

# THE KING OF BACKGAMMON

Paul Magriel's in control and he likes it that way.

by Susan M. Silver

The crowd is four-deep around him, watching every roll, every play, every gesture. The lights at New York's East Side discotheque Hippopotamus are glaring and uneven, better suited to dancing than to backgammon. He appears serious

but unruffled, his face almost expressionless. He's used to the pressure and the attention; wherever he goes in the backgammon world, activity swirls around him. He's far behind in the match, and this could be the deciding game. He makes a





Magriel (left) plays against Kiumars Motakhasses at the Mount Parnis Casino outside Athens. Roger Low, Magriel's consultant, is seated to Magriel's left.

daring play. The crowd utters a nervous sigh. It's a slightly risky move in this position, but it's his only hope. The game does not go according to his computations. Within minutes, he has lost his chances for the World Backgammon Club tournament title and the thousand-dollar first prize—to a backgammon unknown.

But Paul Magriel, known as the "Human Computer" of backgammon, is undaunted. He, perhaps better than anyone else in the world, understands the whimsical nature of the game he has turned into a career. At 32, Magriel, a former mathematics professor, is a backgammon monomaniac. "I think I'm addicted to backgammon," he says. "I am addicted to games in general. Games are controlled violence. You take out your frustrations and hostilities over a backgammon set, where the rules are clearly defined—in contrast to life, where the rules are not so well defined. In games, you know what's right and wrong, legal and illegal; whereas in life, you don't."

Magriel's timing was just about perfect. He fell in love with a 5,000-year-old game in the late six-

ties, just as it was capturing the fancy of the international jet set. This year in Nassau, he won the World Championship of Backgammon, adding a coveted credit to a score of international tournament victories garnered since 1971. Last October, he won the single most important backgammon match ever held—a 63-point, 17-hour contest in Athens against European champion Joe Dwek. His book, *Backgammon*, the game's bible, sold out 10,000 copies in two months early in 1977 and established him as backgammon's leading theoretician. He teaches the wealthy and prominent at a hundred dollars a point and more, works on backgammon problems for 50 to 60 hours at a stretch, and is currently writing nine other backgammon books. For the past year, he's been writing a weekly backgammon column for the *New York Times*.

Paul Magriel may or may not be the world's best backgammon player; there is no official, objective ranking system for the game yet. But there is a word-of-mouth system among the world's leading players, many of whom hang out at

clubs like New York's Mayfair. Based on the fact that he's usually the top-seeded player at international tournaments, and based on his tournament record itself, Magriel seems to crop up on everyone's Top 10 list.

Magriel is known by a variety of names. At international tournaments, he's called "X-22." Around the Greenwich Village games houses, he's simply called "P.M." Among the regular games-players at the Olive Tree Cafe on MacDougal Street, "P.M." is a legend in his own time. It's a status thing to have known him "when"—when he used to hang out, in the late sixties, at the dingy Olive Tree and Singapore Sam's (now defunct), playing chess and backgammon.

"P.M." has come a long way from the Olive Tree to rubbing elbows with the Backgammon Beautiful People—Lucille Ball, Polly Bergen, Arthur Ashe, Hugh Hefner, Bill Bradley, Diana Ross, and Princess Grace—in his travels along the tournament circuit from Nassau to Biarritz to Monte Carlo. In recent years, he's found himself splashed across the pages of the *International Backgammon News*, *Time*, and the *New York Times*.

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**P**aul Magriel looks like an English sheepdog, except that he's always impeccably dressed in Gucci loafers and cashmere sweaters. His thick crop of sandy blond hair bobs up and down when he walks. He has a round, full-cheeked face and hazel eyes that twinkle mischievously behind steel-rimmed glasses. He giggles a lot. But when he talks about his true love, backgammon, his voice becomes forceful and he sits up majestically. King of backgammon.

