

Mar. 6, 1978

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# NEW YORKER



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# THE SPORTING SCENE

## I WAS EXTREMELY LUCKY

ON January 23rd, at Pebble Beach, California, Tom Watson won the Bing Crosby National Pro-Am golf tournament and received a purse of forty-five thousand dollars. The day before that, at Boca West, Florida, Bjorn Borg had won the Pepsi Grand Slam of Tennis tournament and received a purse of a hundred and twenty-five thousand dollars. Borg's final match, against Jimmy Connors, lasted two hours and forty-five minutes; the Pepsi man who handed the victor his large check declared ringingly, on network television, "You're the highest paid hourly worker in the world." If Muhammad Ali was watching, he must have been amused. Borg did not long retain his questionable horal eminence anyway. On January 29th, at Las Vegas, Nevada, it took just a hundred and seven minutes for a man named Moshe (Chico) Felberbaum to win the final round in an international amateur backgammon championship, an event broadcast on closed-circuit television, and with it—thereby thumpingly shedding his amateur status—a first prize of a hundred and eighty thousand four hundred dollars. Chico—sportswriters use nicknames on very short acquaintance—was asked almost immediately after he reaped this monster harvest if he was disappointed at its size, and he said he wasn't. There was good reason for that odd-seeming question: as recently as nine days before the start of the competition, its promoters had been intimating—not much earlier, they had been flatly declaring—that the first prize would come to at least half a million dollars. A modest sum either way, perhaps, for a few minutes' hard work on the part of a champion heavyweight prizefighter, but boxers have to spend a good deal of time and money on training camps, and they also risk getting hurt. Physical violence is only rarely involved in topflight backgammon—though not as rarely as you might think.

Backgammon! The old dice game we used to play with our fathers when we couldn't find the Parcheesi board. Backgammon has come a long way in recent years. People who profess to know say that there are twenty million backgammon addicts—of varying ages and skills and means—in the United States today, and that in this afflicted country alone annual sales of backgammon sets rose between 1974 and 1976 from two million to five mil-

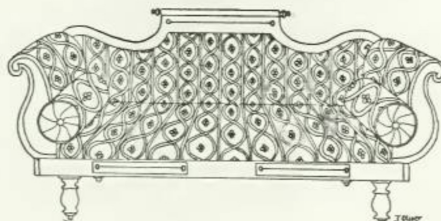
lion. Backgammon professionals have a tour circuit of their own now, not unlike pro golfers and tennis players, and they migrate in flocks from Monte Carlo to Saint-Moritz and on to Nassau and Acapulco, vying for hefty gobbs of prize money and gambling on the side—among themselves and with obliging pigeons—for enormous stakes. Backgammon has certain undeniable advantages over golf or tennis. For one thing, it can be played anywhere, under any weather conditions, for twenty-four hours at a stretch, and it frequently is. In the more or less friendly lunchtime backgammon games I sometimes join at the Harvard Club in New York, the basic stake is a dollar a point. Howard Reiling, who, at eighty-eight, is the club's oldest functioning backgammon player (and one of its best), can recall when the conventional stake there was a dime a point. Nowadays, when inveterate backgammon players say they are playing for a "dime" they mean ten dollars a point. The giants of the sport, however, who in New York hang around cockpits like the Mayfair and Cavendish Clubs, into which stratospheres I have never ventured, often play, I hear, for a thousand dollars a point, or even more. They also drift in and out of Las Vegas, where hundred-dollar bills are as mundane a medium of exchange as are subway tokens on the I.R.T.

It is hard to keep track of time in Vegas. There are few clocks in the big Strip hotels—the only one I noticed, at the Las Vegas Hilton, wasn't working—and there is little need for them, inasmuch as whatever goes on in that otherworldly community goes on around the clock. (What most people think of as Las Vegas isn't Las Vegas at all; the Hilton, the M-G-M Grand, Caesars Palace, and the Dunes—where I stayed, and where most of the backgammon action took place—are actually situated in a geographical entity debatably named Paradise Township.) Despite the absence of ordinary methods of telling time on what out there is called the Vegascene, the sun still rises and sets, and it is thus more or less pos-

sible, provided one occasionally glances through a window, to remember at least what day it is.

