

Mexican Train

Mexican Train is a member of the [Trains](#) family of games. While slightly different from other members of the family, it has the same goals and strategy. These rules are slightly different and more complete than those given by Cardinal Industries, a New York City, NY domino manufacturer.

Other rules to versions of this game go by the names Mexican Train, Mexican Express, Mexican Dominoes, and a game Hispanics call "Longana" (spelling?). They are all basically the same game and their rules can be found in books by Victor Lewis, Gary M. Grady & Suzanne Goldberg, and Mary D. Lankford, to name three. Roy and Katie Parsons of California developed and copyrighted a set of rules. Their game of Mexican Train is played with a double nine set for four players and a double twelve set if more than four persons are playing.

In my version of the game given here, I have taken the liberty of adding more railroading terms to the game and clearing up some missing information in the short description given on one sheet booklet included in several domino sets.

Equipment

The game uses a domino set appropriate to the number of players, one marker for each player and one special double marker shared by all the players (optional). Coins or small poker chips will serve as markers, and you can now buy little colored plastic train engines which look like the token from a Monopoly set. But make sure that the doubles markers are clearly different from the personal markers.

The Deal

The number of players and the size of the domino set used determines the number of tiles in a hand according to this table:

Players:	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12
Double Six	9	8	6	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Double Nine	9	9	9	7	7	7	6	-	-	-	-
Double Twelve	15	15	15	12	12	11	11	-	-	-	-
Double Fifteen	15	15	15	15	15	13	13	11	11	11	11

Remaining tiles are set aside for drawing and are referred to as the rail yard.

Use a smaller set for a smaller number of players. The problem is that a larger set produces a larger rail yard and the odds that the desired engine double is in the rail yard can be half or more. The result is that players will spend a good deal of time the start of the game getting more tiles from the rail yard. For example, if you have three players

using a double twelve set, then 45 of the 91 tiles are in their hands and 46 are in the rail yard; therefore half the time nobody has the starting double for the round. Three players using the double nine have 27 out of 55 tiles or 27 tiles in the rail yard or about half again. But with a double six set there are 10 out of 28 tiles for three players in the rail yard, so about every third hand, you might have to draw one or two tiles to start.

I would recommend using the double twelve for 6 or more players, the double nine set for 4 or 5, and the double six set for 4 or fewer players.

The Play

For the first round of the game, the highest double of the set being used is placed in the center of the table by the player holding it. In the following rounds, the next highest double will be used, and so forth until the [0-0] tile is played. This initial double is called the engine. Once the engine is established, play then moves clockwise from the player who placed the engine in the center of the table.

If no player has the engine for the current hand, all players draw one tile from the rail yard simultaneously. If a player now has the required double, he places it and play continues in the usual fashion. If no player now has the required double, all players continue simultaneously drawing one tile each until someone has the required double.

If no player had the engine tile for the current round, it is possible that the engine tile will never be drawn because there are not enough tiles for all players to draw a new tile simultaneously. Should this rare event happen, throw in all the tiles and re-deal this round, using the same double as the engine.

An alternate rule which will keep the size of the hands smaller is to start the round with the highest double. The player who holds this places it in the center and takes the lead. If nobody has a double, then all players draw a new tile simultaneously and again attempt to find a double.

PlasTech Industries sells several specialty domino games including Mexican train set with a special frame shaped somewhat like a gear wheel to hold the trains and the central domino. They now have a website under the name "[Domino King](#)" and they are located at West Division Street #D1/D2; Arlington, TX 76012. You can also get a vacuum formed plastic frame from Puremco Domino Company, Box 797, Waco, TX 76703. Another plastic frame is sold by Newdell Industries; Box #803; Willits, CA 95490. The Puremco has an excellent collection of rules for domino games that you should see.

Phase One: Working on the Railroad:

Each player, starting the with player who set the central double, builds a train in front of himself which spins off of the engine. The central double gives the "engine number" for this round.

