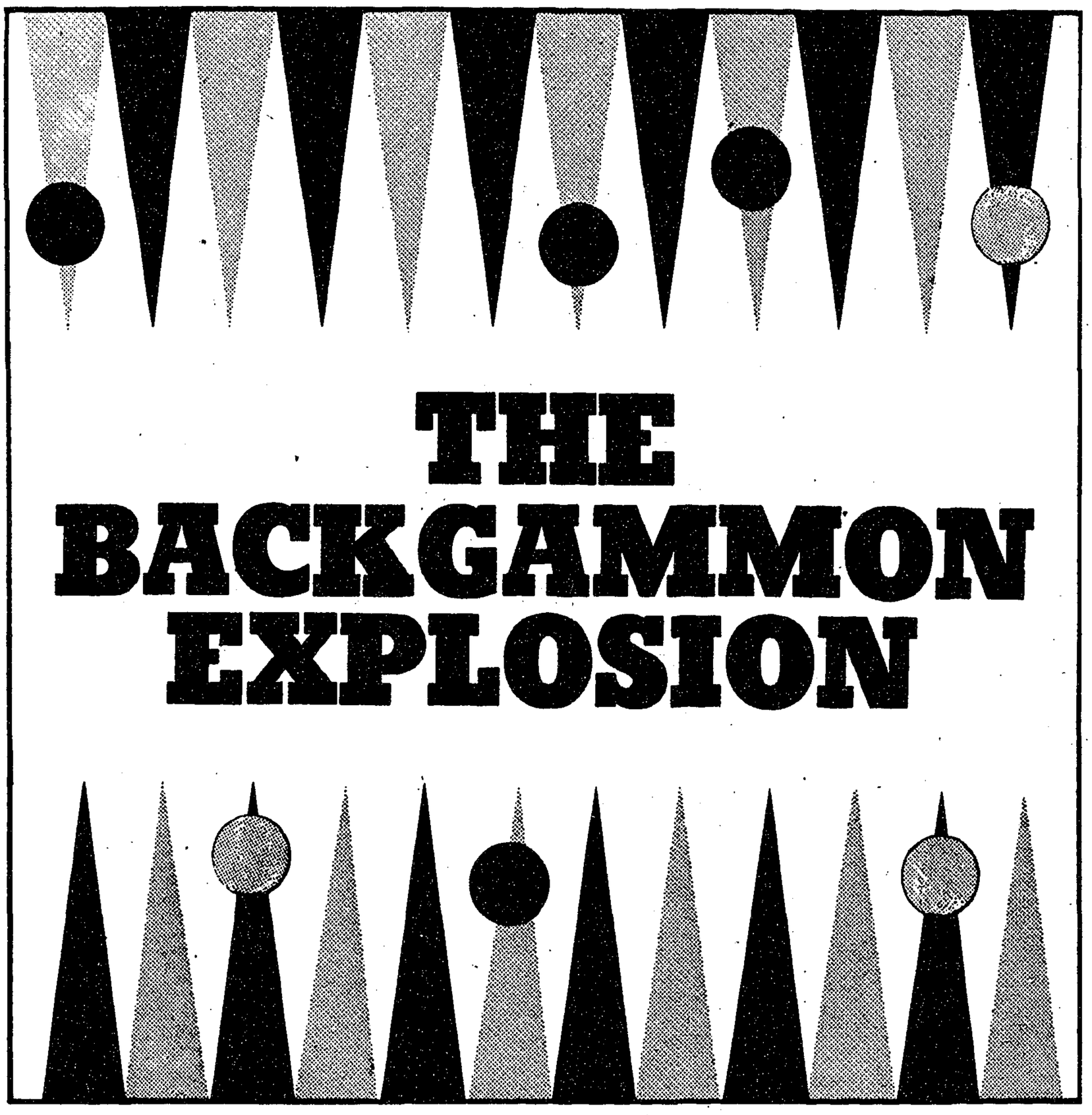

THE BACKGAMMON EXPLOSION

Easy to learn (but not to master), a blend of luck and skill, a gambling game, an ancient game, a game women enjoy as well as men

By Daniel Menaker

In the past, it was bridge, canasta, Mah-Jongg. Today, it's backgammon. Since 1969, the number of Americans who play backgammon regularly has increased tenfold, from 200,000 to 2 million. Cardinal Industries, Inc., of Brooklyn, one of the largest manufacturers of backgammon sets in the United States, sold as many sets in 1973 as it had in the previous 20 years combined. Backgammon sets are turning up with increasing frequency in "class" magazine advertisements. Publishers are rushing new backgammon books into print.

Gamesmakers are diversifying their lines of backgammon boards. You can buy an elephant-hide set for $595. Tiffany offers a sterling-silver doubling cube for $43.50. Karl Springer Ltd. will give you a custom-made batik-leather set for $1,800. If you get good enough, you can win all that and more back in a single night.

