

Club members back to gammoning in preparation for tournaments, fun

By Cheryl Kisling

If you walk into McGuffy's on Wednesday nights, don't be surprised if backgammon boards seem to be overrunning the place. It's the Lincoln Backgammon Club and they are determined to make their presence known.

Hess Baluch, recently "drafted" president, is excited about the group and the potential growth of backgammon, which he said is just hitting the Midwest.

The club, which is affiliated with an Omaha club, now is a member of the Las Vegas chapter and can participate in national tournaments which have existed for about 11 years, Baluch said. Being part of a local club is a definite advantage in getting into national tournaments—it is cheaper to enter and there is local competition to practice with.

National winners can win up to \$110,000, Baluch said.

"Like golf, there are amateurs and professionals. In Lincoln, the amateurs are excellent," Baluch said. He added that member Bob McCulley will participate in the National Amateur Tournament in Las Vegas Nov. 28 and could win \$140,000 in prize money.

Baluch, who was active in chess, said he has been playing backgammon for a year. But the art of thinking and strategies he learned in chess have made him successful in backgammon, he said.

"Chess, like backgammon, is meticulous in moves. If the mind is trained for that, it becomes easy," Baluch said. "We would like to bring some elegance and sophistication to the game as has been done for chess." Baluch said the club is encouraging anyone to come in and participate.

"We are interested in university students," he said. "We want them to participate. The club is even going to offer lessons for them so they can come in and learn."

The club is offering free lessons on Wednesday nights to anyone who wants to learn, he said, adding that there is no prerequisite and that a person always be free to greet newcomers.

"The Club wants to get people interested in the art of backgammon at any level. If a person wants to learn for fun, we teach it for fun. If they want to be competitive, we will teach them so they become a champion," he said.

Ray Rutherford, last year's winner of the Omaha Invitational Backgammon Tournament, said, "New players tend to be intimidated. We don't want that at all, it shouldn't be that way."

Rutherford, along with about 18 members, encourages anyone who wants to learn the game to come in.

An individual can learn the game in a matter of hours, according to Baluch, but it takes much longer to master it.

"The single most important word in the strategy of backgammon is HOLD," he said.

He went on to explain that H is for holding a strong innerboard, O is to observe flexibility and timing, L is to leave a "blot" (knowledge of the probability of being hit) very effectively and to gain advantage for yourself. D is "don't leave your opponent's survival point and position yourself to take advantage."

Another advantage of backgammon, which Rutherford describes as the essence of the game, is the double or "diabolical" cube.

It is the cube that progresses geometrically during the game and doubles the points for the winner, he said.

"Every game is worth one point. If a player at any time during the game feels he has the advantage, he offers his opponent the cube. If the cube is accepted, the game is worth two points. If he rejects it, he loses and the winner (person who offered the cube) gets a point," he said.

This aspect, Rutherford said, can take months to learn to use effectively because the course of the game can change with just one roll of the dice.

"If the situation changes and the person who accepted the cube earlier now has better standing, he can offer the cube right back, only with the point value doubled," said Rutherford. "That cube can either be your ally or enemy."

Rutherford said that backgammon, like other competitive games, becomes involved, and he has even seen a loser react by throwing the board through a window. The rules of etiquette always should prevail, he said.

"Players should not wear their emotions on their sleeves, he said. "There should be gracious winners and gracious losers."



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