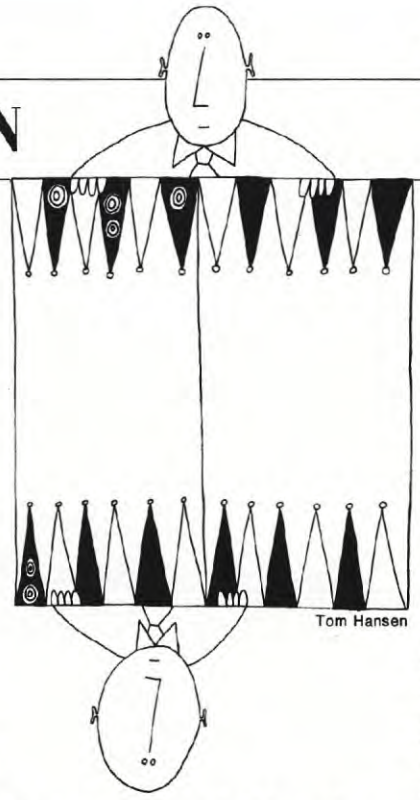
Jon Bradshaw

BACKGAMMON

Polite cruelties



I REMEMBER A TIME, not long ago, when I had never heard of the game. Now and again, I look back on that time—in much the way nostalgic parents do, when speaking of life before the war—as riskless, sedate, somehow undefinably benign. But only now and again. In fact, it is hard to recall what life *was* like before backgammon ruled one's leisure time. Did one frequent concerts and circuses then? Attend one's wife or lover? Did one play for sensible stakes and think of other things? Memory fails me. But I recall the very morning backgammon came up my drive in the person of a young man with a beard, carrying what the Penguin Dictionary of English innocently defines as "a hinged board with draughtsmen and dice."

From such inconspicuous beginnings obsessions are born. Since then, I have studied the game with a diligence that sometimes frightens me, and I have heard credible tales of fortunes won and lost, of losers threatening to throw themselves from the fortieth floor unless the game went on. I have seen the players leaving the gaming parlors at 5:00 A.M., humping heavily home or hurrying down side streets toward the neighborhood brothel. And best, perhaps, the night one of the players lost a blonde in a backgammon game. He considered himself a man of sense and talent, a winner, cheated at the eleventh hour by one of Fate's low conjuring tricks. I remember him muttering as the blonde departed on the winner's arm: "Christ, if my last throw had been double-threes . . ."

Traditionally, the game has been a pastime of the rich, once restricted to such clubs as White's in London, the Reading Room in Newport, and the old Whist Club of New York. (Under different names and without the use of the "doubling block," it has been popular in the Middle East for centuries.) And today, despite a growing network of international tournaments, the heavy action remains for the most part in such clubs as the Mayfair and Racquet clubs in New York and the Clermont in London. Not until 1964, when the First International Tournament was set up and sponsored by Prince Alexis Obolensky, did the game begin to attract people other than the odd earl, millionaire, or socialite.

That first tournament drew only thirty players, but earlier this year at the World Championships in Las Vegas, 186 players appeared to compete for nearly $95,000 in prize money. During the past eight years, the fifty-seven-year-old Russian-born Obolensky has staged at least two major tournaments every year—normally in Vegas in the winter and the Caribbean in the spring. He has become the mainspring of the movement, and without him backgammon might easily have gone the way of other once-popular games such as whist and court tennis.

But backgammon survived to become one of the biggest money games in the world. (As a gambling game, it lies considerably behind gin and poker, but its growing popularity is evident in the nearly five million dollars' worth of backgammon boards sold in America alone last year.) Next to chess, it is the most skillful board game there is, though children can learn it in hours. Backgammon, however, is deceptively simple. It usually involves two players. (With more than two players, it is called "chouette," that is, one player alternating against a field.) Each player, depending on the throw of the dice, must move his fifteen men around and off the board before his opponent can do the same. As with any dice game, luck plays its customary role. Skill is employed by knowing the percentages and probabilities, when to play offense or defense. Although the ratio of skill to luck is impossible to compute, it is generally agreed that when the adversaries are evenly matched (both technically and emotionally) the game is all dice. Over the short term, an average or good player can win, but in the long run even the "unlucky" expert will always win. The law of averages is as infallible as the law of gravity.

