

PROFILES

THE CHAOS OF THE DICE

A backgammon hustler's quest to gain an edge.

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Falafel can make ten thousand dollars in half an hour, but he lives out of a suitcase. Photograph by Michal Chelbin / Institute



In order to meet Falafel, the highest ranked backgammon player in the world, I took a Greyhound bus to Atlantic City, and then hopped a jitney to the Borgata Hotel. Falafel's real name is Matvey Natanzon, but no one calls him that, not even his mother, who calls him Mike, the name that he adopted when they emigrated from Israel to Buffalo—one leg in a long journey that began in Soviet Russia. Now even Falafel calls himself Falafel.

Falafel was in Atlantic City to support a friend he calls The Bone, a professional poker player who was registered in a tournament at the Borgata. The Bone, who is from Ukraine by way of Brooklyn, used to play backgammon, but he switched to poker because there is more money in it. Falafel is either a purist, or unable to master poker, or too lazy to really try, or all of the above. He is committed to backgammon, which is his main source of income—to the extent that he can find wealthy people who want to lose to him in cash-only private games. There are more of these than one might expect, but not a lot. Finding them and hanging on to them is a skill.

The jitney that travels between the Atlantic City hotels is run-down and slow, a horrible way to travel. Falafel would never take it. He can make ten thousand dollars in half an hour playing backgammon; he can make many times that in an evening—and he can lose it all just as easily. The money comes and goes. Currently, he has no home. He has no driver's license. Until just a few months ago, he had no cell phone, no bank account, and no credit card. Pretty much everything that he owns can fit into a large black suitcase. Still, he allows himself certain luxuries, and one of them is to hire a car rather than sit in a jitney.

Falafel had promised that he would be in the Borgata's poker ballroom, and when I arrived, at four-thirty on a gray January afternoon, the ballroom was half empty. To the non-gambler, the interior of an Atlantic City casino is in no way a place of obvious joy. For Falafel, who wanted to dabble in a few quick hands while he waited for *The Bone*, the atmosphere was energizing. He is a big man, both in the tall way and in the overweight way, and he was dressed to relax: a soccer jersey with the logo of a Turkish cell-phone company on the front, and on the back the number seven and "FALAFEL." Propped up on his head was a yellow knitted cap, giving him the appearance of an oversized garden gnome. Nylon shorts extended below his knees. Fiddling with a dumpy black cell phone, he looked up, smiling, and asked, "How did you recognize me?"

Falafel is typically unshaven, but the stubble is not forbidding, and his face easily fills with warmth. In 2005, an Israeli filmmaker made a documentary about him, called "Falafel's Game." In a scene filmed late one night in his hotel, Falafel says, "I'm like a kid inside. I feel like a kid—in my principles, the way I think about things." He is forty-four. He has known hardship: he once lived on a park bench. Pickpockets have stolen from him. Lowlifes have taken advantage of him. He has learned to be streetwise, but something kidlike remains. He lives life as if it were a game.

Falafel bought three hundred dollars in chips and sat at a table. Soon the piles before him were getting taller. He attributed this not to his skill at poker but to his gambling instincts, which are formidable in some circumstances (backgammon, mainly) and horrendous in others (sports betting, mainly). As he played, he glanced at the cards occasionally, but mostly he jabbered. When an elderly man in a

leather jacket sat down and, by coincidence, began to talk about backgammon, Falafel could not contain himself. “Oh, you play?” he said. “I like to play, too.” The man nodded. A round of cards was dealt. “You know,” Falafel said, “I’m the No. 1 backgammon player in the world.” He glanced at a card. “None of you could beat me.”

A skeptical player wearing a Miami Dolphins cap picked up his smartphone to verify. To his left, another old man asked, “Is it in the Google?”

“I’m checking,” the skeptic said. “I’m just getting a lot of restaurants.”

The dealer slowed play, so that the matter could be resolved—which it quickly was, generating a wave of smiles. Suddenly, a celebrity was among them. “O.K., Mr. Falafel,” the dealer said. “What will it be?”