His personality is paradoxical. Away from the backgammon table, he is a polished gentleman with prep-school manners and a fondness for Bach. He often calls himself an "absent-minded professor," referring to the seven years he spent teaching mathematics at the New Jersey Institute of Technology.

Yet there is a Paul Magriel who is clearly an obsessive gambler and gamester. He is obviously more interested in abstract problems and game strategy than in human relationships. His conversation seems calculated, as though he is "computing" his dialogue the way he predicts what's going to happen in a backgammon game. His humor is a hybrid of allusions to the classics and puns on backgammon jargon, with emphasis on the latter. At any time, he may leave you or stand you up, always with disarmingly sweet apologies, for a multi-thousand-dollar backgammon fix at the Mayfair. When he plays backgammon, he is apt to become manic. One old friend tells a story about his turning cartwheels through a posh gambling casino on Paradise Island in the Bahamas when he lost a tournament.

As with most intimate details of his life, he is unusually close-mouthed about finances. But he certainly throws hundred-dollar bills around as though backgammon had turned him into a wealthy man. He often carries a wad of hundreds, stuffed into a tennis band on his wrist or in the pocket of his ever-present brown portfolio. With childish delight, he relates a story

about carrying a lone suitcase full of hundreds to France for a "big game." The suitcase, he says with a chuckle, somehow flew open in Orly Airport, and he scrambled around picking up the bills while surprised passers-by simply watched. Once in a while, he will take out a bill and fondle it, remarking, "Looks like play money, doesn't it?"

In general, though, he lives not ostentatiously but well: occasional dinners at Elaine's or The Palm and luncheons at the El Morocco Club in New York; three or four annual trips to Europe, according to the international tournament schedule; many minor stateside excursions to backgammon events.

But Magriel is not a leisure-class dilettante who dabbles in backgammon for occasional amusement. Everything else in his life is subordinate to the game. His pleasures and his social life, as well as his work, revolve around backgammon, as if the game were controlling him, not vice versa. "I give the *impression* I prefer games to life, but I don't," he insists. The women who have known him intimately—and it seems that his women friends have been his only confidantes—say otherwise.

"Our whole life for the year we were together was backgammon," says Lyn Goldsmith, 25, a well-proportioned red-haired woman with a husky voice and flawless skin. When Goldsmith met Magriel about three years ago, she had recently dropped out of her first semester at Cornell and was taking backgammon lessons "for lack of anything else to do." She's now reputed to be the best woman backgammon player in the world, and she supports herself in style (she lives on Sutton Place) as a professional player. "He didn't teach me the game from the beginning, but he taught me almost everything I know," she says. "He turned me into a good player. We stayed up nights and nights, studying positions and making up quizzes—with time out for sex and dinner."

Paul Magriel was no stranger to games when he first encountered backgammon in the Village as a graduate student of probability theory and games at Princeton. He was always interested in games—ever since he can remember. "At 5 or 6 my mother taught me chess," he recalls. "I liked it, but I never really studied it. In first or second grade, I used to gamble with other kids after school—I ran a poker game."

Magriel's curriculum vitae sounds like a *New York Times* wedding announcement: first Dalton (a private school on 89th Street), then prep school at Phillips Exeter Academy, a B.A. in math from New York University, then Princeton. In 1968 at 21, Magriel left Princeton and started teaching graduate and undergraduate math courses, mainly because his interest in the New York backgammon scene was becoming all-consuming. Three and a half years ago, he gave up the mathematics professor role to become a backgammon pro.

In 1967 while he was still at Princeton, Magriel married Renee Cooper, with whom he had been living for two and a half years. Unlike many of his subsequent women, she was a literary scholar with no bent toward games. She received

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Courtesy of Telex, N.Y.

Playing blindfolded against George Plimpton at New York's "21" Club, Magriel won the match.

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an M.A. in comparative literature at 19 and taught literature on the college level for a few years while working on a Ph.D. in medieval literature at Columbia. For reasons that are unclear but seem to relate to his growing backgammon obsession, the marriage broke up after two and a half years. But Magriel and his ex-wife maintained an unconventional platonic working relationship while they wrote his book, *Backgammon*, together. For three years, he scribbled down notes, he says, and she re-wrote his words into polished prose.