A further dimension is introduced by the use of the doubling block, a large die with numbers ranging from 2 to 4 to 8 to 16 to 32 to 64. At the beginning of any game this die rests at the side of the board, and it can be brought into play by whichever player thinks he has the first advantage. For example, in a game being played for $10 a point (a relatively high stake for casual apprentices but a low stake for professionals), if one player believes he is ahead at any moment in the game, he doubles his opponent to 2. Either player may make the first double, but having done so, may not again double until redoubled by his opponent. If the opponent feels he is going to lose, he retires, thereby losing one point and $10. If, however, he believes he is even, or only slightly behind, he may accept the double and, should he find himself ahead at a later stage in the game, he will double back to 4 (thus increasing the worth of the game to $40). When playing, then, a sound compreh

Jon Bradshaw, a London journalist who has published numerous articles in British and American magazines, became addicted to the game of backgammon several years ago in the back country of Jamaica. Since then, to his considerable cost and sorrow, he has emerged as an authority on the subject.

sion of your own and your opponent's position, and when to give or take a double, is essential.

BACKGAMMON'S apparent simplicity, of course, is the game's initial attraction. I know of almost no one who has not learned 60 per cent of the moves in a week; I know of no one who did not believe he actually understood the game the following day. But backgammon is so subtle that it is impossible to learn all there is to know about it. One acknowledged expert, who has played for thirty years, told me he probably understood only 90 per cent of the game. Because of the skills involved (most average players believe players better than themselves are lucky), and because most players tend to rationalize the dice, blaming their misfortunes on "bad luck," it is difficult not only to recognize your own mistakes but also to evaluate your own abilities. The game is usually played for high stakes, and self-deception can be very expensive. It is for this reason that Barclay Cooke, one of the game's finest players, refers to backgammon as "the cruelest game."

Like some concealed and irreplaceable mechanism, cruelty *is* built into the game. To become proficient at backgammon, for example, one must play with better players, and at their stakes. One great player told me that the cost of becoming expert at the game was two years and $20,000—but then, and only then, if one had talent. The theory, though extravagant, has proved accurate on more than one occasion. I remember some five years ago in London a man called Gravita, who was playing in a chouette against eight other players, most of them experts. Gravita had been losing steadily for years, but he had always paid his debts. This particular night the stakes were set at £20 ($48) a point. Toward the end of the evening Gravita was somewhat ahead, but the game at hand was going against him. The doubling block had been turned back and forth to 64. Finally, sensing advantage, the eight players redoubled Gravita to 128. Gravita hesitated, then laughed, and said, "Well, gentlemen, I can't afford to pay if I drop, so I'll take it." (Had he dropped, his loss would have been $5,576.) Everyone smiled, as Gravita was known for his little jokes. But when the game ended, Gravita found he had lost a double game, or about

$102,304.* He stood up from the table, smiled, walked out of the room, and to this day, no one has seen Gravita again. As a result, whenever anyone takes a bad double in London, it is known as "the Gravita Take."

Talent is just one of the prerequisites of backgammon, and not the most important one. Tim Holland, who has won more major tournaments than anyone else, claims there are many talented players, but that the best players, the winners (see box), are those who are not influenced by adversity. "You must learn to divorce your feelings from the game," he says. "The good player is one who does not compound his losses with personal feelings. And yet 99 per cent of the people who play double up when they're losing and draw back when they're ahead. Result? Disaster. You must look at losing in backgammon in the same way you would look at a business reversal over which you had no control." Paul Magriel, a twenty-five-year-old professor of mathematics and the best young player in the game, says that "you've got to learn when to give in, which in America is a difficult thing in any game, given the 'never say Uncle, never say die' mystique most children are raised with. But in backgammon, that's of no use."

