



EVERYONE FOR BACKGAMMON

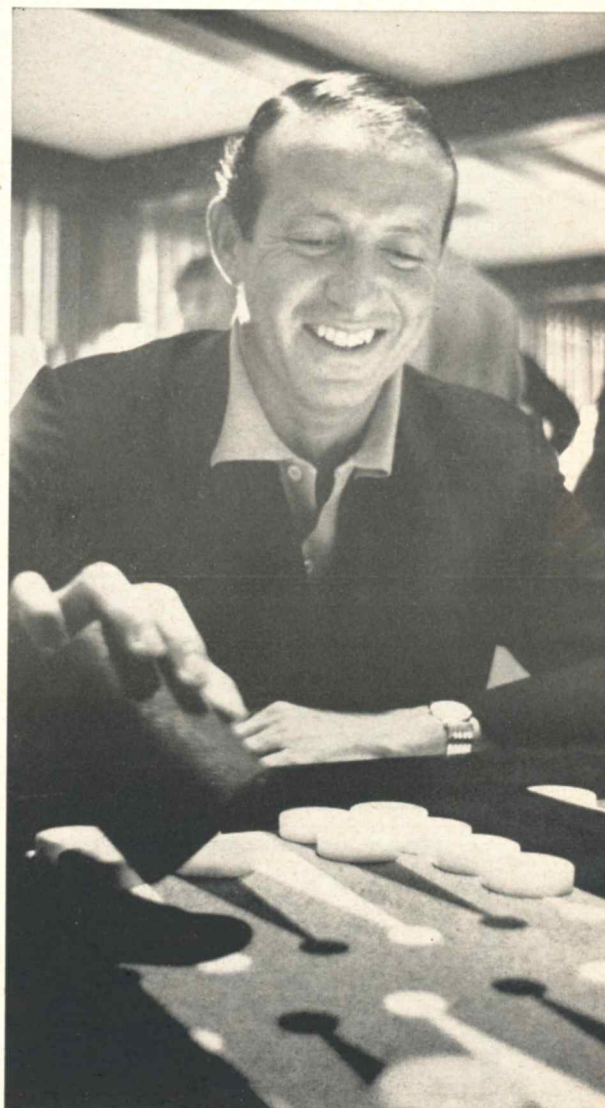
by **EDWIN SHRAKE**

A crowd of socialites and their friends gather on a resort island to play the game they love best

By the gold watch on the wrist of Prince Alexis Obolensky it was 4:37 p.m., and a few stray members of the Jet Set had gathered in the lobby of the Lucayan Beach Hotel on Grand Bahama Island to watch the finals of the First Annual International Backgammon Tournament. Well, why not? King Simeon of Bulgaria had already gone off someplace, the Duke and Duchess of Windsor had decided to stay in Palm Beach, and there was no cocktail party at the moment. Little Sparrow's steel band had quit playing out by the pool. Wind bent the palms and beat the emerald sea and banged at the glass walls of the hotel. Most of the pool crowd—by now, after three days on the island, tons of roasted flesh—had dressed and padded down the hall in velvet slippers to stand on the gold carpet of the new gambling casino. But a dozen or more had stopped in the lobby to see if Porter Ijams, a Wall Street publisher, could beat Chicago Millionaire Charles Wacker III (of the Wacker Drive family) for the Obolensky Cup, a shining silver trophy, and—at least as important—nearly \$8,000 in Calcutta pool and entry fee money.



JET SET KIBITZERS, fresh from sunning by the pool, loll about the plush lobby of the Lucayan Beach Hotel and watch the semifinal



match between Porter Ijams (*left*) and Nicholas Sargent. Ijams upset Sargent, but lost in finals to smiling Charlie Wacker (*above*).

Ijams had reached the finals earlier that afternoon by what amounted to a smashing upset over Nicholas Sargent (né Segaloff), a Rumanian who may be the best backgammon player in the world. The dice ran hot for Ijams, a New York Racquet Club regular who had sold for \$600 in the Calcutta pool but who had thought so little of his own chances that he did not even buy a \$25 pari-mutuel ticket on himself. Wacker had moved steadily through his five previous matches, never in danger of losing. Ijams was the sentimental favorite among the younger players, particularly after beating Sargent. But Wacker was the betting favorite in the opinion of the tournament's unofficial bookmaker, a 5-foot-6, 267-pound crapshooter named Jelly Wehby, who wore green pants and a green shirt and described himself as looking like an avocado salad.

