

Backgammon: The Machines

by Steve Herman

You encounter all kinds of people playing backgammon. Recently a new breed of player has emerged. He isn't much on conversation, his play won't worsen after a few drinks, and he isn't even very attractive.

He is the biggest revolution in backgammon since the invention of the doubling cube and as you may have guessed, is a computer.

Like his human counterparts, the computer player comes in a variety of shapes, sizes and skill. At the recent International Consumer Electronics Show in Las Vegas we had a chance to review most of the varieties of the lifeless backgammon players that have invaded gammondome.



OMAR

Tryom Corporation's series of OMAR computerized backgammon games are the best known and best selling. The computer itself looks like nothing more than a hand held calculator. The OMAR I and OMAR IV are exactly the same

except OMAR I comes with a small magnetic backgammon board. The OMAR I/IV utilizes LED's (light emitting diodes) which display such phrases as "play 45" on the calculator size screen. The OMAR II (corduroy small backgammon board) and the OMAR V (without board) utilize LCD's (liquid crystal displays). These displays make electronic dice appear on the screen with larger numbers.

The first few games with OMAR will likely be frustrating. Programming your moves into the keyboard is a bit of a skill. You can't cheat or make mistakes with OMAR flashing "ILLE" on the screen informing you that your move is illegal. After a while you get the hang of it and playing backgammon with a computer becomes a thrill.

At first, you may think that OMAR has a cheat factor programmed into it since it seems to come up with a lot of super rolls that tend to ruin your strategies. But, basically the OMAR computers are no nonsense, conservative backgammon players. They are not afraid to offer you a double when they have an advantageous position. Here is one secret to beating OMAR — if you get to a position where you have a mathematical advantage, OMAR will refuse the double.

But just how good of a player is this pocketful of diodes and resistors? Tim Shane, the president of Tryom, is pretty confident of OMAR. He says OMAR is "a very good backgammon player and is considered to be better than the average (human) backgammon player."

Basically, OMAR is fun. The design has few drawbacks. It only hesitates when it rolls doubles. It normally executes a move

in 15 seconds or less. The OMAR line retails from \$50. to \$80.



FIDELITY CHALLENGER

The FIDELITY CHALLENGER is in the same price range, size, and skill as OMAR. It differs in that it lets you roll with real

dice. No one can bitch that it "cheats" by throwing its own good rolls. This important feature makes FIDELITY CHALLENGER the only machine that retains the flair of real backgammon. The FIDELITY CHALLENGER was designed by a long-time backgammon player and engineer from Chicago, Ron Nelson. FIDELITY CHALLENGER is the ultimate in electronic backgammon genius. Representative Deborah Cox claims FIDELITY CHALLENGER has improved her play "immensely" in just a short time.

FIDELITY CHALLENGER retails from \$85. to \$100. and comes with a built-in board in a simulated wood grained housing. The current FIDELITY CHALLENGER is selling so well that new advanced models are already being planned.



ARISTOTLE

This is the Rolls Royce of the backgammon circuit boards. It's the one Paul Magriel is endorsing. There's only a very

limited number of them being made and at a retail price of \$2500., they will not likely see mass production.

ARISTOTLE (Alias Gammanoid, Merit & Scottie) is a genius compared to its pocket sized counterparts. Kim Brand, the entrepreneur behind ARISTOTLE, told us at the CES show that it has seven times the number of bytes (memory capacity) as the

OMAR or FIDELITY models.

ARISTOTLE is mounted in a wooden oak frame. You play by touching the edge of the electronic "pieces" which glow beneath the clear glass top. You don't have to program the move into the computer after every roll thanks to "sensor touch." You can also get an instant pip count for both sides by touching a button.

The world's best backgammon players are taking ARISTOTLE seriously. This modern jumble of electronic parts made a respectable showing in Monte Carlo recently defeating the very respectable Luigi Villa by a score of 7 to 1. Ouch!

Like all backgammon players, ARISTOTLE does lose. Brand admits that moves the computer makes "are at most arguable." Brand also allays our fears by telling us ARISTOTLE is not the greatest backgammon player the world has ever seen. "It won't take away the world championship next year," he says. It won't likely get the chance. Some major tournament directors faced with a player of silicon chips, transistors, and wiring have refused to let ARISTOTLE play in recent months. Brand foresees a line of coin operated ARISTOTLES in bars and discos around the world. But some of the models don't hold up because of loose innerds. Surely, they'll have difficulty taking the punishment that a drinking crowd will give them.

All in all, ARISTOTLE is the top of the line. Brand says players like Magriel, Dwek, and DeYoung are using them to work out strategy problem, doubling decisions, and the like.



COMMODORE PET

Home and professional computers are taking the world by storm for fun and work. A number of these systems can play backgammon. Commodore Business Machines has a backgammon cassette for its system. The COMMODORE PET game is

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New Great Lakes Backgammon Board Association

December 1, 1979 organizers of backgammon in the Great Lakes area formed an association which could be the beginning of some great benefits to all "backgammoners". Look forward to greatest return of entry fees, non-conflicting tournaments, universal master points and rules of play, complete information, and a clear establishment of the real heroes of backgammon through a league of the best players around. This will focus attention on the game in a way equal to other recreation, so that backgammon can emerge to a position limited only by our imagination!

☆☆



Front: GARY JAY (Rochester, NY), MICHAEL KLOIAN (Plymouth, MI)
Back: ERNIE GEISEL (Hamilton, ONT), JERRY NATHAN (Buffalo, NY), RENEE ROSENBLUM (Rochester, NY), BOB CIMINO (Rochester, NY), HELENE NEER (Rochester, NY), SCOTTIE FLORA (Plymouth, MI), TOM WROBLESWSKI (Plymouth, MI).

