

Starbucking

Chapter Eight Words From the Genius

“Some words will cut you down like you were only in the way”

According to the Scrabble rules used by the Word Game Players' Organization, a player may arrive late for a game, but once their clock reaches 0:00, the game is forfeit. I was keenly aware of this rule as my car screeched to a halt in front of the Hyatt Regency Buffalo Hotel and Conference Center, and had I bothered to pay for parking, or had tournament staff not directed me to the escalators when they saw me burst into the foyer, or had the division leader not been watching for my entrance so that he could stop my clock, I would have begun the championship with *two* forfeits.¹

The division leader, my opponent, and I all shot a look at the clock's display—0:08! Those eight seconds not only permitted me to begin the game, but they were enough for me to quickly take control of the game, and my opponent, a novice from England, soon fell behind. Despite a ten-point penalty for each of the four minutes that I went over time, I won handily, 479-367, and after the game I looked up at my stunned opponent and said “welcome to America.” That game still ranks among one of my more impressive Scrabble performances, and serves as an example of the tug-of-war that arose between Starbucking and Scrabble once I added that extremely time-consuming hobby to a schedule that was already strained.

Like many other players who took up the game in the early aughts, I transitioned from “kitchen-table” Scrabble to the more serious, competitive game because of the book *Word Freak*.² I did not actually read the book when

¹ I had already forfeited my first round game, intentionally, so I could stop at a craft coffeehouse in Rochester.

² The author of *Word Freak*, Stefan Fatsis, immersed himself in the world of tournament Scrabble, Plimpton-style, and competed alongside players until he achieved an expert rating, and he has remained a member of the community long

it was published in 2001, but after listening to an NPR interview, I decided to look up local Dallas-area clubs. When I arrived at a one club, at a Grandy's restaurant, a few days later, all of the players looked like oldsters³, nothing like the friends I played with at local cafes. I quickly turned around, and I now find this decision highly ironic given how obsessed I would later become with the game.

Late the following year I spotted the paperback edition of *Word Freak* on sale at Barnes & Noble and picked it up. After reading the first few chapters, I found myself fascinated with the tournament Scrabble community that Fatsis described. I could not wait to attend a Houston club, and after just a few games, I was champing at the bit to enter a tournament. I had to wait another month for the next Houston event, and I spent most of that time obsessively studying in between going to several clubs and also playing online.

I competed in my first Scrabble tournament on January 11, 2003, and I do not exaggerate when I state that the experience hit me like a drug and would change the course of my life for decades to come. I did quite well in the tournament, ending up with an initial rating that was unusually high, yet I walked away with a powerful need to do even better and achieve an expert rating as quickly as possible. I had found another contract by that time, so I was not able to study all day long, but I still entered every tournament I could, about once a month. So powerful was my jones for competition, in fact, that a few months later I would lose the job after driving up to Ardmore, OK, for a tournament despite my manager's last-minute demand that we all come into work on Saturday.⁴

I filed for bankruptcy shortly after that job loss, and my car's alternator gave out around the same time, forcing me to put Starbucking on hold. With little to do with my time but study and practise, study and practise. When I finally secured another contract later that year, my desire to compete was at a fever pitch, and as luck would have it, the job was in the Northeast, where tournament Scrabble originated, and where I was able to find a tournament

after the publication of *Word Freak*.

³ OLDSTER anagrams to DROLEST and STRODLE.

⁴ Losing that job turned out to be one of the best things to ever happen in my life, because it spurred me to declare bankruptcy a few months later, and that newfound freedom from debt put me on a path of thriving, rather than merely surviving.

within driving distance at least two or three weekends of every month.

Word Freak was structured around Stefan Fatsis' quest to achieve a 1600 rating, which was, at the time, recognised as an expert, and once I settled into my new job, achieving that milestone became my top goal, taking priority over Starbucking even as the company accelerated their expansion. I surpassed a 1400 rating immediately upon arriving in the Northeast, and I then proceeded to play in a tournament every weekend for *twenty consecutive weeks*. I managed to cross the 1500 threshold during that period, but the rise in my rating came at the expense of Starbucks. I was only visiting new stores during my Scrabble trips, and I fell further behind with each passing month.

