



Arda Fındıkoğlu

Arda Fındıkoğlu is the head director of the most prestigious events of backgammon world, he is also a board member of WBGF, World Backgammon Federation.

Ciao Arda, it's a pleasure to get the chance to interview you and thank you for being available.

I am very pleased by having this interview with you, thank you for your very kind invitation.

1 - In the Backgammon world, you're known for many roles; organiser, tournament director and player. Could you please put them in order of preference, entering in the detail of each role?

Being a player is my semi professional hobby as i m in love with the game and the analytical mathematics hidden inside. At the same time, I enjoy the social side of the game a lot, meeting new people and learn about different cultures.

Being an organizer is my profession, I have been working in big events like concerts, seminars, etc. since I was a teenager & for last 20 years, I make my living out of it. My biggest chance in backgammon organizations is that i can see the scene from a player`s perspective too, like what their needs are, how they would feel more comfortable, etc. so I am able to execute my events with the main aim of maximum comfort of my guests. And my biggest motivation is observing the satisfaction of guests at the end of an event & hearing their thanks, cannot be compared to any financial value for me.

In a backgammon event, I believe the most important factor is the Head TD, his management talents, PR abilities, hospitality and fairness of course. I have my own understanding by those means and instead of forcing them into another individual, I prefer to get the director responsibility and authority of my own organizations.

So, as an answer to your question; I think it wouldn't be wrong to comment; being an organizer is my profession which I am very passionate for so it should be on top of the list, then comes being a director as it is my tool to manage my events in a perfect order according to my understanding, and then a player as my hobby that I love too.

2 - As Tournament Organiser: The Cyprus tournament had a record attendance, did you expect this result? Why do you think it was such a success?

My journey as a backgammon event organizer started in the year 1999. I left my engineering career and worked so hard all passing years, with very limited resources and i was very lucky it took Merit's (my sponsor in North Cyprus) attention in 2013. The aim of the company was to create the biggest backgammon event in the world, so they asked me if we can reach to that point. My reply was positive, they trusted me and we made all plannings with an aim to be the flagship event of world backgammon community in maximum 5 years. So, we started our venture.

Even in our first year there, I was literally amazed by the huge support I got from world community, we got much bigger attendance than we were expecting & in our second year only, we were the biggest event of the world. You can imagine my satisfaction that I was able to keep my word to Merit even earlier than expected and I actually owe this to my very valuable fellows from all around the world.

So, yes, we were expecting and aiming for being the biggest event in the world, however we were not expecting it to happen just in 2 years. Since then, we have a harder task of not to lose our place on top, so we are trying to improve ourselves each passing year.

I think our success of my Merit Open`s depends on many reasons; but there are 3 on top of everything else. That we see players definitely not as customers but our guests, that I know very well what players need in a backgammon event, and that we have a great synergy with Merit staff, we are 20 people working night and day with an aim to make our guests feel comfortable during their stay there. And as a player, when you experience these together with very high quality service of Merit once, you definitely want to be back.

3 - As Tournament Director: what skills are required of a great director (other than knowing the tournament's regulations)?

Sense of fairness before everything else. It is not easy to treat every individual equally under every circumstance, as there can be cases in which your close friends are involved. Even my closest fellows know by heart that I would always direct according to what I believe is correct. I can make mistakes too, but everybody shall know that I always try to make the most fair ruling.

Then comes transparency. I never expect any player to trust me blindly but I try to be very transparent when directing an event, giving explanations as detailed as possible constantly. Experiencing my ways for years, I clearly sense our community trusts me a lot as a result. However, this is such a valuable credit I gain in years & each new event, I do my best to increase my trustability more in players` eyes.

And third is empathy. Such events are organized for players & although I can be named as a strict one, still, directors shall not turn into dictators at any point. When acting, I always try to put myself in players shoes and ask myself how I would see the case from their perspective.

4 - As Player: How did the Backgammon enter your life?