In two hours, Falafel was sitting behind five hundred dollars. Things were looking up. “A year ago, if you found me then, my life would have been so much different,” he said. For a time, Falafel was living in Las Vegas, with a roommate—a young backgammon whiz whom he calls Genius or Lobster, depending on his mood—but he rarely left the couch, where he watched sports, and watched the money that he bet on sports disappear. Now he saw opportunity. “This year, I am travelling a lot, playing more backgammon,” he said. From Atlantic City, Falafel was planning to go to a tournament in San Antonio, and then there were trips to Los Angeles, Israel, Denmark, and, in August, Monte Carlo, for the world championships. In each place, the prospect of cash side games lay in wait. An Internet gaming site was interested in coöperating with him. He had taken on a student. Falafel was filled with a sense of purpose. He was ready, he told his friends, to

turn his fortunes around.

“**W**e should go now,” Falafel said, as he cashed out; he needed to find The Bone, who was finishing a round in his tournament. The two men met in the mid-nineteen-nineties, when Falafel was in New York, living in Washington Square Park, and playing chess. The Bone, whose real name is Arkadiy Tsinis, is tall and thin. He is a disciplined gambler; recruiters from Wall Street have tried to bring him into their game. “That’s him,” Falafel said, pointing to a man wearing a floppy leather hat and sunglasses perched on an aquiline nose. The Bone was locked in a stare-down with another player. The visible portions of his face were impassive. Eventually, with only a few chips left, he folded. Falafel tried to cheer him up as they walked over to an all-you-can-eat buffet.

Falafel’s homelessness was of his own making. In 1972, when he was four, his mother, Larissa, fled Soviet Russia (and Falafel’s father), moving to the Israeli town of Azor, near Tel Aviv. In Falafel’s memory, Azor is ever warm and sunlit, filled with soccer matches and schoolyard friends. Larissa worked long hours at the airport, and so Falafel was often free to do as he liked—until he was fourteen, when she told him that she was marrying an Israeli-American biophysicist, and that they were moving to Buffalo, to live with him. Falafel resented the move. Buffalo was cold and foreign. He didn’t know the language. His stepfather, a Holocaust survivor, was caring but stern, and pushed him to think of life in pragmatic terms. Falafel rebelled. He did little but play chess; he drank, and even went to school a little tipsy. He went to college halfheartedly, and after graduating he lost his savings by betting on sports. Larissa refused to help him unless he

found a job, and so, instead, in the winter of 1994, he hitched a ride with a friend to Manhattan, to hustle chess. “I just went through the motions,” Falafel says. “My only thing was to make a bit of money so that I could survive.”

Falafel knew little about Washington Square Park—a Hobbesian gaming arena in the center of Greenwich Village. “I called it Jurassic Park,” The Bone said. Some of the chess players were fast-talking charmers; some had learned the game in prison. There was Sweet Pea, Elementary, the Terminator. When well-known fish—players of middling skill with money to lose—would turn up, a frenzy would erupt to vie for their action. Falafel became friendly with a wizard at blitz chess named Russian Paul, who adopted a half-mentoring attitude, involving avuncular insults about Falafel’s game or his laziness or his self-destructive habits.

“I can tell you how I discovered him,” Russian Paul says. “I used to play at my favorite table, and one weekend morning I came, and there was somebody snoring, sleeping under it.” He hired Falafel—two dollars every morning—to hold his table for him. Before long, Falafel was playing, too. By the standards of the park, where grandmasters sometimes stopped by, Falafel was in no way exceptional—“Stupid, stupid, that’s stupid,” Paul would mutter as he played him—but he enjoyed the camaraderie of the hustlers. Two dollars was enough to get him a falafel, which he ate every day, often for every meal. One night, Russian Paul found him passed out with patches of deep-fried chickpeas stuck to his face, and the park’s newest hustler earned his street name.

H. G. Wells once said of chess, “It annihilates a man.” But Falafel

wasn't seeking annihilation; he wanted a way out of his self-made chaos. On a good day, he might win thirty dollars, but he lacked the easy duplicity of the more ruthless hustlers. "He does not like deception," Peter Mikulas, a former N.Y.U. employee who used to play in the park, says. "He's a Big Daddy, from 'Cat on a Hot Tin Roof.' Mendacity, falseness—it bothers him."