Magriel's constant companion for the past two and a half years, Joan Ault, tells the story of Magriel's first stake: "Paul was still married to Renee and he was a professor. They didn't have much money. He and Renee saved for six months to get a stake together—skipped going to the movies, etcetera. Renee didn't go with him. She went to bed. She said she just couldn't bear to watch. He came home at 6 a.m. and stood at the foot of the bed. He put his hands in his pockets and started pulling out money. It was raining money! He and Renee were both very excited. The next night he won again. Renee said she knew by the end of the week that money had lost all meaning—that money would have no relation to the rest of their lives."

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**A**t the Figaro Cafe on Bleeker Street and MacDougal, Magriel nestles into his favorite corner table at the back. It is stuffy and crowded with non-Villager couples. He seems oblivious to the loud rock music blaring over the speaker as he begins to talk about how he was attracted to and fell in love with backgammon. His boyish face takes on an aura of seriousness and strength. For Magriel, like games-playing addicts everywhere, men on a board are more real and more exciting than life. "When I play something," he says, "I have an intense desire to be the *best*. It was frustrating for me not to be better than I was at chess. In the brief period I played tournament chess

[he was New York State Junior Chess Champion], I improved very rapidly, then decided to quit.

"I like chess," he continues, "but I never get tired of backgammon. Intellectually, backgammon rates along with chess and go [a Japanese board game]. People don't recognize that fact—the game is deceptive. It seems like when you learn the basic odds, that's all there is to it, but that's false. It's a profound game of position and strategy; the dice mask that fact. Strategy in backgammon is often deep and complex. The ideas are aesthetically pleasing and far from obvious."

Magriel gulps down the rest of his hot chocolate and orders another. He puts his feet up on a chair. "Psychologically," he says, "backgammon is extremely different from chess. It's an exercise in frustration—you can make the right moves and lose, or you can make the wrong moves and win. And chess didn't have the gambling that I like."

What makes backgammon so alluring to gamblers is that at any

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stage of the game, a player who thinks he has an edge can double the stakes, leaving his opponent with two options: to resign or to accept the double, perhaps redoubling later. The stakes can be doubled an unlimited number of times. Magriel, who says he's been involved in games for \$1,000 a point in New York, Las Vegas, and London, says he's seen "people win and lose hundreds of thousands in one chouette."

But for Magriel, backgammon's appeal goes deeper than either gambling or the hypnotic rhythm of the game (shake the dice, move the checkers) that so many players mention. Backgammon offers him the ultimate challenge of creating order out of chaos. "It has a combination of the logic which I like

and the intuitional reasoning I like—distinguishing the arbitrary from what is likely to happen; getting a coherent picture out of random gobbledygook," he says. He credits himself with turning the game into a science. "I wanted to develop a theory. The field was open; nobody had done work on conceptual groupings. I collected thousands of position cards, recording, categorizing, and reorganizing positions, their variations, and their subvariations, and playing key positions over and over. My job was to generalize: what was the concept behind this position?"

Magriel's discourse is interrupted by the arrival of Roger Low, his consultant in the Athens match last fall against London gambler Joe Dwek and Iranian gamester Kiumars Motakhasses. Low, with a near-photographic memory, was able to reconstruct whole games from the match. Tonight they are meeting to discuss some of the key positions.

For 45 minutes without looking up they talk over 20 diagrammed positions printed on long, Xeroxed sheets. Eating a Jamaican omelette but apparently oblivious to it, Magriel laughs and gesticulates. "I love this problem," he squeals, munching on a roll. "All the good players get this one wrong. And it's so obvious to me... winning at backgammon is a matter of control—imposing your design on what are seemingly random patterns." Paul Magriel looks up, eyes twinkling. He's pleased with himself. He's in control. ♁

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