scoring a hand, the same card may be counted and scored as part of several different combinations. For example if your hand is 7 8 8 K and the start card is a 9 you score *Fifteen 2, fifteen 4, and a pair is 6, and a run is 9 and a run is 12* – 12 holes to peg, with each of your 8s forming part of a fifteen, a pair and a run.

After all players have shown their hands, the dealer picks up the “crib” or “box” and scores it as above. Note that for a flush, the crib must have all five cards (including the start card of the same suit) – this scores 5.

## Winning the game

As soon as someone reaches or passes 121, that player wins the game. This can happen at any stage – during the play or the show, or even by dealer scoring *two for his heels*. It is not necessary to reach 121 exactly – you can *peg out* by scoring 2 more when you were on 120 and still win. All that matters is that your opponent's pegs are both still on the board.

## Hints

- If in doubt, lead a 4. This is the highest card on which the opponent cannot immediately make 15. Lower cards are best kept for later.
- Remember that ten-cards far outnumber any others in the pack. Thus, your opponent is quite likely to have one or more 10s. Consequently, do not lead a 5, or make 21. Naturally enough, 10s are often accompanied by 5s. Beware of making 26.
- Conversely, making 11 is generally a good move, providing of course you hold the necessary ten-card to follow up your opponent's.
- Never play a 6 to a led 4, or vice versa. This leads to a nasty sting as your opponent slaps down a 5, for five points (4-6-5 run and 15). Unless you've got a plan up your sleeve, of course...
- Get rid of your higher cards first, as they will be a liability when the count approaches 31. Save Aces – they are your emergency escape route to turn a point-losing 30 into a 2-point-winning 31.
- Do not pair your opponent's card unless you also hold another of the same card in reserve. For example, if your opponent plays a 4, you should not reply with a 4 if it is the only 4 you hold – because opponent is quite likely to have another 4 himself (making a pair royal for 6 points). Conversely, you should encourage your opponent to pair your card when you yourself hold a pair. The chances of him holding the fourth card to make double pair royal (12 points) are minimal.

- When holding two cards that together make 5 (for example 4 and Ace), lead one of them. Your opponent is likely to play a 10 onto it, enabling you to make 15.
- Watch for runs! Don't play a card with a value 1 or 2 away from your opponent's card – for example a 9 on a 7 – as he is likely to complete the run. The exception, of course, is when you hold the necessary card to extend the run yourself and top your opponent's points. Beware of 'banging your head' on 31, though – calculate beforehand whether you will be able to play onto the run without going over 31.
- Vary your play. Your opponent is certainly familiar with these rules of thumb as well, unless he is a novice, and will be expecting you to make the obvious plays. Don't follow these suggestions slavishly – throw down a weird card every so often. At the least it will make your opponent stop and think – you may be up to something. Or not. Either way, it 'breaks flow' – the equivalent of taking your opponent 'out of the book' at Chess.
- Conversely, study your opponent's play. Is he stuck in a set of unbreakable habits? Does he always lead from a pair, make 11 or discard the same kind of cards? The less he varies his play, the sooner you can pin down his habits of play, and exploit them.
- Think about the cards your opponent plays. Remember that when discarding you generally attempt to maximise the points in your hand by keeping combinations that make 15, or pairs. If your opponent lays an 8, chances are he has a 7 to go with it. If he plays an Ace, expect to see a 4 coming out sooner or later (and a ten-card). By the second card you should have a fair idea of the remaining two cards your opponent holds.
- Your opponent will be doing the same! If you have an 'odd' card – one that is not part of a 15 or a pair – play it first, to throw your opponent off the scent and put off revealing your hand as long as possible.
- Keep an eye on the board. If you are well ahead, go all out for points, even if it means giving some away to gain some. If you are behind, do the opposite and try to prevent your opponent from getting any points at all. At first this advice seems absurd – of course you want to make points yourself and stop your opponent getting any. What difference does it make who's ahead? But you rarely get something for nothing, in Cribbage as in life, and most plays involve sacrificing a few points to gain more (for example, leading from a pair, hoping your opponent will pair it and make 2 points, allowing you to bang down the third card for 6 points). 'Break-even' plays (for example, leading a 10 hoping your opponent will make 15 for 2, allowing you to lay your 5 for another 2) are especially dangerous when you are trailing, as the scores are still level but your opponent is that much closer to the all-important 121.

