

Gamine of Backgammon

It's a game of skill, but on the element of luck turns a tale!

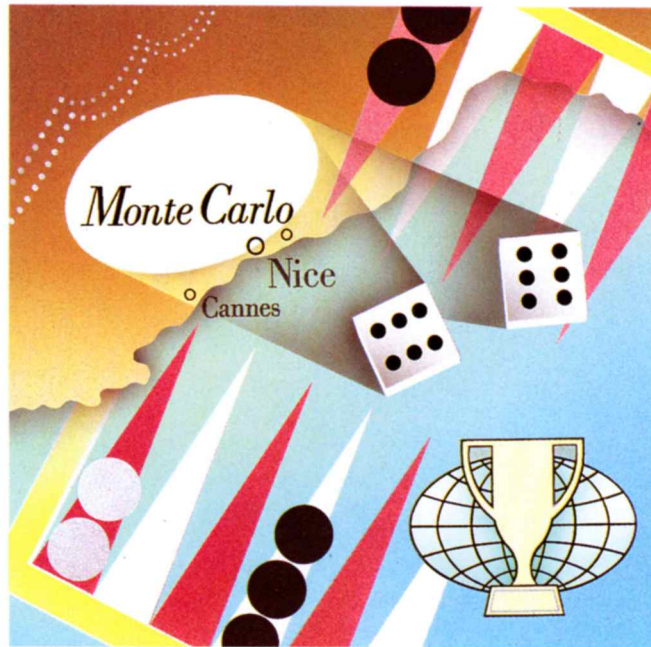
Let me say straight out, I play backgammon enthusiastically, but, as it happens, not particularly well. Friends who are aware of my obsession very sensibly refuse to discuss the game with me. Strangers, however, will occasionally assume that I must be very good since every summer I travel to Monte Carlo to play in the Backgammon World Championship. But the truth is that one need only be good enough at *something else* in order to raise money for the entry fee, airfare, and hotel bill (which, with this year's rate of exchange, comes to from \$4,000 to \$5,000 all told). And since dice are involved, there is an element of luck in backgammon, meaning there is always an outside chance of a keen amateur romping home with a trophy, a title, and about \$60,000 in prize money.

So it was that last July, one hopeful amateur and one dedicated professional—me and my backgammon teacher—set off for Monaco to play in the Backgammon World Championship.

About My Backgammon Teacher

I get to travel with my backgammon teacher on certain conditions: 1) that I never ask his opinion on a backgammon position unless I know exactly where each of the 30 checkers was placed at the time of the quandary; 2) that I don't identify him as my tutor when justifying a particularly naive play; 3) that I limit my baggage to *one suitcase with wheels*. The first two parts of the bargain I keep faithfully; the last I lie about through my teeth. I have little choice, since this is the one time in the year when I pay attention to clothes.

In another life (a euphemism for when I was married) I used to attend a variety of



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glittering events year after year wearing the same serviceable evening dress; I would have thought it the height of careless extravagance to purchase an alternative garment. However, my attitude toward the Auction Dinner at the World Championship is not so casual. I frantically sort through every stitch I own, buy hysterically and inefficiently. Then, on the day before I leave, my friend Susanna, who is three inches taller and two inches smaller around the waist than I am, takes me up to her closet and lends me two or three dresses. And this year was no exception.

Coming in for the Play

On arrival in Monaco, I checked into the Hermitage, a large, well-run fin-de-siècle hotel where I usually stay. (Most of the players were split up among the Hotel Hermitage, the Hôtel de Paris, and the Loews.)

The first day of the tournament did not involve play. That was to allow the competitors to rest. Yet there is a certain

amount of business to attend to. First I registered and paid my entry fee, then went to the bookmakers to place a bet.

The betting, along with the Calcutta Auction, allows players the chance to recoup their investment by gambling. (At the Calcutta Auction, the top 64 players are put up for bids, the money paid for each player is put into a pool, and whoever has purchased the next World Champion wins the jackpot.) I placed a bet, judiciously of course, on a hero or two; then clutching receipts, a schedule of play, a thick wad of tournament rules, and my betting slips, I returned to my room to unpack and dress for the cocktail party that marks the opening of the tournament.

I squeezed into a little black Karl Lagerfeld dress of Susanna's, noting that the Bill Blass she had given me for the Auction Dinner still failed to close by a good inch and a half.

Next morning, a Tuesday, the play began. Two rounds had to be played to reduce the field to 64 players. It was a black Tuesday for the favored Americans, who, with one exception, were all eliminated. In the opening round I beat a young German. In the second round I played against one of the best German players in a much closer match. Though he is a far better player than I am, I struggled through to double match point—a point at which the player who wins the game wins the match. This took time, and it was almost 11 P.M. before we got to this position. A small gallery of German players watched and rooted for

By Annabel Davis-Goff



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him; I had a few friends there too, and the occasional expert or hero would, while passing by, glance at the score and position and raise an eyebrow to see me a contender still. Among the heroes was an American expert whom I think of as the odds maker. Although he is unfailingly generous with his time and attention when asked to assess a backgammon problem or position, he casts a cynical eye on gamblers as a species. I once heard him remark, "Checks are what gamblers think you use when you run out of money."