Some of the men in the park played backgammon, which, Falafel noticed, could be far more lucrative than chess. He once watched Russian Paul beat an N.Y.U. student out of a hundred dollars. Falafel had no real understanding of the game, but he was cocky and insistent, and so he sat down to play Russian Paul, who told me, "I learned how to play backgammon two weeks before him, so I took all his money." With other players, Falafel lost relentlessly. One told him, "Listen, you just don't know stuff. For thirty dollars an hour, I'll teach you." Falafel insisted on playing him for fifty cents a point. Soon he was a hundred and forty points behind.

Backgammon is sometimes called the cruellest game. In 2008, during a snowy November outside Moscow, two strangers played on a board that one of them had carved in a labor camp. When the match ended, the winner got up, walked out of the room to get a knife, and then made good on their wager: "We had agreed to play backgammon—whoever loses dies," he explained at the time of his arrest. He was drunk-seeming, and probably a psychopath, but the story has come to serve as a parable *in extremis* of fortunes lost and won over the board. People have made hundreds of thousands of dollars in single sessions; one expert player lost his home. Bruegel painted the game into his apocalyptic panorama "The Triumph of

Death.”

Unlike chess, backgammon is tactile, fast-moving, even loud, with checkers slammed down and tiny dice sounding like rattlesnakes as they traverse the board. Casual players who believe that they are good persist in the illusion because the element of chance obscures their deficits. At its heart, backgammon’s cruelty resides in the dramatic volatility of the dice. Even a player who builds flawless structures on the board can lose to a novice. The good players simply win more often. As a result, backgammon is often played in marathon sessions that reward physical stamina, patience, and emotional equilibrium. One notable match lasted five days, with both players getting up only for bathroom breaks. The loser fell to the floor.

Like many who have become hooked on the game, Falafel found the omnipresent possibility of winning seductive. After living in the park for half a year, he moved into a tumbledown gaming club near Wall Street, a no-name place run by a gambler called Fat Nick. Stock traders would come. An associate of Vinny (the Chin) Gigante would come. Falafel slept on a recliner, and played whoever would sit with him. He also began turning up at the New York Chess and Backgammon Club, in midtown, where hard men from the Colombo crime family mixed with working stiffs and professional gamblers, and a caged white dove called Squeeze Bird watched over them all. He kibbitzed and tried to hustle opponents into playing “positions”—arrangements on the board that contain a hidden advantage. When he was not playing, he would collapse into sleep wherever he was, and snore loudly. “You couldn’t tell him, ‘It’s time to go home,’ because he didn’t have one,” a player told me. Falafel lost a lot, but he also

improved, and began making a few hundred dollars here and there. When Fat Nick's shut down, he returned to the street, or he slept at the White House, the last of the Bowery flophouses. One night, he recalled, "I was asleep, and a guy next to me was able to reach into my pocket. He took fifteen hundred dollars, and left me two fifty-dollar bills. Maybe he missed it."

Falafel's friends urged him to get off the street. One found him a room, but he could barely pay the rent. Then fortune turned his way, with the arrival of one of the game's most famous fish, a wealthy French philatelist, Internet entrepreneur, and fraudster known as Marc Armand Rousso, or, in the world of backgammon, as the Croc. He was an eccentric—at the board, he would sometimes mutter, "Yum, yum, yum, yum, my little crocodiles," Falafel recalled—and, more significant, he was a terrible player with satchels of money to lose. "He comes in, and he loses a hundred and fifty thousand dollars cash in half an hour," one opponent told me. "Then he leaves and comes back two hours later for more—but now, instead of money, he's come in with fifty pounds of gold!"

Falafel played the Croc a little, but mostly he bet on the Croc's opponents, including a skilled player named Abe the Snake. In a few months, Falafel won enough money to buy a small apartment, had he desired one. "I picked up some pants—I wanted to put something in the pocket—and I reach in and I find four thousand dollars," he told me. "I didn't even know it existed. That's how good it was."