For the next few years, I told others that Scrabble and Starbucking tended to dovetail quite well, because they both involved travel.⁵ This was true, but as Starbucks continued to expand in the early and mid aughts, my two hobbies exerted so much pressure on my schedule that I began to have trouble keeping up with work. I also racked up speeding tickets because I was always rushing to tournaments, and I also began to annoy my opponents because I often arrived late. From my perspective, giving up clock time, even forfeiting games, was a logical decision because visiting the Starbucks that were on the route to a tournament was much more time-efficient than backtracking after hours (detouring to those stores at another time).

Arriving late while remaining competitive is possible in tournament Scrabble because a player with a natural ability to play quickly can win a game in much less time than the 25 minutes allotted to each player. Unfortunately, not all players shared my perspective, and some felt that they owed them a full 25 minutes of sitting across the table, regardless of how fast I played. To me, this attitude made zero sense, because the purpose of competing is (for most) to win, and a player who faces an opponent low on time can use that advantage to push the opponent's clock and force that opponent to make mistakes. I use this tactic all the time against players who have arrived late, as well as slow players, and I still cannot understand why any player would balk at being handed an advantage.⁶

⁵ DOVETAIL anagrams to VIOLATED.

⁶ Of course I always made an effort to inform the director and/or opponents that I would be late, as a courtesy, and this usually forestalled any ill will, but there will always be opponents who cannot tolerate tardiness—it is what it is.

By the mid-to-late aughts, my struggle to balance Starbucking and Scrabble seemed to becoming unmanageable. In 2005 I blew well past that coveted 1600 rating and into the 1700s, and by summertime I had hit 1800⁷. Around the same time, I began tracking Starbucks opening dates in North America and realised that the company was opening a whopping twenty stores *every week!* Prior to that point, I had felt that Starbucks might be outpacing my ability to keep up, but seeing the raw data really brought home the reality that if I did not cut back on Scrabble, I would fall hopelessly behind on Starbucks.

Rather than scheduling most of my Starbucking around tournaments, as I had been doing for a few years, I played fewer tournaments between 2006 and the summer of 2008 and dedicated more time to keeping up (or trying to) with the endless barrage of new stores.⁸ As a consequence, my Scrabble rating stagnated during this period, and I felt unable to achieve another breakthrough while Starbucks growth accelerate. To be honest, I was already feeling trapped between my dueling obsessions when, in the summer of 2008, Starbucks announced the Great Purge, and any hopes I had of recovering my competitive momentum was blown all to hell.

I will never forget the afternoon of July 1st, 2008. I was halfway to the July 4th tournament in Reno, one of the most prominent on the calendar at that time, when I stopped at Borders in Albuquerque to check my email and saw an article sent by a friend. The headline was stunning—Starbucks had announced that they would close *six hundred cafes* across the United States and Canada, an move that was not only shocking in the context of Starbucks' four decades of success, but also unprecedented for any multinational corporation. I will have more to say about the Great Purge later, but in the context of Scrabble, the effect of their decision was immediate.

I quickly emailed the director to say that I was dropping out of the early bird tournaments, and I then bolted out of the bookstore and raced northward, towards Colorado, for a blitz of outstanding stores across that state, plus Wyoming and Utah. Starbucks had made their announcement without listing

⁷ 1800+ is regarded by many to be the true expert rating, rather than 1600+.

⁸ A second reason that I cut back on Scrabble during the 2006-2007 time frame was that I needed to generate media attention for Starbucks with the goal of helping the director of the Starbucking documentary gain entry into festivals and secure a distributor, and, later, promote the release of the film.

which stores would close, and that meant that I needed to visit them all, as quickly as possible.⁹ After the tournament, I took my girlfriend to the airport before speeding west into California, cursing Starbucks the entire way for their unwillingness to release that list of planned closures.

Although I really wanted to put Scrabble on hold until I visited all outstanding Starbucks, I could not skip the National Scrabble Championship, and that gave me only three weeks to blitz through as many stores as possible. I would much rather have spent some time enjoying my road tripping instead of zigzagging all over the place to visit every single store, but I had no choice, not without that list, and to this day I consider Starbucks' lack of transparency to be one of the company's most annoying characteristics.

