

THE GOSPEL ACCORDING TO X-22

BY LAURENCE SHAMES



In his crusade for order in the realm of random dice, backgammon master Paul Magriel has exposed the complexity of a game that once seemed simple

A GOOD WAY to begin to understand Paul Magriel is to learn his nickname and how he got it:

His nickname is X-22, and he coined it himself some half dozen years ago. The occasion was an imaginary backgammon tournament in which Magriel was all sixty-four participants. In his mid-twenties at the time and already one of the most astute players ever to rattle a dice cup, Magriel was turning his attention to the special strategies involved in match play. Being nothing if not thorough, he decided that the best way to study a tournament was to *be* a tournament, so he drew up a bracket and proceeded to roll out both sides of every game of every match of every round, cataloging what worked and what fell flat. The tournament involved several hundred hours of solitary play, which for Magriel were as a moment in the never-ending search for backgammon truth. He tossed the dice an estimated 10,000 times. He advanced roughly 50,000 points and bore off a legion of checkers. And he pondered.

At length, the field was narrowed to two contestants. The "players," named for their positions in the bracket, were X-34 and X-22. In what could not help but be an excruciatingly close final, X-22 squeaked out the win. Partly in homage, partly for its suggestion of robotlike singlemindedness, Magriel took the victor's name for his moniker. To this day, he signs his score sheets X-22 at major tournaments around the world. In Athens, in Vegas, in Nassau, Aruba, Monte Carlo, X-22 has shown up on the winner's line more often than any other name. The prize money checks, however, are made out to Paul Magriel.

PUT SIMPLY, MAGRIEL is the star of world backgammon. Some observers think he is the finest player ever to hunch over a board; others think he isn't—in a game where both luck and ego figure significantly, consensus is not to be expected. There is agreement, however, on the assertion that Magriel is the game's most impassioned student, foremost theoretician, and most visible promoter. His career features statistics that eloquently support these contentions. He has confounded the odds by finishing in the money at over fifty tournaments. His first-prize purse at the 1978 world championship was \$70,000. He has people—including an Arab sheikh and a German financier—paying him eighty bucks an hour for lessons. What it all adds up to is an income commensurate with superstar status and a life-style straight out of a jet-set novel.

What makes it all happen is the unprecedented seriousness with which Magriel approaches backgammon. Other people *play* the game; Magriel dissects it. Other people slide their checkers across the surface of the board; Magriel's moves seem to

take place in some abstracted sphere, of which the physical points and disks are only a dim reflection. Other people asked to explain the logic of a given move will shrug or vaguely credit intuition; Magriel will explicate, will speak of categories, subcategories, recurring patterns.

His double passion—to know and to teach—has led Magriel to wage what is virtually a one-man campaign to win intellectual respectability for backgammon. He cringes at the popular image of the game as a lightweight pastime played in bars amid drinks and propositions. He wants that image scrapped, and he has impeccable credentials for showing why it should be. At nineteen, he was New York State Junior Chess Champion. He studied probability theory at the Courant Institute of Mathematical Sciences at NYU and did graduate work at Princeton, having been awarded a National Science Foundation grant. For several years, he taught ad-

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vanced math courses at the New Jersey Institute of Technology. In 1976, the year he turned thirty, he published a book called, simply, *Backgammon*, which is considered the clearest and most complete introduction to the game ever written. Since 1977, he has had a weekly column in *The New York Times*.

But for all that, it still isn't easy to convince people to take backgammon seriously. Part of the problem is that the game *seems* so simple. It consists, after all, of nothing more than two teams of fifteen checkers racing, in accordance with the dice, around a board made up of twenty-four points. The object of the contest is nothing more arcane than winning the race. Further, the dice lend an element of randomness to the game, and how earnestly can you approach a sport in which grievous blunders can be redeemed by a double six, in which brilliant tactics can be

sabotaged by snake eyes?

Very earnestly, if you're Paul Magriel. "There's tremendous content to the game," he says. "It's profound—and not in the artificial sense of just being complicated. It unfolds, layer after layer. You think you know a lot, and then you break through to another whole level. There's an aesthetic to the game, a flow. People think the game consists primarily of math—calculating odds and so forth. That's not true. It's essentially a game of patterns, a visual game, like chess. Certain patterns fit together harmoniously, make sense in a way that is nontrivial."

Okay, but even if those arrangements of circular checkers on triangular points on a rectangular board can be read as a map of the universal flux, what about the dice, the jarring presence of the arbitrary?

