

Scrabble

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players were some of the top competitors in the country. They had traveled to Castine from New Mexico, Florida, Wisconsin, Colorado and other parts of the country to play in in this small tournament, organized and hosted by seasonal Castine resident and longtime Scrabble enthusiast Andrea Hatch.

Hatch, 72, is a member of the Word Game Players Organization, one of three national groups dedicated to promoting the most competitive levels of the game. Between them, they host dozens of tournaments in North America each year. But Hatch said the first-time gathering in Castine was unusual on several counts.

“This is an all-women’s tournament, only the second one I know of anywhere,” she said. The other is in South Carolina. Most tournaments are open to both men and women, she said, but the ambience and spirit of camaraderie is different in an all-women’s competition. The women, several of whom were accompanied by their husbands, enjoyed hiking and sightseeing together when they weren’t playing Scrabble, she said.

Most tournaments also are quite a bit larger and take place in more accessible locations, Hatch added. “We had to limit this one to 16 players because of the limited lodging and eating options in Castine.”

But the women who participated were top-shelf competitors. “The average ranking here is quite high — higher than in the average tournament,” Hatch said. “They are guaranteed a weekend of very good competition.”

Competitor Lisa Odom, a 57-year-old software analyst from Minneapolis, is the second-highest ranked woman player in North America and the 32 highest-ranked North American player overall. She has been playing tournament-level Scrabble for about 27 years. But she started playing the same way most people do — with her family.

“Everyone plays at home,” the New York City native said. “But one day in 1986 I saw an article in the New York Times about an upcoming Scrabble tournament.” She registered, and went, and was soundly beaten. It was a humbling experience. “It kind of scared me, really.”

But then Odom learned about Scrabble clubs — there are several in most big cities, including one in Portland — and started playing in that supportive, convivial environment, where she honed her skill and built her confidence. Now she plays at world championship competitions all over the world.

Her best play in Castine? “I was able to put ‘dragolman’ in a triple-word space for 97 points,” she said, grinning.

Dragolman? You won’t find it in a dictionary, she said, and she couldn’t define it clearly herself. In use online, it appears to refer to a kind of mythical being, and it is included in the members-only lexicon compiled and endorsed by all the competitive Scrabble organizations, verifiable on a computer set up in the corner of the tournament room.

Free summer camp for autistic children

FARMINGTON — The Autism Society of Maine will hold a summer camp program for children with autism spectrum disorders 10 a.m.-2 p.m. Monday through Thursday, Aug. 8-18, at Camp Summit. Openings are still available in the for children 5 to 10 years old.

The purpose of the program is to help children develop effective communication skills and peer relationships in a social group setting. This summer program will consist of structured activities supervised by two professionals, and college students or paraprofessionals participating in a field experience and earning credits toward degrees and/or professions.

The camp program includes craft activities, outdoor play, swimming, field trips and many other activities to provide children with opportunities for social learning.

There is no cost to attend. For information and to obtain an application, call the Autism Society of Maine at 800-273-5200.



Cheryl Melvin (center) contemplates her next word during a women’s Scrabble tournament at Markel’s Bakehouse in Castine on Tuesday. The competition brought 16 high-level players from across the country to Castine for a three-day tournament.

In that room, more strange words were filling the boards: “zeks,” “eration,” “mayed.”

“Yesterday, in my last rack, I had all the letters for ‘sfumato,’ but there was no place to put it,” lamented 72-year-old Susi Tiekert, who traveled from Florida for the tournament. Tiekert said competitive players memorize long lists of arcane and specialized words, and learn tricks for taking advantage of high-score spaces on the board.

First-time tourney player Diane McLaughlin, 68 of Arlington, Massachusetts, is more confident competing in

“Words with Friends,” an online Scrabble knock-off. But when her friend Hatch needed a 16th player to round out the tournament, she signed up.

“She knows I’m a sucker for a challenge,” McLaughlin said.

She got massacred in the first game and was feeling a little demoralized, she admitted, even after winning one of her later games.

“But these are such genuinely nice people,” she said. “I’m really having a good time.”

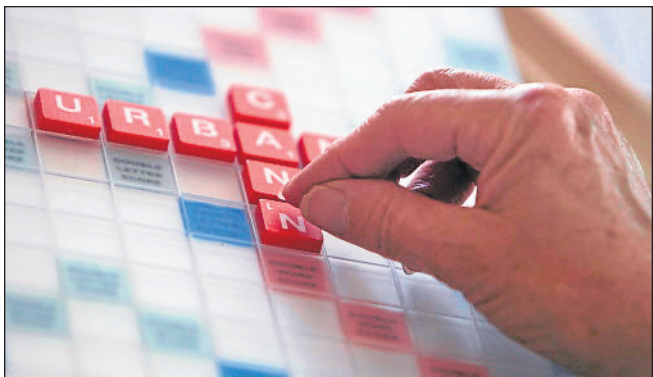
On Wednesday, Hatch said the tournament was a success.

“Everyone loved it,” she said.

Odom won the tournament and the \$300 first prize. Second place went to Anne McCarthy of Durango, Colorado, and Susan Beard of Albuquerque, New Mexico, took third.

Hatch said it was a challenge to organize the event and attract the right number of high-ranked players to Castine.

“The coast of Maine is a long way for people to come, especially from the western states,” she said. “But we’re definitely considering doing it again next year.”



A Scrabble player lays down her word during a women’s Scrabble tournament at Markel’s Bakehouse in Castine on Tuesday.

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