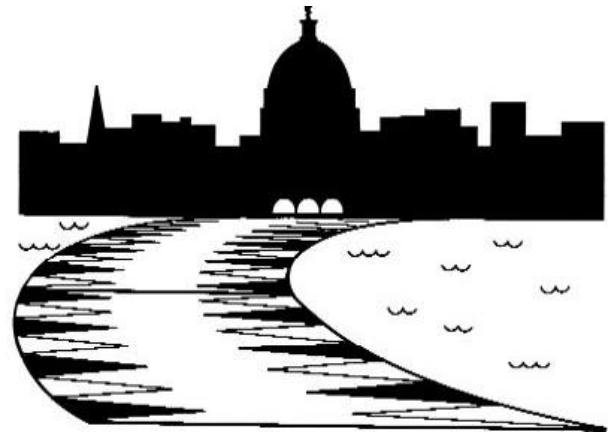


# Madison Backgammon News



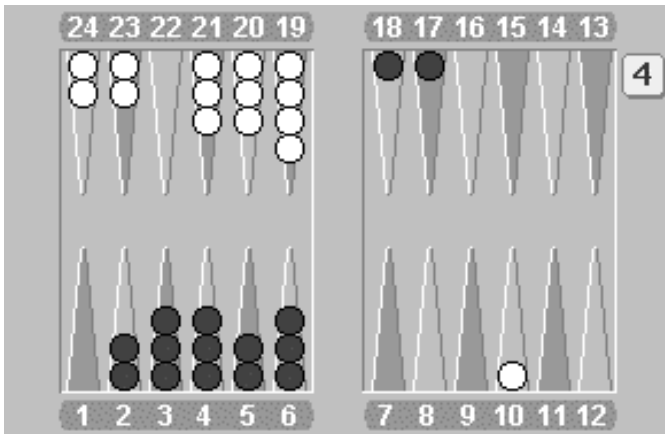
Number 43

November 2001 – February 2002

## Counting The Position

By Sam Pottle

The Cowboy and I had reached a late round of the doubles event, when a big cube loomed up in just the second game of our match. Can we take this position?



7 point match, White leads 1-0. White owns a 4-cube. Cube action?

This is a strong double, of course. White leads 72-88 in the race, and has twelve hitting numbers to boot. The volatility is sky-high here, so White cannot wait to double lest they lose their market, if they haven't already.

We faced a simple choice: drop the cube to trail 5-0, or take for the match. Which approach gives us better chances to win the match? The Chicago Cowboy is an intuitive player with a lot of chouette experience. He thought this looked like a big pass for money, so he wanted to drop the 8 cube. But it's not that simple. Most match equity tables rate our match-winning chances down 5-0 at around 15%, so we should take this cube if we can win the game more than 15% of the time.

Moneyplay experience prepares us to handle doubling decisions with a 25% takepoint, with the usual adjustments for gammons and potential recubes. In particular, most of us are best at judging positions that are fairly close to the money take/drop line (or the double/no-double line). But if a position is much better or much worse than that, we have little practice at evaluating our absolute winning chances. How can we figure it out here?

Fortunately, most of the action in this position is going to take place in the next roll or two, so we can count up the main variations, and make some rough guesses for the rest. On White's turn, they have 12 hitting numbers (6 sevens and 6 eights). They have 13 numbers that neither hit nor run past Black's blots, so that leaves 11 numbers that break contact.

Black's best chance to win is to hit a shot after White rolls a small number. It's important to notice that none of White's bad numbers force them to leave a direct shot -- White will simply play inside and stay back with the trailer, leaving 12 indirect shots (sevens and eights again). So in a cross-section of 1296 games (36 x 36), Black gets this hitting sequence 13 x 12 times. Instead of trying to multiply this in our heads, we can just notice that 13 is almost exactly 1% of 1296, so 13 x 12 is about 12%. So our main way to win has us hitting in 12% of all games. Black doesn't always win after a hit, of course, but we'll be big favorites. So we're most of the way up to 15% already.

It turns out that we have several other ways to win. All of White's hitting numbers leave us a couple (2 or 4) of return shots from the bar. These return hits add up to almost 3% of all games. The position can repeat: if White rolls small and then we miss, we have back almost the same position again. This happens in 13 x 24 games, or about 24% of the time, so we'll get 3-4% more hits there. If we get hit, we have some longer-term shot equity from White's open three point. Finally, if we don't get hit we might just win the race. We're in pretty bad shape in the race, but we ought to win a couple of percent racing.

