



NASPA Bulletin

The monthly news bulletin of the North American SCRABBLE® Players Association

June 2010: Vol. 2, No. 2

Persons of the Year

by NASPA AB Members

The NASPA Advisory Board is pleased to announce their selection of the 2009 Persons of the Year. This is our first award, following the National SCRABBLE Association (NSA)'s 20-year tradition of recognizing one or two members of the SCRABBLE community for what they have contributed to us all. This year's honorees are John D. Williams, Jr., Executive Director of the NSA, and Jane Ratsey Williams, the NSA's Director of Operations, who oversaw the development of an official club and tournament organization and many of the hallmarks of SCRABBLE culture that we take for granted today.

When John and Jane were notified that they had been selected by the NASPA AB for the 21st annual Person of the Year award, they both had the same reaction. It was something along the lines of, "Are you sure? Shouldn't it be a prominent player or director?"

"It was an obvious choice as far as I was concerned," said NASPA Copresident John Chew, who made the nomination. "Looking back over the last couple of decades, John and Jane's contribution to our game through their National SCRABBLE Association has been crucial to its development."

It all began when freelance writer and media/marketing consultant John D. Williams Jr. was asked by game manufacturer Coleco, if he wanted to run what was then called SCRABBLE Brand Crossword Game Players, Inc. as an independent organization, soon to be renamed the National SCRABBLE® Association. He decided to give it a try.

"It was a pretty chaotic time in the world of club and tournament SCRABBLE," John Williams recalls. The SCRABBLE News had an erratic publishing schedule at best, often not mailed for six or eight months at a time. There was not a single SCRABBLE player on the staff of the organization. The ratings results were inconsistent, sometimes not sent out for weeks and often out of sequence. And then to top it all off, financially troubled Coleco pulled the plug and abruptly cancelled the 1987 National SCRABBLE Championship just before the event.

All that was soon fixed, thanks to the combined efforts of the NSA staff — especially Joe Edley — and dedicated NSA members everywhere. The list of accomplishments speaks for itself. Over the last 20+ years, the NSA has raised nearly \$2 million in prize

JOHN, JANE & THE NSA continued on p. 3



Chris Cree (Dallas, TX) taking on all customers at an evening ice cream social and luau at the 2010 National School SCRABBLE Championship at the Royal Pacific Resort in Orlando, FL. Drawing tiles in the left foreground: Bradley Robbins (Windham, NH).

Rita Norr Remembered

by Christine Economos

On April 28th, Rita Norr Provost, a legend among Scrabble players, passed away after a long battle with cancer.

"If there is such a thing as Scrabble royalty," says Lisa Odom, "then Rita was the undisputed queen. The fact that she was the lone female National Champion makes her an icon, but she was such a wonderful ambassador for the game: smart, stylish, graceful, and a fierce competitor with superior analytical skills. With so few women at the top, knowing that one woman made it is a perpetual inspiration."

When Rita Norr set up a small business in her brownstone in Brooklyn, NY in the early 1970s, little did she know it would lead to a lifelong involvement with the SCRABBLE game. She and her business partner, Corinne Phillips, scouted locations for movies and television commercials. Once the business was set up and initial contacts made, Rita and Corinne sat and waited for the phone to ring — and played the SCRABBLE game. Their fascination with the game grew and soon they enlisted other friends to join them. The Brooklyn Scrabblettes, as they called

RITA'S CAREER continued on p. 2

Chris Goes to School

By Chris Cree

As my Copresident, John Chew, is abroad running the European Open and Malta International Scrabble Open right now, I'll be sharing with you our thoughts about a recent National SCRABBLE Association event.

I was fortunate enough to attend this year's National School SCRABBLE Championship (NSSC) at the Loew's Royal Pacific Resort in Orlando, Florida. This was the first time I was able to do so. I had been told that this is a great event. I was told the truth. Others have written about the tournament experience, but actually being in that ballroom and witnessing the amazing talent of those 200+ fifth to eighth graders was such a pleasure.

