

Joe Edley, a three-time national champion, has been racking up great Scrabble scores for decades

Description

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Joe Edley tucks his co-authored book, â??Everything Scrabble,â?• under his arm and surveys the room. Around him, players sit with boards arranged and tiles upright on their racks. He begins gently â?? reviewing short words, simple combinations â?? then quickly moves deeper into board control, opening strategy, and the subtle art of rack management.

Earlier, in the January session at San Francisco Village, he handed out â??The Cheat Sheet,â?• a densely packed list of two- and three-letter words, along with short J-, Q-, X- and Z-words and other tactical essentials.

Assuming the role of opponent, he makes all the calls on tile placement and clearly shows how extra points can be scored through certain strategic moves, such as using all seven letters in one move to score a â??bingo.â?•

Edley enjoys mentoring new converts to the game as well as advanced players hankering to compete at the championship level. â??Anybody can beat anybody,â?• he said.



Joe Edley helping a Scrabble student. (Photos by Myra Krieger)

At 78, Edley is still competing â?? and winning â?? in accredited tournaments, recently winning 17 games out of 20 against opponents often half his age and younger**.**

A three-time national champion, he spent nearly four decades mastering not just the board but the psychology, discipline and philosophy behind it.

He is regarded as a â??grandmasterâ?• by organized Scrabble, a title that originated in the world of chess.

For Edley, Scrabble is more than a game; itâ??s his livelihood.

He worked at an advertising agency promoting Scrabble for 22 years, has published dozens of Scrabble books and collections. He has long held leadership positions with the National Scrabble Association and its successor, The North American Scrabble Players Association (NASPA), which coordinates tournaments and competitive clubs.

At an age where many might be slowing down, heâ??s still competing at a high level. He plans on entering another contest in New Mexico in June 2026, and then there are the national championships in Iowa and Virginia this summer. â??I still feel that, with the universe willing, anything is still possible.â?•

A singular pleasure

Playing Scrabble, Edley said, is a singular pleasure.

â??Thereâ??s always something more going on in your head or on the board,â?• he said. â??Itâ??s just that the act of finding a word in a jumble of letters, that act is fun. Thatâ??s the essential act of Scrabble. You donâ??t need probabilities, you donâ??t need to win, you donâ??t need to care about anything else other than finding plays.â?•

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He traces his facility with board games to his childhood in Detroit, where sensitivity to the cityâ??s polluted air forced him to spend inordinate amounts of time alone at home.

â??My mother had to work; she sat me down when I was eight years old and came up with over 100 things I could do to entertain myself. That was great.â?•


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Joe Edley tallies the score. (Photo courtesy of Joe Edley)

With no computers, only three TV channels, he came home to an empty house and became interested in games and puzzles as well as reading science fiction, mysteries, and puzzle books. He studied chess in high school and won championships at Wayne State University, where he got his bachelorâ??s degree in math and philosophy.

With all that alone time in his early years, he was especially drawn to a game called â??Jotto,â?• a puzzle where players keep guessing, using logic, anagramming skills, and luck until they find the right word. Edley said that he developed his anagramming skill from doing Jotto for seven years before he

had heard of Scrabble.

â??It was pure heaven doing that, and simultaneously I was doing the Detroit News word game every day. Answers were published the following day.â?•

After college, Edley moved to San Francisco in 1969. While working short-term jobs including cab driving, bike messengering, and airport shuttle driving, he landed at the Monroe Residence Club on Sacramento Street in 1974, where he worked 14 hours a week for his room and board as a desk clerk. He still lives nearby in the Marina District.

Edley befriended many others who loved playing Scrabble, chess, backgammon, double-Monopoly, pocket pool, table tennis and reading philosophy and psychology books. â??It was heaven on earth at the Monroe. My high was thinking and playing games and learning about how others lived their lives.â?•

He developed his skill for nine years before winning his first championship.

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Joe Edley talks about the game.

He practiced yoga, tai chi chuan, deep breathing exercises, and New Age mind control disciplines, and uses those disciplines when he plays.

After retiring from his corporate position, Edley started a weekly meditation group, teaching the practive to 15 or 20 regulars. He also teaches a one-hour weekly class to senior at the YMCA on Buchannan Street

â??I knew I needed to keep breathing strongly throughout each game, focusing on how I needed help doing that, asking the universe for that help.â?•

When he was teaching himself the game, he memorized the â??Official Scrabble Players Dictionaryâ?• and he made flashcards and played various competitions, each time gaining confidence even when he lost a game.

Edleyâ??s first triumph was the national championship in Santa Monica in 1988, which paid him $25,000. â??Everything I had been doing in my life was leading up to this moment.â?•

He later prevailed in two more championships and many more competitions throughout the years. He has had a few wins in chess tournaments, and he said he once won a pocket pool contest.

Edley was the first to win three national championships sponsored by the now-defunct National Scrabble Association, which was created in 1978 by the first company to trademark the rights, which were acquired by Hasbro in 1989.

