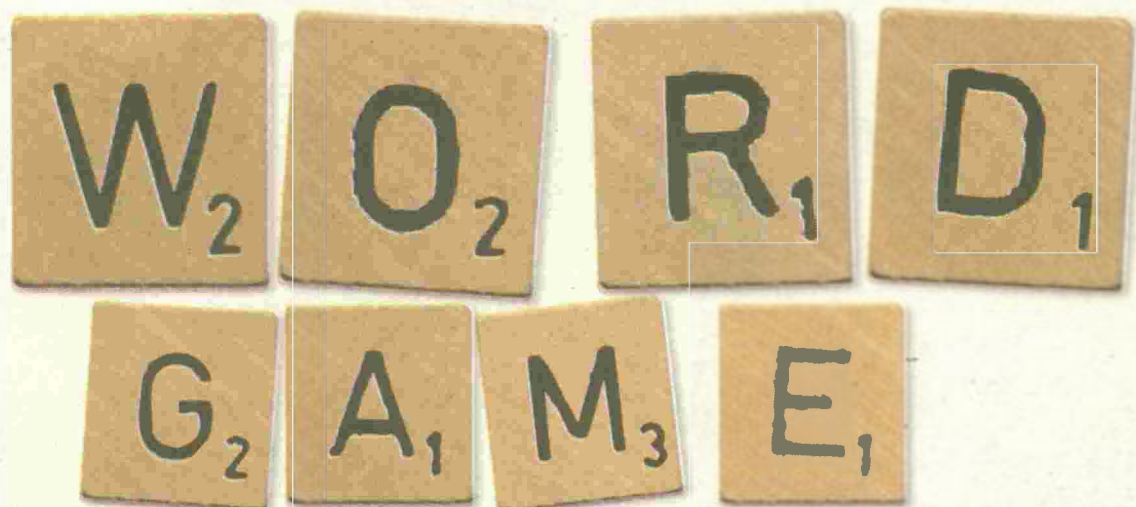


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INSPIRES A TOWN

Aneeta Sundararaj learns how a small community's encouragement has led four boys to qualify for the World Youth Scrabble Championship

FOUR boys sit at a table. On the table are two Scrabble boards. Each boy waves his right hand, stops then holds it out. Two have made a fist and two have not. They switch seats so the ones who made fists now sit facing each other. One boy from each team then reaches into a bag and picks out Scrabble tiles which are placed on the rack in front of him. Their opponents do the same and a new game of Scrabble begins.

Don't dismiss this elementary way of organising teams as child's play. In fact, these four boys — Yoshent Subramaniam, 16, Keeran Bathmunaban, 13, Azhaamirul Warno, 16, and Tinash Rawindrak, 16 — have now qualified to compete at the 2015 World Youth Scrabble Championship which will be held in Perth, Australia from Oct 31 to Nov 2.

What emerges from the story of these Scrabblers, as these boys are now called in their school (SMK Sungai Pelek in Sel-



Kanaka remembers playing Scrabble with her siblings when they were children.

PICTURES BY ROHANIS SHUKRI

 A close-up photograph of hands playing Scrabble on a board. The tiles are in focus, showing letters and numbers.

SCRABBLE TIPS AND TRICKS

MARTIN TEO, 28, the tournament director at the upcoming World Youth Scrabble Championship in Perth, Western Australia shares a few tips and tricks he keeps in mind when playing Scrabble competitively.

- Every Scrabble player should learn the fundamentals of playing the game which include becoming familiar with the 2- and 3-letter wordlists.
- Keep track of your time to avoid exceeding it lest you incur a penalty.
- Learn what he calls Simple Bingo Stems. For example, even when you have RETINA on your rack,

the last letter can help you form various combinations of words. For example, RETINA plus R gives you words like RETRAIN, TERRAIN and TRAINER.

- Only play words that you're sure of.
- Maximise your scores at each turn.
- Keep track of your scores to know if you're ahead or behind your opponent.
- Use tiles like Blanks and S wisely.
- Draw tiles while holding the tile bag above your eye-level.
- If you have too many of the same tiles, exchange them with others, especially if you cannot form any word.
- Most importantly, have fun.

angor), is an inspiring tale which includes the Scrabblers, former Scrabblers, their teachers, families and, indeed, the community of Sungai Pelek.

COWBOY TOWN

It begins with the prime motivator of the Scrabble Club in the school, the teacher adviser the Scrabblers fondly call Teacher Kanaka, 48-year-old Kanakaletchumi Kulandasamy.

