

The pint-size principality of Monaco has always been a safe haven for money and those who have it.

## SLAVES OF MONTE CARLO

BY RUDY MAXA

*Once every year, the world's leading backgammon players converge on the Côte d'Azur to engage in an orgy of chip placing, dice shaking, and high-stakes wagering and intrigue.*

A couple of days before the opening of the annual Backgammon World Championship in Monte Carlo, contestants begin arriving from all compass points. There's a tropical gastroenterologist from Hong Kong, a German who runs a wine importing business in Bangkok, an accountant from Melbourne, a Tennessee land developer, a French marquis, and an Iranian-born rug merchant from Hamburg.  
Women clad in tiny skirts and ripped blouses, cowboy



**Sizzling Stakes:** Claudia Carpendale, of Cologne, one of the contestants, fights for the title of world champion in the playing halls of Loews Monte Carlo hotel.

Melanie Wells, of Washington, D.C., a contestant in the tournament.



**In the Chips:** Above, devoted players Baroness von Meeks and her companion, the Marquis d'Arcangues.

**Below:** Jason Lester and Leslie Bell, two members of the American contingent.

**Bottom:** Gino Scalamandrè and Katie Wright describe their occupations as "club sports" players.



boots and silk scarves fuss over piles of Louis Vuitton luggage in the lobby of the Loews Monte Carlo hotel. Men in bathing suits that are little more than pouches gather around the pool on the roof carrying what look like attaché cases. In fact, they are expensive leather backgammon boards, the battleground on which thousands of dollars will be won and lost.

This United Nations of high rollers, titled rogues, royal pretenders, self-made millionaires, and other professional sharpies congregates in the hazy warmth of the Côte d'Azur for one week every July, where they trade gibes and insults in English, French, German, Arabic, Italian, and Spanish. The official tournament games are held in the afternoon in the hotel's ballrooms. But side games for money are played everywhere—by the pool, by the sea, and in private suites.

On the first official day of tournament competition, the game playing gets seri-

ous. In each of the three divisions—beginner, intermediate, and championship—a player must do combat with two opponents; a defeat eliminates a player from the tournament's main flight and, of course, the major prize money.

The weeding-out process is particularly brutal in the championship division, because to *not* be one of the sixty-four remaining players in the main flight means a player won't be auctioned off during the week's social highlight, the black-tie dinner and floor show held in the Monte Carlo Sporting Club's Salle des Etoiles.

The best part of that evening—open to all players—comes last, when the sixty-four surviving players in the championship division are "sold" to the highest

bidder at prices that range between \$2,000 and \$7,500. The money raised after dinner at the auction creates a separate prize pool that is divided at tournament's end by those lucky enough to have bought the four finalists. There's a certain amount of status in being one of the sixty-four players put up for auction. People come to know your name. Small clusters of observers gather to watch you play. In short, you're a *contender*.

Since 1976—when a crafty, Cairo-born Brit, Joe Dwek, won the first championship match sponsored by Monaco's Société des Bains de Mer—this grand prix of backgammon tournaments has drawn hundreds of players, hopeful that a mixture of skill, luck, and bravado would equal glory and money.

The nationalities of the crowd depend on economic and political realities. Five years ago, for example, when the dollar fetched almost twice the number of French francs it does today, Americans were plentiful. So were Iranians in the glory days of the shah. Today, there are fewer Americans, and stories circulate about the executions of some of the Iranian players from the old days who didn't make a timely departure from Teheran.

Now the tournament that once functioned mainly as a reason for the game-playing jet set to socialize has attracted a new element of determined backgammon players. Call them "math clubbers," single-minded number crunchers who study the results of computer programs that simulate millions of possible dice rolls and moves.

The math clubbers care little that Ram-poldi, a restaurant in the heart of Monte Carlo, serves a great lobster ravioli or that the opulent Louis XV in the Hôtel de Paris just received its third Michelin star. To them, Monte Carlo's backgammon tournament is a money proposition offering several ways to profit. The most straightforward way is by winning the championship division of the week-long tournament and pocketing \$66,000. Or the highest bidder can buy a player at the black-tie auction—and realize tens of thousands of dollars on a several-thousand-dollar investment. A London-based bookie takes bets all day in the playing rooms, changing the odds by the minute as contenders' fortunes ascend or descend. Then there's the unofficial fast money—

# Society

playing side games for \$100 a point around the pool.

Some math clubbers do it all: play in the tournament, buy a player or two with other investors in the auction, hedge their bets with the bookie, and, in their spare time, hope to find a pigeon for poolside profit.

THE TINY PRINCIPALITY OF MONACO has no income, property, or estate taxes, which helps account for its popularity as a home away from home for moneyed residents as diverse as tennis star Björn Borg and the world's largest private arms merchant, Sam Cummings.

