

Telling Lies and Getting Paid

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More
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MICHAEL KONIK

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*More
Gambling Stories*

Michael Konik

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The World's Greatest Backgammon Hustler

He doesn't have a permanent address. But Simon Jones isn't hard to find.

The Presidential Suites of the world's better hotels. The finest restaurants in Paris, London, and New York. The first-class cabins of trans-Atlantic airplanes. These are his usual domains.

Whether in a dark Moscow nightclub or on a technicolor Balinese beach or upon the pulsing streets of Rio de Janeiro during Carnaval, you can pick Simon out of the crowd. He's the one with the beautiful woman holding one hand and a little black briefcase in the other. The woman is, he'll admit, a frivolous accessory, one of the delightful spoils of being rich and generous. The briefcase, though, is another thing altogether. That briefcase is his life.

It contains a couple dozen polished ivory disks—"checkers," Simon calls them—two leather cups, four dice, and a cube with various exponents of the number 2 on each side.

Simon is the world's finest backgammon hustler. And aside from the knowledge he stores in his head,

his briefcase contains everything he needs to subsidize a life that seems shorn from the pages of an Ian Fleming adventure.

Simon Jones [his name and some identifying details have been changed] is in many ways a cipher, a phantom who occupies an all-cash shadow world that shields him from the scrutiny of inquisitive tax collectors and customs officials. But he is by no means obscure. Among the jet set, the preposterously wealthy businessmen and royalty for whom no luxury goes wanting, he is a regular fixture, as common a sight as a Bentley parked in the circular driveway of a European mansion. Simon is One of Them. And this, it seems, is the secret of his gambling success.



In *To Catch a Thief*, dashing and debonair Cary Grant plays a dashing and debonair burglar, a charming con man who mixes easily with his unwitting victims. Some years ago, I interviewed a man named Albie Baker, the international jewel thief whose story inspired the Cary Grant movie. The thief insisted his lock-picking and safe-cracking skills were only average—“There were hundreds of guys who could do what I did,” he told me—but his people skills were unsurpassed. Dukes and Duchesses welcomed him into their social circles; politicians and city planners revealed their most secret confidences. All the while, the thief was relieving them of their precious metals. “Nobody suspected me, of course,” the thief explained. “You don’t suspect a member of your country club of burglary.”

Simon’s strategy is nearly identical. He has slept in the royal palaces of several Middle Eastern nations; he counts among his acquaintances the young (and reckless) scions of one of the world’s largest distilleries and a major Italian bank; Hall of Fame athletes and Academy

Award winners know his face. And all of them have sat across the backgammon board from Simon and happily watched him relieve them of their excess cash.

"All of these people, they like to be entertained," Simon remarks in the hushed clipped tones of a well-bred British school-boy. "I'm an absolute treasure to them. And, I suppose, they to me."

Simon is handsome in a non-threatening kind of way; he doesn't smolder, he comforts. His manners are impeccable. And though he's careful not to make a spectacle of himself, he is often considered the "life of the party," a well-bred Dionysus who happens to be quite splendid at an ancient board game.

The son of a career diplomat, Simon was born in Maryland, near Washington, D.C., but spent most of his youth in European boarding schools, reading James Bond novels instead of studying Latin. ("We should all be Bond," he is fond of saying.) After a nomadic year trekking through Nepal in search of something ("I can no longer recall exactly what"), Simon attended Cambridge, where he studied economics and psychology – disciplines that have prepared him well for his "career," if you can use such a common word to describe the life Simon has made for himself. He never took a degree. But it was at Cambridge that Simon discovered his talent for backgammon, a game that's ridiculously easy to learn, but ridiculously difficult to know.

"I played for fun, with a roommate, and I paid his rent every month with my losses," Simon remembers. "Somehow I found out that there were books written about the game. This struck me as something of a revelation, the fact that there might actually be a way to master the game beyond rolling a lot of good numbers. Without my friend knowing, I went to the library and read all the books on backgammon. Shortly thereafter, I was making more money in a day than most people make in a week of honest work."

In only a few months, after several profitable forays into private London clubs, Simon believed he could earn a living playing backgammon. "I knew I was the best player in Cambridge, and probably in the top ten or so in London. And since I had always harbored these juvenile Bond fantasies, I thought it appropriate to do something utterly irresponsible and impulsive and attempt to live by my wits."

Were this a movie, a banal morality tale promoting the virtues of steady employment and steadfast abstinence, Simon would have found himself beaten down by the cruel torments of reality, only to persevere the indignities of gambling-borne poverty and emerge several years later as a champion.

That's not what happened. Simon was a success.

