

Magic of Persia Charity Backgammon Tournament 2008

Report by
Tournament Director Mike Main

I really enjoyed this event – it was fun, the players were in a relaxed mood and generally time wasn't an issue. I can cram a day as full of backgammon as is possible but sometimes this just isn't a good thing for the day – particularly when it is a social event. A charity backgammon event is a social event – often an annual gathering of a group – where backgammon is the excuse for meeting but really seeing like minded old friends for a common cause is the real reason for most of the players to attend. This Charity has a very natural reason to choose backgammon as their theme of the day simply because it is so much part of their culture to an extent that they have been playing the game a lot longer than we here in London have been doing so. Persians have a reputation of playing with their emotions in full view and they most certainly did so on this day which made it a lot of fun.

Home House was the venue – built in 1776 as a Palace of Pleasure it still retains many of its original features including its cylindrical staircase. Our playing rooms were downstairs which lead on to a very pretty London garden. We had 22 players and numerous spectators. After a Bloody Mary brunch our hostess Shirley Elghanian commenced the day by welcoming all and honouring last year's **winner Maryam and Ramin Pashae**. Maryam passed away this year. The microphone was then handed over to me to explain the format of the day - Group Auction, Main, Consolation, Calcutta Auctions for last 8s, Jackpots for those who were unlucky to lose and the introduction of Joker Cards. Next up was Chiva Tafazzoli of the WBA who ran this tournament last year to do the Group Auction. Chiva has a big presence about him and makes an excellent Auctioneer.

With 22 players we had 6 1st Round matches to play, 4 2nd Round matches that could commence straight away and 2 players waiting for results from Round 1. All matches were playing in the drawing room so the earlier quite hush that had encompassed the room was banished for the day. As I expected I had a number of minor T.D. decision to make as players got used to the rules this tournament was being played by.

Peter Bennet struggled pretty well all the way – it highlighted his ability to stand the test of plainer backgammon than he is used to playing but he was to achieve his goal in the end. In his first match (1st Round Main) I was surprised to see not only the score considerably advanced for so soon after the commencement of play but also that Peter was trailing 5-0 in a 7 pointer. As I passed by other times the score flip-chart did slow down but steadily increased in Peter's favour. But not enough because Farzin, who has increased his knowledge of our westernised game a good bit these last two or so years, managed to claw up to the required 7 points. Mr Bennet Consolation bound.

From Round 1 also Consolation bound were Chiva Tafazzoli (who had a hard draw against Michael Michael), Max Montgomery, Abbas Sharbatzadeh, Ali Ghaffarpour (3rd placed 2007) and Justin Silver of the RAC. They all had a slight wait while the remaining 2nd Round matches caught up to see if they got byes in 1st Round Consolation or were required to play in Conso Round 1.

In Round 2 Main Danny Harouni lost to Farshad Eshraghi, Julian Wilson won over Bahman Chahardehi, Kourosh Aalai lost to Reza Maghzian in a match that attracted a lot of attention and Jahan Abedi lost to Natasha Jenabzadeh who I had been informed was probably our weakest player of the day.

In the 2nd Round matches that had required other results to come though before they were played Romolo Mudu triumphed over a late out of bed young man Richard Norman and Robin Hayley lost to young man Michael-Henry Krayem (he who famously beat backgammon TV presenter John Clark in the Cancerbackup Tournament 2008.)

We employed a tournament system whereby every player was guaranteed at least two matches which worked (with the help of some complex excel programming) very well indeed, meant we had 11 players in the Consolation Tournament and only 9 of the 22 players had 2 matches, the remaining having at least 3 each.

Joker cards were, as mention, in operation during this event. It's an idea I borrowed from Charity Poker Tournaments where it has proved successful. Every player was given upon registration one joker card to be played at any time they chose. Sean Williams and Zoe Cunningham were there on hand with laptops to run positions though the computer to give the best play. Players could choose to buy more joker cards for a donation of £20 to the charity. It's not something I would ever consider using in a serious money play tournament but in a charity event it can have a place. And it worked well. Not all of the joker cards were used but their presence certainly added to the day and made it educational for those that played them. Sean and Zoe saved the positions so we will hopefully publish some of them soon.

As soon as the Consolation (which even though we had increased match lengths due to the lower number of players than expected was still in advance of schedule) was down to the last 8 we held a Calcutta Auction of those players. Meanwhile the Main was down to the last 9 players so we ran a Calcutta Auction for the Main as well. Bidders proved to be generous in the full knowledge that the charity would benefit further from these Auctions. Being a Calcutta every player was entitled to buy 50% of themselves from their owners and a number did.

Our last 8 in the Main were soon known: Michael Michael, Richard Norman, Farshad Eshraghi, Julian Wilson, Reza Maghzian, Jahan Abedi, Michael-Henry Krayem and Shino.