"You know," says Kanaka, Keeran's exuberant mother, "I'm from Cheras. Many years ago, when I knew I was going to get married and move to Sungai Pelek, I didn't even know where it was. My father helped me look it up in the Modern Atlas and I told him he was sending me to a swampy area. This was 1992. And, really, when I first arrived, it was like a cowboy town. No modern buildings and at 8

o'clock in the morning, people would be sweeping the roads. The shutters were all wooden, you know. Still, my father told me that this was an upcoming area. Now we have the Sepang circuit nearby and also the airport."

Kanaka remembers playing Scrabble with her siblings when they were children. Her father bought them a set as a gift for doing well in school. "But we were only allowed to play during the holidays. Not like these children. They play all the time."

In mock anger, she adds: "You know, sometimes, I have to beg these children to stop playing Scrabble. We have chores. But look at them. They can't get their hands off the tiles."

NEED FOR EXPOSURE

The Scrabble Club in SMK Sungai Pelek



was started more than 10 years ago. One of its more prominent members is a former Scrabbler, Jivan Subramaniam, 22. This son of a lorry driver and housewife admits that he was first interested in qualifying for competitions because of the prizes offered.

The inter-school competitions Jivan joined soon led to exposure to competition at a national level. Although he didn't win, there was an unexpected realisation on his part. "I couldn't understand how I could lose to a 10-year-old boy," says Jivan. "I was 14. We used to think it was just a board game. But I saw that these city boys got training and exposure. I knew we needed more of this."

That desire for exposure, though, costs money.

"To charter a bus to take us to KL and back costs about RM600," explains Kanaka. "When our renewal fee is only RM15, and after buying all the Scrabble boards and maintaining them, our funds are already depleted."

At one point, managing the Scrabble Club got a little too much for Kanaka as she felt that she was doing everything with hardly any support or encouragement. "I was so exasperated," she confides. "So, in 2009, I decided to back out from being the teacher adviser for the club."

RAISING FUNDS

By the end of that year, though, things changed. Jivan, who was then in Form Four, approached Kanaka. He brought along other devoted Scrabblers like his brother, Jeihin, 21, and friends, Prema Maniam, 20, and Geetah Maniam, 22.

Shares Kanaka: "They said to me, 'Please be the teacher adviser for our Scrabble club again.' I wasn't keen. No one was doing anything. But then Jivan said, 'At this point, Kanaka stops talking and wipes away tears. She regains her

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The Scrabble Club in SMK Sungai Pelek was started more than 10 years ago.

composure and continues, 'I give you my word, Teacher, that we will do the work. We will help find the money.'

True to his word, from then on Jivan and his friends began to take a far more active role in managing and maintaining the Scrabble Club. His interest in the society remains even though Jivan and his friends are now pursuing their undergraduate studies in medicine and pharmacy respectively. They all return to their alma mater on a regular basis to help raise funds and train the new generation of Scrabblers at SMK Sungai Pelek.

Initially, Kanaka was reluctant to let any student undertake fundraising activities such as going door to door to seek donations as she feared for their safety. However, the children were determined and in the process showed their entrepreneurial spirit. To their credit, every year since they started, Jivan, his friends and all those who have followed in their footsteps have consistently collected the requisite money to go for their competitions.

There have been some mishaps during these fundraising activities. One boy fell into an open manhole, a girl was chased by dogs, and the children found that owners of bigger houses tended to donate lesser money. Sometimes, the house owners would send their maids to say they weren't in or older folk would pretend they couldn't hear.

There's one lane, though, that the children now call The Lottery Road.

"When we went to the first house," shares Varma, a current Scrabblers, "the

lady said to wait and she'd come back. She took a long time and we were sure she wasn't going to help us. When she came out, she gave us RM20. We were quite happy. Then she said, no. She was giving us RM20 per head. That was RM60 in total. From another house, we got RM50. In one day, we got almost RM300."

LUCK ON THEIR SIDE

The success of these children at both Scrabble and their studies hasn't gone unnoticed. Indeed, principal Muskamal Mohamad Jonan, 56, who was once a student at SMK Sungai Pelek, is enormously proud of their achievements.

"We're a day school," he says. "For us, most of the funds come from donations or the PIBG. We need to generate funds to send this team to Perth. It's not a question of whether they win. It's about the experience and exposure."

Another teacher adviser, Mageswari Munusamy, 45, points out that by playing Scrabble, the children have also learnt something about themselves. For example, Prema and her friends would typically speak in their mother-tongue, Tamil. They remained introverts for a long while. Today, Prema is able to give motivational talks in English to the next generation of Scrabblers at SMK Sungai Pelek.

Azhaamirul speaks for the four boys bound for Perth when he says: "We're very proud to represent Malaysia." A pause, and Yoshent chips in: "If Lady Luck has something in store for us, then we'll have a good set of tiles on the rack."

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