

# The Game of Pharaohs

The author may be one of the country's most important book critics, but like the rest of us, there was something else he wanted to be good at, something else he didn't want to transform from a dream into a regret. So he packed a bag and his backgammon board and headed to MONTE CARLO.

By Dwight Garner





I SEE A RED DISK AND I WANT TO MAKE IT BLACK... Opposite: Mick Jagger in Barbados with Jerry Hall, just prior to his fortieth birthday. This page: Tina Turner as she appeared in a photo for the cover of *Backgammon* magazine in 1979. Photograph by Andrea Waller

# Walking through the lobby

**of the Fairmont hotel in Monaco,** home to the Backgammon World Championship, is like striding through an aquarium. Well-tended women, summa cum laude graduates of the Ivanka Trump School of Advanced Moisturizing, move through the first-floor casino as if in schools, their older boyfriends, many of them Russian, in tow. Call girls, only slightly less well tended, perch on couches and sip cocktails from long straws. There's a throwback bad-taste glamour here in Monte Carlo, the Las Vegas of Europe. One waits for Engelbert Humperdinck or some other sideburned lothario of the 1970s to sidle past in a leisure suit. Yet the Fairmont, in its way, is an up-to-date sin palace. There's the thumping of EDM from the hotel's Nikki Beach roof bar. Out front there's a crush of valet-parked Porches, Bentleys, and Maseratis glinting in the July sun. The hotel sits on a hairpin turn that bedevils Formula One Grand Prix racers and has caused countless crashes. The calm on my first morning is shattered by a distraught gambler who rocks the lobby's ATM as if it were a pinball machine, slapping it and calling it his bitch because it refuses to dispense money he no longer has.

Among these beautiful people, the most elite backgammon players stand out, the way roadies do on an Ariana Grande tour. Some 190 players are here from all over the world competing for \$250,000 in prize money. Nearly all of them are men. Many, if not most, are unshaven introverts in cargo pants or dad jeans. They're "froggish men, unpleasant to see," in the words of an old Randy Newman song. On the first morning, I see a crowd gathered around a match in the hotel's conference room. I peer across the rows of heads. Akiko Yazawa, then the world's number-three-ranked player and among the game's few great female adepts, is competing. It's fun to watch her play, in part because she's brilliant and in part because, as one spectator tells me, "she's attractive-attractive, not just backgammon-attractive." Akiko wears a T-shirt with a backgammon board on it. The caption: "And they call this fun?"

I've traveled to Monaco to compete in the World Championship. I feel I am plausibly ready, at least in the sense that George Plimpton was plausibly ready to sub in for a few plays as quarterback of the Detroit Lions. I've been playing backgammon since I was a kid, often in all-night, low-stakes gambling binges with friends. Lately I've been really working on my game. I live in New York and I've sat in with the hustlers in Washington Square Park and Bryant Park in Manhattan. I've devoured a pile of books with titles like *Backgammon: The Cruellest Game*. I've watched classic matches on YouTube, the way a wide receiver studies game tape. I hired a tutor, a pro who lives in Virginia, and took online lessons. Additionally, I'm sickly addicted to a pro-level backgammon app on my iPhone. I play twenty or thirty games a day. It's my go-to stress reliever. It beats a black-tar-heroin habit.

Just before I flew out—in a moment of pride or panic, I'm not sure which—I reached out to Victor Ashkenazi, the number-one-ranked backgammon player in America. Victor lives in New Jersey and at the time was a vice-president at Goldman Sachs. I'd read about him. I emailed Victor out of the blue, told him I was going to compete in Monaco, and asked: Would he agree to a match with a relative novice, to let a guy know what he was in for? Victor texted me back: "Haha why not?"

We meet on a warm spring Saturday at Bear and Birch, a Russian *banya*, or spa, in Freehold, not far from where he lives. It's where Victor goes to unwind. The place is modern and well lit, yet it has that emotional five-o'clock shadow that clings to so many restaurants and other spaces in New Jersey. You can imagine a *Sopranos*-style hit going down in a corner sauna. Victor, who is in his late forties, is late and apologetic. He has a six-pack of beer under his arm. (The place is BYOB.) He's so tall that he has to lean down to say hello, his shaved head gleaming. "You want to have sauna?" he asks. So we sit, towels around our waists, and bake. Victor's family emigrated from Russia in 1995, he tells me, when he was twenty-five. Back then, he knew maybe twenty words of English. "I'd played chess as a kid, and I noticed the chess games in Bryant Park for small stakes," he says. "Then I noticed this other game, one I'd never seen back home. They were playing for more money than in chess! Backgammon was more competitive and volatile. The crazy arguments helped me to learn English."

