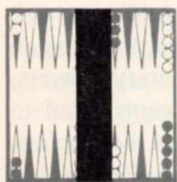


# THE CRUELEST GAME

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by E. J. Kahn, Jr.

Iran gave us not only the Ayatollah Khomeini and the jumbo pistachio nut but also backgammon, a game of skill and chance that attracts some 70 million addicts around the world. One of them here describes the lure and hazards of the global backgammon circuit.



In a world tentatively at peace, people with combative instincts seem to find it necessary to seek alternatives to armed conflict. It is thus perhaps significant that the astonishing global interest in the venerable game of backgammon began just after the end of World War II. The pastime's English name befits the martial role it plays, being derived from the Welsh *bac* and *gamen*—"little" and "war." So dizzyingly has the backgammon virus infected the United States that this country now probably harbors, on one level of expertise or another, more than 20 million victims. Some Americans hold the game to be just as popular a recreation these days as roller-skating, over which backgammon has obvious advantages: you can indulge in it sitting down, and without skinning your elbows or knees. (The ageless Oswald Jacoby, one of the earth's pre-eminent sedentary sportsmen, is credited with having played backgammon for three days nonstop.) There are perhaps 50 million or so additional backgammon fanciers scat-

tered around the rest of the planet, with the heaviest concentrations in Egypt, Cyprus, Lebanon, and Syria. In the United States, 5 million backgammon sets are now sold annually—many of them at startling prices—in luggage shops as well as toy stores. Indeed, some itinerant backgammon players often give the impression that a portable set is all the baggage they need.

Backgammon is generally believed to have originated around 5000 years ago, in Persia, where it was known as *tachti*; and in the pre-Khomeini era Iranians were as ubiquitous on the international backgammon circuit as Australians once were in tennis. Aristotle allegedly taught the pesky game to Alexander the Great. A game suspiciously akin to backgammon was found in King Tut's tomb. Backgammon has allured Samuel Pepys, Thomas Jefferson, Winston Churchill, and Richard the Lion-hearted, who decreed that none of his courtiers could play it for money unless they had attained knighthood.

It is, at first glance, a simple enough game. Any reasonably alert seven-year-old can learn to play backgammon in seven minutes, and given the right throws of dice at the right moment, can in any single game humble an expert. My grandson, at eight, once briefly held his own with Paul Magriel, the author of the weighty *Backgammon*, the backgammon columnist of the *New York Times*, and a champion contestant known, because of his computerlike mind and because he enjoys thus being known, as "X-22." Magriel once amused himself by organizing a tournament of sixty-four competitors, all nonexistent, and playing both sides of all their matches. He numbered his contestants "1" through "64"; "22" won the involved exercise.

Backgammon is also, once one gets deeply enmeshed

in it, one of the world's most complicated pastimes. Magriel, who as a teenager was a chess champion but switched to backgammon because he found chess too tame, has said that before he could state with assurance what the absolutely correct move was in certain given backgammon situations he would have to sequester himself in uninterrupted meditation for 150 years. Backgammon differs radically from chess, moreover, because it is, or can be, a high-stakes gambling game. The largest authenticated exchange of money in a single game of backgammon (a game may last anywhere from fifteen seconds to fifteen minutes) was 64,000 English pounds, unless one counts a slightly less documented shoot-out in which cabinet ministers of two Middle Eastern countries vied for a *Mystère* jet, which the loser's abashed government is supposed duly to have delivered to the winner's elated one.

I should quickly explain, in case anyone is totally unfamiliar with backgammon, that it is a board game. The backgammon board has twenty-four spaces, or landing places. Each player has fifteen pieces, or men, which are arranged initially in a prescribed formation and which he strives—as the dice dictate—to move in one direction into his home territory while his opponent—taking alternate rolls of the dice—moves *his* men in the opposite direction to *his* home base. If a player has two or more men on a landing place, his opponent may not alight there en route. A solitary piece, if pounced on, must start around the aggravating course all over again. Once a player has all his pieces at home, he may begin removing them from the board, or “bearing off.” The player who bears all his men off first wins. Doubles count double: that is, if one throws double-3's, one can—must, if possible—play four 3's. (In backgammon, one should not think of a 5-2 roll as a 7. It is a 5 and a 2, and can be played with one man or with two of them.) That is all there is to it. *Caveat emptor.*



Some say that the recent surge of interest in backgammon is a reaction, in part, to two-platoon football. Backgammon, a game of strategy and position, is like the old-fashioned kind of football, where the same players struggled on offense and defense. A backgammon player must all at once be on offensive and defensive. General George Patton, who considered that attack was everything, would probably have fared poorly at backgammon. Anyway, he preferred polo. Success at backgam-

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E. J. Kahn, Jr., whose most recent books are *About The New Yorker* and *Me* and *Far-flung and Footloose*, claims to come out about even at backgammon.

