

The 2014 World Championship of Backgammon



← **BACKGAMMON'S REIGNING QUEEN**
Dressed in regal purple, Akiko held her court at Monte Carlo.

Opinion

The Tsunami hits Monte Carlo, the Hobgoblin of Continuity, and Ideas to Reinvigorate the World Championship

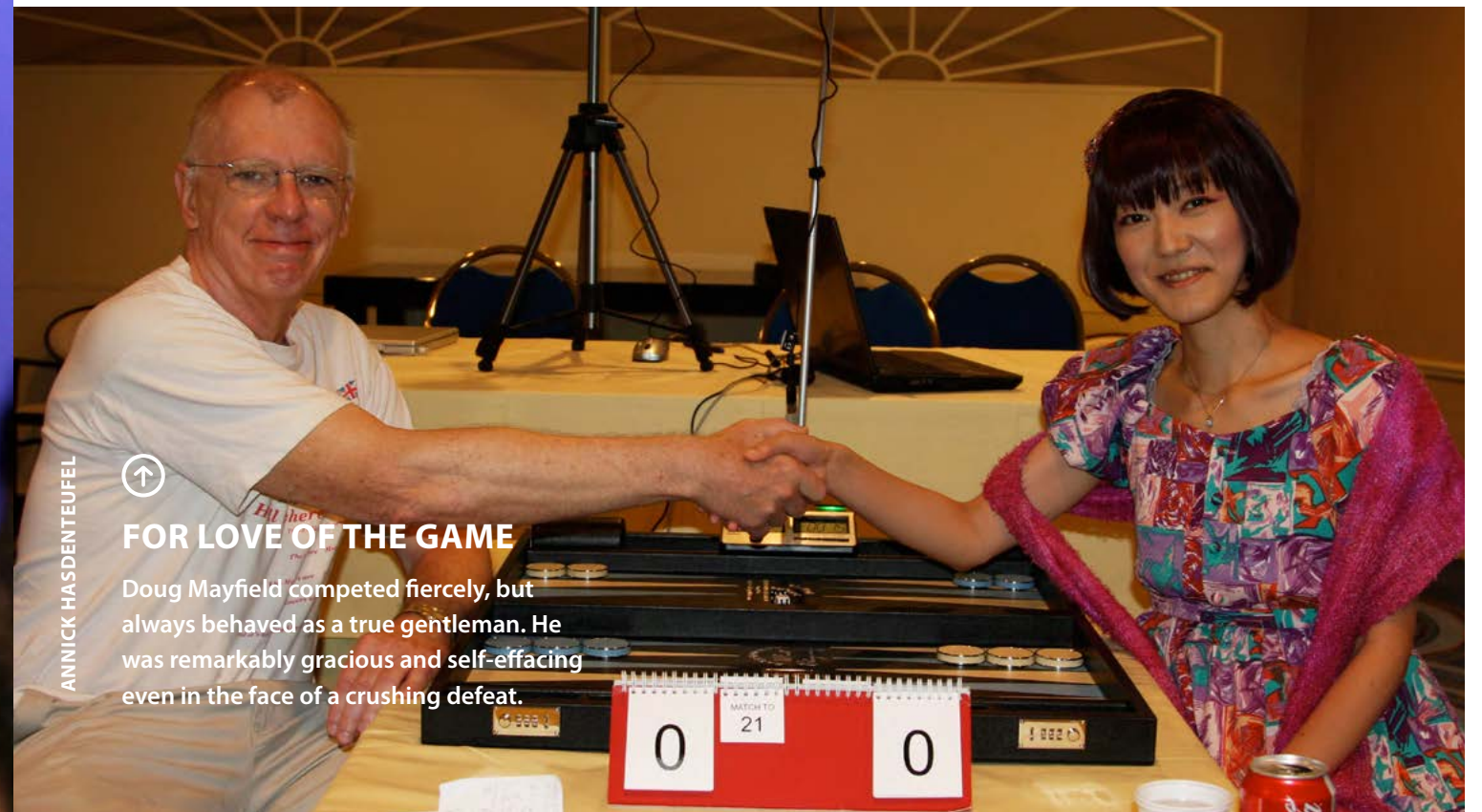
By Jason Pack

Just as French cooking and wine are imitated the world over, the French have many famous sayings that have been copied in English. “*Plus ça change, plus c’est la même chose*” crossed the Channel as: “the more things change, the more they stay the same.” This cliché remains popular in both languages, and has proved all too applicable to the changes in format and tournament organization at this year’s 39th Backgammon World Championship.

