

To double or not to double

BY JOHN LONGACRE

■ "There is no such thing as a 'modern' Backgammon," says Georges Mabardi, one of our leading players, "unless 'modern Backgammon' is another name for 'bad Backgammon.' A game which has not changed for centuries cannot be altered overnight." Further, he deprecates specifically "Two minor conventions: the Double and Chouette; the former, however, merely a new way of scoring."

But the fine old games *do* change—all of them; and the changes, when approved, be-

come thenceforth the standard game. Chess, at one time, was a four-handed game. And the best chess-player on the *Mayflower* wouldn't know how to move half of his men in modern tournament play. When Whitney, Milburn and the two Waterburys first visited England, many of us can recall the outraged English protests that there *could* be no sound polo except that which was developed in India, the aged old home of the game.

Again, consider the evolution of Whist to Bridge, to Auction, to Contract. Each step was opposed by conservative devotees of the game then in vogue, and a short life was confidently predicted for the innovation. But each new development eliminated its predecessor—and logically, for each succeeding variation gave more scope for skill to combat the sheer luck of the game.

The most recent example of this steady evolution in a game is the Doubling, or Modern, game of Backgammon, which is now universally played by the army of new enthusiasts. Far from being merely a new way of scoring, it is a distinct variation of the old game, in which success is dependent on a technique which was never before required, and which formed no part of the Backgammon of thirty years ago; that is, the ability, at any point in the game, to make a reasonably correct estimate of the chances of eventual victory. Proficiency in this has become the most important qualification for individual superiority. A player of the Doubling Game can no more hope to win, in the long run, if he lacks sound judgment in offering, accepting or declining the double, than can the Auction player who essays Contract, without the ability to estimate exactly the trick-taking values of his own and his partner's hands.

■ It must be admitted that doubling was originated with no such high purpose as the advancement of skill in the game. It was devised solely in order to obtain the maximum "action" in the shortest time—and in this its reputed father, the Grand Duke Dmitri, was eminently successful. It is highly probable that he did not realize, at the time, that skilful analysis of relative position had thereby suddenly become essential to successful play, but, since this has undoubtedly been the result, it seems certain that this modern variation will consolidate its position as the Backgammon of the future.

The double has been deprecated on the ground that it is only a method of gambling, and has no place in a skilfully played game. That is: "Between two absolutely perfect players there would never be an accepted double; a correct double is made only when the doubler is definitely ahead, and a correct acceptance is made only when the acceptor knows he is not definitely behind; there can be no difference of opinion, the men are on the board, all that is necessary is to estimate their strength; the expert player at all times knows exactly how far ahead he is of his op-

An expert backgammoner has something to say on newer trends in an old game and the question of doubling

ponent; two experts will never disagree; after all, knowledge at Backgammon is finite."*

Let us examine this criticism. Conceivably it might be sound if applied to Checkers or Chess; but at Backgammon, where the dice inject so large a factor of pure luck, there never was, and never can be, either a "perfect player," certain of the outcome of an unfinished game, or an "expert" who knows exactly how far ahead he is at any time. The limit of human ability is an approximate estimate, based on consideration of the mathematical odds and an appreciation of relative position and of the potentiality of maneuver. Where there is so large a factor of the unknowable, it is just because their knowledge is finite that there will always be ground for disagreement in the judgment of experienced players.

Do you know any Contract player who prefers Auction? Or any Backgammon player who does not find the old game insipid after trying Doubling? There is good reason for this. The abrupt termination of uninteresting play is a real improvement; hopeless games receive a happy despatch, instead of being dragged out to their long-foreseen conclusion. Moreover, the easy adjustment of the stake to the shifts of fortune, together with the possibility of limiting loss, is unique; but even this does not constitute the chief attraction to students of the game. The real interest lies in acquiring adroitness in the handling of this new weapon—the power to double the stake at any time—for it is effective, but two-edged, and to draw it prematurely is simply to put it in the hands of the adversary.

■ There is no question of its employment after a long lead has been established, but there is little chance for a double game, as it would be folly to allow the opponent a free opportunity to throw the necessary extraordinary dice. With a slight lead, in an end game, when opportunity lessens with every throw, a double will discourage pursuit which, in a certain number of cases, would have been successful, had the game been played to a finish. But these one-sided situations are elementary, and present no problem. The player who uses the double merely to kill a cripple is simply a pot-hunter.

In every game there has been a period at which the eventual winner would have had his double accepted. How often can this opportunity be perceived and seized? There are, of course, games where an early advantage increases steadily, (Continued on page 78)

*Vanity Fair's Backgammon to Win, by Georges Mabardi.