The chemistry involved in the backgammon explosion is complex. For one thing, in the late sixties, a number of charitable organizations adopted glamorous backgammon tournaments as a means of fund-raising. For another, Prince Alexis Obolensky, the Russian aristocrat-socialite-huckster, has for the last 10 years or so been conducting a massive publicity campaign in the game's behalf. A year or so ago, the Seagram company became the first major firm to sponsor backgammon, as a part of its liquor-marketing activities, and it retained the Prince as its publicity representative, underwriting the expenses of the tournaments Obolensky organized in resort areas, like the Bahamas and Las Vegas. Pepsi and Dunhill have now followed Seagram's lead.

An 18th-century game of "tric-trac."

Another influence on the renaissance of backgammon was the Fischer-Spassky chess championship in 1972. The interest focused on this match diffused into other board games, especially when chess *arrivistes* found the game too difficult and too slow. They turned to backgammon, a fast, relatively easy-to-learn game that lends itself to gambling and that depends enough on luck to allow the loser to curse the dice instead of his own incompetence. Finally, some people in the games industry believe that inflation and the gasoline shortage have fueled enthusiasm for domestic pastimes in general and backgammon in particular.

During St. Patrick's Day weekend, the Girls Club of New York sponsored a major backgammon tournament called the Gotham Championships in the Baroque Suite of the Plaza Hotel. On Thursday night, some very rich people from all over the world ("I think we'll have some Persians," the woman handling the publicity told me, and we did) gathered for a Calcutta auction of the players participating in the tournament. Formerly associated chiefly with bridge and golf tournaments, a Calcutta auction is a means of generating a pool of prize money. The best players are "auctioned off" to the highest bidders, who are then entitled to collect all the players' winnings, unless, as is usually the case, they have sold percentages of their action to others, including the players. Also, many of the wealthy bidders were themselves entries in the open division; a few were competing in the championship division. Tim Holland Enterprises organized the tournament. Holland is generally believed to be the best backgammon player in the world.

The auction produced more than $90,000, to which were added entry fees paid by the approximately 140 participants. The Girls Club skimmed off $10,000—10 per cent of the total—with the remainder divided among the winners and runners-up in a maze of championship and open eliminations, consolations, and "last chance" consolations. The winner of the championship would receive some $20,000; the open was worth $2,500 for first place.

But very few people came to make money. Most of them already had it. They came to play backgammon, be seen, and "have fun." Jesse Philips, president and chairman of the board of Philips Industries, Inc., manufacturers of construction materials, spent $50,000 buying players in the auction. He knew he couldn't possibly make back his investment, but he looked happy, anyway, poring over little chits of paper that told him what percentage of which player he owned.

On Friday night, the tournament began. The Baroque Suite was filled with two rows of long tables bearing heavy linen tablecloths and scores of backgammon sets. Two hundred and eighty dice rattled faintly in 140 leather cups. Diamonds flashed, complementing the huge crystal chandeliers overhead. The men had on nipped-in, tailored suits; many of the women's dresses were backless. As I watched one match, I heard a man standing behind me introduce his fiancée to some friends. I turned around. The

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man was fat, 50, and short. His fiancée was about 25, 6 feet 1, and bare-midriffed. Her face affected an expression that had settled more naturally on many other faces around the room: the bored amusement of the rich at play.

This newest craze may in fact be the most ancient board game known to man. Archaeologists have discovered a board suitable for backgammon at the site of Ur of the Chaldees, in Iraq. It is about 5,000 years old. In Egypt, a backgammon set has been found in King Tut's tomb. The Greeks played it. The Romans played it (*ludus duodecim scriptorum* they called it, "the twelve-lined game"). A Roman mural depicts a young couple playing strip backgammon. Backgammon and its variations are played by peasants and farmers all over the Middle East, the Near East, and the Mediterranean countries. (The issue of its true geographical origin is vexed.) Though it was probably introduced to Northern Europe by Caesar's legions, backgammon caught on there only after the Crusaders learned it in the Holy Land. They brought the game back home with them, and, like most of their other treasures, it remained largely in the hands of the clergy and the nobility. Indeed, one of the perquisites of knighthood in England was the right to play backgammon.

References to "tables," as the English still sometimes call the game, turn up frequently in British history. In 1437, King James I of Scotland spent the eve of his assassination "playing at chess and tables." In 1526, Cardinal Woolsey declared the game illegal and ordered all boards burned. Nobody paid him any attention. Later, Samuel Pepys and Butler referred to backgammon in their writing. Still later, Sir Walter Scott took up the game with great enthusiasm. In France, during the 17th and 18th centuries, members of the nobility competed among themselves for the reputation of owning the most elaborate "tric-trac" boards. Marie Antoinette's backgammon table cost 238,000 gold francs.