This is done as one play, not a tile at time as in other games in the Trains family. The leftover tiles in his hand are called "empties", since they were not put in the train. The resulting layout of radiating trains is called the "round house", with a line of tiles

pointing towards each player. A player who cannot play any tiles from his hand on the engine is said to have a train made up of just the engine. In this situation, he is considered to have built a train that has only the engine. In accordance with the usual rules of play, he puts a doubles marker where his train would start.

Building trains on the first round is called "working on the railroad" and it has precedence over the other actions that will be described in the "Playing tiles" section. You can consider the first player's move to be a special case of working the railroad, since he both places a double and his train in one move.

While not likely, a player can domino in this phase of the game. In this case, the other players still get to complete their initial trains, but the hand is over and it is time to count points.

Consider this example of the precedence of the rules. Player A sets the engine for the round and then builds his train which ends in a double. Player B, who follows A, ignores the "doubles rule" and builds his train and so forth round the table until the play returns to A. At this point, the building phase is over and play has returned to A, who is subject to the following rules.

Phase two: Playing tiles:

When everyone has their train in place, each player in turn places tile on the end of trains according to these rules. If a player can place a tile, they must do so in their turn, according to these precedence rules:

1. If the double marker is on the end of a train, then the player is required to play on the marked train. If they cannot, they must draw a tile and the turn passes to the next player. We will say more about playing doubles later. When someone plays on the most recent double, that double marker is moved back to either the engine or to another double. Eventually, you want to put the double marker back on the engine. A player can call out "All aboard [number of the double]" to remind the following players that the doubles rules are now in effect. You might want to consider having numbered doubles markers, so you can answer the doubles in the right order.
2. The end of their own train. We will say more about how markers are placed and removed on a player's train later. If a player's personal train ends with the last tile of a suit, then nobody can ever play on it again. Any player can call "end of the line", verify that this train is dead, and stack the last tile on top of the next to last tile. Verification is easy; just count the number of occurrences of the suit on the board if you see $(n+1)$ halves with that suit in the round house, nobody has any more of them.
The player who has reached the end of the line continues to play in the usual manner, but he can only play on exposed doubles, marked personal trains and the Mexican train.
3. The end of the train of another player if the other player's train has a personal marker on it. The marked train is said to be "taking on freight" when a play is made on it. When this train has taken on freight, the personal marker is removed and returns to its owner.

4. If a player is not able or does not wish to play on an existing train in the roundhouse, the player may start the "Mexican Train" for this hand. The first car in the "Mexican Train" must start with the engine count, so that it is a part of the roundhouse, like all other trains. After this point in the game, the "Mexican train" acts like a train that always has a personal marker on the end and it is covered by the rules that apply to any train. That is, playing on the Mexican train is optional unless it has a double marker on it.

There is no priority as to which train to play on in situations (2), (3) and (4). Much of the game is picking which train will give you the most options for future plays.

If a player is unable to play on the end of his own train, a marked train, on the last double, or the Mexican train, he must draw a tile from the rail yard. If the drawn tile can be legally played, he must then do so. Notice this means that he must play on the last exposed double, but has a choice among his own train, a marked train, or the Mexican train if those options exist.

If this new tile still cannot play, he retains the tile in his hand and places a personal marker on the end of his train. The turn passes to the next player.

If a player is unable to play and the rail yard is empty, he simply passes his turn; when nobody can play the game is blocked and then the points are scored.

Playing Doubles:

If a player places a double, he must place another tile in the same turn. This second tile can be, but does not have to be, placed on the double. If this second tile is also a double, the player gets to place a third tile under the same rules and so forth until he runs out of doubles. The player has to put the special double marker on the last double played. Alternately, instead of using a special marker, you can simply look for the exposed double on the train to mark it. The placement of all of these tiles counts as one turn, so this player is not obligated to play on his own first double (such a rule would make it impossible for him to set a second double).

If a player sets a double, but cannot play on any train afterwards, he draws a tile from the rail yard and loses his free turn. If the rail yard is empty in this situation, the player simply loses his free turn.

