The 2014 World Championship of Backgammon

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 Trabolt (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...
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 Askenazi (chess to backgammon). In his first-ever backgammon tournament, Toshiyuki Moriuchi came 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 felt especially guilty — I had hoped to and actually heard of anyone winning against such odds in a bear off or in a tournament.

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 Consolidation 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 (0.2%)—a probability that is one-thirtieth 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.

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 heads 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”?

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.
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 entrance 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 attention, there will still be instances when the dice will not go our way.

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-optimal’ 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 to prepare for the 3:45 it was announced that the draw would finally be ready by 4pm. Play actually started closer to 4:35pm.

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, at that at 3:45 it was announced that the draw would finally be ready by 4pm. Play actually started closer to 4:35pm.

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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 bopped 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 reinvested. 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. 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 the world. 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 grievances 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 Yawazawa 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.

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 play the game. She had a remarkably hard draw. Her path to the final was through Eli Royani, 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 were some of the best young non-Scandinavian European players. Having performed so well and beaten the world’s best, 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 bad 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 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: òaudace, audace, toujours l’audace. 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.)

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