

World's best domino players yearn to 'crack bones' in Jamaica

By Stevenson Jacobs
THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

KINGSTON, Jamaica — Brian Baylie, a mild-mannered exterminator by day, becomes a cutthroat domino player by night, clacking pieces together on bar room tables and intimidating opponents.

From the beaches of Barbados to the cafes of Cuba, dominoes long have been a favorite pastime in the Caribbean. Now, more than 500 of the world's best players are converging on Jamaica for the World Championship of Dominoes.

"Jamaicans take dominoes very seriously," said Baylie, 38, who challenges his computer when he cannot find opponents on the streets of Jamaica. "It's an accepted part of life here."

The three-day tournament beginning Thursday at the Ocho Rios resort will have players from a dozen Caribbean countries, the United States, Britain and Mexico squaring off for more than \$150,000 in cash and prizes.

Dominoes was invented by the Chinese in 1120 A.D., using tiles carved from ivory or bone with inset ebony pips. It did not reach Europe until the early 18th century, when it appeared in Italy, France and England before spreading from taverns and pubs to the far-flung British colonies in the Caribbean.

According to the Internet site worlddomino.com the oldest known domino set was found in the tomb of Tutankhamun, king of ancient Egypt about 1355 B.C. Modern leaders also have been aficionados, the site says, including President Lyndon B. Johnson.

The game has been eulogized in poems and stories, including Puerto Rican poet Jack Aguieros' "Dominoes & Other Stories" and U.S.-Dominican writer Elvys Ruiz's collection of political plays titled "Coffee

Playing it 'straight' for \$25,000

The world's best domino players gathered in Jamaica to compete in the 2003 World Championship of Dominoes. The two-person teams will play the game of straight dominoes against a field of more than 500 others for the chance to win \$25,000.

Straight dominoes

Start the game
Each player starts with seven dominoes. A double six piece must be posted by one of the players to begin the game. Play then rotates counterclockwise.

Playing straight

The next player puts a matching piece to the longer side of the double six piece; other dominoes are played "in-line." Doubles are placed at right angles to the line of pieces.

The winner
The first team to play all of their dominoes wins. Or if there are no more legitimate plays available, the team with the fewest total number of dots on their remaining dominoes wins.

Breaking the code
Tournament officials will be watching closely for players "coding" or using prearranged gestures to communicate with each other.

SOURCES: 2003 World Championship Domino tournament rules; Associated Press

and Dominoes."

"I like it because it's a brain game, a mental challenge," said Buxton Rankin, 56, one of about 50 players hunched over felt-lined tables at a Kingston nightspot, preparing for the championship.

First place is worth \$25,000, second \$12,500 and third \$7,500.

In straight dominoes, the game most common in the Caribbean, a pair of two-player teams take turns trying to match the number of dots on their pieces with those on the table. The first team to get rid of all its pieces wins.

Like any game, dominoes also has its share of cheaters. Championship judges and surveillance cameras will watch players to guard against illegal "coding," a prearranged system of gestures — like coughing or scratching one's head — used by partners to communicate strategy or indicate which pieces they hold.

Last year, officials banned two Jamaican players for life after they were caught using sandpaper to mark pieces to see which ones remained.

Some players liken the game to poker as they try to gauge opponents' moves.

"Dominoes in Jamaica is synonymous to baseball in America," said Chris Blake, general secretary of the National Association of Domino Bodies, which regulates the game on the island of 2.6 million people. "It's second nature to us."

On Jamaican streets, the style of play is loud.

Players thump domino pieces, or "bones," on wooden tables to intimidate opponents and erupt in joy after a winning hand. Insults — and the occasional fist — fly in heated games.

Matches continue for hours at night, to the chagrin of spouses and family members.

The game, while known for cutting across class and race, traditionally has been dominated by men. However, more women are joining clubs, entering tournaments — and even winning.

"Once the guys realize you can play and aren't a pushover, then they respect you," said Ann-Marie Benjamin, 38, of Jamaica.

It's all part of efforts to bring uniformity and discipline to the game, said Ruddy Schaafe, the Miami-based chairman of the World Championship of Dominoes.

And the ultimate goal? "We'd like to see dominoes become an Olympic event," Schaafe said. "It has a long way to go, but the light in the tunnel is getting brighter and brighter."

Di's brother discounts conspiracy theory

By Sue Leeman
THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

LONDON — The year before Princess Diana died, she was alienated from her brother, Earl Spencer, and he wrote to her saying she had mental problems and was manipulative and deceitful, a newspaper reported Wednesday.

Spencer, speaking on NBC's "Today" show, said the letter, published in excerpts from a new book, was being seen out of context and that he "adored Diana."

Worldwide television audiences watched him in September 1997 give a funeral oration about his sister, in which he spoke of their closeness as children, honored her memory and appeared to make a veiled criticism of the royal family.

He also said Wednesday that he did not believe her fatal 1997 car crash was planned, despite a letter, published in the same book, in which Diana said she feared someone would tamper with her car's brakes.

Both letters are from "A Royal Duty," a forthcoming book by Diana's former butler Paul Burrell,

which is being excerpted in the Daily Mirror newspaper.

Spencer told NBC he hadn't seen the letters but had heard from handwriting experts that published sections appeared to have been written by Diana.

The princess's companion Dodi Fayed also was killed in the crash; his father, Mohammed al Fayed, has never accepted the French verdict that driver Henri Paul's use of drugs and alcohol, and the car's high speed, caused the accident. Paul also was killed. Al Fayed says the deaths were intentional.

"My family and I are absolutely certain that we've never seen any evidence of that whatsoever," Spencer said, speaking to NBC from Toronto. As for Diana's fears, he said, "I do think it's just a horrible coincidence, rather than actually tied in with reality."

Asked if Diana's fears were justified, Spencer said she had spoken to him about being eavesdropped on and having her private quarters bugged.

"I think paranoid's a very strong word but I think using it in the common way meaning very, very concerned about yourself, yes, she was at times," Spencer said.

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