(Con't)

BACKGAMMON/THE MACHINES

easy to play. You make moves by punching them in the keyboard. Your board is on a video screen directly above the keyboard. One COMMODORE PET salesman told us "I have a nine year old son who plays at home and he doesn't know BASIC worth a damn."

COMMODORE PET backgammon does have one drawback, it just freaks out if you put more than eight men on a point. But it admits this in the introduction that is flashed on the screen. It also informs you this shouldn't happen anyway since such a stacking of men is very poor strategy.

No one is going to buy a COMMODORE PET (or an APPLE computer) just to play backgammon. The price is nearly a \$1000 just for the hardware. But if you already have one, why not play backgammon too?



MATTEL

This company is big on games you hook up to your TV. Amidst the choices of space battle, horse racing, and poker is backgammon. The backgammon hook-up allows two people to play each other, or man to

face machine at two levels of play. Chuck Papazian says the MATTEL game has the skill of an advanced beginner to an intermediate player.

Alas, the MATTEL game lacks a doubling cube. The MATTEL game has a pip count

display but what sense is it without a cube? Papazian says he hopes MATTEL will put a doubling cube in future models.

The hardware for the MATTEL Intellivision will cost you over \$200. with the individual cartridges for each game (including backgammon) costing around \$20. each.



ATARI

ATARI's back gam - mon game has an advantage over the MATTEL game in that it has a doubling cube.

You can choose to play with or without the cube. You make your move by adjusting the circular knob on a paddle you hold in your hand. Unlike the MATTEL game which has an easy to read multi-colored board, the resolution on the ATARI screen is not very good.

The ATARI hardware system sells for under \$200. but the backgammon cartridge itself goes for \$40. If you play backgammon or acey-deucey on the ATARI system always make sure you're white. White always moves first on the ATARI board.

There you have it — a review of a number of the backgammon computers on the market. So the next time you roll the dice, you will know that man is not alone — at least in the world of backgammon.

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SHOW GUIDE

ALADDIN 736-0240

Cocktail Show 8 p.m. & Midnight
02/26-03/10 Gladys Knight and the Pips

CAESARS PALACE 731-3333

Cocktail Show 9 p.m. & 12:30 a.m.
02/21-02/27 Paul Anka
02/28-03/05 Willie Nelson

DESERT INN 733-4444

Dinner Show 8 p.m. & Late Show Midnight
02/19-03/03 Debbie Reynolds, Doc Severinsen
03-04-03/17 Dionne Warwick, Foster Brooks

DUNES 737-4110

Dinner Show 8 p.m. & Late Show Midnight
Thru Dec. Casino de Paris '80

FLAMINGO HILTON 733-3111

Dinner Show 8 p.m. & Late Show Midnight
Indefinite Razzle Dazzle

FRONTIER 734-0240

Dinner Show 8 p.m. & Late Show Midnight
02/07-03/05 Wayne Newton, Dave Barry
03/06-03/19 Roy Clark

HACIENDA 739-8911

Dinner Show 8 p.m. & Late Show Midnight
Indefinite Ice Fantasy

LANDMARK 733-1110

Show: Tues., Wed., Thurs., 12 Midnight;
Fri. 9 p.m. & 12 Midnight; Sunday 11 p.m.
Indefinite Redd Foxx

LAS VEGAS HILTON 732-7777

Dinner Show 8 p.m. & Late Show Midnight
02/19-03/03 Tony Orlando
03/04-03/24 The Osmonds

MARINA 739-1500

Cocktail Show: Fri. & Sat. 8 p.m., 10 p.m.
& Midnight; Sun.-Thurs. 9 p.m. & Midnight
Indefinite Bare Touch of Vegas

MAXIM 731-4300

Cocktail Show: 8 p.m., 10 p.m., Midnight
(Off Mondays)
Indefinite Olde Tyme Burlesque

MGM GRAND 739-4111

Dinner Show 8 p.m. & Late Show Midnight
02/21-02/27 Captain & Tennille
02/28-03/05 Engelbert Humperdinck
ZIEGFELD ROOM:
Indefinite Hallelujah Hollywood

RIVIERA 735-5110

Dinner Show 8 p.m. & Late Show Midnight
02/07-02/20 Anne Murray, Rodney Dangerfield
02/21-03/05 Steve & Eydie, Corbett Monica

SAHARA 735-4242

Dinner Show 8 p.m. & Late Show Midnight
02/22-02/23 Johnny Carson, Sahara Girls
02/24-03/05 Dinner—Tennessee Ernie Ford
Midnight—Buddy Hackett
Helen Reddy
03/06-03/12 Buddy Hackett, Joey Heatherton
03/13-03/19

SANDS 733-5326

02/20-03/04 Alan King, Susan Anton
03/05-03/11 Shecky Greene, Bernadette Peters
03/12-03/29 Tony Bennett, David Brenner

SILVER SLIPPER 734-1212

Show: 8:30 p.m., 10 p.m. & Midnight
Indefinite Boy-les-que '79 starring Kenny Kerr

SILVERBIRD 735-4111

Show: 9 p.m. & Midnight
Indefinite "IPI-TOMBI"

STARDUST 732-6111

Show: Sun.-Fri. 7 p.m. & 11 p.m.;
Sat. only 6 p.m., 9:15 p.m., 12:15 a.m.
(Food served after first show)
Thru Dec. 13th Edition, Lido de Paris
starring Siegfried & Roy

TROPICANA 739-2411

Dinner Show 8 p.m., Late Show 11:45 p.m.
Extra Show Sat. only 2:15 a.m.
Thru Dec. Folies Bergere '80