THE EISENBERG FLAIR

From Aruba to Manila, he's not your typical backgammon and bridge champion.

Billy Eisenberg *making his move in a backgammon game at the Cavendish West, a private bridge and backgammon club in West Hollywood.* **Gambling Times** *feature editor Roger Dionne is looking on. The plexiglass contraption to the right is used for rolling the dice.*

Backgammon is back...

by Roger Dionne

Sid Caesar and Lorne Greene do it. Lucille Ball does it. James Caan, Jim Brown, and Peter Lawford do it. Hugh Hefner has been doing it for years. Bankers and insurance executives, stenographers and typists, old and young, male and female, whether in a chic disco overlooking the Pacific or in the back room of a tiny Armenian eatery—they're all doing it. The boards are unfolded, unlatched, unveiled, the checkers are lined up on points in what seems—but is not—an arbitrary arrangement, and the rattling of dice is heard over the land. From stars like Sid Caesar and Lorne Greene to children learning to count in school, everyone is playing backgammon.

Item: The American Backgammon Players Association has been organized nationwide and is awarding masterpoints to tournament winners in much the same way as does the long-established American Contract Bridge League to bridge players. The Association also runs an annual American Cup championship tournament.

Item: The World Amateur Backgammon Championship, to be held in four hotels in Las Vegas in December, will be the largest tournament in history with an anticipated 16,000 participants. First prize will be one million dollars, second prize $250,000, and there will be 512 cash prizes in all, totalling $1,880,000.

Item: Several elementary schools around the country are using backgammon to teach students arithmetic and the laws of probability.

Item: Bridge writers like Charles Goren, Alfred Sheinwold, Oswald Jacoby, and many others now write regularly and enthusiastically on backgammon.

Item: From the Bar Point House of Backgammon in New York to Tiffany's in Los Angeles, more and more clubs for backgammon players are opening across the country.

While backgammon appears to be as old as recorded history itself, its modern resurgence dates from the 1960s when Russian emigre Prince Alexis Obolenski introduced the game to his socialite circle of New York friends. Interest in the game spread so rapidly that today it is estimated 20 million Americans play it. And it has caught people's fancy just as much in other countries around the world as well. Whereas 20 years ago it was hardly more than that strange-looking pattern on the back of a checker board, today backgammon sets are by far the hottest-selling items in game stores, going for anything from a few dollars to a few thousand dollars.

There are perhaps three reasons for backgammon's current popularity. First, it is a game easy to learn but very difficult to become expert in. It is something like golf in this respect: you can have a great time as a duffer, but you always know there is a great deal of room for improvement.

Secondly, backgammon is a perfect mix of skill and chance. Chance controls the numbers you roll with the dice, but skill determines how you use those numbers in making your moves. In the long run, the more skillful player will win. As backgammon expert and mathematics professor Paul Magriel pointed out in the New York *Times*, "Playing one game against an average player, my skill would give me a 55 percent chance of winning, little better than a coin flip . . . If we played all day, my opponent wouldn't stand a chance."

Finally, because of its way of combining skill and luck, backgammon is a great gambling game. The introduction of the doubling cube in the twentieth century has added a powerful strategic and psychological factor to the game that gives it something of the flavor of poker. A game that started off being played for a dollar could conceivably end up being played for $64.

In this issue of *Gambling Times*, we profile one of the more interesting backgammon experts in the country, Billy Eisenberg. Eisenberg was not only world backgammon champion for a year, he was also world bridge champion in 1970, '71, and '76. Hopefully you'll end up by agreeing—backgammon is back, backgammon is in, backgammon is fun. What's more, it's a hell of an interesting way to gamble.

The ballroom at the Riviera Hotel in Las Vegas, where the 1977 United States Open Backgammon Tournament was taking place, was stirring with excitement. More than 150 players had turned up, twice as many as the hotel had anticipated. Among them were some of the best backgammon experts in the country—Chuck Papazian, Gino Scalamandre, Oswald Jacoby, Tony Gobel, Tom Gilbert.