As most of Turks, i learned the traditional game "Tavla" (almost the same game, just without the cube), from my father when i was 3-4 years old. I remember i was not enjoying to play at all as i was even unable to count from 1 to 10 and he was usually angry at me because of my miscountings during our matches. When i was in high school, i had a chess career which didnt last long as i was just an average player which bored me after some time.

I came to Istanbul to study in university in 1996 and one day, as i was surfing on the web, i found a gaming server by chance. There, i saw backgammon which i thought i could easily play and that click changed my life. First, i met some players talking about probabilities, equities, etc. It was very surprising for me to see that Backgammon was a serious game for them as for me, it should be a game of pure luck. The days i was playing chess, we had a saying "Those who are not wise enough to play chess, they play backgammon".

The first thing i did was buying late Paul Magriel's "Backgammon" book to understand what they were talking about. Then Bill Robertie and others... More I read, I became more ashamed of myself that i underestimated Backgammon for many years. I read many books trying to improve my gaming skills and initially became an online player.

5 - The pandemic created some serious disruption to the backgammon circuit and recovery is in slow motion. What are your predictions?

Indeed, all around the globe, our lives changed suddenly by the effect of the pandemic in March 2020 & since then, I m aiming to keep our society together with online events I am organising.

This long period reminded me the value of what we were having before, our live events and freedom to travel, I am missing that a lot!

As I am in contact with individuals from every region of the world, I can clearly see things are getting better, mainly with the help of vaccine in western world. Unfortunately, eastern country residents are not that

lucky at the moment. Still, it seems to me that we are getting closer to its end slowly & in a couple of more months, we will be able to get rid of Covid-19 mess.

I am expecting live events to slowly come back by mid-summer & we have already started planning 2021 World Championships to be held in Monte Carlo at the end of July. Honestly, I can not wait to be there & meet my fellows again after this long pause!

6 - In tournaments, money plays a decisive role. Some young players think that a degree of "sporting achievement" should be the criteria for accessing certain categories, and not a disposable income. What do you think about this?

Since analyzing softwares, especially XG entered the game and it is very easy to own it, skill level of players increased a lot. Oldschool players are not so keen on computers and internet though, so it is a natural result that young generation players have boosted their level more than older ones. At the same time, that's very normal young players, as they are at the early stages of their business life, don't have that income to invest a lot of money into the game.

I often hear from young generation players that tournaments must be more PR based and luck factor should be eliminated from the game. However, we shall not forget the fact that Backgammon doesn't have strong sponsors bringing money into the game and events are run mainly with the fees of participants. If we put skill level as the main criteria, because older (and weaker) players wouldn't see tournaments interesting anymore, would we be satisfied with having very low amount of participants in our events & eventually having our events with very low fees and a very low prize value at the end?

I think the solution is in the game itself. Better players will win more in long run, but there is always a chance for a weaker player to win as well. That is actually a perfect balance, that keeps all skill levels of players constantly attracted to Backgammon.

Of course, we can have special events or categories, in which "sporting achievements" can be the main criteria, but for me, they should stay as "special", as open categories or prestigious titles like World Championships should be open to all levels, with a reasonable amount of inscription fee to create an attractive prize pool, which will bring new players into the game.

7 - The doubling cube represents the modern way of playing Backgammon. How was this change perceived in Turkey? Tell us something about backgammon in Turkey!

It was not an easy task at the beginning; as you can imagine, human nature is not so open to major changes. The traditional variation without the cube, "Tavla" is being played in Turkish lands for many centuries almost since the invention of the game, today even on the streets, and we say that we have the skill in our blood! This fact was an advantage for me to attract newcomers to my clubs as I had 10s of players willing to join us, and at the same time, a disadvantage too because most of newcomers were believing that they are literally the best in "Tavla" and when they lose in "Backgammon", they were just blaming the game, the cube and other factors like luck, not accepting the long term success mainly comes from the knowledge&skill.