He didn't become rich overnight, and his skills were not immediately commensurate with his tastes for fine wine and finer women. But at every level of competition he flourished. Simon began playing for the equivalent of \$10 a point. Then \$25, then \$50, then \$100. His rise came gradually – and, in his estimation, undramatically – his growing skills producing a growing bankroll. Now he's comfortable playing for \$2,000 a point, some of the highest stakes in the world. Any higher and he feels himself starting to play conservatively, in violation of one of his essential rules: If you don't re-double [challenge your opponent to double the stakes] when you've got a demonstrable edge, you're playing too high. Given the chance to triple his net worth or go broke – for example, in a match against the Sultan of Brunei – Simon would take the chance.

He does not, however, view his occupation with wonderment. The romantic ideal that most amateurs harbor of the successful professional gambler is, according to the world's greatest backgammon hustler, mistaken. "What I do is like selling insurance," he says. "You go to work every day. Some days are winners, some are losers. I try

not to get too emotional about either result.”

He has always been similarly sanguine about his talent. He recognized it early, developed it fully, and uses it to earn a living. But he does not stand in awe of it.

“Backgammon is an open-information game,” he explains. “There aren’t any hidden cards. You can see when people, yourself included, make mistakes. If you’re properly objective, you can assess your opponents’ weaknesses. And more important, you can assess your own weaknesses.”

In the late 1970s, only a few years after reading his first book about backgammon, Simon could identify the best player in London: himself.

His rise continued unabated, culminating with victories at the World Cup tournament and the annual World Championship tournament in Monte Carlo, the only player ever to win both. (He still attends most of the major tournaments, primarily to develop new clients.) Today, Simon is widely regarded by cognoscente as one of the top three backgammon players in the world. But, he insists, it’s not pure playing talent that has made him the most successful backgammon player on Earth. His math skills, he claims, are average, probably equal to an accomplished ninth-grader. His ability to analyze a table situation (a “proposition,” in backgammon parlance) is less the function of technical prowess than keen intuition. And, he freely admits, he has neither super-human resolve nor *cojones* the size of grapefruits.

“I pick my spots well. I’m not a gunslinger. I don’t need to beat ‘the best.’ I’d rather play the guy who can’t see, hear, or think. I want to beat the donkey,” he says, chuckling.

“There are gentlemen—well, certain authors, for instance—that I consider geniuses, great theoreticians who don’t care about money. If you offered them one billion dollars in exchange for ten points off their I.Q., they probably wouldn’t do it.”

He glances around his penthouse suite overlooking Central Park, and laughs. "Me? I'll take the money."



Simon has just finished playing a week-long match against a Pakistani fellow, a banker, whom he met at the Traveler's Club in Paris. The Pakistani fellow beat Simon out of \$250,000. Simon is not unhappy.

"I'll eventually take this guy for a couple million," he says dispassionately.

He views himself as a walking casino, capable of absorbing losses, sometimes large losses, but playing all the time with an advantage. Even the most famous casinos on the Las Vegas Strip have a bad day, a bad week, maybe even a bad fiscal quarter. But in the long run, they tend to get the money. So does Simon.

And like the casino that trumpets the number of jackpot winners who have periodically emptied out the casino's slot machines, Simon doesn't hide his losses. He advertises them. "If one of my clients beats me, I want them to enjoy themselves and spread the word. I want people to know how beatable I am. I want people to think I'm not as good as everyone says I am. If they didn't think they had some chance of winning, why would anyone play me?"

In this regard, Simon is not a hustler in the traditional sense, like a pool shark who acts as if he's never seen a cue ball. His deception is far subtler. He tells potential opponents, "I'm too good for you" — and they, being highly successful titans of the globe, winners in the arenas of business and finance and power, are eager to prove him wrong.

Unlike poker, where higher stakes usually mean more talented players, high-stakes in backgammon don't necessarily produce better players. In fact, most professionals will tell you the big games are lousy with bad players.

And for some reason, they say, Simon attracts them like a flower does a bee.

“The ten best pigeons in the world are desperate to play with him,” one top professional complains. “Nobody else can get near them, and they’re falling all over themselves to play Simon. In my opinion,” the pro says, “he’s not the greatest player. He’s very good, I think, but not great. But he makes more money than anyone in this business, because he finds the games. Actually, that’s not true,” the pro says, reconsidering. “The games seem to find him.”

This assessment does not bruise Simon’s feelings. “I played a guy last year. He lost a hundred thousand to me in four days – and he was truly happy. He thanked me!”

Sometimes good players become surly when lesser players beat them. It happens all the time at the poker tables and almost as frequently over the backgammon boards. This, of course, only alienates the “pigeons.” Still, many allegedly “professional” gamblers, a number of whom are seriously deficient in self-esteem and are more concerned with inflating their egos than their bankroll, seldom miss an opportunity to snivel or whine.