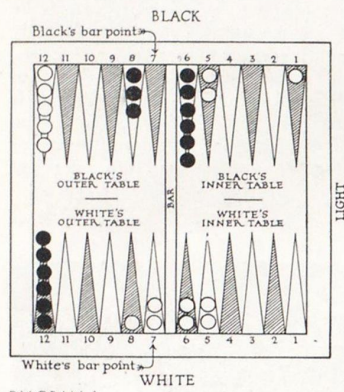


DIAGRAM I

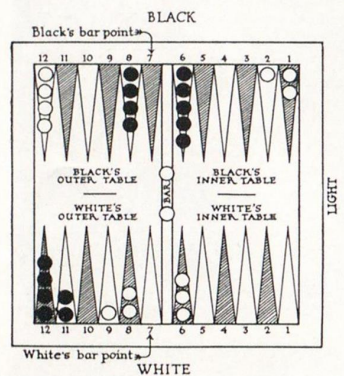


DIAGRAM II

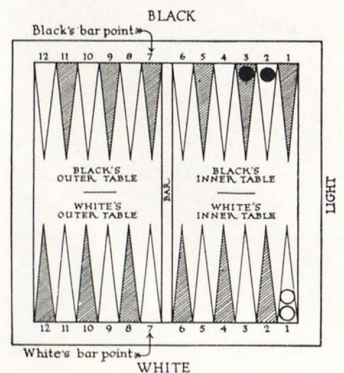


DIAGRAM III

The golf panic is on

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ing of the final day, his ball lay on the putting carpet in seventy-three.

"I had a seventy-five in the morning when I won my Open Championship at Shokie, after a pair of seventy-tuos. I can't lose now. I'm as good as in. It's the same score." He stepped onto the green and flicked his approach putt to within eight inches of the cup for his seventy-fourth. His seventy-fifth stroke was so easy that he tapped it carelessly and watched it aghast as it quit on the rim of the cup and didn't go in. Instead of his lucky seventy-five he took a seventy-six. It convinced him that he wasn't meant to win and he didn't. But in his swaggering moods when the shots are pouring out of his clubs, he believes no one can beat him, and very few can. He is hot for another championship.

They call Tommy Armour the Black Scot. His hair is black streaked with gray won in the British trenches along with his decorations and rank of Major. He wears black hose and sweaters, his mien is dark, a veritable Armour Dhu but his golf is all gold. Such is his mastery of the iron-tipped clubs that it blinds critics to the fact that he is also one of the greatest wood players in the game today. His midiron fade inside a ten foot circle around the pin is so spectacular that the gallery forgets the powerful and perfectly placed drive that put him in the position to bite the turf with his accurate iron, instead of having to apply himself to his brassie or spoon. He is as lean as a racehorse and has some of the thoroughbred's temperament. So finely balanced is his golfing machinery and so sensitive his nervous system that he may be thrown out of gear temporarily, often with damaging results. He once had a six-stroke lead on the field in a 10,000 dollar Open Championship when Mac Smith caught him in a bad round and beat him by two strokes. He has been Open, Canadian and Professional champion, and is a good ten to one shot against the field. Coupled with the *Vanity Fair*

Stable, Mac Smith, Sarazen and Diegel, he is as good as four to one.

The prize might escape the big four. Whiffy Cox has played great golf on the winter wheel. He is a master putter and one of the longest drivers in the game. But the third round has been his undoing. Mehlhorn, a hard, boisterous, truculent golfer is liable to bustle through. Horton Smith's beautiful style and rhythmic three quarter and half swings always wait until the National Open to desert him. The Turnesa boys play great rounds in the minor tournaments and are waiting to click in the big ones, particularly the slim Joe. Hagen is liable to spread-eagle the field. If an amateur gets up in the first ten it will be almost a miracle.

It will be a wild, hysterical, cut-throat tournament. Heretofore the reporters who have covered it have had it easy. The Messrs. Grantland Rice, Trevor, Alan Gould, Powers, and their colleagues merely set their noses to the Jones trail. This year with ten potential winners, they will run themselves ragged trying to be in at the death. The last two hours of the show I can particularly commend to any lunacy commission. For that is the time when the Open Championship suddenly becomes poison to the players who seem to have a chance to win it. They hurl the thing from one to another, they kick it about like a football, it perches on their shoulders, and they knock it off. Weary, semi-hysterical, their nerves frazzled, they come into the last mad dash for the wire when some wide-eyed, breathless numbskull tells one of them that he needs only a 5-4-4-4 or one over par to win. Immediately he succumbs to the jeebies and cards 6-5-4-5, throwing the tournament into the lap of the next incoming candidate who juggles it, fumbles it, drops it and finally beats it to death in a trap, until finally some last hero is found who cannot get rid of it in spite of himself, and who manages to stagger home to collect the plaudits, the laurel and the cash.

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and in these the double could only have been accepted during the first few throws. No skill can be claimed for the eventual success of such tactics; this is pure gambling. But there are many more games in which a justifiable expectation of increased profit is lost by delay or over-caution or a blank unawareness. Another throw and it will be too late; the fish will not take the fly.

