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THE BACKGAMMON BOOM

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AT A TIME when booms of any kind were considered distinctly out of style the game of backgammon entered upon the greatest boom of its long life. With the single exception of Mah Jongg, no game ever swept into wide favor in this country as rapidly as backgammon in the last two years. The Oriental pastime disappeared back to China as quickly as it came, but there are definite reasons why backgammon may hold its newly won place among the thousands of its new friends. It now has a quick tempo and excitement which did not exist in the game as played a few years ago. The few changes it has undergone fit it perfectly to the present-day spirit of Americans. It furnishes a new kind of thrill and in addition is adaptable to various numbers of players, frequently giving it an advantage over a game like bridge, which can be played only by groups of four.

It is indisputable that the present boom of backgammon in this country can be traced to the enthusiastic adoption of the game by those who visit the French seaside playgrounds. At Deauville in Normandy, Biarritz in the South of France, Cannes and Antibes on the Riviera, it became the reigning sensation among games about two years ago and is that today, only more so. At Newport, Palm Beach, Havana, and similar resorts on the Western Hemisphere it was played all last season on the beaches as well as indoors.

Probably the greater number of games of backgammon in this country are played in homes; the next, in clubs of recognized standing. It can be found, however, in many other settings. Hotels in many cities have installed backgammon rooms, specialized backgammon clubs have been organized and numberless speakasies furnish equipment for their patrons. Some of the latter have arranged backgammon rooms in charge of competent instructors. To supply this varied demand, several dozen manufacturers make backgammon boards in countless forms, shapes, and sizes, and offer them for sale through innumerable channels. Even dressmaking establishments in some cities display them in their windows.

The extent of the backgammon boom is hard to measure, but the main reasons for it are not. Any one who played it years ago, dropped it, and then took it up again, will find it a vastly improved game. One feature alone has added tremendously to the thrills it produces—doubling. Whenever one player feels that he has a definite enough advantage over his opponent, he can say: "I double." That gives the opponent an opportunity to accept the double, which means that the players thereafter keep on with the value of the points exactly twice what they were before the incident; if the opponent does not wish to accept the double, he must immediately resign and be declared the loser of the game. The possibility that at almost any time the very next throw may give one or the other a good chance to double or redouble keeps the contestants mentally

on their toes. So-called automatic doubles apply to the start of the game, when the players throw to decide which will move first; if they throw the same number, the size of the points is automatically doubled, and this may occur several times before the actual game is under way.

Just who definitely originated this doubling idea which has so keyed up the game it is impossible to say. The veteran Jean Nicolopoulo, one of the outstanding backgammon enthusiasts of the Travellers Club in Paris, where many Americans play, says that doubling was employed for years in the East, before being tried in Occidental countries. It is pretty certain that its first use in either Europe or America was in a game played in Paris five years ago by H.I.H. The Grand Duke Dmitri of Russia and Aksel de Wichfeld of Denmark. The Grand Duke and Mr. de Wichfeld began by doubling each time they threw the same dice for choice of opening move. Though this may have been done before in remote countries, they report that to them the idea was original. They kept it up through months of play, and induced all the other members of the Travellers Club to adopt it. The doubling during the game was also developed by these same two players there independently of any possible previous use elsewhere. Some of those players then introduced the novelty among the players at the Racquet and Tennis Club of New York which, with the University Club of New York, for decades has had a number of staunch backgammon devotees even to the old form of the game. Some of the friends of John P. Wemple declare he was the first to show the new feature to them. In any event, it was welcomed with open arms about three years ago, and from that moment on the nationwide spread of the more stirring form of the game was inevitable.

Another feature of backgammon recently imported from France is "chouette," the procedure whereby the natural two-handed game is turned into one in which larger numbers can take part. In this, one player competes against the others, who constitute a team, its members consulting with the one active member known as the captain, who may take their advice or not as he chooses. They share the winning or loss with him, but if he is beaten another takes his place as the active one; if he wins, he becomes the individual opposed to all the rest and a different member of the original team becomes the captain or active opponent.

Nobody knows who gave this form of the game its name. In French, "Chouette" literally means a small owl, or screech-owl. There is an old French idiom, *faire la chouette*, which means to compete alone against two or more, undoubtedly based on the fact that many a poor little owl has had to fight for his life when outnumbered by his feathered enemies. "Chouette" is therefore a peculiarly apt term to describe the form of backgammon in which one player is outnumbered by his opponents.

Though the more-than-two-players ele-

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ment did not enter backgammon as now played until just a few years ago, it is known to have been tried in the early forms of the game as far back as the late seventeenth century. The game of *tric trac*, which was then the vogue in France and some other European countries from which backgammon has developed, was something played with two on a side alternating as contestants and sometimes with two against one, the inactive player taking the place of a beaten one.

