

# A QUARTER A POINT ISN'T TWENTY-FIVE CENTS

The man from the Harvard Club had it figured: 'With dice like yours, an illiterate could win.' But that was before the author's first match in the \$191,795 backgammon tournament and the lucky roll that he will always remember

by E. J. KAHN JR.

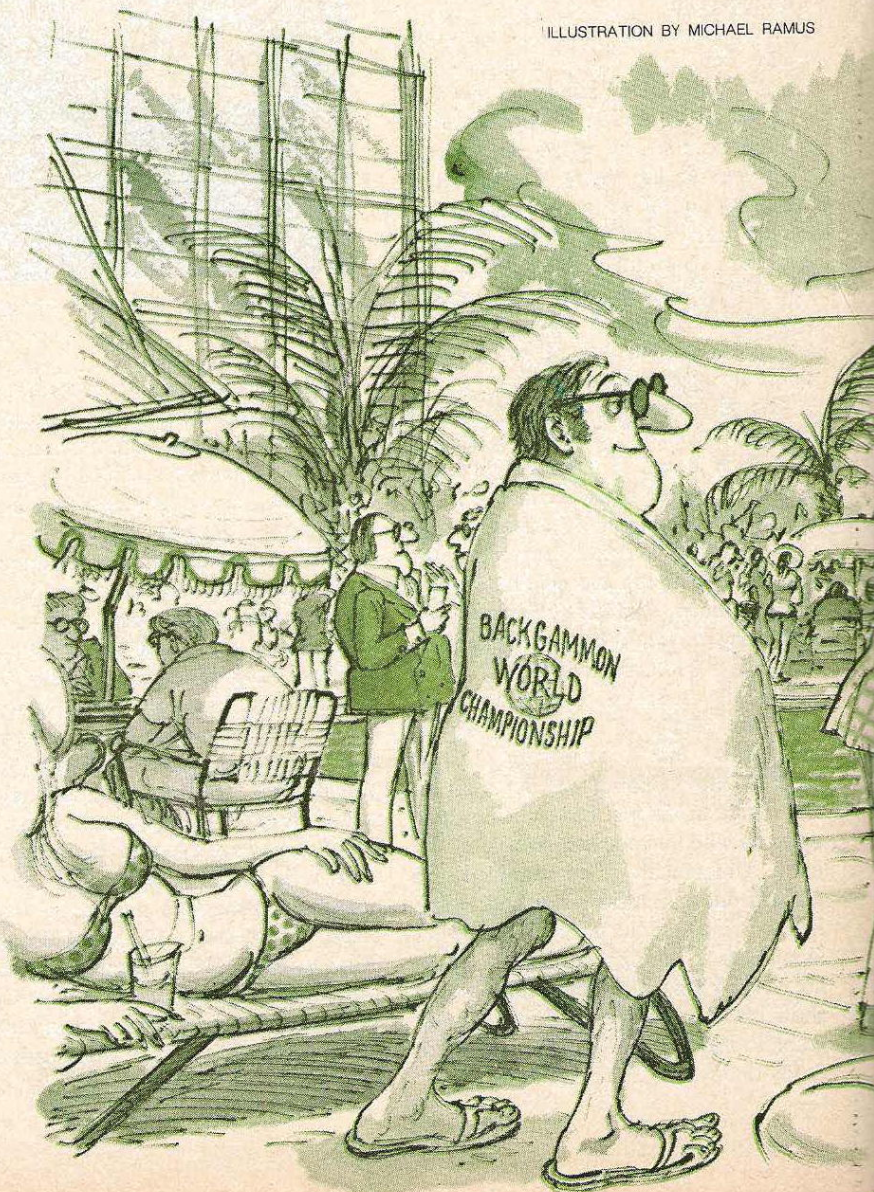
MONDAY: Tomorrow I fly to Nassau, to compete, by invitation, in the Philip Morris World Championship of Backgammon. I have tried to explain to my wife that it is chiefly Stavros' fault. Stavros often plays, as I do, in the friendly dollar-a-point lunchtime backgammon games at the Harvard Club in New York. I don't know exactly what Stavros, who I guess is Greek, does for a living. Something to do with investments, probably; he once gave me a tip on an over-the-counter North Sea oil-drilling stock. Alas, the rig sank. In any event, he is a unique member of our otherwise low-key gambling coterie; on the few occasions when he loses, he proffers hundred-dollar bills. Most of the rest of us have never seen one.

