

Backgammon to lose

BY COREY FORD

Some sour notes on the latest week-end menace by someone who is backgammon pretty sick of too much of the game

■ A lot of pilgrims have been wending their way up to my Himalayan cave lately, and asking me to come down to earth again for a few days and get rid of Backgammon.

The country, they tell me, is practically a shambles. Everybody has gone Backgammonberserk. Hostesses meet trains nowadays with sets in their hands; black-and-red boards flap open at every lapse in the conversation; the click of markers and the cadaverous rattle of dice pursue the hounded guests even in their sleep. Experts are doubling and redoubling their trusting partners out of small fortunes, gentlemen are separating their wives from their very cigarette money, and the Long Island roads these nights are filled with a long line of stripped and penniless dowagers trudging back to town in barrels. Already Contract Bridge is *déclassé*, ping-pong and billiards have been relegated to the museum of social what-is-it's, and the Art of Conversation is entirely extinct. The sport of Backgammon, so my visitors inform me, has swept the nation like new brooms. The entire structure of the American week-end is threatened; and before the ancient custom disappears and they substitute a new calendar eliminating Saturday and Sunday entirely, these pilgrims want me to slip on a goatskin and a pair of sandals and do something about it.

"You got rid of Mah Jong for us," they point out breathlessly, because it is quite a long climb on white donkeys to my cave and the rarified atmosphere up here gets you at first. "You waged a war on the Baffle Books practically single-handed. You spent months fighting the plague of Parlor Games like 'Murder' and 'Twenty Questions.' It was the pogrom you instituted against 'Laddergrams' and 'Guggenheim,' O yogi, which rid society at last of both these pests. You are known and feared from coast to coast as the Scourge of the Cross-Word Puzzles. Every so often you appear in *Vanity Fair* like a clap of thunder, and another week-end menace goes reeling over the horizon, five years or so later. Please use your influence this time to abolish Backgammon. And while you're at it," they add, "you might do something too about Floyd Gibbons, spinach, Tom Thumb Golf, and people who carry cocktails in to dinner."

(All this is translated for me later by Sull-ivan, my faithful Indian retainer. I can't understand a word, of course.)

"America needs you now," pleads another pilgrim, a Mrs. Messersmith of Montclair, N. J. "Dinner parties are being ruined, homes

broken up, husbands and wives are not speaking. A whole new glossary of bewildering words like *chouette*, *pips*, *blot* and *gammon* has crept into an already over-complicated language. If things keep on, it is only a step to 'Authors', squat tag, alphabet blocks, and the psychopathic ward."

I comb a few ashes thoughtfully from my long, matted beard.

"We'll guarantee to pay all expenses," adds her husband, a Mr. Messersmith. "Just come down for a week-end and see what it's like."

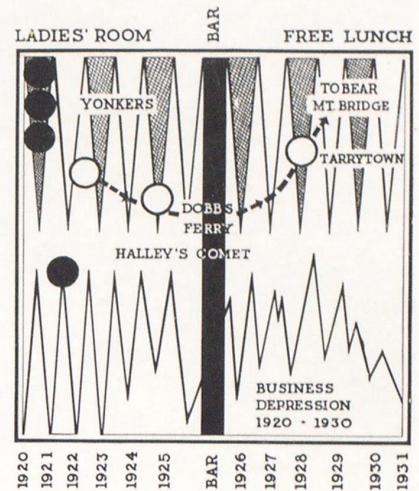
By way of answer I squat myself comfortably on the glowing coals, and stick one or two rusty nails contentedly into my flesh.

"Not on your life, bo," I reply, in Hindustani. "This old yogi knows when he's well off."

■ In the first place, I am very much afraid that Backgammon is no passing whim. M. Mabardi has pointed out that it was played in Egypt thirty centuries ago by Ur of the Chaldees; and if that is true, then a fat chance we have of getting rid of it overnight. (They've been chipping away at the Sphinx for years.) We may as well accept the fact calmly that Backgammon, like the automobile, is here to stay; and set about trying to work up some sort of racial resistance to it, such as we have developed against measles or the White Man's Curse. Personally I have always found that a very good form of racial resistance against games like Backgammon is never to learn how to play them in the first place.

And even if they *did* get rid of Backgammon, there would only be something else even more unpleasant to take its place. Society is just a bunch of children grown up (and not so gosh-darned grown up at that, if you ask me) and the old nursery hangover still crops out on the slightest provocation. I have seen a sophisticated dinner-party, which had exhausted Matisse, Marcel Proust, and the future of companionate marriage, adjourn to another room and be screaming with laughter five minutes later over their efforts to toss playing-cards into a derby hat. Wearied *débutantes* who consider Kraftt-Ebing pretty much kindergarten stuff will spend hours on their hands and knees blowing a feather across the floor, or dressing up in funny hats to act out the syllables of a better-known vegetable. If it were not for Backgammon, we should probably go back even further into our baby days, and spend our evenings putting a set of Meccano together, or playing Farmer in the Dell. Any week-end might be featured by the sight of a group of guests sitting in a circle with their shoes off, each trying to get his big toe into his mouth. Somehow I think it would be better to stick to Backgammon.

