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Full of fun

A table, four chairs and 36 cards are usually enough to get the evening going. Jass warms the heart, starts you ticking and at the same time gets the adrenalin flowing. At home, in the café, in a mountain hut, during military service,

on ship or train, jass mats are rolled out and cards spread over the table. Hard and fast rules there are none. It is a good idea to make sure you agree before you start playing.

But even the cleverest strategy does not guarantee victory. It is exhilarating to have a good hand – but cockiness seldom does any good, since experience shows that even the best horse can lose. You can have good or bad cards, and if you are playing in pairs you can get on well with your partner or not.

What exactly is it that makes three and a half million Swiss, 60,000 of them championship players, so attached to jass? "I play because it relaxes me", explains self-appointed Swiss-German jass pope Göpf Egg. It also makes for good conversation. "Looked at in this way jass deserves the word entertainment in more than one sense".

In 1965 television interviewer Kurt Felix brought him on to the small screen. Since then jass programmes – with names like “Stöck – Wys – Stich” taken from the jass vocabulary – have been regularly aired. Jass shows

In his younger days Göpf Egg journeyed around Switzerland as a textiles salesman. Perhaps it is because of this background that he is at daggers drawn with one jass group which absolutely denies him the rank of jass expert. This title can be used by anyone in Switzerland of course, but there is no such professional qualification – that is the criticism. His "Official Swiss Jass Regulations" – published by AGMüller Neuhausen ("Puur – Näll – As" in Swiss-German and "Valet d'atout" in French) – is now in its seventh edition and has already sold 62,000 copies. But it is condemned by his detractors as "incomplete and unnecessary". He puts "extremely strange and even grotesque ideas about jass into people's minds", writes Peter Hammer in his anti-Egg



Jass for the asking

The most often played is probably the "Schieber". This has four players, with two against two. But even this has different sets of rules, starting with the simple way of counting up to 1,000 points until the "Coiffeur" (from the French "Quoi faire?" meaning "What to do, what trump suit to choose?"). Provided you do not want to take part in the Swiss jass championships, fantasy knows no bounds with regard to the rules.

modest alcohol consumption of jazz players, which irks innkeepers. Those who play jazz do not drink much, and when they do it is the cheaper drinks like beer or cider that they order. They also stay put for a long time, and it is usually the jazz players who make the most noise.

But be careful, in both cases loners are not loved over much. At the end of the day the winner is the one who cooperates best with his partner. There is no lack of combinations in the cards. Göpf Egg says: "Jass players never hold the same set of cards twice in their whole lives". And indeed there are 91 million different ways of laying the cards on the table.

As if there were not enough jass barriers already, three-quarters of the Swiss population play with French cards and a

There is very little information about exactly who plays it. Anyone can see that older people like playing jass. But where do they play it nowadays? As recently as ten years ago cards along with chalk and a scoreboard could be had at any time in almost every Swiss café. Today, however, these together with all the jass players have simply disappeared from many bistros or are there in the afternoons only. Göpf Egg thinks that this is because of the increase in police drink-driving clampdowns – “if you drink you don’t drive”. There is also the