John Crawford, one of the world's leading authorities on bridge and backgammon, ran the Girls Club tournament at the Plaza. He also entered the championship competition. His first opponent was a young, olive-skinned Argentinian named Luis Basualdo, who had been playing backgammon only since 1970. He had learned it one winter in St. Moritz.

A small knot of people surrounded the Crawford-Basualdo board. The match was 13 points, with each game worth one point unless it was doubled. Crawford appeared to be using every stratagem he could think of to rattle his relatively inexperienced opponent, who was nevertheless managing to keep the score very close. After Basualdo threw his dice and while he considered his move, Crawford vigorously shook the dice in his own cup and often chatted across the board or with spectators. After one game, which Basualdo won, Crawford went so far as to point out a misplay on his opponent's part: Basualdo had left a vulnerable man with one chance in 17 of being captured when he could have exposed another man instead, with only one chance in 35 of being "hit."

Basualdo's face never changed expression. He reacted to Crawford's needling as little as Walt Frazier reacts to a referee's bad call on the basketball court. And Basualdo's self-control paid off in a narrow victory. "Against a superior player like Crawford, I usually try to play a conservative, running game," Basualdo said after their match, in pleasantly accented, excellent English. "I found Crawford's tactics not particularly agreeable," he went on. "They almost made me play badly on several occasions. Mr. Barclay Cooke, who is in my opinion the best backgammon player in the world, and my teacher at the Racquet Club, warned me what to expect from Crawford." I made a mental note to talk to Cooke about backgammon later on.

Throwing the dice in 15th-century Germany.

I asked Basualdo what he did in Argentina. He looked puzzled for a moment, then brightened and said, "I am a polo player in the Arhen-tyne. And, uh, you know, a ranchero." Oh yes, I thought, one of those ranchers-polo players I'm always running into. I resolved not to ask anyone else at the tournament about his occupation.

I found Barclay Cooke hovering studiously over one of the many matches in progress Friday night. He is a tall, gray man in his 60's. Everything about him looked Racquet Clubby except his ice-blue gambler's eyes. I introduced myself and told him about his protégé Basualdo's victory over Crawford. He was delighted and said, when I mentioned Crawford's attempts to psych Basualdo, "Nobody likes to play with John. But Luis can handle that sort of thing. He's a damn good player. Every time he comes to New York, we play at the club."

I asked Cooke if he would take me to the Racquet Club to see where backgammon was played and to give me an interview. I had heard that $20- or $25-a-point stakes were not uncommon at the club, and that sometimes astonishingly high amounts of money changed hands over backgammon. One legend has it that somebody once dropped $100,000 in a single evening. Cooke seemed distressed by my request. "We play for very low stakes now," he said. "We've had so much bad publicity that we've got to be careful." Nevertheless, he reluctantly agreed to show me around the club the following Thursday. I left him consulting a few little chits of paper that he had been carrying in his shirt pocket.

For 250 years, backgammon in America followed the pattern established in England: it provided an occasional diversion for the wealthy. When the device of doubling and redoubling stakes was introduced, in this country, in the nineteen-twenties, interest in the game in British and American clubs rose sharply. One could raise and re-raise the stakes in a single game, *(Continued on Page 95)*