"The dice," Magriel contends, "don't change the game intellectually but only psychologically. There's still a best move for every roll in every position. But the dice make the game a *gamble*. They make the game perverse. It can be unbelievably vexing. The dice can mock you, tease you, lead you on. It requires a certain amount of masochism to subject yourself repeatedly to their brutality. But intellectually, the challenge is to react neutrally to the dice, to make the right move on a bad roll as well as on a good one."

Ultimately, then, it is the pursuit of this shining ideal, The Right Move, that gives backgammon substance, that makes its patterns matter. Were The Right Move always to be known, one small niche of the cosmos, at least, would be neat, tidy, free of dust and noise. Unfortunately, there is a virtually infinite number of possible positions in backgammon, and for every position, there are twenty-one possible rolls of the dice. That's just too many right moves for anybody to know.

Paul Magriel, however, is trying to learn them, one by one. To that end, he has had a backgammon board printed onto several thousand index cards. When an interesting situation comes up in one of his games, he takes out a card and pencils it in. Then he goes home and studies it for up to a hundred hours. He lays out the position again and again, moving every possible combination of men, tracing out the result of any given tactic. Locked in a sort of epistemological trance, he will return to the starting point a thousand times, reconsidering, mapping out, playing through to certainty. No matter that the position under study might not recur in 10,000 games. What matters is the search.

So passionate is Magriel's devotion to The Right Move and so fierce is his conviction that sound play will overcome the demon Chance, that in speaking of these matters, he will sometimes invoke the deity. "If God played backgammon," he says, "and if he were subject to the randomness

Laurence Shames, a New York writer, is currently at work on his fourth novel.

of the dice but could be counted on to make the best move on every roll, he'd win every time. At least in long matches."

THE FOREGOING MIGHT suggest that Paul Magriel's entire life is a clenched and somber questing after clarity and order. This is hardly the case. The patterns of his life leave ample room for a number of pronounced and even outrageous incongruities.

For one thing, he often goes on sleepless sprees during which the sequence of day and night apparently becomes irrelevant. He has been known, while working or partying, to ignore the passage of entire weekends. There have been times when he's sat down to play backgammon on Friday evening and hasn't surfaced till Monday morning.

Moreover, for all his insistence on the eventual triumph of skill over luck, Magriel has a cowboy's reckless enthusiasm for blind crap shoot gambling. He has no illusions about his shortcomings as a poker player—which are considerable and well-known—but he will gladly get in on a high-stakes sit-down. He'll jump at the chance to wager a hundred dollars on the flip of a coin. He recently cancelled a sizable debt by asking the debtor to stake the sum on that dumbest of all dumb-luck casino games, keno. Asked if he senses some small discrepancy between his stated philosophy and his behavior in the neighborhood of green felt, Magriel, without flinching, says, "Of course."

His attitude is typical of the truly fervent gamesman, the red-eyed seeker of order who channels all his yearnings into a sphere where order is, by definition, possible—and who is otherwise content to inhabit a merry chaos. Such inflamed games players, it would seem, are born rather than made, and Magriel early on showed signs of a true vocation. At an age when other little boys were running around in fireman hats, Magriel was already rolling dice, making rudimentary judgments as to which numbers appealed to him and which boded ill. In his teens, he plunged himself into chess, and it was here that his uncanny visual-spatial ability first became apparent. But the chess passion was ill-timed; it came on the brink of manhood, when Magriel felt compelled to take up something "serious." He dropped chess and picked up mathematics.

Not surprisingly, the branch of math he decided on was probability. "My own history exactly parallels the history of the subject," he says. "P theory got started back in the seventeenth century, when a few Frenchmen decided to come up with a scientific way of calculating odds. Probability entered the math world straight from gambling, and so did I."

The parallel soon diverges, however, for while P theory stayed mainly in the math world, Magriel reemerged. Back-

gammon lured him away from the computers and back to the dice.

When he was introduced to the game in the mid-Sixties, he did not immediately take to it. A year after his initial exposure, at age eighteen, he had to be retaught the rules. This time something clicked. It dawned on Magriel that backgammon perfectly suited his intellect, training, and temperament. Like chess, it was a game of enormously complex patterns and positions; yet, to a greater degree than any other game, it was built on a foundation of elegant arithmetical relations. Better still, it involved a seductive blend of skill—*more* skill, Magriel sensed, than anyone had ever realized—and the kind of luck that holds the threat of sudden calamity, the hope of sudden salvation. It was the perfect game for the intellectual gambler who is still, ineluctably, a gambler.