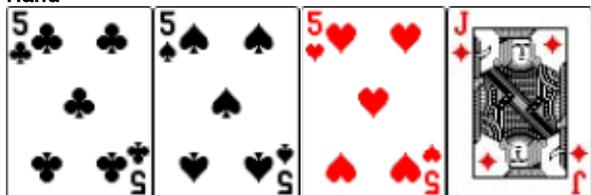
## Finale

"Nineteen" is the lowest impossible score in cribbage, and is used euphemistically as a zero hand.

Cribbage has given the English language a number of expressions which it is hard to imagine doing without, including "level pegging", "what a turn-up/a turn-up for the books", "streets ahead", and "pegged out".

The highest hand possible is worth 29 points. The following cards make up this rare score.

Hand



Start Card

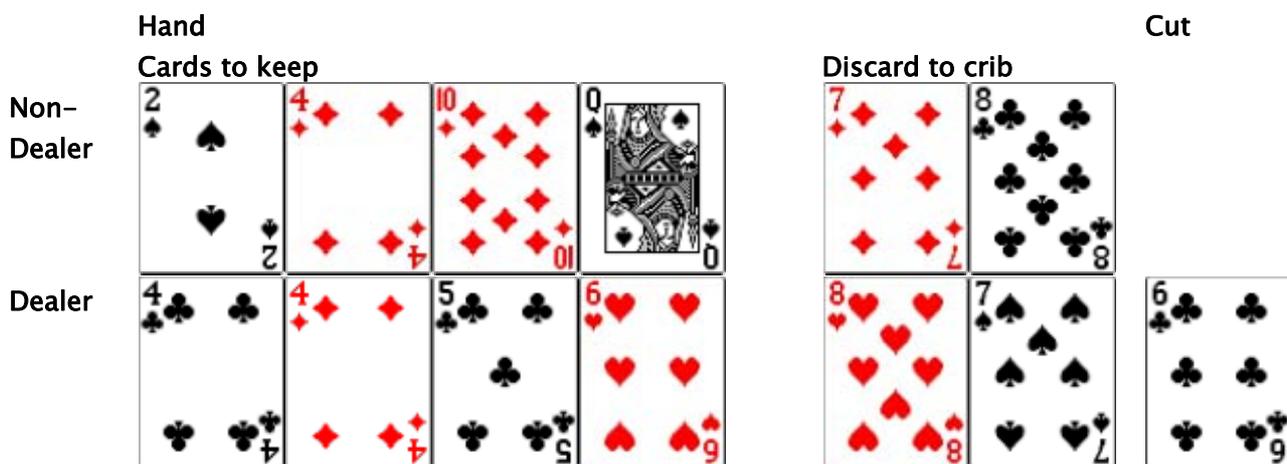


**The hand is made up of :**

4 fifteens (each five paired with the Jack)	8 points
4 fifteens (there are four combinations of 3 fives)	8 points
The double pair royale (4 of a kind)	12 points
1 for his "knob"	1 point

The probability of getting this hand is quite small. Three fives are required to be dealt with the jack of the fourth suit, and two other cards neither of which is a five. The total number of such six-card hands is  $4 \cdot (47 \cdot 46 / 2) = 4324$ , out of  $(52 \cdot 51 \cdot 50 \cdot 49 \cdot 48 \cdot 47 / 720) = 20358520$  possible hands. Given this event, the probability of turning up the fourth five is  $1/46$ . So the probability is:  
 $4324 / (20358520 \cdot 46) = 1/216580$

**An interesting play**



You deal the above cards and discard the 7 and 8. The cut is made and out pops a 6.

**Pegging:**

Who	Card	Total	Score
Non-dealer	Q	10	
Dealer	5	15	2 for 15
Non-dealer	10	25	
Dealer	6	31	2 for 31
Non-dealer	2	2	
Dealer	4	6	
Non-dealer	4	10	2 for pair
Dealer	4	14	6 for pair Royale, 1 for last

Non-dealer scored 2 points for the paired 4, dealer scores 11 in total

In the hands, non-dealer pegged no points, dealer has a 24 hand and a 24 crib. Dealer has outscored his opponent 59-2. It does rely on a player making a fairly stupid discard!

Thanks to various sources including

Cribbage Corner  
Cards games website

<http://www.splange.freemove.co.uk/cribbage.html>  
<http://www.pagat.com/index.html>