In passing years, out of hundreds of individuals that I encountered to the modern game, some players adapted themselves as some others left playing as a natural result. Today, after more than 20 years since I started, coming from point zero, we are approximately 3500 modern variation players from 40 different cities of the country. We have big tournaments in different cities every 20 days, having a national league which is running in 8 different cities at the same time. And most important, we are sending national delegations to international events with an aim of making Turkey one of the BG countries of the world.

Although our 3500 is nothing inside the total population of 80 million in Turkey, as we reached to this point from only one person who was myself, I am feeling proud when I think of where we came from. And the idea of still having hundreds of "Tavla" players in streets yet to be converted into backgammon lovers in Turkey, keep me well motivated to my job here.

8 - A personal question Arda, I'm organizer and director too, I considered that the players are more collaborative, ethically sporty, do you think it is also a bit of our merit?

You are not only an organizer & director, but a hard working & a very successful one, with all of my respect Alfonso. If I get your question right, as "if it is connected to us as organisers&directors that players in our events are more collaborative and sportsman", yes, indeed I believe it is very well connected.

It is obvious players expectation is to get a good service during events. And when they observe us doing our best to achieve that, by cutting from our leisure times, sleeping hours, rushing around to serve them the best way possible, at the same time we are trustable and fair, they start doing their best to contribute in our success too, which is at the same time for their own benefit as well.

In my events, big majority of players are usually so understanding and helpful. Of course, in such crowds, there can be a couple of players who are having hard time to adapt themselves, however when they see we are there to accommodate them well and when we gain their trust, sooner or later they join the cycle too. In my 20 years of career, i experienced only a couple of times that we are unhappy with a guest after all. I believe, an organizational success is the result of good collaboration between all sides involved & player side is probably the most important one. I see ourselves lucky that our community is mainly so friendly and warm though.

9 - If there was such a thing as a Backgammon magazine, you would definitely feature on the front cover!

What are your feelings about being so highly considered in the Backgammon community?

Above everything else, the feeling of pure appreciation and big gratitude. I have always been a hard worker, however i know by heart that without the huge international support from world community, i wouldn't be where i am today. Honestly, i didn't do anything special to gain this huge support, else than always being sincere and working hard as a perfectionist. I feel truly blessed when i think about what i m given by our community just because i am myself though.

Fame poisons our soul. I saw many times that people change their characters when they become celebrities. They started seeing themselves in the clouds and actually that often resulted a big fall down. I constantly remind myself not to forget where I came from, and never to see myself as a different person than the day I first started my career.

For me, it is a big honor having this high consideration of backgammon community & I must work harder everyday not to lose this blessing though.

10 - If you could choose between being the best tournament organiser or the best player, which would you choose?

Definitely the best organizer – as when being the best player, you would be a lonely one who has hidden rivals, but being a good organizer, all you will get is appreciation and support from our community, that's a big motivation for me though. Plus, being the best player is million times harder than being a good organizer, so I go with the easier way.

11 - Italian players think of you as a friend. Is it the Backgammon game that knows no borders, or is it something about you?

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12 - Let's talk about WBGF of which you are one of the committee members: how is it going? What's the role of the USA in the future of backgammon and what are your predictions?

You know Backgammon is not recognized as a sport in majority of countries. WBGF (those times as EUBGF) was formed with an aim of having a superior authority by collaboration between European national organisers like you and me, to create awareness about us and our game, at the same time, being a stronger body by acting together. I was invited to join the federation in 2015 and since then, I am an Executive Board member. Just a couple of years ago, we decided to convert our body into world federation by changing our name to WBGF, so we can have non-European backgammon nations like USA and Japan inside too. I personally support this and gladly since the conversion, global growth continues.

USBGF is the most crowded federation of the world, with their own understandings, gaming traditions and own rules as well. Good news is they are positive about being a valuable member of WBGF since the first day we invited them. For that purpose, negotiations are still going on, we are working on our statutes and rules with an aim of unification and we have made big progress so far. I hope and expect, USA will officially join our body latest in next couple of years though.

