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Chair, Youth Subcommittee, WESPA

WESPA Youth Subcommittee was formed in 2005, to focus on attracting and developing young players. We have run 11 annual World Youth Scrabble Championships, and 2.5 WESPA Youth Cup events (a name change forced on us by Mattel). The first WYSC had 50 players. This year's version will have 250+, across two sections. Each year, it becomes more hotly contested, to the point where a number of countries are limiting access to only their very top players (hence the need to incorporate a second section, for the first time).

We are slowly adding more and more countries to WYC – some notable additions over the years have been Pakistan (joined 2010) and Hong Kong (2015). Both these nations have experienced exponential growth since their inaugural appearances in our world youth event. A typical intervention package, such as provided for Pakistan (where I was assisted by my son, Dr Alastair Richards, ranked 8 in the world) is to teach them how to teach beginners, plus running separate workshops for experienced players, followed by organising a tournament (using tournament software), and establishing a local rating system.

Nepal are joining WYS this year, and we intend to have players from China and Myanmar join in future (training sessions are already planned for all three of these countries).

In Asia, numbers of youth are rapidly expanding. African countries are also growing their youth component (but find it more difficult to compete internationally, due to finances and visas) They share our vision for more young players. Europe has been slow to take off. However Catalin Caba (Romania) has now introduced a youth circuit, with his YES! event including players from a number of countries, like UK and Netherlands. This is expected to provide the impetus for an increase in numbers of young players in Europe over the next 5 years. North American youth are somewhat isolated, for two reasons: using both a different format (pairs) in school Scrabble events, and also using a different dictionary ("School"/censored version). However, there are small pockets of young players starting to experiment with Collins, including a group in Ontario, Canada. We would love to take WYC to Canada sometime soon, although that would mean smaller numbers (too expensive for most Asians).

Regarding the interface with Mattel, there was an interesting development in Malaysia this year, when a sales representative from Mattel decided to stimulate sales by setting up a Scrabble competition. He chose schools which do not already have a Scrabble presence (many already do, given the Ministry for education endorsement of Scrabble as an educational activity). He then set up 4 tournaments, one in each state, and took the best players (all new to Scrabble) from those four events, to play in a championship event. Because Mattel approached MSA (Malaysian Scrabble Association) to assist with running these events, MSA were able to insist that the tournaments were run to normal rules, and that each group received a few hours coaching from experienced players like Vannitha, prior to competing. Many of these players then migrated to the normal Malaysian Scrabble Association events, translating into approximately 100 new tournament players. This cooperation between Mattel and an established (WESPA-member) Scrabble organisation could also provide a model for Mattel in other countries.

Collins Dictionary are also actively involved in a schools program being run in India, under the leadership of Shaikh Ahmed, from Indian Scrabble Association.

Alchemist Cup, considered the most prestigious Scrabble event in the world, featured 17 of 50 players who were alumni of WYSC. That proportion (one-third), is expected to double over the next 10 years.

Our focus has not only been to increase the number of players worldwide, but also to encourage the development of excellence. Apart from running actual training programs, we have a website which features resources to help individuals develop their own study programs (eg hooks and stems to study). It also provides some coaching sessions, eg the Scoring Tutorial, which are frequently used by teachers in group settings. Dr Trevor Hovelmeier (South Africa) contributed many of the mnemonics.

Recently, in Malaysia, a beginner visited a tournament, to see how things work. The youngster (10), asked, dumbfounded, as he surveyed the room, "Do old people also play Scrabble?" Scrabble is viewed as a game for young people in most of Asia. Young players are our future. They are already running events for the rest of us, as well as taking on leadership roles in WESPA (eg John Hamilton: WESPA Rules Committee, TD for events like Seniors World Championship and Australian Championships. Jessica Pratesi: Chair of WESPA Rules Committee)

The youth committee will continue to reach out to more countries, and support the training and development of young players (focussing mostly on schools and universities).

The end-goal is:

More youngsters, more skill (both in playing and in admin) for young players and their leaders, and greater credibility given to Scrabble as an educational pursuit, worldwide.

CURRENT YOUTH COMMITTEE (some slight changes are pending approval by WESPA committee)

Karen Richards, Australia (Chair)

Martin Teo, Malaysia

Shan Abbasi, Canada

Akkarapol Kwansak, Thailand

Tariq Pervez, Pakistan

Ruvini Fernando, Sri Lanka

Cornelia Guest, USA

Ruth Groffman, NZ

Neeta Bhatia, India

Chris Lau, Hong Kong

The following three are potential new members:

Yong Jian Rong, Singapore

Catalin Caba, Romania

Aditya Iyengar, India

An invitation has also been extended to Sumbul Siddiqui (currently in UK) who will advise her availability once she has secured work.