As the assorted barons, counts, princes, Palm Beach socialites and Wall Street brokers gathered around the finals table, Jelly Wehby laughed with a colossal heaving and

bellowing. "Backgammon is for idiots and rich people," said Jelly. "I come here to play African golf. But I can tell you two things about backgammon—it's a big gambling game, and don't ever play it with a Syrian or a Turk."

Backgammon is indeed a game in which fortunes are won and lost, mostly in exclusive men's clubs where the stakes are high and the action is fast. It is a game with a history that can be traced back to the pharaohs. In France the game is called trictrac, because of the sound of the tiles on the board. Almost everyone has heard of backgammon but, strangely, very few know how to play it. Most think it is something like cribbage or parchesi, and undoubtedly there are some who think you play it with a racket. Few realize that the other side of a checkerboard is not like the other side of the queen of clubs; the other side of a checkerboard is a backgammon board.

The game is deceptively simple. Children play it. The idea is to move your pieces around the board and back home,

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by rolling the dice, before your opponent can do the same with his. Luck is of obvious importance. Where the skill comes in is in knowing the percentages, knowing when to play offense and defense, when to block and when to run. Where the gambling gets big is in the use of the doubling cube—a die that signals the stakes have been doubled. It is rather like a press bet in golf, except that in backgammon you press when you think you are ahead.

In one of the predawn, nontournament games at Lucaya a prominent New Yorker, playing for \$50 a point against several people and with the stakes doubled up to 32 times the original bet, found himself needing to throw doubles with the dice on the last roll or lose \$16,000. He threw double deuces and cut his losses to \$8,000. A few games later he lost \$4,000. He sighed, wrote a fistful of checks, and went to the casino. "The saddest words on land or sea," Jelly Wehby told him, "are deal, dealer, but deal past me." That was hardly any consolation.

Backgammon was the excuse for about 100 of the Jet Setters and the social ramblers to assemble two weeks ago on Grand Bahama Island—a 75-mile-long, 15-mile-wide strip of limestone that sits due east across 76 miles of ink and turquoise water from Palm Beach. The tournament was the idea of Prince Obolensky, a tall, gregarious Russian who sells real estate around Palm Beach, and Bindy Banker, a Wall Street broker.

"We were in Obey's [if you are In, that is what you call Prince Obolensky] house in February and I said, look, Obey, we all love to play backgammon and they have a new gambling casino over at Lucaya, so why don't we get up a tournament and also go see the place," said Bindy Banker. The prince agreed. He arranged the tournament with the aid of the Grand Bahama Development Company, which bought 150 backgammon sets from a gaming store in Brooklyn for almost \$2,000, including shipping costs. The prince talked some of the game's best players—Teddy Bassett, Michel de Surmont, Count Jose Dorelis, Prince Nicholas Toumanoff, Charlie Wacker and Johnny Crawford, the bridge expert—into flying to Grand Bahama for the tournament, which finally developed 48 contestants. The tournament, or the various other pleasures of the island, also brought in prominent


