

THE JERUSALEM POST LIFESTYLE

October 12, 1983

SCRABBLE/Sam Orbaum

SHORT & SWEET

[*Note: numbers are accurate for when this column was written in 1983. Dozens of words have been added to the dictionary since then. There are, for example, 101 two-letter words today, compared with 86 in 1983.*]

There are almost 50,000 seven- and eight-letter words in the *Official Scrabble Players Dictionary* (OSPD) — a daunting figure to the novice who seeks to improve his game.

There are less than 1,000 two- and three-letter words, which the novice tends to disregard while searching his rack for the magic bingo and its 50-point bonus.

The relative merits of long words versus short words is a common misconception among Scrabble players. Whereas a bingo scores a lot of points in one fell swoop and affords a greater turnover of letters, its real value is often lessened when it requires several turns of ‘fishing’ (dumping a letter or two on the board for a few points, or back in the bag, aiming for a bingo rack). Short words, on the other hand, can score 20 to 40 points instantly — and often serve the additional purpose of clearing the rack of tiles that hung up a potential seven-letter word.

In a recent study conducted by *The Scrabble Players Newsletter*, 16 games were annotated and analyzed. Even among the expert-caliber players, who are more apt to play bingos, 46 percent of all the points tallied were from two-, three- and four-letter words. Ergo:

Almost half of the scoring (46 percent) in a Scrabble game comes from a choice of 4,680 words (86 two-letter words, 908 threes and 3,686 fours), and the other 53 percent comes from nearly 90,000 other words in the OSPD.

(The remaining 1 percent is the value of un-played tiles at game’s end.) The cost efficiency of studying ‘the short game’ is apparent.

Short words can give you more scoring punch per game without your having to spend much time memorizing words or comprehending intricate tactics.

Every good player, when an **X** is drawn, compulsively searches the board for a premium square (double letter, double word, triple letter, triple word) next to a vowel. **AX, EX, OX, XI** and **XU** can mean an easy 48 or 50 points, overlapped alongside a word on the board, with the **X** counting double (or triple) across and down. Similarly, a simple common word like **HE, WE, YAK, WHO, HEX, FLY, JAMB,**

etc. could give you 20 to 40 points and more. Get in the habit of looking for a premium square next to a vowel any time you spot a high-point consonant lurking in your rack.

Other functions of short words:

1. Picking up additional points (instead of exchanging letters) when fishing for the one or two letters needed for a bingo
2. Setting up a place for a bingo
3. Blocking a spot for a bingo, if the situation calls for defense
4. Getting rid of difficult letter combinations
5. Seducing a less knowledgeable opponent into challenging your **VAV**, **KAT**, **PYX** or even a more innocent **LIN** when you've added your **N** onto **LI** in making **JONQUIL**
6. Rack management. You have **AAEKSTU**. Playing **AUK** leaves **AEST** on your rack, a basic combination for building seven-letter words.
7. Rack balancing. You have **AAERSUU**, and an open **N** permits you to play **UNAU**, with a rack-leave of **AERS** — a good balance between vowels and consonants, with no duplications.
8. Playing a bingo by overlapping letters, thereby also forming one or more short words, which can substantially increase your score (or it may be the only way to place a bingo)
9. Playing a three-, four- or five-letter word by overlapping (as in function 8) to exploit your letters' value to the maximum.