

Nine Men's Morris

About the Game

Nine men's morris is one of the oldest board games in the world. At the temple of Kurna in Egypt, a morris board is incised on a roofing slab, probably carved by the workmen who built the temple around 1400 B.C. Centuries later, it was important among the Vikings: a board was placed in the funeral ship of a king buried about 900 A.D. at Gokstad, Norway.

The first morris boards were like the ones used today, consisting of concentric squares with lines intersecting their sides. In the fourteenth century, when the game was immensely popular in the courts of Europe, a variant was devised in which diagonal lines were added to the corners of the squares. A twelve-man version of morris, using this new board, was brought to America by early British settlers. The game in the United States is still played on this board, and includes a rule that allows a 'mill,' or row of three counters, to be made on the diagonal corner lines.

Morris is mentioned in King Alfonso of Spain's thirteenth-century *Book of Games*, and in such diverse sources as the Talmud and William Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. Indeed, morris players appear frequently in the medieval writings of France, Germany, and Britain.

In Germany the game has always been called *Mühle* (mill). In France, it was originally called *mérelles* (counters), but in modern French, it is also known as *jeu de moulin* (game of mill). The English 'morris' is probably adapted from the medieval French. In addition to nine men's morris, several other versions of the game have been widely played: they are known as five-penny morris and three men's morris, according to the number of men used. The nine men's morris presented here uses the diagram prevalent in Europe today, without the diagonal lines.

How to Play

Nine men's morris is a game for two players, each having nine black or white men. The game is played on the 24 'points' on the board. These points are the corners of the three squares and the intersections of the squares with the lines crossing their sides. Before beginning the game, players draw lots for the first turn.

There are two parts to a game of morris. First the players take turns placing a man on any empty point of the board. In the second part, when all the pieces are on the board, a turn is taken by moving a piece to an adjacent vacant point. In both the placement and movement of the men, the object is to form a 'mill' or row of three pieces on a line. Every time a player makes a mill, he may remove one of his opponent's men. Unless there are no other pieces to take, a player may not take a piece from a mill made by his opponent. Once a piece is removed from the board, it does not return into play.

The game is won when a player either reduces his opponent's forces to two men, or blocks all his opponent's men from making further moves. (Some players agree to let the last three pieces move 'wild,' that is, from any point to any other point.)

Open and Closed mills:

A mill may be 'opened' by moving one of the three pieces off the line, and then 'closed' on the next turn by returning the piece to its former position. Thus a new mill is formed, and the player is entitled to remove another opposing piece from the board.

Some players dislike this rule and agree that a mill that has been open and closed is not considered a new mill unless at least two of its men have been moved. Another optional rule states that a player cannot move the same piece on two consecutive turns.