When he was homeless, Falafel had promised himself that if he ever made enough money he would return to Israel. "I wanted to get back and feel some love and warmth and affection and some closeness," he

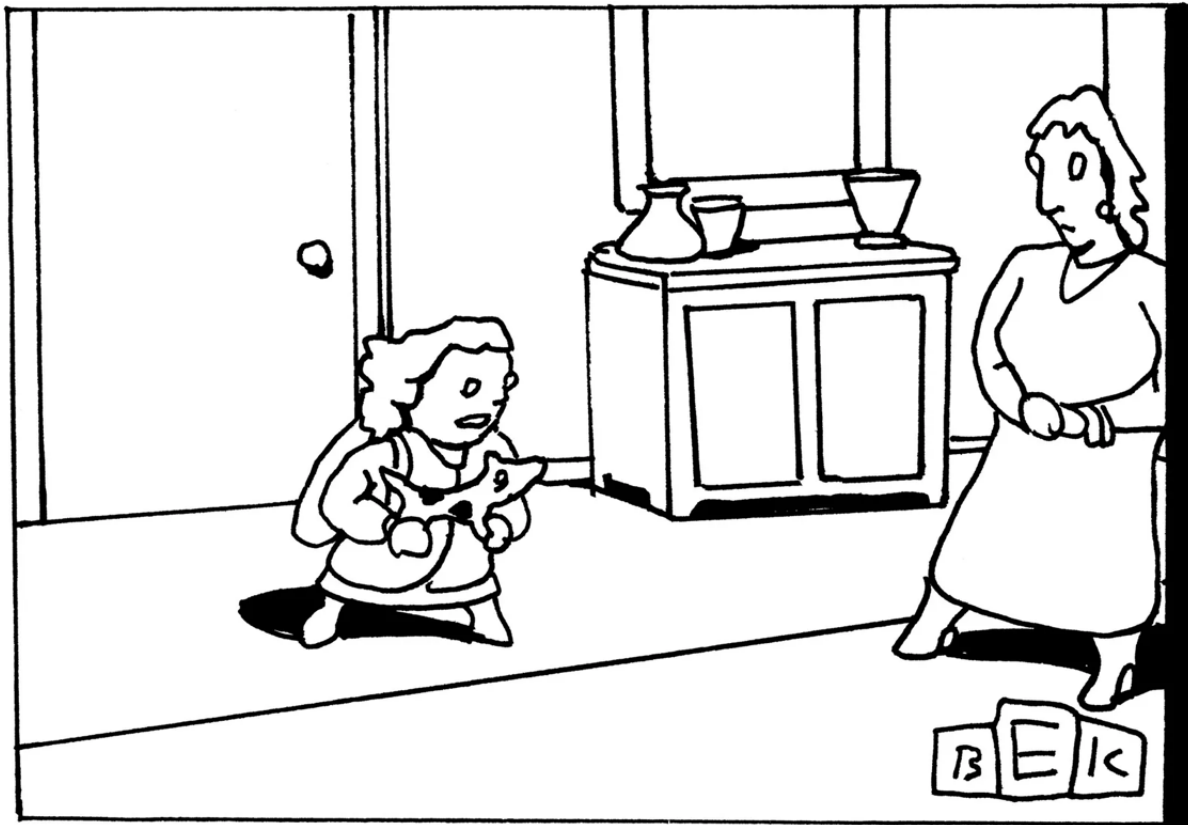
told me. He yearned to be married. But ever since his arrival in Buffalo he had been shy with girls, and while he was living on the street relationships were no easier. For several years, he rented a place in central Tel Aviv, and in 2001 he got in touch with a girl he had known in middle school. But things didn't work out. Relocating the warmth was not so easy.

Falafel took to spending fifteen hours a day online, playing backgammon, with the shades drawn, determined to master the game. Clothes and trash piled up. He ate and ate and gained weight. Sometimes he played at a dingy backgammon club nearby. "I saw Falafel there, this big fat guy with his baseball hat backward, playing this big, dark-skinned Israeli guy," a friend says. "They were playing high stakes, a hundred dollars a point, and the room was packed with people. It was a gladiator fight, you know, just alive, in a place you would least expect it. Falafel, with his special looks—he just looks like an idiot, and everybody here was thinking that he's just a rich American dumbass who is going to donate. And Falafel was teasing everybody. He told them that they are all idiots, and he is going to take all their money. And, the thing is, Falafel cleaned up the club. He just cleaned everybody up, and people were going insane, and the stakes got higher. He had everybody play against him. He said, 'You can consult, because you're so bad it doesn't matter. I want to hear all the stupidity.' And they would basically want to kill him, because he took their money, he took their pride, and he was really, really cocky."

