

M A C K M E L L E R

Mack Meller: Youngest SCRABBLE® Expert

By Cornelia Guest



A little over a year ago I got a call from a mother whose ten-year-old homeschooled son was interested in joining one of my SCRABBLE classes. In my response I suggested he try the Internet SCRABBLE Club (ISC) for practice. She said he was already playing on ISC, with a rating in the 900s. I watched a few of his games and felt he was exchanging too often, sometimes throwing away a bingo he didn't know. But he seemed to have a good sense of the board.

The first night Mack Meller came to my class at the Ridgefield Library I played him to get a sense of his skills. I had an S, so set up a play where I might hook it. Mack played a double-double bingo straight away. He added up the points almost instantly. I won the game--but not by much.

That was one of the last games I'd ever play where I'd beat Mack. Over the summer he studied some flash cards I'd loaned him, and he started our fall sessions with complete knowledge of the 5-vowel 7s and 8s. And he wasn't afraid to phony, either.

Mack's first tournament was in Ardsley, NY, on November 21st. He had an inauspicious first game, losing by several points. But he won his remaining 7 games to finish 7-1 +1504 and take the division. He was our featured "New Face" in the December issue of *The Last Word*.

But Mack was still relatively unknown in SCRABBLE circles until Annette Tedesco's Albany New Year's Tournament, played just days before he turned 11. He astonished all his opponents in the Main Event by finishing 19.5-2.5 +2217, Gibsonized going into the final game. His rating shot up to 1454. The world was on alert: A young star was born.

It was not just Mack's performance that drew attention--it was his poise and politeness. In a trend that continues today, one of his Albany opponents commented: "I just have to give public props to Mack Meller, who is the most adorable, quiet, shy, sweet player [and who I'm pretty sure I bored to tears during those last two games in which he totally slaughtered me]. I loved watching Mack this weekend, and his super proud parents. He rocks." Mack quickly became friends with other youth players, and earned the respect of the adults--even those who traditionally grimace when facing a young opponent.

Mack continued studying and playing top players at New York and Connecticut clubs. In March, seeded last, he won Division 2 at the inaugural Norwalk Tournament (6-2 +408),

41

M A C K M E L L E R

bringing his rating up to 1582. At the May 7th Norwalk Tournament he was playing in Division 1; his 4-4 -152 finish brought him to 1585.

At the June 25th Norwalk Tournament, Mack's 7th tournament in 7 months, Mack was sensational again, finishing 2nd to 1847-rated Will Anderson. Mack's rating climbed 53 points to 1638--and the National SCRABBLE Association (NSA) announced 11-year-old Mack as the youngest SCRABBLE "expert" in official history!

In researching the record, I found that Canadian champion Adam Logan also reached 1600 at a young age. However, data from that time period (mid- to late '80s) proved difficult to find. Adam himself did not recall when he reached 1600, though cross-tables.com documents him reaching 1700 at 5/23/87, at age 12, and entering that tournament rated at 1692. Further complicating the issue is that the rating system was different in the 1980s ("expert" was considered 1700 and rating points were determined differently), so it's not a direct comparison.

Putting the need to research further to rest, on July 24th Mack set another record. Playing up into Division 1 at the Old Greenwich Tournament, Mack finished third to Kate Fukawa-Connelly and Joe Edley, with a 10-6 +454 record, taking home a new rating of 1711. This record was easy to document--nobody younger than 12 has ever reached 1700 before--and it seems likely Mack is on his way to break more records!

Over the course of the past year, Mack has studied word lists on Zyzzyva, played on Quackle, and memorized an astonishing number of words. On June 16th he won all his games at the prestigious New York City NASPA SCRABBLE Club #56, winning the Expert Division. That evening he averaged 451.5 points a game, and was the "Most Prolific Bingo Producer" with 11 bingos: SEJEANT, EUGENIA, POINTIER, RETILES, DICTATED, LAUDERS, SOFTEST, PURLOIN, TRACINGS, IONISED, and CEILERS.

Former World and National Champion Joel Sherman, who has watched Mack play at Club 56, played him in tournaments, and offered him suggestions, had the following to say:

"Probably Mack's greatest strength is that he makes errors, and you can be sure he remembers every improvement he's made aware of, but his temperament is coolly clinical, he takes them all in his stride and doesn't beat himself up over them; he has the patience to accept he's not going to do everything perfectly right away. If he can continue to tolerate occasional disappointment when he gets into the 1900s and above (and becomes the favorite to win every tourney he enters) as well as he does now, he can be a great champion."

Three-time National Champion Joe Edley, who has given Mack several lessons, was similarly impressed:

M A C K M E L L E R

"Regarding Mack's playing skills: Besides quickly seeing all of the bingos he knows, an exponentially growing list, he's picked up a profound understanding of strategy, including how to play weak racks. He seems to understand that luck is a factor and doesn't get overly concerned when drawing poorly--that's a skill often underdeveloped in younger players. As far as sociability, Mack is very outgoing and personable, and is likely to develop many friendships throughout our community. He can be a great ambassador for the game."

I interviewed Mack after his record-setting Norwalk Tournament:

What do you enjoy most about SCRABBLE?

"I enjoy everything about it."

What study methods do you use?

"I use Zyzzyva to study words and Quackle to improve my play."

What was your favorite game at the Norwalk Tournament?

"My favorite game by far was the tie with Ben [Schoenbrun]. It was the most limited board I ever had. In the end we both had high-scoring tiles on our racks. Since we couldn't play them we passed the game out."

What is your highest scoring play?

"My highest-scoring play at a tournament was UNRAVELS, a triple triple for 185 points. I played it in Albany over New Year's."

What is your favorite word?

"That's a tough one to decide. Some top ones are TEOCALLI, an Aztec temple; CONFERVA, algae; BABASSU, a palm tree; and BOMBYX, a silkworm."

What has been your highest game?

"I had a 602 at a club against you!"

Now that you've become an expert, what is your next goal?

"I want to become a 1700!"

Within weeks of the interview, Mack Meller had reached that goal at Old Greenwich. Yet when I congratulated him on reaching 1700, he commented modestly that he was "probably overrated." I disagree--and look forward to seeing him continue playing extraordinary SCRABBLE.