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SCRABBLE/Sam Orbaum

## THE LONG AND SHORT OF IT

According to an ancient Chinese proverb, “Scrabble player who wins with the long word, loses by the short word.”

Or, in other words, a player who improves from the novice to the advanced level does so because he or she has learned to construct longer words of seven and eight letters. In addition, the major difference between an advanced player and an expert is that the expert has mastered the short word. If this sounds like taking a step backwards in order to progress, you are correct in theory, wrong in practice. So much for Confucius.

The expert will still play the game-breaking seven-letter word (bingo), but will sometimes snub the 60- or 70-point bingo for a short word of less value, in a ploy known in economics as ‘budget-stretching.’ As discussed here in an earlier column, this logic is based on getting full value for your letters.

The following situation arose recently at the Jerusalem Scrabble Club. Holding the letters **EIQSU**□□, a top-ranked player mulled her options — the most obvious being **SQUIRES** or **QUICHES** (there are numerous others) reaching a triple-word score and totaling 94 points. Scanning the board before making the play, she noticed a spot where she could score 66 using only four letters. To the surprise of onlookers, she chose the lower-scoring play (**QUEEN**, using an **E** on the board and one of the blanks as an **N**), keeping **IS**□ for the following turn.

Despite scoring 28 points less, her decision was a wise one. She still had a blank and an **S** for a likely bingo in the next turn or two.

Most players would be automatically lured to the 94-point play without considering an option. However, using four prime letters (□, □, **S**, **Q** + **U**) in one move is squandering their true value. Instead of using them all in one go, profit from them as much as possible by spreading them out over two or three good turns. In this way, you assure yourself of several good scores in a row while still having the blank on hand for a later bingo. But, be careful. If the board is blocked, you cannot be reasonably assured of an opening for an upcoming bingo, and if the game is in its later stages, don’t gamble — unless you are losing by over 100 points. Then you may as well try for two or three good plays to catch up.

Now and then this strategy will backfire and you’ll feel stupid, but that can be a result of risky speculation.

The serendipity of the above-mentioned example — four high-value letters, including two blanks in one rack — is unusual, so don't spend much effort studying it. More frequent is the rack heavy with the more common three- and four-point consonants. Many players get flummoxed by these tiles grinning up at them when they're 'thinking bingo.' One may feel annoyed by all those awkward **Hs**, **Ws** or **Fs**, and respond by dumping them for bargain-basement scores, just to clear them out of the rack. But it is proper use of these letters — **B**, **F**, **H**, **K**, **M**, **P**, **W**, **Y** — that can contribute more to raising your average score than anything else.

Why these particular letters? All are valued at three to five points. All can be used to form two-letter words — the **C** and **V** are not included because there are no two-letter words with a **C** or **V**, which makes them good defensive tiles but impotent for two-letter hook plays — and score well on premium squares (double-word, triple-letter, etc.). A good player reacts automatically upon getting one of these letters by searching the board for an open premium square adjacent to a vowel. This is a standard tactic, but often underrated.

All players, from novice to master, can (or ought to) maximize their scoring by milking their letters to the hilt — especially with two- and three-letter words, and high-value letters on premium squares. If your approach to the game does not include this basic premise, then you're missing out on half the fun of playing Scrabble.

Or, as Confucius said: "Better to spend an hour at silly word game with cool glass ice tea, than spend all day under hot sun in rice paddy."