

## ON YOUR OWN TIME

Editor: Charles G. Burck

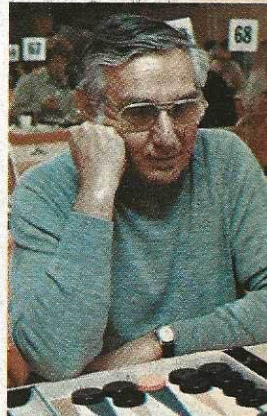
Research associate: Joseph A. Zebrowski Jr.



Rocky Aoki



Daniel Marcus



Harold Greenberg

Solemn players struggle silently at the world championship tournament in Las Vegas.

The 1974 world backgammon tournament drew a mixed bag of playboys, hustlers, and sober businessmen who happen to be devoted to the game. Rocky Aoki, the thirty-five-year-old founder of the Benihana of Tokyo restaurant chain, won the intermediate-class championship. Daniel Marcus, vice president of Grand Machining Co. of Detroit and the U.S. champion, was knocked out in an early round. Harold Greenberg, president of the United Cerebral Palsy Fund, the sponsor of the tournament, got to the finals in the beginner's class. Peter Kikis, a shipowner from New York, made it to the quarterfinals of the championship class. The new champion is Claude Beer, a wealthy regular on the tournament circuit whose home club is New York's Racquet & Tennis.

## New Roll for a 4,000-Year-Old Game

Those triangular-shaped markings on the back of the checkerboard have finally come into their own. They constitute the playing field for backgammon, a game that dates back some four thousand years and has been rediscovered within the last decade by an estimated quarter of a million Americans, including a sizable contingent of executives. The attaché case clutched by that man in the camel-hair coat on Madison Avenue, Peachtree Street, or under the pillars of the Loop may well contain not papers but an elegant cork-surfaced playing board, complete with markers and dice.

Why the sudden surge of interest? When the game last enjoyed a renaissance, in 1930, the editors of *Vanity Fair* hazarded the guess that it represented "an exciting, if miniature re-enactment of the stock market crash, with its sudden adventurous ups and downs, its rapid, unpredictable and dizzy turns of fortune." Just possibly that explanation holds again today.

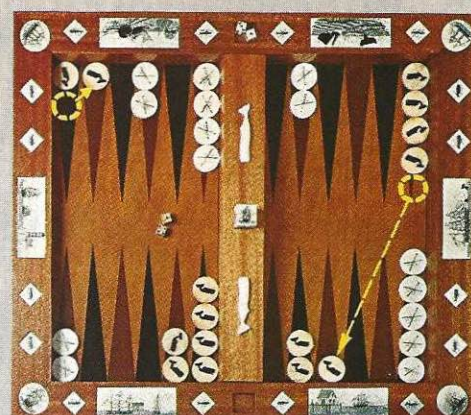
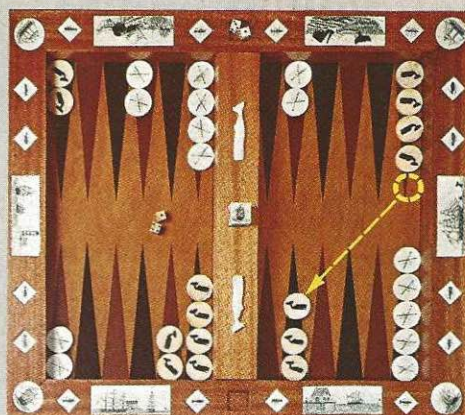
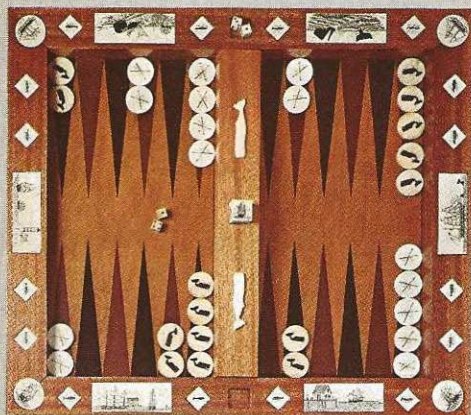
Backgammon has also been treated lately to the ministrations of a first-class promoter. He is Prince Alexis Obolensky, a Russian émigré who over the years has made a living at everything

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Peter Kikis

## THE REWARDS OF CALCULATED RISK



There's no way to win at backgammon without taking chances. The sequence above illustrates two alternative plays—the first a safe move of the sort that beginners like to make, and the second a somewhat riskier move that is also much more worthwhile. (The board, made by a nineteenth-century New England whaler, is from the Don Lester shop in New York.)