JANUARY 25TH: I am on a Trans World non-stop flight, in economy class, from Kennedy to Vegas, hoping to improve my backgammon prowess by watching some experts perform. I sense that this is going to be an uncommon sort of pilgrimage when, only a minute or two after takeoff, a stewardess gives every passenger who wants one a complimentary deck of playing cards. I hope there will be a tournament for me to observe when we reach our destination. Last summer, a Phoenix, Arizona, former travel agent announced a forthcoming backgammon tournament at Vegas with nearly two million dollars' worth of prize money, but then various agencies of the law, including the Attorney General of the State of New York, began looking into how he was handling the entry fees he had collected, and the whole scheme blew up. The idea, though, was in the wind. Early in November, a second seven-digit-dollar tournament was announced, and this time its sponsors said that the entry fees—five hundred dollars per contestant, which included three nights' lodging in Nevada—would be paid directly into an escrow account at the Marine Midland Bank, in New York, and that nobody could touch a penny of them until the prizes were awarded. There was to be an unconditional limit of three thousand three hundred and twenty-eight participants. No one who had ever won as much as a thousand dollars in a single backgammon tournament, or who made his or her living primarily by playing backgammon, would be eligible. The first prize would be half a million dollars, the second prize two hundred thousand. The last thirty-two survivors would all be in the money. As a come-on, additional prizes were promised for the best showing among women and senior citizens. Concurrent with the main event, there would be exhibition matches between professionals who couldn't play in it, and between members of the New York Yankees and the Los Angeles Dodgers—a kind of reprise of last fall's World Series.

The nominal promoters—not counting the ubiquitous George Plimpton, who had been hired to lend his name to the competition as honorary chairman—were two men whose names





are celebrated in gambling circles: Oswald Jacoby, the septuagenarian grand master at bridge, gin rummy, canasta, and, more recently, backgammon; and Paul Magriel, the thirty-one-year-old wunderkind known as the Human Computer, who gave up playing championship chess and teaching abstruse mathematics (he specialized in the theory of probabilities) to concentrate on backgammon. Magriel is the author of a thick, twenty-dollar tome published two years ago and entitled "Backgammon," and he writes a weekly column about the game for the *Times*. (He has long contended forthrightly that in any single game of backgammon—in contrast to a protracted match—mere luck is a fifty-five-per-cent factor. I can attest to the truth of that: not long ago, in New York, the Human Computer while blindfolded defeated Plimpton in one game and was then defeated unblindfolded in another game by a son of mine over whom I like to think I can usually prevail.) The real promoters were a small syndicate organized by Henry Wattson, a thirty-five-year-old New York-based scion of a California family in the tunnel-construction business, who is a broker in government bonds. Wattson belongs to the Mayfair Club and takes private backgammon lessons from Magriel, who has not entirely forsworn pedagogy. The young master charges five hundred dollars for five two-hour instructional sessions, and more than once after a sour lunch at the Harvard Club I have been tempted to give him a ring. If the promoters had assembled their full quota of three thousand-odd contestants, they would, after expenses, have netted a tidy three hundred thousand or thereabouts for themselves. According to the terms of their Octo-

ber agreement with Marine Midland, which was signed by Wattson and Magriel, if there was not a million dollars in escrow by January 5, 1978—exactly three weeks before the tournament was scheduled to get under way—the whole affair would be called off and everybody would get his money back. By Christmastime, it was clear that the total would fall far short of that cutoff number. On December 31st, a new escrow agreement was proposed by Magriel and by Henry Wattson's older brother Al, the president of the R. A. Wattson Corporation, in California. Now the size of the tournament was scaled down. There was no mention in the second agreement, as there had been in the first, of a million dollars, or of a half-million-dollar first prize. Instead, the arrangement was that of every five hundred dollars that came in, four hundred would go into a prize-money pool, and the promoters would sweeten the pool with an additional hundred thousand of their own. The ultimate winner would receive half of whatever the pool amounted to. With a thousand entries, there would be half a million dollars to spread around among the fortunate thirty-two survivors—fifty per cent of it going to the winner. Twenty-two hundred and fifty entries would re-create the million-dollar situation. With three thousand entries, the winner would receive six hundred and fifty thousand dollars, or even more than had initially been offered. However one looked at it, backgammon was beginning to make golf and tennis seem like peanuts.

ON the plane, I remind myself that I have been warned by a friend of mine named George, who is going

to play in the tournament but is booked on a later flight, to beware of hustlers. I am surprised that George is eligible. He once won eight thousand dollars in a smaller-scale Las Vegas tournament. George insists, splitting hairs too fine for me to see, that something like \$7,000.05 of that was auction-pool money and only \$999.95 was prize-pool money, so he cannot be said to be a thousand-dollar man. He has apparently persuaded the promoters of the reasonableness of his arithmetic. I often play against George, and we break even, all in all, but I have never won anything in any tournament. In terms of proficiency, I am to big-time backgammon roughly what Gerald Ford is to golf. A stranger sitting across the aisle riffles his free deck of cards and says, alluringly, "Would you like to play a little gin rummy?" Who is hustling whom? From the look of him, I could take him for the cost of my entire trip before we cross the Mississippi. But I am feeling kindly. I tell him I do not know the game. Besides, I have spotted Paul Magriel sitting up ahead, and I want to talk to him. Magriel has such a cherubic, innocent face that if I didn't know who he was I might suggest a few hands of gin rummy myself.

