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**BOOM
IN
BACKGAMMON**
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Backgammon has always had a certain chic. But today it is a craze. In New York, and now London, fortunes are gambled away on its board. What is its appeal? SEAN HIGNETT reports on a gaming phenomenon

HIGH STAKES AT SEPARATE TABLES



Pictures from *The Backgammon Book* by Oswald Jacoby and John R. Crawford, published by Macmillan

BACKGAMMON divides the majority of one's adult acquaintances more or less equally. There are about 50 per cent. who have hardly heard of it and never played it and for whom one ought at least to say very quickly that it's-a-board-game-something-like-ludo-played-with-counters-and-dice. And there are about 49 per cent. who know about the game, having played it along with snakes and ladders and ludo in some once-upon-a-time nursery on a long, rainy afternoon.

What the other one per cent. realise, nodding knowingly, is that backgammon as a gambling game has become a craze in the United States and is already attracting the interest of some very high rollers indeed here in Britain. Somewhat more surprising, the majority of casinos have not realised this either. I rang the secretary of one big West End gaming club and asked her whether the club had introduced or intended introducing backgammon to its tables. There was



Backgammon today: concentration at the Fourth International Backgammon Tournament, Lucaya (top). Above: 400 years ago, gambling at the same game

a long pause during which I heard her whisper to a colleague. "Backgammon? Do we play that? I don't know - a card game I think. Maybe he means baccarat."

Not so long ago my own ignorance was as great as that of that particular house of cards. Some years back I was bidding, I thought, for what the auctioneer's catalogue described as "Victorian Chess Table, marquetry inlaid, sewing table beneath". Successful at about four guineas, I returned to the saleroom later, to collect it only to discover that the table was one of a pair and I had bought the wrong one. It was indeed marquetry inlaid, but instead of a neatly chequered pattern of mahogany and sycamore it had a sequence of 24 light and dark extreme angled isosceles triangles. A backgammon table, the porter informed me, and looked as though he understood my never having heard of it.

But it was ornamental enough. So I took it home, and ornament it would

have remained had not my six-year-old son spotted it. A fanatical gamesman who had already, at the age of three, learnt arithmetic on a cribbage board and broken his arm playing a fruit machine, he insisted that I find out the rules. And this I did, adjacent to bagatelle and beetle in an old book of indoor games.

The board, I learnt, with 12 triangles or "points" of alternate colours down each side, is divided into four "tables" of six points each. The game begins with each of the two players' 15 draughts-like pieces set out in a standard way on specified points. Here five pieces, there three pieces and so on. The players roll two dice alternately and move their pieces round the board according to the numbers thrown, much as in backgammon's better-known offspring, ludo, until all one's 15 pieces are in one's home, or "inner", table. The pieces may then be borne off the board, again according to the numbers rolled. The first man to clear his

By courtesy of the Trustees of the British Museum

pieces from the board is the winner. On the way round a player may make points "safe" by putting two or more pieces on them or "hit" an opponent's "unsafe", i.e. solitary, pieces. A piece that is hit must be taken off the board and started from the beginning again.

Those, apart from one small but significant modern addition, are the basic rules of the game for which 200,000 boards will be sold in the United States this year alone. So popular has backgammon become there that one smart Los Angeles discotheque has installed tables and succeeded in attracting the world's first backgammon groupies. And the boom has reached Britain. The few London stores that stock the game are experiencing a run on boards that is limited only by the speed with which they can obtain supplies from the manufacturers.

SMYTHSON'S, the Bond Street store that supplies the Clermont Club, sells boards as fast as they come in and are now beginning to hold the more expensive tables - that is, complete pieces of furniture with a backgammon top or drawer - in stock where previously these could only be had to order. Mrs Wells, of their games department, speaks of the increase in interest over the last ten years as incredible and the boom of the last three as unbelievable. Stock, at £18 for a travelling set to £100 for a leather and wood board, is always sold out in advance and the game is, despite Fischer and Spassky, far more in demand than chess. Asprey's say much the same thing: the demand is no longer Christmas-list seasonal but, starting with American visitors, has moved to what they call "the bright young set".

Chess, in Kensington Market, selling as well as antique boards a very low-priced modern range, finds it hard to keep pace with the demand from the same bright young things. "They come in with their Gucci shoes and their Gucci handbags and you know it's not a chess board they're after. An antique board hardly gets into the window. Julie Ege bought a backgammon board recently as well as a chess set and that must be indicative of something."