Victor has a gift for numbers. He landed a job as a computer programmer, and at night he played online backgammon. "I have a good visual memory," he says. "I remember positions and patterns. And I'm a sports guy. Backgammon is a sport. There are long hours playing—long, long, long. It's like a boxing match. You have to have stamina and a strategy and the will to win." He played in his first major tournament in 2007 in Las Vegas, the largest one in the United States at the time. He won it and he was hooked.



A PLACE IN THE SUN Backgammon and the good life, as captured by Slim Aarons in Acapulco, 1972.

We climb out of the sauna. Victor pulls out a shiny black-and-red backgammon set that looks like it belongs to a Bond villain. (James Bond plays backgammon. In *Octopussy*, Roger Moore suavely defeats a cheating Middle Eastern cad.) The pieces on his board—these are called stones, blots, men, or checkers—are marble and have an agreeable heft. Hurling one, you could stop a charging Pussy Galore in her tracks. Backgammon is a racing game. You want to get your fifteen checkers around the board and then remove them, a process that’s called “bearing off.” If you get your checkers off the board first, you win.

**I am reminded of Mike Tyson’s comment that everyone has a plan until they get punched in the mouth.**

I have a small shot against Victor, I think, because backgammon involves some luck. About 80 percent of the game is chance. This is one way it differs from chess. If you sit down opposite Magnus Carlsen, the world’s top chess player, you have zero hope of winning a game. Chess is 100 percent skill. A casino game like roulette, on the other hand, is entirely luck. Backgammon sits, tantalizingly, in between. It allows enough luck that, if only in the short term, David can slay Goliath.

We start playing. Here my memory goes somewhat blank. I am reminded of Mike Tyson’s comment that everyone has a plan until they get punched in the mouth. During the first five or six games, Victor doesn’t just beat me; he does to me what Sherman did to Atlanta. After about thirty minutes of abject defeats, I begin to pull my wits together. I slow down and analyze the entire board before moving, as the pro I’d studied with had taught me to do. I start counting my “pips”—the total number of places I need to move to win—to determine whether to use the doubling cube. I start to win the occasional game. My eyeglasses unsteam. Victor begins to heckle me. “What a luck-box,” he says, grinning, when I roll a series of doubles. He says it with a lingering Russian accent, so it’s like having Count Chocula dis you. Then his girlfriend (now his wife), Alia, who’s watching, chimes in. “Look at this guy, Victor—he thinks he’s a tiger.” Later, she says, “Look at his big balls. Hear his big balls clacking.” Victor adds, “What a luck-box.”

Soon I realize we’ve been playing for five hours. (We’ll play for

eight.) I begin to appreciate once again why backgammon has more juice than any other game I know. Its highs and lows are intense. With its weird mix of luck and skill, it's the game that most resembles life. Like life, it offers extreme reversals of fate—fate that can rain down on you like magic or bury you entirely. It's a game that small children can play, yet it takes a lifetime to begin to master. It's the only thing I know, besides sex and skiing, that you can do for eight hours and still want to keep doing. There's something oddly moving about the game, too. In order to win, you merely need to find your way home.

By now it's dark. We get up to leave. I see that Victor has barely touched his first beer, while I've had several. Don't drink and play; that was my first unspoken pro tip. I think I've done moderately well until Victor remarks that my checkers play was poor and my use of the doubling cube was dismal. A game of backgammon may be only 20 percent skill, but if you put that number in Las Vegas terms, you realize how overwhelming that percentage is. In a craps game, the house is a favorite by only 1 percent, yet it rakes in the money. Imagine if the house were a 20 percent favorite. I never had a chance. Victor looks down at me and shakes his head. "My friend," he says, smiling, "you are like a little child lost in the woods."

# The

**Backgammon** World Championship in Monaco unfolds over nine days. The first three days are given over to preliminary tournaments in which the top prize is \$22,000. The championship takes place over the final six. After observing the talent in the room, I decide to play in the intermediate division. I want a fighting chance to land in the money. Here we go!