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Backgammon

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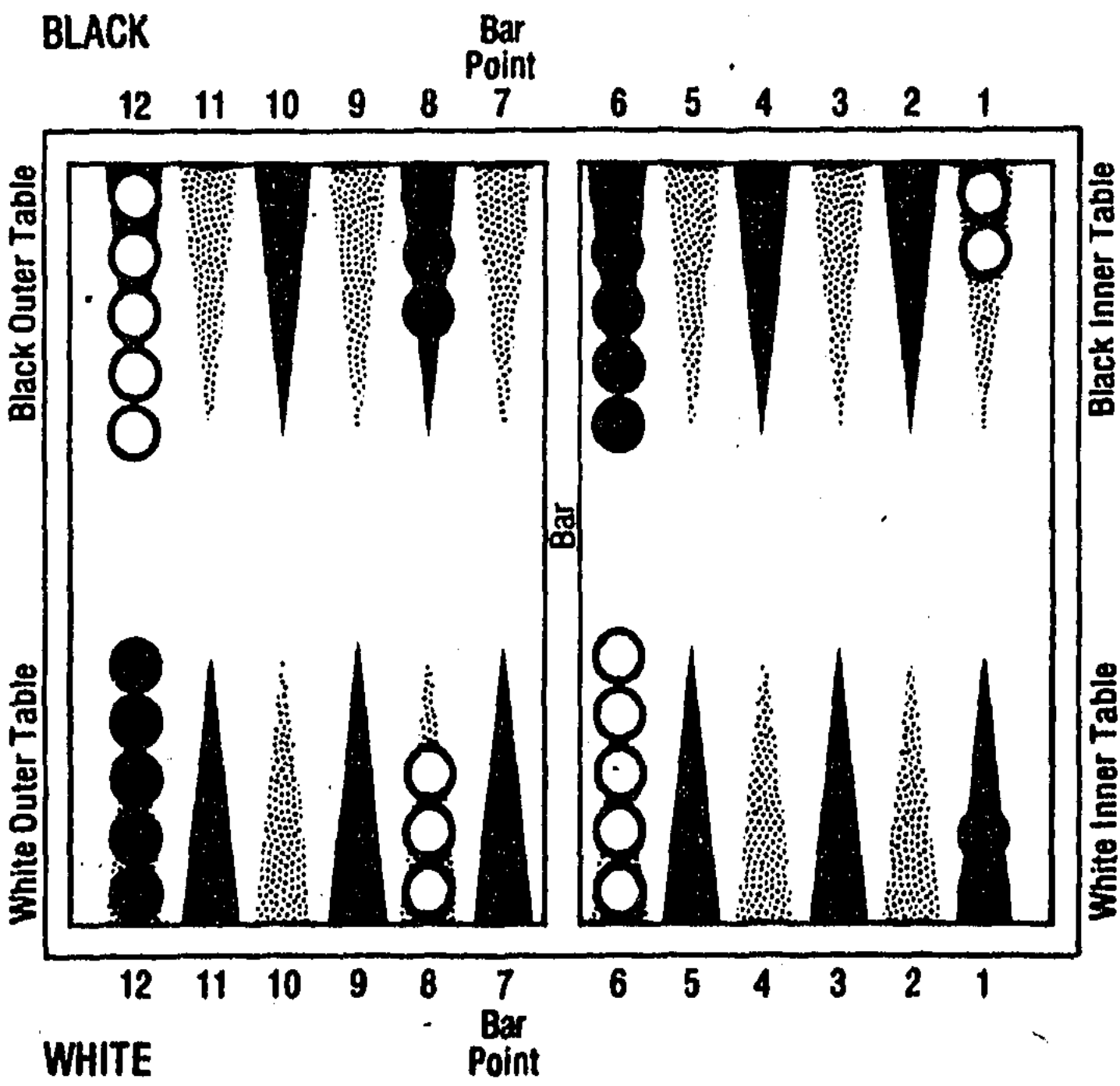
and backgammon now exuded the faint scent of real financial danger that characterized other forms of gambling. But its lineage made it respectable.

Tim Holland—who, like Cooke, Crawford, Oswald Jacoby and a few other superior players, had been given a bye in the opening round of the Girls Club tournament—played his first match against a young man from Miami named S. Edward S. Christiansen 5th, president and chairman of the board of the Equipment Company of America, manufacturers of, among other things, freight-handling machinery. Christiansen is short, blond and wiry, and, like most backgammon players, simultaneously cool and intense. He gammoned Holland in two doubled games at the outset, and thus led 8-0, a virtually insurmountable advantage in a 13-point match. From then on, Holland caught up slowly—too slowly. In the last game, with Christiansen ahead 11-7, the game was doubled, so Christiansen could win the match 13-7 by winning the game. Holland got some terrible dice and wound up playing a forced back game—holding down two points in Christiansen's inner table in the hope of consolidating his own inner table and then hitting enough blots to give him time to get his rearguard home. This is an extremely delicate and desperate sort of game to play. Holland, who is very tall, good-looking and dark, hunched over the board, computing probabilities and "counting" his and Christiansen's positions. He almost brought it off, but a couple of good rolls gave Christiansen the game and the match.

When I talked to Christiansen later, he seemed happily stunned by having beaten the best backgammon player in the world. He said he had redoubled early on because he knew he was the inferior player, and a shorter match would give him a better chance to win by luck. He had learned backgammon at the Jockey Club in Miami two years ago, he said, and he had already seen games in which players won or lost scores of thousands of dollars. He was in New York to see his investment managers, and the tournament happened to coincide nicely with his visit. It was his third tournament, but he had never played against, much less beaten, anyone near Holland's caliber.

Backgammon is very easy to learn from someone with a board who knows how to play. It is, however, fairly complicated to explain the game by writing about it, just as it is with any game.

Each player has a pair of dice and 15 men, which are arranged at the beginning of play as shown below. The object of the game is to bring



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all of your men around the board to your inner table (five of them are already there) and thence off the board before your opponent can do so. White travels along the horseshoe-shaped path indicated by the arrow; black travels in the opposite direction.