I slide into a vacant seat next to Magriel, and he tells me that he has to write his column for tomorrow's *Times* before we land but that he can spare me a few minutes. He says he expects eight hundred players to materialize before the registration rolls are closed. I am startled. A release issued by his own office a fortnight ago said that "at least" two thousand players were expected, and only yesterday a woman at that office informed me that Marine Midland already had money from a thousand players in its custody. Maybe Magriel

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has been away from his office. In any event, he himself is emphatically ineligible to swell the total of contestants. In October, he won a million drachmas—nearly thirty thousand dollars—in Athens, in a head-to-head confrontation with the legendary Joe Dwek, the London-based scourge of European backgammon (each had the help of a consultant); and just ten days ago he picked up another twenty thousand dollars by taking the World Championship, at Paradise Island, just off Nassau. (It is further indicative of how greatly luck figures in backgammon that in the same tournament the year before Magriel lost in an early round without scoring a point, and that the fellow who skunked him was himself eliminated by a woman whom nobody on the backgammon circuit had ever heard of.) I cannot fathom why Magriel is not riding first class.

"Whatever happens at Vegas, we'll have about four times as many players as ever entered a tournament before," Magriel tells me, "and a prize-money pool ten times the size of any other." He says that arranging for the tournament has kept him so busy that he has had no time to work on any of nine additional backgammon books he is supposed to be writing—on such nuances of the pesky game as "Opening Moves," "Back Game," "Prime vs. Prime," "General Principles of Positional Play," and "The Doubling Cube." Backgammon has been in existence for four or five thousand years, but the doubling cube, which enables players alternately to double the original stake, according to their view of their prospects at any given moment (a player who refuses a proffered double thereupon loses the game in progress), dates back only to the nineteenth-century, and it has given backgammon an entirely new and sometimes devastating dimension. (The cube goes from 1 to 2 to 4 to 8 and so on giddily up. The highest I personally have seen doubling stop at was 1,024, but that was in a mere half-dollar-a-point game, and, anyway, the chap who stood to lose the most in it wasn't risking much; he was playing aboard his private jet, and his pilots had standing orders that unless they were running out of gas they were never to land it until he was ahead.)

"Many people still think backgammon is a child's game," Magriel goes on, "but in fact there are still millions of things to be understood about it, in terms of theory, that nobody knows. Backgammon is very hard to learn. Everybody thinks it is simple,



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and it seems simple, and the fact that dice are involved in it tends to disguise the fact that it isn't anything of the sort. No one has yet studied the game the way chess and bridge have been studied. There are millions of situations in which nobody knows what the right move is. The trouble is that, my book and other backgammon books notwithstanding, we have too little literature. Imagine how backward we would be in chess today, or in bridge, if nobody had copied down the moves of games. In backgammon, we have no such thing yet, though I am planning to bring out, as still another book, a move-by-move analysis of my Dwek match in Athens. It lasted three days, and I barely beat him, 63-61. As backgammon stands today, in its relative infancy, the great players are great because of inbreeding. We play against one another all the time. I watch other good players and try to figure out why they make certain plays, and that improves my game. But the average player, lacking the appropriate literature, has no access to such a body of knowledge. People say that the top players in the world today have reached perfection. Well, if you were to let me lock myself up in a room for a hundred and fifty years to study the theory of backgammon and then come back and play the me of today, the future me would slaughter me."

AT the Dunes, upon checking in, I find that it is nearly impossible to get to one's room without going through the casino. I am fortunate—I can ignore the silver-dollar slot machines, because I don't have any silver dollars on me. After unpacking, I make my way to a second-floor cluster of chambers where the tournament will start tomorrow. A fellow in the press-room tells me, with a long face, that I was on one of the last planes to get out of New York on schedule. The East and the Midwest have been smitten by awful storms, and there are backgammon players wringing their idle hands from Maine to Minnesota. George Plimpton is snowed in at Flint, Michigan, and has phoned that he is going to try to get out of there by bus. Plimpton on a bus! There will be a book in that, you can bet your bottom silver dollar. In a second-floor corridor, kibitzer tickets are going on sale—ten dollars to watch any one day's play, twenty-five for the whole tournament. An outfit called Aries of Beverly Hills is providing nine hundred new boards for the contestants to play on; they re-



I started dancing when I was five at a famous ballet school. I practice, practice, practice. The first time I went on pointe was one of the greatest moments of my life. My family encourages me a lot and if you want to be the best, you need all the encouragement you can get.

