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SCRABBLE/Sam Orbaum

ACROSS THE BOARD

Scrabble is currently at the height of its popularity. A veritable academy of the game exists in the US, and yet most players are unaware of the strategic approach to the game.

The prevailing wisdom is that, as one doesn't know what letters will be selected from the bag, it is all a matter of luck.

Luck is a four-letter insult to the astute Scrabble player. "Well, of course you won. You got lucky. You had both blanks, the J, X, Z and three Ss. I had all vowels." This is the loser's usual cry.

In fact, a good player *does* get more than his share of the valuable letters, and it will appear to a lesser player that his opponent is simply lucky. Let's look over the shoulders of two imaginary opponents, Joe (the better player) and Ed.

By the fifth turn, Joe has already picked a blank, and on a wide open board has a choice of spots on which to lay down a bingo (seven-letter word) for the 50-point bonus. Ed is struggling with poor tiles.

It required an element of luck for Joe to pull out the blank, but he has greatly increased his chances of doing so by using as many tiles as possible, thereby drawing more. After four plays, Joe has used 20 tiles, Ed eight. Counting the seven in his rack, preceding the fifth turn, Joe has already gone through 27 percent of the tiles. And by laying them all down in turn five, he got seven more chances at another blank or at letters with high-scoring potential.

Aided by a greater vocabulary plus the knack for 'seeing' words in the random jumble of his tile rack, Joe deliberately tried for an early game-breaker, and got it. (Try this simple exercise: based on the above example, pull out 27 tiles at random and see how many of the major letters — **SJXQZ** and the two blanks — you come up with.)

Joe, being the superior player, understood what approach he must take. Ed was looking to score points with what he had in his racks, and did not give much consideration to what surplus letters the next rack would inherit. With the letters **AAAEOBM**, Ed at once noticed **MA**, **BE**, **ME** and **BOA**, and found a satisfactory place on the board for one of them, scoring 16 points with a 'bad' rack — but leaving a terrible rack for the next turn (as well as getting only two new letters).

Using the same rack, Joe would notice the simple words, as well as several more useful and less-known ones — **AA, ABA, BAA, AMA, ABO**. He wouldn't stop there. Shuffling his letters around, he would find a six-letter dump to clear the unbalanced, awkward rack and earn himself a handful of new tiles (**AMOEBA, AMEBA**).

If you don't spot a play that substantially improves your rack, your score or your position on the board, don't hesitate to 'waste' a turn to exchange letters.

If for several games running, your opening plays are words such as **EQUINOX** and **JANIZARY**, and your opponent calls you lucky, don't argue — you're either lucky or Uri Geller.