Pivotal Play

The game I was playing was a crucial one. I do not even fantasize about *winning* the World Championship. To think such a thing possible would disillusion me about the game, making it seem a closer cousin to craps than to chess. But my ambition is not to lose to anyone other than a world-class player. I knew that if I won this game, I would be one of the 64 qualifiers to be put on the block in the Calcutta Auction; I knew, too, that there was only one other woman player who had made it to the round of 64. The game reached a position where I became the favorite. I was so excited it became hard for me to breathe. My opponent rolled a number and looked at it. Tension, fatigue, and the blind spot that occasionally strikes most players had him misperceive an average roll as a situation in which he was forced to leave one of his men vulnerable. He looked at the move for several minutes; his friends looked at it for the same length of time. To their credit not one of them twitched a muscle, cleared a throat, or breathed audibly. He picked up his dice, making the play irrevocable. I rolled one of my few unlucky combinations and did not benefit from his error. He rolled again, played well, and won the game and the match.

The most powerful moments of self-loathing I have ever experienced have come after losing crucial backgammon matches. Once, after making a technical error in the semifinals of a tournament, I woke up my husband, who did not play the game, taught him the rules, questioned him to make sure he fully understood, and explained the position and my error. At the time it seemed to be the only viable alterna-

tive to slitting my wrists—with my own teeth as the instrument. This night was no different. Some friends, including my teacher and the odds maker, had waited dinner for me. They commiserated and coaxed me to eat. I refused and confined myself to sulkily chewing the basil garnishing each plate on the table.

Disappointment, rage, and chagrin had fretted away enough weight so that by Wednesday, the third day of the tournament, Susanna's dress fit perfectly—provided I didn't breathe deeply. That evening I joined the cream of the world's backgammon players, some barely recognizable in black tie, for the Auction Dinner at La Salle des Étoiles, a huge room with a stage and, as its name implies, the open, star-filled sky above. After a delicious meal and a show, it was time for the key event—the Calcutta Auction. A high proportion of the better players had already fallen by the wayside. Nevertheless, the auction pool topped \$100,000.

Onward Ho!

Tournament organizers usually set aside a percentage of the prize money so that those eliminated in the preliminary rounds can play in a second tournament, aptly called the Consolation. On Thursday, I won the first two matches in the Consolation. Flushed with success, I went to my teacher looking for praise. He congratulated me, then pointedly asked why, since I had traveled with two heavy suitcases, neither with wheels, I had chosen to play both matches in shorts over a damp bathing suit. It was a good question, but the answer was a simple one: poolside action. By now, not only had many of the better players been eliminated from the World Championship but some of them were also out of the Consolation. A humiliating 45 minutes later I joined their ranks. The losers, although still eligible for some of the minor events, were indulging more and more in three activities—casino action, poolside action (private backgammon games, played for money, not trophies), and propositions. A proposition arises when two players have disagreed on a play—how to move a checker, for instance, or whether a double should be given or taken. One will offer to play out the position a certain number of

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times—20 perhaps, or 100. Since such a position is likely to occur in the middle or near the end of a game, and may involve deciding whether or not to turn the cube (i.e., double the stakes, redouble, etc.), propositions are rife with the potential for high drama and a crowd gathers wherever they are being played.

Last Chance

By Friday evening the World Championship and Consolation sections were down to four players each. The eight players, those holding sizable wagers on them, their friends and family, and the bookmakers were excited, tense, elated, or looking to settle a bet. Others were waiting for the Last Chance, which is precisely what the name implies: an event offering the losers a last chance to win.

On Saturday I played in the Last Chance. I lost my match in about ten minutes, ending my tournament participation for the year. An hour later I watched my last hero, on whom I had placed a long-odds bet, lose. Walking disconsolately away from the table, I met one of the American pros. He said he had a compliment to convey to me. It seems that the German player who had beaten me in the World Championship, a youth who appeared to be only marginally older than my schoolboy son, had told him that I was the strongest woman he had played so far. "That's it," I said, "I'm going home."

That evening my teacher and I boarded a plane bound for New York, even before the champion was named. In the cab from the airport, unslept and red-eyed, we decided never to play in a tournament again. But the next morning I phoned him to firm up arrangements for a tournament in Boston. Although we hadn't yet recovered from disappointment, we agreed with Nick the Greek Dandalos that the next best thing to playing and winning is playing and losing. Although Nick the Greek, who died in poverty on Christmas Day 1966, is not my primary role model, I understand, as he did, that the important thing is to be able to stay in the game. ■

Annabel Davis-Goff's latest book, Walled Gardens, will be published in September by Alfred A. Knopf.