What was most fun for me was the ice cream and games party after dinner on Friday night. After 3 intense games earlier that afternoon, the kids and their families gathered at the hotel's outside pavilion for some desert and relaxed socializing. Besides the fun ice cream buffet complete with every topping you could imagine were dozens of small tables all set up with various Hasbro games for kids to sample. Having as much fun as they were, I got to play 5 games of SCRABBLE,

NSSC REPORT continued on p. 3

Rita's Career

from RITA NORR REMEMBERED, p. 1

themselves, included Corinne and Rita along with Audrey Tumbarello, Charlotte Skrobe, Barbara Taragan, Wendy Littman, and Vivian Koos. All young mothers, the group met once a week and over the years saw each other through pregnancies, chicken pox, job crises, and PTA ventures. "We had a riotous time," remarks Audrey Tumbarello, "Rita was our most serious player. She generously shared her skills and tips, and graciously tolerated our sometimes nonserious approach to the game."

In the mid-70s, Barbara Taragan saw an ad for a New York City SCRABBLE Championship. The tournament was held at the War Memorial in Brooklyn Heights. Rita and some friends entered. Rita did not have much word knowledge. What she did know she gleaned from lists that appeared in the SCRABBLE News. Still, she enjoyed the tournament so much that she began to seek out more. Back then there were only two or so tournaments a year. All held at the Game Room in New York City. As a working mother with three small children fitting tournaments into her schedule was a challenge. Her first tournament was in Downingtown, PA. Rita made it a family affair, bringing along her husband and three children. The weekend tournament was just ten games, and everyone played in the same division. There wasn't a rating system in place and it wasn't until the early 1980s that Rita was given her first rating: 1916. It put her in the top 100 players in the country.

In 1987, Rita attended the National SCRABBLE Championship in Las Vegas. It was the largest Scrabble Championship in history with 340 players from 8 countries. All competitors played in one division. Although she started out with a 9-1 record, Rita didn't realize she actually had a chance of winning until Joe Edley mentioned it to her on the morning of the last day. Rita won her last few games narrowly beating out Jere Mead on point spread. She accepted the \$5,000 prize on behalf of all women who play the Scrabble game. The win gave Rita the impetus to begin writing books to help Scrabble players sharpen their skills. Rita and coauthor Audrey Tumbarello, wrote several books including *The Word Game Power Workout*, *The Literate Puzzler*, and *Uncommon Word Puzzles for the Creative Thinker*.

For Rita, playing was just part of the SCRABBLE experience. She loved meeting people from all over the country... and the world. Her SCRABBLE play took her to places such as the Grand Canyon, Portland, Denver, Las Vegas, London, and Thailand, to name a few. She once said she could go anywhere in the United States and know there were Scrabble players there that would open their homes and hearts to her. But most of-

ten Rita was on the giving end. "Rita's homes — and there were many — have always had the welcome mat out for myself and other players," said Paul Avrin. "Every summer she would entertain and host several of us at her beach house on Shelter Island, NY. She'd treat us to some fun dinners and lots of Scrabble. We would all stay overnight... perhaps a few nights and have a great time."

A big part of Rita's success was her ability to multitask. "Rita managed to raise three kids, go back to college, get a degree, write three books, and still win SCRABBLE tournaments," said New York player Ann Sanfedele. "And she never gave up. She could be 200 points down in a game that's nearing the end and she would still look for the best play. If she was 200 points ahead she'd look for the best play too."

"In addition to really understanding board strategy," says Lynn Cushman, "Rita had the ability to bear down and focus with her whole being during a tournament. She had a fierce will to win, which I think is one of the marks of a champion."

"Rita may have been fiercely competitive" adds Barbara Taragan, "But the one thing she would not do, at least against lower, far lower ranked players like myself, was play phonies. She would only play words that she knew were good. And occasionally, very occasionally, I would win. She invited me in to her world of SCRABBLE champions as she invited me into her life in so many ways. I miss her dearly... my lovely friend of 40 years."

"Rita was very encouraging," recalls Lisa Odom. "Even when she kicked my butt, I knew I'd have her shoulder to cry on and vice versa. Rita enjoyed gourmet food. So after a long hard day of competition, you'd want to be going wherever she was going for dinner. You could be sure it would be an interesting crowd with lots of anagrams and word puzzles tossed about and even some healthy non-Scrabble game conversation. Rita provided the total SCRABBLE experience."