Several weeks ago, after I had scored a rare but well-earned triumph over Stavros by throwing a much-needed double six, he snarled, "A man with your luck ought to be in the world championship." I demurred, stating, truthfully, that I had never even read a book about the complex game. "With dice like yours," Stavros declared, "an illiterate could win it." He was already entered at Nassau, it seemed, and soon, to my astonishment, so was I. There are major championship backgammon tournaments around the globe by now (many of them, like the Virginia Slims tennis circuit, under the sprawling aegis of Philip Morris)—at St. Moritz, Marbella, London, Pebble Beach, I forget where all else—but Stavros says Nassau is the big one. Its prize money might even match the phenomenal \$93,000 that was run up in the players' auction pool at Monte Carlo. My wife says I might as well go down and try to get my addiction out of my system. I have promised to stay no more than four days, because we have theater tickets for Friday.

TUESDAY: Stavros picks me up at dawn for the ride to the airport. He explains en route that there will be a dozen or more seeded players who'll be sold off individually in the auction pool; the rest of us will be strewn into fields of eight,

as in an enormous horse race. There will be a championship tournament, an intermediate and a beginners'; for him and me he scorns the last as *infra dig*. Those eliminated from the championship flight will have a shot at minor purses in a First

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Consolation, a Second Consolation and, ultimately, a Last Chance. (There will also be a special prize for the most heart-rending hard-luck story.) There is money to be won at every turn, he assures me, and, he asks, what am I into these days, anyway? He himself is deep into cotton futures.

At the airport, Stavros takes out flight insurance. I've never before traveled with anybody who did. On the plane, he introduces me to some of our fellow passengers. One I have met before—a fellow who got thrown out of the Harvard Club when it was determined he was a non-member and was also suspected of being a backgammon hustler. "It's a new step for you, to leave the Harvard Club," this fellow tells me. I refrain from alluding to the odd circumstances of *his* departure. Among the others aboard is Barclay Cooke, who is practically the father of modern backgammon. Sitting behind us, Stavros confides to me in a whisper,

are a couple of professional gamblers from a certain New York club. He says they cheat. "Each other, too?" I ask. "Oh, yes," says Stavros affably. There is a woman a couple of rows ahead who, he tells me, once lost a million dollars at backgammon in a single day.

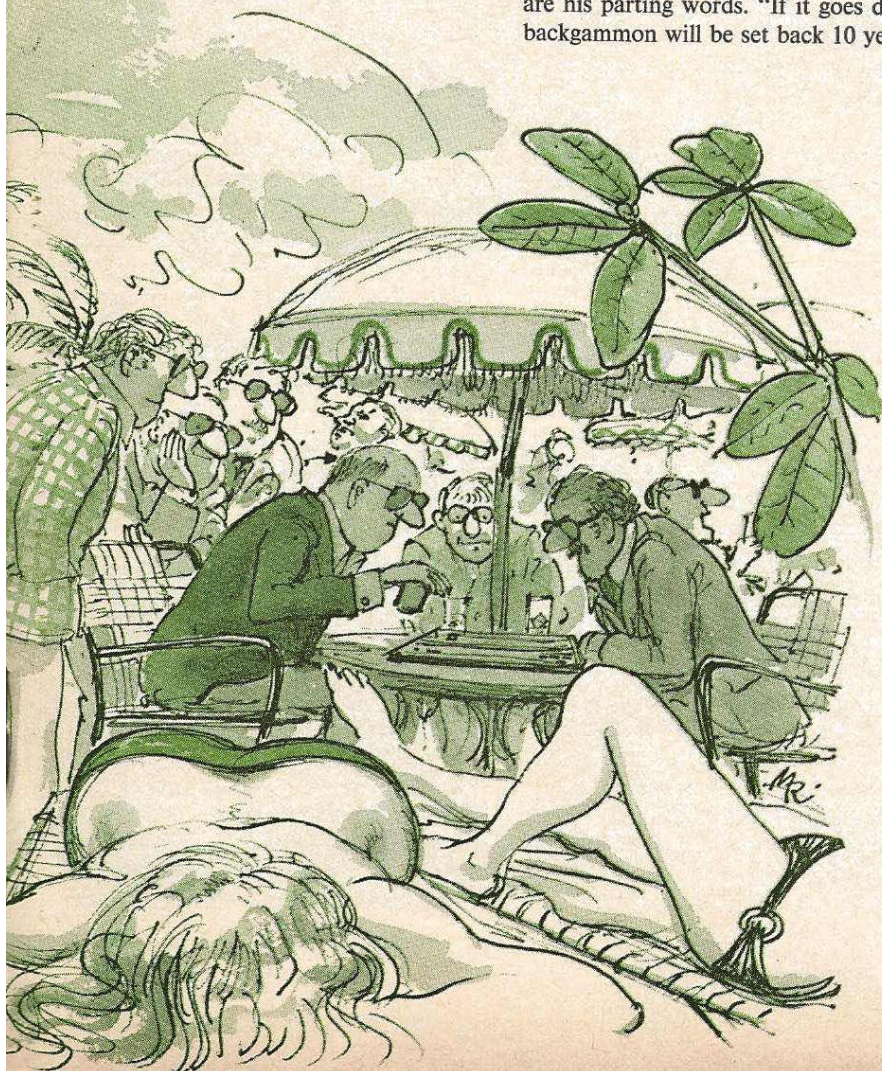
A lanky young man flops into the seat next to me. He reminds me that I know his parents. When he identifies them, I know who *he* is: he is their pride and despair, a school dropout who has become handsomely self-supporting by playing backgammon for high stakes—minimum of \$5 a point—at still another club. Self-support tells me that Paul Magriel will be in our tournament. I ask who Paul Magriel is. Self-support gives me a long hard look and replies, in pitying tones, "The human computer, often known as 'X-22.' Some consider him the best in the world." Self-support moves across the aisle, where a couple of his clubmates have set up a board for a game of airborne chouette. "Some of the strongest players in the world are on this plane," are his parting words. "If it goes down, backgammon will be set back 10 years."