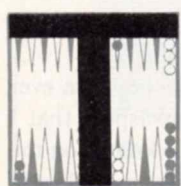
mon depends on timing. One lies back, sometimes, hoping if possible to crunch the enemy as he attempts to breach one's final outpost. Or one plunges on in the assault, hoping to catch the enemy off guard before he can cover his flanks. Or one does both simultaneously. Different throws of the dice can be good or bad at different times. For instance, at the very end of a game, three consecutive double-6's on the part of one player are as devastating as, on another scene, would have been the dropping of a bomb through a Berchtesgarden chimney. (The odds against three double-6's in a row are something like 42,875 to one, but it happens, believe me, it happens.) To throw three consecutive double-6's at the very *start* of a game, though, is so disastrous that any rational player who had that misfortune would at once be prepared to surrender. One thing that makes backgammon fascinating is that within the course of any game the tide can and often does radically turn on a single throw of the dice. With one toss (beautiful or hideous, according to which side of the board one is sitting on) the palm of victory may crumble into the ashes of defeat.

Backgammon is, of course, different from war. Physical injuries are rare, though not unknown. (Being struck by a dice cup thrown at short range in a towering rage can hurt.) There is a comparable enemy, to be sure—the opposing legion of men and the dice-rattling general who orders them around. But there is another, insidious enemy, sometimes also friend: the dice themselves. It is no accident that the adjectives longtime backgammon addicts (suffering from an addiction, some say, worse than drink or dope) routinely confer on dice are ones such as “inhuman” and “sadistic.” The dice are the gods of the backgammon wars, and like the gods of yore they mock the puniness and pretensions of mere men, and women, too. It is no surprise, further, that some contemporary players, who, when they took up the infernal game, used to allude to it as a cruel one, now designate it the cruelest. In any single game, because of the dice, luck is about a 55 percent factor. However, in any match of, say, 17 or 19 points (each game is worth a point unless it's doubled), an expert is probably a two-to-one favorite, regardless of dice, to beat a tyro. An expert knows all the odds and probabilities. The chances of throwing any particular number with two dice are eleven in thirty-six, the chances of throwing any specific combination of different numbers are two in thirty-six, and so forth. Anybody who plays backgammon for money and is not acquainted with such elementary arithmetic plays at his or her grave risk, and should probably abandon the game for *Parcheesi*.

There is no sane reason to believe that dice are anything but inanimate, but some veteran players seem to think otherwise. I have seen backgammon players kiss

obliging dice with a fervor rarely witnessed since Gilbert bussed Garbo. I have heard others engage their dice in impassioned colloquy, and the dice appear to listen. One ex-marine I sometimes play with, a chap who survived several hairy assault-force landings, habitually (and with awesome success) urges his dice to perform heroics for him by barking at them, before flinging them down, "Come on, force troops!" It is patently absurd to think that there could be any connection between the human mind or voice and a pair of unloaded dice. Still, one wonders. What is one, for instance, to make of a concept enunciated by the medium-rank player whose name is enshrined in the annals of backgammon as the author of "the Gianis theory," which states, tersely, "If you can never throw a 1, you should never play"? How can it be, in an ordered society, that there are individuals who time after time come up with a double-4 (one chance in thirty-six) when nothing else will save them from extinction; or that there are others who, if I may wax sadly personal, have succumbed more often than one cares to reflect about to a confounded 5-4?

The modern rules for backgammon were more or less established a couple of hundred years ago by the protean Edmond Hoyle, but the game that is so rife today took a savage new turn in 1925, when some unsung aficionado introduced the gimmick of the doubling cube. Whatever the initial monetary stake may be—a penny a point, \$1000 a point—a player who thinks he has an edge may double it. If his opponent refuses a proffered double, the opponent concedes that game. If he accepts, the stake is doubled. Then he "owns" the cube, and has the right to double next himself. And so the cube may turn, as the tide surges and ebbs, from one to two to four to eight and even, some hair-raising days, to sixty-four or higher. In a nickel, dime, or quarter game (backgammon parlance for \$5, \$10, or \$25 a point), the potential profit or loss may assume chilling dimensions. Furthermore, if one player bears off all his pieces before the other has removed any (called "gammoning"), the victor's spoils are automatically doubled. Worse things yet can happen, but they are too painful even to contemplate.