Magriel became hooked, but he did not exactly explode onto the international tux-

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edo circuit. His first serious games were played at Singapore Sam's, a now defunct chop suey joint on MacDougal Street in Greenwich Village. The usual stake at Sam's was ten cents a point, and the caliber of play, like the food, was on the downhill side of mediocre. Within a few months, Magriel could outmaneuver all the regulars. To refine his skills, he needed better competition. But the stronger players, for the most part, were tucked away in private clubs, and Magriel had neither the ready cash nor the connections to gain entrée. He might have languished forever in the Village had not destiny stalked MacDougal Street one night in the figure of an uptown type slumming over a bowl of won ton soup. He sat down across from Magriel and was impressed enough with the youth to invite him to The Mayfair Club, where, then as now, New York's fiercest backgammon was being played.

Circumspect in his choice of opponents

at the Mayfair, Magriel won almost from the start. He had to. He was living on a \$2,400 stipend at the time, and at \$3 a point, he simply couldn't afford to lose. Having amassed a small stake, he went on to beat players who, in terms of tenure at least, had every right to consider themselves experts.

As learning experience, the most valuable aspect of The Mayfair Club competition was the chouettes. A chouette is a form of backgammon in which more than two people play and strategy is discussed aloud. Thus, Magriel had the opportunity to exchange ideas with some of the leading players of the day—gamesmen of the stature of Oswald Jacoby, Ralph Chafetz, and Tobias Stone. Magriel, still thought of as a novice, was never bashful about expressing his advice; in fact, he tended to be rather insistent. The situation had certain similarities to that in which the twelve-year-old Jesus met the elders at the Temple and proceeded to elucidate for them the Talmud. Except that in Magriel's case the elders were not so thrilled to listen; they sent the prodigy out for sandwiches. "I guess you could say I really started my backgammon career as a gofer. It was frustrating, but it was the price you had to pay for watching the good players. There was a pecking order, and I violated it."

But pecking orders are subject to rearrangement, and in the course of a few days in 1971, on the Caribbean island of St. Maarten, Magriel catapulted himself straight to the top roost by winning the second major tournament he'd ever entered. He was twenty-four at the time. He'd lived fewer years than many of the top players had played. In the finals, he defeated no less august a personage than Prince Alexis Obolensky, the father of the modern backgammon renaissance.

Having outscored the prince, Magriel could not very well be dispatched to the deli anymore. Nor did the older players any longer find it profitable to dismiss his suggestions in chouettes. "I didn't have to yell after that," Magriel says. "I didn't even have to talk. I could just *point*, and people would make the moves. Sometimes I'd make peculiar-looking plays, just for the hell of it."

PECULIAR-LOOKING PLAYS, of course, are relative to one's expectations. There is no such thing as an inevitable arrangement of checkers in backgammon, any more than there is such a thing as an inevitable musical scale. It's purely a matter of convention. But conventions come to *seem* inevitable, and it takes a species of genius to see beyond them. Einstein's achievement was to see past the strictures of classical physics; Freud's was to lift the veil on accepted notions of emotional cause and effect; Magriel's has been to discern that certain time-honored precepts for scooting men around a backgam-

mon board, far from being self-evident, were downright fallacious. To a not inconsiderable degree, he has reinvented the game.

"When Paul started to play," says Steve Zolotow, a former publishing executive turned full-time gambler, "his moves looked bizarre. You have to play backgammon to realize just how profoundly distressing the sight of a checker in an unexpected place can be. His moves *couldn't* be right. But they were—most of the time, at least. So, gradually, the other good players started doing it his way. Now the old moves look weird."

Magriel's importance as an innovator, however, extends far beyond his choice of individual moves and encompasses his whole method of inquiry into the game. For example, before Magriel, nobody bothered to chart backgammon matches. The game was not considered substantial enough to warrant it. Magriel found this absurd.

"Look at chess," he says. "A grand master of today would clobber a grand master of fifty years ago, even though the old grand masters were geniuses. But the game has evolved. And why? Because matches have been recorded, analyzed, broken down move by move, away from the pressure of the table. Theory has grown more sophisticated, and the same can happen with backgammon."

Perhaps Magriel's most radical notion, though, is his conviction that backgammon is worthy of a literature. There are thousands of books on chess and bridge, while backgammon boasts less than a hundred, most of which stay as solidly on the surface of their subject as they do on the tops of coffee tables. "It's amazing," says Magriel. "The game's been around for thousands of years, and nothing's been done. It's virgin territory."

