

Matvey Natanzon, a.k.a. Falafel the Backgammon King, Dies at 51

A Russian-born émigré by way of Israel, he made a gambler's living taking on challengers, and often hustling them, in becoming the world's ranking player.

By Sam Roberts

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Matvey Natanzon, who was known as Falafel because he subsisted on deep-fried chickpea balls while hustling gullible opponents in Washington Square Park in Manhattan while he groomed himself to be the world's greatest backgammon player, died on Feb. 14 in Clarence, N.Y., near Buffalo. He was 51.

Mr. Natanzon, who was born in Soviet Russia, emigrated to Israel with his mother when he was 4 years old and later moved to the United States, spending his teenage years in Buffalo, was a compulsive gambler.

"If I say it, I have to bet on it," was his credo.

"Recently Falafel made another big bet, the biggest," his friend Jake Jacobs, another backgammon champion, wrote in PrimeTime Backgammon magazine, published by the United States Backgammon Federation. "He had cancer. I am not certain of the specifics, but it was serious, deadly serious, attacking the best part of him, his brain. He bet he could beat it."

A shlumpy jovial giant who weighed upward of 300 pounds at one point, Mr. Natanzon lost that bet, less than two years after doctors first told him that he had stage-four brain cancer.

His death was announced by his family in a notice in The Buffalo News.

His illness prematurely ended a roller-coaster career during which he went from sleeping under a bench in Washington Square Park, where he lived for nearly six months after college, to mastering backgammon, a board game that combines rolls of the dice with strategic checker moves.

"He had the skills to put his money where his mouth was, skills developed through tenacious study," Mr. Jacobs said

"Backgammon used to be filled with characters," Mr. Jacobs added. "Since the computer era overtook the game in the 90s, there are hardly any characters in the tournament rooms; the only ones to be found are on the keyboards, as players consult robots for answers, instead of consulting wizards such as Falafel. The game needs wizards, and he was one of the last. That's his legacy."

Like the dish falafel, the game originated in the Middle East, and its methodology evolved from ancient guesstimates to mathematically perfect computer-generated algorithms in the late 20th century.

Before finding more hospitable though far from plush accommodations, Mr. Natanzon survived on the \$2 a day he was paid to guard one of Washington Square Park's famous chess tables favored by a player who called himself Russian Paul.

"One night, Russian Paul found him passed out with patches of deep-fried chickpeas stuck to his face, and the park's newest hustler earned his street name," Raffi Khatchadourian wrote in a profile of Mr. Natanzon in *The New Yorker* in 2013.

In his short pants, sweatshirt and knitted wool hat, Mr. Natanzon could look like an amiable loser to his easy marks, as he baited them with his nonstop babble and swaggering hubris.

He would graduate to winning (and, on rarer occasions, losing) tens of thousands of dollars in as little as an hour; achieve celebrity status in a game that had migrated from black-tie casino tables to cheesy hotel ballrooms, where baseball caps worn backward were de rigeur; and be named the top player in an unofficial ranking by his peers, known as the Giants of Backgammon.

"Falafel is, without a doubt, backgammon's No. 1 commentator and is probably its best-known celebrity," Joe Russell, the chairman of the backgammon federation's board, said when he awarded Mr. Natanzon the organization's Lifetime Achievement Award in 2018. "He has been in the top 10 of the Giants list seven straight times, and has been voted No. 1 twice and No. 2 once."

Matvey Natanzon was born in what was then Soviet Russia on July 5, 1968. His mother, Larissa Bomshtein, fled with him to Israel when he was 4 to escape anti-Semitism and his father, about whom little is known. They settled in Azor, a town near Tel Aviv, where Ms. Bomshtein worked at an airport. When he was 14, she married an Israeli-American Holocaust survivor, Dr. Robert Rein, a biophysicist, and the family moved to Buffalo.

His mother, now Larissa Rein, and his sister, Elaine Lewis, are among his survivors.

Mr. Natanzon drank and gambled his way through the State University of New York at Buffalo (now known as the University at Buffalo) and graduated with a degree in accounting in 1991, though emerging jobless and penniless after losing sports wagers. After three years he hitched a ride to Manhattan to make his fortune in Washington Square Park.

"Instead of making money hand over fist on the park's famous chess tables as he dreamed, Natanzon ended up broke and sleeping under them," the journalist Brin-Jonathan Butler wrote in "The Grandmaster: Magnus Carlsen and the Match That Made Chess Great Again" (2018).

Mr. Natanzon was quoted as saying: "I just didn't like working; sleeping in the park was better than going to work in a cubicle. My relationship with backgammon is the exact opposite of my personality everywhere else in my life. I'm very, very lazy. But when something captures my attention and I want to seek out the truth, I can never let go of it."

He later camped out in a ramshackle game room on Wall Street and at the New York Chess and Backgammon Club in Midtown Manhattan, slept in a flophouse on the Bowery, and rented a room, where, by his account, he would spend 15 hours a day playing online.

Largely self-taught, he played on the Israeli team in the Nations Cup backgammon tournament in 2005; in 2007 his peers named him the world's top player. He lived in Las Vegas and Tel Aviv, among other places.

Mr. Natanzon was playing poker in an Atlantic City casino once when a man sat down beside him and, by coincidence, began talking about backgammon.

“Oh, you play?” Mr. Natanzon said coyly, according to The New Yorker. “I like to play, too.”

The man nodded indifferently, which provoked Mr. Natanzon into adding a footnote. “You know,” he said, “I’m the No. 1 backgammon player in the world. None of you could beat me.”

When Mr. Natanzon introduced himself as Falafel, a skeptical player reached for his smartphone to Google him.

“I’m checking,” the skeptic said. “I’m just getting a lot of restaurants.”