This continuity has some virtues. Despite all the advances in technology and the homogenization of playing styles they have brought about, the long high-stakes matches of the World Championship bring out — in its purest form — the dramatic, intellectual, and psychological

contest that is backgammon. Moreover, even though the tournament’s new double-elimination format doesn’t necessarily culminate in a decisive final match, the two “finals matches” between Akiko Abe Yazawa of Japan and Douglas Mayfield of the USA lived up to the fireworks of last year’s epic contest between Slava Pryadkin and Lars Trøholt (which I shall continue to analyze in two further installments in *PrimeTime Backgammon* later this year). These contests were incredibly exciting, down-to-the-wire affairs, filled with fascinating cube and checker play decisions, with both players achieving PRs of under 6 (I treat a few positions from the match in a separate article on page 30 in this magazine).

Other positive developments at this



↑ **FOR LOVE OF THE GAME**
Doug Mayfield competed fiercely, but always behaved as a true gentleman. He was remarkably gracious and self-effacing even in the face of a crushing defeat.

ANNICK HASDENTEUFEL

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year's World Championship included the introduction of a Shogi (Japanese chess) tournament, which was run concurrently with the warm-up backgammon tournament — the Monte Carlo Open. This brilliant stroke, drawing top Japanese Shogi players to Monte Carlo, will make it easy for them to take up tournament backgammon, following a path similar to that taken by Bill Robertie and Victor Ashkenazi (chess to backgammon). In his first-ever backgammon tournament, Toshiyuki Moriuchi came in 4th in the World Championship. (Unsurprisingly, as Shogi lacks an element of chance, Toshiyuki, who is the 2nd most accomplished currently active Shogi player, also won this year's Monte Carlo Shogi tournament. He has been the Meijen, one of the seven prestigious titles in the world of Shogi, eight times between 2002 and 2013). His impressive showing will no doubt be another inspiration for his

countrymen, who are already dominating international backgammon. It is unclear if the tsunami has crested or if Japanese dominance will only expand over the coming years.

This year the Gala Dinner was held in a private room above the Café de Paris. The organizers smartly cancelled mandatory play after the dinner break, allowing those of us still in the tournament to be able to truly relax, enjoy the evening, and imbibe. The aperitif was real champagne served on an open-air terrace with breathtaking views of Place du Casino. The food was tasty, the DJ music was retro and very festive, and the wine was quaffable and free. I was undefeated at the time so I relished the heady environment as I calculated the possibilities that lay before me.

Continuities in format and organization

also gave rise to the usual unfortunate and comical consequences: for example, many of the world's best players got anti-byes or had to face off against one another in the early rounds. And this year's draw was particularly lopsided, especially as it was compounded by the double-elimination format: the top half of the draw contained all nine Giants at the tournament, while also containing all the anti-byes. The fact that the Fighters' Bracket and the Consolation Draw derived directly from the original bracket without any redrawing or reshuffling meant that a bad draw and an anti-bye accompanied one throughout every stage of the tournament. When the top Israeli player (and last year's Consolation finalist) Eli Roymi lost to the eventual champion, Akiko, in his first match, he found himself in the round of 1024 in the Fighter's bracket, which is actually the round of 4096 of the whole tournament — meaning that he would

have had to win twelve straight matches to win the tournament (.02%) — a probability that is one-third that of winning a race in which you are on roll and have eight men on the six point while the opponent has four men on the ace point. I've never actually heard of anyone winning against such odds in a bear off or in a tournament.

Pour revenir à nos moutons, or as the English have butchered it (pun intended) “to return to the matter at hand,” even though Eli miraculously proceeded to win his next seven matches in a row to reach the last 16 of the Fighters' bracket, he still had not cashed in the Main when he was knocked out by Kenji Shimodaira. He then won his next 5 matches in the Consolation to cash as a semi-finalist. Therefore, despite having the incredible record of 12-3 (the most wins of any player in the main tournament), Roymi barely netted back his entry fees — while players with far fewer wins achieved greater distinctions and more money. In the old system, such a performance would have won the 1st or 2nd Consolation and serious money. In the new system, players who lose in the early rounds of the Main require many more wins before they cash as more players drop down from the Main into the Fighter's.