Every two years, the top backgammon players around the world vote to pick the best of their peers, for a roster called the Giants of Backgammon. In 2007, Falafel was No. 1. "At some point, he woke up and became the best player in the world," Elliott Winslow, a top

player, told me. The title is unscientific, and often debated, but no one could contest that Falafel had achieved greatness. “We can never know for certain who is the best player in a given year, but we can confidently eliminate 99.99 per cent,” Jake Jacobs, the roster’s auditor, says. “Falafel survived the cut.”

Falafel reacted to the news humbly, citing other players he thought were more deserving. “I didn’t end up making a living as a backgammon player by accident,” he said at the time. “I couldn’t function properly in the ‘normal’ world.”



“The art lady came in and told me all people want is derivative crap.”



Falafel is intensely loyal to the people who befriended him in Jurassic Park, and at the Borgata he decided to stay in Atlantic City for as long as The Bone could keep up his run—even if it meant delaying his trip to the backgammon tournament in San Antonio, which was about to begin. When I called Falafel to see if he was going to make it to Texas, the best he could say was “I rate it a favorite.” Backgammon is a highly probabilistic game, and Falafel’s world is rarely defined by certainties. I booked a ticket not knowing for sure that he would show.

The tournament was held in the Menger Hotel, a dusty old building just opposite the Alamo. When I arrived, after 11 P.M. on the first day of play, Falafel had not yet turned up. In a small conference room, a couple of dozen people were milling about, and a few matches were still under way. One was between a Bulgarian man from South Carolina, Petko Kostadinov, and Ed O’Laughlin, an older player from Virginia. Kostadinov—compact, with neatly parted graying hair—was intently focussed on the board. O’Laughlin, a wiry man, was dressed all in black, and his legs were folded up in his chair like crushed origami. He moved his checkers in abrupt jabs, then touched the pieces as if to confirm their solidity.

In the past half century, backgammon tournaments—like backgammon itself—have undergone a profound transformation. The game, which has been around in some form since the time of the Pharaohs, is most popular in the Near East, and in the nineteen-twenties it became a popular club game in the West. In the sixties, the game acquired a certain glamour. Lucille Ball played, and so did Paul

Newman. The world championships were black-tie—though many competitors were mediocre, a condition that soon attracted the attention of genuine gamblers, who set out to unlock the game’s money-making potential. Backgammon is far more mathematical than chess, but, while chess has a literature that dates back centuries, backgammon had no real theory until the nineteen-seventies, when gamblers at New York’s Mayfair Club began to take the game apart systematically. Chess players can visualize what the board might look like twenty moves ahead, but in backgammon the dice offer twenty-one random possibilities at each turn. The game must be encountered frame by frame. The players at the Mayfair drew up tables: *If one checker is twelve slots from another, there are three ways to attack, and an eight-per-cent chance of doing so successfully.* They rolled out positions, playing every permutation to identify the best move. Rollouts could take hundreds of hours. Players attempted to calculate, at each position, their game “equity”—the more the better. By shaving off any trace of error, they could hedge against the chaos of the dice. To the uninitiated, they undoubtedly seemed astoundingly lucky. The Mayfair denizens won a lot of money, until their skill became too conspicuous.

For players of Falafel’s generation, the early theories were given a tremendous advance in the nineteen-nineties, when an engineer at I.B.M. figured out how to apply neural-network computing to the game. The laborious rollouts were no longer necessary. One of the old Mayfair hands, Jersey Jim Pasko, a bodybuilder with a math degree, told me, “I’m spoiled. I want to do a lot of mathematical analysis, and I don’t want to allow anybody else to do any.” He said that many new players came into the game with a single-minded desire to make

money, and lacked any sense of style and social grace, so he had dropped out of the circuit.