Despite the tabloid headlines and grainy, topless photos that haunt Princess Stephanie these days, Monte Carlo is not just a wild and crazy place. Sure, the young women in small dresses stalk the discos, such as Jimmy'z and Parady'z, where a beer costs \$35 if you're unlucky enough to be calculating expenses in dollars. And the number of Rolls-Royces and Ferraris relegates Jaguars and Mercedeses to the status of everyday cars.

But Monaco is primarily a safe haven for money and the people who have it. At the borders of the principality, discreet cameras record the license plates of cars entering and leaving; locked as Monaco is against the sea by craggy, coastal hills, there are only a handful of roads to and from France.

In this square-mile outpost of serenity—a mini-Switzerland with the warm Mediterranean to soften its climate—it seems that every available inch of land is either developed or carefully manicured with formal plantings. Though Monaco's exterior may appear seamlessly proper, guests are allowed occasional bursts of outrageous behavior. During a backgammon tournament several years ago, three

Mexican millionaires cut a swath through local restaurants. During dinner at one bistro, where tradition demands hurling empty wineglasses into the fireplace, the trio carried the practice a bit further.

Not just the crystal but also the crockery was pitched into the fire as the indulgent owner added francs to the tab. When their table was at last bare, the revelers dismantled their chairs. And when the roaring fire had consumed the furniture, they began feeding the flames with all they had left: fistfuls of hundred-dollar bills. The next morning, everyone agreed it had been one hell of a night, even by Monte Carlo standards.

This summer, things are more quiet on the waterfront, though a ripple of excitement did pass through the Loews backgammon rooms with the appearance of a player who was banned from Monaco years ago for brandishing a gun during a tense moment of tournament play. He is unarmed this time, however, and even the most dramatic players make do with the usual psychological tactics to ruffle opponents.

They curse in several languages at bad rolls of dice or stalk off to the bathroom to pout for fifteen minutes in the middle of a match turned sour. Or they throw temper tantrums about spectators standing too close or talking too loudly.

Every advantage is pressed. A shapely young woman from Buenos Aires wearing a low-cut, strapless dress sits across from her male opponent, acres of breasts shifting suggestively with every throw of her dice. Another contender plays wordlessly, his body rocking to the rhythm of the rock music of his Walkman. Paul Magriel, the American author of a best-seller bible on backgammon, plays under the name X-22 and shakes his dice cups with the gusto of a bartender mixing drinks, his tongue darting in and out like a snake as he plays. With his goofy grin, he's an over-

weight Jerry Lewis, a wacky professor entertaining his fans as he plays with seeming disregard for the money at stake. His nonchalance is made all the more vivid by the intensity of his colleagues, who each paid \$900 to play in the championship division.

Unlike other games, such as bridge and chess, there is no universally recognized system of awarding points to backgammon players or tracking champions around the world, despite efforts to devise one. Tournaments in Gstaad, Venice, Bangkok, and hundreds of other tony places are independent operations. The Monte Carlo tournament simply proclaims itself the world championship, though it is the largest and richest contest open to the public. Anyone with the entry fee of as little as \$150 (for the beginners division) and without a reputation for cheating is welcome to enter the beginner, intermediate, or championship division of play.

Such lack of organization suits the game. Unlike chess, backgammon is made infuriating by the random roll of the dice. A veteran player can be defeated by an amateur, though in the long run the veteran will triumph. Five Americans, three Italians, two Frenchmen, one Englishman, one German, one Swiss, and one Mexican have all claimed the top prize. But in the fifteen years of play in Monte Carlo, no one has ever won twice.

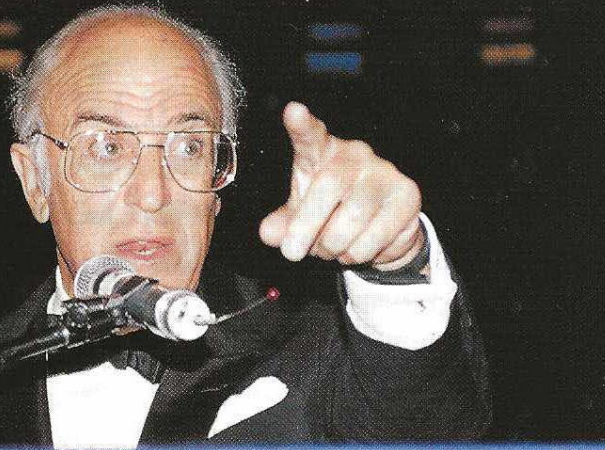
It's time for the event everyone has been waiting for: the auction. Seated at the center banquet table of the Sporting Club's Salle des Etoiles, Princess Vera Rachevsky of Park Avenue ("my husband was Russian") surveys the eight-hundred guests gathered to watch as the sixty-four surviving players in the main flight are sold. "This used to be a very elegant affair," she confides with slight disapproval, as she peruses the tables of lesser status—the ones up and away from the stage where the untitled languish. "Now it's so huge!"