As the weeks evaporated and the NSC neared, I found myself calculating and recalculating how late I could push my departure while still visiting as many stores as possible. I finally decided that I had to start the cross-country drive on the Wednesday before the championship. I was in Yucaipa that morning, and a straight shot to Orlando would have been 2440 miles, a challenging distance with just under 72 hours remaining before the first round of the tournament. Of course it wasn't a straight shot, not by any means, but instead closer to 2800, beginning with a fifteen-store blitz of greater Phoenix before transitioning to a zigzagging north and south as a picked off stores in a litany of remote cities that included the likes of Rudoso, Lawton, and Hattiesburg. With each detour, the cushion that I was creating by speeding like a mofo dwindled, but I did not have a choice—every store I skipped would end up costing me more time later.¹⁰

After Hattiesburg I had no more time to spare, and I ended up driving quite late into the night, sleeping just a few hours before making the final push on Saturday morning. All the while I had been touching base with the tournament director so that he could make necessary pairing adjustments if I was going to be late. Amazingly, I made my first round game, beyond

⁹ I could not drop out of the entire tournament because my long-distance girlfriend would be meeting me in Reno for the main event. As devoted as I was to Starbucking, I was not about to forgo time with her to go visit more Starbucks. While I have never been good with women, I was not that clueless.

¹⁰ Batesville, MS, is one such example—it did in fact end up on the closure list, and after the NSC I had travel well out of my way to see that store.

exhausted, and somehow I managed to win against a rather strong opponent.

Exhaustion soon got the better of me, and I only managed two wins that first day, but the truth is that my mind was not focused on Scrabble. When I checked the news that afternoon, I saw that Starbucks had finally given in to pressure and published a list of closing stores. Now, clearly they did not purposefully withhold that list until the NSC began, and it would be insane, not to mention narcissistic, to even think that, but I'm not going to lie—it kinda felt personal¹¹.

By the time the final day of the tournament rolled around, I was still irritated, and then I read another piece of jaw-dropping news—Starbucks Australia had announced the closure of 75% of their cafes by week's end. My heart skipped a beat when I read the news, and my literal first thought was to drop out of the championship and get on the next plane to Sydney. With the first game of the morning fast approaching, I did some furious searching and found airfare to Australia that I could afford, though not without putting a serious hurting on my savings. I will never know if I would have made such an abrupt and expensive change of plans, because after calling a couple of stores down under, I learned that stores would actually begin closing on Thursday. It was already nearly Wednesday in Australia, and by the time I touched down, many stores would be closed already—I never had a chance.

In retrospect, the timing of the announcement was for the best, because if I had depleted my savings on a last-minute jaunt to Australia, I would not have been able to afford the multi-country tour that I would make the following year.¹² Still, in the moment, I was quite angry with Starbucks, feeling like they had “betrayed” me by not giving me the heads up about closures, even though, yes, objectively speaking, I have no relationship with the company, and they never promised me anything.

Angry and demoralised, I returned to the championship and finished with a mediocre 14-14 record, but I hardly cared, because even though Australia was out of reach, I was determined not to lose any North American stores. I

¹¹ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QF38tMQ7HaE>

¹² When I finally did visit Australia, to see the remaining two dozen stores, I traveled in a much more efficient manner that took me around the globe over a three-month period.

spent the next few months criss-crossing the country yet again, and Canada, to see all of the stores that would be closing. I only played tournaments that coincided with my route, and Scrabble remained in the background for the next few months.

Other than one store I missed by mistake, I was able to visit every store on the closure list by the time that I began a new contract in Wisconsin. I was eager to return my focus to Scrabble, and even though I still had a mapful of unvisited Starbucks, I was in no hurry as they were not expected to close anytime soon. Well, a mere few months later, just as I was getting my Scrabble groove back, Starbucks announced the second phase of the Great Purge, the closure of 300 additional stores. Still in the middle of that job, and much more financially responsible than my younger self, I could not drop everything to go touring, and I had to settle for weekend trips focused on picking off stores within driving distance.