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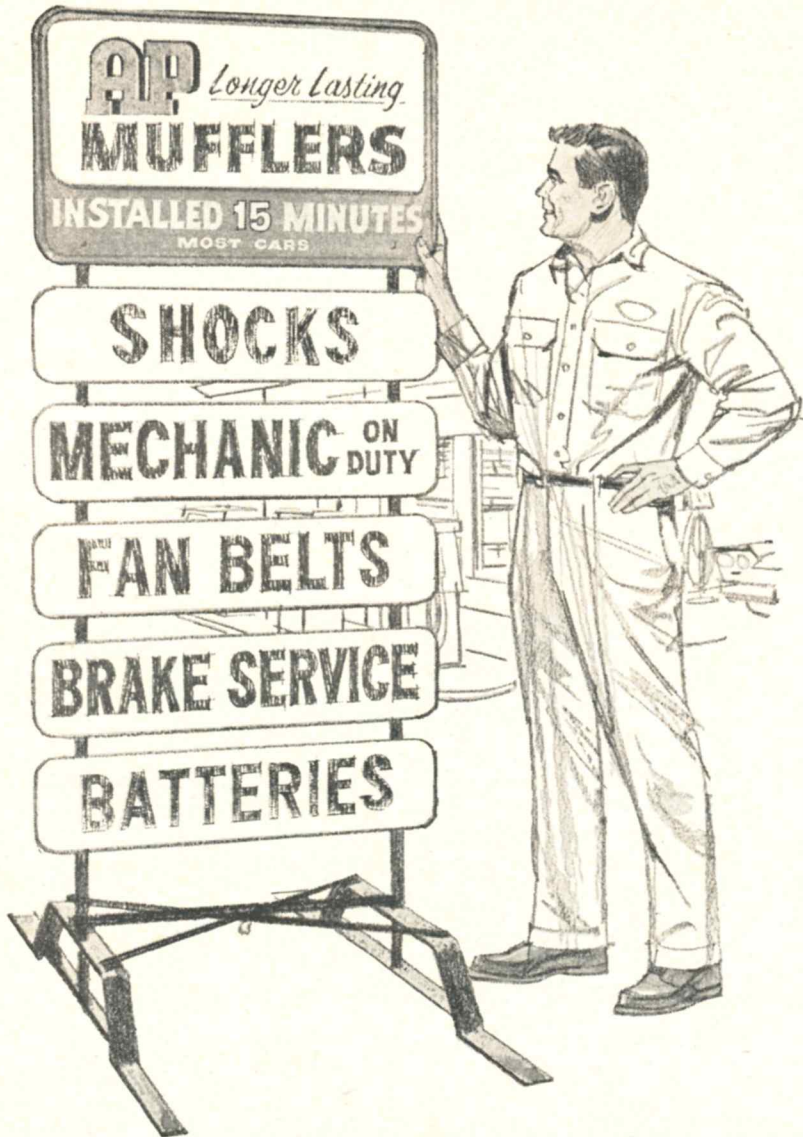
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When they arrived at Grand Bahama they found bulldozers crunching through the pines, palmetto and white sand in a frantic rush of construction. Based on an exclusive 10-year gambling franchise that Canadian Lou Chesler, president of Grand Bahama Development, wangled from the newly independent Bahamian government, the \$8.5 million Lucayan Beach Hotel grew up around a luxurious casino where guests play roulette, craps, blackjack or baccarat beneath a chandelier that is a bright flower of crystal and brass. The casino is staffed by pit bosses from Las Vegas or from Batista Havana, but the 62 croupiers are all Europeans trained in London by order of the Bahamian government. Having croupiers with Beatle haircuts and British or Continental accents is meant to keep a European flavor in the islands.

Lucaya is in a duty-free area called Freeport, where the liner *Italia* will be berthed in June and converted into a hotel hard by a \$50 million cement plant. Several new hotels are going up, at least one of which will also have a casino operated by Chesler's Bahama Amusements Corporation. Chesler's existing casino is not yet a highly profitable investment. The \$33-per-day average rate at the Lucayan Beach Hotel, which Chesler has sold to fellow Canadian Allen Manus, is too high to attract the swarms of small bettors who go to Las Vegas. And the Bahamian government has levied a \$280,000 tax against Bahama Amusements, a matter that is being violently debated in the Bahamian Senate.

But the visiting Jet Setters were not concerned with the taxes, and some not with backgammon either. They played golf at the Lucayan Country Club (former U.S. Open Champion Craig Wood is resident pro), where the areas between fairways are like long planter boxes of palmetto and pines. In one of them Writer Jim Bishop's foursome recently lost 48 balls. They had to stop on the 17th hole. Other guests sprawled beside the thatched-roof bar at the Lucayan Beach Hotel's pool, a few yards from the ocean, and listened to Little Sparrow's