In San Antonio, while Kostadinov and O’Laughlin played, an official observer with a laptop computer entered their moves into a program that can roll out thousands of possibilities in seconds and calculate errors to three decimal points. Many younger players assume that its judgment is close enough to perfect. Michihito Kageyama, a former McDonald’s employee from Japan who is now fourth on the Giants of Backgammon list, told me that he had created a database of ten thousand positions. He reviews thirty a day on his Kindle, as a morning exercise.

Falafel has no patience for memorization. Because he is undisciplined, he regularly makes small mistakes early on, but in the complex middle game—where checkers are spread out in ambiguous arrangements, and the differences between plays can be hard to measure—he excels. “He’s very special,” Kageyama told me. “He doesn’t calculate equity. He’s just seeing it.” Perry Gartner, the president of the United States Backgammon Federation, put it this way: “Truthfully, out of the top sixty-four players that I know, there isn’t anyone who has his intuitive understanding of the game.”

I should have bet on Falafel: by the time the main tournament in San Antonio began, he and The Bone had arrived. The event was held in the Menger’s Grand Ballroom, though most of the attendees—a hundred and thirty people—were middle-aged men in T-shirts or casual wear. “Backgammon used to be a lot more glamorous,” one of the few women there told me. Falafel was wearing red Air Jordan sweatpants, a black-and-white plaid shirt, a green hoodie, and his

yellow cap. His first opponent was Carter Mattig, a sound engineer from Chicago and a jocular trash-talker. Looking at Falafel, he said, “That’s quite a color combination he’s got today,” and that afternoon he posted a photograph online of Falafel in the ensemble, titled “The Angriest Elf.” Falafel was sore about it for days.

The two men found an empty spot at one of the folding tables that filled the room. When Falafel plays, his manner is casual but focussed—unless he is losing, in which case his head droops as if it were filled with sand, and his body curls over the board. If an inferior player beats him, he might say, “He played horribly.” When Falafel wins, he is not always gracious, and he often seems unaware of his lack of tact. Once, on a backgammon forum, Mattig wrote, “I do vomit a little in my mouth when he speaks of his ‘modesty.’”

As a few spectators looked on, Falafel played Mattig, who put in earbuds and listened to music—to block out Falafel’s “crying,” he said. The play was brisk, and with each move Falafel, like all the Giants, was looking for fractional advantages. For most people, it is difficult to see the difference between a superlative player and a very good one. Later in the tournament, Jeremy Bagai, who is No. 40 on the Giants list, pulled me aside during a game between two competitors who were playing at an exceptionally high level. “I haven’t seen anything like this,” he said. As a computer made clear, each move was just marginally better than the one Bagai would have made, but the aggregate effect was undeniable. Backgammon is a game of nano-distinctions.

Falafel beat Mattig, 5–4, and afterward a debate arose over one of his moves: was it mathematically correct, or had luck aided him?

“I would be happy to bet on this, Falafel,” Mattig said.

The stakes were set at fifty dollars. The position was entered into a computer, and players crowded around the screen.

“Oh, the move is right!” Falafel called out. “You owe me!”

“Wait, where is the move right?” Mattig said.

“Right here,” Falafel said. “It’s significant. It’s like *one per cent*.”

Falafel called Kageyama over, showed him the position, and asked him what he would do. Kageyama gave the same answer that Mattig had, and Falafel nodded, smiled, and told him, “That’s a mistake.”

Falafel was slowly making his way upward in the brackets. He had an easy time against Gary Oleson, a Walgreens pharmacist, who had come dressed in a black nylon shirt featuring a dragon strangling a tiger. While Falafel was up, 2–1, it was announced that the tournament would break for dinner. He stood and stretched, which emphasized his hemispherical belly.

“So is it true you have a bet to lose weight?” O’Laughlin asked him.

“Yeah,” Falafel said.

