

# WORD VALUE

Local students put Scrabble skills to national test today

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## GRAYED OUT

TODAY: Some sun, then cloudy. High 50-55. Low 38-43.  
TOMORROW: Rain. Cooler. High 46-51. Low 42-47.

HIGH TIDE: 6:37 a.m. 7:24 p.m.  
SUNRISE: 5:53 SUNSET: 7:33  
FULL REPORT: PAGE D8

## These kids know the value of words

By Joseph P. Kahn

GLOBE STAFF

At 9 o'clock this morning, 200 students from around the country will file into the Hynes Convention Center, plunk themselves down in front of game boards, set their clocks, grab their score pads and letter tiles, and attempt to out duel one another at a game largely played for fun around the family dining-room table.

For the fourth year in a row, the National School Scrabble Championship will be decided in Boston. The day long event, open to children in grades 5 through 8, will be intensely competitive, according to local players who've been through it before. But well worth the effort.

At the end of the day, one pair of teammates will go home with \$5,000 in pocket. Others will depart with dashed hopes and arcane words such as "jupe," "xylem," and "zax" dancing before their tired eyes. Most will spell the experience F-U-N, possibly with a side of R-E-L-I-E-F that it's over.

"It gets pretty quiet in there," says Mohini Srivastav, a seventh-grader at the John D. Runkle School in Brookline whose team finished in the top 25 a year ago. "Everyone's focused on the game."

Will Jackson, 13, Srivastav's classmate and playing partner, who also competed in last year's tournament, says competitors occasionally burst into tears when things go badly.

"There's a lot of tension in the room, a lot," says Jackson, who, like many other competitors, got hooked on tournament Scrabble through an older sibling who played competitively.

Does Jackson get butterflies before a big match?

"Not really," he says with a shrug. Although if he did admit to having any, he'd probably prefer the term "angst," a more playable word under the circumstances.

Immune to competitive pressure or



L<sub>1</sub>

E<sub>1</sub>

T<sub>1</sub>

V<sub>4</sub>

A<sub>1</sub>

R<sub>1</sub>

S<sub>1</sub>

I<sub>1</sub>

T<sub>1</sub>

Y<sub>4</sub>



E<sub>1</sub>

R<sub>1</sub>

M<sub>3</sub>

E<sub>1</sub>

N<sub>1</sub>

PHOTOS BY JONATHAN WIGGS/GLOBE STAFF

Will Jackson (top) and Max Pohlman, seventh-graders at the John D. Runkle School in Brookline, will participate in the National School Scrabble Championship today.

# Students hope preparation spells success at Scrabble competition

not, members of the Runkle club - along with representatives from nearly two dozen other schools and libraries from around Massachusetts - will be testing their wordplay skills against some stiff competition. Scrabblers are headed to the Hub from California, Oregon, Tennessee, and Georgia, among other states. They will have survived regional tournaments and be battle tested.

On a recent fine spring day, therefore, while their schoolmates cavort on the playground outside, Srivastav and Jackson are stuck indoors going rack to rack against a pair of formidable, and familiar, opponents.

One is Max Pohlman, a Runkle seventh-grader and tournament veteran who describes himself as "viciously competitive."

The other is Jackson's mother, Susan Beebe, a Quincy pediatrician and coach of the Runkle squad, who is substituting for Pohlman's regular partner, off playing sports somewhere.

"Lots of kids drop by to play casual games," explains Beebe, who holds weekly practice sessions throughout the school year. "But some are more into it than others, obviously."

To simulate tournament play, the Runkle teams are using a digital chess clock - as in the tournament, each side has 22 minutes to complete all its moves - and official scoring sheets. Exceeding the 22-minute limit incurs a penalty of 10 points per minute. (The clock is stopped for word challenges.) In the actual championship, teams will play six games over eight hours, with first place going to the team with the most wins. If two or more teams are tied at the end, the winner is determined by combined point differential between its scores and those of its opponents.

Playing quickly and confidently, Pohlman and Beebe take an early lead against Jackson and Srivastav with a 79-point bingo (playing all seven tiles at once) on DRIFTER. It is a lead they will not relinquish. However, as Beebe emphasizes the goal of practice is not necessarily victory but learning to playing rapidly, strategically, and creatively.

Knowing when to gamble on playing or challenging a word of dubious legitimacy is also part of game strategy. When Jackson and Srivastav put down OILIEST, a potential 70-point move, Beebe and Pohlman immediately challenge STOY, a downward word created by the play. Sorry, not in the Official Scrabble Dictionary. Ditto for BEEBIES, another play by Jackson and Srivastav that's swiftly challenged and rejected.

QAT works just fine, however, as do TAV, AG, DUI, and FEZ, words that few seventh-graders carry in their working vocabularies.

The final score of 412-307 is less impressive than the 30 minutes taken to complete the game. How do they learn to play like this?

"I started working with timers and memorization in second grade," says Pohlman. "Plus I play a lot of Scrabble online."

"The first year we trained was the hardest," says Srivastav, whose older sister has also played in the national tournament. "Now it's more fun because it comes more easily."

Asked if their Scrabble obsession seems geeky to their friends, the players nod.

"But," interjects Pohlman, "it doesn't hurt my reputation, because I also play sports."

When he's playing Scrabble a lot, says Jackson, "I'll use irregular words like 'irk,' and my friends will go, 'Huh?'"

Contrary to popular assumptions, says Beebe, young Scrabble aces are not necessarily lexical geniuses. Memorizing lists of obscure words can be useful, she says, but other talents come into play, too.

"It's really more a game of visual and spatial skills," says Beebe. "You can be bad at English and language arts and good at Scrabble." Her kids aren't competitive spellers, she points out, but most are good at math and have grown up playing board games with parents and siblings.

Started in the Boston area in 1991, the school Scrabble program has more than a million participants in 20,000 schools throughout the United States, according to the National Scrabble Association website. The person most responsible for promoting it locally is Ben Greenwood, a former Runkle teacher and national Scrabble champ (he won the intermediate division title in 1998) who's now an educational consultant to the Scrabble association. Greenwood says he got a "phenomenal" response from students and teachers when he began using Scrabble in the classroom a decade ago.

"It's hard to get kids that age to pick up a dictionary, but kids in my classroom were fighting over it," recalls Greenwood, who'll serve as tournament director at the Hynes event.

In 1999, Greenwood organized the first statewide school championship, in Springfield. Four years later, the first national tournament was held in Boston. Contestants this year will get to meet current and former Scrabble champs and attend a screening of "Akeelah and the Bee," a movie about an 11-year-old spelling whiz opening later this month.

"It's become a really strong community," says Greenwood, noting that unlike competitive chess, tournament Scrabble requires teamwork and an element of luck to prevail. In contrast to spelling bees, he adds, no contestant gets eliminated by a single loss or misstep, making the experience less stressful than single-elimination competitions.

"If you talk to these kids, afterwards," says Greenwood, "they'll tell you what a great play they made or what a tremendous match they had. That's what sticks with them. It's only later that you find out they never actually won a single game."

## 'The first year we trained was the hardest. Now it's more fun.'

MOHINI SRIVASTAV,  
*student Scrabble player*