



## Meet our national Scrabble champ

December 08, 2009 16:53 IST

**Tags:** [Zyzyva](#), [Sherwin Rodrigues](#), [Mumbai Education Trust's Institute of Management, India, MET](#)

The interview is over and we are in the elevator when some of **Sherwin Rodrigues'** classmates walk in and ask why he's in a lift meant for the college's guests. He tries to evade the question till finally he sheepishly confesses that he was being interviewed for *rediff.com*. A silence follows as his friends smirk at him. He knows he will be ragged soon after he steps out of the elevator.

Rodrigues, 20, is a student at Mumbai [ [Images](#) ] Education Trust's Institute of Management and is happiest when there is no special attention being showered on him. But it's difficult to avoid being in the glare when you have been an Indian national Scrabble champion for two years in a row. He has just returned from Malaysia after finishing 13th in the Tenth World Scrabble Championship, no mean feat. And the folks at the institute are excited enough to have sponsored his entire trip to Malaysia. In fact they're even hoping he goes there again the next time around.

For now, though, the young champ is playing out the role of a good student and is preparing for his exams. He says he isn't too good at English and communication skills but has a vocabulary of over 80,000 words.

In an interview with **Abhishek Mande**, Rodrigues discusses what it takes to be a Scrabble champ and why it is more interesting than chess. Edited excerpts:

### **You're just about 20. When did Scrabble figure in your scheme of things?**

I was schooling in Muscat and would watch my grandparents and mother play Scrabble all the time. The love for word games was always there because I enjoyed solving jumbled words and crossword puzzles in newspapers. Once I suggested to my grandfather a move that was better than what he was about to play. He realised I had a gift for it and introduced me to the game.

By the time I was 10, I had already won a tournament in Muscat and there was no looking back. By 12, I was playing with grownups and by 13 I was the national Scrabble champion in Oman.

I returned to India [ [Images](#) ] when I was 15 and have been playing in India ever since. In 2008, I became the Indian national champion and managed to defend my title in 2009.

### **How many hours do you practice every day?**

Not more than one because there is too much work. Ideally, I'd like to devote at least two hours each day.

### **Do you enjoy playing any other board games?**

I used to love chess till a point. However I began to find it boring because you're stuck with the same pieces. Unlike that, in Scrabble each move is a different situation. There are always more than a couple of options for every play. And a lot of thinking goes into how one can maximise one's score. Scrabble also helped me to improve my mathematics because I could count faster.

### **So is English your favourite subject?**

(Laughs) Not really! The words that are used in Scrabble are not used in everyday spoken English. But mathematics on the other hand has always been challenging.

### **How do you improve your vocabulary?**

It helps if you have a basic vocabulary. But after a point when you go pro you refer to a dictionary that is so huge you cannot possibly remember the meanings of all the words. For many of us it becomes a waste of brain space to remember the word and its meaning.

### **So how do you remember words? Do you just rote learn them from the dictionary?**

We have certain systems that give us pre-defined lists of words. Personally, I study by probability -- according to what is most likely to appear on the rack as seven- to eight-letter words. Scrabble players also have a software called *Zyzyva* that shows you words that you may tend to forget more frequently than others. Even though I do use *Zyzyva*, I prefer printouts. Also, *jumbletime.com* is the site I visit most often because it helps me quickly spot seven and eight letter words; *isc.ro* is another site on which I am active. It is an online scrabble site where you can compete with the best in the world.

### **So are there any words that have the letter 'Q' and not a 'U' following it?**

(Laughs) Oh yes there are! There's a word called Qi (pronounced 'Chi') that is acceptable in Scrabble. Qat, qanat, qoph, waqf... are just some of the many. In fact, with 'Qi' itself you can score a 64 point play if you place it on the triple letter score!

### **'Q' is generally perceived to be the most hated tile. What comes second?**

'V', because there are no two-letter words with it in the English dictionary. It acts as a blocker. Personally, I also don't like 'W' because it is tough to find to many words with 'W'. Also, with 'W' you need the right vowel. W-U is the worst combination you can ever have.