As a gambling game, for that is where the present interest stems from, backgammon has long been played as an afternoon diversion at such clubs as White's and St James' and, perhaps more seriously into the evening as well, at the Clermont. Other clubs, those at least that know a bar point from a steeplechase, are beginning to show an interest. Crockford's and Curzon House included backgammon in their latest application for renewal of their gaming licence. ABP, Britain's biggest suppliers and manufacturers of casino gaming equipment, after careful costing and market research of the potential demand, produced a prototype board early this year and are now steaming into steady production of a de luxe casino model that may make



On the backgammon circuit: aficionados Serge Obolensky, Mary Obolensky and Alexis Obolensky at the Segrams 100 Pipers Tournament, New York, 1972. Champions now circle the globe to compete in these high-rolling derbies

its way into one or two retail outlets as well.

But a high rolling game? This game you have either never heard of, or thought of simply as the decoration on the back of a chess board? That extension of ludo and snakes and ladders played before you were old enough for croquet, somehow more respectable than cards, less demanding than chess? That game?

Board games, by and large, fall into two categories: war games and race games. In a race game the object is to get your men on or off the board as quickly as possible. In a war game the object is to confine or capture your opponent's pieces or a particular piece. Chess, for example, is a war game. Backgammon is a race game, the oldest known race game, and the precursor of every modern board-pieces-and-dice game from snakes and ladders to Monopoly. Early versions of backgammon were found at Ur of the

Chaldees, dating from about 2,600 B.C., and in the tomb of Tutankhamun. Later, *tabulae* - tables or *ludus duodecim scriptorum* - the twelve-lined game, became a craze in the Roman Empire. Tables were carved in almost every courtyard in Pompeii and Claudius had one of the first travelling boards mounted in his chariot. A Roman board, now in the National Museum of Wales, was discovered at Holt in Denbighshire, but the Romans left little behind them other than the name "tables", by which backgammon was known in Britain until about 1750.

It remained for the returning Crusaders to reintroduce the game as a version of the Moslem game *nard*, played, as modern backgammon, with two dice instead of the Roman three. Dice, like the original bones - the astragals or ankle bones of the sheep - from which they derive, have always been closely associated with

prediction as much as gaming and fortune, and it is presumably from the Moslem interpretation of the *nard* board that mystic explanations of the backgammon board derive. The 24 points are held to represent the hours of the day, the division into 12 black and 12 white the months of the year as well as day and night, the 30 pieces, the days of the month, and the seven tallied on opposite sides of the dice, the days of the week.

History and literature abound with reference to "tables" and later to backgammon. Chaucer in *The Parson's Tale*: "Now cometh hasardrie with hisse apurtenances as tables and rafles". James I of Scotland played at tables the night before his assassination in 1437, while James III's brother, Albany, played his jailer as a prelude to slaying him and escaping from Edinburgh Castle in 1479. Sir Miles Partridge played King Henry VIII at tables for the bells of St Paul's. And won. Samuel Pepys lost a crown at tables before walking home.

From about 1750, tables disappeared and the game became known as backgammon, the Oxford English Dictionary deriving this from Anglo Saxon for "back game", and Dr Johnson from the Welsh for "small battle". Thomas Jefferson records in his diary the gains and losses made at backgammon while drafting the declaration of Independence, but by the end of the 19th century backgammon, railed against as "kueade" or wicked in 14th-century Kent and from time to time banned as injurious to the Sabbath, had disappeared from the clubs and coffee houses to the country parsonages where it achieved respectability. It was not until the Twenties that a small but significant American addition to the method of play helped turn backgammon into the game of chance and skill that can shift five figures from one bank account to another in the course of an evening's play in London today.

Backgammon has always been a game involving perhaps more skill and less luck than other games of chance. "Playing at tables on the Sabbath," one 16th-century author wrote, "is far more tolerable - although in all respects not allowable - than dice or cards, for it leans partly to chance and partly to industry of the mind." For one thing backgammon is an open game, unlike most card games where the opponent's hand is known only to himself. The position of the pieces of both players in backgammon is in full view and cheating, except by thimble-rigging the dice, is impossible.

The skill of an experienced player lies in knowing the odds both for the immediate roll and the opponent's possible return shots and using these odds to hit "blots" - the opponent's "unsafe" pieces, or to risk leaving blots himself that may be hit on the next roll. He must also be able to assess the overall chance of the game resulting in a win or a loss from any given position.

So far child's play. Where the present day gambling game differs is

firstly in the possibility of playing in a chouette – that is, in a group against a single player – and perhaps buying one's way from one side to the other as the odds alter, and secondly, and more importantly, in the use of the so-called doubling cube. This "monster", as Joe Dwek, one of England's leading players describes it, is the refinement added by an anonymous American in the 1920s that has become the foundation of the present day game and the cause of its attraction for high rollers.