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tail at fifty dollars each but, when it's all over, will be available for purchase, slightly used, at thirty-five. I brief myself on some of the rules that will govern the play: the official tournament language will be English, and nobody may talk in any other; kibitzers may not open their mouths at all, nor may they use hand signals to communicate with players. I hear that Oswald Jacoby, in a last-minute effort to attract some local talent to the fray, is playing backgammon right now on television, and that the nearest set is downstairs in the casino. I rush to the scene. The TV set is alongside a poker table, and just as I arrive one of the poker players gets up and snaps it off in mid-Jacoby. "I have better things to do than watch somebody play checkers," says the poker player, returning to his childish pursuit. Back upstairs, I meet Henry Wattson, the promoter, who is a huge, bearded man. He says that he and his co-sponsors need fifteen hundred entrants to break even, but that, because of the weather and everything, he now anticipates only a thousand. He says there would have been more had not fifty people who tried to enter been disqualified. Wattson says that he himself, as a non-thousand-dollar-winner, would qualify, but that it would probably be unsuitable for him to compete. He says that there is nothing, though, to prevent him from playing *me*, sociably. He invites me to his lair. He will not play for less than a "nickel"—five dollars—a point. I shrug and accept his invitation. We play most of the night, oblivious of countrywide rain, hail, snow, sleet, and other irrelevant distractions. I graciously permit him to pay off in casino chips.

**JANUARY 26TH:** This morning's Las Vegas *Sun*, which is devoted largely to stories about one of Howard Hughes's wills and about possible effects of radiation on eighty thousand people who were present during nuclear tests in Nevada in the nineteen-fifties, has a brief item in its sports section about our impending extravaganza which says, "At least 2,500 players are expected to compete." While I am puzzling over the source of that figure, my friend George phones from New York. He is inundated at the airport, and will arrive as soon as he dries out. After breakfast, I proceed to a salon where players who have managed to get to Vegas are converging to register. I hear German voices, and Israeli voices, and cascades of Spanish. Flights from

Mexico are coming in nicely. Somebody says that if all who are expected to get here arrive, the countries represented in the starting lineup will also include Australia, Brazil, Bulgaria, Canada, Chile, England, France, and Japan. "This is bigger than the Super Bowl and the World Series combined," I hear one man say, in unaccented English. Somebody else says that the Yankees and the Dodgers will not put in an appearance after all ("Too bad," a publicity man comments. "It was to



have been their last big fling before spring training") but that Lucille Ball has duly arrived and will play. The less celebrated participants are milling around discussing crucial moments of bygone games ("And would you believe, a double-four, a thirty-five-to-one shot and the only one that could hit me") and, if they haven't previously sent their money in, trying to find somebody who can accept their entry fees. Only a banker who has been dispatched to Vegas by the Marine Midland can do that, it appears, and nobody knows where he is. Paul Magriel is literally running around looking for him. Like most other people in Vegas, Magriel is casually dressed; and—sensibly, in his circumstances—he has on track shoes. Toward noon, a young man arrives who is easily identifiable as the banker: dark suit, with vest; shirt and tie; black shoes; short hair; horn-rimmed glasses; briefcase. He sets up a local branch of the Marine Midland, his back to a mountain of cardboard cartons containing glassware, in a small storage room off a bar. Oswald Jacoby also shows up, and is greeted with reverence befitting his elder-statesman stature; it is as if Bernard Baruch were visiting the White House. Jacoby is wearing bright-red pants and a Harry Trumanish sports shirt. (The word is out that Barclay Cooke, another of backgammon's doyens, is stuck in New York.) Jacoby seizes an empty chair, and a local reporter scurries over to pry a few quotable words out of him. Jacoby reflects for a bit, and then says, "I never stand when I can sit, and I never sit when I can lie down." Hyperbole, I infer, inasmuch as he stays in his chair. One prospective player waiting for an audience with Mr. Marine Midland asks a companion to guess the average age of the sixty or so bodies milling about the premises. The answer comes back with a computerlike immediacy that Magriel might admire: "Thirty-eight." I wander down to the casino in the hope of cashing in Henry

Wattson's chips, which turn out to be redeemable at par for real money. At a nearby bar, I pause for some fresh grapefruit juice, which is delicious here, and which may be the reason that so many people seem to gravitate toward Las Vegas.

By mid-afternoon, tournament play is at last under way, though latecomers are still being allowed to register, and will be tomorrow, too. Concurrent action, I hear, has started up over at the Hilton. There are no favorites, odds-on or otherwise. Few people know who anybody else is, though Magriel did tell me in flight that he suspected that the eventual winner might be a bridge player of championship calibre. "I would predict that he will be somebody who excels at some other table sport," Magriel said. "He will have to have a berserk desire to win, and be used to excruciating tournament pressure." At the Dunes, the competition is taking place in a vast hall called the Crown Jewel Room, and two men, one with a cowboy twang, who are waiting for the signal for them to begin are indulging in a practice game. I watch them and am appalled. One seemingly doesn't know how a game is supposed to start, and the other doesn't know in which direction his pieces are supposed to move. Can this be a double hustle, or are they amateurs of egregious amateurishness? Later, when they get down to serious business, the cowboy throws a 5-4 but wrongly moves a 5-3, and his opponent doesn't notice the gaffe. As a kibitzer, I am forbidden to talk; I manage to suppress a gasp. I wish I were playing against both of them in the tournament.