But the excitement wasn't over the tournament at all. The players' pool payoff was sizable enough, what with all those entrants at $150 apiece. However, the Calcutta auction—in which people bid for the right to "own" players they think will finish in the money—hadn't been handled well, the bidders had lost interest, and, whereas a successful Calcutta garners from $80,000 to $100,000 or better, the Riviera auction brought in only about $25,000. That wasn't enough to create much excitement, certainly not enough to create all the excitement in the ballroom that Sunday.

"Here, take two thousand," someone shouted, waving the bills in the air.

Billy Eisenberg wrote him down for $2,000, and the man with him took the money. Eisenberg had been defeated in the second round of the backgammon tournament, yet all sorts of gamblers, people he had never seen before, were crowding around him.

"I'll go for a thousand," someone else said.

"Put me down for three," said another.

Eisenberg wrote down the names and the amounts, while his friend collected the money.

"This is what's happening," Eisenberg had explained a few minutes before to the people milling around the backgammon tables. "We're going to play a gin rummy and backgammon match against a guy who's putting up $35,000. He's not a very good player, but it's possible he's not a very honest person either."

Eisenberg would play the backgammon match, and the gin game would be handled by the veteran card and backgammon expert Oswald Jacoby, whose reknown dates back to the famous Culbertson-Lenz bridge match of 1931-32. Word of Eisenberg's side action spread fast, the tournament was all but forgotten, and within a half-hour he and his friends had the $35,000 they needed.

However, some of Eisenberg's friends who weren't in the action didn't like what was going on. One of them approached him nervously.

"Billy," he said. "I have to tell you. You have to worry. This is bad for your reputation."

"I don't have to worry about a thing," Eisenberg said.

"A lot of people think you're running a scam."

"Let me tell you right now, they can judge me by what happens. I'm not interested. I offered them a deal they could say 'Yes' or 'No' to."

The match began at three-thirty in the morning in Johnny Moss' poker room over at the Dunes. With every roll of the dice, the crowd around the backgammon table buzzed and commented, whooped and groaned. A neutral party was holding $70,000 in cash. Tension mounted. Eisenberg was excited with the action, he was high on natural speed, and he won his 30-point match going away. However, Jacoby lost the gin match. He was seventy years old, after all; it was almost daybreak; and the poker room, which Moss rents from the Dunes for $280,000 a year, was crowded and stuffy. Jacoby had put up a good fight, but now he had to catch a plane out of town.

The others wanted to continue the action even though the sun was coming up. Eisenberg found another gin player to replace Jacoby and started a second round, which didn't end until late Monday morning. Again it ended in a tie. Eisenberg won his match, but his cohort lost the gin rummy game. After a day's rest, they were at it once again at ten that night. Eisenberg had yet a third gin rummy player, as well as several new backers to replace those who had had to leave town. Finally, late Tuesday morning there was a decision. Both Eisenberg and his gin player won their matches.

Above, *and next page, below, Billy Eisenberg and his pretty wife Barbara engaged in a backgammon game at their home in West Los Angeles.*

"Everything was fine. I lived a half-crazed life for three days with no sleep, but it was worth it."

"Thank goodness we won," Eisenberg told me in one of our first conversations. We were sitting in the wood-paneled manager's office at the Cavendish West, the fashionable bridge and backgammon club on the West Hollywood-Beverly Hills line, where some of the best bridge players in the world gather regularly. "Because if we had lost," Eisenberg went on, "those people who were talking would have been sure we were in on some kick-back or something. But it was a wonderful day. It was a holiday. Everything was fine. I lived a half-crazed life for three days with no sleep, but it was worth it. One thing's for sure—winning is better than losing."

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Why would good gamblers, good percentage players, climb all over one another to bet thousands of dollars on a backgammon player who had been eliminated from the Riviera tournament in the second round? Who is Billy Eisenberg?