Consider, too, the situation of the doublee, i.e.—the player who is doubled. His opponent evidently *thinks* he is well ahead—but is he? There are plenty of advantageous positions which can be wrecked by one or two bad shots. How many of these are possible? And are men well placed to take advantage of them? There is also to be reckoned the absolute advantage of the last double. If the lead is regained, an appreciation of the lessened opportunity for the lucky throw will force the redoubled adversary to relinquish a certain percentage of his legitimate expectation.

When to double, and when to decline? The player with the best average of correct decisions—for no one can bat 1,000—is now the outstanding exponent of the game. Here we are all more or less at sea, steering by our own dead reckoning, for there can be no positive certainty, and it is most interesting to watch how players, with first-rate reputations gained at the old mechanical game, will go completely astray. No one seems yet to have evolved a reliable theory for the analysis of a mid-game position. Maybe it is impossible, for the factors involved are provokingly intangible, but it is a rather fascinating problem.

It is, of course, absurd to say that an experienced player can tell at any time *exactly* how far ahead he is. The only possible guide which approaches exactness is the computation of the number of pips required to bring home and throw off each side. Allowing an assumption of subsequent even throws for both sides, this method is reasonable—provided that the opponents are

past each other; each unpassed opponent decreases the reliability of this guide. For we are⁸ here considering only the factor of Progress. How shall we reckon the factor of Position? While this is definite at any given moment, its relative value shifts with every move.

For instance in Diagram I, Black is four average throws ahead of White, in Progress, but is he more likely to win the game?

Or, in Diagram II, Black, in Progress, is more than nine throws ahead; in fact, White is worse off, on this count, than when he started. But if he enters one of his men on the bar on the adversary's 2-point, Black will need luck to win.

This problem of deciding the relative advantage of the position, when a double offers, is already perplexing; but a certain school, including many first-rate players, have complicated it still more by introducing what seems to the writer a fallacious theory—that a double automatically betters the odds to the side to which it is offered. That is: Black doubles, putting up an extra stake. White clearly loses his original stake if he declines. But, if he puts up one more stake, he has a chance to win Black's two and his own original one; therefore, by acceptance, he obtains odds of 3-1. Argument having failed, let us take a concrete example, in rebuttal:

In Diagram III, it is Black's throw, and he doubles. He will win, unless he throws a shot containing a 1—in which case White must win on his next play. There are eleven possible shots with a one, and twenty-five without. In other words, it is 25-11, or something more than 2-1 that Black will win. But if White, by accepting the double, can get odds of 3-1 on a 2-1 proposition, any bookmaker will tell him that he has only to obtain a perpetual opponent in order to enjoy a steady income.

And, if so, I believe I could find someone willing to oblige him.

Speculations on the future

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without paying the slightest attention and without showing the least concern. Inject into these same mice, however, the secretions of certain glands, and immediately the callous little amazons are transformed into admirable mothers! Before your very eyes they abandon their games, devote all their time to these babies which are not theirs; they will even die to defend their adopted foundlings. In this particular case we are concerned only with a simple and powerful elementary instinct, but it is possible, on thinking over these experiments, to predict that a time will come when scientific combinations and proportions of these gland secretions will make it possible to obtain more and more subtle and delicate nuances of sentiment. You will see joint laboratories of psychologists and biologists; romanticists and scientists will collab-

orate to produce Tender Friendship (guaranteed free of sensuality) out of test tubes; even as now medical agents which are too violent are tempered by others in order to attain a normal heart action in a patient, compounds will be made of verbal romanticism and emotional indifference.

Naturally, the development of all the sciences will make education, by the year 2000, a new and extremely complicated problem.

Doubtless it will be impossible to teach the sciences to any one human being. Up to the age of twenty, students will have to be taught only subjects of general culture, and all citizens will be required to take this cultural education. After the age of twenty, they will begin a long and intense period of specialized study. "Childhood study," says Professor

Ogburn, "will be prolonged to the age of thirty, then to forty. Since, at the same time, the span of human life will have been lengthened, everything will turn out satisfactorily, since the relative periods of childhood, of maturity and of old age will remain the same. It will seem quite natural for a man of forty to end his studies brilliantly, for a hundred-year-old man to consider himself in the prime of life, and for a woman of sixty to act the young coquette. We should not forget that, in Balzac's time the maturing characteristics of *The woman of thirty* were those that we attribute today to a woman of forty-five; and that today children attend school or college for many more years than the children of the 18th or 19th Century. In England, in 1831, a child of the laboring class worked in factories from the time he

was eight years old, and in 1931, school is obligatory up to the age of fifteen. It is quite probable that this cultural curve will continue to rise."

These are strange thoughts, but should they disturb us? I think not. If anyone had described exactly to the people of 1880 the life that we are leading today, doubtless they would have thought it terrifying. But many of the people living then are still alive; they have adapted themselves, without being conscious of it, to a mode of life that would formerly have seemed painful and extravagant to them. It will always be so. We do not know what those among us who are alive in 1957 will see, but they will, without a doubt, find life quite normal and monotonous, and will speculate with curiosity on another future the plan of which we today cannot even faintly conceive.