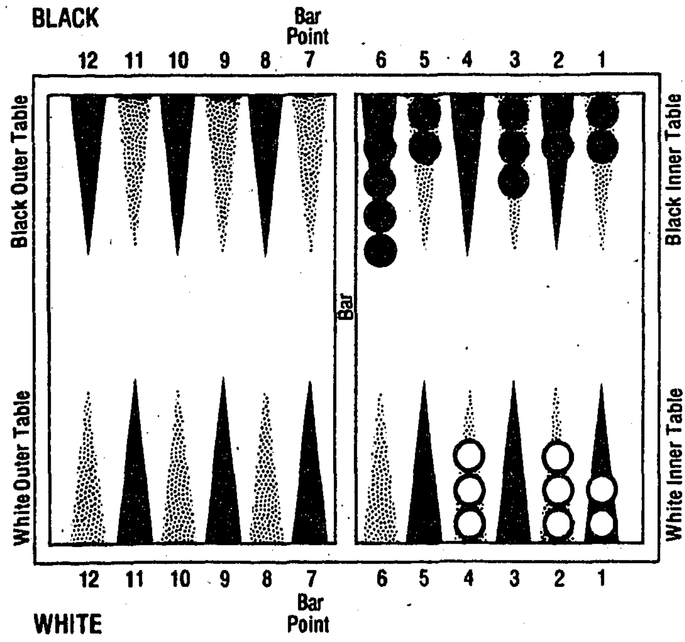
The cast of a single die determines who goes first. If both players throw the same number, they throw again, until one throws higher than the other. The winner of this preliminary then starts the actual game by moving his men according to the numbers shown on the two dice just cast. His opponent then takes his own two dice, throws, and moves his men. Play alternates for the rest of the game. On each throw a player makes, he may move one man the number of "points" represented by the sum of the two dice; or he may move two men—each one the exact number of points shown on one die. For instance, if White goes first with a 6 and a 5, he may move one of his two men on Black's 1 point to Black's 7, or "bar," point, and then on to Black's 12 point. As an alternative, White may take two men from Black's 12 point—one man six points to his own 7 (bar) point, and another five points to his own 8 point. (The first move is far superior to the second, strategically speaking.)

Neither player may *ever* land or even touch down on a point occupied by two or more of his opponent's men. That is, on his opening roll of 6-5, White may *not* use his 5 to move a man from his own 6 point to his 1 point, because two of Black's men are sitting there. Nor, speaking legalistically, may White use his 5 to move a man from Black's 1 point to Black's 6, even if he planned to use his 6 to continue on to Black's 12 point. Technically, that move must be executed 6-5, not 5-6. When a player throws doubles, he moves the thrown number four times instead of two. That is, with, say, double 3's, he may move one man 12 points, or one man nine points and another man three points, or two men six points each, or four men three points each.

A single man occupying a point is called a "blot." If either player lands or touches down on a point occupied by an opponent's blot, the blot has been "hit," and is removed from the board and placed on the bar. No matter where the man was removed from, he can re-enter the board only through his opponent's inner table. So if White is lucky or skillful enough to hit a blot after having moved at least two of his men onto each of the points of his own inner table, Black cannot re-enter at all, since no throw would allow him to touch down on a point that is not occupied by two White men. Under these circumstances, White continues to throw until one of his inner-table points opens up.

After a player has succeeded in moving all of his men into his inner table, he may begin bearing them off. In doing so, the player must use his entire roll or as much of it as possible. If one die shows 6 but there are no men on the 6 point, he must bear a man off from the highest occupied point.

In the diagram below (where White has borne seven men off and is on his way to winning), if White throws 6-5, he *must* bear off two men from his 4 point. If he throws 2-1, he has a number of options, all of which will use his full roll: bear one man off the 2 point and one man off the 1 point (obviously the most efficient move); bear one man off the 2 point and move another man from the 2 point to the 1 point; move one man from the 4 point to the 3 point and another man from the 4 point to the 2 point; etc. The player who bears all his men off the board first wins the game. If he bears off all his men before his opponent bears off any of his, he scores a "gammon" and automatically wins twice the stakes agreed upon at the beginning of the game. If he bears off all his men while his opponent still has a man or men in the winner's inner table, he scores a "backgammon" and automatically wins three times the original stakes.



Later Friday night, I talked with Bob Reiss, a spectator and the president of Reiss Games, Incorporated, a New York firm that manufactures backgammon and other adult games. He had just taken up backgammon, he said. He had never before learned a single one of the other games his company manufactured, but he loves backgammon, for the same reasons that everybody else — professional gamblers as well as tyros — loves it. "It's a fast game and a terrific betting game," he said. "Right now, it also has lots of glamour. It isn't into the masses yet, but it will be. We couldn't ship sets out fast enough last Christmas. The game is big in New York, Miami, Los Angeles, the better stores in Chicago. Hey," Reiss called out to a passerby, "did I tell you about our newest board game? It's the Xaviera Hollander Game."

There are three basic strategies in backgammon. The most elementary, at least as a concept, is the "running game," in which you try simply to scoot your seven men far behind enemy lines (five on your opponent's 12 point, two way back on his 1 point) around the board as fast as you can. Throwing a couple of 6-5's early on greatly facilitates the running game, since it allows you to move those two back men all the

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way to near-safety on your opponent's 12 point. Once you and your opponent are "disengaged"—with no men vulnerable to being hit—the rest of the game is perforce a running game.