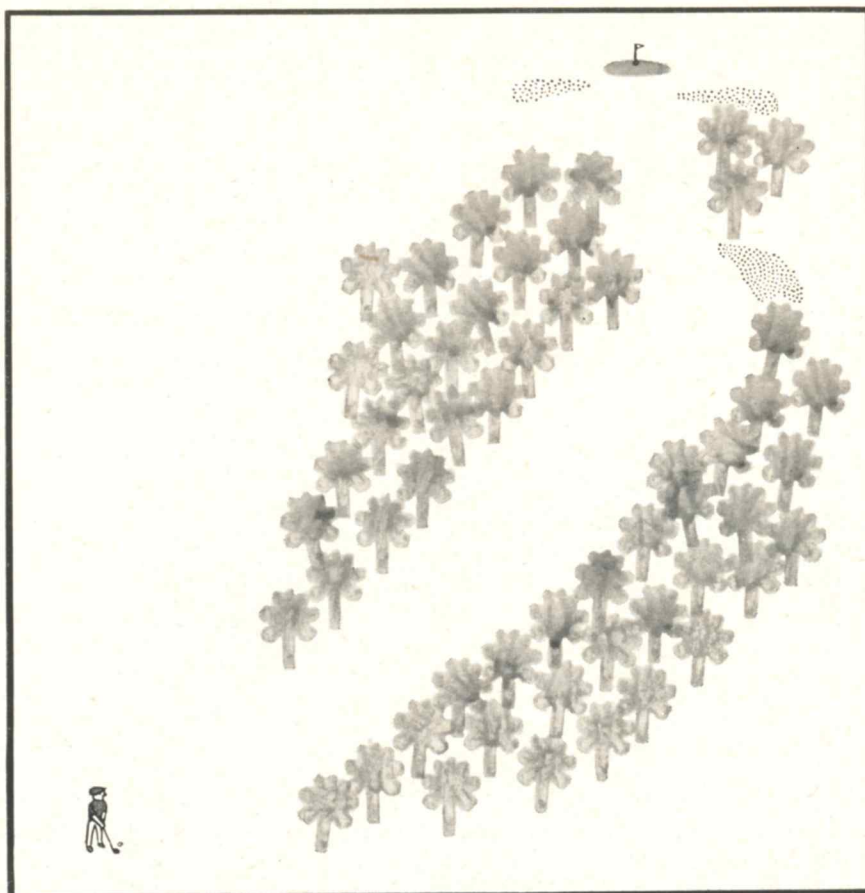
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steel band and sunned in the company of some incredibly beautiful women. Or, dressed in their double-breasted blue blazers, ascots, red slacks and slippers without socks, they wandered through the lobby and glanced at the backgammon on their way to the bars or the crap tables.

On what was supposed to be opening night of the tournament, the Calcutta pool and dinner party, which raised \$15,425, lasted until after midnight, so the tournament was put off until the next afternoon. The draw was tough on several of the better players. Nick Sargent met and beat Johnny Crawford in the second round. M. de Surmont lost to Bassett in the third round, and Bassett lost to Sargent in the fourth. That set up the semifinals meeting of Ijams and the craggy-faced, chain-smoking Sargent, who could be called a professional at backgammon. After Ijams beat Sargent his luck seemed to be running high, and he quickly got a lead on Wacker in the finals. But the tide changes swiftly in backgammon, and in two and a half hours of play to 25 points Wacker put out Ijams 26-20. Ijams was not overcome with disappointment. "I was fortunate to beat Sargent," he said. Ijams had been worth \$2,468 to the holder of his Calcutta ticket and had collected \$705 for his \$50 entry fee. Wacker paid off \$6,170 for his Calcutta bidder and collected \$1,645 from the entry fees. That put them all in the mood for Connie Dinkler's black-tie celebration party, which wound up with a daylight swim and more backgammon for stakes much richer than those of the tournament.

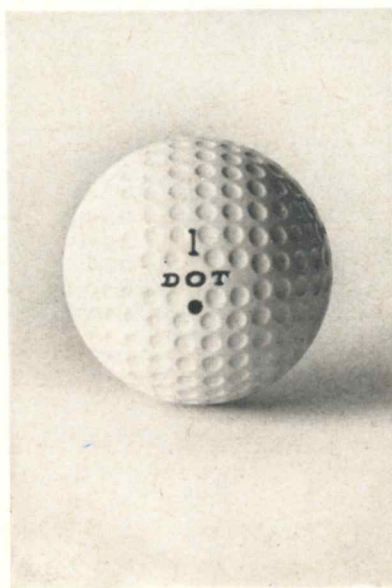
What is the appeal of the game? "It is a game for gentlemen and will last as long as there are gentlemen. It is a game for the Racquet Clubs, though of course not the Racquet Clubs of Miami or Palm Springs," says Mrs. Nina Thompson of Delray Beach. "It is an ancient and exciting game," said Prince Obolensky, who is already planning the Second Annual International Backgammon Tournament.

"I don't know what it is," said Jelly Wehby, who had bounced through the whole affair with the expression of someone watching grown men playing hopscotch. "It looks like what kids do, moving little deals around on that board. But it's got action, and cash passes hands. I guess I better learn it, in case they come down here again." **END**



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