What to do if you don’t get accepted

Here is some advice from a former grad student who was not accepted the first time he applied to a doctoral program. The second time around, he received an offer from a program that matched his interests very well.

Figure out how to stay actively involved in research in some way, so you can add presentations and publications to your vita and continue to develop research-related skills. A common way to do this is to get a job as a lab coordinator or data manager. Look for positions in higher education at www.jobs.com and on university websites. Apply for positions that connect to your experiences and interests. For example, look at departments who have faculty members you’re familiar with from the literature you’ve read and research you’ve conducted.

When you’re ready to reapply, target doctoral programs where there are professors who will be familiar with the research area in which you worked and with the supervisors you worked for. Networking is a huge factor in gaining admission into a doctoral program. After narrowing the field to the handful of most competitive candidates, the admissions committee will trust the judgment of the colleagues they know. This is usually the tipping point for two equally competitive candidates, determining why one gets an interview and the other does not. Having recommendation letters from someone who is known by the committee will really help an applicant overcome weaknesses such as less-than-outstanding GRE scores.

Additional tips:
It helps to be willing to relocate if you really want to get into a doctoral program or find a job that will help you get into one. If you limit yourself to a specific geographic region, you may be excluding a program or position that would be a good fit for you.

Apply to several (perhaps six or seven) doctoral programs to maximize your chances.