But an absolutely pure running game in backgammon is as rare as it is in football. Bad throws interrupt the race; blots get left and then hit. It is partly these hitches and fluctuations that make backgammon a gambler's dream—you can look like a sure loser for most of a game and then, with a single fortuitous throw, devastate your opponent's position — and that also allow the backgammoner considerable play for skill and planning. In most contests, the running game must be combined with a "blocking" game. That is, you attempt simultaneously to rescue the two men marooned on your opponent's 1 point and to build up your own inner table with as many consecutive "made" (blocked) points as possible, so as to limit 'the mobility' of your opponent's farthest-back men. Also, should you happen to send a blot to the bar, a nicely clotted-up inner table will make it difficult — perhaps impossible — for your opponent to re-enter the board. A "prime," or six made points in a row, is a roadblock for any opposing men caught behind it. Nothing pleases a backgammon player more than seeing two of his men installed on six consecutive points, looking like so many interlocking cogs.

On Saturday night, I interviewed John Crawford. He says he is a professional gambler. He learned all sorts of games in his early teens, and, at 17, was the youngest person ever to become a Life Master in bridge. Crawford is a sleek, gray-haired man, with a broad face and merry eyes. He speaks briskly in a loud voice, with a touch of what sounds like British affectation. "Two things are responsible for the recent growth of backgammon — my book and these charity tournaments," he told me. "It's the ideal game," he went on, and ticked off the reasons on his fingers. "One: It's easy to learn but hard to master. Two: It's a superb blend of luck and skill. Three: With the doubling cube, it's an excellent gambling game. Four: It's easy on the eyes. Five: It's fast. Six: Women enjoy it as much as men do."

I asked Crawford what the largest stakes were that he knew of in a backgammon game. "That's a fine question!" he said indignantly. "I couldn't possibly discuss that. Can you imagine asking a question like that?" he appealed to a bystander. "I'll tell you one thing, though," he went on, lowering his voice, "I've played many times for more than all the prize money available in this tournament."

Crawford's opinion of women backgammoners appears to be shared by most experts. "Women simply can't compete in *any* game on an equal basis with men," he said. "But in backgammon, they do better than in most games. The stress and stamina factors aren't as great. My wife Carol, who is in this tournament, is one of the best woman players in the world."

I asked Crawford why he enjoyed gambling and playing games so much. He never answered the question, but his response was interesting, anyway: "It is impossible to tell why someone is a good gambler. Mathematical ability is essential, of course, but it takes more than that. A certain instinct. Eighty-five per cent of the good gamblers are 'made.' They work and study. The remaining 15 per cent are instinctual players, like myself. We simply have an uncanny ability to play any game well. A scientific player will never beat a natural player."

In the meantime, Carol Crawford was advancing steadily in the championship division, defeating S. Edward S. Christiansen 5th. Mrs. Crawford is a very pretty blonde somewhere in her 40's, breezy and unselfconscious. Her nose was peeling slightly—perhaps the consequence of an Acapulco sunburn. She has the best major-tournament record of any backgamine.

Only advanced players can execute well the "back" game —the third basic strategy of backgammon. (The word "backgammon," in fact, probably derives from the Middle English "bak"—back—and "gamen"—game. When I was a kid, I thought it was called "backgammon" because it was played on the back of a checkerboard.) Ordinarily, the

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back game represents an all-out gamble by a player who finds himself lagging far behind in a running game and thus has no alternative. Basically, he must deliberately expose some blots, in the hope of occupying two points in his opponent's inner table—preferably two low points, ideally the 1 and the 3. He must then build up his own inner table while waiting for a shot at an opponent's blot. That blot may well develop, because the opponent will have trouble deploying his men safely in his inner table, since two of its points are being held captive. If you play the back game and it fails, you are in real trouble, because your opponent may well be able to bear off all his men before you have borne off any. He has thus scored a gammon, and you must pay him twice the original stakes.

On Sunday, Mrs. Crawford faced her old friend Oswald Jacoby in the finals of the championship division. Jacoby, 73 years old, is the grand old man of bridge and backgammon. He is the only surviving member of the committee that met at the Racquet Club in 1931 to draft a set of standard rules for backgammon — rules that now govern the game almost universally. Jacoby has won more national bridge titles than anyone else ever has. He differed from most others at the tournament in that he has a profession—a fitting one—besides gambling or polishing the family jewels: He is an actuary.