All these dribs and drabs of equity add up. It should be clear by now that Black easily wins 15% of all games from this position. In fact our winning chances are over 20% (and nearly a money take!), so dropping this cube would be a major blunder.

The Cowboy hated it. He didn't want to put the match on the line in a position we were very likely to lose. We argued about the decision at some length, and I finally prevailed. We took the 8 cube, and lost both game and match. Oh, well.

Chouettes don't always teach patience, or the courage to put it all on the line when the odds favor it. But if you want to excel at match play, sometimes you have to count the position, and follow the numbers instead of your heart.

# The Douse Speaks Up

By Ilia Guzei

First of all, congratulations to the winner, Bill Minser, and 2nd and 3rd place medalists, Mark Tremayne and Stan Livingston, on their impressive performance in 2001. Well done!

There are two kinds of backgammon players—those who can count their pips and their opponent's pips, and those who don't know what to do with these numbers. A splendid and informative Douse reveals some interesting information about both. In the following discussion all characters, names, and events are real. Any resemblance to actual persons and events is purely intentional.

Twenty people participated in the club's two-match, guaranteed competitions in 2001, a 25 percent increase in attendance over 2000. A total of 284 matches were played in 24 tournaments. The number of points awarded annually went up by about 20 percent. The increased size of the tournaments was especially evident at the end of the year when an all-time, largest field of 14 was seeded last November.

The club welcomed new regulars: Steve Reuschlein, Sonya Sidky, Alan Gold, and Brad Andersen, as well as the return of the club founder, Bruce Russell. There were 10 members who played both in 2000 and 2001. The top five finishers, Bill Minser, Mark Tremayne, Stan Livingston, Sam Pottle and Tom Machaj, only traded places.

In 2001, the competition was excruciatingly close with the top four finishers' scores ranging less than 2 points, or about 0.6% of the total club points awarded for the year. The top three players showed up for at least 22 tournaments, winning over 30 matches each, indicating that there is something to be said about coming regularly to JT Whitney's on tournament nights.

The Iron Man award again goes to Tom, who did not miss a single tournament and played the most matches (64). Not surprisingly, the four people who participated in more than 20 tournneys were paired up most often – Tom and Mark played ten matches (5:5), Tom and Bill nine (3:6), and Tom and Stan battled it out eight times (4:4). Six pairs faced each other seven times. Participants were almost twice as likely (48:26) to meet another player at the board once than twice.

In the end, when all the douses were rolled and checkers born off, it is victories that counted. No. 1 Bill won the most matches (33). Sam, with the highest master point count (25), won the most club tournaments (4) to achieve the best match winning percentage (63%). And while busily depositing our entry fees into his bank account, Sam bested the rest of us with the longest winning streak of eight matches.

Ilia Guzei won seven consecutive matches and three tournaments. Bill and Mark placed at the top of the consolation brackets four times each, while Stan was a four-time runner up in the main flight. A somewhat sad observation is that only five regular members had their winning percentage over 50. If one wants to be in the top five, you either had to win more, or you had to be Sam. And to be Sam, you would have to successfully compete in the Open class at ABT events and drive a boxy, but good, Volvo.

The logical chain of backgammon-cars-travel directs us to look at member performance out of town, at the ABT events.

Bruce, who took 1st place in the advanced division in Pennsylvania, 1st place in the advanced division in California, and 1st Consolation in the open division in Illinois, acquired an impressive 24.13 ABT points. Bruce finished No. 5 in the nation for the year 2001. Good job!

Sam won the Land of Lincoln masters, the consolation in the open division in Minnesota, and shared the 3rd and 4th places in the open doubles in Illinois. Tom was the big winner in the advanced field in Indiana. Bill, Mark, Stan, and Ilia won various consolations and last chances in Illinois. Additionally, Stan placed second in the advanced field in Springfield.

Overall, the club members did very well in 2001, better than in 2000. The Douse predicts that at this pace more ABT points will be awarded to us in the 2002!

