

WESPA Youth Committee report – by Karen D. Richards (Chair , Youth Committee)

In December 2019, we ran the most recent face-to-face WESPA Youth Cup in Malaysia. With over 300 players, it was the first year we have needed to add a second division, with over 200 in the main group.

This year, WESPA Youth Cup will be held in Thailand, with an expected total attendance of around 1000 youth. The “adult” side event to the youth this year will also offer high prize money (US\$4000), to attract some of the best players in the world.

Akkarapol, organiser of these Thai events, is a teacher who sacrificed his teaching career to establish a series of Scrabble coaching clinics. Along with Waseem Khatri from Pakistan, these players devote their life to furthering Scrabble for youngsters. It is no surprise that Asia is the epicentre of the explosion of incredible young players who will populate the top positions worldwide in the next ten years.

.....

When WESPA was formed 18 years ago, I saw the need for encouraging more young players into the game. Hence I volunteered to form a youth Committee to:

1. Establish Scrabble as a bona fide competitive event, with academic and social benefits.
2. Recruit more young players.
3. Mentor and coach young players.
4. Provide resources for youngsters.
5. Provide motivation and reward for achievements.
6. Provide an opportunity to network with players internationally, hoping they will continue to play for the rest of their lives.
7. Develop young players to be able to organise and direct tournaments.
8. Encourage young players to establish software pertaining to Scrabble play.

We have achieved most of these, although some not to the highest level.

1. We established “something for young players to aim for” - our World Youth Scrabble Championship, now called WESPA Youth Cup (after Mattel withdrew their permission for us to use the name). This endowed Scrabble with a legitimacy as something to which to aspire. In addition, this event has convinced governments and education authorities, that Scrabble does indeed have an academic component. Governments like Sri Lanka regularly fund the entire youth team (including blazers for the 2018 event.) Malaysia includes Scrabble as a sanctioned activity, providing time out of school for events, having coaches come into schools to recruit and train players, and organising their own interschool competitions. Many young players who competed in WYSC (and more recently WESPA Youth Cup) have been granted scholarships to the best universities, such as Stanford.

2. Starting with our flagship World Youth Scrabble Championship in 2006, we have gradually increased numbers from 45 and 14 countries, to the most recent face-to-face event in Malaysia in 2019, where we need 2 sections to accommodate over 300 players from 20+ countries.
3. We now have a network of coaches who even work over the internet to increase the expertise of players. By 2009, I started to notice high-probability but low-general-usage words being played. Players had obviously started serious study (this may have been about the time Zyzzyva became available). Three notable coaches, whose entire careers are based on teaching Scrabble to youngsters, are Akkarapol, Waseem, and Kong. Kong is retired, and spends his day coaching individually, within schools or over Zoom for International students. Waseem is employed full-time at Happy Home School in Karachi, just to teach Scrabble. His reputation is such that many students choose this school just for the Scrabble coaching. Akkarapol gave up his job as a teacher, in order to set up a franchise-type chain of coaching clinics in Thailand. He also offers online coaching. Various other coaches work part time on the youth scene, eg Tony Hunt, who runs regular Woogles sessions for Australian youngsters, and has sometimes included young players from Hong Kong or Malaysia.
4. We have a dedicated website with resources such as study lists, instruction on setting up Zyzzyva Cardbox etc. There are also guides to running a school club and hints on how to improve the skills of more advanced players. Currently, we also use it to broadcast live results during our annual world events. However, ideally WESPA website would provide a link for official WESPA events, as well as other major events which attract an international field.
5. Our WYSC (or WYC) provides motivation for serious study. We applaud all age groups, for instance, even having an Under 8 Champion in the years that we have 6 and 7 year-olds competing (usually only 2 or 3 players, but this will start their Scrabble career). We also have under 10, 12, 14 and 16, as well as awards for high words and high games. Various other awards are “most improved player” from the previous year, Best Novice for someone who has not competed before, Best Player in top 25 (usually aged 11 or 12). There is also a team event for the best 3 players. This is inevitably won by Thailand, Pakistan or Sri Lanka, with India fairly close to the mark
6. Many friendships have been formed over the years. These players continue to compete as adults, as well as practise online with their international compatriots. Unfortunately, due to both the geographical isolation plus use of a different dictionary for school play, there has been limited involvement for North American players.
7. John Hamilton is now organising tournaments, directing major events such as the World Seniors, is President of the Australian Capital Territory Scrabble Association, and also serves as Chair of WESPA Rules Committee. This is typical of the calibre of player coming through our ranks. In 2019, our TD was taken ill on the first day of WESPA Youth Cup, 19-year-old Aditya Iyengar from India took over as TD. No-one appeared to notice that he was only just older than they were, and he competently presided over 212 players, including during a 4 hour blackout on the last day, where most of the challenge computers were unusable (every TD’s nightmare!). When

COVID struck, the young Pakistani players worked together to perform a number of international events played online – 3 of these for youth, but also the virtual WESPA Championship of 2021. This was a mammoth logistical effort, requiring intense supervision - one youth supervising 6 players on monitors - to ensure the integrity of the event. Without these wonderful youth, WESPAC21 would not have happened. I know that the future of Scrabble is in great hands, with the talented youngsters coming through the ranks.

8. A number of youngsters, alumni of WYSC, have developed software for our use. Goutham from Singapore has written various study software programs, Wali from Pakistan has constructed websites (including the soon-to-be released refurbished WESPA website), and Hong Kong Scrabble players have developed their own tournament software.

In summary, the thrust of the youth movement within WESPA appears to be working well.

However, I have some personal regrets about some things which we have not yet achieved:

1. Official academic studies to prove that Scrabble is beneficial for young people. (We are still looking for PhD student to provide a study we can share with the world). Anecdotal evidence doesn't hold sway with most governments, and we need government bodies to acknowledge how the strategy, logic, problem-solving and all those other wonderful aspects of our game are actually challenging and educational for youth.
2. Working out a way to bring youth of the world together on the internet, permanently. Pakistan showed us how to run virtual tournaments with integrity. However, I will spend my last 6 months in this position, attempting to achieve WESPA endorsement for an official rating system for online events, plus featuring these on the tournament calendar. Whilst I am not a fan of playing online myself, I grasp the vision of the internet being accessible to anyone who is physically unable to attend international events. This may be because of distance, visa issues, finances, physical disability, or domestic restrictions. Whatever the restriction, if we do not provide this option, we are effectively discriminating against a section of society. In addition, I predict online Scrabble as being a way to recruit more players to face-to-face events in the long run. Many beginning youngsters find scoring and tile-tracking difficult, and this aspect is covered for them by computers.

Here's to a great future for youth as they venture into Scrabble, and hopefully stay for a lifetime.

Karen D Richards

Chair

WESPA Youth Committee

2005 to 2023