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SCRABBLE/Sam Orbaum

TRICKY SITUATIONS

“Three blanks?!” It happens with infuriating frequency: both blanks are already played and a third shows up, leading to the discovery that one of the first two was in fact a lettered tile played upside-down, probably for a boatload of points. [Note: the introduction of pro-tiles has solved this problem.] The perpetrator blanches, the victim turns an enraged shade of purple, and the club or tournament director is summoned. What is the ruling?

The published rules of the game do not deal with this or many other situations. Over the years, directors have learned through shared experience how to adjudge even the most obscure calls.

Still, incidents arise that many leave the director at a loss for a ruling. Yet he has to come up with a fair decision, and quickly.

Perfect knowledge of the rules, combined with solid experience playing and adjudicating, enables a good director to interpret the rules and come up with an answer that is logical, wise and correct.

How would you do as a director? Mull over the following situations and compare your decisions with those of the experts.

1. As described above, a third blank is drawn, showing one of the first two to be a lettered tile.
2. A word is played backwards.
3. Stuck with the Q at game's end, a player realizes that the fourth U is missing from the bag. He is robbed of a win by the fact that there is a letter missing.
4. The last of the Ss is out and you play accordingly, but your opponent snaps up the opening with...a *fifth* S.
5. You are playing alongside another game, and you suddenly realize you've been taking tiles from the wrong bag, and other players have been using yours.
6. The board is upset and cannot be reconstructed. Coincidentally, you were winning big when your opponent suffered that unfortunate spasm.
7. JINXQUIZ is played, accompanied by an exultant: “I've always wanted to play this! It's the rarest word in the OSPD!” The daunted victim, influenced by this ‘evidence,’ does not challenge this audacious phony. Later he cries foul. Can the word or the game be annulled?
8. You are a word judge, but apparently not a very good one. You err on a challenge, disallowing a perfectly good word.

9. It is a rainy Sunday. Your aged grandmother suggests an afternoon of Scrabble. You consent. Your first word is ZORI. “Hah!” she says, and promptly plays JEJUNAS/ZORIS, using two blanks (for the first J and the S). You glare at her. You challenge both words. She looks them up and finds that neither word is good. [Note: several dictionary changes later, ZORIS is now acceptable.] Her next play, in the same spot, is JEJUNAL/ZORIL, changing one of the blanks from an S to an L. Both words are now legal. You flip the board across the kitchen, claiming that she found these words in the process of looking up the previous play. Who is in the wrong here?
10. A player makes a three-letter word, but draws four tiles by mistake. Should the opponent take one from the four newly-drawn tiles, or from all eight tiles?
11. ANRGIER is played, the points tallied up, and the clock is hit. The player then notices he has transposed two of the letters and corrects the word to read ANGRIER. Nevertheless, a challenge is issued. Player no. 1 claims the challenger is nitpicking, as it was obvious what the word was intended to be. [Situation updated for clock play.]
12. STHENIA is played, with the S hooked to the end of ATHLETIC. Both words are challenged. STHENIA is good but surprisingly ATHLETICS is not in the printed *Official Scrabble Players Dictionary* (OSPD) although it is obviously a legal word. Do you, as word judge, overrule the dictionary of authority?
13. Player No. 1 plays a blank as a T, but later in the game Player No. 2 uses it as a D, and is immediately challenged. He insists the blank was identified as a D. Who is to be believed, and how is the challenge to be handled?
14. On a congested part of the board, a player neatly fits in a few tiles to make a number of small words — but unwittingly has played tiles both horizontally and vertically. The transgression is not noticed until a few turns later. Does the play stand?

The director decides:

1. It is the responsibility of the players to verify that a blank is in fact blank on both sides. Experienced players habitually flip over blanks played against them. However, a turn is not official until the score is announced [Note: today, until the clock is hit]. Thus, if the error is detected *before* the turn is officially completed, the play may be reconsidered. If it is detected *after* the clock is hit but *before* fresh tiles are drawn, the player loses his turn. (Once new tiles are drawn, the previous play is official and no appeal or challenge may be issued.)
2. The word may be challenged off the board, but in rare instances it may be permissible. The backward letters are looked up in the dictionary as, for example, BOX backwards (XOB). Curiously, though, some words thus played (such as TIME, which read backwards is also a legitimate word EMIT), would cost the challenger a turn.
3. Tough. Both players are responsible for ensuring that all 100 tiles are in the bag before the game starts

4. This situation arose in an Israeli tournament a couple of years ago, and remains a bone of contention between the players involved. The tourney director adjudged that the condition was identical to that of Problem No. 3, and the fifth S was allowed.
5. This is a woeful situation, as it taints two games. If the game is in its early stages, both games should be replayed with both bags of letters first sorted out. Otherwise, the games should both be completed, even with the bizarre distribution.
6. The scores should stand as they were at the time of the manmade earthquake. This is a most difficult call to make, as it opens the door to cheating. However I would be flexible with this rule if I detect that foul play might be at hand, having the game called a tie, or perhaps replayed.
7. Neither the word nor the game can be annulled, but the sly boor should be severely admonished. That's a lowdown dirty trick.
8. To err is human, to request a second opinion allowed. If a recheck is not asked for, the erroneous word stays.
9. The only rule to cite here is the unwritten rule of etiquette. Shame on granny for not sharing information inadvertently gained, shame on her for using said information to her advantage, shame on you for trusting her to look it up. Don't ever play with her again.
10. [*Note: new rules since the column was written are these...* If the four new tiles have been placed on the player's rack, the opponent chooses two tiles plus the overdrawn tile (three in all) from the eight on the rack, places them face up and then throws his or her choice of overdrawn tile back into the bag. If the new tiles have not been mixed with those on the rack, the opponent makes his or her choice solely from these, turning over three (two plus the overdrawn) tiles and returning one to the bag.]
11. Challenge ANRGIER. This is not a case for gracious concession. Carelessness costs. And besides, one of the weapons in a player's armory is strange words that look wrong (STRONGYL, LONGEING, RAZEEING).
12. The word judge never overrules the dictionary of authority, but a keen adjudicator would realize that ATHLETICS is a legal word even if it is not in the OSPD. ATHLETICS is a noun plural, and *not* the plural of the adjective ATHLETIC (which *is* in the OSPD). The OSPD includes all words with a root of two to eight letters. For words with a longer root, such as the nine-letter ATHLETICS, *Webster's Collegiate* or any agreed-upon dictionary should be consulted. [*Today's electronic Scrabble dictionaries have the longer words.*]
13. I have never had to handle this problem, but if called upon, I would identify the blank according to the player who played it, but would allow the second player to play again without missing a turn. This may be a flawed call, but it is fairest to both sides. [*Note: tournament play requires that players note in writing the letter represented by the blank.*]
14. The play stands. If it had been detected between the time the score was announced [*Note: today, the clock was hit*] and fresh tiles drawn, the player would lose his turn. This silly sort of situation recalls a sarcastic wisecrack preceding the 1981 North American championships, when a rule review

elicited a lengthy debate among the world's best players. Putting the squabble in perspective, the inimitable Hymie Ripps piped up: "Yeah, but what if (while placing tiles to make a play) you miss the board?"