There are numerous variations of backgammon, perhaps the most commonplace of which is something called acey-deucey: if you throw a 2-1, you play those numbers and, as a bonus, any double of your choice. Acey-deucey is considered by most bona fide players to be an abomination, akin to playing poker with eighteen wild cards, to be indulged in solely by very small children, institutionalized adults, and sailors on long cruises who

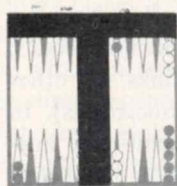
have been denied shore leave. A variation which most seasoned players espouse, though, is the chouette—a nerve-wracking situation in which a single player is pitted against a whole team of others, as many as five or six opponents at a clip. If the individual wins, he collects from everybody. If he loses, he is likely to lose his shirt. It exemplifies the complex nature of the game that in the course of a chouette one roll of the dice may suggest, to five competent members of a team, five different moves, all sensible, all acceptable, all potentially fraught with success or, depending on what happens next, failure. Quite often, whether in a plain head-on game or in a chouette, the move of one die is mandatory, or obvious; but the move of the other die may prompt even an expert to ponder for long troubling minutes, inasmuch as what he does with a humble 1 or 2 may well cost him a game, a match, hundreds of dollars, or all three.

As backgammon has burgeoned, it has spawned social clubs devoted exclusively to the game and, in most large American cities, stores that sell nothing but backgammon sets and allied accouterments (books, magazines, odds charts, T-shirts, cuff links and other kinds of jewelry with backgammon associations). In many a bar and grill there now lurk small-scale hustlers who will gladly take on challengers for a nickel or more a point. There are even computerized backgammon games for solitary shut-ins to contend with. Backgammon has also spawned its own tournament circuit. (The first tournament of consequence was held as recently as 1964, in the Bahamas.) There are about 600 topflight players in the world today, half in the United States, most of the rest in Europe, Brazil, Mexico, and South Africa. ("We seem to attract a preponderance of players from right-wing dictatorships," one tournament official said not long ago. "We never get anybody from, say, Bulgaria or Zaire.") During the first six months of 1980 major tournaments were scheduled in, among other oases, Nassau, Florida, Paris, Madrid, Amsterdam, Geneva, Munich, San Francisco, London, and Monte Carlo.

Compared to tennis or golf, the prize money at these gatherings is modest, with the eventual winner unlikely to receive a purse of more than \$25,000, but at most of these competitions at least one hundred or so of the best players predictably materialize. The main tournaments in the United States are currently being sponsored by Black & White Scotch, those elsewhere by Merit cigarettes. The chief managing functionary for both these underwriters is an Englishman named Lewis Deyong, a forty-five-year-old onetime real estate operator who is among the few individuals who makes a living exclusively from backgammon. "Lewis is our number-one mercenary," a tournament regular has said of him, not unkindly. Deyong has won several

international tournaments, and has been a high-stakes gambler of formidable achievement, but he now devotes much of his time to running tournaments.

Most of the backgammon elite have non-gambling occupations or professions. Paul Magriel used to consecrate himself exclusively to backgammon, writing about the game or giving lessons (at \$1000 a day, on occasion) or playing for fun and lucre; but not long ago he went to work on Wall Street. So did another ranking American, Roger Low, who was Magriel's partner in a memorable marathon match at Athens in 1977, when they defeated two of Europe's best, Joe Dwek (the author of *Backgammon for Profit*) and Kumar Motakshasses (a London-based Iranian who some say is the best player anywhere) in a 63-point match that lasted the better part of three nights. Deyong gives lessons, too, but only to experts. He charges £200 for an eighty-minute session.



Typical of the circuit tournaments was one held in January at the Turnberry Isle Yacht & Racquet Club, a comfortable enclave just north of Miami. (Deyong owns an apartment there—condominiums range in price from \$140,000 to \$600,000—and while it was not an announced purpose of the backgammon fray to peddle real estate, a couple of dozen international players—presumably all winners—have followed his lead.) There were 400 players present, 146 of them in the championship division, to enter which they had to pay a \$500 fee. The first prize came to \$25,560, which was well worth fighting for; but many of the contestants were no more interested in prize money than in what they could pick up playing on the side. While I was engaged in some modest side action myself, a fellow two tables away was up 80 points at \$500 a point: \$40,000. I did not ascertain how he eventually made out because I was concentrating on a real pigeon I had found—a truly inept player who had no business being there. I could not fathom why, considering the ridiculousness of his play, he was 32 points ahead of me. It took me until 5:30 A.M. just to get even, whereupon, as I was finally settling down to pluck him clean, he had the gall to declare he was sleepy and departed for bed. People who behave like that should be banned from the sport.

