

The perfect backgammoner

BY JULIAN JEROME

Light-hearted but sound advice about the etiquette of a new game for the benefit of its enthusiasts

■ The year nineteen thirty has been a memorable one in the world of fashion, for it has seen the romantic revival of long skirts, a crash (with social reverberations) in the stock market, the sprightly advent of Tom Thumb golf, and the sudden and wide-spread vogue for the ancient and all but forgotten game of backgammon. Now, some philosophical soul might find in the extraordinary popularity of this latter fad a combination of the elements of all the other three: like long skirts, its reversion to antiquity is a pleasant revolt against a too rigid modernism. Again, the game is an exciting, if miniature, re-enactment of the stock-market crash, with its sudden adventurous ups and downs, its rapid, unpredictable and dizzy turns of fortune. In addition to this heady wine of chance it offers the same childish mental hazards and imaginative possibilities as Tom Thumb golf. Thus the philosophical soul might make an excellent case for the theory that this latest parlour phenomenon, backgammon, which is both modern and romantic, dangerous and frivolous, lucky and skillful presents a perfect portrait of the modern mind.

However that may be, backgammon is here and, we may suppose, here to stay: meaning, exactly, that it is here to stay until some game with more exciting possibilities is

evolved, invented, or resuscitated. To prove that the new backgammon (unlike the late unlamented Mah-Jong) is not a transient vogue, several fair-sized volumes about it have already appeared. But in all truthfulness it must be said that they contribute little more to the knowledge and directions given by the classic Mr. Hoyle and the *Encyclopedia Britannica* article than certain added facts about doubling, the only new development of the game, and some diagrams which simplify the playing directions for the novice.

And none of the volumes which have appeared until now (nor indeed any of the newspaper or current magazine articles) have contained a word about the *etiquette* of this game—a deplorable omission, for, as any backgammon fan will tell you, there is no game, not even Contract Bridge, in which a player, without infringing any of the written rules, may be more annoying, more irritating, and more of a bore to his opponent, than at backgammon. The variety of ways in which a man or woman, armed with a dice-cup and dice, can sit down before a board and quite unconsciously, perhaps, exasperate or exhaust an adversary, are numerous enough to deserve some mention.

■ Into the category of backgammon nuisances the blatant novice does not precisely fit, for while he is an obvious bore to the experienced backgammoner with whom he insists on playing, he is often a blessing in disguise, a lamb preparing himself for the slaughter, something, one might almost say, handed to you on a silver platter. And unlike the bridge novice who assumes, with disastrous and embarrassing results, the responsibility of a partner, the backgammon neophyte is on his own—lives, dies, doubles,

and loses on his own. And while it is always tedious for an expert to play backgammon with a novice the monetary rewards usually make it (to speak brutally) worth his while.

But it is the trying habits of the experienced opponents—those who can ably roll their own—which have made more than one backgammoner vow never to throw a pair of sixes again.

First, there is the Lazy Player (women are the greatest offenders in this) who sets up the board and arranges the men in as leisurely a fashion as if only one game were to be played every three hours—meanwhile chatting, smoking, or drinking, and then at long last, noticing, with a little gurgle of amusement or embarrassment, that her board is set up quite differently from your own. While you start rearranging your board to match hers, the Lazy Player begins apologetically to do likewise, so that the whole performance becomes a constant shifting and pushing of men to all four corners of the table. (The simplest way with such scatter-brained lazy players is patiently but firmly to say, "May I set up your board for you?")

The Slow Player is the over-thoughtful one who ponders for long, weary minutes over every possible and probable move combination of his throw, and takes also into lengthy consideration the chances of your next throw. In a game whose greatest charm is a certain swift and fluid quality, the exaggerated brain-rackings of a Slow Player are both tedious and out of place.

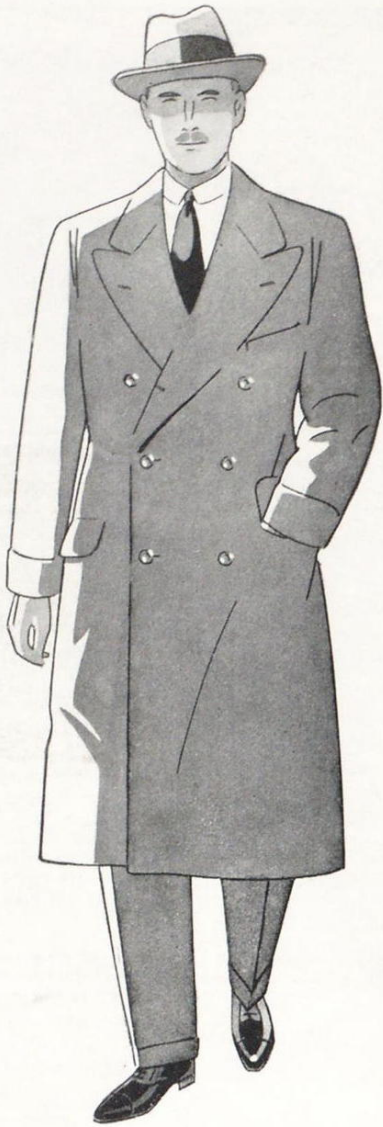
■ One of the worst backgammon offenders is the Cup Rattler. With infantile glee, he grasps his dice-box in his hand, and from the moment your first throw is made to the moment his last man is borne off, he frantically, loudly, and passionately rattles his dice. Nothing can stop him, for the better your throw, the more vigorously he rattles his box, and when he himself is winning, it sounds like the gourds of an entire Havana Rumba band, without, one might add, the exhilarating cadences of those primitive instruments.