In short, the new format does require the stars to align for someone to win the Championship after an early loss. Unlike the double elimination system used at the Nordic Open, the World Championship format is a true double elimination

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with all players needing two losses to be defeated. Let's look at it this way: after the draw was published and Akiko received a bye, landing her in the round of 128, her chances of winning the tournament (if we assume that the probability of winning any given match was a coin toss) were 1/128 or .78%. Conversely, after Douglas Mayfield received a bye, then won his first round match and then lost



The big appeal of the new format is that even after losing a match, one can still hope to become World Champion. Also, there is a kind of purity to it: as a true double elimination, it allows no one but the Champion to go home without losing twice.

to John Broomfield in the third round of the Main, he found himself in the round of 256 of the Fighters' bracket — meaning he would have a .3% chance of reaching the final, at which point he would have to win two matches — meaning his chances of winning the tournament at that point were only 1/1024, or .09%. Were the format from the Nordic Open used, after an early loss a player would be four or eight

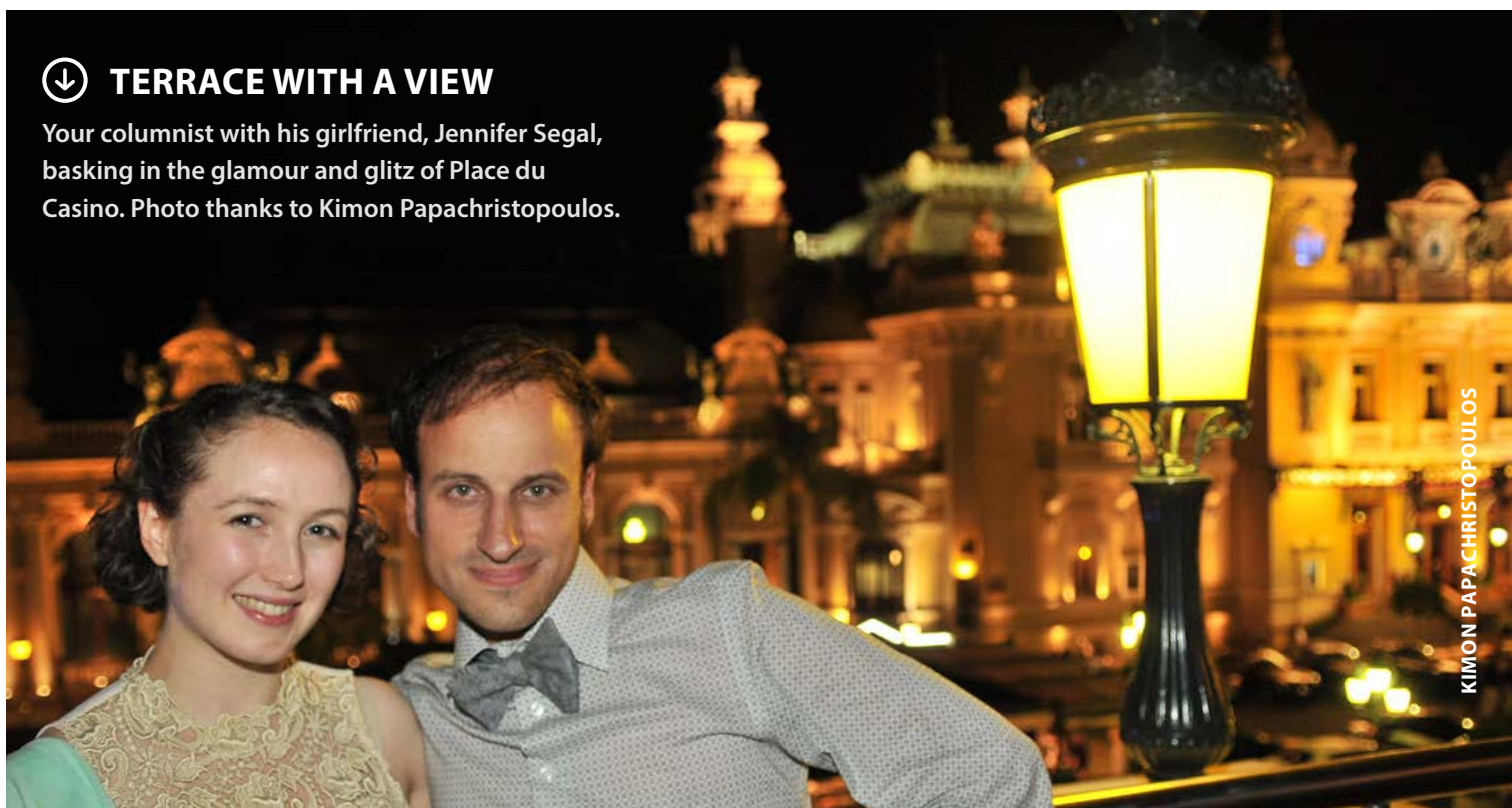
times more likely to win the tournament from the Fighters' bracket depending on in what round the loss occurred.