At any given time, Falafel has more bets going than he can keep track of. He has bet on his abilities at tennis, on his dancing skills, on whether he can win an argument about Islam. (Many bets are for a thousand dollars—a “ruble,” in Falafel’s lexicon—or much more.) When he was thirty-eight, Falafel bet five rubles that he would be

married in two years. (He lost.) In San Antonio, he told Perry Gartner that he had a long-standing bet: for every day he did not have a child before turning fifty he owed someone five dollars. Gartner, perplexed, asked how that was even a bet. “Right,” Falafel said. “My downside is unlimited. But it is going to happen.” Lately, it seems, Falafel has been trying to bend a vice into a virtue—and no bet has more potential in this regard than his weight bet.

“So what is it?” O’Laughlin asked. “A lot of money?”

A woman walking by answered: “It’s for a *ton* of money!”

“Thanks,” Falafel said.

“Well, what is it?” O’Laughlin said. “A thousand? Ten thousand? A hundred thousand?”

Falafel, who has a gambler’s habit of speaking evasively, cradled his belly. “It’s for money,” he said.

The weight bet originated last October, when Falafel flew to Tokyo to play in the Japanese Open. One night, he and several other backgammon players were crammed into Sushi Saito, a three-star Michelin restaurant that seats only seven people. A question was posed: Could Falafel and his ex-roommate Genius achieve the same weight in a year’s time? By then, Falafel, who was enduring a difficult stretch of sports betting, had reached three hundred and ten pounds. Genius, who has a slight frame and is four inches shorter, weighed only a hundred and thirty-eight. The question began to take on the contours of a wager, and the next day a taker emerged willing to give them fifty-to-one odds. The taker is a legendary backgammon hustler,

perhaps the most successful in the game's history. He hustled me into referring to him only as Mr. Joseph—even though anyone on the backgammon circuit will immediately recognize him. He has played Saudi royalty, and he claims to have won as much as three hundred thousand dollars in a match. He once told another gambler, “I used to say I'd like to have a hundred-thousand-dollar day. I've had those, both winning and losing, many times since then. Now I say I want a million-dollar *losing* day, which means I am wealthy enough to have a million-dollar winning day.” His bet with Falafel might help him lose tremendously. No one involved is keen to see its magnitude documented, so just imagine the contents of a large armored suitcase in a James Bond movie.

Mr. Joseph was in San Antonio, too. An enormous man, he was dressed in a black T-shirt and shorts, and, when Falafel and The Bone walked over, he and Genius were playing a variant of backgammon involving only three checkers, for five hundred dollars a point. He told Falafel, “You never win in tournaments. The Bone wins. He knows how to win. You find a way to lose to the worst players.”

“I want to win, too,” Falafel said. “But sometimes I get into a spot.”

The Bone interjected, “It's going to change now that he is losing weight.”

“I play better if I am in better shape,” Falafel said. Since Sushi Saito, he had lost about sixty pounds, and Genius had gained twenty. Just about any time I ran into Genius, he was eating a J.J. Gargantuan Unwich sandwich (seven hundred and thirty-nine calories), from Jimmy John's. Mr. Joseph was unconcerned; he seemed to take

pleasure in the bet's manipulative aspects. In 1996, he told another player, Brian Zembic, that he would give him a hundred thousand dollars if he got breast implants and kept them in for a year. Months later, Zembic got them, size 38C, and, to everyone's surprise, he liked them. They helped him meet women, and he ended up marrying one of them. A year came and went—and a hundred thousand dollars was wired to a Swiss bank account—but still he kept the implants in. Once, when Falafel came to visit, Zembic unbuttoned his shirt and danced. Falafel smiled and blushed.

In his own way, Falafel wanted to be transformed, too. He wanted to be healthier, more mindful, more purposeful. “My life, I just got into a situation,” he said. “Some of the hardships I endured, I did so without realizing that they were hardships. I should have a family. That is a big missing part of my own puzzle.”

Once, in an airport, Falafel sat next to a rabbi, and asked him for his thoughts about gambling. The rabbi said that it was not prohibited, but that a life of gambling was unsanctioned by God. Falafel told me, “I see religion for what it really is: just a bluff,” but he couldn't get the interpretation out of his head. One evening, outside a casino bathroom, I saw him stop a young bearded man in a yarmulke and say, “I have a question for you: Do you know what Jewish law says about gambling?” The man was taken aback. It didn't matter—Falafel was already answering. “I think it is that you can gamble, but that you can't earn a living from gambling. Is that it?”

