



Tiletales

Big Ideas on the Board

A SPARK & ANVIL STRATEGY BOOK

TileTales – Big Ideas on the Board

A Spark & Anvil companion book – free to download and share.

Ages 9-14. Game: dominoes.

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This volume teaches strategy through the app's cast – 6 big ideas, one per chapter.

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*Dominoes hides real arithmetic and planning behind a simple line of tiles. The other TileTales books teach the rules; this one teaches how to **play well**, through the cast you know. One big idea per chapter.*

Chapter 1 – Score on the Fives

Fiver Odalys plays the All-Fives game, where you score points whenever the numbers on the **open ends** of the chain add up to a **multiple of five**. Make the two ends total 5, 10, 15, or 20, and you score that many points.

"I am always doing a little sum," said Fiver Odalys. "What do the ends add to now – and what tile makes them reach the next five?"

Threes Thandi plays the same idea with multiples of three. Either way, the big skill is the same: on every turn, look at what the open ends total, and choose the tile that lands the total on a scoring number. Playing well in All-Fives is really a steady stream of quick mental arithmetic.

Say it out loud: *Add the open ends – play the tile that hits a multiple of five.*

Your turn: The "Score the Ends" workbook pages show a chain with two open ends. Which tile in your hand makes them total a multiple of five?

Doing the ends-sum every turn is the core skill. It is quick arithmetic that turns dominoes into a thinking game.

Chapter 2 – Control the Open Ends

Match Mateo knows the one rule of placing a tile: an end you add to must **match** the number already open there. Block Bianca turns that rule into strategy by **controlling which numbers are open**. If you can keep the open ends showing numbers the opponent cannot match, they are forced to draw or pass.

"I do not just play a legal tile," said Block Bianca. "I choose the one that leaves the ends showing numbers they can't answer."

So a strong player watches which numbers have mostly been played (if six of the seven sixes are down, keeping a six open is powerful – few sixes remain to answer it). Steering the open ends is quiet control that starves the opponent of good moves.

Say it out loud: *Steer the open ends to numbers they can't match.*

Your turn: The "Open Ends" pages show your hand and the chain. Which tile leaves the ends hardest for the opponent to answer?

Controlling the ends is invisible to a beginner and obvious to a strong player. Learning to see it changes how you play every tile.

Chapter 3 – Play Your Doubles Wisely

Double Dev handles the tricky tiles: the **doubles** (a tile with the same number on both ends). A double is usually laid crossways, and in many games it becomes a **spinner** that opens *new* arms of the chain to play on.

"A double is a decision," said Double Dev. "Play it early to open the board – or hold it, because a double left too long can get stuck in your hand at the end."

Doubles are heavy: they carry lots of pips, so if you are caught holding one when the game blocks, it counts against you. Strong players plan when to shed their doubles – early enough to place them safely, but timed so they help open or restrict the board.

Say it out loud: *Play doubles on time – they open the board but weigh down your hand.*

Your turn: The "Doubles" pages show a hand with a double. Is now the time to play it, or should you hold?

Doubles feel awkward until you learn to time them. Getting rid of them at the right moment is a real skill.

Chapter 4 – Count and Block

Tally Tunde counts the pips left in every hand. Block Bianca returns with the winning trick: if you can **block** the game (make it so no one can play) at a moment when *your* remaining tiles add up to **fewer pips** than the opponent's, you win the round.

"Sometimes the win is not playing all your tiles," said Tally Tunde. "It is stopping the game while you hold the least."

So a strong player keeps a running count of how heavy their hand is versus the opponent's, and when they are lighter, they steer toward a block. When they are heavier, they keep the game open and try to shed. Counting the pip totals is the hidden scoreboard of dominoes.

Say it out loud: *Block the game while my hand is the lightest.*

Your turn: The "Count and Block" pages show both pip totals. Should you block now – or keep playing to shed more?

Playing to block, not just to empty your hand, surprises new players. It is a deeper way to win.

Chapter 5 – Shed to Win

Shed Sunil plays the most direct goal: be the **first to play every tile** and call "domino!" Draw Dilan handles the boneyard – when you cannot match, you draw a tile (or pass). The skill is planning the *order* you shed, so you are never left holding a tile you cannot play.

"Do not just dump tiles," said Shed Sunil. "Keep a tile that matches lots of numbers for last, so you are never stuck."

Strong players think about which of their tiles are easy to play (they match many numbers) and which are hard (a double, or a number mostly played out), and shed the hard ones while the board still gives them a place.

Say it out loud: *Shed the hard tiles early – keep a flexible one for last.*

Your turn: The "Shed" pages show your hand. Which tile should you play now so you are not stuck later?

Planning the order you empty your hand is the difference between winning and being caught holding tiles.

Chapter 6 – The Branching Games

Train Tomás grows a personal **train** off a central hub in Mexican Train; Chicken Cheo makes a played double sprout **three branches** before play continues in Chickenfoot. These variants add a new strategy layer: with many open ends at once, choosing *which* branch to build on – and which to block – becomes the whole game.

"More branches, more choices," said Train Tomás. "Build the one that helps you and starves everyone else."

The big ideas from the earlier chapters all return, just with more ends in play: count the totals, control which numbers stay open, time your doubles, and shed the hard tiles first – now across several branches at once.

Say it out loud: *With many branches, build the one that helps you and blocks them.*

Everything in this book meets here: score on the fives (Chapter 1), control the ends (Chapter 2), time your doubles (Chapter 3), count and block (Chapter 4), shed in the right order (Chapter 5) – now across a branching board.

Your turn: The "Branches" pages show a Mexican Train or Chickenfoot board. Which branch do you build on, and which do you leave for the opponent?

Juggling many open ends is the hardest part of dominoes. Handling it well is exactly what getting good feels like.

Keep playing at spark-and-anvil.org – the trainer runs these ideas as live positions, with the cast beside you.

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