Pointing this out is not meant as a criticism of the changes in format. The big appeal of the new format is that even after losing a match, one can still hope to become World Champion. Also, there is a kind of purity to it: as a true double elimination, it allows no one but the Champion to go home without losing twice. A final advantage is that the new format provides a distinct ranking to the top eight players who cash. In the old system it was unclear if it was better to win the 1st Consolation or to be a semi-finalist in the Main. In the new system, all the prizes except for that of Champion and Runner-up are allocated in the Fighters' bracket, producing clear 3rd/4th place and 6th through 8th place finishes. If the current format is retained (something about which I am ambivalent) I would suggest having the 3rd and 4th place finishers play each other for a gradation in prize money (like in the Olympics or the World Cup third place match) and giving 6th, 7th, and 8th place trophies to the players who lose in the Fighters' Bracket semifinal — sorting them out based on who has a better win-loss record (or in the event of identical records a short head's up match could be used as a tie breaker).

This addition would certainly lead to more attractive trophy labels. I mean: who really wants a trophy which reads, “6-8th place at the 2015 World Championship”?

↓ TERRACE WITH A VIEW

Your columnist with his girlfriend, Jennifer Segal, basking in the glamour and glitz of Place du Casino. Photo thanks to Kimon Papachristopoulos.



KIMON PAPACHRISTOPOULOS

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Conversely, coming in 7th at the World Championship is something you can put unashamedly on your resume or as a signature line at the bottom of your email!

But whether the new system is maintained or discarded, I firmly believe that its technique of allocating byes and anti-byes via a computerized draw is not the best or fairest approach, even if it is totally random. There are many ways to fix it: once the number of players is determined, the byes could be auctioned off to the highest bidders; or if a random draw is used so as not to give an advantage to wealthier or more committed players who could purchase byes, those who randomly get anti-byes should get a portion of their entry fees back equal to their lost equity in the tournament. Using either fix, every player starts the tournament with the amount of equity he or she puts into it. At present, for those of us to whom a thousand euros is a lot of money, it feels like a kick in the teeth to draw an anti-bye and a Giant in the first round (as I did this year). Even if these systems require some public debate before decision and implementation, as a temporary fix there could be some kind of unilateral organizer's reform to guarantee that players who get an anti-bye in the Main should automatically get a bye in the Fighter's or Consolation, and that the entitlement to a bye doesn't disappear if they happen to win their first round match in the Main. (It turns out that the Gammonmanager computerized draw system preferred by most Danish organizers doesn't facilitate

such a system, but this is no reason it couldn't be done by hand).

Also true to previous years, the tournament was filled with more skill levels than other major tournaments (e.g. Nordic or Chicago). Yet it boasted many upsets even though 17-point matches should give a significant edge to the more skilled player. MCG lost in the first round to a "Middle Eastern-style" player who relied on his hyper-aggressive cube action and intimidating personal demeanor to compensate for MCG's superior understanding of the game and composure.

In the next round, facing me, said player insisted on throwing his die for the opening roll with his hand, rather than with the dice cup — and twice he offered to settle endgame positions, as if we were playing a money session. I informed the organizers of these irregularities, and although they told me that both behaviors contradicted the rules, he was not punished or even warned that he could be penalized. Fortunately for me, after he clawed his way back into our match, I backgammoned him after he redoubled me to four in a position which would have been a money-game beaver. Having now reflected on the matter, I believe that a player who offers to settle a game in a match should be first warned by the organizers and subsequently penalized or disqualified if he or she repeats the behavior. The same should happen to any player who accepts such an offer.