Nonetheless, most players continue to believe they will win, simply because they want to. With the compulsive gambler, even winning and losing become irrelevant. And backgammon is the compulsive gambler's dream. Dostoevsky, an illuminating example of the compulsive gambler (though not at backgammon), explained his needs in a letter to a friend: "The main point is the game itself. On my oath, it is not greed for money, despite the fact that I need money badly." Intrigued by the novelist's passion for gambling, Freud drew parallels between compulsive gambling and sexual behavior in his paper "Dostoevsky and Parricide." He believed that the gambling passion was a substitute for the compulsion to masturbate and noted significant similarities in the two activities: the importance placed upon the hands; the fact that both were held to be vices; the irresistible nature of the two acts, which led their devotees to renounce them time and again only to derive enormous thrills and subsequent guilt when their resolutions were broken.

Paul Magriel believes backgammon to be the most masochistic of games. "It requires more discipline and control than any other game I know," he says, "because one of the game's major attractions is the possibility of getting hurt." All backgammon players are not compulsive, of course, but the style of the game emanates a particularly heady form of *Angstlust*, which attracts the compulsive player. I have seen them leaning across the board, as if they heard a kind of broken music in the dice.

In backgammon, if one passes over the major emotional traps, perhaps the most subtle technical trap is the general lack of understanding of the percentages and probabilities involved in the game. Most players look upon the odds as a kind of mathematical hocus-pocus and turn away as from a strange fog. But the mathematical definition of probability, after all, is certainty, relative to the conditions. And the best players know it. Although there is no other game in which a player can make the wrong percentage move and win as a direct result of it, such success is always short-lived. A knowledge of the odds remains essential to the game.

An example of this occurred in the finals of a recent championship match. The match was between Christopher Stout and Achille Fong,* and victory was to be decided on the final roll in the final game. Each player had sixteen points in the seventeen-point match. In that final game, Stout had two men left on his one-point; Fong had four men left, one of which was on his six-point (see page 38). It was Fong's throw and he needed double-sixes to win the first prize of $6,500. At this point, Stout stopped the game in order to ask a knowledgeable spectator what the odds were against Fong's throwing double-sixes. The man informed him that the odds were 35-to-1 against. In backgammon, particularly in the final matches of

*The names are invented. Although prideful and much given to boasting, backgammon players become wonderfully modest when speaking of their exploits to agents of the Internal Revenue Service.

*A double game is one in which a player, in this instance the unfortunate Gravita, fails to take any of his pieces off the board. He then loses twice the number of points showing on the doubling block.

tournament, whenever one reaches a position where the odds can be calculated exactly, asking for insurance is a customary practice. Stout extracted a $100 bill from his pocket and asked what odds he could get. One spectator said he would give him 30-to-1 against the double-sixes. Stout agreed. Another spectator offered Stout 31-to-1 against for a further outlay of $100. And Stout agreed. Stout, of course, knew he was getting the worst of the odds, but in this case it was worth it as insurance against the possible disaster of double-sixes.

It was Fong's throw, and as the crowd waited, he threw double-sixes to win the match. By losing, Stout collected not only the $2,500 second prize but also a total of $6,100 from the two spectators—or $2,100 more than he would have received had he won the match. As the crowd surged round the table congratulating the players, a woman turned to one of the losing spectators and asked, "Aren't the true odds against double-sixes 35-to-1?" "No," the man said, "not when a Chinaman's rolling."

THOUGH MANY of the percentages in backgammon are calculable, the ratio between skill and luck is obscure and has probably been discussed for as long as the game has been in existence. Because backgammon is not as logical as chess or as scientifically exact as checkers (a game so restrictively formal that if two experts play, the one who moves first always wins), it is often dismissed by the unknowledgeable as just another game of chance, performed by gamblers who might as well be flipping coins. Barclay Cooke is convinced that backgammon is 85 per cent luck and 15 per cent skill. "I know the layman will be astonished at such a ratio," he says, "but let him consider other gambling games. If you play craps against the house, for example, and play them correctly, the odds each time are less than 1 per cent against you. If you play blackjack, the odds are 2 per cent to 3 per cent against you; roulette is about 5.5 per cent against you; in betting on football with a bookmaker, the odds are 5 per cent against you. So you can see that the 15 per cent in backgammon is very high indeed."