Not Simon. “If a guy is going to swim up a waterfall to beat me, I congratulate him, and I do it sincerely. I tip my hat to him. Gambling is like hunting. If you’re constantly chucking spears at people, you can’t whine if sometimes you get one in your back.”



Not long ago, Simon was particularly flush. He’d spent the previous month in Monaco, playing a Kuwaiti sheik who knew he couldn’t win. On the other hand, he didn’t mind losing \$5,000 an hour to his newly discovered friend, as long as the laughs flowed as freely as the first-growth claret. This particular sheik typically spends

about \$20,000 a day on hookers alone; the money he lost to Simon was, likewise, cheap entertainment.

With nearly \$400,000 of the sheik's petro-dollars to the good, Simon traveled to Sweden for a tournament. There, one of the tournament directors challenged him to a match for cash. Knowing the guy had exactly zero chance of winning – "He couldn't possibly get lucky enough" – Simon readily accepted, *not* knowing that his opponent's playing stake was the money collected by the tournament to pay for the hall and awards dinner. Which is why Simon was mortified when the tournament official, down nearly \$10,000 and belatedly realizing he had no hope of recovering, dashed for a nearby window ledge and threatened to jump.

"Of course, I immediately offered the man his money back," Simon recalls. "Well, now he *really* wanted to jump – honor and such. It was a rather tense moment, this man being several stories above Stockholm. So, instead, I offered to let him borrow the money. I assured him that he still owed me, that I wasn't letting him out of his debt. That I expected every dime. But that we could consider it a loan."

The tournament executive begrudgingly agreed – and has been paying Simon in small installments (an amount considerably less than Simon's monthly hotel tab) ever since.

"Looking back on my choice of profession, I could have made more money as a stock trader," Simon figures. "Much more than what I earn playing backgammon. But," he says, sighing contentedly, "I've met a lot of interesting people this way."

Sister Jean Picks The Winners

Most Las Vegas gamblers would give their diamond pinkie rings to have the kind of handicapping success a Chicago lady named Jean Kenny has enjoyed over the past several years.

– Super Bowl XXVIII: She predicted Dallas would win by 17. They won by 17.

– Super Bowl XXIX: She predicted San Francisco would win by 20. They won by 23.

– Super Bowl XXX: She predicted Dallas would win by 14. They won by 10.

– Super Bowl XXXIV: She predicted Tennessee would shock Jacksonville and meet St. Louis in the title game, where the Rams would triumph by seven. Which they did.

– Super Bowl XXXV: She predicted (on “The Tonight Show With Jay Leno”) Baltimore would thump the New York Giants. Cha-ching!

In 1994, as a panelist on WGN radio’s “The Prediction Show,” she compiled a 10-6 record, beating the host, Hub Arkush, and trouncing *USA Today*’s odds expert, Danny Sheridan.

Jean Kenny, 46, credits her penchant for pigskin prognostication to good old-fashioned Christian virtues: hours of exhaustive research, concentrated mathematical analysis, and meticulous attention to details. She's got the kind of work ethic that is supposed to pave the stairway to heaven. During the season she reads *Pro Football Weekly*, a statistics-heavy periodical favored by wiseguy bettors, and the sports sections of the local *Chicago Tribune* and *Chicago Sun-Times*. She does her homework.

"I study the injury situation," Kenny says, showing me a six-inch-thick file of newspaper clippings. "I follow the key performers and track how they did in previous games. I keep a separate file on special teams [punt-return squads, for example]. And I especially like good defensive teams. I guess you could say I pay close attention to the NFL."

Actually, you might say Jean Kenny follows the NFL religiously. In addition to being a rabid Chicago Bears fan, an expert handicapper, and a trusted leader among the sports-betting crowd, Jean Kenny has been, for the past 29 years, a certified S.P.

As in, Sister of Providence.

As in, nun.

She teaches religion and drug education/prevention at Archbishop Weber High School in northwest Chicago, lives at the Immaculate Conception convent, and studies the Holy Scriptures for an hour every night.

Only when she's done with those solemn duties does Sister Jean Kenny study the stat sheets. She even writes poetry extolling the virtues of her beloved home team, Da Bears. Such as this little free verse paean: *And on the eighth day God said: "Let there be football!" / And God created a classic team – the Chicago Bears.*

She is a most unusual individual, the kind of singular person most of us don't bump into very often: a lifelong nun who really, *really*, understands football.