Like Oswald Jacoby, he's better known for his bridge. In fact, most observers consider him, at thirty-nine, one of the five or six best bridge players in the world; many consider him *the* best. He has won every major bridge tournament in the United States at least once, and three times—in 1970, '71, and '76— he was a world champion. Last year's victory in Monte Carlo over the prestigious Italian Blue Team was particularly satisfying, for that team had never been defeated in the twenty-seven year history of the world championship competition. (They had been in temporary retirement in 1970 and '71.) It was also the team which, the year before, amidst strong but unproved evidence of cheating, had barely edged out the Americans, thus keeping Eisenberg from being world bridge champion and world backgammon champion simultaneously.

Yes, world backgammon champion. In 1975, with dramatic come-from-behind victories in the quarter-finals, the semi-finals, and the finals, Billy Eisenberg won the world backgammon title, defeating Arthur Dickman, a teaching pro from Florida, in the final match. Prior to that victory, he had won the Cannes Backgammon Tournament in France, the Palm Bay Club Tournament in Florida, and the Pips Tournament in Los Angeles. Since 1968, when he entered his first backgammon tournament on Paradise Island and was auctioned off in the Calcutta for a mere $100, he has won or placed in the money in countless other tournaments and challenge matches, both in the United States and abroad. In recent years, bidders have gone as high as $3,200 to buy him in a Calcutta, and once he played in a marathon match for which a syndicate put up $200,000. The match began in Los Angeles and continued in Aruba. When it was over, Eisenberg was the winner.

So those gamblers at the Riviera knew what they were doing. They knew their percentages. They knew they were putting their money on a winner.

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The townhouse apartment complex in West Los Angeles is stylish and expensive-looking. Brown slat fences around the inner court provide the residents with private little yards. It is ten-thirty in the morning when photographer Bob Landau and I pass through the Eisenbergs' gate. Their large calico Persian cat, who has been sunning herself in their little yard, rolls to her feet, hunches her back, and gazes at us diffidently. We knock on the front door softly, then loudly. Footsteps. A young woman opens the door. It is Barbara Eisenberg—short blond hair, twenty-six, "a double Sagittarius," she later tells us.

"Today is Monday, isn't it?" she says. "Oh yes, come on in."

She is bare-footed and dressed only in a loose, flannel nightgown. Though her eyes are puffy with sleep, her youthful prettiness shows through as she ushers us into the living room.

She had worked as a lawyer for the House Judiciary Committee before marrying Billy a couple years ago. However, she is now putting together a portfolio to try modeling. Barbara has also become a fine tournament backgammon player. Landau and I sit down on the sectional sofa she designed while she heads toward the kitchen to get us coffee.

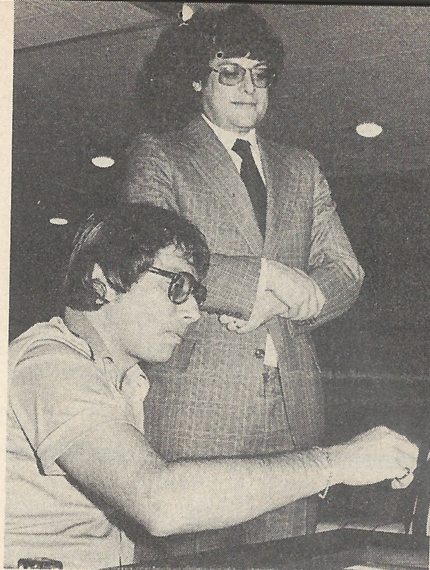
"Magazines are strewn across the floor—*Psychic* and the latest issue of *Gambling Times* . . ."

"If you want to smoke, help yourself," she says, waving in the direction of the coffee table, a low square cocoa-brown affair with a wide chrome strip running diagonally across it. She designed the coffee table too. In fact, she designed most of the house.

"This is the first home Billy's had," she says when she returns with our coffee. "I mean, he had an apartment in Dallas and so forth, but he might as well have been living in a motel. I made this a home for him."

A set of wide, bright-colored stripes, reminiscent of artist Frank Stella's work, moves horizontally along two of the living room walls. The motif continues up the stairwell leading to the second floor. A tall abstract sculpture of chrome cubes rises near the entryway, and a neon sculpture of a star and a crescent moon shines near the fireplace. Over the fireplace is an elaborate three-dimensional mirror design. There are modern paintings on the walls. A chrome and glass bookcase stands in one corner, and along a far wall is another bookcase, where a couple hundred record albums are stored—rock, soul, blues, some jazz, some classical.