The only hope that I can see is to improve the present game until it is no longer offensive. For example, the editors of *Vanity Fair* have just sponsored an elaborate and authoritative volume entitled *Backgammon to Win* by Georges Mabardi. (Continued on page 102)



HOW TO PLAY COREY FORD BACKGAMMON:

In this popular version of the game, the Backgammon Board is eliminated entirely. So are the black and white markers. In fact, all that remains is a pair of Dice. The game is played on your hands and knees.

RULES

According to the rules, as approved by *Vanity Fair*, one player places the stakes before him and holds the dice. His opponent "fades" him (See glossary). If on the first roll the player throws a 7 or 11 in any of its combinations, he wins. If he throws a twelve, a two or a three, he loses. If he throws any other number (say a nine) he keeps rolling until he "makes his point" (See glossary). If he makes a seven before the "point", he stops shooting and passes the dice to his opponent.

GENERAL STRATEGY

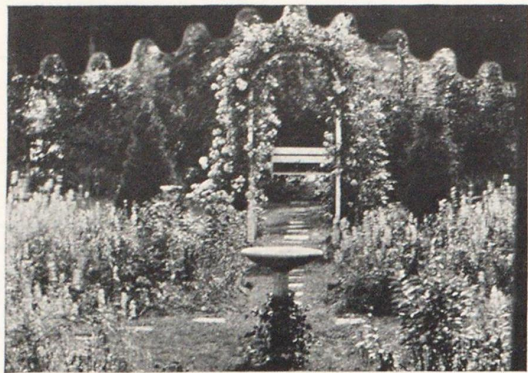
There are six ways to make a seven.
There are five ways to make a six or eight.
There are four ways to make a five or nine.
There are three ways to make a four or ten.
Sixes and eights against seven are an even bet. Odds on five and nine are three to two against you. Odds on four and ten are two to one.

CHOUETTE

Side bets may be made with one of the players, or with anyone else observing the game. For instance, the player has led a ten. One bystander says "Buck to a half he don't." Another says "Faded" (See glossary) or "Half a buck he's right." This goes on all night.

GLOSSARY

Big Joe: a ten.
Box Cars: a pair of sixes; i.e., twelve.
Craps: twos, threes, and twelves.
Eighter from Decatur: an eight.
Fading: calling an opponent, covering his bet.
Little Joe: a four.
Make a point: to get your number before you throw seven with the dice.
Nina from the South: a nine.
Natural: a seven or eleven thrown on the first roll.
Right: Dice are "right" when they are working well for the thrower.
Snake's Eyes: a one and one.
Wrong: Dice are "wrong" when they are continually throwing craps or sevens before the point number. N.B. This almost always happens.



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including a Glossary, Authorized Rules for 1931, Rules for Chouette, and Tournaments, and two supplementary chapters by Clare Boothe Brokaw (*Horace Liveright, New York: \$1.50 adv.*). Now, I do not intend in this article to go against the editors of *Vanity Fair* (and lose my job. I'm no fool); but it seems to me that there are one or two methods of living up the ancient and honorable sport which this handsome handbook has omitted. These suggested improvements are as follows:

1. Eliminate the game. (This is pretty nearly impossible, except in isolated cases.)

2. Eliminate the players. (Unfortunately, if there is one thing duller than playing Backgammon with a crowd of people, it is playing Backgammon by yourself.)

3. Eliminate everything else.

And right here is where I fit in. Here is the suggestion I had to make to the Messersmiths. After studying the present game from all its angles, I have come to the conclusion that there are a lot of useless features which only slow up the sport, and which can be removed without harming the essential object of Backgammon: genteel burglary.

As a result, I have invented Corey Ford backgammon.

The first and most interesting feature of my new version is the fact that it does away with the Backgammon

Board entirely. This alone represents a saving of at least fifty dollars a set, and throws the game open to the general public such as myself. In addition, there are no black and white markers to be nibbled by bleary-eyed guests, under the impression that they are caviar sandwiches. In Corey Ford Backgammon, all that remains is the dice; and the object of the game is simply to shake these dice in your hand (it is considered sort of sissy to use a cup) and roll them out onto the floor, snapping your fingers. From then on, the game takes care of itself.

To be sure, there are one or two expert angles to this new game. They are not very important, and in the heat of the sport they are apt to be overlooked; but just for the fun of the thing, I have listed them on the first page of this article, complete with Rules, General Strategy, and a comprehensive Glossary, as compiled by that old Egyptian sage and Backgammoner, T. H. Wenning, who used to play it every day on the *terrace* of the *Café Bellevue* until he had cleaned up the entire place.

And until the situation clears up, and my new game of Backgammon takes the place of the present social menace, old yogi Ford sticks right up here in his cave in the Himalayas, and to hell with everybody. You don't get me to stir an inch off these ashes. I'm no sucker.

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