Cooke's son Walter, who has won two of the World Championships, disagrees. "I think the argument about the skill-luck factor in backgammon should stop," he says. "In theory, if an unskilled player, unable to play one piece correctly, plays a skillful player, there would be no luck factor at all. In other words, the skillful player would win every time. The argument, therefore, is meaningless." Paul Magriel agrees. "Talking about skill and luck is like talking about oranges and apples. Unless you define your terms—who is playing against whom, at what stakes, over how many games—a skill-luck ratio is incomprehensible."

Backgammon is not a game in which luck should be taken seriously, though many players will gamble at it, relying, it would seem, on the dodgy advice given by an Oriental sage, who claimed that "if you throw a lucky man into the sea, he will emerge with a fish in his mouth." Such players forget that although *they* are gambling, the experts are not. Gamesmen rather than gamblers, the experts always have an edge because they know infinitely more about the game. To play against them for money is like backing the victim at a public hanging. But for many players these certainties do not exist. In the parlance of the game, such players are called "pigeons."* The pigeon is a particularly amenable variety of chump, and in New York, for example, I have seen them pit themselves against their betters with the blind resolve of suicides. It is always the same. During those long evenings of euphoric play in the back rooms of bars and private drawing rooms, there is a sense of promise in the air, a vague presentiment that luck will last, that God is just, that dawn will never come.

I REMEMBER, PARTICULARLY, a game one night in a rather shabby East Side bar. There were four or five players at the back table and a group of drunken onlookers hanging round. The bar was crowded and noisy, but the players seemed unaware of the din. So engrossed were they that a stranger might have mistaken the play for the rites of some low Masonic order. There was something almost orgiastic in their play, and I remembered that Dostoevsky had reputed

*Pigeon: "a simpleton, a dupe," from 1590—or the verb from 1675 meaning "deceive grossly," e.g., "having one nigh been pigeoned of a vast property." O.E.

achieved orgasm when he gambled—but only when he lost. As the game continued, three of the players fell behind and suggested to the fourth, an elderly man who had contented himself with soda water while the others had been drinking brandy, that the stakes be raised. The man agreed with a cursory nod. Toward 3:00 A.M., a girlfriend of one of the other players leaned over, and following a tense exchange, she stalked away from the table and out of the bar. The player, a young man in a dinner jacket, shrugged and turned back to the game.

Just before dawn, the proprietress announced they would have to go. Indignantly, the players demanded three final games, but she would not be moved. The match was over. The elderly player pushed the scoresheet across the table. The others studied it, as though it contained a riddle they couldn't solve.

Gathering their coats, they straggled one by one into the street. The player in the dinner jacket threw his umbrella, end over end, into the night. The elderly man thanked them for their contributions. The others exchanged the drawn farewells of truant boys. The man in the dinner jacket wandered south and east, reeling clumsily through the empty streets. He looked like a man attempting to learn the steps of a new dance. □

Any ranking of backgammon players will be argued feverishly by the *cognoscenti*, but the following list of the world's top fifteen players (in order) represents a consensus among the leading players at the Racquet, Clermont, and Mayfair clubs:

1. Tim Holland, New York
2. Barclay Cooke, New York
3. Walter Cooke, Vale, Colo.
4. Paul Magriel, New York
5. Claude Beer, New York
6. Ralph Chafetz, New York
7. Louis de Yong, Miami
8. Joe Dwek, London
9. Gino Scalamandre, New Yor
10. Philip Martyn, London
11. Oswald Jacoby, Dallas
12. Tobias Stone, New York
13. Porter Ijams, New York
14. Jimmy Goldsmith, London
15. Arthur Dickman, New York