Jacoby, or "Ozzie," as nearly everyone calls him, got excellent dice and rolled up an early lead of 8-1. Then Mrs. Crawford won a doubled game with some of Jacoby's men in her home table—a backgammon worth six—triple the points at stake. She ended the game by throwing double 6's, a gratuitous flourish that the spectators greeted with groans and applause. Then Jacoby ran the score to 16-8. In the next game, Mrs. Crawford doubled, saying, "It looks right, but Ozzie will count it after I've done it"—an admission that she was offering the double without being utterly certain that her advantage was great enough to justify doing so. Ozzie did indeed count, after which he declined the double, thus forfeiting one point. But in this episode lay the reason for Mrs. Crawford's eventual defeat and some evidence for the male-dominance theory advanced by her own husband and others. She lacked the relentless precision and perfectionism that a champion competitor must add to his natural skills.

Jacoby went on to win the championship, 25-14. "Chris" Christiansen sat in for the referee part of the time, typical of the tournament's informality, for he owned 10 per cent of Mrs. Crawford. Christiansen told me that he had won $2,600 for getting to the semifinals of the championship, minus the $1,400 he had invested in himself and others, plus his 10 per cent of Mrs. Crawford's winnings, for a total profit of about $2,000—an amount he seemed to be celebrating as I might celebrate finding a subway token.

The Mrs. Crawford-Jacoby match was very pleasant and courtly. At one point, Jacoby reached across the table and shook Mrs. Crawford's dice cup for her, to help her with her luck. After a particularly lucky throw by Jacoby in the late stages, Mrs. Crawford exclaimed, "Oh, stop it, Ozzie!" Still later, Jacoby waited with great patience as Mrs. Crawford took at least five minutes to think about a troublesome 4-2 roll. The most time I saw *him* take over a throw was 30 seconds.

Backgammon, like chess, has various standard openings. A first throw of 6-5 moves one of the two men on your opponent's 1 point to his 12 point. A 6-1 allows you to make your bar point—a very important position, since it gives you three consecutive made points — by moving one man six points from your opponent's 12 point and one man one point from your own 8 point. A 3-1 makes your 5 point (one man three points from your 8, one man one point from your 6). Early in the game, if you cannot run your back men out of danger immediately, it is wise to split them, on a throw that includes a 1, by moving one of them to your opponent's 2 point. This split doubles the number of shots you can take at any blot your opponent leaves on his outer or inner tables.

Modern backgammon experts have even come up with standard replies to standard openings. For these and all the other strategies—along with the game's history, psychology and variations—I

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strongly recommend "The Backgammon Book" (Viking; Bantam paperback, $2.25), by Oswald Jacoby and John Crawford, two experts we've already met. This excellent little book also contains the official rules of backgammon, a chapter on chouette (a form of the game in which one player takes on two or more opponents), some entertaining backgammon legends, guidelines for running a backgammon tournament, a glossary, and an old-fashioned, admonitory prose style ("It doesn't do the least bit of good to bang down your dice or throw the dice out the window").

After his victory, Jacoby seemed to have some difficulty determining how much of the $20,000 first prize belonged to him, and how much belonged to others who had invested in him, and how much others in whom he had invested owed him. He went dashing around, mulling over his little chits of paper like everyone else. Finally, I got a chance to talk to him. He was a little peevish about the confusion over his finances—a peevishness that didn't seem at all lessened by the fact of his win, which he appeared to be taking totally for granted. He spoke rapidly and authoritatively—a habit, I had begun to believe, of gamblers in general. He recited his accomplishments for me, along with those of his wife, son and grandson —gamespeople all, it turned out. He told me about his mathematical prowess. He told me that Mrs. Crawford was a fine player, but that no woman, etc., etc. He had to run off to examine somebody else's scraps of paper, but he departed with a piece of advice that seems sounder and sounder the more I think about it: "Lose cheerfully but never mean it."

After Jacoby left, I got up from where we had been sitting and caught a glimpse of myself in one of the numerous mirrors that are set into the walls of the Baroque Suite. I finally realized what it was that had been making me feel physically so different from those involved in the tournament. I was cod-white, like most middle-class Caucasian New Yorkers in March, while the backgammoners, almost to a person, were suntanned.

At any time during the game, either player may offer a double, just before he throws. If accepted, the double makes the game worth twice the number of points or twice the amount of money originally agreed upon. Doubling is accomplished by turning the "doubling cube," a part of every backgammon set, so that its 2-face is up. The other player, if he considers his position decidedly inferior, may refuse the double, thus forfeiting the game and however many points are at stake. Or, if he thinks he has a good chance of recovering, he may accept the double, thereby also taking control of the doubling cube. It automatically becomes solely his privilege to redouble later, by turning up the 4-face of the cube. If the redouble is accepted, control of the cube changes hands again.

If simple backgammon is rich fare for the gambler, doubling adds the spice that makes the game nearly irresistible. Invented in the nineteen-twenties "by some unknown genius playing in one of the American clubs," according to Jacoby and Crawford, the double in backgammon resembles the raise in poker. It permits you to increase your potential winnings when your hand looks strong. Dice being by their nature perverse, however, you must exercise doubling power with care, because your opponent can gain the upper hand with a single throw and redouble the stakes.

