

Vodka & Dice

Fresh from the PartyGammon Millions in the Bahamas, Russian backgammon bombshell **Victoria Smirnoff** gives us the lowdown on beating odds and beating men!

I'm in the wrong job, I think to myself as I walk into Victoria Smirnoff's London penthouse. On one wall Sky News is being beamed from a TV screen bigger than my flat and the other end of the lounge is occupied by a very satisfied-looking professional pool table. "I should give up poker and take up backgammon!" I quip as Victoria laughs and hands me a cup of Russian tea. Charming and beautiful (even though she assures me that "most Russian women are better-looking than me" and incredulously talks about being ignored by Russian men when out on a Saturday night). With a near-total dominance of chess for a century or so, it's no surprise that Russia has now given the world at least one backgammon genius. In the old Cold War days, the Moscow-born belle would have been considered a devastating piece of propaganda, but it occurs to me – as backgammon continues to gain popularity, who better to have as its poster girl than the ice-cool Ms. Smirnoff?

Smirnoff. No relation to the drinks giant I trust?

(laughs) No, sadly not! And anyway I'm teetotal!

You recently returned from the PartyGammon Millions. How was that?

It was a great experience. It was the first really big-money backgammon tournament that's been organised. All the best players turned up. It was in a beautiful setting as well, so you know, if I lost, no matter, there was always the beach!

Any big tournaments coming up?

I think I'll be playing the World Championships in Monte Carlo (in May). I've got a bit lazy travelling round to a lot of tournaments. When I was playing with Paul [Magriel], we played every tiny game all over the world. Now I'll only travel to the biggest games!

I think if I lived here, I wouldn't travel much either! You mentioned Paul Magriel. You won the Doubles Consulting World Backgammon Championship with him in 2000. How did that relationship flourish?

Well, you know we were playing together for years, but then Paul went



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back to the U.S. and we played less and less together. Also for a few years I lost interest in backgammon. Only recently have I started playing again!

How did you first get into the game?

I was living in Monte Carlo with my husband, and I was, you know, pretty bored (*laughs*). I was on the beach one day and saw Paul [Magriel] playing backgammon against Mike Svobodny. I met Mike through his wife who’s also Russian who hooked me up with Paul as a teacher. He turned out to be a superb backgammon teacher and the rest as they say is history!

What does it take to be a world-class backgammon player?

Well first of all, you have to understand that you need a knowledge in mathematics and as with poker, an understanding of the odds. Even today, there are only about 100 really world-class players around.

Do you think your psychology degree has helped you understand your opponents better?

(laughs) Well it helps me when I drive men crazy at the board!

Backgammon’s gradually getting more and more popular online.

Can you see it catching up with poker in popularity?

It’s hard to tell, because backgammon has been cracked by the computer. It’s a lot easier to analyse your game in backgammon and iron out your mistakes. But I think it will be popular, because people are always after new games to play.

You’re busy scribbling away with an autobiography (called ‘From Russia With Luck’.) How’s it coming?

Very well. It’s 200 pages long so far, but I’m debating whether to put a lot of scandalous stuff in!

So no juicy tales of the high life?

Well there is one. Once I was playing backgammon with a member of a royal family from the Middle East on his huge beautiful boat in Monte Carlo. About 20 of his friends were watching. The stakes were very high (at least for me), and pretty soon I’m 15 points up. Suddenly my opponent asked for a break and invited me to walk around the harbour. He stopped and offered me a huge sum of cash to loose the match. He couldn’t face losing to a woman in front of his friends! What he was offering me was more than I could have won had I carried on playing him for another 20 hours! So naturally I accept the offer. But the most difficult part was yet to come. I had to carry on playing and try and make it not too obvious that I was trying to throw this game. So I was trying to play badly without making it too blatant - but I was still winning! Meanwhile my opponent was getting more and more angry

- he was worried after taking his money I was still going to try and beat him. I start sweating. In the end this terrible player finally breaks me down and he wins and his friends are none the wiser.

Any plans to become a full-time writer and follow in your grandfather’s footsteps? [Oleg Smirnov].

Well, I know how to write, because I went to literature school. It’s hard because with this autobiography I have so many stories to put in, I’m not sure where the book will end!

Are you a natural-born gambler?

Well, I’m not sure whether I’m a natural gambler, but I’m definitely extremely competitive. I love to compete with men. That’s the main thing for me! I don’t enjoy playing any game against a woman – backgammon, ping pong, tennis, whatever. I play too nicely! But put me against a man, and, I don’t know, something happens! Funnily, I was playing in the PartyGammon Millions against a young girl from Japan, a sweet little thing. I was thinking ‘oh she’s just a Japanese tourist, here for a holiday’ and I let my game relax. But the girl destroyed me! When I asked the tournament organisers who she was, they told me she was the top player in Japan!

Is the backgammon world as male-dominated as poker?

Without a doubt. As a psychologist I recognise that these games suit the man’s mathematical and logical brains better. There are exceptions of course! Some famous poker players like Gus Hansen are also backgammon whizzes. It’s interesting, if there was as much money in backgammon as there is in poker you’d see a lot more poker players taking part. Gus could quite easily be up there with the best if he wanted to switch careers!

Ever considered turning your skills to poker?

I’ve tried it, but I get tired very easily. I just don’t have the patience to sit there and fold hand after hand! I need action action action!

What’s the biggest gamble you’ve ever made in your life?

My lawyer has told me not to divulge! You’ll have to read about it in my book – maybe!

You live in London now. How’s the London life?

I travel a lot, but I call London my home now. I left Russia 10 years ago and have lived in Los Angeles, Monte Carlo, Paris and New York, but I love London over all of them. I always feel at home here and I can’t say that about Moscow. I love the seasons here, so different to Los Angeles where it’s just dry and sunny all day, every day. And the sense of humour is amazing, just like the Russians’. That’s what will keep me coming back here.