The sequence takes place early in a game, and it opens at far left. The player whose markers bear the whale emblem is moving his pieces clockwise, toward the lower left-hand quadrant (his opponent moves in the opposite direction, toward upper left). He has just rolled a 4-1 combination on the dice, which entitles him to move one man a total of five points, or spaces, or one man four points and another one. He may not advance to a space where his opponent has two or more markers, but he can knock a lone marker off the board, obliging his opponent to begin his next move by getting that marker onto the board again at the lower left. Our player's instinct, if he is a novice, will be

to take a man from his column in the upper-right corner of the board and move it a total of five points as shown in the second picture, to the point where two of his men are already safely ensconced.

The more experienced player will move his men as shown in the third picture. He brings one of the men from the upper-right column over four points to an empty space, and he uses the single point on the other die to move one of his two men in the upper-left column ahead one space. He has left not one but three men theoretically vulnerable to "hits." But the odds are against it, and even if one of them should be hit, there is still time to bring it back into play without losing momentum. If none of the men is hit, the rewards are great. The single man at lower right may be useful in establishing a two-man block on one of the points farther along the board. By the same token, "splitting" the men at upper left also multiplies the possible numbers that could be used to hit any single man his opponent brings around toward *his* home board. By virtue of a seemingly simple play, the player has moved to the attack.

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from importing orchids to selling real estate in Palm Beach. "Oby," as he is known in the jet set, has some clear-cut ideas about how to put a product across. "After you interest the *in* people," he says, "it's easier to appeal to others." He has been promoting backgammon tournaments for a decade in such palmy spots as the Bahamas, Monte Carlo, and Saint Martin. A year ago he founded the World Backgammon Club, which provides him with income from various tie-in promotions. He has helped launch clubs and bars like Pips in Los Angeles and Don Denton's in New York, where backgammon is a main attraction.

But with or without Obolensky, backgammon is simply too much fun to have stayed lost on the back side of checkers forever. It is a game that calls for mastery of the laws of probability and the ability to weigh and undertake frequent shifts in strategy. Executives find it a microcosm not just of the stock market, but of any number of other real-life

games they have to play. Daniel Marcus, vice president of a Detroit auto-parts-manufacturing firm and winner of the 1973 U.S. championship, likens it to labor negotiations. "It's a question of assessing your opponent and what his position is—of weighing the best way to put pressure on him, or of knowing when to accede to his pressure, and having through it all the sense of timing, of knowing when to make your move."

#### Psychological warfare

Though easy to learn, backgammon is a surprisingly subtle and complex game to play really well. Since you have to maneuver through your opponent's defenses, there is no real possibility of bringing all your pieces home without getting some of them knocked off the board, or being temporarily stymied by your opponent's blockades. A backgammon player is thus forced to think strategically: how can I minimize my own exposure and at the same time optimize

my chances for either blocking or hitting my opponent's pieces?

If strategy is one basic element of the game, another is psychological warfare of a high and deadly order. The chief weapon in this respect is the doubling cube—a block whose sides are engraved with the numbers 2, 4, 8, 16, 32, and 64. At the outset of the game either player can double the stakes by bringing the cube to the board and placing the "2" face upright; control of the cube—meaning the ability to redouble the stakes—passes back and forth between the players after each redouble. Players can decline a double only by forfeiting the game. Most businessmen play for modest stakes—a dollar a game is common—but even that stake can escalate rapidly to \$64 if two inveterate gamblers are playing. And the stakes—whatever they finally are—can be multiplied again at the end of the game in certain instances. A player who fails to bring any of his men off the board before his opponent

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At Dallas's Willow Bend club, backgammon is the newest game. Advancing his markers is Robert Alpert, a real-estate developer. His opponent is Dawson Bray, a Dallas cattleman. Apart from casual games, players meet once a month in tournaments.

Lucky dice enable beginner Mimi Garvey, seventeen, to take three straight games from her father, John, at home in Greenwich Village. An expert player, he is senior vice president of Wm. E. Pollock, a New York bond firm.



has finished will be "gammoned," for a double loss; if one or more of his players is still trapped within the opponent's home board, he will suffer a "backgammon," and a triple loss.

Whether the stakes are dimes or tournament points, the cube adds a poker-like dimension to the game. "There's a tremendous amount of psychology," says Dawson Bray, a Dallas cattleman. "You have to know whether your opponent is a charger or whether he just plays by

percentages. A good player knows whether he has the slightest edge, and whether he has an unobvious edge. He will double then, and he knows when the opponent is likely to accept the double."

As might be expected, professional risk takers such as brokers and real-estate developers are particularly fond of the game. Lowell Schulman, a Westchester builder, explains why: "I have to come up with a tremendous amount of venture capital for projects to which

anything can happen—the economy can turn, for example, or labor negotiations can tie me up. Backgammon is very similar. You have to take chances—and you have to plan the game so you can weather the bad rolls." The Stock Exchange Luncheon Club in New York is a hotbed of noontime players, and other brokers squeeze in a few games while riding home on the train.