THE cube bears the numbers 2, 4, 8, 16, 32, 64, and a player, assessing his position and the odds of a win or a gammon (a double win) or a backgammon (a triple win), may turn – or "double" – the cube at any stage of the game, leaving his opponent to pay up and get out, or to accept the double and play on at twice the stakes, control of the cube then passing to him. Theoretically, there is no reason why such a cube should not be used in any game played for a stake, but in fact although it has occasionally been used on the golf course, modern backgammon is the only game of which it forms an integral part. The cube brings in a poker element of bluff and both Joe Dwek and Philip Martyn, reckoned England's best players, attribute their expertise as much to mastery of the cube as to skill in the mechanics of the game.

"Knowing when to get out and pay

up is as important, perhaps more important, than anything else," says Dwek, recalling the weekend as house-guest at Southampton, New York, that was his baptism into backgammon. "At \$2 a point, you can't get hurt," his mentor assured him. Came Monday morning, Dwek was \$2,000 lighter. He returned home to play against himself, studying the game all night, every night. "In those days I'd play a game from the same position a hundred times to see whether I should have accepted a double or not. I'll still play a game 50 times, but I'm a more aggressive player now. You have to be aggressive. John Aspinall, for example, is poor at moving the pieces, but he's a frightening player to have against you because of his knowledge of gambling and of pressure. A poor player will turn the cube and double the stake a shot too early and then you come into control. I could give you a thousand examples. Egypt – I was born in Egypt, British parents in business – in Egypt, they all play. The Egyptians ought to be the best in the world because if you order a cup of coffee there, you get a newspaper and a backgammon board with it. But they're not and the reason is they've never had to use the cube.

"In the Lebanon I played in a chouette – me against the whole of the Lebanon – and I won because I knew how to use the cube. It makes it a different game – it's like playing polo

with bikes instead of horses. There are situations where you cannot make a certain move unless you are about to double on the next move."

JOE, small and well-built, learnt his backgammon while working in a stockbroker's office in New York in the early Sixties after graduating from Manchester University and Harvard Business School. Since then he has not missed a tournament – Las Vegas, Miami, the Bahamas, Hawaii, last spring the winner in Gstaad, this summer in Monte Carlo, circling the globe to compete in the heavy roller derbies.

Joe returned to England permanently in 1970 tired, he says, of collar and tie and Wall Street and stockbroking. "There's a difference in the game here too. The American game is very serious, but the English game is cruel. The English needle the loser." Married with two children, a non-smoker and a rare drinker, Dwek looks not a bit one's image of the Mississippi riverboat gambler. In his post-Wall-Street open-necked shirt and loose jacket, he looks more as though he is on his way to the tennis court. Which he probably is, for he exercises every day, either at tennis or working out in the gym. After the tennis, he may drop into the Clermont in Berkeley Square "to kill the afternoon" as he puts it.

Steve Raphael is the doyen of the Clermont players and turns up most

afternoons after the Stock Exchange has closed. He learnt backgammon in the Thirties in the bar of the Ritz in Paris and reckons the only way to become expert is to watch experts for two years or play them for about the same length of time. "And that way the tuition is going to cost you about £2,000 before you find out whether you're going to be any good or not." The game at the Clermont is not an expensive one, he says. "You might drop two or three hundred in an afternoon and pick it up the next, but if you wanted to you could do that in a minute upstairs at the tables. I play backgammon quite simply because it's the best board game: it's exciting and fascinating."

Joe Dwek has reached a similar assessment by a different route. "The Clermont game is purely recreational as far as I'm concerned at the moment. There was a time when it was possible to make a few hundred every afternoon. Sometimes it could be as much as a thousand to two thousand. But before the Gaming Act it could be £5,000 an afternoon at £100 a point. Now it's £10 or £20 a point and things have cooled off. I suppose the cube only gets as far as 8 and that only two or three times an afternoon. But I enjoy the conversation as much as anything else.

"A good chouette at the Clermont can be very witty, but it's not for high rollers. They're scared Philip or I will move the cube around. Now and then



They don't miss much.

there's someone wants to play and lose just to say that they've taken a shot at Joe Dwek, but if the man's no good, it would only be embarrassing. Backgammon's not that kind of game. I love the bread and I love winning, but hustling a mark would be very boring. It's good to have a challenge, good to feel the killer instinct inside you. I wouldn't want to play against someone like Dr Schweitzer, for example - you've got to work up a bit of hate and aggression. Then you win. If you get soft, you lose.