My first match in the preliminary tournament is a breeze. I play a cocky little Frenchman in a polo jersey, and all the breaks go my way. We play a nine-point match, which ostensibly means the winner must win nine individual games. But when the doubling cube is laid down, you can quickly find yourself playing for two, four, or, more rarely, eight or more points. In backgammon, you double if you're in a winning position. The other player can accept or resign. If they accept, only they can double the next time. The Frenchman is annoyed at my dominance. He's annoyed, too, at my sloppy backgammon etiquette. He reminds me that dice must be shaken vigorously, as if you were making a margarita. He reminds me to roll only on my side of the board. Back in Bryant Park, these niceties matter less. I win in about an hour.

The next afternoon, my second match also goes well. My opponent is again French, a woman in her late forties. She casts a certain Mrs. Robinson or Jackie Onassis glamour. It occurs to me that much of the game's lingo has sexual overtones. When you roll a five and six early in a game, for example, so that your checker sails over the board like Evel Knievel over a row of school buses, it's called a "lover's leap." When one of your open checkers gets hit by an opponent and put out of action, on the game's center bar, you are "dancing on the bar." I'm in the zone. I double aggressively, and it pays off. I win the match after about forty-five minutes. When I report the results, I look at the brackets on the wall and realize I am only one victory away from finishing in the

money. Hot damn. I decide to look for Victor to give him the news.

It takes me a while to find him across the expanse of the conference room. But here he is, midmatch. His T-shirt says, "I bought this T-shirt with your money." He's winning. But as I stand over him, watching, he begins to falter. He shakes his head after making a minor counting mistake. His dice rolls turn sour. I fear I'm his cooler, so I walk away. When I see him much later that night, he's irritable. He's not doing well in the tournament. But he's scanning for something more important: men and women known in the backgammon world as fish or pigeons or marks, wealthy players who might want to test themselves for large stakes against a pro. He finds one and disappears.

I look around for a private game myself, but most people have left. The atmosphere in the hall, with its fluorescent lights, is grim. I can't find a player, and the bars are mostly empty. And not for the first time, I wonder: *What happened to backgammon? When did it lose its chic and fall off the cultural map? Can we get those days back?*

The game itself is as old as the pharaohs. According to *The Backgammon Game*, by Oswald Jacoby and John Crawford, Homer mentions a version of it in *The Odyssey*. The Roman emperor Claudius had a built-in set on his chariot so that he could play while on the move. Shakespeare and Chaucer each cited the game in his work, and Thomas Jefferson played while drafting the Declaration of Independence. In a notebook of his expenses during the summer of 1776, Jefferson wrote:

Lost at backgammon 7/6

Won at backgammon 7d / 1 / 3

As recently as the 1970s, backgammon was a pop-culture obsession. Bob Dylan, Mick Jagger, Paul Newman, Tina Turner, and the members of Pink Floyd were photographed hovering over boards. Thousands of players flocked to tournaments in Las Vegas and the Bahamas, where winners took home million-dollar prizes. (The top prize money at tournaments today rarely reaches one-twentieth of that sum.) From 1977 to 1980, *The New York Times* ran a weekly backgammon column by Paul Magriel, a master of the game.

Backgammon became a jet-set phenomenon, but its popularity first took off in private clubs in London and Manhattan. The game had an aura of cigar smoke and black tie; it was something you might play while eating a haunch of venison and sipping Madeira. In 1966, the *Times* sent a reporter to cover the burgeoning backgammon scene at Manhattan's Metropolitan Club. He came away with unintentionally hilarious quotes like "All these men are members of the different Ivy League clubs. You see the type of men they are" and "There's always been a backgammon game available in the good families." Backgammon seemed like

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## Backgammon is the I know, besides sex you can do for eight and still want to

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just the thing to play if you wanted to be the first to lose your head when the revolution came.

In *Playboy*, Hugh Hefner began to print photographs of tanned celebrities playing the game with adoring women. *Sports Illustrated* sent reporters to cover backgammon tournaments. The attention was good for backgammon—and bad for backgammon. The secret was out. The wider world had discovered the game, but like airplane travel, it slowly lost its cachet. To put it in Yogi Berra terms, backgammon got so popular that no one wanted to play anymore.

Shady players such as the Israeli-born Gaby Horowitz invaded the scene. Horowitz—who at one point was married to Marcia Clark, the lead prosecutor in the O. J. Simpson murder trial—was a West Coast hustler who seemed to have walked out of an Elmore Leonard novel. He was a brown-eyed ladies' man who was accused of cheating by manipulating magnets under his board. In a bizarre twist of fate, Horowitz was accidentally shot by another backgammon player, a gun collector, in a freak accident in 1989, when a bullet ricocheted off a ceiling and into his head. He was paralyzed and never heard from again.