But the room is a mess, and as we sip our coffee, Barbara tries to tidy it up. Dirty plates and glasses are lying about. The ashtrays are filled with cigarette butts. Candle wax has dripped onto the coffee table. There are magazines strewn across the floor—I notice *Psychic* and the latest issue of *Gambling Times*—and books



Eisenberg pauses *as he moves a man toward his home board. Looking on is Dr. Richard Katz, with whom Eisenberg is partnered in a backgammon chouette. In addition to backgammon, Eisenberg and Katz are among the best bridge players in America.*

are piled haphazardly in corners and on the bottom shelves of the chrome and glass bookcase. Robert Rimmer's latest novel is spread-eagle on the coffee table.

"We got a rib roast and had some people over for dinner last night," Barbara explains. "Billy's just getting up. He should be down in a minute."

Barbara has recently returned from a trip—"part business, part pleasure"—to Washington, New York, and Chicago. Billy returned Sunday afternoon from another weekend in Las Vegas. In a week he will leave for a month of backgammon and bridge tournaments in New York, Aruba, and Caracas, Venezuela. One of them will be a bridge Calcutta, a direction in which he hopes bridge tournaments will go. For in a Calcutta, bridge players have the opportunity to win large sums of money, something that never happens in American bridge tournaments and rarely in European tournaments. After returning from Caracas to Los Angeles for a month, Billy and his wife will leave for backgammon tournaments in London and Monte Carlo and bridge matches in Israel and Deauville, France. Not long after that trip is over, they will leave for the 1977 Bermuda Bowl world bridge tournament in Manila, where Billy hopes to repeat as world champion. The apartment in West Los Angeles seems more like a pit stop than a home. After Barbara has finished tidying up, the living room looks about the same as it did before—messy.

"I don't see any of Billy's trophies around," I comment.

"They're in the kitchen somewhere," Barbara says. "I mean, they give you the ugliest things. We gave Billy's mother one. She uses it as a planter. I mean really. What can you do with them?"

Billy Eisenberg greets us as he descends the stairs, tucking in his shirt. He kisses Barbara, and the miniature German schnauzer he bought for her for $300 lopes over to him. After he has hunkered down and ruffled the dog's neck, Billy sits down with us. Barbara brings him a cup of coffee, then goes upstairs to get dressed for the picture-taking.

"As you can see," Billy says, "discipline and organization are not my strong suits."

He has a deep voice with traces of the Bronx, where he grew up. He settles back on the sofa and tells us about his weekend in Las Vegas, where he spent two days trying to get up another high-stake backgammon-gin rummy match. In the end, the match fell through because neither side trusted the other's gin rummy player.

> "The game is really a microcosm of life . . . If you accept the changes philosophically, you'll do all right."

"Where did you first learn to play backgammon?" I ask him.

"At the North Shore Bridge Club in Long Island about eighteen years ago. David Strasberg, who owned the club and who was very responsible for my early development as a bridge player, said he'd teach me for twenty-five cents a point. It didn't seem like a lot of money until I recognized that the doubling cube gets up to sixty-four. It cost me a few dollars before I began to get the hang of it."

"And then you got hooked."

"I think it's the best gambling game there is. It has the most excitement, it has the most opportunity for divergent circumstances to occur from one play to the next, and it has the best blend of skill and luck. That's the definition of a great gambling game. If it were pure luck, it wouldn't be a great gambling game. But in backgammon, the mix is so complicated that it never becomes clear when you're lucky and when you're skillful. It's an incredibly flexible game. The position changes radically from roll to roll."

Billy takes a Marlboro from one of the opened packs on the coffee table and lights it.

"The game is really a microcosm of life for me," he continues. "I think of it in terms of flow. What happens is the flow changes from roll to roll, and the most important thing is to consider the changes. If you prepare for these changes and accept these changes philosophically, you'll do all right. But if you're attached to the fact that your opponent's rolled double sixes, which changes the game around, you're not going to do so well on your next roll because you're going to be involved in how unlucky you were on his roll. I don't have any time for that. I've got to deal with what I can do here now. If I have too much sympathy for me, I'm going to be hopeless.