In 2005 Rita married her second husband, Rick Provost. Several months later she was diagnosed with brain cancer. "After her diagnosis with brain cancer," says Lynn Cushman, "Rita exhibited the same grace, tenacity and bravery in her battle to live as she did in her Scrabble game. She remained active as long as she could, playing tournaments, getting together with friends, caring for her family and home, even co-planning a milestone birthday party for her good friend Ann Sanfedele. As her condition worsened and she became more housebound, she and her husband Rick welcomed visitors to their home. During these visits, Rita was upbeat and interested in the general conversation, participating, if not always with words, then with her strong presence and vitality. She greeted old friends by name and loved hearing news about fellow Scrabblers — she remembered

everyone. She enjoyed life's pleasures as fully as possible for as long as possible, playing with tiles on a Scrabble rack, delighting in an Indian lunch brought from a local restaurant, and beaming at the candles on her birthday cake. It is comforting to remember her courage and the joys of her friendship, because it is very saddening that she had to suffer and die at a young age from such an illness.

"Rita had a profound desire to live and did indeed live well beyond her life expectancy" says Audrey Tumbarello, "Her husband Rick left his job to care for her in the many months she clung to life. He was there for her throughout her ordeal in a way that can only be described as heroic. Paul Avrin and Lynn Cushman were dedicated visitors and brought Rita much joy. Many others made the trek to Danbury to share their love for her and I know how much this is appreciated by her family."

Rita touched and enriched the lives of so many. She was a gem who will be remembered as a true Scrabble spirit, a legend, a gracious, remarkable lady, and, above all, a friend.

Jan Dixon Rules Chair

by Chris Cree

John Chew and I are very pleased to announce that Jan Dixon has accepted the position of Chair of the Rules Committee. As a long-serving member of the Committee, she has amply demonstrated her qualifications for the position and her dedication to the integrity and spirit of the game.

We are all sad to see John Luebkmann step down after his term of dedicated service both as a committee member and as chair. John's input was an integral part of this decision. Thanks so much, John.

Why do people play at organized SCRABBLE events? They wish to compete in a structured environment with an accepted word source with fair, well stated rules. Our Rules Committee has contributed to our rules being what they need to be while always striving to improve them when necessary. We thank them all for their diligence, and thank Jan for accepting this very important position.

International Events

by John Chew

Canadian and American players interested in representing their countries at the Causeway Challenge, the Can-Am Challenge, or the World SCRABBLE Championship (but not the World Players Championship, which is open) should visit the NASPA website frequently in the coming weeks to check for final information about registration procedures for each event's qualification system. Questions should be directed to the Canadian Committee (for Canadians) or the WESPA Liaison Committee (for Americans).

John, Jane & the NSA

from *PERSONS OF THE YEAR*, p. 1

money for the players. Local tournaments have grown from 75 to over 200. The NSA helped start the World SCRABBLE Championship and seed the next generation of tournament players with the National School SCRABBLE Program. Visibility for the club and tournament scene has been raised by over 5,000 news articles, documentary films, five ESPN SCRABBLE telecasts, a best-selling New York Times book and more. Again, John and Jane emphasize that this was a group effort.

Jane Ratsey Williams officially joined the NSA staff in 1992 and brought a skill set and energy that made its presence felt in every aspect of the organization. A former magazine editor and art director, she revamped the event planning, office procedures and business practices, and has brought the school program and championship to new levels of growth and excellence. “There is not a single aspect of the NSA that does not have Jane’s fingerprints on it,” John notes, “she has helped me achieve a lifelong goal of becoming somewhere between a figurehead and irrelevant.”

Both John and Jane admit that the decades running the club and tournament scene has not been without its challenges. “People are passionate about SCRABBLE and they really keep us on our toes,” Jane says. “We have a small staff and answering all requests and managing all the aspects in a proper and timely manner can be a challenge!” John has a different take.

“Without question the toughest part is being the people caught in the middle between Hasbro and the player community. Players don’t always understand the constraints under which we operated — legal, financial, marketing, etc.

And Hasbro execs handle scores of games besides SCRABBLE and are sometimes mystified by the level of devotion and sense of ownership the players have. The most defining week in my 20+ years was very clear. In the course of a few days I read on the Internet how a top-rated player said I was what was wrong with SCRABBLE and only cared about the business side. Then later in that week, while trying to convince Hasbro execs to stay involved in sponsoring the World SCRABBLE Championship, one took me aside and warned me that I was starting to think too much like a player.”