More statistics and numbers can be found at the club's unofficial website:

<http://cic.chem.wisc.edu/bg/theDouse.htm>

## Final Club Standings For 2001

Bill Minser	31.73
Mark Tremayne	30.92
Stan Livingston	29.96
Sam Pottle	29.90
Tom Machaj	26.01
Lee Pflugrad	18.80
Ilia Guzei	18.40
Charlie Walter	15.61
Steve Reuschlein	14.45
Sonya Sidky	14.85
Bruce Russell	13.80
Alan Gold	12.15
Steve Mayer	10.00
Gary Hines	6.20
Brad Andersen	4.70
Sonja Peacock	4.05
Tim Helms	3.90
Warren Harrison	3.85
Hiro Asari	3.80
Victor Freides	2.40

## Recent Club Tournament Results

**Oct. 16** – (10 players) 1<sup>st</sup> Lee Pflugrad,  
2<sup>nd</sup> Alan Gold, Cons. Mark Tremayne.

**Nov. 6** – (12 players) 1<sup>st</sup> Sonya Sidky,  
2<sup>nd</sup> Bruce Russell, Cons. Alan Gold.

**Nov. 20** – (8 players) 1<sup>st</sup> Mark Tremayne,  
2<sup>nd</sup> Victor Freides, Cons. Bill Minser.

**Dec. 4** – (14 players) 1<sup>st</sup> Gary Hines,  
2<sup>nd</sup> Brad Andersen, Cons. Mark Tremayne.

**Dec. 18** – (13 players) 1<sup>st</sup> Lee Pflugrad,  
2<sup>nd</sup> Sam Pottle, Cons. Alan Gold.

**Jan. 8** – (11 players) 1<sup>st</sup> Stan Livingston,  
Sonya Sidky, Cons. Charlie Walter.

**Jan. 22** – (13 players) 1<sup>st</sup> Ilia Guzei,  
2<sup>nd</sup> Charlie Walter, Cons. Lee Pflugrad.

## Madison Club Action On FIBS

By Ilia Guzei

First of all I am thankful to the club members for their enthusiasm and willingness to play in the on-line tournaments. They allow us to gain more experience in playing longer matches (9 points) in a pleasurable fashion. It's convenient to play from your own home (some play in the raw) and the pip count is there for you to use. Stan Livingston won the first on-line club tournament in which seven people participated. The Douse has all the relevant information.

FIBS (First Internet Backgammon Server) is a backgammon play server that also hosts Kit Woolsey's GammOnLine, a leading BG magazine published exclusively on the web. Questions about FIBS can be posted on rec.games.backgammon newsgroup where the FIBS system administrator Patti Beadles and other fellow members answer them. David Escoffery and Kit Woolsey conduct double elimination money tournaments on FIBS two times a year for Limited and Open brackets. In contrast, our tournaments are round robin with no entry fees and no prizes.

The second on-line club tournament started two weeks ago. Since FIBS action has become popular among us, here are some neat tricks one can do with the related software. Dropping your opponent is not one of them. I used to use play with BBGT 4.0 client, but its graphics is rather inferior and

sound accompaniment annoying. In 2001 Peter Nevalainen introduced JavaFIBS2001 interface and an increasing number of people have been using this shareware on FIBS. It has customizable buttons, it can greet opponents automatically, there are several board layouts to choose from, and the checker play and doubling cube action is easy. Peter will quickly respond to e-mail and will incorporate suggestions.

One feature that is permanently set on my JavaFIBS2001 interface is "Log Games while playing" under Preferences/Log Games. This option saves all matches played on your hard drive. The files are numerous, but miniscule in size. Note: a match record will be messed up if one player's connection is interrupted. The match will be resumed from that moment when either opponent invites the other one to "resume" and the latter agrees. FIBS is smart enough to warn you that there is a saved (interrupted in the past) match with an opponent should that opponent challenges you to a new match. Thus, you don't have to remember how many postponed matches with whom you have. The postponed matches are stored on the FIBS forever and are not mechanically "resolved" as practiced on some other servers such as GamesGrid.

Other JavaFIBS2001 client features worth mentioning are listed under its Tools menu. The "match converter" is self-explanatory – it transforms your matches from some internal format into JellyFish .mat format for future analysis. The "Statistics" button shows a graph of your rating versus time in one submenu while the other submenu summarizes how you performed in general – matches won and lost, the last ten (or any number) match history, your record in 1,3,5,7,n-point matches, your performance versus a certain player and even the match scores. That rating-vs-time graph looks very much like a typical stock market curve. In my experience, 50 point fluctuations occur regularly. They say that 100 ELO point drops are normal on FIBS, but somehow no one mentions unexpected 100 rating point climbs.