It was relatively easy to distinguish the backgammon players at Turnberry Isle from its run-of-the-mill clientele: few of the former had suntans. "You should see what those backgammons look like—all night long sitting at a table," one leathery-faced woman golfer said to a companion in the clubhouse. Not that the backgammon crowd didn't have any other interests. At din-

ner there late one night (cocktail parties for backgammon players are likely to begin at 10 P.M.), my wife sat alongside a gentleman who gave her a membership application blank for the Attractive Nudists Club of America. Contestants came from Canada, Finland, France, Greece, Holland, Israel, Italy, Spain, Venezuela, England, and New England. There was a conspicuous dearth of Iranians. "This is the first tournament I've had in four years without a single Iranian in the field," Deyong told me. The Rt. Hon. Lord Rennell of Rodd, who *inter alia* manufactures dog-show trophies, graced the scene with his titled presence. So did the Marquis Guy d'Arcangues, who somehow finds time between backgammon games to write novels and poetry. Joe Dwek came over from London. So did a bookmaker, who was scribbling betting slips as fast as he could write, and stuffing \$100 bills into the pocket of a windbreaker. Many of the best American players gravitated to the scene—Paul Magriel and Roger Low, for instance; also the much feared Jason Lester, a deceptively youthful skirmisher who looks as though he were waiting for someone to read him a bedtime story; and the patriarchal Barclay Cooke, who is to American backgammon roughly what George Washington was to the Continental Army. There may also have been one or two agents hanging around, incognito, from the Internal Revenue Service.

It was a gathering, by any reckoning, of backgammon titans. Many of the English titans had brought aviaries with them—strikingly handsome young birds in shocking-pink getups, all blond and breastless and appearing to have been delicately lobotomized. The birds were generously festooned with gold, as were their escorts. I have rarely seen human necks and wrists so thickly gilded. Most of these young women did not play backgammon, but just stood around decoratively. There are some good female players, but not in proportion to their statistical numbers. Lewis Deyong attributes this discrepancy to an insufficiency of killer instinct. The gentle-looking Lee Genud, a first-class woman player who blasted me mercilessly out of the consolation round at Turnberry Isle, gave no evidence of a lack thereof. Afterward, Ms. Genud told me, to my surprise, that she believes most backgammon players, regardless of sex, are inherently masochistic. "When it comes to gambling," she said, "I don't know many people who want to win."

Although neither Lee Genud nor anybody else ever said so in Florida within my hearing, I suspect that I had the reputation there of being what is known on the backgammon circuit, rather pejoratively, as a dumpling. A dumpling is a bland, yielding player whom anyone with a fair set of backgammon teeth can ingest without bothering to chew. When the big tournament got under way, by the luck of the draw, or some diabol-

ical edict, I found myself instantly confronting the great Magriel. Although his family nickname has long been Button, nobody in backgammon would ever allude to *him* disparagingly. As it happened, Dumpling was leading Button, 11-6, in a 17-point match, when Magriel blew his bugle, rallied his troops, and launched his cavalry charge. Even so, the score would have reached 15-15 had not I, with the doubling cube at 2, correctly played the percentages the experts like Button have taught me to respect. Compelled to expose one of my men to a direct hit—i.e., a single number on the dice—I had the choice of giving him either fifteen or twenty chances out of thirty-six. I gave him the

fifteen. He hit me. Game, match, and vanished dreams of glory. Had I played the other way, the reckless way, Magriel would not only have missed me but would have been in dire, conceivably fatal, straits. Enough of that: one of the most difficult things about backgammon is to get anybody to listen to your hard-luck stories. Hoping to salvage something from the debacle, I asked my conqueror to sign my score sheet. At least, I reckoned, I would have the champ's autograph as a souvenir. Magriel wrote something and strode triumphantly away. The paper in my anguished hand was inscribed "X-22." Backgammon is truly a cruel, inhuman game.

### X TO PLAY 6-5

This situation arose at a crucial point in a tournament match between the author and the world-champion player Paul Magriel. The match was for 17 points. The author had forged into a comfortable 11-6 lead, but Magriel had clawed his way back and was ahead 15-13. The author had already doubled, and inasmuch as Magriel still had eight men to bring into his home board, had a chance of gammoning his opponent, thus winning 4 points and the match. But two unfortunate throws had brought the author into this position, and now he had to play a 6-5. The 6 was forced—from the 10-point to the 4. The question was, should the author play the 5 from the 10-point to the 5-point, hitting O's blot (single, and therefore vulnerable, man) and forcing O to re-enter, or should he play the

5 from the 6-point to the 1-point? If the author chose the former course, he would leave two blots, on the 5-point and the 3-point, and Magriel would have had twenty chances out of thirty-six to hit one of them. If he chose the latter course, Magriel would have had only fifteen chances to hit the blot on the 10-point. The author played the percentages, and moved 10-4, 6-1.

Magriel next threw a 4-1. He would not have been able to re-enter had the author chosen the first alternative. As it was, of course, Magriel was able with that throw to hit the blot on the 10-point. The author threw a 5-4 and could not re-enter. Magriel threw a 6-1 and covered the blot on his 22-point. There went the game, set, and match.