There is also the Fast Shooter. This type of pest never waits until your dice are back in your box to hurl his own upon the table with the speed of a machine gun, and his do-or-die expression manages to make you feel as if the destiny of an empire hung upon the cast of his dice. In his painful eagerness to see what that destiny will be, he acts as though he hoped to see, not only double sixes, but quadruplets as well.

Again, there is the School-Teacher Player, who knows just as well as you and I, or his youngest child, that three and two make five, but who, in a loud, monotonous, and cheery voice, counts out every throw something like this: "Well, *there's* my three, and *there's* my two! And here's a four, and there's a six. And that's *one* one, (Continued on page 108)



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and that's *two* ones, and that's *three* ones, and this makes *four* ones!"

Another variation is the Point-Counter, who, holding his man between a thumb and forefinger, loudly taps every point, droning like a bee. "One—two—three—four—five—and six. (Down the man goes, thank heaven!) And one—two—and three!"

The Noisy Player is the one who literally scales his men from point to point, throwing them across the board as if it were a bowling alley, and knocking your men off like ninepins. This is usually accompanied by a great air of assurance, as though he were the finest backgammoner at the boards.

The Cock-Dice Thrower, who in his enthusiasm for good rolls, throws into your board, into an ash tray, on the floor, or under the piano, is another pest, particularly so, as by some evil (or lucky) chance, his cocked throw is usually an excellent one, and when he must take it over again, he breaks out into a whole train of laments against his ill luck and fortune.

This type quite naturally leads us to the Grouser. He is also found on the golf course, complaining bitterly of poor lies, and at the bridge-table, of wretched cards. But when he enters the backgammon lists, the board becomes a veritable wailing wall, and after his first bad cast of the dice, he lifts his voice in a pathetic apostrophe to the Gods of Chance: "That," he exclaims, "was the worst throw I could have had! I always throw the most terrible dice in the world! I've never seen such dice as you throw. You get everything you ask for!" etc., etc., ad nauseam.

But even the Grouser is not as bad as the Coaxer, the pathetic and heart-rending wooer of Fate, who announces to his box before every throw what lovely sights he would like to see issue from it. "Now for a little five and a four!" he cries, hopefully. Or, holding the box between his two hands in a supplicating and prayerful fashion: "Double sixes, double sixes please!" And when, curséd moment, he actually calls his throw, his harassed opponent can think of no better fate for him than boiling in oil!

And now a word about the doublers. Doubling, the modern development of backgammon, is probably responsible for the game's enormous popularity. And it is while doubling that a player can most subtly offend and exasperate all but the wariest and most hard-boiled backgammoners. For the Insolent Doubler, who doubles as though he were challenging the personal honor and sportsmanship of his adversary, provokes by his ungracious bravado many a more proud than wise player into accepting a preposterous double. Of course, a seasoned player can neither be bullied nor intimidated into accepting a double which is not justified, so that while here the bad taste of the braggardly, I dare-you-to doubler shows more psychology than sportsmanship, the not too intelligent victims of his blackmailing methods deserve little sympathy. It may be pointed out, however, that the man who tries to shame an opponent into a double is on a par with the golfer who talks loudly while his adversary

is driving off the tee, or the tennis player who by various gestures, antics and postures, tries to rattle the man across the net. And while this method may be considered fair, like bluffing at poker, in backgammon (when played for money) its practitioners are apt to become, in the long run, more unpopular than rich. Perhaps this is even truer of the Immediate Doubler, who, when the stakes have been set, doubles after the first throw, thereby immediately raising the stakes, without any respect for the probable outcome of the game. Here, however, while he may annoy an opponent who may already be playing for as much as he can afford, the doubler puts himself at a disadvantage, for he gives that opponent the privilege of re-doubling him when the game shall have developed, so that his avaricious and somewhat ill-timed attempt to raise the stakes is often a double-edged sword.

These types would form a composite picture of what the perfect backgammoner is not. What then, is the perfect backgammoner? Finding the answer in none of the published books about the game (the names of which are given at the end of this article), there was nothing left to do but to consult personally the man who is considered the finest backgammon player in America today. Mr. George Mabardi, an Egyptian authority, has never written a word on this game (the chances that he will eventually do so are about as good as throwing double sixes when you need them), but is nevertheless considered a great expert and a teacher of excellence.

"The perfect backgammoner?" he asked, his sombre oriental eyes lighting up with the eagerness of the enthusiast, and his long fingers shaking an imaginary and traditionally lucky box. "Why, every day on the *terrasse* of the Café Bellevue, overlooking the blue Mediterranean—in Alexandria, my home—I have seen hundreds of perfect backgammoners, playing all day long. From the cradle to the grave Egyptians play backgammon, the game of the great Pharaohs. They play well, they play rapidly, they play quietly; they smile and talk a little and they never complain of their luck. They smoke their *narguilés* and drink their *café turc*, and believe that luck is the just reward of the skillful."

THE NEW BACKGAMMON (Harcourt, Brace) by *Elizabeth Clark Boyden*. A complete treatise, with variations for the jaded backgammoner, such as French, Russian, and aceyducey backgammon.

HOW TO PLAY THE NEW BACKGAMMON (Doubleday, Doran) by *Lelia Hattersley*. A Bridge expert turns her attention to the new vogue, with some illuminating and constructive results.

MODERN BACKGAMMON (Henry Holt) by *Grosvenor Nicholas*. A pioneer backgammoner explains in considerable detail, his conception of what it is all about.

BACKGAMMON IN TWENTY MINUTES (E. P. Dutton) by *Harold Thorne*. If you think you can learn *anything* in twenty minutes, you can probably learn backgammon from this book.