In spite of all the interest in the game, during its recent rise, few have hitherto seen fit to delve into its ancient history and present the authentic story of its origin and development. Most of its biographers have contented themselves by revealing it as a game played in early times by royalty and the nobility, later taken up by the smart set everywhere. It was in great favor in the eighteenth century, but gradually subsided as cards became more popular, particularly the various forms of whist and then bridge. It kept a minor place, however, through all that time in every civilized land, being known under different names. Backgammon in America and Great Britain, it is *Jacquet* in France, *Sbragolino* in Italy, *Puffspiel* and *Tric-Trac* in Germany, *Nardi* in Russia, *Tavla* in Turkey. It is easy to establish the fact that in all of these countries as well as others, backgammon remained without an essential change, in board, set-up of men, dice and rules, for more than two hundred years. The tale of its birth and development goes much farther back than that—indeed, a modest matter of several thousand years. During that stretch it evolved slowly, with an amazingly small number of differences between the earliest game and that of today.

As far as dependable records are concerned, the story of backgammon probably should date from about the year 3000 B.C. Egyptian hieroglyphics tell of the finding then of a gaming board with two sets of draughtsmen and dice in Ur of Chaldees. Undoubtedly the oldest gaming board with sets of men and dice now in possession of civilization was found in the tomb of Tut-Ankh-Amen. In ancient Greek much can be read about their game of *Abacus*, played on a board with dice. The Japanese had a game centuries old called *Sugoroku*, played on a board marked by twelve horizontal lines, with fifteen white and fifteen black pebbles and dice.

The connecting link between the ancient and the modern in backgammon, as in many other things, was Rome. The Roman game of *Ludus Duodecim Scriptorum* was a twelve-line game with fifteen white and fifteen black men and dice, practically the backgammon of today. Imbued with the habit of introducing their manners and customs wherever they went, the soldiers of

Rome left their imprint everywhere and were the first great sellers of ideas abroad. They introduced their game to the populations of all nations conquered by them, including France and the British Isles, and there is no reasonable possibility of doubt that backgammon is a direct descendant of their pastime.

Details concerning the game and how it was played became numerous from the tenth century on. At that time the game acquired the name "tables" in all the countries of northwestern Europe. In the reign of Canute the Dane, it was played on a board with no dividing line or "bar," as it is now called. In the eleventh century the bar was added, but the points were not distinguished by being of different colors. It is well established that in the seventeenth century the game of "tables" was played in England and a similar game in France, there called *tric trac*. The board was the same as today and the men the same, but they were all placed on what is now called the "one-point" and three dice were used. Later only two dice were used, and a count of six was substituted for the third die, just as if three dice were thrown and one of them showed a six. The play was complicated and difficult; markers were always used, being placed on the points on the table, and pegs were inserted in holes placed around the frame of the board for marking the progress of the game and to serve as counters.

Toute-table was derived from *tric trac* and became popular in France in the early eighteenth century, the set-up of the pieces on the tables being identical to the backgammon set-up of today, and two dice being used. "Backgammon" was the name given this game in England shortly afterward. The scoring then was one point for game, two for game if won by throwing a doublet on the last throw, three points for a gammon and four points for a gammon if won by throwing a doublet on the last throw. Later the count was changed to one point for a hit or game and two points for a gammon. The backgammon or triple game was added early in the nineteenth century, but played by few until decades had passed.

The many books on backgammon, which are found on so many library tables, on shelves, and in stores, are by no means the first writings on the game. In its earlier forms, the game is described minutely in *Le Jeu de Tric Trac avec les Jeux de Toute-Table, et cetera*, published in 1698 in France and in *Le Grand Tric Trac*, published there in 1738. A year later in England Richard Seymour told about it in *The Compleat Gamber*, and in 1745 the immortal Edmund Hoyle published *The Polite Gamber*. In 1822 in France came a much more thorough book with the simple title of *Traite*

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Complet du Jeu de Tric Trac suivi d'un Traite du Jeu de Backgammon, and some more worthwhile material was published in 1831 in *The Sports and Pastimes*, by Joseph Strutt.

Most modern authors refer to the numbered markings of the board, though boards are never actually marked. The purpose is to guide the reader by having a definite way to designate the different points of the board accurately. This was done also by the early writers. In *tric trac* the points were designated by letters—A, B, C, et cetera—from the upper right-hand corner all the way around to the lower right-hand corner. Later they were designated by numbers, from one to twenty-four. In backgammon the points have been indicated in two ways, by numbering either from one to twelve on the two sides of the table, starting from the right, or from one to six up to the bar with the designation of Inner Table, and one to six from the bar on with the designation of Outer Table, the opposite side of the board being numbered likewise. During the thousands of years that

the game has thrived in one form or another, there is no indication that it ever had been governed by any official set of laws or rules. Apparently in early times the regulations were merely a matter of the prevailing practice. Occasionally, when some writer published a codification of these, they seemed to become the more or less generally accepted authority for an indeterminate period, but no definite effort to draw up an official set of regulations was made until the Racquet and Tennis Club in New York took the initiative. After first issuing tentative laws, it invited representatives of recognized clubs in various cities to join it in framing a thorough code, backed by the authority of all of those clubs. Working in unison, they adopted laws which have been accepted wherever introduced. These are now available to the backgammon-playing public in the book *Complete Backgammon*. Thus, for the first time as far as known, in a career of nearly five thousand years, the game of backgammon is standardized and made uniform so that all may enjoy it without misunderstanding or dispute.