"Backgammon has a way of revealing people as they really are. I've seen objectivity go right out the window. I've seen people's judgment go right out the window when, under the pressure of a lot of money, they've had to make decisions. There is nothing worse than a person who gets stuck at the game and doesn't know how to pass. I've done it myself.

"The trap to watch out for in all these things is that if you're overly concerned with how you're going to do, it gets in your way. I never assume I'm going to win anything. I just play and don't even think about it. If I think about winning, it interferes with winning. On the other hand, if you think about losing, that, unfortunately, makes it happen."

We talk a little about the history of backgammon, which appears to be as old as recorded history itself. During the 1920's English archeologist Leonard Woolley started excavating in the Biblical Ur of the Chaldees, hoping to find traces of Noah's ark. Instead he uncovered five gaming boards closely resembling the back-

"More and more, I think, the concept of backgammon is going to be seen not as a race between two opposing armies, but rather as a strategical way of placing those armies in the best manner to take advantage of holding and trapping and closing people out.

"My sense of what the world's about now takes away the judgment of what's good and bad for myself and other people. I don't know what's good and bad for myself and other people all the time anymore. I used to think I knew. Now I know I don't know. I consider that growth."

"The nature of games isn't the crucial factor involving gambling. It's the nature of people. Now backgammon is a game that a lot of people will think is very, very evil because people become crazy. But the truth is no game makes you crazy. It just allows you to experience yòur craziness."

gammon boards of today. A year later another expedition, digging in Mesopotamia, found similar boards. In the age of the Egyptian Pharaohs the game was flourishing, and it continued to flourish in ancient Greece and ancient Rome.

While there is evidence that in all of these epochs the game was played for money—Nero is reported to have wagered as much as $15,000 a point—it was the introduction of the doubling cube in modern times that turned backgammon into the high-powered gambling game it is today. "Playing backgammon without the doubling cube," Eisenberg says, "is like getting a plate of spaghetti without any sauce."

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The doubling cube has six numbers—2, 4, 8, 16, 32, and 64—and it works as follows. At any point in the game, either player can turn the cube to expose the number 2, thereby doubling the original stake. If the game was being played for $1, it is now up to $2. The doubler's opponent has the option of passing, in which case he concedes the game at the original stake, or of accepting the double, in which case the game continues and the doubling cube comes into his possession. Should he then gain the advantage, he may turn the cube to 4, thereby doubling the stake once again. Now it is the original doubler's turn to decide whether to pass and concede or accept the double. If he accepts, the game is now being played at four times the original stake and the doubling cube reverts into his possession. With enough doubles a $1 game could become a $64 game. In one of those quarter games when he was learning to play, Eisenberg could have lost (or won) as much as $16. Clearly the doubling cube adds a whole new dimension to backgammon, and many experts feel that using it properly is the most important element of the game as it is played today.

"Ideally the time to double your opponent," Eisenberg says, "is that time when he is unsure whether to take it or not. You don't want to double your opponent when he has no more interest in the game because it probably means there was a market for you to take advantage of earlier in the game. Likewise, you don't want your opponent to be able to take the double because the doubling cube is very valuable, and when he owns it, he now has a weapon at his disposal.

"The time to *accept* the double is a time when you can still manage to conceive that you have one chance in four or better of winning. You see, in order to start the game, each of you put up one unit. As in poker, you each put a unit in the pot. At some point, if I say double, I'm putting another unit in the pot. Now there are three total units for you to consider with your single unit, and that's why it's three to one. It's basic arithmetic.

"But to double you don't need to be a 3-1 favorite. You base your decision on whether you'll show a return on your money by doubling as opposed to not doubling. You don't have to win three games out of four. You only have to win more games than you lose and not have to deal with your opponent's doubling you back. It's a matter of proper timing."