If backgammon served only as a re-enactment of the business world it would not, of course, be much of a recreation. Like any game, it has the property of diverting even as it mirrors real-world considerations. Because the throw of the dice can upset the best of strategies or rescue a bungler from the fate he deserves, backgammon is less intellectual—and less damaging to the ego—than chess or duplicate bridge.

Like chess, backgammon offers well-to-do players the subtle aesthetic pleasures of moving beautifully wrought markers across an inlaid antique board. "The tactile aspects of the game are almost as important to me as the cerebral aspects," says Richard Hexter, executive vice president of Donaldson, Lufkin & Jenrette. "They have the same soothing elements that something like knitting or crocheting does—but in a more socially acceptable way."

Some businessmen who have been playing backgammon at home or in their clubs for years are not pleased to see Obolensky's café-society crowd flocking to the game. The chairman of a large utility company, a championship-level

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Elegant appointments add to the pleasure of the game for Howard Story (right), chairman of Story & Kelly-Smith, newspaper-advertising representatives. Story is the champion at New York City's University Club; his board is an antique fruitwood table. Story's opponent is Robert Strachn, executive vice president of Inter-Continental Hotels.

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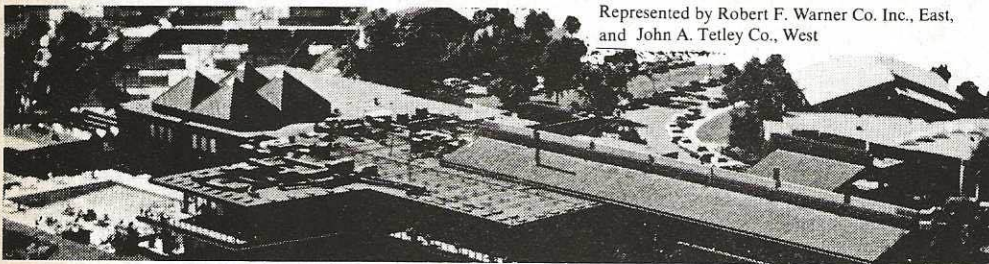
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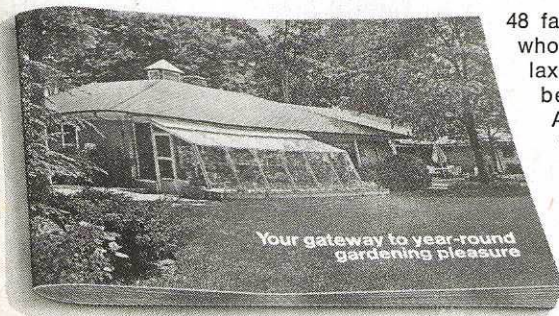
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player, simply refuses to allow his name to be associated with backgammon. "The publicity could only hurt me," he explains. "Many of the people I have to work with think there's something degenerate about backgammon."

The tournament circuit is peopled to some extent by hustlers looking for rich "pigeons" to pluck in side games, and by men and women with a good deal of money and leisure time. At its extreme, the atmosphere is heavy with the jaded scent of affluent ennui. Marcus recalls that after he won the U.S. championship last year, he was interviewed by a tournament organizer seeking some background information. Among the questions put to him, very matter-of-factly, was, "What, if anything, do you do for a living, Mr. Marcus?"

## Ice cubes on the table

The popularity of the backgammon bars, where a lot of younger players hang out, has imposed some new strains on the game. "You've got to be careful about drinks," says one experienced New York player. "It's been known to happen that players pick up their drinks instead of the dice cup and roll their ice cubes on the table."

But backgammon players are in general a well-behaved lot, capable of great concentration even after twelve or fifteen hours of play. And there are indications that the newer players will uphold the traditions of the game. At Denton's last year, the besotted girl friend of a player, feeling neglected and angry, climbed to the top of the bar about 2:00 A.M. and removed all of her clothes, piece by piece. The backgammon players took absolutely no note; and when the girl finally stumbled and fell across a table, the players lifted her gently out of the way, regrouped their scattered pieces, and began a fresh game.

At the Las Vegas Hilton the barmen and waiters, who are by necessity pretty good judges of character, say they would welcome the backgammon crowd back anytime. Only a few weeks previously the hotel staff had attended to a major bridge tournament. By their account, there were episodes of near mayhem. Partners shouted obscenities at each other, and "one lady actually brained her husband with an ashtray." By contrast, the backgammon crowd was, in one waiter's words, "the nicest, most gentlemanly bunch we've ever had here." **END**