

Scrabbling for Africa

In the best selling Scrabble® crossword game, players amass points by using letter tiles to form valid interlocking words on a board. African players are excelling at the highest level in this international competitive pastime

THE 1994 African Scrabble champion, Ifeyani Onyeonwu, blew his shot at greatness because he knew too many words, not too few.

Iffy, a 40-year-old Nigerian ex-architect now living in Austin, Texas, US, is a master Scrabble player. At the August 2002 North American Nationals in San Diego, he won all his first 16 games in Division 2. But then he won just one game in the next 15. The Nigerian had used two dictionaries to determine valid words for Scrabble when playing in his country – the British-based Chambers Dictionary and the American Official Scrabble Players Dictionary (OSPD). But Americans only allow players to use words from the latter, and Iffy lost many turns for using non-OSPD words.

This board game has grown into a global sport. Semi-professional players compete for thousands of dollars. And Africans are quietly showing an increasing competitive flair. Their top players can battle across the boards with the world's best. Unofficial world rankings have a Nigerian in the fifth spot and a Ghanaian in the ninth. Ten of the top 30 players hail from Africa. Five Africans have achieved top 10 finishes in the biennial English-speaking World Scrabble Championships.

Scrabble is taken seriously in Africa. It's more than just a game hauled out when the television set is broken. There are national Scrabble associations with hundreds of players and clubs in The Gambia, Ghana, Kenya, Nigeria, the Seychelles, South Africa, Tanzania, Uganda and Zambia. Smaller groups play in English in Cameroon, Liberia, Sierra Leone and Zimbabwe. This intriguing, but oft-frustrating game/sport is also played in French at varying levels in Angola, Benin, Cameroon, Congo-Brazzaville, Congo-Kinshasa, Côte d'Ivoire, Madagascar, Morocco, Niger, Senegal, Togo and Tunisia. Some Senegalese are world champions.

The strongest Scrabble-playing country in Africa is Nigeria, which produced all



Iffy Onyeonwu, right in the foreground, plays against Sal Dimare during the 2002 National Scrabble Championship in San Diego, California, in the US. Picture courtesy of Sherrie Saint-John

previous African champions before South African Dr Trevor Hovelmeier broke their stranglehold in Nairobi in October 2002. Scrabble was recognised as an official sport in Nigeria in 1994, and there are 34 clubs affiliated to the Nigerian Scrabble Federation (NSF). Another 120 clubs are unaffiliated, and over 1,200 players have played in tournaments. Each of Nigeria's 36 states receives government funding for its State Scrabble Association, and they vie for honours and medals in the biennial National Sports Festival.

The Pan-African Scrabble Association (Panasa) is the only continental body in world Scrabble. Formed in 1994, Panasa organises the biennial African Scrabble Championship, with the 2004 event in Dar es Salaam, Tanzania. It promotes the game across Africa and has dreams of staging a continental School Scrabble event soon.

Why do African players excel at this board game? Top players have studied hard, learning lists of words and combinations of letters, now freely available on the Internet. And they play often. The Nairobi club is packed almost every night, as the worn-down letter tiles show. There is a strong competitive drive by players to be the best. And as the game develops, prize

money and opportunities to play overseas become strong motivators.

Nigerian Chief Toke Aka, Panasa and NSF president, said: 'I have a very strong resolve that Scrabble could easily rank alongside football in popularity.' He attributed Nigerian Scrabble prowess to 'all the top players having an undying passion for the game'. He said they play tournaments for the prestige of being the winner, as prize money is not big, and also for the privilege of representing their country at African and world championships. Recently, increased prize money led some players to see the game as a way to make a living, with top prizes of about \$500 in Nigeria.

This year Iffy has soared again. In January he was unbeaten in Lampasas, Texas. In February he was third at the Texas State Championship and then he won Division 1 at the prestigious Phoenix tournament. His ranking rocketed to 20th in North America. When interviewed, he said: 'I play Scrabble because it gives me immense pleasure.' Ironically, after his drubbing in America last year, he is now in line to make the US team for the 2003 World Scrabble Champs in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia. – **Steven Gruzd, South African Scrabble champion**