It is not easy to move such bodies so things are progressing slowly, however I can easily comment there are many positive happenings going on for the good of all of us & there are still a lot of things to be done. Still, whatever the task is; there is nothing we cannot achieve when we are acting together.

And about World Team Championship which is the main annual event of WBGF, held every year by a different member country... I was honored by general assembly to hold it in Budva, Montenegro in 2018, getting a record amount of 26 participant countries & out of more than 300 events I held in my career so far, I can clearly comment that it was such a unique experience for me as an organizer to welcome national teams of backgammon in my venue, was such a high prestige for me and I believe that's the future of our game actually.

At this point, I must add, since the first moment I heard you were a candidate of hosting this very special event in Venice next year, you have my full support. I can't wait to bring my Turkish team to your beautiful city of Venice so we can enjoy your hospitality and professional organization there, I am sure it will be absolutely fantastic! Wish you the best of luck although you don't need it.

13 - The current regulations are under stress because of some controversial rules like the "legal move" or the dice on top of the checkers... many players have adapted to the changes. What is your advice for those who **didn't adapt** to such rules?

I have my personal opinion about this subject. I actually do not think there should be only one rules set to be enforced in every culture, as cultural differences directly affect our gaming understandings.

For example; my experience is; in western cultures, legal moves rule can give perfect results, at the same time, in eastern cultures, it only encourages people to lie, so it doesn't really work. Would you be surprised to hear that when I am running an event in Turkey, I inactivate "legal moves" rule, at the same time, if I organize in a western country, I would happily activate it?

In Russia for example, they do not use shakers at all, but all matches are being played with Baffle Box tool. In USA, dice on the checker is cocked. We all have our differences & I actually favor this fact.

So, my approach to "rules" matter is; instead of enforcing 1 fixed rules set to every gaming culture, we should have a booklet defining all possible methods in an official way and TD's should decide which methods they will apply in a specific event & announce it in a written form during advertisement phase of the event so players know from the beginning how it will be run.

14 - Is the Baffle box a good solution? Would you make it mandatory?

It is a solution not only against possible cheating, but at the same time, cocked dice too. However, Backgammon has its ritual of "shake and roll" in its genes & under standard conditions, I do not see it really needed to change it. So, in my event regulations, I leave players free to decide for themselves if they want

to roll with a Baffle Box, however they cannot force their opponents to do so. Exception is a TD ruling, that in some cases, as a TD, I may enforce the use of a Baffle Box by both sides in a specific match.

15- I hope to see you again at our CNB tournaments. Do you hope the same? Can you leave a message to the Italian players?

Of course I do! I have always been welcomed with a very high hospitality in CNB events + your very professional management makes me feel extra comfortable and safe. I have only good memories from my times in CNB events & your Varenna is still my most favourite destination. I miss spending time together with my Italian fellows and you will definitely see me again soon in your events.

When we are back to our operation after pandemic, i am expecting to see more and more Italian players in my international events, wherever I organize & no doubt they will be welcomed as my personal guests.

A personal anecdote:

Beaulieu - France - 2018, I asked you to be part of the Tournament Committee. A greek player that was playing the final of the tournament of the previous day forgot to register for the main tournament for which he came. After the tournament started, we had this problem to resolve. Your suggestion was to suspend a match that was just started and to add the greek player as a late arrival. I have a vivid memory of this as it was a difficult solution and choice to make, infact it was an exception to the regulation that was perfectly in line with the spirit and the balance of the Backgammon community. Chapeau!

I remember the case. We were lucky that all sides involved were so kind to accept our ruling without any disputes there. When players cooperate with us well, there doesn't exist any problem without a fair solution though.

Thank you Arda from myself and the CNB.

Thanks to you Alfonso! With my best regards to all CNB family & we will meet soon! Forza Italia!