Toward dusk, I bump into Henry Wattson. "The weather is killing us," he says. I stroll downstairs for a Perrier-and-lime, and, near the bar, spy the Marine Midland banker. "I've never seen anything like this," he says. "I had two hours' sleep last night, trying to get the accounts in order." I ask him when, if ever, he was in Vegas before. "My parents brought me here when I was fourteen," he says, "but this time I haven't even had a chance to put a penny in a slot machine." Word of inflation has evidently not yet reached his bank.

I betake myself to the Hilton, to observe an East-West exhibition match that has been scheduled there. Such bona-fide gods of the backgammon pantheon as Billy Eisenberg, Chuck Pazanian, Stanley Tomchin, and Roger Low are supposed to be on view, but the only one I see—standing in a hallway—is Low, a twenty-year-old school



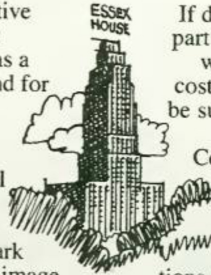
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dropout from New York whose father despaired of him until Roger began earning more money at backgammon than Low père ever had at anything. Low fils and Magriel occasionally amuse themselves on airplanes, while they are travelling to this or that tournament, by playing backgammon blindfolded. Well, not exactly blindfolded: they use an imaginary board and instead of throwing dice they throw out fingers at one another, and keep everything in their astonishing heads. Roger Low, wearing a broad sash with "Director" printed on it, says that the East-West matches aren't taking place right now but will resume tomorrow. This seems an odd thing to say, considering that, as it turns out, they haven't yet begun. Perhaps he should have stayed in school a trifle longer. He directs my voyeuristic attention to a table where two men are playing for two hundred dollars a point. I watch one of them count a wad of hundred-dollar bills he is clutching in his hand. By my confirming audit, he has twenty-seven of them. His opponent, after a spell of bad dice, runs out of the hundreds he has been holding, reaches into a pocket, extracts a fresh supply, and plunges on. Neither says a word. Bored by their lack of carefree chatter, I return, at around midnight, to the Dunes, where I encounter Barclay Cooke, who has finally made it in from New York. "I'm supposed to be on the rules committee," Cooke tells me, "but there doesn't seem to be any ruling to do." His chance will come. I run into Henry Wattson, who suggests a return match. Poor sucker! He will never recoup his large entrepreneurial losses from me. Toward dawn, he graciously permits me to pay him off in travellers' checks, of which I heretofore thought I had brought along an adequate supply.

**JANUARY 27TH:** At 7 A.M. Las Vegas time, when I have barely fallen asleep, I am awakened by a call from my wife. It is 10 A.M. in New York. How does she know I am here? I thought she thought I was in Tucson, Arizona, visiting a grandson. She says George told her. Blabbermouth George clearly has a lot to learn about male bonding. Now that she knows where I am, she says she is glad she caught me before I went off to work. She wonders how the weather is in Vegas and whether I have had a chance to stroll around town. I tell her, truthfully, that I haven't seen much of the weath-

er and that I don't know which direction town is in. I decide I might as well get up. I can sleep on the plane going home. In the pressroom, I see a late issue of a Mexico City magazine, *El Mundo del Backgammon*. The headline over its lead article is "*El Millon de Dolares ¡Resucitado! ¡O Solo Una Ilusion?*" Somebody hands me a clipping from the *Armenian Post*, a New York City weekly—this tournament is getting a big play all over—which relates how Paul Magriel not long ago conducted a backgammon demonstration as a benefit for the Boston Symphony Orchestra. It is this sort of thing that backgammon players think gives us class; you never hear of poker or gin-rummy players taking time off from their wretched pastimes to accomplish anything cultural like that.

Play is continuing in the Crown Jewel Room. A woman is complaining to one official that the hovering over her shoulder of two other officials cost her her first-round match, because they made her nervous. She has fingernails an inch and a half long, and I would hate to be in her vicinity when she got really agitated. The play is momentarily interrupted by a bewildering announcement over a public-address system: "People who have been forfeited have not been forfeited." Barclay Cooke is conferring solemnly with a bevy of other officials, who are all carmine sashed save him; he is wearing a bright-green sweater, and to drape a red sash over that would be, for a Racquet and Tennis Club man of his distinction, in unspeakably poor taste. Also, too Christmassy for January. One player has a bright-red fez on his head. He doesn't look Egyptian, or even Armenian; perhaps he is a Shriner. He has put a hand-lettered sign next to his board: "NO SMOKING KIBITZERS PLEASE!" That would have raised eyebrows at many another tournament on the pro circuit, because Philip Morris has been a no less dogged patron of championship backgammon—this Las Vegas tournament notably excepted—than of women's championship tennis. The fez man, staring reproachfully at an official with a cigar in his mouth, says, to no one in particular, "Other people deny it, but I am the best player in the world." A moment later, he loses his match, and resignedly walks over to one corner of the Crown Jewel Room to enroll—for an extra hundred dollars—in a Second Chance flight. It has been decreed that









