

Men of letters

Montrealers prepare for World Scrabble Championships

Joel Wapnick flips the leather cover of his personal digital assistant. A list of words runs down the left side of the screen. He scrolls through them, muttering the letters quietly, as his opponent, Adam Logan, prepares for the game. "These are the words I don't use as much," Wapnick explains. There are 30,000 of them.

They're words found in the British Official Scrabble Words but not in the Official Scrabble Players Dictionary, the word bible used in North America, Thailand and Israel. They're usually verboten at the Montreal Scrabble Club's weekly meetings. But tonight, in preparation for this week's World Scrabble Championships, a few club members are allowing entries from the British Official Scrabble Words as well as the Official Scrabble Players Dictionary, for a total of 108,225 words.

Wapnick, Logan and 1995 world champion Dave Boys are among seven Canadians who will travel to London to vie for the crowning title.

Logan and Wapnick's game begins tamely with POW. I expect more from a former world champion (Wapnick) and a Canadian champion (Logan).

Then the game moves quickly to KILORAD and MISTLETOE. In three turns, each has scored more than 100 points.

By 7:30 p.m., more than 10 games are under way. Two rows of tables joined end-to-end trisect Trudeau Park's Chalet No. 1. Coffee brews at the end of the room; children's paintings and Halloween decorations hang on the walls.

Every Wednesday night, this Cote St. Luc daycare is converted into a Scrabble haven for players of all levels. There is little noise in the room apart from players calling out words and points, and the chit-chit sound of plastic tiles tumbling over one another as the bag is mixed.

MAQUI. DAG. UNAI. SPROG. DAW. PEH. Wapnick and Logan's game is a dense tangle of letters.

Two- and three-letter words are the foundation of any serious Scrabble player's vocabulary. They can be played parallel to others, forming multiple words in a single turn and racking up many more points.

Wapnick, 59, leans over a photocopied sheet and scratches off played letters. Advanced players count letters much the same way as blackjack players count cards.



CREDIT: PIERRE OBENDRAUF, THE GAZETTE In competitive Scrabble, top players sometimes don't know the meaning of all the words they play - but they know they are good words.

"They know who has what letters and can figure out statistically what they will get," said Sary Karanofsky, the club's co-

director. Knowing the bag is full of vowels or that eight of the 12 Es are gone midway through a game allows a player to adjust strategy.

Logan played in his first North American Championship when he was 9. Eleven years later, he won it. He has won the Canadian title twice and finished in the Top 10 at the worlds four out of five times.

"For the last few years, he's been playing in the U.K., generally terrorizing the poor British players," says John Chew III, director of the Toronto Scrabble Club and the webmaster and assistant director for the worlds.

When the bag is empty, Logan, 30, leads with 455 points to Wapnick's 361. In his last turn, Logan plays all seven tiles in his rack - a Scrabble bingo and an extra 50 points, taking him to 547.

"I beat him the week before and he was out for revenge," Wapnick said. "He got it."

A later game pits Wapnick against David Boys, a 1995 world champion. The board



they're playing on rests on a faux green marble disk. It's emblazoned with plaques from the 2003 World Scrabble Championship in Kuala Lumpur, where Boys and Wapnick ranked 16 and 17, respectively.

Their game takes on an organic shape: a dense knob of letters anchors branches of words to the board's centre. Boys, 41, hunches his shoulders, crosses his arms and tucks his hands under his armpits when he looks for words. REJOICE appears magically on his rack.

When the last letter is pulled from the bag, both players have nearly the same letters on their racks. Boys finds a space for CESTOIDS. "At their level, they both know the dictionary back and forth. It becomes luck," said Bernard Gotlieb, the club's founder. CESTOIDS might be a word, but Boys admits he has no idea what it means.

In the weeks before the world championships, Wapnick, an associate professor at McGill University's School of Music, spent evenings strolling through Westmount rehearsing words. This will be his eighth worlds. He also studies a book of anagrams organized by a word's vowels.

Logan uses a software program called LeXpert to study anagrams and hooks - letters that can be added to played words.

In London, Wapnick will continue his study walks. Logan, a researcher at the Centre de recherches mathematiques at the Universite de Montreal, prefers to be a tourist.

"It's one of my favourite cities. I'll visit the bookstores and go to some

concerts if there are any good ones," he said. "I might drop in on a few mathematicians I know."

Boys, a new father, flew over last week with his family.

Who's going to win? Everyone is talking about Nigel Richards, who's been left off the New Zealand team for years because he lives in Malaysia.

"His game is terrific," Wapnick says. Richards is the "player to watch," according to Logan.

But a final between Logan and Richards would be a "Scrabble fan's dream," Chew said.



CREDIT: PIERRE OBENDRAUF, THE GAZETTE

Wapnick at the Montreal Scrabble Club. He's headed for the World Scrabble Championships in London.

Tips From the Pros

The World Scrabble Championship is held every two years. This year, it's being held in London, England, Nov. 16-20. First prize is \$15,000 U.S. (wscgames.com)

Learn your two- and three-letter words.

Study short words that use high scoring tiles (J, Q, X, Z), like QI, QAT, and JEUX.

Don't waste an S or a blank on a low-scoring word. A well played S may be worth eight to 10 points and a blank more than 25.

Play letters worth four or more points on premium squares

- those that double or triple that letter's value.

Don't leave a vowel next to a double- or triple-letter score. Your opponent might play a valuable consonant.

Balance your rack when you play. Don't get stuck with a rack full of vowels or consonants. Play a lower-scoring word if it puts you in a better position for the next turn.