The telephone rings—it has rung several times during our conversation—and this time it is bridge expert Edwin Kantar, who will be Eisenberg's partner in Aruba, Caracas, Europe, and finally in the world championship matches in Manila. For the past several months Eisenberg and Kantar have been refining a new, advanced bidding system, and now, talking to Kantar, Billy shunts backgammon aside and shifts his mind to bridge.

"Frankly, it's been a very big advantage to compete in both these games," Billy told me at the Cavendish West, "because they complement each other. They're both, in their way, analytical. They help me competitively. I'm able to concentrate really well when I need to, and I'm good under pressure because of the practice of the two of them."

Billy and Kantar spend perhaps ten minutes on the telephone discussing

their novel method of showing singletons en route to a slam try.

"But suppose West has four diamonds to the king-queen," Billy says, and he spells out a hand. "And what about this situation?" he adds after a pause. His mind transfers honors from one hand to another, holding four, five, six variations in focus at once.

Presently his discussion with Kantar ends, and Billy hangs up. However, the discussion has ended only for the moment, for it will most assuredly continue, with more and more frequency and more and more intensity, right up to the post-mortem analyses in the wired, numb hours of the morning during the final championship rounds in Manila.

"How would you compare backgammon and bridge?" I ask.

"I stand for individuality . . . Who can legislate what is good for other people?"

"Both games are hypnotic in their way," Billy says. "The involvement is all-encompassing. But as a gambling game, bridge is slow. The stakes tend to be very uniform and consistent, and people play with what they can afford. Backgammon is a more frenetic, exciting kind of action. It's kind of like being at the crap table as compared to the blackjack table. It takes more discipline and more will to keep your head above water. But that's very challenging for people because ultimately they have to learn how to control themselves. They can't have that legislated for them. And if our lawmakers would understand that, they wouldn't be making these dumb laws. It's not useful to tell people they can't do something if they're going to do it. Backgammon is a game a lot of people might think is very, very evil because people become crazy. But the truth is no game makes you crazy. It just allows you to experience your craziness."

"I take it you oppose laws against gambling."

"I stand for individuality. Which is to say that it is very difficult for an external authority to suggest what's best for an individual. Who can legislate what is good for other people? As we grow and mature as a civilization, we have to recognize, first, that only individuals can judge what is right for individuals, and secondly, that so long as the value structure of the United States is based upon money and its importance, people will have a high regard for gambling activities. That's the nature of the beast."

"How do you feel about money?"

Billy looks at me cagily. "It's useful," he says.

"Has getting money been important to you?"

"Only insofar as dealing with my insecurity in not having any. I don't have any desire to accumulate very large amounts of money. I only want to have my needs met and not have to worry about it anymore. I just want enough to allow me and the people around me to live comfortably and securely."

The doorbell rings, and Barbara, who has just descended the stairs looking radiant, lets in the maid. Jasmine, the German schnauzer, will be taken for her walk, and in an hour or two the Eisenberg apartment will be swept clean of debris.

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A week later. Billy and I are driving to Los Angeles International Airport, where he'll catch his transcontinental flight to New York to begin his series of backgammon and bridge engagements. He and Barbara said their goodbyes at the apartment. "Good luck," she wished him. "Take care," he said. They will talk by phone this evening.

Billy swings his Mercedes 450 SL convertible from Santa Monica Boulevard onto the San Diego Freeway and steps on the accelerator. Back when he was living in Long Island, he once lost his driver's license for speeding. He remembers how, while his license was still suspended, a telephone call interrupted a pinochle game just after he'd picked up a 500-point hand. It was his mother on the line. His father had just suffered a heart attack in the City. Would Billy get him to the hospital? Billy rushed off, leaving a big pot behind. On his way into town, a police car stopped him, the officer was furious that he was driving while under suspension, but Billy convinced him of the seriousness of his mission. He managed to get his father to a hospital still alive. Years later, he was talking long distance with his future wife Barbara when an operator interrupted. "It's your father!" Barbara said. She was right. His father had died of a coronary.