The Sister Jean Kenny phenomenon is peculiar, but

not entirely incredible, if you take into account the geographical influence: namely, that she is from Chicago. This is a town that takes its sports seriously – far too seriously. (I was born there; I’m allowed to say this.) Fans in Chicago are knowledgeable, passionate, and rabidly devoted to their beloved Bulls-Hawks-Sox-Cubs-Bears. These are fans who throw back opposing-team home runs at Wrigley Field. This is a city where every third billboard attempts to make a product tie-in with the Bulls’ string of World Championships. This is a society of sports lovers who did not take “Saturday Night Live’s” lampooning of Mike Ditka well, penning numerous letters of complaint to the NBC television network. This is where Michael Jordan lives.

Sister Jean Kenny is the unlikely end product of a Chicago culture that breeds sports fanatics – whether they’re stockbrokers, truck drivers, or Sisters of Providence.

Her journey into the world of odds and pointspreads and over-unders began in 1985, when she won a William “The Refrigerator” Perry poetry contest sponsored by a local radio station. She had always followed sports as a child, playing varsity basketball and coaching tennis when she got older, but going to a Bears game, watching The Fridge rumble into the end zone – well, that gave her the kind of visceral thrill nuns usually derive from a particularly enlightening Bible passage. (“A good game is like watching poetry in motion,” she says.) “Monday Night Football” thought their nationwide viewership might be amused by a Catholic nun’s adoration of a 320-pound ball-carrying lineman and ran a segment about her during the 1986 playoffs. Shortly thereafter, Bears management invited Sister Jean to attend a few Bears games, where she got to meet Chicago’s craven idol, Mike Ditka, he of the slicked-back hair, pugnacious jaw, and easily parodied motivational speaking style. Reporters started calling Sister Jean to ask her opinion of upcoming foot-

ball games; her predictions, it seemed, were often eerily accurate, as if touched by divine inspiration.

A spiritual leader, if you will, was born.

In addition to her regular Thursday-evening gig on “The Prediction Show,” Sister Jean has appeared on KABC in Los Angeles, CNN, and “Late Night with Conan O’Brien.” This year she premiered a new radio program, “NFL for Women,” during morning drive-time. People pay attention to what she has to say.

“My motive is strictly fun,” she insists, sitting in the living room of her Chicago convent home. “It’s like a hobby, that’s all. I don’t personally bet on the games. Otherwise, something I do for fun would be like a Las Vegas carnival. You’ve got to draw the line.”

The nice – and mildly surprising – thing about Sister Jean, is her merciful, even forgiving, attitude toward those who would sin. “If people want to bet on football games, fine,” she says, shrugging. “I don’t want to get into a big moral thing. If my listeners choose to bet, that’s their business. If you take my advice and you’re lucky, I’m happy. If not, I don’t want to hear about it.”

Sister Jean believes those who follow her advice will fulfill this quotation from John 16:22. “Your heart will rejoice with a joy no one can take from you.” And if not, hey, she only does this for fun.

Sister Jean has received more than a few notes and calls from what she describes as “faithful” listeners who have profited from her advice. “Oh, I get calls all the time. ‘I won twenty bucks because of you.’ Or, ‘Thank you for your advice. You really helped me win big.’ Of course, I’m not so sure these people are going to be so happy if I make a big mistake. I try to tell people that betting on football games is a big risk.”

She tells her fourteen-year-old students the same thing: She does a lot of study, she works hard on her handicapping, and she can strongly *recommend* certain picks. But ethics and responsibilities to a higher calling

preclude her from plunking down the collection money on the Cowboys-Dolphins game.

"The fact that I'm pretty good at what I do gives me credibility," she says, nodding. "The kids really open up to me. They think I'm cool."

I can't help wondering, has Sister Jean ever considered establishing a "900"-line, like so many other "professional" touts? The profits could go to her diocese or some other worthy charity. She could advertise in the sports section of the *Trib*: "Sister Jean's Football Picks. There's Nun Better!"

"Oh, heavens no," she laughs. "I wouldn't do something like that even if I was allowed, which I'm not. I don't think it's right. And besides," she says, smiling, "if predicting football games ever became more than my hobby, it would stop being fun."

In lieu of monetary rewards, Sister Jean Kenny's handicapping prowess has earned her a scrapbook full of celebrity mementos, such as personal notes from Conan and his former sidekick Andy Richter, arm-in-arm photos with Bears star Chris Zorich, and her most prized picture: a shot of her with The Pope of Chicago Sports, The Man himself. Ditka.

"I'm very fond of him," Sister Jean says reverentially. "He's very feisty, but very likeable. And he knows his football. I think Mike Ditka is great. Of course, I generally like disciplinarians."

Meeting him was, she admits, the second biggest thrill of her life. "The first was Mother Teresa. That was the greatest moment of my life. But Ditka was a close second."