He’s Definitely Good with Words

A personal rendezvous with the professional Scrabble scene at the global level

... 

“Ten years may have passed. I may not be the player I once was. But I still live for this.”

—Stefan Fatsis, Author of Word Freak

Boy Scout Royston Nazareth jingled the tile bag in his small fist as vigorously as he could, as if his fate in the game depended on it. Aqsa Ali and I met each other’s nervous glances as we looked to and fro from the Scrabble board in front of us to our shared rack of Z, Q, I, M, N, P, L, and at the studious seventh grader in a neatly pressed Boy Scout uniform who was seated in front of us. We knew too well that we were in the school’s Scrabble club for the simple reason that Amanda Lobo, an older Girl Scout, had told us, “All you need is a dictionary. And pretend you know a couple more words.” But we had no idea that we would be paired up against the boy who had the strongest vocabulary in the entire seventh grade. While I kept wondering why we took the “easy” way out by picking the Scrabble club over other scouting clubs at our school, our patrol leader paced down the room filled with scrabble-playing Girl and Boy Scouts towards us to inspect our progress in the game. Before I knew it, Aqsa grabbed the tile bag from Royston and emptied it across the board. Acting quickly, we built a crossword across the board...
with the first letter tiles we could find, much to Royston’s disgust. And from then on, we grew to become the kids with the tarnished reputation of being fake Scrabble players.

But while we played this board game in the most dishonorable way, in another corner of the world there existed—and still do exist—persons who play professional Scrabble at the international level. One evening after Mass, three years ago, my parents were talking to a couple they knew from their youth in Mumbai. Referring to their son Sherwin, my mother commented, “Scrabble is his life.” Once we were back home, I asked my mother what she meant by that. She then explained to me that the couple’s son Sherwin was at that time the National Scrabble Champion of India and Oman. Furthermore, he turned out to be the same little boy I chased around in the church’s parking lot in my childhood. Curious, I glanced at my old dusty Scrabble box and then, with repeated clicks of my mouse, got reacquainted with Sherwin through Facebook. While the uncovering of childhood memories is always pleasant, I wondered why any twenty-something would be serious about playing a game that was reserved for kids who did well at English in elementary school. Or, for that matter, retired grandparents who have nothing to do on a rainy day.

According to Stefan Fatsis, author of *Word Freak: Heartbreak, Triumph, Genius, and Obsession in the World of Competitive SCRABBLE Players* (2002), Scrabble is not a living-room game and one does not need to have a good command of English to do well at the game—it is much more than that. The Scrabble scene is fast growing with a new generation of players who are caught up in the politics of ascending the performance rankings, dictionary changes, and competitive tournaments. If not a physically exhausting sport, it is a mind sport in its own right, and surprisingly enough to the rest of us, it includes the web of big money and drugs. So what
makes this board game worth living for? What does it mean to be “one with the board”? I found my answers in the summer of 2012 in India when I visited Sherwin.

In April 2012, I happened to be in the Indian state of Goa—a coastal wonderland—for a retreat, when Sherwin was playing the two-day Annual Goa Scrabble Open, so I decided to go and watch him. To my utmost surprise, there were players from various age groups (Sherwin being one of the youngest), all of whom seemed relaxed and laid-back for a mentally exhausting tournament, where I expected to see much scratching of heads and gritting of teeth. To my surprise, at the end of a series of seven games for the day, these word nerds united to hit Goa’s famed casinos and beaches for “post-scrabble drinking-cum poker sessions,” not in the least bothered about their tiles and tribulations. When I asked Sherwin if he ever felt uncomfortable playing with people twice his age, he responded with a wave of his thin palm, “Of course not! In fact when I started playing Scrabble, I was thrilled to beat people much older than me!” Smirking at what can only be described as “serious fun,” I enquired of Sherwin how prepared he felt for the next day of mind-riveting games after much partying. He informed me that the morning of the “tourney,” as usual, would be vastly exciting—so much so that he would wake up without an alarm (personal interview).