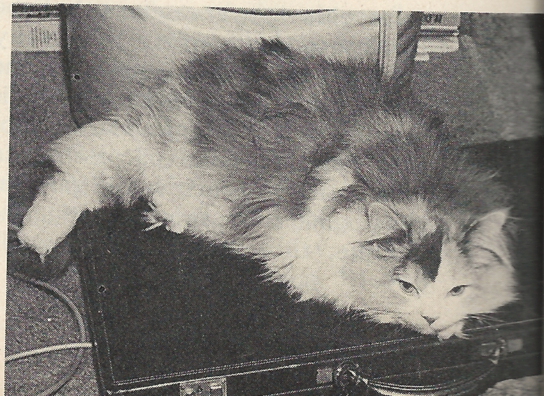
"Money is important to me only insofar as dealing with my insecurity in not having any."

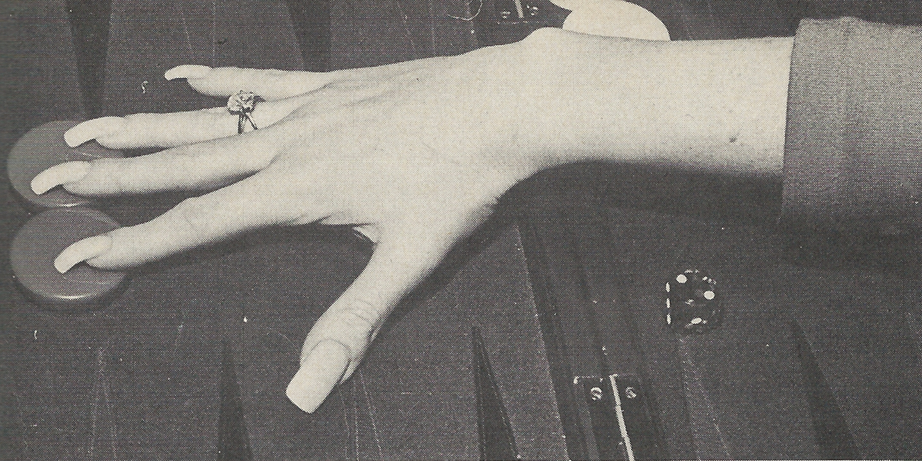
That was in the past. Billy had moved beyond the local-hero days of New York. From 1968 to 1971 he had been a rebellious member of the disciplined Dallas Aces bridge team, with whom he had won the world bridge championship in 1970 and 1971 and with whom he defeated Omar Sharif's Bridge Circus of European experts in a long, 840-deal match that see-sawed back and forth with much fanfare and media coverage through Chicago, Winnepeg, Los Angeles, St. Paul, Dallas, Detroit, and Philadelphia. The final score was Dallas Aces 1,793 International Match Points—Sharif Bridge Circus 1,692 International Match Points.

Then Eisenberg moved to Los Angeles.

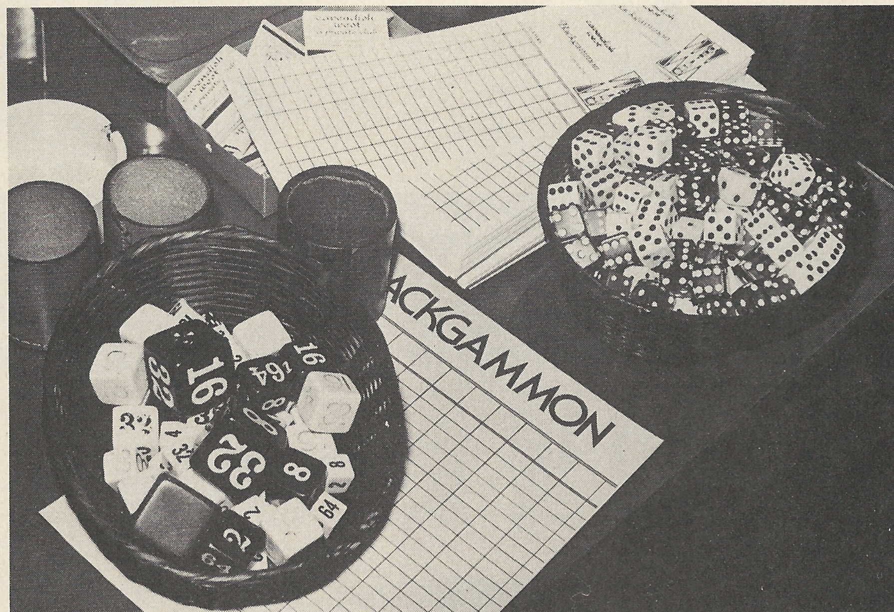
"I chose to live here," he says, as we pass a Chevy station wagon and a Porsche, "because going back to New York would have been a ritual, it would have been a rut, it would have been a return to the way my life was. I didn't want that role. I wanted something new."