Then the number crunchers began to arrive, as they have in all professional sports. The game started to be broken down by computer programs. The first of these, created by IBM's Gerald Tesauro in 1992, used neural networking to teach itself to play. These programs, over time, have thoroughly deconstructed the game by assigning equity values to every possible position. No one used to know what the best move was; now they do. The game has become one of memorization and mathematics, increasingly for whey-complexioned nerds who play and study all day in their basements. Nowadays playing with your heart or with your instincts will get you nowhere.

The final blow came with the advent of online poker and the live broadcasts of poker tournaments on cable television, beginning in 2003. Poker stole what little thunder backgammon had left. It offered higher stakes and a shot at fame. It's a casino game, and backgammon can't really be played in casinos. There's no place for a dealer in backgammon, for one thing. For another, a game involves only two players and can take a long time. It simply isn't profitable. One former backgammon champion, Erik Seidel, is now a poker legend, having won eight World Series of Poker bracelets. He made the switch partly because it was easier to find poker games. Players flock to poker, he tells me, because cards are familiar to them and because poker appears to have, at first glance, a lower barrier to entry. "With poker, people can delude themselves for a longer period of time in terms of their skill," he says. "In backgammon, a novice will get killed constantly. In poker, a newbie might think he can actually play."

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# I've

**still got a shot** in the preliminary tournament. But then I get knocked off by a stringy fellow with an unplaceable accent who rolls double sixes the way Roger Federer fires aces. As he does this, he shakes his head philosophically and says, "Eh, it's backgammon" just as Jack Nicholson's partner said, "Forget it, Jake, it's Chinatown." I lose again later that day and then again the following morning. I'm out.

I wake up early the next morning, the first day of the World Championship, and seek wisdom from the Israeli-born Matvey Natanzon, better known as Falafel. He got his nickname from his favorite cheap lunch. Falafel is a backgammon-world superstar, a man who became a world champion while homeless and playing in Washington Square Park. He's almost certainly the only living backgammon player to have been profiled in *The New Yorker*.

Falafel is an endearing slob who's a treat to watch play. He rubs his belly, rocks back and forth like a diviner, and grimaces and sighs as if he were Zero Mostel. He's as close as backgammon has to a celebrity. He won't confirm it, but he's said to have been hired by Leonardo DiCaprio as a tutor. "I keep trying to get out of this game, but they keep pulling me back in," he tells me. The prize money in backgammon these days is barely enough to make it worthwhile, he says. I ask him if he has any advice for me. He encourages me to take my time, to study the whole board before moving. Then he says, "You will also need the gods on your side."

Sitting with Falafel, I wonder: *What does this guy have, in terms of ability, that I don't?* An inborn gift for numbers, for one. Plus, he became a champion because he was literally hungry—desperation can bring a lot out in a person. It's why good boxers rarely grow up in houses with manicured lawns.

The championship starts. I'm nervous. I suddenly want this thing. First I play a sweet older man who resembles my father-in-law and played in the 1973 Backgammon World Championship in Las Vegas, nearly winning. This fellow is in his eighties. I later discover he is gravely ill with cancer. He genially destroys me. My next match is in the evening. I badly want a martini to steady my nerves, but drinking and professional backgammon don't mix. I pace. In my room, I consult my backgammon books. I try to keep my wits about me.

The next day, I lose again. And the next day, I burn through my consolation rounds and then my last-chance rounds. My luck, and my focus, have gone to hell. My tournament is over. All that's left to do is swim in the Mediterranean, play blackjack, eat oysters, and watch the others.

I brood over my bad math skills. It doesn't surprise me that the tournament is ultimately won by a little-known Frenchman, Didier Assaraf, who other players say is savant-like and has an aptitude for numbers. It's the last day. Victor has been avoiding me. He hasn't done well in the tournament, either, but he's apparently done well in his extracurricular matches. He asks me if I can carry a wad of money back to the States for him. I make a face that says, "Really?" He says never mind.

I fly home and mope about my game. I buy more instruction books and upgrade my computer program. I text Victor: "How about another match?" We meet again at Bear and Birch, this time in early fall. We take some steams. We eat chewy Russian dried fish. We begin to play. He annihilates me, but not as definitively as he did earlier in the year. He calls me a luck-box once in a while. In the end, he admits that there's a fair to middling chance I might find my way out of the woods. ■