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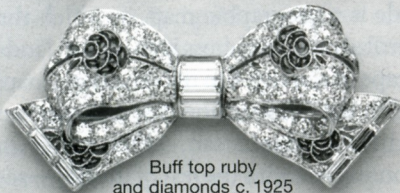
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ANNALS OF GAMES

# SPREADING THE WORD

*The new Scrabble mania.*

BY JUDITH THURMAN

The 2008 Big Apple Scrabble Tournament took place on a weekend in early October. Meg Wolitzer, the novelist, had signed up for the three-day event with her son, Charlie Panek, a thirteen-year-old eighth grader who was competing in Division 4, the lowest tier, but was holding his own against adult rivals. His mother, in Division 3, invited me to watch them play their final games, and we arrived at the venue, a loft on lower Fifth Avenue, a little before nine o'clock on Sunday morning. A light rain was falling, and the Avenue had been closed to traffic for the Pulaski Day parade. A high-school marching band from New Jersey, wearing Polish folk costumes, was disembarking from a tour bus with a clatter of drums and cymbals. "Uh-oh," Wolitzer said anxiously. "Oompah music—just what we needed."

Players were drifting in from a hearty breakfast at the Comfort Diner, on West Twenty-third Street, armed with leftover carbohydrates. The diner's owner, Ira Freehof, runs the tournament. His assistant director, Joel Sherman, a wiry bachelor from the Bronx known as G.I. Joel, is a legendary player and a former world champion who figures prominently in "Word Freak," a pungently written best-seller by Stefan Fatsis about the competitive Scrabble subculture. (Sherman's nickname refers to the soundtrack of gastrointestinal disturbances that often punctuate his games.) When Wolitzer introduced us, Sherman covered his ears with both hands and huddled near a wall. "I have sinusitis," he said. "You're distracting me. Go away." Later in the afternoon, we had a cordial chat about his role as the "official adjudicator," but he was hard to draw out. "Socializing is a challenge for a lot of us in the Scrabble community," John Chew, the tournament's Webmaster, noted tactfully. At that moment, we heard a scream, followed by a thud, and a young woman fell to

the floor, apparently having a convulsion. A few people rushed over to help, but she turned out to be convulsed, for obscure reasons, with hilarity.

The room was a bright rectangle crowded with tables arranged hierarchically. Wolitzer and her son found their places in "steerage," as she put it. Once the games began, a hush fell, and players hunched over their boards. The tension and the brainpower were palpable. Tiles rustled in cloth bags, and I watched as a top-seeded player laid "pealike," using all seven letters—a "bingo"—which his opponent countered with another bingo, "cr[e]jolise." Chew and his colleague Sherrie Saint John—anchors of a live Webcast—took the time to point out a few celebrities. Saint John whispered, "The guy with the red hair, taking notes and shaking his head at careless moves, is Adam Logan, a world champion. Like Joel, Adam doesn't talk much, but he went to Princeton at sixteen. Over there is Sal Piro, the president of the 'Rocky Horror Picture Show' fan club, playing with Frank Tangredi, who wrote an Off Broadway play. The handsome Latino guy to his right is Winter." Winter, a software engineer, just goes by one name. He is the subject of a documentary about his quest to visit every Starbucks on the planet. He told me, "I plot my itineraries to dovetail with Scrabble tournaments. So far, I've been to about eighty-nine hundred branches."

Wonkish misfits with awesome powers of recall, most of them male, seemed to dominate Division 1, and, during a break, I met John O'Laughlin, the baby-faced genius who designed Quackle—a Scrabble computer program that, Saint John said, "thinks almost like a human, which can't be said of everyone here." But Robin Pollock Daniel did not fit the mold. She is a chic blond Gestalt therapist from Toronto, and the highest-ranked female player in North America. While I was watching, she "bingoed out"

