

EASTER ISLAND SCRABBLE CHAMPIONSHIPS

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Every eleven years a unique event takes place on an isolated outcrop in the eastern Pacific. With its mysterious ancient monoliths brooding over the barren landscape, Rapanui, as it is known to the original inhabitants, seems an ideal location for the world's most unusual Scrabble meeting.

The first Easter Island tournament was held in 1958; although gaining little publicity, it attracted a field of top exponents from around the globe. Subsequent events have been held hendecennially and continue to draw word freaks from all over, including (allegedly) a non-Terran in 1969 and an android in 1980. Neither of them met with much success.

Why is this congregation of Scrabblers unique? Apart from the venue and the diversity of entrants, there is the format. Each participant must play seven games a day for a week, a complete round robin for the fifty competitors. Games may last up to an hour, and the 'Double Challenge' rule applies; however, only one word may be challenged at a time. The references used for adjudication are Webster's Second and Third Editions, the Oxford English Dictionary and the English Dialect Dictionary.

This year's Easter Island tourney was held in the last week of March. It featured an amazing final round clash between Professor Lewis Shilbut, of BENZHYDROXYQUIN fame (see "Higher-Scoring Scrabble" in the November 1979 *Word Ways*) and the unbeaten 1991 titleholder, the enigmatic, stateless Doctor Dromos Palin. Incidentally, Shilbut distinguished himself by winning the 1980 event, along the way baffling his opposition with such oddities as SKYWASH, UNROCOCO, KWAZOKU, OBRIGDT, NESTALIQ, EXRADII, OLDIOID and SQWUG. His most remarkable achievement though was when he added PUDDING to JACK already on the board, to make JACKPUDDING, with the G in front of GEM to make GGEM, a dialect spelling of 'game'.

The incredible game between these two Scrabblemasters started with Palin putting down TANALUM. Shilbut admitted later he thought it was a word, but must have been getting mixed up with TANTALUM. Anyway he let it go and played AMANITA directly underneath to take an early lead:

T A N A L U M
A M A N I T A

The doctor responded immediately with PIRATES right under AMANITA, forming seven acceptable three-letter words:

T A N A L U M
A M A N I T A
P I R A T E S

The professor couldn't believe his luck when he found ENDLESS on his rack. But where to go? He wasn't happy about pluralizing TANALUM, or NAR for that matter, although he would have risked it. Imagine his astonishment when he realized he could place the word under PIRATES to make a 7-by-4 rectangle:

T A N A L U M
A M A N I T A
P I R A T E S
E N D L E S S

What could possibly top that? The answer wasn't long in coming as Palin played ETIRACA directly above TANALUM, creating some mighty peculiar-looking five-letter words as a consequence:

E T I R A C A
T A N A L U M
A M A N I T A
P I R A T E S
E N D L E S S

Now the professor had a real problem. Which one to challenge? He was unfamiliar with ETIRACA, but it looked strange enough to be right, and he wasn't sure about INARD, RANAL or CUTES either. Wait a minute -- wasn't RANAL something to do with the plant order Ranales (or frogs, perhaps), and wasn't CUTES the plural of 'cutis', a skin layer? After weighing everything up, Shilbut challenged INARD. Bad luck -- it's a dialectic form of 'inward'. He therefore had to miss a turn and await the doctor's next move.

At this stage, Palin had well and truly grabbed the psychological advantage with a lead of 283 to 190, and another turn to come. Unmoving, intent only on the game, he concentrated all his energies on the tiles before him -- AEFLRTU, probably seeing FAULTER, REFAULT (?), and, of course, TEARFUL. What about FLAUTER? Suddenly his eyes lit up for just a moment as he rearranged the tiles and played out REFUTAL on top of ETIRACA for a further 122 points:

R E F U T A L
E T I R A C A
T A N A L U M
A M A N I T A
P I R A T E S
E N D L E S S

His opponent was naturally flabbergasted. Now he was faced with another dilemma, or more accurately a trilemma, or even a quadrilemma. Shilbut said later he didn't much like the look of any of the new words except REFUTAL, RETAPE and ETAMIN. The others seemed plausible enough, but incredibly the one he chose to challenge was ACUTES. When asked about it afterwards, the professor said he had had a mental block in the heat of the moment. He felt a complete fool when he twigged that ACUTES are simply

acute accents as in French words like *dégagé*.