Definite penalties for settling match games should be built into the rules that the USBGF, DBGF, and UKBGF are now formulating — on the way to compiling an internationally-recognized standard.

There were also other frustrating and negative issues carried over from bygone days: as usual, there were constant delays and confusion about the tournament rules. The warm-up tournament prior to the World Championship, called the Monte Carlo Open, was scheduled to begin at 3pm on Sunday August 3rd. I was dismayed, but not surprised, that at 3:45 it was announced that the draw would finally be ready by 4pm. Play actually started closer to 4:35pm.

Confusion prevailed concerning the functioning of the new double-elimination format in the Championship flight and the newly-compiled set of rules which were sanctioned by the tournament sponsor, the IPATT Group. Unsurprisingly but quite distressingly, the tournament started without the rules posted in the playing venue. There was much bewilderment as to whether the tournament was to be played 'clock-optional' or 'clock-preferred' or as to whether a 12-second or 15-second delay was to be used. The rules posted on the event's website weeks before clearly indicated that all events taking place in the World Championship would use a 15-second delay. I had done my homework and knew this, yet to my amazement and chagrin the tournament organizers and directors did not — until I showed

them their own webpage on a friend's smartphone!

Frequent attendees to the World Championship have come to accept and cope with such organizational inefficiencies. Many feel that the late starting times, nonchalance, and laissez faire attitude towards players who don't follow the rules of tournament backgammon add to the tournament's charm. Yes, these practices have become something of a tradition, and Monte Carlo would feel like quite a different event if play started before 15:00 or if the famously long dinner breaks were curtailed. To my mind, a balance must be struck between tradition and respectability. Dis-(and mis-) organization should not be condoned by players. In the final analysis, it is the players and the backgammon community who are both the producers and consumers of the Backgammon World Championship. Unlike at different local or national events put on by specific clubs or federations, the World Championship is, inherently, the whole backgammon community's event. If we don't speak up, who will?

If backgammon wishes to attract young blood and gain legitimacy internationally, on par with bridge, shogi, and chess, these issues must be dealt with head on. At present, backgammon remains a relatively small community that has embarked on some long overdue improvements. Most importantly, we are making great strides with the establishing of national federations. At present the number of

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committed Open-level players is in the low hundreds internationally, yet attendance is slowly growing at many top events such as London, Copenhagen, Tokyo, and even Monte Carlo. To entice more players to consistently attend the top events, sponsorships and discounted hotels (both of which organizers are currently working on) must be combined with efficient organization, media coverage, and reforms in tournament structure (domains in which most organizers and tournament directors have few concrete plans). Among major organizer and tournament director pairs, Sean Williams and Mike Main of the UK are the exception that proves the rule. The military start times of their London Open combined with its TV-quality streaming and live commentary should be a model for other organizers to study and imitate.

There is very little money in organizing backgammon. Patti Donner-Rubin, Steen Grønbech, and their crew do what they do primarily out of a love of the game. This is noble. Therefore, I don't want my criticisms to come across as harsh or antagonistic; rather, I wish to draw attention to these pressing issues because I love backgammon and cherish its community. I would like us all to encourage and help each other to do better next time, grow our sport, and improve its reputation.

Next year will be the 40th Backgammon World Championship. Of course, this landmark event should feature a tournament of past champions, top-

notch sponsors, added money, serious mainstream media coverage, and improved streaming of matches. I believe each country's backgammon federation should also conduct a satellite tournament in which the prize is an all-expenses-paid trip to Monte Carlo to participate in the World Championship. This could be combined with a special "Tournament of Nations" whereby the winners of every national federation's event face off against each other. There are already steps in this direction — a Federations' Cup was held this year — but there are lots of improvements needed, and many of them are low-hanging fruit.

In my opinion, one of the best developments of the 39th World Championship was the movement towards a 15-second delay with two minutes per point for all matches. This was a big step in the right direction and is likely to increase the acceptance of clocks and bring more players into the World Championship. 12-second delays can turn serious matches into a form of speedgammon — encouraging players not to shake their dice sufficiently and to play on feel rather than calculation. I also believe that a 12-second delay deters some online and big money players from entering live backgammon tournaments, as they feel too rushed or uncomfortable with the mechanics of clock play.

