

OLD

We begin by blindly picking a single tile from a small leather pouch. I quickly open my hand, revealing an "A". The other players show their letters, "T", "L", and "E". I play first. My advantage is that I'll pick first from the pouch of letter as well as having my first total word score doubled.

I methodically shuffle the seven letters on the small wooden stand, I..N..O..W..A..W..D. I immediately notice that I've drawn the only two w's available. I place six letters on the board, forming the word "window". Covering the sky-blue, double-letter box on the board with the first w, my total score is thirty-four.

The window near our table reveals that D-block is almost empty. The winter wind is blowing powdered snow in waves over the packed mounds. Only a few men brave the fierce elements of a mid-January afternoon in upstate New York. The blacktop walkway encircling the huge yard is submerged under a heavy white blanket. Figures bundled in dark green huddle close to the phones, steam puffing from their faces as they speak to loved ones far beyond the walls. Others traverse the yard in small groups; their feet plow a path of scars into the unblemished drift.

We sit at a small, square, laminate table near the front of our gallery. The gallery is over two-hundred feet long, but only ten feet wide. Tight quarters for forty-five inmates to navigate through our daily routines. The table abuts a row of five silver hot water pipes. They provide a dry heat that can cause acute sinus flare ups or sore throats in the morning. Dark terrazzo tiles cover the floor, illuminated under a wash of fluorescent light.

The opponent to my left quickly uses the first w to build his word as I select six fresh tiles from the pouch. DJ is a thin Puerto Rican in his mid- twenties with a perpetual five o'clock

shadow. He places "winds" on the board. The "s" covers the pink double-word score, multiplying his score to eighteen. He's always a fast player, an attribute I appreciate. Only three "s" tiles remain. They can be strategically employed to construct two words simultaneously.

A full minute passes and opponent two, Bugs, has yet to play. Bugs' name defines him. In prison, a bug or bug-out is someone with mental deficiencies. His small stature, five foot four, and round, chubby face belie his forty-seven years. To his credit, at times he's very lucid and can play a good game of Scrabble. Today is not one of those times. Opponent three begins to hum the theme tune of "Final Jeopardy", mocking his inertness. Bugs scrunches his face like a deflated football while staring at him. Finally, he exchanges two letters, surrendering his turn.

Opponent three is my only real challenge. Fred knows how to use the board to his advantage. Fred's been down the longest of the four of us, seventeen years and counting on a twenty-five to life bid. He's tall with sandy brown hair and a crooked nose from too many fights in his younger days. I've witnessed him score over fifty points using only two letters. Give him an opening with triple-word score boxes and he'll hurt you in a hurry; but this play only registers fourteen with "drab".

Prison is a drab place. Drab colors, drab surroundings, drab food, drab conversations. The mere presence of the word on the board reminds me of the awful fact that I'm in prison. This is a thought we must push away or it would occupy every chamber of our consciousness. We dwell in a world of passing time, an environment quite different from the spatial one. It moves slowly, an undulating stream of mood, emotions, or their absence, crawling to some distant, unseen tributary.

Shifting tiles, I spot an opportunity. "Jack" scores thirty-three points, the "J" accounting for twenty-four due to a cobalt blue triple-letter block. Bugs asks if names are allowed.

"Wow, you don't know jack, do you?" Fred asks.

"Hey Bugs, did you ever use a jack to fix a flat?" I ask.

"Go ahead, go ahead," Bugs concedes.

Letter tiles cover squares on the board over and over. Words intersect words. Play by play we are crossing each other out in shades of blue, gray, and red. Fred makes his move near the end, using "ax" and "axon" at once. An axon is a long, single nerve cell process that usually conducts impulses away from the cell body. Scrabble does not build your vocabulary as some might think. Most words formed are either one to two syllables. It fits the syncope syntax of prisoners nicely. A good bit of luck is built into the game. I've experienced the bad luck of having seven hard consonants that might spell the name of a Slavic industrial town, but nothing in my native tongue.

A few on-lookers have gathered around the table; some await the outcome, some study the board for future reference. One of them uses a pen to scribble a word on his palm. I have only two letters remaining, "I" and "M". The combination of ax and axon has given Fred a four point lead. Victory will be mine if I can find a spot to drop these letters, for in addition to my word score, I'll collect the unused letter points of my three opponents. I locate two possibilities. One will spell "sim", but I believe it's an abbreviation, not permitted by the rules. The other will spell "nim", which I'm not certain is a word at all. Decisions, decisions, with no aim, dim, or rim available, I carefully place "nim" on the board, engaging the n of neon.

"Challenge," Bugs announces.