Shortly after our last 4 in the Consolation where known: Max Montgomery, Natasha Jenabzadeh, Ali Ghaffarpour, and Peter Bennet.

Meanwhile a few of those knocked out had taken up on playing in Mini-Jackpots, others joined the circles of spectators chatting or watching matches – all in all it was a very social day with competitive friendly backgammon the order of the day.

In the Main one of the three young men of the day – Richard Norman - did a "Michael-Henry" and won over Michael Michael, Julian Wilson proved his backgammon pedigree by winning over Farshad Eshraghi, Jahan Abedi won over the impeccably dressed Reza Maghzian and Shino (who was aware of Michael-Henry's history) gave the 1st young man no quarter.

In the Consolation Semis the form book suggested that Max would wipe out Natasha while Ali versus Peter would be the match to watch. But what on earth was the lowly considered Natasha doing in the Semis? I watched her game – plain, simply backgammon, let the boys play their silly complex games, Natasha focused on safe play and a running game. It worked – Max was out, Natasha a Consolation finalist. Peter again went heavily down in the start of his semi match but tenacious play saw his scrape past Ali who's game seemed, from what I saw, flawless.

Over in the Main could young late out of bed still ruffled hair man Richard Norman repeat his giant killing over Julian Wilson? Would Shino, who seems to play better as tournaments progress, discard Jahan? Answers: no and yes: Finalist Main: Julian Wilson versus Shino.

Final Consolation; Natasha versus Peter and Natasha takes an early lead of 7-2 in a 9 pointer. Peter is doing this match the hard way as well. 7 away versus 2 away and the 2 away player is still playing her cagey running game – surely she can win just 2 more points before Peter wins 7. But Peter digs deep and starts his fight back. 4-7. Peter offers a double and Natasha is not sure if she should take or drop. So Natasha plays brilliantly by playing her thus far held onto joker card. It looks to others like a double/take but Sean brings the laptop over, position is entered and a double/take is confirmed as the correct play. Natasha follows the advice of the computer but the game swings Peter's way and the score becomes 5-7. Then 6-7. Can Peter do it? Can Natasha halt his advance? Can the Lady win those two more precious points? The crowd gathers round and Natasha finds herself in an unaccustomed position of being in the backgammon limelight but Peter is used to this and just plays his thought though undisturbed game. Natasha cubes at two away – lesson needed there but that can come on another day – Peter's eyebrow raises a millimetre which is a big facial expression for Peter and he gladly takes. Shortly after Peter re-cubes to 4, Natasha takes and we're at effective double match point. Peter wins the game and the match. My hat off to Natasha who played her game, the game she knows and out did others that play the game to a deeper level by sticking to her guns and oh so nearly was handsomely rewarded. Even so she still came out with a plus on the day. Peter came with the hope of winning a Crockford's / Geoffrey Parker board and achieved his goal.

Final Main: Julian Wilson versus Shino. Both have been around the London backgammon scene for years – both have played big matches before, Shino's results have been the better but Julian can never be discounted. In honour of the standing of the match a large table and a Crockford's board was set in the centre of the front room. There was space a plenty for spectators and gathering in they came to watch the drama unfold. Julian took the first game but Shino then took a healthy lead of 7-2 in this 13 pointer. Could Julian fight it back? He tried, he was close in many games but never managed to pull the scores level as Shino motored sternly on. That might suggest that the match wasn't worthy or a final but it was – the spectators would surely have drifted off had it not been so but instead they increased in their numbers. And really that's the way it should be – all too often a final is a lonely barren affair in serious tournaments. Not so here in this social backgammon gathering for a good cause where all eyes poured upon players and board. And what they saw was Shino march forever on to the 13 point mark. Hard luck Julian, well played Shino.

Champagne flowed, prizes were awarded and hands were clapped. It had been a fantastic way to spend a London Sunday – Home House and garden is a wonderful

location and the service was remarkably good. The players had a good day of backgammon, the spectators made the event a lovely social gathering and £1759 was raised for the Magic of Persia charity.

From the point of view of Bg in London it was a wonderful day of backgammon to direct. We quickly and successfully adapted the day to the numbers that were there, I got to meet and work a little with Chiva of the WBA hence proving that Bg T.D.s can indeed work together for the betterment of backgammon and Bg in London did some good for a charity. I was also honoured to receive a "thank you" from MOP as well. This is a replica of the Cyrus Cylinder encased in glass. The Cyrus Cylinder (539 B.C.) has been described as the first charter of human rights and sums up very well the ethos of the Magic of Persia charity. I'm primarily a backgammon organiser, I've won a few trophies as a player but none of them have suited me as well as this present of a instinct that goes so well with me. I thank Magic of Persia.

We thank Crockfords Casino for their sponsorship of the 2 Jeffrey Parker boards, as well as I.B. Tauris Publications for the magnificent Persian themed coffee table books that were given out as prizes.