Did Stavros know something I didn't know when he took out the insurance? We land safely; by then, Self-support informs me cheerfully, he has already made his plane fare.

At the Britannia Beach Hotel on Paradise Island, which seems to be harboring not only much of the globe's backgammon elite but also an accommodating casino and a round-the-clock gaggle of hookers, I register for the championship flight. The entry fee is \$150. No personal checks accepted; Philip Morris evidently knows the backgammon crowd and will only accept cash or travelers' checks. I am given a Philip Morris World Championship beach towel, and I wander, clutching it, out to the swimming pool, where a dozen unofficial backgammon contests are in progress. I inquire of a bystander what the stakes are at one table—how much, that is, per point, and he says, "A quarter." I discover that "a quarter" means \$25. "One" is \$100. No pinchpennies in this bunch. A cluster of Englishmen—from, I ascertain, the notorious Clermont Club on Berkeley Square—are reminiscing about memorable shots in bygone backgammon games, much as golfers discuss old rounds. At one table sits a white-haired Nestor who is addressed as "Ozzie." Could it be . . . ? Yes, a moment later he is hailed as "Mr. Jacoby." Oswald Jacoby! I haven't the gumption to introduce myself to this legendary hero of sedentary sports. It was for much the same accursed diffidence that I once blew my only chance to meet Marilyn Monroe.

There is a black-tie dinner tonight, preceded by a champagne party. I run into a woman who is covering the competition for the German *Playboy*, and a hypnotist from Boston who confides to me that this is his first tournament, too. Should I come up against him, I must remember to keep my eyes on the board. At dinner, by good fortune, I find myself at the same table with Barclay Cooke. During dessert, the auction of players begins. It is conducted by Lewis Deyong, director of this tournament and a player of no mean distinction himself; he won at Biarritz and Abidjan. There seem to be 22 seeded players, to be sold off individually. Joe Dwek, the winner at Monte Carlo and author of the reputedly autobiographical *Backgammon for Profit*, is put up first and goes for \$4,200.

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Soliciting bids on Jacoby (who eventually fetches \$2,500), Deyong acclaims him as "one of the greatest names in backgammon." Few of the field players rate any citations, so I am naturally electrified to hear the auctioneer intone, "E. J. Kahn's a newcomer, but I understand he knows the game." Conceivably because of that accolade, the field to which I am assigned commands a \$5,200 price tag. I am entitled to buy one-tenth of my own field, but I don't want to seem greedy. Still, it is flattering to reflect that my field turns out to be the most expensive one. Self-support's, for instance, sells for a paltry \$2,600, and Stavros', I am almost embarrassed to observe, for \$2,300. By the time the auction is concluded, Deyong is able to disclose that the bids have totaled \$140,500—the largest amount in backgammon history. The total prize money will be a whopping \$191,795. This is right up there with pro golf. I almost wish we didn't have theater tickets.

After the auction, I accompany Stavros to the casino, where it appears he has established a line of credit. Operating on a strictly cash basis, I back my wife's birth date at a roulette table and retrieve my plane fare.