He's in a distant third place with no chance of winning. No matter in his mind, on his previous challenge he was successful with "azone" against DJ, proving it was not a word. "Thank you," Fred whispers, counting his chances. Bugs eagerly flips the pages of the thick, hardcover

dictionary. His eyes dart up and down the pages. The sudden sour look on his face tells me that "nim" is indeed a word. //

"This dictionary's bugged out, it says nim means to steal or pilfer, that's whacked son," Bugs says with irritation in his voice.

"Bugged-out? That's a collegiate dictionary put together by English scholars, moron," DJ says.

Bugs squints his eyes at him, "Who you callin' a moron, you's an idiot,".

"Alright Bugs, chill man," DJ says giggling, patting him on the back.

"I beat you anyways," Bugs says with pride.

Scrabble provides an outlet for our competitive natures to emerge in a positive way from the doldrums of restricted liberty. Other outlets are cards, pumping iron, sports, chess, and handball. The latter on hiatus for the long, cold winter. This competition is friendly and constructive. No one wants to become the pariah of the entire company – the cause of an officer confiscating the game.

I encourage the inexperienced, marginal players such as DJ to read and use the dictionary whenever they encounter an unfamiliar word. Among the scant possessions in the walk-in closet size cell I inhabit is a wide array of books, which I loan out on a regular basis. This altruism stems from the decade I worked as a teacher on the outside, along with six years working in the academic outreach office here. In my classroom I always had supplemental books and magazines that my students could use when working on their assignments. I receive a return on my investment the very next game when DJ puts "Qa" on the board and proudly announces that it's a Babylonian liquid measurement.

"Nice, you're doing your homework," I say.

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Scrabble is a game based on the ideas developed by Alfred M. Butts, a New York architect. It was introduced in 1948 by the Production & Marketing Co. of Newton, Connecticut and was first manufactured by the Selchow and Righter Co. of New York City.

The National Scrabble Association was born in 1980 in the Suffolk County town of Greenport, NY, on the north fork of Long Island. Membership has grown to over twenty thousand. Each year people of all ages gather to compete in games, to vie for the coveted title of Scrabble champion. Regional competitions are held in various cities around the United States. Last year, a large Mid-west regional attracted over one thousand enthusiasts to Terre Haute, Indiana. Terre Haute is also home to a maximum security Federal prison. I wonder if inmates there have access to Scrabble?

After learning about these contests, we decided to develop our own private competition. Due to the physical design of the prison it was impossible to compete with players from other blocks, or even other companies on our block. Each block is an island. The prison boasts four quadrants, separated by concrete and steel. After a brief debate, we settled on a company competition. A round robin tournament was conducted, and a company champion was crowned, yours truly. I was proclaimed the dread sovereign of Scrabble, Gronk the Great.

Fred, my chief opponent, and I now engage in a mano y mano of classic Scrabble. Midway through the game the tension is palpable. Smacking down two seven letter words early gave me a commanding lead, but he has methodically shrunk the gap. On his penultimate play he lays down "hundreds" to capture the lead. I still have a K and Z that I've failed to fit onto the board. He wins this game, placing "oyster" perpendicular to "torpid".

Scrabble is currently manufactured by the Hasbro Corporation. It's recommended for those eight years old and up. The letter tiles present a choking hazard to small children. I don't want to even think of what the tiles taste like, having been rubbed between fingers thousands of times. This is precisely the reason why germophobes don't play Scrabble. I recently read a story in the New York Post about a man in New Haven, Connecticut that was stabbed by a friend after an argument erupted during a game. The suspect claimed that his opponent cheated by palming extra letters. Tempers can flare during a close match.

In my seven years of incarceration I would approximate that I've played over three hundred games of Scrabble. I have yet to witness a game abruptly ended by an angry flip of the board. Verbal banter is sometimes exchanged but I've never seen it escalate to violence. We laugh at Hollywood's depictions of unceasing turmoil and carnage inside prison walls. This is not to say that we enjoy a serene, tranquil existence behind concertina wire. Make no mistake, there is a real potential for violence to ignite, either between inmates or doled out by c.o.'s. Television and cinema simply embellish the frequency and intensity of such occurrences.

A distinct decorum is religiously adhered to in our games. A dictionary is agreed upon before we begin each game. This lexical choice forms the boundary line that separates serious Scrabble competitors into two groups. One group invariably uses the Official Scrabble Dictionary. A fat paperback, overloaded with short, one syllable words, scant definitions, and no pronunciations. It includes such nonsensical words as: ef, defined as, "The pronunciation of the letter F;" and eet, which has no definition whatsoever.