The Eisenbergs' *calico Persian cat "Sneakers" has decided to take a rest atop a backgammon case in the Eisenberg's West Los Angeles apartment.*





Above, *Barbara Eisenberg on the attack after having rolled doubles.* **Below**, *the tools of the game—dice, doubling cubes, score pads.*



In Los Angeles Billy met people from every walk of life, from backgammon mechanics to acid heads; he traveled in Hugh Hefner's jetset crowd; and he opened himself up to the possible reality of psychic phenomena. A rationalist and atheist all his adult life, he now recognized the immediacy of chance, of fate, of the spirit.

"I used to have a fixed notion about luck," he says. "I used to have a fixed notion about skill. It was a very controlled kind of thing. It dealt with predictable spaces that would not give me any upsets because they were all predictable. Unfortunately it took the life out of everything I was doing. Now I see that life is more full when I don't have control, when there are surprises, when I recognize that all things—supernatural or otherwise—can be. They don't have to be, but they can be. Everything is allowed, everything is open. I see the universe as an open place now as opposed to a closed place."

We are nearing the exit to the airport. The intense California sun is shimmering off blots of chrome and metal that streak past us.

"What do you say to people," I ask Billy, "who tell you you're wasting your life playing games when the world is full of important problems like hunger, disease, human rights?"

"Playing games?" he fires back somewhat belligerently. People think you're not doing important things? What do they know about what's important? When I grew up, I had enormous world consciousness. I was involved in politics. I was concerned about the misery of the world, and I decided to become a lawyer. But what I discovered about Law is that it wasn't my fantasy about justice. The rules were arbitrary, capricious, and not in the spirit of where I wanted to be. I wasn't going to be fighting for issues of life and freedom. I was going to be fighting little games in little boxes with little people. I didn't want that."

Billy stuck it out at Hofstra College for three years, majoring in Political Science in the pre-law program. But he quit, finally, and set out to become the best bridge player in the world, then to become the best backgammon player in the world.

"I used to have a lot of guilt about the idea of playing games," he says. He turns off the freeway onto Century Boulevard. A 747 zooms a few hundred feet overhead on its approach to the airport. "I used to think games weren't important, that I ought to be doing something else. I no longer think that. Because it's all bullshit. The whole conception our world has is all wrong. Everything's a game, and whatever one does is as important as he feels about it. The form it takes is the form it takes. Games are as much fun as they are or not as much fun as they are. They're as serious as they are. They're whatever you feel about them. How I feel about them when I'm feeling best is they can be fun, they can be stimulating, they can be interesting, they can be creative, and they tend to let my juices flow. It's clear that games are, like anything else, exercises in the drama of living."

Skirting past a taxi inside the airport grounds, Billy pulls up to the red-painted curb of a tow-away zone. There are four lanes of traffic to cross to get to his terminal. We take his suitcases out of the trunk, and he hands me the keys to his car, which I'm to return to his apartment. We shake hands, and I wish him luck in New York, in Aruba, in Caracas.

"Thanks," he says.

He's a true gambler, a true games-player. It's not that he's entrusting his Mercedes 450 SL to a person he hardly knows. It's that, were I to total it, I suspect he'd shrug it off as nothing more or less serious than a backgammon opponent's rolling double sixes, another of those radical changes in the flow of things, another exercise in the drama of living. He hasn't the time to dwell over unlucky rolls. He grips his suitcases, we say goodbye, and he skips through traffic toward the terminal building, New York, and further adventures. gt