### **And what is the most-loved tile?**

The blank is the most useful tile. It is used to form a bingo and you can score more than 70-plus points. And since there are only two, you hope to pick up at least one. If you get both the blanks, you can easily beat the best player in the world. Followed by the blank is the letter 'S', because you can form plurals with it. Finally there is the vowel 'E'. There are many words you can make out of the letter. In fact, 12 out of the 100 tiles are E, which proves that it's the most commonly used letter in the alphabet.

### **How did your folks at home take to the idea of you playing Scrabble?**

Oh they were very supportive. In fact, they were the ones who encouraged me to compete with adults. After winning the national championship, they encouraged me to participate in the Gulf championship, which was being held in Bahrain. I came to India and won an international tournament here too.

### **Who takes care of your travel expenses?**

Usually it is my father. He works in a travel agency. It used to be easier when I was under 18 when we used to manage to get a discount. Now we try and look out for sponsors. My college, MET sponsored my recent journey to Malaysia.

### **What are your plans for the future?**

Someday I aspire to be a world champion. But otherwise, I hope to get into marketing. Why marketing? Partly because I don't see myself getting into finance or HR. Besides I found it very interesting when I'd studied it as a subject during my graduation days.

### **Is it possible to just play Scrabble for a living?**

Not in India. In the US there are championships where the prize money goes as high as \$25,000. But there is always a chance that you may not win, so unless you are very good at it, you can't really make a living out of it.

**What do you do a day before a game?**

Usually, I try and relax. I also do a last-minute revision of high-probability words and play a couple of games. Most of the preparation is done about a week before. So by then I am all ready to play.

**Have you ever lost a seemingly simple game?**

Yes! There have been some and these things are bound to happen. A tournament lasts for over three days and the winner usually wins about 18 to 20 out of 24 games. My personal best has been 21 wins. You do feel disappointed when you lose a simple game, but then there are always those games you win that you didn't expect to. So it evens out.

**They say losing a game of chess can be devastating sometimes, because it's a mind game. Does it hold true for Scrabble too?**

Yes, to a certain extent. But luck plays a role in Scrabble. Unlike in chess, where you have just those many pieces to play with, in Scrabble you don't know what tile you will get. But in a tournament, the luck factor evens out. Besides, you cannot win all the games. So you have to just learn from your mistakes and move on.

**What is the one thing that Scrabble has taught you about life?**

That it is good to take risks sometimes. There are many times when you see situations on the board that require you to take a chance and you do. Sometimes it pays off, at other times it doesn't. But if it does, you win. You just have to follow your gut feeling and go ahead.

**What are your hobbies? What kind of films and books do you like?**

I love to play all kinds of sports -- cricket, basketball, table tennis etc -- and I watch movies and hang out with friends. I love reading popular fiction...the Sidney Sheldon kind. I love the concept of heist and robbery and my favourite film is *The Italian Job*.

**Do you go clubbing?**

Nah... not really. I don't enjoy dancing so much.

**What would be the five most important things to do to win a Scrabble tournament?**

First, you need to have a basic vocabulary. To win a championship it is pertinent that you know at least 8,000 words. How you go about learning those words is up to you. I prefer printouts. You can go online and visit the sites I mentioned earlier, or simply use the *Zyzyva* software.

Rack balancing is very important. It means you need to have a good mix of consonants and vowels. Ideally, if you form a three-letter word you must have two consonants and two vowels on the rack. If you are forming a four-letter word then two consonants and one vowel is enough because there are more vowel than consonant tiles. The idea is to have a decent set of letters for your next play.

Board vision can make or break a game. For instance I lost a simple game because I did not see an obvious play that was hidden in a corner of the board. A good board vision is difficult to maintain but is a must if you want to win consistently.

Strategic thinking is just as important as having a good vocabulary. Just knowing words won't help. You need to know how to maximise your score with the tiles in your rack. The current world champion believes that the first three moves are crucial and can define the way the game is heading. He takes the maximum time on the first three moves.

Finally, whatever happens, you must have a cool temperament. You cannot be lucky in every game. You are bound to lose sometime or the other. So don't make too much of the loss and move on to the next game having learnt your lessons in the game lost.