Our group belongs to the category that is adamant in refusing to employ this sophomoric piece of word. We insist that a regular English Dictionary, preferably a Webster's or Oxford's Collegiate, be our standard. A time limit is set on each play, usually one minute. A single player

is selected as timekeeper. It's his responsibility to ensure that the game doesn't drag. The instant he says, "Times up," the player must place his tiles on the board or forfeit his turn.

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Game Three. The final game of the day. The prison yard is closing for the afternoon. A c.o. in a Gothic style tower calls over the PA for the even numbered galleries to come inside. Inmates brush off the snow that has accumulated on their hats and coats before filing into the narrow steel gate that leads to the corridor. I look at them through the window with empathy. Once, in the distant past, these men were young boys returning to elementary school from a period of recess after playing in the pure, virgin snow. What sequence of events in their lives led them here? I know that it only took a moment of unrestrained anger to bring me to this place.

There isn't enough time to finish this game. Lock-in will begin fifteen minutes after all those in the yard have returned to their cells. We all agree to finish this series tomorrow. In one hour the gates will crack open to allow us to walk to the mess hall for the evening meal. Today's menu consists of spaghetti with a mystery meat sauce, four slices of white bread, applesauce, and watery, grape kool-aid. The meat, blended with tomato sauce is in fact a soy product that's used in many of the meals. I opt to skip it. Later I'll grill tuna and cheese sandwiches on the small hot plate I bought for three packs of cigarettes. DJ sold it to me after he smuggled it back to our company by hiding it in folded aprons, returning from his job in the kitchen. A barter economy that's universal in prisons.

Those who have chosen to attend evening chow have returned. We will all be locked in our cells for the next two-and-a-half hours, until the yard reopens from seven to nine-thirty. A clanging alarm reverberating down the soulless, hallow hall announces five o'clock count. I unconsciously respond to the bell in a Pavlovian manner, pushing myself up from the thin

mattress while flipping the light switch on my wall with an extended hand, illuminating my dark space with bright, fluorescent light. It has become an ossified routine after seven years behind bars. A pair of blue shirts briskly walk past, glancing inside, and taking count.

When they're gone I begin preparing the tuna and cheese melts. Using a cheap opener, I carefully turn the plastic covered handle, releasing a fishy odor into the stale air of my cell. Emptying the tuna into a Tupperware bowl, I blend in mayo, diced onions, and sliced green olives stuffed with pimento. Buttered slices of bread sizzle on the hot plate. The delicious aroma of cheddar melting overwhelms the tuna. I brew a steaming cup of hazelnut coffee, purchased via a VVA fundraiser, to enjoy with the light meal. Lock-in affords a time for us to ruminate, reflect, or even plan for the future. It's for the most part a quiet time on our gallery.

"Man, Gronk, you eatin' good in the neighborhood," DJ says, breaking the silence.

"Oh, pretty good, would you like some?"

"Only if you can spare it,"

I hand him half of a sandwich wrapped in a brown paper towel through the bars.

"Mmmm, that's good, thanks man,"

"No problem, enjoy"

The Scrabble board sits undisturbed on the small laminate table in front of my cell. I peer through the painted white bars, examining the game's symmetrical lines, perfectly square and multi-colored. From my vantage point on the third floor, I can see over the corridors that separate the four main blocks of the prison yards. I visualize giant letter tiles being lowered into the huge, snow covered yards.

My attention shifts back to the board. Lights from the yard cast a shadow of thin lines across its surface. A list on the left side displays the letter distribution. Most of the letters are

vowels. There are two B, C, F, M, P, V, W, and Y tiles. Only one J, K, Q, X and Z tiles exist. Glancing back and forth from the board to the quadrant formed by the corridors outside, my mind wanders. I picture the board as a kind of human blue print of the prison population. Some are grouped into a single large category, like the vowels. People who came to prison as young men and are growing old here, or those who keep returning after brief stints of freedom. Others are less succinct, sparsely distributed among the letter field, much less expected to inhabit this place, but all a piece of the prison mosaic.

I've discovered from reading statistical volumes in the library here that a U.S. citizen's chances of being incarcerated are drastically lowered each year after age twenty-five. For a person incarcerated prior to age twenty-one, the chances of being re-incarcerated are above seventy percent. If you are fortunate enough to have avoided prison up to age thirty-five, as was my case, the likelihood of imprisonment being in your future is .0002 percent. These odds are similar to picking the only two w's out of a bag of a hundred Scrabble letters on a single turn.

At midnight, before going to sleep, I look out from the bars of my cell to examine the board one last time. It's fragile, sitting on the small table. A c.o. passing by while doing count on the graveyard shift could easily bump into it and scatter the letters. I notice that I can use all seven letters using the M from the existing word "formed". "Ferments" will add seventy-two points to my score. I write it down on my notepad to use tomorrow morning.