Several friends and dinner companions share the front and center table with Princess Rachevsky. There's the Baroness Marianne Brandstetter, who as the former girlfriend of Resorts International chairman Jim Crosby has had quite a lot of experience with high-stakes gaming deals. When Crosby died in 1985, Merv Griffin had to negotiate with Brandstetter in order



**The social highlight of the week-long tournament is a black-tie dinner during which the competing players are auctioned off like so many racehorses.**

**Auctioneer Lewis Deyong, of London and New York, recognizes bids at the black-tie dinner, where the competitors are auctioned off.**



**Casino Royale: Princess Vera Rachevsky, left, plays in a consolation match after having been knocked out of the tournament.**



**As the former girlfriend of Resorts International chairman Jim Crosby, Baroness Marianne Brandstetter, right, has a lot of experience in high-stakes gambling.**



to acquire controlling interest of Resort's Atlantic City and Nassau casinos (Brandstetter owned 10,000 shares in the company). Today, while Griffin struggles to stay solvent in the gaming business, Brandstetter divides her time between Manhattan and her apartment in Monte Carlo, where the abundantly endowed baroness is a topless fixture on Monte Carlo's only private beach. You can also spot her driving around the principality in her white convertible Rolls-Royce Corniche.

Then there's Brandstetter's best friend, the Baroness Lise von Meeke, a voluptuous, fortysomething-year-old blond Frenchwoman whose former husband is Belgian royalty and whose present companion is the elegant Marquis Guy d'Arcangues, head of a centuries-old Spanish-French family. I remember first seeing the two on a dance floor years ago in Monte Carlo and remarking to a British acquaintance that the marquis seemed quite a bit older than the baroness. "Yes, and he doesn't seem to mind at all," my friend replied.

Next to d'Arcangues, the American contingent, as Rachevsky has noted,

seems a populist group indeed. There's Harvey Huie, head of Harvey Hotels from Dallas; Stuart Duncan, a Newark, Ohio, jeweler; Manhattan stockbroker Joel Silverman; and Gino Scalamandr , whose family founded the Scalamandr  silk company (though he's not in the family business), and his wife, Katie.

An inveterate game player, Scalamandr  once lost so much money at the tables in Las Vegas when he was a young man that he simply couldn't pay up. The casino owner, a friend of the family, extracted a promise from Scalamandr  that to satisfy the debt, he would get himself to a monastery to atone for and perhaps shed his gambling ways. Scalamandr  went to the monastery and promptly set about teaching the monks how to play bridge and backgammon. It's said he left the religious retreat with serious winnings.

Today, Scalamandr  frequents the world's warm climes with his wife, also a varsity backgammon player. I once asked, for journalistic purposes, how I could describe what they did for a living. "We play club sports," said Katie Scalamandr .

Now it's time for the actual auction. The show girls have left the stage, the last

plate of *coquilles de chocolat fondant* has been cleared from the banquet table. From a stage in the enormous banquet room where the ceiling opens to reveal the Mediterranean night sky, the auctioneer, the tournament's honorary chairman, Lewis Deyong, of New York and London, accepts bids in several languages. (Deyong, a veteran of backgammon wars around the world, earlier told of a recent private game in Texas he oversaw, where the entry fee was \$25,000, and the winner pocketed \$150,000 after a weekend of congenial play on a millionaire's ranch.) Paul Margri  sells for \$4,000, while another American with shoulder-length blond hair, Billy Horan, garners the highest bid of \$7,500.

During the bidding there are hurried conferences, as individuals who have formed investment consortiums weigh how high to bid. Deyong hypes the talent, praising past winners, noting authors of backgammon books, weaving visions of an easy win for a modest investment.

In fact, he's right about the generous payoff. By week's end, the winner turns out to be a Canadian computer programmer, Al Heinrich, who fetched one of the lower bids on auction night, \$2,500. Since his backer won \$43,000 from the auction pool, the purchase of Heinrich represents a handsome seventeen-to-one return on the investment.

In a poetic sense, Monte Carlo and the money game of backgammon go together well. The city has always attracted men and women looking for the main chance, angling for the fast franc, ever since her splendid casino beckoned European gamblers in the era when the French Riviera was a winter resort. Though the principality no longer derives a majority of its income from the casino, popular songs and movies have forever linked Monte Carlo with gambling.

So every summer the contessas and computer kids come to make a grab at the brass ring, perhaps hoping they'll be able to live out the scenario suggested by a tanned, middle-aged Frenchwoman whom I once overheard talking to an old acquaintance on the Monte Carlo beach.

"Darling, you look so pale," she remarked with obvious concern. "You're not *working* for a living, are you?" ★