BUT it cuts both ways. There is a big game in London, the biggest in the world, the one I told you about. Philip Martyn and I play in it about once a week, just him or me against this other person - I can't tell you who he is, he's worried about his shareholders - and it can easily go up to five figures in the course of an evening. But the day after, win or lose, we're patsies for the boys at the Clermont. We haven't quite come down and we'd take any double anybody offered."

Joe Dwek and Philip Martyn are reckoned by many to be England's best players, perhaps even the world's best, for a joint challenge they have issued following the Fischer-Spassky circus has not been taken up. If Joe Dwek is far from the image of the riverboat gambler, Philip Martyn is still further removed. Martyn, who won the New York tournament in November last and has helped organise this month's world tournament in Monte Carlo, dropped into the Clermont after a morning lapping Silverstone with Jackie Stewart. A Greyhound and Authentic while reading history at Oxford in the early Sixties, he spent most of his university career training for the 1964 Olympic bobsleigh event. Thirty-four years old and married to Nina Rindt, widow of Jochen Rindt who was killed in the Italian Grand Prix of 1970, Martyn was bitten with backgammon while working in Wall Street in much the same way as Joe Dwek - by losing a great deal as a pigeon. "I just didn't see that it had any subtleties at first. I went on playing for fun and found out I was losing. Then I got aggressive and tried to win. I'm not like Joe. When the game's over, it's over. I don't go home and play it all over again to

see where I went wrong. But I don't enjoy losing - at anything. It eats away at my guts. I remember a game in the Hotel de Paris where I threw the board out of the window and then ran down eight flights of stairs so that I could trample it to pieces. You've got to be aggressive, and then it's the greatest two-handed game. And it's knowing how to use the doubling cube that makes it. You can always, always, make people play for more than they want to and that's what gambling is - staking more than you can afford to lose. You can make a millionaire squirm with that doubling cube."

"The Monster," nods Joe. "I'll tell you a story about that. I was house-guest in Westport, Connecticut and I was playing my hostess one morning for \$10 a point. Now she was a known lunatic and that cube went round, right round, twice and then took another turn. You can work it out yourself - double \$10 and do that 13 times - over \$80,000 it came to. And we were at what had to be the last couple of moves of the game before one of us won and she wanted to double me again. So I said to her, 'This is crazy, why don't we stop for lunch and think about it.' Well, I can't remember why, maybe I was calling my bank manager but whatever it was during lunch I asked her if I could use the phone to call New York. And you know what she said to me, and she wasn't joking? 'Are you calling collect? Because if you're not, then that's going to cost you 35 cents.'"

JOE rose to watch the chouette that had got going now that the afternoon racing on the television had finished. "England's bound to follow America into backgammon - it follows it into everything else. And the English, I guarantee, love to gamble. And once you're into backgammon, you're hooked."

A couple of days later I was driving down a half-darkened street past a five-storey block of flats whose dormer windows were casting long pointed shadows that dissected the bright roadway. Unaware, without noticing, I found myself working out the roll I'd need on the backgammoned highway to take the car from one safe point to the next. □

BOOK OF THE WEEK

A TOUCH OF DANGER by James Jones. From the cellars that gave you vintage Hollywood comes some old wine in new bottles. Surviving ruggedly into the age of post-Vietnam, long hair, and easy come easy go, James Jones (*From Here to Eternity*) slings this high-tension novel in a hot Greek island full of freaks, drop-outs and knots of conspiracy. The narrator, Lobo Davies, a private eye of 50-ish, arrives for a holiday which a cast of sinister Greeks, rancid Americans, hippies, whores, smugglers, millionaires, layabouts, thugs and ponces deprive him of, anxious as they are either to recruit or to eliminate him. Davies has aged like a bear, keeping his claws. He snorts at hippies, their dirt and holy conceit. He wisecracks old-style, talks of broads and blondes, likes skin-diving, drinks hard, and enjoys nothing more than a fight against odds (three muggers, say), preferably followed by sex.

All this he has in plenty while a fog of leads, clues and decoys clears to show him a vast market in heroin and its inevitable wake of murder and corruption. I lost my grip of the niceties about a third of the way through, but was still gripped by a suspense that broke like a monsoon pages before the end. A sanguine, growling saga of crime and intrigue; funny in parts, and irresistibly easy to read. Doubtless, too, the book of the film. (Published by Collins: price £2.50)

Brendan Lehane