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this happening memorable enough to enshrine in the annals of network television, and whose invasions of privacy I had been carefully avoiding until I came out of my Tucson closet. There is an odd-looking little middle-aged fellow hanging lovingly on to Lucy, whom I identify for an inquisitive bystander as Mickey Rooney. Mickey Rooney double-crosses me by turning out to be Bobby Riggs. Miss Ball's playing area is soon engulfed by spectators, and, being no taller than Rooney-Riggs, I cannot see over their bent heads what is going on, so I stop to chat with one contestant, also from New York, who says he plays both at the Mayfair and at the Yale Club. I'd had no idea that Yale men play backgammon. I return to the casino for a straight vodka. The Marine Midland emissary is hunched wearily over the bar, his tie loose. He says nobody will know until tomorrow, when a banker more senior than he arrives from the East with all the escrow records, how many players there actually are in this benighted tournament. I get back to the Crown Jewel Room in time to see my friend George toss away his first-round match. Before my unbelieving eyes, he stupidly misplays a critical 2-1 roll, and then he neglects to double three times in a row when he is in so advantageous a position that his opponent, if he has any sense, would have to concede that particular game. George is of Greek extraction, and, after he rises and congratulates his deposer, a kibitzer says something to him in a foreign tongue. George nods. I ask him what the other fellow was saying, and in what language. "He said, 'Θά έπρεπε να διπλασιάζεις,'" George says. I request a translation. "That's Greek to me, for 'You should have doubled,'" George tells me. He proceeds to enlist in the Second Chance ranks, and he invites me to play him once more. Lucille Ball is now engaged in some lively calisthenics alongside her playing table. (She eventually reaches the third round, but there falls to a woman wearing less lipstick.) It is nearly midnight, however, and "60 Minutes" has carted off its gear for the evening and so misses this exclusive footage. George and I play à deux for several lively hours. A costly mistake on his part.

**JANUARY 28TH:** This morning's *Sun* has a headline reading "LV BACKGAMMON CONTEST SURROUNDED BY MYSTERY." The *Sun* is wondering, not illogically, why nobody can tell how many people are playing in it. At



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breakfast, I run into George Plimpton. He got here at midnight, he says—too late to play in the tournament. He looks so forlorn that I offer to play him myself. The first-prize winner, it has been announced, will receive not merely cash but also a leg on a trophy called the Plimpton Cup. George P. confesses that he has never laid eyes on it and did not foot the bill for it, so I suppose the trophy cannot be considered exactly analogous to the Davis Cup.

In the playing area, Henry Wattson is standing on a chair calling the roll of Second Chance survivors. George the Greek is not among them. His last tournament ship seems to have sunk at some hideous early-morning hour. Las Vegas is a dangerous place to visit in more ways than one—at four-thirty this morning, I saw a man being carried off to a hospital after slipping, literally, on a banana peel—but it has sturdy furniture: Wattson weighs two hundred and seventy-five pounds, and the chair does not even tremble. There are well over a hundred more or less normal-sized bodies left in contention—out of how many starters we still have not been informed. We do hear that there was almost a fistfight at the Hilton last night—something involving a person who thought he had lost a match, congratulatorily shook his adversary's hand, and was then advised by a loose-lipped kibitzer that he had misread his opponent's dice and hadn't yet lost at all. Barclay Cooke had to be summoned to the Hilton from the Dunes to render a decision, and he ruled against the premature handshaker. A formal protest has since been lodged, which I gather from reliable sources the appropriate officials will in due course see fit to ignore. Almost as soon as play resumes at our hotel, another argument erupts. A woman has played a 4-2, which she insists is what she threw; her opponent, before the woman scooped up her dice, saw it as 5-2. Henry Wattson lumbers over to adjudicate. "I believe that both of you believe you're right," he says, with consummate tact. He instructs them to roll one die each—the higher number to determine what the woman's move is to be. She rolls a 5, her opponent a 4, and she gets to play her 4-2 after all.