Sherwin Rodrigues, as an Indian boy of ten from Oman, won his first tournament in 1999 when he created a new record by winning all seven games in the children’s category. By the age of twelve, he had begun beating the adults as well. He continued to bring fame and honor upon himself and his folks by becoming the youngest Scrabble champion of Oman at the oh-my-word age of thirteen. It was at this point that he realized he enjoyed the game and there was no turning back.
Contrary to what most people assume about professional Scrabble players—that they are highly standoffish word geeks—Sherwin happens to be a highly sociable and charming young man, with whom I would absolutely prefer spending evenings by the beach than drafting a set of building plans. As an architecture student, I was astonished to find out that this game of skill and strategy was invented by an out-of-work architect, Alfred Butts, in 1938. Looking back at how the game has evolved, it is far from the parlor game that gained so much popularity. Today, it is a game with limitless boundaries, which these professional Scrabble players continue to passionately tease. In fact, the top players at the American National Scrabble Championship ingest brain-stimulating drugs like dandelion root extract—anything to keep the big bucks coming. While Sherwin claims that he doesn’t use any of these drugs, he does admit that he could probably benefit from using some, as studying the insanely huge Scrabble Dictionary needs a little more than faith, trust, and pixie dust (personal interview).

Keeping this in mind, I recall one evening in May 2012 when Sherwin and I went out for dinner. It was the day after he earned second place in the National Scrabble Championship (NSC) in Mumbai after being the reigning Indian Scrabble Champion for four years. Over a few drinks and a couple of chicken wings, Sherwin directed all his frustration towards the lexicographers, who he feels make his life hard by constantly adding new words to the dictionary. While I tried my best to reassure him, I realized that his not being able to defend his title obviously came as a huge blow to him, as Scrabble is undoubtedly an inseparable part of him. Indeed, Sherwin has a disciplined lifestyle that revolves around the game, which he wouldn’t wish to adversely affect with drugs and the like.

The executive director of the American National Scrabble Association, John D. Williams, Jr., once rightly stated, “Top Scrabble players as a general rule have structured their lives in such
a way that they can devote three to four hours to Scrabble every day” (Word Wars, 2004). Noting this, Sherwin explained to me that it is indeed exasperating when his memory fails him more often than not: “It’s tough simply because the more words you study, the tougher it becomes to remember them all” (personal interview). But the optimistic King of Tiles that he is, Sherwin joked about how his name is an anagram of “WHINERS” when I pointed out to him that he whined way too much that night after his loss. Undeniably, Sherwin relies heavily on anagramming to practice for tourneys by using the daily challenges offered on wordplay websites like Aerolith and Jumbletime.

Before I knew it, the summer had to come to an end, and it was time for me to transform into my new avatar: a freshman in college. However, without Sherwin’s knowledge, I continued to keep track of his tournaments, his rankings, and his international trips, simply because I knew how important they were to him, and because I knew that these are simply part and parcel of the global web of the professional Scrabble scene. When college transformed me into someone who remained constantly occupied with studio projects, I wondered how now-23-year-old Sherwin coped with his Scrabble career throughout college. In answer to my letter in which I enquired about the same, Sherwin affirmed, “It never was awkward; my friends would come to cheer me on at tournaments too, and they were always supportive. I played tourneys all throughout college and absolutely enjoyed them. Sometimes my friends would read my name in the newspaper and they’d go like, “Dude, you’re in the Times of India,” so yeah, that was fun actually!” (personal interview).

Like most professional Scrabble players, Sherwin has found the right balance between a love affair with Scrabble and the normalcy of a life lived well. Considering himself a huge movie buff, he worked for Mumbai’s home video industry and has kept track of every thriller he comes
across. I, on the other hand, in order to further my research for this ethnography, recently watched the informative Scrabble documentary *Word Wars*. Interestingly enough, Sherwin—both a movie buff and a Scrabble superstar—has never watched this film.