In fact, the doubling cube in gambling backgammon becomes the focus of much of the game's psychology and skill. Just as you must "read" your opponent as a running or blocking player, you must also read his doubling patterns. If he doubles recklessly and early, don't get bluffed out of the game. If he shows uncertainty in his play, you may be able to bluff *him* out of the game by offering a double even if you hold only a marginally superior position.

On the Wednesday following the tournament, I interviewed Tim Holland at his apartment in the East Sixties. I arrived well after noon, but Holland had just gotten up and was wearing a bathrobe. He explained that he had been playing backgammon until 5 in the morning.

Holland is another professional gambler, confi-

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dent of his abilities but a charming and gracious man nonetheless. He has been a gamesman all his life, starting out as a fine amateur golfer in the mid-fifties. He learned backgammon by watching some older men play the game at the La Gorce Country Club, in Miami. After a time, he realized that there was tremendous potential profit in backgammon, and that very few people ha studied the game closely So *he* did, and went on t win 10 major backgammo tournaments—a better rec ord than any other back gammon player. He ha turned his familiarity wit the game into a business writing an excellent book "Beginning Backgammon, for real novices, and mar keting, through Reis Games, a self-teaching de vice called Autobackgam mon.

Much of what Hollan said about the game wa by now familiar to me— its virtues, its glamorou history, and so on—but h seemed to have a firme grasp on the reasons fo his love of gambling tha did the others with whon I'd spoken: "Everybod gambles every day," h said. "Every time you tal to your boss, you're play ing a game, taking chance — gambling. Gam bling is the essence of life the way I look at it. S if you're good at it, wh not just go ahead and gam ble directly?"

To gamble wisely at back gammon—to know when t offer a double and when t decline one, to use every ro of your dice to its maximun advantage—requires a thor ough understanding of th laws of probability. For in stance, if you must leave blot but have a choice be tween stationing it two o three points away from you opponent's men, you shoul know that you stand a bet ter chance of escaping th bar from two points away Similarly, in the endgame when both players are bearing their men off the board, you must be able to "count" your position and your opponent's to figure out who stands the better statistical chance of winning. (The endgame often produces intense doubling-and-redoubling activity, since, in a close game, the advantage can shift back and forth with every throw of the dice.)

Indeed, what elevates a player above the vast middle rank of backgammoners is precisely the ability to compute dice probabilities rapidly and accurately. The luck-skill ratio in backgammon is somewhere around 75-25. Therefore, a beginner attended closely by Ms. Luck can drub a champion in a game or two or three. But in the long run, the law of averages will vindicate the master, because he knows how to abide by it.

On Thursday, I kept my 6 P.M. appointment with Barclay Cooke to see the backgammon room at the Racquet Club. I felt a little cowed on entering the club's grim, neo-Renaissance building at 52d Street and Park Avenue. The dark-blue awning out in front had no name. Was that a medieval Masonic chant I heard floating out of one of the upstairs windows?

The lobby of the club is a large, vaultlike space with a desk near the front attended by two black-uniformed minions. "Mr. Cooke will be right down, Sir," said one of them, regarding my unruly, tight-curled hair with some skepticism. Mr. Cooke soon appeared and drew me into a small reception room off the lobby. "I feel awful about this," he said, "but I've spoken with the president of the club, and he doesn't want any more publicity about backgammon, so I'm afraid I won't be able to take you upstairs." Cooke was obviously embarrassed and sincerely apologetic. "I lost your number and couldn't get in touch to tell you," he went on. "We've just had so many sensational stories circulated about the stakes we play for."

I tried to put him at his ease, but I also told him that I would have to mention the club's sensitivity about gambling on their premises. He said that he understood that and would do the same thing in my position. We went on to talk about backgammon briefly, and Mr. Cooke voiced the opinion that the game would continue evolving in strategy and tactics indefinitely. He said that it had already changed enormously since he started playing it and that there were many young, raw players who were experimenting with techniques that would someday eclipse current ones.

The fact that backgammon is a complex enough game to allow innovation and development is the real interest at the heart of its recent popularity. By reading, and by playing one game after another, one grows more and more aware of its difficulty and challenge. The big-money games and their patina of fashionableness are ephemera. They afford the wealthy just another way to burn up some of the riches they wouldn't otherwise know what to do with. Backgammon the game, as opposed to backgammon the fad, is an enduring fascination, as its antiquity suggests. Like every game of chess, every game of backgammon is a microcosm of human struggle, and calls for all the intelligence and intuition at one's command. But, as is not the case with chess, the strategies of backgammon are subject to the intercession of chaos—the roll of the dice. It is the capriciousness of the dice that makes backgammon so intriguing, and that reminds one of the human bones from which the dice themselves were once carved. ■

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The 20th-century version: Last year's Seagram's American Championship of Backgammon at the Plaza Hotel. That's backgammon-publicizer Prince Alexis Obolensky at center, with arms folded.

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