JavaFIBS2001 also has a command line for you to type commands that FIBS can perform, but which are not an integral part of JavaFIBS2001. For example, you agreed to play with "balashiha" tomorrow at 5:00 AM, but then realized you are not that crazy to sacrifice a few hours of beauty sleep. In the command line, you type "message balashiha let's reschedule" and hit "enter". Balashiha will see

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the message "let's reschedule" the next time he logs in on FIBS. If the command syntax is mysterious – type "help message" and an appropriate part of the FIBS manual will be displayed in the system window. There are many more commands on FIBS for all life events, but investing time into exploring them is a task for a different lifetime.

## Analyzing Matches Has Never Been Easier

By Ilia Guzei

New backgammon products designed for match analysis have recently appeared on the web. While most everyone is familiar with the Snowie and JellyFish Analyzer programs, the following competent programs have not been widely recognized.

GNUBG is freeware that plays matches and money games, as well as analyzes matches. It is an excellent product (project under development) with rough edges and bugs of varied magnitude, but it is constantly improving and new code is recompiled almost daily. The best features are speed and statistical output that includes your checker, cube decision, and luck rates among other things. The evaluations can be conducted on 0-, 1-, or 2-ply levels, but beware that the 2-ply evaluations are performed only for the two top moves selected by the program. Thus, if the best move is number three on GNUBG's list it may not be correctly evaluated.

This is a trade-off for the speed with which program works. On my 350 MHz machine, a 220-move match is analyzed within 30 minutes. Stepping through the match is not super convenient as three windows must be opened for all the information to be displayed – the board, evaluations, and game record. In general, GNUBG's evaluations are in accord with those of JF, but the two programs attribute different equities to the same moves. While GNUBG plays at least at the world-class level, it has not been officially matched up against Snowie or JellyFish to confirm its strength or reveal its weaknesses.

BlowFish is a brand-new product. It is a free match evaluation tool that is also a work in progress with its code frequently updated. Mike Rudman is polishing this software that employs GNUBG

engine. The program interface is very easy to read, the graphics is similar to that used on GammOnLine, and going through matches is a breeze. While stepping through a match you can save selected positions in a quiz file to analyze or print out later. If you want to see your errors, it's possible to jump just to those positions with one click of the mouse.

If you want to see blunders only – jump to blunders only. Missed cube decisions – no sweat. The program outputs statistics both for each game and entire match, summarizing error rates, errors, blunders, and cube decisions in separate columns – very much like the \$380 Snowie. Snowie who?

But as there is no free drop at the 3-away 1-away score, there is a downside to BF – it is buggy. So much so that I run into a problem almost every time I analyze a match. The program is annoyingly slow due to evaluating every possible move at the 2-ply level and hence running BF is restricted to nighttime, otherwise a 350 MHz computer becomes unusable. Of course, the user can choose a different ply level that will be applied across the board. Mike has been diligent about troubleshooting the software and incorporating suggested changes. I would not be surprised if this program becomes a top of the line product in the near future.

If you don't want to deal with imperfections, there is yet another way to study matches. GammonVillage has decided to institute charges for its readers in the form of annual subscription cost effective as of January 28, 2002. There are several "levels" of subscription with various perks, but one of the features they promise is the on-line availability of Snowie 3 for match analysis (for an extra fee). Combined with copious articles and intense news stream at GammonVillage, it may be worth their suggested subscription rate of \$20 - \$100. Still, I am rather displeased with their decision to charge for site access.

### >>> REMINDER <<<

Club tournaments start promptly at 7:00 p.m. If you want to get into the tournament, but you may be a few minutes late, leave a message for Tom at 276-8144 or Sam at 258-9815 or e-mail: machaj@charter.net After 6:00 p.m., call J.T. Whitney's at 274-1776 and leave a message with the staff. We want you to play!