Oswald Jacoby is in the room, but he isn't watching anybody. With a large crowd watching him, he is taking on someone from California. "They don't play one another for more than a hundred dollars a point," Wattson tells me. "They'll gladly play other people for more. They'll play you for a



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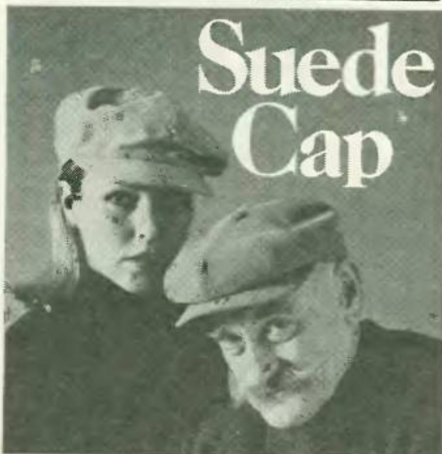
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lot more." I ask him, to change the subject, how many players there have been in the tournament, and he asks me to guess. My guess is eight hundred and twelve. He says I am not far off. While waiting for the ranks to be further thinned, I engage in a low-key, three-dollar-a-point contest with another Californian, a young woman who is covering the tournament for the magazine *Gammon*. (The press is here in full force—*Stern*, *Visual Images*, *Sports Illustrated*, and *Gambling Times*.) "I'm a second-year law student at Whittier," she tells me, "but since I took up backgammon, eleven months ago, I've been sitting in the back of the classroom studying Magriel's book during lectures." She has not been frittering her time away in law school; she relieves me of three dollars.

The rumor circulates that the number of contestants will finally be put at six hundred and thirty-eight. In any event, we are down to thirty-two of them, and by the end of this day—more accurately, by dawn tomorrow—all but four semifinalists will have vanished from contention. The thirty-two assured money-winners, whatever it may mean, are all male—eleven from California, four from New York, three each from Texas and Illinois, two each from Canada, England, Mexico, and New Jersey, and one each from Florida, Minnesota, and Wisconsin. The oldest is sixty-nine and the youngest twenty-one; their average age (shades of what the fellow in the registration room calculated two days ago!) is thirty-eight. Their surnames have a tangy international flavor: Aryeh, Jalil, Kaloudis, Malik, Manukian, Tcheurekdjian. I have never heard of any of them before.

At 6 P.M., paired by lot, they get under way. I ask Barclay Cooke, who, in view of the increasing seriousness of the moment, has switched to a dark suit (Magriel has stopped running, but he is still in track shoes), whether he is sorry he cannot take part in any of this. "Not at all," he says. "I'm glad to have the pressure off for a while." And indeed the pressure seems to be on: the players do not smile or chat; they take longer between moves than they did in earlier rounds; air-conditioning notwithstanding, there is sweat on more than one furrowed brow. At midnight, I take another spectator break. Henry Wattson invites me to play with him a little. I decline. I would as soon wrestle a bear. Instead, I join George Plimpton and George

the Greek and a stray Pakistani in a less pressure-packed game. The man whose name adorns the Plimpton Cup does not consider himself as adept at backgammon as at football, baseball, ice hockey, and other comparatively sedentary sports; he will not play for over two dollars a point. The other George, trying to mount a comeback, insists that the rest of us play for twenty. I have never climbed that high before without oxygen. George P. quits early, an eighteen-dollar loser. He will probably retrieve the loss from a book about how we trounced him. By the time the other George gives up, he has run out of cash. I hope his checks, of which I seem to have a fistful, do not bounce.

At 6 A.M., the semifinalists are revealed: Ron Rubin, a broker and bridge champion from New Jersey, and Simon Naim, a salesman from Chicago, in one bracket; and in the other Dennis Stone, a screenwriter from Van Nuys, California, and Chico Felberbaum, a businessman from Edmonton, Alberta. I fall asleep dreaming of their pots of gold.

**JANUARY 29TH:** Play in the semifinals is slated to start at 9 A.M. Before then, at breakfast, I meet up with Magriel. He says groggily that the bankers have finally authorized the release of some figures: total contestants, 652; first prize, \$180,400; second prize, \$72,160; third prize, \$18,040; fourth prize, \$9,020; lowest prize, \$902. "I'm a little disappointed," Magriel says. "But you have to keep everything in perspective. We did end up with the biggest tournament ever, and next year we'll do better, because we've established a certain credibility." Magriel eats cinnamon toast for breakfast.

I ask him if the competition has been more disputatious than in run-of-the-mill tournaments.

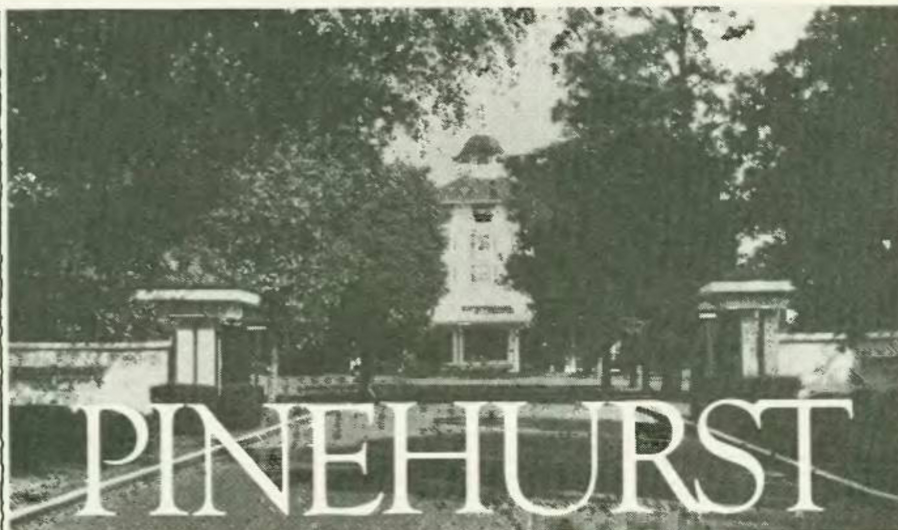
"The more you play for, the more intense the arguments get," he says. "After all, these guys are playing for nearly two hundred thousand dollars, which could radically change their lives."

