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SCRABBLE/Sam Orbaum

STRATEGIC ADVANTAGE

Scrabble is intrinsically a word game, but to win you must base your strategic approach on numbers.

Keeping score during a game is an underrated but essential factor of your game plan. You should play differently if you are winning by 150 points than if you are losing by 15. In fact, a player who doesn't keep score probably doesn't fully appreciate the merits of strategy.

In the process of a game, a good player will change tactics several times, based upon (a) the ever-shifting pattern of the board; (b) the letters in his or her rack; (c) the opponent's style, strengths and weaknesses; and (d) the score. The last factor is the most important as it qualifies each of the first three.

One of Jerusalem's most avid Scrabble players had been losing a lot of close, high-scoring games, often frittering away a substantial lead. Too many games culminated in a late, last-gasp bingo (seven-letter word). Once, after completing a game in which she won by a large margin, she looked up at her score-keeping opponent and asked: "Who won?" And in the very next game, she dispiritedly conceded defeat — at a point when she held a narrow lead. When it was later suggested to her that she keep track of the score, she smiled and said to her opponent: "No. I trust you."

Consider the following endgame problem: you're halfway through a game in which keeping track of the score hasn't helped much — you're losing by 160 points. The board is wide open, and the J, X, Q and Z have all been played. Your rack is □□**AERST**. If you can't find a bingo in that rack, either your game is strictly bridge or you're from a different planet altogether. There are no less than 380 seven-letter bingos, and if you use a letter from the board, 858 eight-letter bingos! Simple decision: play a bingo, right? This situation arose recently in the Jerusalem club. I was holding a similar dream-rack with two blanks, wide-open board, 160-point deficit.

My play drew gasps from the kibitzers peering over my shoulder. I exchanged one tile — a blank!

I had tried this exceedingly rare tactic only twice before, unsuccessfully. It is an absolutely fascinating gambit. My reasoning is that a bingo would still leave me 80 to 100 points in arrears, with all the potent tiles (J, X, Q, Z and the blanks) spoken for. With such a large deficit, one bingo wouldn't help, but two could pull

me back into the game. So I threw a blank back into the bag, virtually assured of a bingo on my next play, in any case. I thereupon drew seven new tiles — and seven chances at regaining the blank. If I don't get it immediately, I use up as many tiles as possible, maximizing my chances in the following turns.

Of course, my unsuspecting opponent has as good a chance as I do of picking it up. However, by consciously affecting this large turnover of letters in the mad scramble for the other blank, the odds are in my favor (my opponent has possibly switched to a defensive game at this stage, which means he's using fewer tiles, to clog the board).

Incidentally, it worked. I got the second blank, bingo'ed, and then bingo'ed yet *again*. Down but not out. I felt a little like John Wayne.