The next player is obligated to play on the train with the last double placed, i.e. the one with the special marker on it. If he is not able to do so, he draws a tile from the rail yard and puts a marker on the end of his train. Each of the following players is obligated to play on the double or mark their train in their turn in the same manner. Playing on the double and breaking this pattern of play is called "getting off the train". When the double is played upon, the special marker is returned to the previous exposed double and finally to the engine.

For example, assume a player has three doubles, [1-1], [2-2], [3-3] and he holds the [2-6] and [3-4] in his hand. He plays his [1-1], places the doubles marker on the [1-1], and gets another turn. He plays his [2-2] on a second train, places the doubles marker

on the [2-2], and gets another turn. He plays his [3-3] on a third train, places the doubles marker on the [3-3], and gets another turn.

At this point, he is out of doubles and the [3-3] is marked. Playing a double after a double is the exception to the rule that the next play must be on a marked double. If you think about it for a second, you see that you cannot play a double on a double because you would need identical doubles in the domino set. Chains of doubles are in effect a free play that leaves an obligation for the next player.

Now he has one more play coming. If he puts the [3-4] on the [3-3], which frees up the last double played, he has gotten off the train and the double marker returns to the [2-2], where it must be satisfied. When the [2-2] is satisfied, the marker moves to the [1-1] tile until it is satisfied and then finally back to the engine.

If he decides to play the [2-6] on the [2-2] or on some other tile for his final play, then the next player is obligated to play on the [3-3] because it is still marked. At this point, he may call out "all abroad threes" to warn the other players of their obligation. When the [3-3] is satisfied, the marker moves to the [1-1] tile until it is satisfied and then finally back to the engine.

If one or more players end their personal trains with a double while working on the railroad, the doubles rules will come into effect on the second round.

Exceptions for the Doubles rule:

The last double played must be satisfied, unless:

1. The player dominoes with it and ends this round. The round is over and player count their scores.
2. The double being played is the last tile in its suit. In which case, any player calls "end of the line", stacks the double face up on the end of the line and moves the double marker to the previous exposed double or retires the marker back to the engine, as is appropriate.

The reason for stacking the tile is to avoid confusion with the active double later in the round and to avoid locking the game with nobody allowed to play.

The player who set the "end of the line" double then takes his extra turn. If the doubles marker has moved to another double as a result of an "end of the line" play, this new marked double is treated as if it were set by the player himself and he is not now required to play on the new marked double unless he wishes to do so.

3. If two or more players end their trains with doubles while working on the railroad, then the exposed doubles must be satisfied in the order they were played.

Last tile:

A player must announce when they have one tile left in their hand; this can be done by tapping the table with the final tile or calling out "uno" to warn the other players. When a player forgets to "tap" the table when they are down to one tile, they have to take two more tiles. Anyone who catches him before the play rotates back to the offender can tap

him for the two tile penalty. If the play gets back to him and he was not caught, then he can play without penalty. In Texas, the tradition is to call "Uno!" when you have one tile left in many domino games.

The best method is to put the last tile face down in front of the player, so there is no argument as to whether an announcement was made.

Scoring

Play stops immediately when one player has dominoed or the game is blocked.

Since players without a play are obligated to draw a tile from the rail yard, the rail yard will be empty when the game is blocked.

The player who dominoes gets a score of zero.

In both cases, the players who did not domino score the total of the pips on the tiles left in their hand. The lowest score wins the game after all engine numbers have been used (i.e thirteen rounds with a double twelve set).

Comments & Strategy

It is a good idea to Xerox a score sheet with the engine number down the side and the names of the players across a grid for each game, so that you do not forget the engine number between hands.

The markers should not be placed on the tile on the end of your train, since that would block all or part of the pips. If you are using transparent plastic markers, then you might allow covering the pips.

Be aware of which trains are open for play in your turn. Build the longest possible initial train so that you have the fewest number of tiles to play after the first round.

You can save doubles, but be aware that you could get stuck with them in your hand if the other tiles in their suit have been played. The reason for hoarding doubles is to run them at the last minute, or to block other players by forcing them to play on the double.

The train which has reached the "end of the line" is useless to his owner and to anyone else since you cannot play on it. It is a good idea not to shut down your own train if you can help it.