

# The Backgammon Tournament

BY GROSVENOR NICHOLAS

A veteran Backgammoner instructs the hostess in various methods of conducting the Tournament

■ The eternal problem of the hostess is to provide entertainment for her guests. Now that Backgammon is being played more and more generally, a fortunate solution is to be found in the Backgammon Tournament.

After dinner the hostess, or perhaps more appropriately the host, announces the Tournament, whereupon all of the guests may enter or not, as they please, and the details may be arranged in several different ways. The host may, of course, provide prizes; a first prize for the winner and a second prize for the runner up. However, in games with dice as with cards, while prizes may be pleasing souvenirs they can hardly be regarded as trophies. Luck in the deals and in the throws of the dice is always too important a factor.

A medal, or having one's name engraved upon a cup, may be an appropriate award for superior skill, or valor, or athletic prowess, but who can imagine anyone taking a chance in a lottery, or playing roulette or poker for anything so unsubstantial?

■ Where luck or chance determines the result, a money hazard seems most appropriate. And in a Backgammon Tournament, while there may be also prizes, a certain amount of money involved always adds to the interest. This may be arranged by charging each of the players a fixed entrance fee, which may be five dollars, or fifty dollars, or any amount that will not embarrass any of them. About two-thirds of this sum is generally awarded to the winner, and the balance (less the amount of one entrance fee) to the runner up. The one entrance fee reserved is used as a prize for a subsidiary or consolation tournament which is played in, while the main tournament continues, by all of those who have been eliminated in the first round of the main tournament.

Another way of giving added interest to a tournament is by means of a pool. This may be arranged by permitting the guests to make bets of a certain fixed amount upon any one of the players or upon the "field," the "field," of course, including all of the players upon whom no bet is specifically placed. The bets are made upon slips of paper, which are folded and remain unopened until the tournament is ended, when the entire amount goes to whoever has picked the winner.

Instead of this there may be an auction pool, the host or one of the guests acting as auctioneer and selling each of the players

at auction to the highest bidder. When this is done, it is usual, and no doubt advisable, for a successful bidder to allow a player whom he has purchased to buy a half or some other fractional interest in himself. These auction pools are always most amusing and, provided the bidding can be kept within reasonable bounds, they are excellent.

■ For the play of the tournament one board must be provided for every two players. Drawing the names by lot determines which of the players shall first oppose each other and, as each pair of names is drawn, they are written in a vertical column upon a large sheet of paper or card board and then bracketed as in other tournaments.

In this bracketing there is frequently encountered a slight difficulty. In the final round of a tournament there can be only two players. In the semi-final, therefore, there must be only four and with each round the total number of players must always be divided by two. Accordingly tournaments must always be commenced with some power of two, like sixteen or eight, which, if continuously divided, will result in two players meeting in the finals.

In a small private tournament, it is perhaps simplest and best to limit entries to sixteen or eight and thus dispose of the matter. However, if others wish also to play, the difficulty can be overcome readily by holding a small preliminary round to dispose of any number of players in excess of the sixteen or eight with which it is necessary to begin. This preliminary round may be played by those whose names are first drawn.\* If, for example, there is one player in excess of sixteen there would be a preliminary round of the first two drawn and in this one player would be eliminated. If there are two players in excess, there would be a preliminary round of the first four drawn for the elimination of two, and so on.

There seems to be much difference of opinion concerning the actual play of Backgammon Tournaments. Some prefer that they be played with the present doubling of the stake, just as the game is now generally played, eliminating, however, what is known as the automatic double. Others prefer, for Tournaments, to revert to the old game without doubling and eliminate even the gammon or double game.

When Tournaments are played with doubling, the earlier rounds are usually played for seven points, or matches, each. The player *who first wins seven points wins*. The semi-final round is played for nine points, or matches, and the finals for eleven. When this method is used there is frequently an amusing incident. Whenever one player is within one point of winning, his opponent, quite without regard to the state of the game, invariably doubles. He may gain by this and he has nothing

to lose for, if he loses the game, the one point undoubled will beat him anyhow.

When the old game without doubling is played, the earlier rounds frequently are for the first seven games, the semi-finals for the first eleven and the finals for the first of some greater number.

In arranging a Tournament the number of players and the amount of time available must also be taken into consideration. Because of the doubling, Tournaments that are played for points generally progress more rapidly than those which are played for games. However, in either case, when there are more players, the rounds, especially the earlier ones, can be made briefer so that the Tournament will not last too long. In estimating this, it is well to count upon a game as requiring from fifty to sixty moves and upon moves being made no faster than three to a minute for, it must be borne in mind, that no round can be concluded until the longest or slowest games are finished.

■ Backgammon Tournaments usually are played, just as the game is played, by the players throwing their own dice. Most people seem to enjoy throwing dice, though perhaps unconscious of this, and possibly Tournaments are more enjoyable in which the dice throwing is done by the players. However, another interesting method is to have the dice thrown by an outsider for all the players. In this, after determining which of the two players at each board plays first, all of those playing the Black men play one throw and then all of those playing the White men play the next.

They continue in this way and, after six or seven moves, in which precisely the same dice have been played at all the tables, it is interesting to see how totally unlike will be the positions of both the Black and the White men upon the different boards. The difference in the results sometimes is astonishing. It may be that White's dice will have been far superior but, notwithstanding this, one or two of the players of the Black will win.

While such paradoxical results may be regarded as proof of a superior skill (and will surely be so regarded by the few who have survived with the Black), this is unfortunately not the entire truth. In Backgammon while success may be, as it frequently is, the result of superior skill, it is also true that, because of the many unusual and unpredictable performances of the dice, a bad play may be more successful than a good play.

It is, in fact, this inherent uncertainty in the game of Backgammon which makes a Backgammon Tournament so enjoyable. While generally it takes a fairly good player to survive until the finals, it is by no means unusual for the best players to be eliminated in the first round. Even beginners need have no hesitation about entering. They may survive longer than the experts and, with luck sufficient to counter-balance their inexperience, they may win.

\*This will expedite matters although in other tournaments it is usual to have the preliminary round played by those in the middle of the list, the byes being at the top and bottom.

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