## The Douse Interview

*For the first interview was chosen the winner of the 2001 Annual Madison Backgammon Club Championship **Bill Minser**. During that annual competition he won 33 matches (more than anyone) while getting to the main flight final five times and winning the consolation four times. Bill is a 31-year-old database programmer for University of Wisconsin-Madison Ophthalmology Department. A Massachusetts native, Bill came to Madison to work with a college friend, who moved out 9 months later. But Bill is here to stay for the foreseeable future.*

**The Douse:** *When did you first get interested in BG?*

**BM:** In 1998, co-worker's husband showed me the game. To me, backgammon is a game of patterns. Some are strong, some are weak. Strong patterns tend to flow into other strong patterns. And the correct strategy to win a game is constantly changing. It's much more interesting than word or card games.

**The Douse:** *How much BG reading/studying do you do?*

**BM:** I play a lot against Jellyfish, and recently, online. When I get stuck, and my game stops improving, I read through a book, but I do not "study" the book. I just look for concepts and then try to recognize them in my play. I will have to learn to really study positions and concepts if I am going to be successful above the intermediate level. At home, I have Robertie's Advanced Backgammon Vol 1. But I have gone through Magriel twice and try to keep up with Woolsey's GammOnline articles. I hope to pick up Robertie's Vol 2 at the next tournament.

**The Douse:** *Have the club members and chouettes been helpful?*

**BM:** The Madison club is the best place to learn this game very cheaply. The stronger players are always ready to give advice. And in the chouettes, they will say a lot of things you don't understand. Ask. Then take the concepts home and try them out online or against your favorite bot. I am very thankful for the patience that Sam, Tom, Gary, and Bruce showed when I first joined the club. It is the patience and kindness of this club that makes it a joy to learn the game. The way you have focused on learning the game rather than stuffing your wallets has kept me coming back. Thank you for helping me learn this wonderful game. Oh, and Tom, thanks for the board.

**The Douse:** *Who is the toughest player you have ever faced?*

**BM:** I wouldn't say that the competition I have seen at the intermediate level in big tournaments is any harder than the weekly competition from the experienced players in Madison. And I am too scared to play with the big boys. For money, Gary Hines is the strongest player

in town, especially when advice from the team can talk him out of the really big plays. In match play, Sam is really strong.

**The Douse:** *What's your most memorable BG experience?*

**BM:** I still gloat over beating Sam twice in the 17 point tournaments. I like to pretend it was because I made brilliant cube and checker decisions. Really, it was more about trying not to make huge blunders and being in a position to win when the dice went my way. But then, I count not making huge blunders when staring across the board at a strong player as a solid achievement.

**The Douse:** *What are you BG career goals?*

**BM:** God, I hope I never call it a career. BG is a game for me. I have to keep it fun or I might as well stay home and work on the latest project for work. Of course, it is always more fun to win, so I hope to get incrementally better through occasional study. I guess my only real goal is to not lose so much money I have to quit.

**The Douse:** *What are your strengths/weaknesses in this game?*

**BM:** I love to play from interesting positions, so you can bet I am looking for the less than obvious move. When things are going well, that is an important feature of my game. It also explains why I get gammoned so much.

**The Douse:** *What do you think dominates backgammon - luck or skill?*

**BM:** The cube-handling skill is by far the most important factor in my experience. Luck may swing a game here and there, but the difference between people that leave money at the table and people that take money away from the table is cube-handling. (Of course, I could be wrong.)

**The Douse:** *Favorite dice roll?*

**BM:** Any indirect hit from the bar. I seem to win a lot of games that way. A lot of games that I have no business winning.

**The Douse:** *Any particular tournament you'd like to play in?*

**BM:** The first big tournament I went to was in Indianapolis. I really like the format (modified Swiss movement) and the extra (third) day. The Meeses run a very good show. I would also like to play in a tournament on a cruise. Doesn't that sound pleasant?

**The Douse:** *How would you characterize yourself in five words?*

**BM:** Lucky S.O.B. (Spell it out. It's five words.)

## ADDRESS SERVICE REQUESTED

### Upcoming Events

**Feb. 2** – Chicago Bar Point Ground Hog Doubles. Anyway's Chicago Grill & Bar, 5 E Roosevelt Rd, Oakbrook Terrace, IL (630) 932-9323. 11:30 a.m. Registration. Play begins at noon. \$60/team.

