

Lauderhill Scrabble Club is Not for Novices

By John Thomason
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The players enter Lauderhill's Veterans Park about 6:45 on a Wednesday night. For the next three hours, they'll drop everything to focus all of their brainpower on 100 tiles, extracted from a sewn velvet bag and strategically placed on a 15-by-15-inch game board.

They'll try to balance their racks with the right amount of vowels and consonants to facilitate an easy bingo. They'll try not to open up a triple-word line, and if their opponent does, they'll be the first to take advantage of it. They'll challenge your dubious word.

Such is the vocabulary of Scrabble, one of the world's most popular board games. The Lauderhill club is one of two in Broward County; the other meets at 6:15 p.m. Thursdays at the Fort Lauderdale Bridge Club. But this one is not recommended for beginners or, in Scrabble terminology, "living-room players."

The Lauderhill club boasts some of the finest Scrabblers in the world — three in the national top 50, in fact.

Club director Sandee Bloom recommends the Fort Lauderdale club for novices and beginners. At her club, if you're not ready to play esoteric words such as CRWTH, GJETOST and ZAX at the drop of a tile, you might have a tough time.

"Fifteen years ago the Sun-Sentinel did a story on us, and people came out of the woodwork thinking they could play," Bloom said, sporting a shirt with the letters SANDEE stitched like pink Scrabble tiles. "They were kitchen-type players and were indignant, saying things like, 'That shouldn't be a word!'"

But with the rise of Internet Scrabble and the availability of The Official Scrabble Players Dictionary, Bloom said the materials are there for anyone to excel at the game.

An above-average living-room player myself, I was walking into a den of many lions recently in Lauderhill. They included Ian Weinstein, fourth-ranked in the country, 39th-ranked Steve Polatnick and 49th-ranked Trip Payne, who achieved local celebrity status for being featured in the crossword-puzzle documentary *Wordplay*, released in 2006.

The players are jovial and unpretentious, ready to welcome a newbie like me into the nondescript room in the Veterans Park Community Center.

There's Scrabble paraphernalia everywhere: a cork board bursting with news clippings about the game, a tote bag from the 2000 national tournament, hand-sewn bags to carry materials, and luxurious, personalized, \$150-valued boards, most of which were made by veteran local player Ossie Mair.

My opponent in the first game is Bloom. I'm trying to be a reporter between turns, but I quickly learn that some players like it quiet. Marty Rosen, an expert playing beside us, shushes me while he thinks of a move, then seconds later says, "OK, you can talk now, she's playing," referring to his opponent, Melissa Edelson.

The ages of the Lauderhill regulars generally range from their mid-20s to Lya Korda, who will turn 87 on the Fourth of July. There's also no one type of Scrabble player.

"People are so nice and so diverse," Bloom said. "There are all different occupations and ages here. Most of us become friends outside of Scrabble. We're like a family."

A family that has no mercy. I'm clobbered in my first two games, with Bloom laying down two bingos (playing all seven tiles on her rack): UNSOILED and WALTZED, the latter a 96-point game-clincher.

I get taken to school in game two by Shereen E. Weinstein but rebound by handily defeating my opponent in the third and last game of the night.

In that game, I had my first moment in which I felt I truly belonged. I played a word that I knew but my opponent didn't: ZAIRE. Proper nouns aren't allowed, but ZAIRE is playable because it's also a monetary unit in Zaire.

That was the rush I needed to solidify my place there. They said they hoped I'd come back again. It'll be difficult to keep me away.

For information about the Lauderhill Scrabble Club, call Bloom at 954-726-6449. For the Fort Lauderdale club, call Tim Wise at 954-942-6319.

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