Sure enough, this young man lingered on as an interesting subject in my study of the subculture of international professional Scrabble players, and so I looked forward to meeting him upon returning home for Christmas. One warm evening on Oman’s beaches with my man of seven letters, I discussed with Sherwin how Scrabble had impacted him. Since it was the last week of the year, Sherwin was in a reflective mood; he eagerly replied, “Playing Scrabble at the international level is great. You get to interact with people from all over the world and from completely different backgrounds. As for me, I love travelling, so visiting new places is something I always look forward to.” I looked back at him in awe, and with a knowing look he responded, “So 2013 is going to be an exciting year for Scrabble. I have the iGATE in January, the Open in Goa in April and then the NSC in May. The winner of the NSC will represent India at the WSC, which is most likely going to be held in Prague in November, so I’ve gotta work hard. Aside from these tourneys, I’m keen on attending the international tourneys in either Thailand or Sri Lanka” (personal interview).

I was impressed with how Sherwin, like most competitive Scrabble players, has his life figured out; I’ve learned that the game infuses them with a competency in the usage of tactics, trickery, and contextual wordplay. Mind blocks, brain freezes, losing streaks, and memory failures may deter them, but the sheer love of the game is what propels them. In addition to this, recognition as word-masters and the extravagant monetary prizes serve as other incentives. Unfortunately, however, the Indian government doesn’t recognize Scrabble as a sport, and Sherwin and his fellow teammates pay for themselves. According to most competitive Scrabble
players, their performance in the sport isn’t sufficient to sustain them—with the exception of Nigel Richards. Richards, the world’s long reigning Scrabble champion, has won most of the tournaments worldwide; his current Scrabble earnings amount to $194,376. Such is the seriousness of a board game that many of us deem less important than even chess.

But why professionally play a board game and run the potential risk of being labeled a geek, most of us wonder. To this Sherwin answered confidently, “What keeps me hooked on the game are the strategies involved: each move requires a lot of thinking, and choosing the most optimum play at times is quite tricky, which is what makes it very interesting. I like that luck is an important factor in Scrabble. If an average player gets lucky in one game, he has the chance to beat a top-level player. Endgame situations are challenging, and figuring out the best way to win is fun!” (personal interview).

Fast forward to May 2013: the present. It is my first summer of college, and I’m staying at my grandfather’s house in Mumbai. One evening, I walk over to the house next door, where Sherwin lives. I paint my nails and listen to Bruno Mars while I watch him concentrate and gear up for the upcoming WSC in Prague. Looking up must-see fall destinations in Prague on my iPad, I watch his eyebrows knit together as he quietly focuses on his laptop screen while playing the Internet Scrabble Club, a site he uses for Scrabble practice. Taking advantage of this, I open a new internet tab and begin to read up on him. “Once ranked 13th in the world, Rodrigues now stands 39th, and 2nd in India. He advises aspiring Scrabble players to learn high probability words, keep a cool temperament, and not fake words. The first strategy Rodrigues learned was rack balancing.” What about timekeeping, I wonder. Then he wouldn’t show up so late for our dinners, I think smugly. I continue reading. “His favorite word is NARTJIES—a small sweet orange; it earned him his highest word score to date, 257.” I laugh, for in my scouting days, I
barely earned a score of 48. Upon hearing me giggle, he spins around and immediately knows what I’ve been up to. He then asks me how we wish to spend the rest of that evening.

When it comes to Scrabble, it is important to distinguish between the grandmothers and the grandmasters. I can’t decide where I want my grandmaster to take me out for dinner. Sherwin suggests “Some Like it Hot,” a classy restaurant nearby. I grin. Such are the perks of going out with an equally classy professional Scrabble player. Of course, when it comes to real life, I let him have the last word.
Works Cited:

Watson, Mark. “Scrabble is like life: you've got to be in it to win it” (On My Mind). New Statesman 1996. Print.