Conversely, a 15-second delay allows players previously unfamiliar with a clock to gain some experience, without granting a significant edge to the player who is more

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familiar with clock play. And for those of us with day jobs, a 15-second delay gives us a little more time to try to figure out the deep math behind cube decisions at lopsided scores. A 12-second delay seems to favor professionals who have the math and the match equity tables already memorized. I hope that 15-second delays will be retained at the World Championship in future years and that we will begin to see more and more players using clocks in all of their matches rather than opting to avoid a clock so as not to feel rushed.

Clock play is fairer play. It prevents fast rolling, allows for illegal moves to be easily corrected, and does not pressure a player to hurry up because his opponent is playing quickly or acting bored. Clock play can confer all of these advantages without having to rush or stress those who choose it.

If the World Championship is to remain the cornerstone of the international backgammon circuit, it must be reinvigorated. As the generation that came of age during the golden era of the sport in the 1970s will soon be heading off to their assisted-living facilities, international backgammon could be faced with a grave crisis or with a great opportunity. If we don't want the Seniors tournament to attract greater attendance than the main event, the world championship has to appeal to tech-savvy youngsters, nouveau-riche tycoons from the developing world, and board games geniuses who don't speak English. If we want to convince these

groups to spend their precious holiday time attending backgammon tournaments, they will expect transparency, an ethic of customer service from the organizers, on-time matches, and rules and publicity in their own languages.

The 40th Backgammon World Championship should boast a website, rules, and schedule in the ten main languages of the backgammon community — English, Danish, Russian, Japanese, Hebrew, French, German, Italian, Spanish, and Turkish. Furthermore, even though there are few players from mainland China at present, it might be worth adding Chinese as well, given that it is a language read by 1/5th of humanity. Moreover, the Chinese are growing in wealth and have a strong cultural affiliation for gambling.

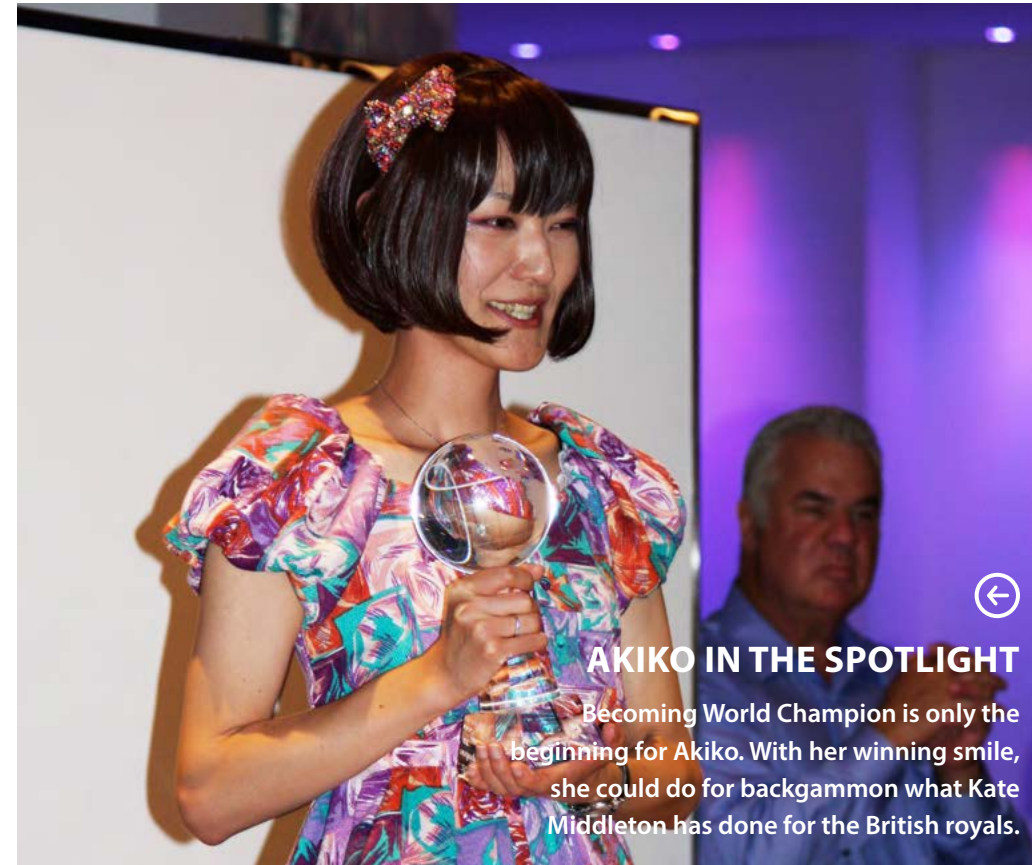
These multilingual rules and schedules should be posted in all these languages online and at the tournament venue prior to the start of play. Addressing these concerns is easily doable. Resorting to ad hoc solutions or Google translate simply won't suffice. Moreover, when this problem is solved once, it will be solved permanently and the definitive, internationally-recognized rules of backgammon will be in the public domain in the world's major languages. They could then be used to promote and standardize backgammon throughout the world.