His own program for filling the gap consists of a projected series of nine books—in addition to his 400-page tome, *Backgammon*, already published. The volumes of the nonalogy will cover such topics as the doubling cube, the backgame, and prime versus prime. Asked if each of these sub-subjects is meaty enough to warrant separate covers, Magriel's eyes widen. You might as well have asked a theologian if the story of Job is juicy enough to be called a book. "Absolutely," he says. "The trick will be in deciding what to leave out. And these books won't be esoteric, for-the-expert-only type things. They'll contain mostly basic stuff—there's that much to know."

KNOWLEDGE, HOWEVER, IS inadequate armor for the backgammon wars. Its plates leave the heart, loins, and jugular exposed. Bad dice can make it come unhinged. Thus, Paul Magriel does not win every tournament he enters. Statistically speaking, though he wins far more

than anyone else, he wins hardly any.

The open division of the World Amateur Backgammon Championships, held at The Dunes, in Las Vegas, this past December, was one of the tournaments Magriel didn't win. He axed three opponents that week-end before being ousted himself. But along the way, he made a powerful implicit pitch for the unlikely notion of backgammon as a spectator sport. Magriel's presence over the board is riveting, even though, by usual definitions of action, he's doing very close to nothing. Energy pulses out of him, transfixing the dozens of kibitzers who stand on chairs, tables, and each other to get a glimpse of X-22 at work. He is a mass of small gestures, which, like the blinking lights on a computer console, are evidence of the calculations going on inside. After making his moves, he looks at his opponent with an expression that is neither a smile nor a smirk but a wilting and unconfrontable

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mask of absolute neutrality. He offers the doubling cube with a portentousness that can cause an opponent to recoil, as if it were a blunderbuss being pointed at him rather than a small square of plastic. Magriel's opponents generally end a match looking heartbreakingly tired, as if they had just emerged from a relentless and somewhat sadistic interrogation. Which, in a manner of speaking, they have—Magriel has been asking them the silent question again and again, on every roll of the dice, punishing them with the monotony of the query: All right, my friend, what do you know about *this* position?

But style, after all, is distinct from victory, and for all his panache, Magriel went down swinging in Vegas. When he did, however, a strange thing happened—he remained, to a large extent, the focus of interest at the tournament. Of the more than 1,500 players who competed in the various divisions of the tournament,

Magriel was the only one almost everybody recognized, the one pointed out in awed whispers. So great is his hold on the imagination of the backgammon coterie that in the later stages of the weekend, when semifinalists were playing off for thousands of dollars and Magriel was killing time in thirty-buck chouettes, it was still Magriel's table that drew the biggest crowds.

Magriel had the further distinction of being the star of the amateur finals without having played in the amateur division. The amateurs—the richest part of the whole shebang, offering a first prize of \$149,600—were open only to those players who had never won more than a thousand dollars at a given tournament. With a small fortune on the line and the frayed nerves of nonprofessionals to be considered, it was decided to lock the finalists away from the spectators and to air the match in the Crown Jewel Room over closed-circuit TV. The match featured color commentary by Paul Magriel, who that afternoon showed himself to be, besides backgammon's finest theorist, teacher, and ambassador, its most adrenaline-producing sportscaster.

He made the amateur finals sound like a Stanley Cup hockey game. If you closed your eyes, you could almost catch a whiff of the arena, the cadences were that stirring. ("He needs a two here, needs a two. *He got it! He got the two!*") The visual element of the broadcast—dice bouncing, fingers tapping, checkers sliding—was potentially stupefying, but Magriel's voice kept the viewers on the edges of their red plush chairs. He invested the contest with a nearly hysterical and thoroughly contagious commitment worthy of Phil Rizzuto. He was so good that it came as a surprise at the end of the broadcast not to be hit with a commercial for shaving cream or Japanese cars.

SOME MOMENTS AFTER the match was over, Magriel left his monitor and appeared in the Crown Jewel Room. He was considerably more agitated than he'd seemed at the conclusion of any of his own matches. His hair was awry, his eyes darting, his hands fidgety. An acquaintance approached him and said, "Jeez, Paul, you really made it sound exciting."

"Sound exciting?" said Magriel, his voice not yet quite converted to its conversational mode. "It was exciting. Amazing things were happening up there!"

He pointed over his shoulder to the TV screen, and everyone's eyes followed the gesture. The cameras were still on, and the abandoned backgammon board was pictured. The checkers were frozen in their final positions, the dice spilled at random. It was not, in itself, a sight to quicken the pulse. It's a question of what you read into the possibilities, and Paul Magriel reads in more than anyone. **G**