**Feb. 5** – Club Tournament. JT Whitney's Pub & Brewery, 674 S Whitney Way, Madison, WI. (608) 274-1776. 6:30 p.m. Registration. 7:00 p.m. Play begins. \$6/Entry, \$4/1<sup>st</sup> Side pool, \$5/2<sup>nd</sup> Side pool.

**Feb. 15-17** – The 24<sup>th</sup> Annual Pittsburgh Backgammon Championships. Greentree Radisson, 101 Radisson Dr., Pittsburgh, PA. (800) 333-3333. 1:00 p.m. Friday registration opens. 9:00-10:00 a.m. Saturday final registration. Play begins at noon. \$200/Championship with \$100 side, \$110/Advanced with \$50/side, \$35/Novice. Several other events.

**Feb. 19** – Club Tournament. JT Whitney's Pub & Brewery, 674 S Whitney Way, Madison, WI. (608) 274-1776. 6:30 p.m. Registration. 7:00 p.m. Play begins. \$6/Entry, \$4/1<sup>st</sup> Side pool, \$5/2<sup>nd</sup> Side pool.

**Feb. 24** – Milwaukee BG Club, Sunday Monthly Tournament. John Hawks Pub, 100 E Wisconsin Ave, Milwaukee, WI. (414) 272-3199. 12:00 p.m. Registration. 1:00 p.m. Play begins. \$40 Entry with \$10 side pool. Free parking in ramp, Water St. entrance.

**Mar. 5** – Club Tournament. JT Whitney's Pub & Brewery, 674 S Whitney Way, Madison, WI. (608) 274-1776. 6:30 p.m. Registration. 7:00 p.m. Play begins. \$6/Entry, \$4/1<sup>st</sup> Side pool, \$5/2<sup>nd</sup> Side pool.

**Mar. 19** – Club Tournament. JT Whitney's Pub & Brewery, 674 S Whitney Way, Madison, WI. (608) 274-1776. 6:30 p.m. Registration. 7:00 p.m. Play begins. \$6/Entry, \$4/1<sup>st</sup> Side pool, \$5/2<sup>nd</sup> Side pool.

**Mar. 22-24** – The 2002 Midwest Backgammon Championships. Wyndham Lisle, 3000 Warrenville Rd, Lisle, IL (800) 946-3426. 3:00 p.m. Friday registration opens. 9:30-10:30 a.m. Saturday final registration. Play begins following the 11:00 a.m. Charity Calcutta auction. \$300/Championship, \$150/Advanced, \$30/Limited. Several other events.

**Mar. 31** – Milwaukee BG Club, Sunday Monthly Tournament. John Hawks Pub, 100 E Wisconsin Ave, Milwaukee, WI. (414) 272-3199. 12:00 p.m. Registration. 1:00 p.m. Play begins. \$40 Entry with \$10 side pool. Free parking in ramp, Water St. entrance.

**Apr. 2** - Club Tournament. JT Whitney's Pub & Brewery, 674 S Whitney Way, Madison, WI. (608) 274-1776. 6:30 p.m. Registration. 7:00 p.m. Play begins. \$6/Entry, \$4/1<sup>st</sup> Side pool, \$5/2<sup>nd</sup> Side pool.

**Apr. 7** – Chicago Bar Point Sunday Tournament. Anyway's Chicago Grill & Bar, 5 E Roosevelt Rd, Oakbrook Terrace, IL (630) 932-9323. 11:30 a.m. Registration. 12 Noon Play begins. \$40/Open, \$20/Intermediate. Entry includes \$5 food & drink coupon.

**Apr. 16** - Club Tournament. JT Whitney's Pub & Brewery, 674 S Whitney Way, Madison, WI. (608) 274-1776. 6:30 p.m. Registration. 7:00 p.m. Play begins. \$6/Entry, \$4/1<sup>st</sup> Side pool, \$5/2<sup>nd</sup> Side pool.

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*Madison Backgammon News* is published bimonthly or so to promote game of backgammon in south central Wisconsin. Madison Backgammon Club meets every Tuesday evening at 6:30 p.m. at J.T. Whitney's Pub & Brewery. Club tournaments are held on the 1<sup>st</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> Tuesdays of every month. Chouettes and one-on-one play are conducted on all other Tuesdays and after players have completed their tournament matches. For further information, contact Tom Machaj at (608) 276-8144 or by e-mail at [machaj@charter.net](mailto:machaj@charter.net)