By the time the job ended, Starbucks had published a list of the second wave of closures, and this made it relatively straightforward to visit them all. At that point I could have returned my focus to Scrabble, but by then my priorities had shifted again. With a year's worth of savings, I was eager to return to Europe after my aborted 2008 trip¹³. That trip last three months, and shortly upon my return I took off again, for Chile this time. As expected, my tiling skills had diminished during my hiatus, and once I resumed competition, my rating plummeted.

To say that I found a low expert rating to be agonising, even tortuous, is an understatement. Truth be told, words cannot express how much of my sense of self-worth and identity was tied up in my Scrabble rating during the height of my Scrabble fever, and my mind was fixated on a 2000 rating and a top-ten ranking. At the same time, Starbucking also defined me, but on a larger, global, scale, and those recurring periods of hiatus from Scrabble were as inevitable as they were painful.

My Scrabble progress continued to stagnate for the remainder of the year while I cleaned up the relatively small number of U.S. Starbucks still

¹³ In the spring 2008 I took off for Europe with plans to tour until the National Scrabble Championship, but picked up a water-borne bug in Lebanon and had to abort.

unvisited, most of which had opened during the previous year¹⁴. A few months later, in late 2009, I returned to Siemens for another contract, and this one held the promise of lasting a full year. The prospect of being in the Northeast for such a long time gave me the idea to embark on a project that I dubbed my Scrabble Big Year¹⁵. The idea was to compete in at least one tournament every single weekend of the calendar year, and after one final Starbucks trip, to Mexico, I put Starbucks squarely in the background for all of 2010.

My Big Year was amazingly successful. Even though I had stopped playing at clubs or online, playing every single weekend served to hone my skills, and I went through a period when others complained that I was “winning everything”. Within a few months I had broken the 1900 rating mark and eventually achieved a peak rating of 1957. At the same time I was competing with another player for the distinction of having played the most tournament games for the season, and eventually I prevailed because was able to endure the stress of nonstop travel while she gave in to exhaustion.

The completion of my Scrabble Big Year coincided with the end of my contract, and after a year of nonstop competition, I was ready to take a break from Scrabble and throw myself back into Starbucks. However, in the aftermath of the Great Purge, Starbucks had opened/relocated only a dozen stores in all of 2010, leaving me free to set my sights abroad. After fourteen months of saving, I was ready to embark upon my longest overseas trip ever, a four-month round-the-world tour during which I played no Scrabble—my longest period without a game since I began competing in 2003.

Domestic store openings (and relocations) ramped up over the next few years, but quite slowly relative to the explosive growth that Starbucks was seeing in the aughts. I felt little or no pressure to keep up with those openings, simply fitting them in my other travel plans, and instead I continued to focus on overseas Starbucks with long trips in 2012 and 2013, then again in 2015 and 2016. I no longer had to put Scrabble on hold while abroad, however, because in late 2011 the focus of my Scrabbling shifted to

¹⁴ The post-Purge openings were scant—Starbucks only opened a few dozen corporate stores in the United States in 2009, compared with nearly 500 in 2008.

¹⁵ Based on the coveted bird watching accomplishment.

Collins, the lexicon used in most of the Scrabbling world outside of North America. With the ability to compete internationally, I began to plan overseas trips that coincided with foreign tournaments.

Incorporating Scrabble into my overseas Starbuckling was not without its cost, however. In the United States and Canada, if I had to skip a store during a given trip, I could assume that I would have another chance to see it within a year, two at worst. Sure, the Great Purge taught me that no Starbucks is guaranteed to live forever, but after that huge setback for the company, newly-returned CEO Howard Schultz published an open letter in which he admitted to overbuilding and committed to wiser store placements in the future. This gave me confidence that I would have a few years at least to visit any new store openings, and as it turned out, for over a decade, until the COVID-19 pandemic, only a few stores would end up closing down within two years of their opening.

