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Style

THIS MONTH

OWEN TRAYNER
looks at backgammon

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BACKGAMMON COMES TO LIFE

By Ken Zoretich

A very attractive young brunette in a bra-less chic outfit sat across the table from Owen Trayner one Thursday night at the Players' Club in Fort Lauderdale, a backgammon board between them.

Trayner, a tall, likeable 64-year-old cherub, is recognized as one of the better backgammon players in the world. The woman, a beginner.

It was somewhere in the middle of the contest and Trayner had just rolled his dice and was moving his pieces around the board. He took his hand off the pieces but was still pondering his moves. His dice were yet resting in his home court.

The woman apparently thought Trayner was finished with his turn. She reached for the leather cup containing her dice and started to shake.

Without a change of expression, Trayner casually, but quickly extended his right arm and tapped the woman on her right arm.

She looked up, quite startled. When her eyes met his eyes, he said solemnly, "You've got a broken arm, honey."

Then he broke out in laughter.

The dozen or so other beginners sitting around the table also started to laugh. Trayner, in a manner peculiar to his gregarious nature, had just taught the woman a lesson she'd probably never forget. Nor would the others.

"One of the rules of the game say you can't even shake your dice until I have picked up mine from the board," Trayner said. "I could still move my pieces differently as long as my dice are down."

Elsewhere in the room, perhaps 60 other people, men and women of all ages, were playing backgammon. They are some of the estimated three million Americans now fascinated by the game.

More and more start playing every day. Five years ago, maybe only 200,000 people played the game in the U.S.

And who is Owen Trayner, the smiling man always surrounded by beginners and veteran players alike asking an endless number of questions about the rules and strategy in backgammon?

In Florida, he is the man doing for backgammon what Fischer and Spassky did for chess a few years back. In Fort Lauderdale, he is the man to go to if you want to learn the game; and have fun learning.



Owen Trayner and his wife, Alyda, at their home battlefield.

Photos by Stephanie Swardlin

A game formerly delegated to the back of checker boards makes a real comeback after 3,000 years of quiet existence

In an interview in his home at the Point of America 1, Trayner explained how the game originated, where it's going and why people are suddenly playing like they never played before.

IL: What has happened to backgammon?

Trayner: Well, in 1974, the big tournament, the World Championship Tournament in Las Vegas, drew the largest crowd of players we've ever had at any backgammon tournament. And, in addition to that, a tournament I recently returned from, the World Championship International Tournament, in Monte Carlo, drew 176 players from all over the world. So, here's one in Vegas that draws a tremendous crowd and one in Monte Carlo that does the same thing. Now, in Monte Carlo we had players from South Africa, Germany, France, England, and of course from all over the United States. San Francisco, Chicago, New York, Florida. About 20 players from Florida. That will give you an indication of the interest. The press coverage at these things, that has increased. The London Daily Telegraph sent Anthony Hayden-Guest, a special reporter, to cover the tournament. There was a columnist from Los Angeles because all the movie stars, all the television stars are vitally interested in backgammon. Now you see, also, in the various newspaper columns like Suzy, that the jet set goes here and there for a big backgammon tournament.

IL: Why the sudden interest?

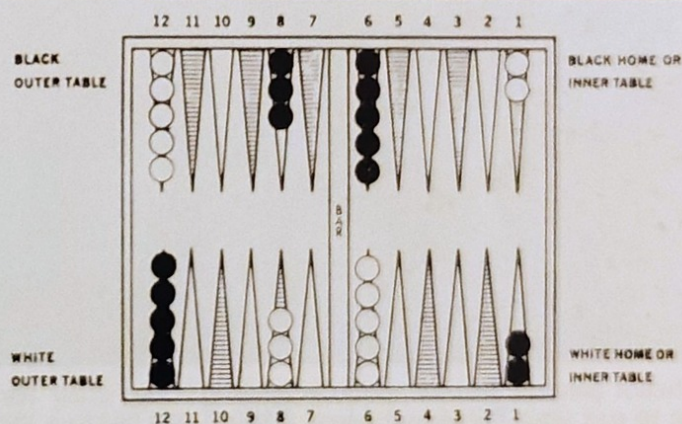
Trayner: The American public has an interest in all types of games, whether it is backgammon, gin rummy, chess or bridge. It just took backgammon a little longer to catch on. If you think back, we all learned as young people to play checkers. Well, the reverse side of the checker board was always the backgammon board. You might remember the points. But, very few of us, for some unknown reason, learned how to play backgammon. Backgammon is a game at least 3,000 years old. In my research I can even show you 4,000 and 5,000 years old. It originated in Persia and spread up through Lebanon, Syria, Armenia and across to Turkey, Greece and Egypt. In King Tut's tomb there is a gold backgammon board. The Viking sailors had backgammon boards on their ships. Dice, you heard the slang expression of