Personally, I would happily volunteer some of my time and professional contacts to help out with issues of tournament

organization, mainstream media coverage, translation of rules, etc. The ball is truly in Patti Donner-Rubin's court. She saved the World Championship and kept it in Monte Carlo. For this we are all grateful. There are many people who love backgammon and cherish the idea of having a World Championship in the international and glamorous country of Monaco. I, for one, hope to be able to make the trip to the Côte d'Azur to play in the 80th Backgammon World Championship in 2055 (and hopefully in its tournament of past champions as well :-). I know many kindred spirits in the world of backgammon who would eagerly volunteer their time to help make the World Championship the best and most respectable tournament it can be.

Sadly, all of these gripes are far from new. They existed long before I was on the circuit. In fact, they represent the myriad continuities between this year's tournament and previous ones. And yet this year's tournament presented its participants and the backgammon community with a breath of fresh air and a genuine ray of hope for the future. Akiko Yazawa of Japan became the third woman ever to be crowned World Champion and the first non-American woman to reach this pinnacle. She represents the attractive face of the future of international backgammon — young, gracious, modest, eager to share her knowledge despite her limited English and reserved demeanor, and filled with a boundless enthusiasm for study, match play, and chouette.

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AKIKO IN THE SPOTLIGHT

Becoming World Champion is only the beginning for Akiko. With her winning smile, she could do for backgammon what Kate Middleton has done for the British royals.

the cube. It was her attacking style and her personal audacity which won her the title and allowed her to defeat Mochy and Michy along the way.

So, to conclude with another French aphorism, this time from Napoleon: *laudace, laudace, toujours laudace*. Or, as the English have butchered it, fortune favors the bold. ♦

- JASON PACK

(The views expressed in this article are the author's alone and do not represent the view of the USBGF Board of Directors, officers, the staff of USBGF or of *PrimeTime Backgammon* magazine.)

Early this year, Akiko became the first-ever female Giant of Backgammon. She is undoubtedly the strongest woman in terms of average error rating to ever to play the game. She had a remarkably hard draw. Her path to the final was through Eli Roymi, Martin Kahn, Tanaka, Michy, Martin Birkhahn, Mochy, and then John Broomfield. The median PR of her opponents was significantly under 4.0. Some of her lesser known opponents like Martin Kahn and Martin Birkhahn are some of the best young non-Scandinavian European players. Having performed so well and beaten the world's best, Akiko is clearly an ideal role model to aspiring up-and-coming players everywhere. She has proved that hard work is actually rewarded in backgammon and that it isn't

simply a sport for wealthy, overweight, retired white men.

A pernicious myth exists in poker, backgammon, and other forms of skilled gaming that women can't bluff and are timid or frazzled when the stakes are high. Akiko disproves these sexist myths. She is not deterred by high stakes and relishes big money action. She has an excellent poker face and cannot be intimidated or distracted. Akiko may have had her brief lapses in the final against Doug Mayfield, but over the course of the tournament she played fearlessly, redoubling when she needed to and going for a gammon when the time was right. She plays an attacking style of backgammon and never allows her opponents to push her around with



Jason Pack is a Researcher of Middle Eastern History at Cambridge University, president of Libya-Analysis.com, and co-author of *Libya's Faustian Bargains: Breaking the Appeasement Cycle* (Atlantic Council, 2014).

He is also an occasional opinion columnist for *The New York Times*, *The Wall Street Journal*, and other publications.