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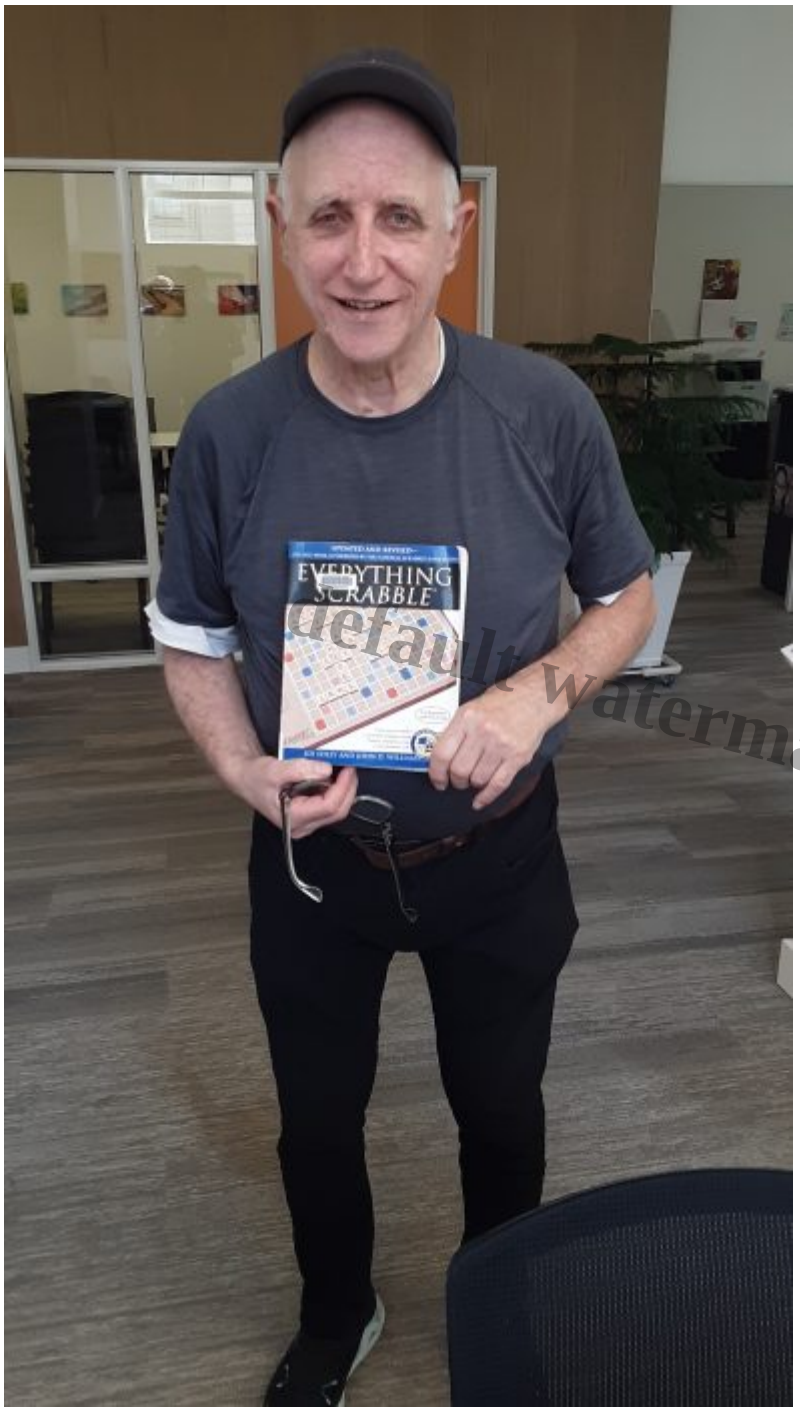
A long career

He worked for Williams & Co., the ad agency that represented Hasbro for 22 years, retiring in 2010. It was during this time that he wed Laura, his former wife. Their daughter, Amber, was born in 1995 and is now a physicianâ??s assistant. â??I spend time with Laura, who is still one of my closest friends. We talk on the phone a lot; we just canâ??t live together,â?• he said.

At Williams & Co., he ran NASPAâ??S rules committee and investigated allegations of misconduct. He also organized the national Scrabble championships, sometimes running them, sometimes competing.



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Joe Edley displays his co-authored Scrabble book.

His writings of Scrabble-centric materials are voluminous: about 22 books altogether, which include puzzles, calendars, and a self-published book on anagrams, called â??Anagrammar.â?• While working within the Scrabble organization, he wrote â??Scrabble News,â?• a newsletter on new developments related to the game, published eight times a year.

Scrabble, Edley said, is a great family game. â??Itâ??s intergenerational. Little kids can play their grand- and great-grandparents.â?•

He helped establish school championships and developed programs that used Scrabble as a teaching tool in schools on Long Island, New York. And he works as a mentor to young hopefuls on the path to championship status.

â??Mack is brilliant. His parents put him in my hands when he was 10 to tutor him in Scrabble,â?• Edley said. â??Three years later, he finished 7th in the National Scrabble Championships, a remarkable achievement at just 13.â?• Mack won the 2024 national championship when he was just 24.

Edley keeps busy preparing for the next championship game and attending a weekly Scrabble club.

A new game is coming

Currently, he is developing a visual logic game he has worked on intermittently for several years. Itâ??s called â??Symplay,â?• an image-shape exercise that is individually played on the website: buendiabraingames.com.

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â??Itâ??s good for exercising your brain; you can learn the rules in five minutes. The player learns to remain calm in the face of obstacles. All in all, itâ??s a meditative energizer,â?• Edley said.

He has renewed his partnership with a games industry entrepreneur who will be including this game in his emerging product line. He is thrilled about the prospect of getting this venture to the marketplace and said he will be showcasing the game on Tuesday, April 14, at the San Francisco Village, 3220 Fulton St., from 2:30 to 3:30.

Said Edley: â??I absolutely love creating new rules and new variations that excite my curiosity.â?•

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