

# COMPETITIVE WORD SQUARES

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The Pears Word Games Society (PWGS) recognizes five versions of the same basic game, though its members tend to restrict themselves to only one of these, the smallest. The National Puzzlers' League (NPL) has also played Competitive Word Squares but to a playing format that makes high scoring almost impossible.

In the PWGS format, two players in contention with each other draw individual grids with dimensions of 5x5. These grids are concealed from the opponent's gaze as each player takes turns to suggest letters until any 25 letters have been called. The resultant words created in both horizontal and vertical planes are scored as given below, and the person with the higher total is the winner. Only one word per line may be scored on the basis of one point per letter, but there is a bonus of an additional point for a five-letter word. Thus, a maximum of 60 points is possible. To illustrate the differences which can arise as each player puts his or her letters into the grids and the subsequent effect this has on their scores, compare those illustrated below. The winner, with 52 points, was Dawn Hawkins, whilst her opponent (me) scored a below-average 39 points. Our reference works were the Concise Oxford Dictionary supplemented by Pears Advanced Word-Puzzler's Dictionary.

S	M	A	C	K	6
T	I	L	L	A	4 (ill)
U	N	D	E	R	6
M	C	A	R	T	4 (cart)
P	E	R	K	S	6
6	6	3	6	6	

(add)

T	R	A	M	P	6
R	E	D	C	L	3 (red)
T	A	S	L	U	3 (tas)
C	R	E	A	M	6
K	I	N	K	S	6
X	4	3	2	6	

(rear) (ads) (la)

Scores in excess of 50 points are rare; the best result known to the PWGS is my defeat of a competent opponent by 56 points to her 42 points. In this instance, the basic reference was Funk & Wagnalls Standard Dictionary (F&W) supplemented by the English Dialect Dictionary (EDD). (We play, in the event of dispute, to a maximum of two dictionaries named in advance.) The EDD validated DREAP and ESTS which are, respectively, a variant form of DREEP and a dialect form of NESTS. Our international edition of F&W carried only DREEP and DREPE as two of the spellings of the British dialect verb "to drip", and, of course, -EST merely

as an invalid suffix. Here is the winning grid:

T	R	E	N	D
R	A	D	A	R
I	N	U	R	E
N	I	C	K	A
E	S	T	S	P

The five versions recognised by the PWGS, together with their optimum-word bonus scores and consequent maximum totals, are:

5x5	5-letter word scores	6 points	maximum	60 points
6x6	6-letter word scores	7 points	maximum	84 points
7x7	7-letter word scores	9 points	maximum	126 points
8x8	8-letter word scores	10 points	maximum	160 points
9x9	9-letter word scores	12 points	maximum	216 points

Obviously, the larger the grid the more difficult it becomes to gain a high percentage of the maximum score. This can be illustrated by a contest between two of the finest competitive word game players in the United Kingdom, the 1989 British Scrabble champion Russell Byers, and the chairman of the Nottingham Chapter of the PWGS Mrs Ivy Dixon-Baird. Their 9x9 game ended in this fashion:

P	A	R	A	C	H	U	T	E	12
A	V	E	N	U	E	S	U	S	7
R	E	S	I	L	I	E	N	T	12
A	R	C	D	T	L	R	X	I	3
G	S	I	G	H	D	X	M	M	4
R	A	N	C	H	M	K	I	A	5
A	C	D	N	P	O	I	N	T	5
P	A	E	X	P	A	N	D	E	6
H	E	A	V	I	N	E	S	S	12
12	5	7	2	4	4	4	5	12	

D	E	S	E	C	R	A	T	E	12
E	A	G	A	H	A	L	A	X	3
M	O	P	C	I	V	A	I	C	3
I	N	S	H	P	I	N	C	H	5
S	H	U	R	M	N	D	V	A	2
T	A	X	D	U	E	M	A	N	3
E	X	P	A	N	D	I	N	G	12
R	I	I	T	K	R	N	E	E	3
S	L	A	P	S	T	E	R	S	5
12	4	3	4	12	6*	4	4	12	

Played solely to the Concise Oxford Dictionary, Russell emerged the winner by 121 points to 109. The following points of interest are worthy of comment. Ivy gambled on the possibility that LAND-MINE might prove to be a single, unhyphenated word; it was not. But, unlike many other competitive word games, she was allowed to suggest an alternative word and consequently settled for the four points of LAND. Curiously, she overlooked the possibilities of RAVINED and merely scored six points for RAVINE.

The NPL format has any number of players each taking turns to nominate a letter for whatever size of grid is being utilized. Naturally, this becomes something of a lottery and mitigates against high scoring. Even as few as three players will make record-breaking a virtual impossibility, as control over the letter content is diminished.

Competitive Word Squares is a delightful game, and the 5x5 version is ideal for a pleasing quarter of an hour's word battle. Tied scores are comparatively rare and a good average is in the 45 to 48 point range. My fellow players in the Scarsdale Chapter of the PWGS regularly play three or four games of the 5x5 rather than progress to the larger versions. Doubtless, once one of us makes the magic 60 points then we will set our targets higher, but, will a **Word Ways** reader be the first to gain the maximum? And, who will set the standards for the other versions? Watch this space.

### **A CALL FOR HELP**

*Ben Blankenship, 2675 Meadow Glen Drive, San Ramon CA 94583 (415-820-7595) is looking for a linguistically-oriented programmer to help him modify and improve software to transliterate Latin stelae (wall inscriptions) attributed to the 2nd-century B.C. Umbrian dramatist Plautus. Although Plautus did not deliberately seek to conceal his messages, they are written in a highly-abbreviated style requiring both historical insight and cryptanalytic skill to determine the underlying Latin text. After four years of work, Blankenship has decoded 97 per cent of a 660-character stele, and has a longer one awaiting similar analysis. He is considering awarding a \$3000 prize for the best decipherment of this. The editor will furnish descriptive material prepared by Blankenship to anyone contemplating this project.*