At the Menger, Mr. Joseph had rented the Presidential Suite, and on Super Bowl Sunday he filled it with food and with backgammon players. By then, the tournament was over. The mood was relaxed.

Falafel had lost in the semifinals, to a longtime player from Texas, and he had been upset. But now, in Mr. Joseph's suite, the loss was easily forgotten. There was the Super Bowl to distract him—he had bet many rubles on the Baltimore Ravens. And there was his weight. He stood near an elaborate buffet that Mr. Joseph had arranged. “You can eat this,” a player from Germany said, pointing to a tin of celery. Falafel already had a stalk in his mouth. He took a few carrots and a bottle of mineral water and walked over to a couch. A plate of cheesecakes was set down in front of him. “Those pies,” Mr. Joseph said, casually. “Have one of those pies.”

“No,” Falafel said, cradling his belly. “I can't.”

“I'll give you fifty bucks right now to eat one of those pies,” Mr. Joseph said, pulling out a crisp bill.

“How many calories?” Falafel said.

“Thirty,” Mr. Joseph said.

“Bullshit!” The Bone said.

Falafel looked at the money and hesitated. “Jeez,” he said. “You're giving me a fifty?” But he held his ground.

It used to be that tournaments were the center of big-money side games, but these days the few players who make their living from backgammon must look in deeper waters for big fish. Before leaving the Menger, one top player told me in hushed tones that he was going to see a billionaire who puts him up in a hotel near his house so that they can play all-night games for a thousand dollars a point. The

billionaire is so obsessive that he can play for fifteen hours uninterrupted; the player told me he had to bring a friend to cover for him during bathroom breaks.

From Texas, Falafel and The Bone headed for Los Angeles, where they rented a business suite at a Manhattan Beach hotel. Word had been quietly circulating about a group of wealthy amateurs playing for enormous stakes. Not merely fish—a pod of whales. Who would they be? Ted Turner? Carl Icahn? George and Barbara Bush host a private tournament at Kennebunkport. One of the most-read books in the Bush family is “Backgammon for Blood,” a handbook from the nineteen-seventies. (“Unfortunately, that’s one of the worst books,” a mathematician told me. “It was written under a pseudonym, and some people say it was intentionally bad so that people reading it would play worse.”) Falafel thought he could find a way into the action from the West Coast, but he was fanatically secretive about what he knew. The money was too big—too important to his future. “This is a fantasy,” he told me, by which he meant that the games were just an ephemeral opportunity, a blinding spark.

Falafel’s hotel was a favorite of Jersey Jim’s, who had also come, with his wife, Patty. Every day, they went across the street to a gym the size of an LAX hangar. Falafel was relying on them to help him lose weight. But he did not want to lift, or run, or exert himself intensively. Instead, he decided to restrict his diet to a thousand calories per day, and to walk. Jersey Jim and Patty worked on him until he agreed, at least, to climb the Manhattan Beach dune: a steep, two-hundred-and-seventy-foot incline near an Army Reserve facility, where athletes like Kobe Bryant come to work out.

On the morning that Falafel and The Bone arrived, a lean man with bleached dreadlocks, shirtless and deeply tanned, was doing yoga on a blanket at the base of the dune. Falafel looked a little intimidated. He watched as The Bone began striding up the incline and then slowed down. “Gee,” he said. “The Bone, he’s realizing that it takes a lot of energy.”

Patty turned to Falafel. “This is how you lose weight,” she said.

“Yeah, for sure,” Falafel said. He gazed at the hill uncertainly. At his last weigh-in, he was two hundred and forty-five pounds. But things were looking up. He had won on the Super Bowl. He was flying back to Israel to attend a wedding, and to spend some time near his childhood home. Then he was off to Copenhagen, for the Nordic Open—informally known as “Denmark vs. the World.” Falafel, who was captaining “the World,” was putting together an international team, and hoped to bring in Genius and Abe the Snake. The whales seemed increasingly within reach. Squinting in the bright Los Angeles sun, Falafel pushed his feet into the hot sand. Slowly, he began to climb. ♦

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