

CREATING EXCELLENCE IN YOUTH SCRABBLE:

Three countries are outstanding in the quality of their youth players: Sri Lanka, Pakistan and Thailand.

For the last 6 years, the team prize at World Youth Scrabble Championship (now called WESPA Youth Cup) has been awarded to either Sri Lanka or Pakistan. That means they have 3 players in the top ten in the world. In fact, in 2017, all three of these countries had 3 or 4 players in the top 10, and no other country had a chance. (In 2018, India and Hong Kong also managed top 10 finishers, along with these three countries).

It is no accident that these countries have so many excellent players. Any country wishing to emulate their success can learn some lessons from them. I will address, in particular, the success of Pakistan and Sri Lanka. **Thailand** is a little different, having developed over a longer time period, with much more **commercial involvement** (including selling workbooks and equipment), more **pomp and ceremony**, and by incorporating a wide range of **other activities**, from Spelling Bees to A-Math, to playing in their local language.

GOALS:

1. **Develop in youth (and the Scrabble community) a desire for excellence.**
2. **Create an atmosphere of competition to encourage players to make more effort.**
3. **Address coaching and training requirements to assist youth to succeed.**
4. **Ensure there are perceived rewards for hard work and success.**

HISTORY:

In 2010-12, I had the privilege of working with my son (prior to him studying Medicine). At that stage, he was a teenager, ranked 7th in the world. Not everyone has access to a top player, but it certainly helps to have a role model involved in your youth program, perhaps one of your top local players. This gives youth something to aim for (as in “one day, I will beat that guy”)

SRI LANKA: Prior to our visit to Sri Lanka, the local association did something wonderful – they set up 30 schools, to provide their top 2 players (i.e. we coached 60 top players). The schools were therefore forced to orchestrate school competitions, to find the two best, and the chosen ones felt they were rewarded for their performance, by officially having two days off school, to participate.

This achieves many things:

- (a) it gets **schools involved**. One person can do little in terms of training hundreds/thousands of school students. What one must do, is to get teachers within the schools to take responsibility. Give them guidance, advice, resources, equipment, some training, but make the schools responsible in the first place, for recruiting and basic training.
- (b) it gives the students a **reward** for working hard to win their school event – the reward being the invitation to work even harder, with a group of their peers.
- (c) The **time** of your expert coaches/mentors is **not wasted on absolute beginners**, many of whom may never take it any further, and can thus be aimed at the serious young players.
- (d) It sets up a **framework for interschool competitions** (because they have already chosen their best players) – the type of student attracted to Scrabble will be competitive, cannot get enough

of competition, and will be itching to compete. Feed that need with interschool events, and eventually invite them to play in “adult” tournaments.

PAKISTAN: Our visit to Pakistan was slightly different, as Pakistan was very new to the competitive youth Scrabble scene, having only first competed in WYSC in 2010 (unlike Sri Lanka, who had been working with youth for years). We spent about a week there, covering a wide range of activities:

1. Introducing absolute beginners, more a “**show and tell**” of how the game is played, and making it exciting enough for them to want to continue.
2. Showing a group of adults how to coach students – “**train the trainer**”. Some of the “adult” trainers were, in fact, their top young teen players!
3. Coaching their **more-experienced** young players, and giving them the skills to keep improving by working amongst themselves (i.e. making their training self-sufficient)
4. Setting up a local **rating system** for Pakistan
5. Running a **tournament** for them, covering some of the organisational aspects (and using this to seed their new rating system)
6. Focussing on the “**consensus game**” method of learning, which is the most effective way of teaching strategy, but is best done with at least one expert player to facilitate. (One could possibly use Quackle in lieu of an expert player, but Quackle does not explain why one move is better than another)

From that series of sessions, Pakistan has gone from strength to strength. These are some of the reasons behind their success (apart from their charismatic leader, Tariq Pervez)

- (a) They ran regular **rated mini-events** (every week, 3 or 4 games, in their central club location in Karachi) – this allowed
 - (i) young players to **sample tournament play** in a less-threatening environment.
 - (ii) players could obtain an **initial rating** (after playing so many “provisional” games – 30 or 50?),
 - (iii) after achieving an official national rating, they have the fun and challenge of **improving that rating**.
- (b) From the beginning, they forced their experienced young players to “**give back**” to the **community**, by organising events, and running training sessions
 - (i) The most incredible event is their national championship, where there are close to 2000 young players competing. This is **run by a team of youth players** (about 20?). As a separate event (different dates), they have the Masters division of the national championship, in which these players compete. Eligibility to compete in the Masters is seen as a huge reward for hard work, and they are happy to give back to the less-experienced and younger players who will one day follow in their footsteps.
 - (ii) Their two **best players** (Waseem and Moiz, both young) go into schools, as paid coaches, and these two have the advantage of prestige as role models.
 - (iii) Potential players are more inspired by their **peers**, those who are only a few years older, than by having “oldies” organise events and training for them.
- (c) Pakistan Scrabble has an incredible presence in the **media**, where every event is written up as a “**Sporting**” event, i.e. in the same terminology as if reporting on a cricket match. This allows them to highlight success of their top players, and by doing so, give credibility to these top players in their roles as mentors and coaches.

- (d) Pakistan **travel** to as many suitable Youth (and other) competitions as possible. Apart from their obvious successes in our world youth championship events, they have conquered Princess Cup (Thailand) with the Hadi Khan twins both taking out the title in 2017 and 2018 respectively. Such success allows more publicity in the national newspapers and TV, which generates national pride in Pakistan as a nation of high-achievers in Scrabble, on the world stage.
- (e) Pakistan have developed a **clear structure for youth to qualify** for events. Specifically, in order for them to represent Pakistan at WYSC/WYC, they have a two-stage protocol. Approximately 6 months prior to the event, they have a tourney where they pick the top 100? players, for further consideration as part of the final team. These 100 players will be given additional training/ boot camps etc - whatever they need to improve. Then, a few months prior to the actual event, the 100 will be narrowed down to the top 10 (which is the official number who form national teams for WYSC/WYC – of course, others are allowed to compete, but must pay their own way.)

TEAMS: Both Sri Lanka and Pakistan also excel in the following area:

They maintain good relationships with their government and are able to procure funding for their official team. They achieve and maintain their credibility as a legitimate sport, worthy of support, because the government can see that

- (a) they are properly organised (and accountable)**
- (b) they are picking the best teams**
- (c) they are training and developing those teams**

Overall, the sense of **team pride** in these countries is phenomenal. They work together to help each other improve. A group of the top Sri Lankan teens wrote a book to help their peers. They are always impeccably dressed, with team uniforms (Pakistan provide three different shirts, so they have clean shirts for each day). Their team spirit is built in many things, including the way the parents interact and support each other.

This level of organisation and team spirit is essential in obtaining serious sponsorship.

Hopefully you will find this information useful to identify ways in which to work towards excellence in your young players.

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