Overseas, the picture was different, because if I had to skip a store to play Scrabble, there was no guarantee that I would return to location in the foreseeable future, and I thus needed to make every effort to see every store on my list while en route to tournaments. This need created situations like Durham, England, where the store had not yet opened its doors at the scheduled time of 8:00, and any wait would make me late for a tournament in Coventry (three hours to the south). Fortunately I was able to catch the eye of a barista and persuade him to sell me a bottled coffee so I could check that store off my list.¹⁶

While I did get that Durham store, I am certain that many of the stores I skipped across Europe and Asia due to Scrabble have now closed (the COVID-19 pandemic took a huge toll on Starbucks), and while I could have maxed out my Starbucks total and traveled in a more relaxed manner without Scrabble, my perspective on Starbuckling had changed. I was still dedicated to the project, but not to the exclusion of all other activities, and reaching the highest rungs of the Scrabble rankings was almost as important as visiting “every” Starbucks.

¹⁶ As of this writing, that store, at Framwellgate Bridge, still exists, but in the past decade, hundreds of Starbucks in the United Kingdom have either closed down or been turned over to franchisees (which makes them ineligible for my project).

The latter half of the decade created another shift in my priorities, this time not directly related to Scrabble. A family crisis left me financially responsible for my mother's care, and that forced me to take a longer-term contract. The work was not glamorous, but it was relatively stable, a priority as I incurred the expenses of traveling to Panamá every few months and spent thousands on medications and toiletries. Not only did these costs limit my Starbucking budget, but with much of my available travel time dedicated to Panamá trips, my opportunities for Starbucking abroad were limited. For about two and a half year, until the COVID-19 pandemic, I limited most of my Starbucking around trips to see my mother or driveable tournaments.

The life-imposed cutback on Starbucking had a positive effect, however, and I finally achieved two long-coveted Scrabble goals, a 2000 rating and a new peak ranking of #12. Although I still hoped to reach #10 one day, hitting those milestones spurred me to shift my priorities yet again, and I began skipping tournaments to catch up on the ever-increasing number of new Starbucks¹⁷. I also began spending more time in the gym, more time on the treadmill, and I began competing in 5K races for the first time since high school.

Around the same time, Starbucking saw a resurgence in popularity thanks to my repeated appearances on the internet radio show *Time Crisis* and as well as a number of media appearances centred around my 15,000th store visit. Besides the media attention, I was more directly engaged with fans thanks to Instagram and Twitter, and keeping that momentum going felt more important than Scrabble. Not that I was out of the game, mind you, but my Scrabble focus had shifted to major tournaments or trying and crack that #10 milestone. Little did I realise at the time that all that time I spent Scrabble in late 2019, when I eschewed the opportunities to fly out to the western part of North America for Starbucking catch-up, would prove costly when the world turned upside down a few months later.

In late 2019, a novel coronavirus was detected in the Chinese city of Wuhan, and by March of 2020, the virus named COVID-19 had spread around the

¹⁷ Human memory is short, and it took less than a decade for Starbucks to forget the lessons of the Great Purge and resume overbuilding.

globe and led to a rapid shutdown of the most countries, including the United States. Organised Scrabble was paused and quickly shifted to online play, but I chose to view this forced break from tournament play as an opportunity, not a setback. After a few weeks, once I had gotten over the initial shock of the near-total shutdown of the country, and the disappearance of most of my pastimes—Starbucking, Scrabble, filmgoing, the gym—I decided to make lemonade out of my the largest lemon that the world had seen in a century, and I began to work on this book.

In addition to writing, I used my pandemic time to make significant improvements to my website and to slap together an initial version of a Starbucks Everywhere app. I also increased my running, and once gyms reopened, I put more time into my workouts. During the summer, once Starbucks began to reopen, I took advantage of my newfound, pandemic-imposed, ability to work remotely to hit the road and catch up on hundreds of store in the United States, and the following year, once Canada reopened to visitors, I made that a priority. By that time, with much of the North American population vaccinated against COVID-19, tournament Scrabble had resumed on a limited basis, but I maintained my commitment to keep Scrabble as my lowest priority until I had completed my book and achieved some other Starbucking and personal goals.

As I write this chapter, I have played only six games of Scrabble in twenty months, and I have no immediate plans to play again. Oh, I know I will, because after coming out undefeated in that six-game tournament, after a year and a half with no play or study, I could feel that hunger to keep winning, but Starbucking remains the priority. Only time will tell when the urge for new Scrabble achievements will becoming overwhelming, but for the time being, Starbucking has the upper hand in the lifelong struggle between the two passions that most define my identity.