So Shilbut missed another turn and it was Palin's move again. He stared impassively at his seven tiles for a full five minutes and then, almost inevitably, played them all out right under ENDLESS. The word completing the 7-by-7 square was DESYSTE, with the second S being a blank tile:

R E F U T A L
E T I R A C A
T A N A L U M
A M A N I T A
P I R A T E S
E N D L E S S
D E S Y S T E

The professor didn't appear so worried this time. He considered the words. DESYSTE could be an old spelling of 'desist', he mused, and RETAPED, ETAMINE, TALITES and ACUTEST were probably all right. FLNARD/S sounded vaguely familiar -- a type of fish, or a bird perhaps? No, that was a 'winard'. How about URANALY? Something rang a bell here, too -- uranyl, uranaly(sis) -- what on earth was it? But LAMASSE, ah yess, he positively knew that was wrong, because he'd had those very letters before and studied them in depth at his leisure. The word wasn't in Webster's or the English Dialect Dictionary, he knew, but it was in the Oxford as an old variant of Lammas, the 1st of August, observed as a harvest festival in the early English church. It had to be capitalized (he was absolutely certain it did) so LAMASSE was the word he challenged.

When the challenge slip came back with a cross beside LAMASSE Shilbut breathed a sigh of relief. His quiet jubilation was short-lived. Palin raised his arm and uttered the only word he spoke throughout the entire game -- 'Appeal!' An adjudicator came over and was handed back the challenge slip, with some additional writing on it. After a tense minute or so he came hurrying back muttering apologies. The word LAMASSE was now ticked! The faintest trace of a smile flickered briefly across Palin's face. Shilbut studied the fateful notation written on the slip in a strange hand:

Lammas c1290 quote Oxford

The rest of the game proceeded in a more conventional manner. The professor was shattered, but he still managed to gain some late consolation with QIBL1, and then OXHUVUD using the second blank, before his opponent went out with DELFIED. The final score was 777 to 412.

Shilbut said afterwards he felt as if he had been thoroughly psyched out, brainwashed by a superior mind. The Oxford does indeed record LAMASSE in uncapitalized form in a c1290 citation, which made it allowable under the tournament rules. The professor swears it wasn't there when he carried out his previous research

into this particular letter-combination. On checking further, he also found that he could have successfully challenged TANALUM, ETIRACA, FINARD(S), URANAL, LAMASS or URANALY. That didn't improve his humour either.

So Doctor Dromos Palin won his 49th straight game of the tournament, crowning it indelibly with a 49-letter 7-by-7 square. The feat is unparalleled in Scrabble history and will probably never be repeated. And what of Doctor Palin, if that really was his name? No one knows for sure how, or even if, he left Easter Island. He didn't attend the prize-giving ceremony, and was last seen standing among the massive statued heads on the southern slopes of Rapanui just before sunset. Local children said the twilight made him appear to glow with a vibrant yellow aura, and he was holding something up to his mouth that looked like a corn-cob.

The Scrabble world has been left in a state of stunned admiration. We can only wonder where the mysterious Master Scrabbler came from and where he has gone. There is already much speculation on the possibility of a reappearance at the next event in the year 2002. We shall just have to wait and see what happens, won't we?

THE WONDER OF LANGUAGE

We take language for granted -- yet it borders on the miraculous. As children, we learn the rules of language without effort -- yet these rules are so complex that grammarians have never succeeded in codifying them fully. There are so many possible grammatically-legal sentences that it is highly likely each sentence of 20 or more words you speak or write is unique -- it has never been expressed before. In fact, civilization as we know it is inconceivable without language.

These are some of the messages in Richard Lederer's latest book, The Miracle of Language (Pocket Books, 1991; \$20 in hardcover). He has the rare gift of viewing language in general (and English in particular) with a childlike sense of awe. Besides general philosophy, he gives thumbnail biographies of seven "literary artists who, sculpting significance from air ... changed the world by changing the word": William Shakespeare, Samuel Johnson, Lewis Carroll, Mark Twain, Emily Dickinson, T.S. Eliot and George Orwell. The latter third of the book consists of quotations mined from Bartlett and elsewhere on books, libraries, poetry, and words, and suggestions to the reader to hone his skills by letter-writing and poetry-writing.