"bones" for dice. The original dice were made out of a couple of pieces of bone. You have the Roman senators in the baths, King Arthur and his knights were all backgammon players. King Arthur ruled that only nobility could play backgammon. Shakespeare in his writings tells about "tables." In England, the game of backgammon in those days was called tables. He refers to it in at least two or three places. Backgammon had been played in America all through the years, but only in a few, fine clubs throughout the country. Palm Beach was always a hot bed of backgammon. I founded the first true backgammon club in the entire country right here in Fort Lauderdale. I started teaching every week and have probably taught at least 6,000 people how to play backgammon. As this went along we held tournaments, some of the jet set, some of the movie stars started to play, became fascinated, and columnists like Irv Kupcinet of the Chicago Sun-Times started to write about it and it

became the game to play. The publicity kept up, more and more people said, "What do I do, I want to learn how to play," and it just kept on growing.

IL: Is it faddish?

Trayner: Backgammon is such a marvelous game, once people pick up the game they are players forever. I can teach anyone to play backgammon that has the ability to count to the number six because that's the highest number on the dice. This is a game you have to have instruction in, however. You can't just pick up a book and learn how to play backgammon. You have to have the basic instruction and play a little bit to get some of experience. Then, if you read a book on backgammon it will help you. But, once you learn the game, you're a player from then on. There's always the possibility, because of the luck of the dice, that a beginning player, if he's rolling fabulous dice, can beat Oswald



A QUICK LOOK AT THE RULES

Backgammon is a game of advance and block. Each player has fifteen men of contrasting colors on a board containing six points in each of four sections. The object of the game is to move the men around the board in opposite directions by the roll of the dice. The first player to get all his men off the board wins the game.

If a point is covered by two or more men, the opponent may not land on it. A man alone on a point is vulnerable and can be knocked off the board and must start all over again.

A doubling cube encribed with the numbers 2, 4, 8, 16, 32 and 64 is used to increase the stakes of the game during play. A player refusing the double forfeits the game. If accepted, the game continues at double the previous stakes, with the power of the doubler changing hands.

The lucky rolls of the dice are the doubles. If double-six is rolled, for example, the player gets to move four sixes instead of just two.

... Owen Trayner

Jacoby. If he rolls bad numbers and you're rolling good numbers, there is this ego thing, you have the chance to beat the world champion player. And it happens.

IL: How did you get started?

Trayner: I learned the game as a young man in Chicago. Then, there was a long period of time I didn't play. In World War II, I was in the Navy and there's a game we played called Acey-Ducey, which is a variation of the game of backgammon, but the essentials are the same. After World War II, there was a long period of time again that I didn't play. I've been in Fort Lauderdale about 12 years, and about three years prior to that I started playing backgammon again. I came to Fort Lauderdale, but there were no backgammon players. I went to a tournament in Freeport, Grand Bahamas, and as I was bemoaning my fate to all the players, this one fella said I should put an ad in the newspapers. I thought it was a good idea and I put ads in the Fort Lauderdale News and the Sun-Sentinel. I thought if I found two, three or four people that I'd be happy. Well, my telephone rang off the hook. It ended up I had 175 people at my home. I called Prince Alexis Obolensky and some other friends in Palm Beach to come down and bring backgammon boards. Anybody that accepted my invitation had to sit down that night at the party and learn how to play. I went out and got a bunch of silver trophies, had them engraved and started a tournament. That was my hook because I wouldn't let the tournament end that night. They had to come back a week later and that's how the Fort Lauderdale Backgammon Club started. It's been going on ever since.

IL: How long does it take to understand the game?

Trayner: I think anyone with an average IQ can play well in six week's time. The ones that are best at it have an excellent mathematical grasp because it's a game of numbers. You're rolling dice. You're moving the men in accordance with the numbers, and the laws of probability of dice come into effect. If you have a math background and know something about chances and odds and percentages it's going to help you and that will make the difference.

IL: What percentage is luck and what is skill?

Trayner: Barclay Cooke, whom I respect very much as a great player in New York, has figures of 85 percent luck and 15

percent skill. But, that 15 percent is an edge. That's where strategy comes in. There are six points in each of the four sections of the board. We each have 15 men. The object of the game is for you to advance your men one way around into your home board. It's just like an army. This is a game of advance and block.

IL: What's the doubling block?

