

Sergeant Major

3 players

52 cards

Difficulty: Medium

Duration: Medium

Meet or exceed your trick target: dealer = 8, left of dealer = 5, third player = 3.

SETUP

- 3 players with a 52-card deck (remove one low card for 51 cards).
- Deal 17 cards each. Dealer chooses the trump suit.

SCORING

- Track surplus and deficit tricks against your target each round.
- Overachievers give worst cards to underachievers next round and receive their best.
- Most cumulative surplus after set rounds wins.

Tip: As dealer, choose trump in your longest, strongest suit to hit your 8-trick target.

ON YOUR TURN

- Player left of dealer leads first.
- Follow suit if able; otherwise play any card.
- Highest trump wins; if no trump, highest of led suit wins.
- Play all 17 tricks.

Sergeant Major, also known as 3-5-8 or 8-5-3, is a three-player trick-taking game where each player has a different target number of tricks to win. The dealer must win 8 tricks, the player to dealer's left must win 5, and the third player must win 3. Players who exceed their target gain an advantage in the next round.

Objective

Meet or exceed your trick target for the round. Players who win extra tricks above their target exchange cards with underperformers in the next deal, creating a dynamic advantage system.

Setup

1. **Players:** 3 players.
2. **Deck:** Standard 52-card deck with one card removed (typically the 2 of Clubs), leaving 51 cards.
3. **Deal:** Deal 17 cards to each player.
4. **Targets:** Dealer must win 8 tricks, player to dealer's left must win 5 tricks, third player must win 3 tricks.

Trump Selection

1. **Dealer chooses:** The dealer examines their hand and declares the trump suit.
2. **Kitty variant:** In some versions, the removed card is not predetermined; instead the dealer picks up any remaining cards after the deal.

Gameplay

1. **Lead:** The player to the dealer's left leads the first trick.
2. **Follow suit:** Players must follow the led suit if they can. If they cannot, they may play any card, including a trump.
3. **Win trick:** The highest trump card wins the trick. If no trumps are played, the highest card of the led suit wins.
4. **Continue:** The trick winner leads the next trick. Play all 16 tricks (one card remains unused).

Card Exchange

1. **Over-tricks:** After all tricks are played, players who won more tricks than their target note the surplus.
2. **Under-tricks:** Players who fell short of their target note the deficit.
3. **Exchange:** In the next round, overachievers give their worst cards to underachievers and receive the underachievers' best cards in return. The number exchanged equals the surplus/deficit.
4. **New targets:** Targets remain the same (8, 5, 3) based on who deals, but the deal rotates.

Scoring

1. **Running total:** Track each player's cumulative surplus or deficit across rounds.
2. **Game end:** Play a set number of rounds (often 9 or 12). The player with the most cumulative surplus tricks wins.
3. **Alternative:** Some groups play until one player reaches a target surplus (e.g., +10).

Variations

- **9-5-2:** An alternative target distribution giving the dealer 9 tricks, next player 5, and third player 2.
- **No exchange:** Some casual groups skip the card exchange between rounds.
- **Full deck:** Play with all 52 cards, dealing 17 each with 1 card set aside unseen.

Tips and Strategies

- As dealer, choose a trump suit where you hold length and high cards, since you need 8 tricks.
- As the player needing only 3 tricks, focus on winning tricks with high trumps and avoid overcommitting.
- After the exchange, adjust your strategy based on the strong cards you received from underperformers.

Tips & Strategy

As dealer, pick trump in your longest strong suit. The card exchange creates a snowball effect, so meeting your target early is crucial to avoid falling behind.

The card exchange mechanic means that performing well compounds over time. A player who consistently meets their target will receive increasingly strong cards, creating a virtuous cycle.