The semis begin. It is touch and go at both boards. Finally, Rubin edges Naim, and Felberbaum squeaks past Stone. Rubin and Felberbaum have each had to win ten consecutive matches to get this far. The two finalists, as if at a title-prizefight weighing-in ceremony, repair together to one side of the Crown Jewel Room and, hemmed in by their seconds, confer in muted tones. Word soon spreads that

they are trying—to no avail, it turns out—to agree to split their money, sixty per cent of their total take to the winner, forty per cent to the loser. (Splitting the money is not uncommon in such circumstances.) Bobby Riggs saunters by, enticingly waving a tennis racquet. Who could think of tennis, whatever odds Riggs might offer, at a time like this? Anyway, is it daylight or dark, clear or raining? I adjourn to the casino bar for a double Scotch. The younger Marine Midlander is there, besweated and tieless; a couple more days of this and he'll look as scruffy as the rest of us.

The final is held in a smallish chamber from which most onlookers are barred, except for Barclay Cooke, the designated referee for the epic encounter, and a pit boss from the casino, whose mission is to keep a sharp eye on the dice. The rest of the cast—some four hundred strong—assemble in an adjoining room where we are to follow the tense proceedings on a large television screen, with Magriel furnishing a running commentary. This match will be a fifteen-pointer. There is a mild flap at the outset, about the direction in which the players should move their pieces. (Either way is perfectly acceptable.) “When you’re playing for this amount of money, that can make a difference,” Magriel explains. “Chico likes his home board to his left.” Chico has his way. And then, as they swing into action, Chico wins further: in what seems no time at all, though it is really about an hour, he has attained a huge lead, of 10–1. But in backgammon there are no insurmountable hurdles. Ron comes clawing back, and at 14–4, one point from defeat, he needs a 7 to stay alive. He gets it, with a boldly thrown 6–1. That, though, is the last good breath he draws, and a few minutes later Chico Felberbaum joins Tom Watson and Bjorn Borg on the select roster of big-money champions.

Soon afterward, inevitably, the newly crowned champ holds a press conference. We learn that he is thirty-four, is from Israel, is a Sabra, is the father of two, is married to a photographer. (His wife is here with him, but she is too dazed by their good fortune to remove her camera from its case.) He migrated to Canada nine years ago, and is in “real-estate development” at Edmonton; he prefers not to divulge the name of his company, though it is his own. He has been playing backgammon for about fourteen years, on and off. More off than on: incredibly, he hadn’t played seriously for six months



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prior to this tournament. There isn't anybody in Edmonton, he says wistfully, to play with.

What—*Gambling Times* and *Gammon* and *The New Yorker* are desperate to know all—brought him to Las Vegas?

"The prize."

What backgammon books has he found most helpful?

"I've never read a backgammon book."

How does he keep his game sharp, if he doesn't play much?

"I don't think it's sharp."

To what does he attribute his success?

"I was extremely lucky, and my opponent had the worst dice."

Has he ever played against any of the pros, and, now that he is one of them, will he be joining them on the circuit?

"I haven't got a chance against them. I think I played against people here who are better players than I am, which shows that backgammon is seventy-five per cent luck."

**S**OON we all go home. It has been a stimulating experience, everything considered, though following Tom Watson around a golf course might have been healthier. On the Vegascene, things are settling back to normal. The Dunes is preparing for the annual Hadassah dinner dance tonight, Billy Graham is due at Caesars Palace tomorrow, and soon after that, over at the Hilton, Ali will be toying with young Spinks. My friend George gratefully accepts a ride in my cab to the airport, but he is flying to Detroit, not New York. He says he has a deal he hopes to make there with some automobile people. Earlier, he had mentioned that he owned a Rolls-Royce. A good enough deal and he will be close to even. Paul Magriel, for his part, is planning to pack up his track shoes and take off for Riyadh, where he has been summoned to give private lessons for a whole month, at what hourly rate of pay I dare not contemplate, to a brother of the King of Saudi Arabia.

—E. J. KAHN, JR.

Gov. J. Joseph Garrahy, quarterbacking Rhode Island's battle against mammoth snow drifts, donned a change of clothes for the first time in four years.

—*Mexico City News*.

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