Trayner: Some smart American who liked to gamble and get the stakes up invented the doubling block. The rule is whenever you think you have an advantage, you can pick up the block, which is inscribed with the numbers 2, 4, 8, 16, 32 and 64, and before you roll the dice, turn it to 2 and say, "Owen, I'm doubling you from 1 to 2." We agree before the game what stakes we're playing for. Let's play for a Rolls Royce. I have a minute to decide to accept or decline the double. If I think your advantage is too great, I say no and have forfeited the game, owing you one Rolls. If I accept, the game goes on, but we're playing for two Rolls. If I get lucky and roll some good dice, I'll double you to 4. Then it's 8, 16, etc. You can see how high the stakes can get. It had never been used for 3,000 years before this fella in New York, evidently a good player,

wanted to get the dollars up. It caught on and has become the fascinating part of the game.

IL: Someone said while the doubling block is the heart of the game, it is devoid of sportsmanship?

Trayner: It is the heart of the game, but I don't believe it is devoid of sportsmanship because when I double you, you have the right of accepting or declining; an option. Don't forget, once I double you the power of the doubling block is in your hands. I've only doubled you from 1 to 2. When you have the power, you're going to double me from 2 to 4. That's a big power.

IL: Then it's a game of ego and machismo; a test of nerve?

Trayner: That's part of it. There is a lot of psyching your opponent out, saying things to him, gamesmanship, brinksmanship, whatever you want to call it. Sometimes they do try to scare you with the doubling block when they really don't have a double to put a little pressure on you. It's that type of game.

IL: Describe a match you remember very well.



"Is she or is she not the living end?"

Trayner: It has to be Estoril, Portugal, at the World International Championship. I was in the finals with a man from London, Lynn Gardener, and I'm way ahead of him in the match. It was the first time a world championship was held for 27 points. It was always 25 points before that. I got to 25 points first, but my dice went bad and he crept up and beat me by one point, 27-26. That was close. A big moment, but then a letdown. I thought I had him beaten. It was one of those things.

IL: Are backgammon players superstitious?

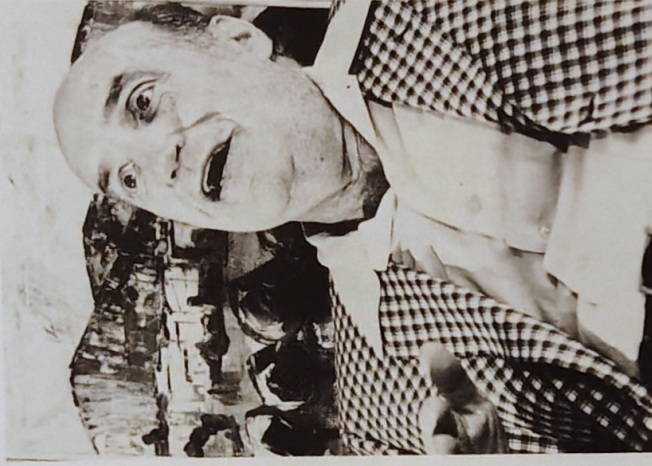
Trayner: Well, I believe in ESP as far as the dice are concerned. A couple of years ago, Duke University did quite a study on that. I think you have to be able to talk to the dice to help roll the right numbers. A lot of players carry lucky pieces, a rabbit's foot, or whatever. That's part of it.

IL: Rate yourself as a player.

Trayner: As a player, I would say, on a scale of 100, I would make myself about 99. But, I do believe I'm the finest teacher in the country of beginning players. And, I have taught more people to play backgammon than any other five people in any other part of the country. I introduced backgammon to all clubs here in south Florida and have had at least one beginning tables each week throughout the last 12 years. Those include the Players' Club, the Everglades Club in Palm Beach, Palm Bay Club, Coral Ridge Club, the Lauderdale Yacht Club, LeClub International, and so on. I'm also one of the few qualified tournament directors.

IL: How many great players are there?

Trayner: I would say I could probably name 100 great players. To show you, we were going to put on a tournament in New York for just the top 20 players and



"If he rolls bad numbers and you're rolling good numbers, there is this ego thing, you have the chance to beat the world champion player. And it happens."

it became such a rhubarb as to who those top 20 were that we were never able to do it.

IL: How well do women play the game?

Trayner: Women have won the world championship twice and I predicted this in my former Palm Beach newspaper column two years before it happened. Women are tigers at this game. My wife, Alyda and I can sit down to a battle, and so help me, the dinner burns in the oven. If I'm ahead, she will not let me leave the game.

IL: Did you ever want to give the game up?