But both John and Jane Williams agree. The best thing about the whole experience is getting to work with and know as friends all the remarkable people along the way, establishing relationships that continue on as the foundation of a new organization.

All of us here at NASPA feel the same way about them too. Congratulations, John and Jane!

NSSC Report

from *CHRIS GOES TO SCHOOL*, p. 1

2 of them simultaneously, with the next generation of tournament SCRABBLE players. They all displayed good word knowledge, board sense and math skills — the key ingredients to success over the board.

I was most impressed by the emotional makeup of those that I played. They were calm and focused — again, key ingredients to success over the board. I expect to see many of them sooner than later at the National SCRABBLE Championship, taking on adults easily four times their age.

You might recall, in 2008, 4 of the 6 divisions were won by those age 18 and younger. This past year, a number of these young players have zoomed up the North American SCRABBLE Players Association (NASPA) ratings list... with Matt Canik, Joey Krafchick and Sam Rosin, all former NSSC participants coming to mind.

This event and the School SCRABBLE Program are examples of ways in which Hasbro is still very much involved with NASPA. They are, in effect, indirectly funding our membership campaign. As these bright youngsters “graduate” from the School Program, the next step is to NASPA and officially sanctioned tournament SCRABBLE. There are now 30,000 kids in the program.

I was also able to meet for a few very productive hours with 4 of the Hasbro executives while at the event. Hasbro has promised to provide a link to NASPA directly from their website as well as a redesigned insert for the millions of boards being sold throughout North America to include the NASPA website and sales pitch to join. This is an example of Hasbro’s direct funding of our membership campaign.

In their continuing support as we grow, Hasbro has also agreed to a free license for NASPA to use the trademarked name “SCRABBLE” and has also committed to a \$15,000 sponsorship for this year’s National SCRABBLE Championship. NSA’s John Williams and Katie Schulz will also be sent by them to handle PR.

So, for those who thought that Hasbro was done with tournament SCRABBLE play, please think again. They are very interested in our growth and success and are taking steps to help ensure this.

NASPA anticipated approximately 1,800 members by July 1, 2010. As of this writing, NASPA has over 3,000 members. One recent membership addition has reentered competitive SCRABBLE for the first time since 1994! I do not know for sure what has contributed to this 67% increase but I would think that a resurgent interest in the game coupled with some of our advertising strategies are making a difference.

As Phil Jackson, head of Hasbro Games put it, “GO SCRABBLE!”

WSC 2011: Canada

by John Robertson and David Boys

NASPA’s recently introduced SOWPODS rating system made it necessary for the Canadian Committee (CC) to clarify the rules for Canadians attempting to qualify for the 2011 World SCRABBLE Championship. The CC agreed that fully rated games played under either the traditional rating system or the new SOWPODS system both count toward the minimum 68-game participation requirement. A player’s higher peak rating from either system will now be used.

NSC 2010 Registration

by the NSC Organizing Committee

As we go to press, Nigel Richards (Malaysia), Dave Wiegand (Portland, OR) and 121 more of the expected 500 players have registered for this year’s National SCRABBLE Championship, to be held August 7–11 at the Hotel Intercontinental Dallas in Addison, TX, right before the (SOWPODS) World Players Championship at the same venue. Online registration will be available for both events until July 21st. Please book early to ensure availability of rooms at the hotel. Entry fee is \$175 for Division 1, \$150 for Divisions 2–5, with unlimited play-up.

Dave Wiegand (Portland, OR) had AEG-MOT? and trailed 155–172 to Rob Robinsky (Spring Lake Park, MN) at DO 2010. Which bingo would you play?



Copyright ©2010 NASPA. SCRABBLE® is a trademark of Hasbro, Inc. in the United States and Canada, and of Mattel, Inc. elsewhere. The NASPA Bulletin is available exclusively to NASPA members online during the first week of publication, and can be publicly downloaded from <http://www.scrabbleplayers.org> in later weeks. Comments concerning and submissions to the Bulletin may be emailed to info@scrabbleplayers.org.

The NASPA Bulletin is designed, typeset (in Adobe Garamond 10/10.5 with heads in Gill Sans) and edited by John Chew and Kristen Pederson Chew of Poslfit Press.