WEDNESDAY: One rises late when the casino closes at 5 a.m. At noon, just after breakfast, I stroll over to the posh Ocean Club, where Stavros is staying. I find him in a huddle with Tournament Director Deyong, who says, intoxicatingly, that first prize will come to something like \$56,000. He adds that 19 of the best 20 players on earth are on this tiny island. One of them, Paul Magriel, the Human Computer, is giving a lesson at poolside. Magriel looks like the kind of kid you wouldn't trust to light your backyard charcoal grill, lest he go up in flames; but then, so do many mathematical geniuses. At an adjacent table are two more of the best, Messrs. Cooke and Jacoby. Hoping to pick up some expert tutelage myself, I make bold to join them. They are cagey. They talk baseball. Jacoby is describing, practically pitch by pitch, his recollections of the final game of the 1911 World Series. Cooke interrupts him to ask something that has been preying on his mind: Did or did not the famous catcher Wally Schang ever play center field? This is all too arcane for me, and anyway it is time to return to my own digs and gird myself for battle.

The Grand Ballroom of the Britannia Beach has been cleared of nearly every-

thing but backgammon tables. More than 100 of them are there arrayed—an awe-inspiring sight. The draw has been posted. There are 200-odd entrants in the championship flight and, to my astonishment, I have been granted a first-round bye. I am already one of the 128 best backgammon players in the world. A chap I dimly recall from the casino last night peers over my shoulder and says, "You must be a pro." I grant him a small professional shrug.

The first-round matches are 17-point affairs, the second round 19. While I wait to see who'll face me in that bracket, I am enchanted by the non-stop rattle of dice, an eerie, lulling sound. Somebody ought to record it and peddle it to John Cage. I stop by Stavros' table. He is being slaughtered; it is too painful to watch. I drift over to where Self-support is engaged; he, too, loses, and because there has been some argument along the way, there is no exchange of handshakes. I eavesdrop on a couple of toffs from the Clermont Club, where I've heard it's not uncommon to play backgammon for £200 a point. One Limey is telling another about a poker game yesterday evening in which somebody dropped 340,000 quid.

Finally, I get to play. My opponent is a woman, with long, tapering, curved fingernails that eventually have me mesmerized; they claw at her dice and checkers like hawks' talons. I run up a nice lead—6-1, 10-4, 13-9. I am distracted by a frightful dispute at the next table, about the correctness of a score. Deyong and Cooke are summoned to arbitrate, while I am trying to concentrate; the contretemps is settled by a roll of a die. A tough way to lose.

My own loss is hard to take, too—a 19-18 defeat. Would you believe that this woman—who has already been favored with the luckiest damned double four you ever heard of in your life—would, with the score 18-18, get the *only* throw that would give her a chance to survive, a five-four, 17-to-1 odds against her, for God's sake; and that an instant later this long-shot artist would defy the laws of probability *again*? Sixty-five years hence, will I remember the fateful six-two she threw as clearly as Ozzie Jacoby can recall the 1911 World Series? More clearly, I dare say; he was only a spectator.

I slink off to the casino to lick my wounds. I bet again on my wife's birth date and lose my plane fare and a bit

more. Stavros looms at my shoulder; he says the dame who knocked me out is only a so-so player. I comfort myself before falling asleep with the reflection that it doesn't really matter whether or not she threw that outrageous six-two, or even the five-four. Why should I care whether I am one of the best 64 backgammon players on earth or merely one of the best 128? It is not winning or losing that counts. That I gave it my all is the only consolation I need.

THURSDAY: Today the first consolation round begins. I'll show them. I read in a backgammon magazine somebody has left behind at breakfast that my conqueror last night won the ladies' prize at Monte Carlo. So much for Stavros and his opinion. I visit the Grand Ballroom to check on the survivors of yesterday's combat. The casualty list is appalling. Half the seeded players are dead—Cooke, Jacoby, Dwek and Magriel among them. I hear that The Human Computer has been *blanked*, by an anonymous mortal. I am in good company.

I have a bye in the first consolation, too. I hang around for three hours—so ciably hustling a couple of stray backgammon pigeons, from whom I win two or three—to learn who my second-round opponent will be. He plays slowly. By the time I dispatch him and thereby advance to the third round, it is 9:15 p.m. I haven't eaten since breakfast, but am instructed to be ready to play again at 9:30. I seek out Stavros at an elegant restaurant and bum a roll off his table.

My third-round opponent is a suave Swiss, with a Liechtenstein mailing address—an internationalist if ever I encountered one. He beats me, sort of fair and square, but only after accepting a preposterous double that no Harvard Club man in his right mind would countenance; and, after that imbecility, throwing a fantastic double five—35-to-1 odds against him, as I wish I could forget—that wraps the match up for him. Of all the infernal misfortune! I have no doubt that on the basis of what has happened to me, I could win the hard-luck-story competition hands down, but I don't intend to try for it. I believe a gentleman should take his gambling lumps in silence.

FRIDAY: Back in New York, I go to an Off-Off-Broadway revival of *The Vagabond King*. I cry throughout *Only a Rose*. The next time I run into Stavros, I must remember to ask him who won. **END**

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