Trayner: No, no. It is frustrating and you

run in cycles in this game, though. You have weeks when you're hot with the dice and months when you're cold with the dice.

IL: Are the moves controversial?

Trayner: Oh, yes. Many times top players will disagree on a move. There is a little newspaper called the Backgammon News, and it will publish problems; how would you move, this way or that way with a particular roll of the dice. Then they poll six or eight expert players and one fellow's answer will be to move it this way; the other fellow is just as adamant you move it that way; another guy will say, "Go home, the game's over, you've lost." Everybody has a different idea of what to do at a particular time. There's two sides to a coin in all this. And, you've got to remember this in backgammon, no matter what you do you don't know the next roll of the dice of your opponent. It could change the entire thing around.

IL: Why would you recommend this game to anyone?

Trayner: It's so fascinating. It's so changeable. It has so many elements of fun, mental exercise and it's enjoyable to many people all at the same time. It's so simple to learn. So simple to play. There are so many young people taking up the game today that are going to be great players. For the older people, it gets them out and doing something. It takes you out of the quiet life. You meet people. And, there has been many a romance started over the backgammon board. I've got to tell you one little story. I was at a tournament in Nassau and this young couple was on their honeymoon and called me over and asked me for some pointers. I was talking to them and asked them what stakes they were playing for. The bride looks up at me and said, "Backscratching time. And I've won five minutes."

Fort Lauderdale News, Friday, Feb. 10, 1978

Owen R. Trayner, Backgammon Promoter

Owen R. Trayner, the man who did more than anyone else to promote backgammon in Broward County, died suddenly on Wednesday from a heart rupture. He was 67.

"He played right up until his death," a friend of the family said yesterday. "Just Monday night, he staged a tournament at Le Club International."

Mr. Trayner, 2100 S. Ocean Lane, Fort Lauderdale, brought his love for backgammon with him when he moved to Fort Lauderdale in 1961, after retiring as vice president of the Maywood Park Harness Track in Maywood, Ill.

Dismayed with the game's absence in his new home, Mr. Trayner once placed an advertisement in the newspaper inviting anyone interested to a backgammon party at his home. Some 125 persons accepted and shortly thereafter he formed the Fort Lauderdale Backgammon Club.

When CB radios became popular, Mr. Trayner took his nickname, "Mr. Backgammon of Fort Lauderdale," and used it as his handle.

Trayner once identified Playboy empire chief Hugh Hefner as one of his favorite competitors. "The most difficult thing," Mr. Trayner com-

mented, "is when he had the real Miss January and the real Miss February sitting across the table. It's hard for an old codger like me to keep my mind on the game."

Mr. Trayner, after retiring in Chicago, found a second and very active business life here. He served as public relations officer for the Pompano Harness Track for some four years.

He also served as a partner in Trayner Murray Inc., 1002 E. Las Olas Blvd., an interior decorating service. A few years ago, Mr. Trayner finally decided to retire from all but backgammon and sold his interests. His name remains on the shop window.

Mr. Trayner belonged to a long list of clubs, including the Racquet Club in his native Chicago, the Adventurers Club of Chicago and the Coral Ridge Country Club.

He is survived by his widow, Alyda, and two stepsons, Keith and Peter Mortlock.

A 10 a.m. mass will be held at the St. Sebastian Catholic Church in Harbor Beach. The body will be transported to Evanston, Ill. for burial.

Friends may call at the Fairchild Funeral Home, 299 N. Federal Hwy., from 7 to 9 p.m. tonight.



Owen R. Trayner, the founder of the Fort Lauderdale Backgammon Club.

TRAYNER

Owen R. Trayner Jr., 67, of 2100 South Ocean Lane, Fort Lauderdale, passed away Wednesday at the Broward General Medical Center. A resident here 15 years from Chicago, Ill. Member of the Coral Ridge Country Club, Le Club International, Racquet Club of Chicago, Adventurers Club of Chicago, the No Name Club, the Jockey Club and the Palm Bay Club. Veteran with the U.S. Navy in World War II. Survived by his wife Alyda; two stepsons Keith Mortlock, North East, Pennsylvania and Peter Mortlock, Kalamazoo, Mich. Mass of the Resurrection at 10 a.m. Saturday at St. Sebastian Catholic Church. Friends may call 7 to 9 p.m. Friday at FAIRCHILD NORTH FEDERAL FUNERAL HOME. Interment will be in Calvary Cemetery in Evanston, Ill. under the direction of Carroll and Sons Funeral Home, 25 Erie Street, Chicago, Ill. The family requests that memorials be made to the American Cancer Society in lieu of flowers.