

HOW RUSSIAN PEASANTS CAN BE GOOD FOR YOUR HEALTH

Most people believe that puzzles and word games are good for your brain - and could even help Alzheimer's and stroke patients. Joanna Mathers talks to a man who is certain of it.

MUZJIKS, if played correctly, is a killer in Scrabble: 128 points. This (the Russian word for peasants) can give you an insurmountable initial advantage and ZO (a type of cattle) and XI (a form of currency) are also big scorers.

Never heard of them? Never fear. They are all officially sanctioned by the mysterious World English Language Scrabble Players Association (WESPA) and sought after, by those in the know, with fervour.

"How often do you think that combination of letters comes up?" Christchurch Scrabble aficionado Paul Lister is talking about MUZJIKS, palpable longing in his voice. "It's like winning LOTTO."

Scrabble, that summer holiday staple, is a game of endless combinations: "It's like a dog chasing its tail all its life," laughs Lister. "The combinations are infinite."

But it also has a health benefit for the numbers of older people passionately involved with the word game. For Scrabble may, in fact, help fortify the brain against dementia.

"People [who play Scrabble] die as normal," says Lister. "But they seem to suffer few diseases of the mind, because of the brain activity involved. I have known very few Scrabble players who suffer from dementia."

The positive effect of all those word combinations on the brain has been backed by recent research from University of Calgary, showing that Scrabble players' brains work very differently from the rest of us.

Twenty Scrabble experts, and 20 non-Scrabble players, were put in front of a computer displaying jumbles of letters. They were then asked to identify, as quickly as they could, which letter jumbles were real English words. Electrical activity in the brain was monitored.

The research revealed that Scrabble experts were much faster and more accurate at this task, and made use of a different part of their brain than usually associated with such a task.

"They're actually recruiting areas [of the brain] more associated with visual processing and working memory. So they're doing the task quite differently," post-doctoral fellow Sophia Van Hees reported on Canadian website CBC News. This suggests that humans can use different areas of the brain to do the same task, something that may have implications for Alzheimer's and stroke patients in the future.

"If someone has a stroke and they damage some of those language areas that non-experts are using for the task perhaps, with training, we can tap into these alternative areas that these Scrabble

players are using to do the same task," Van Hees said.

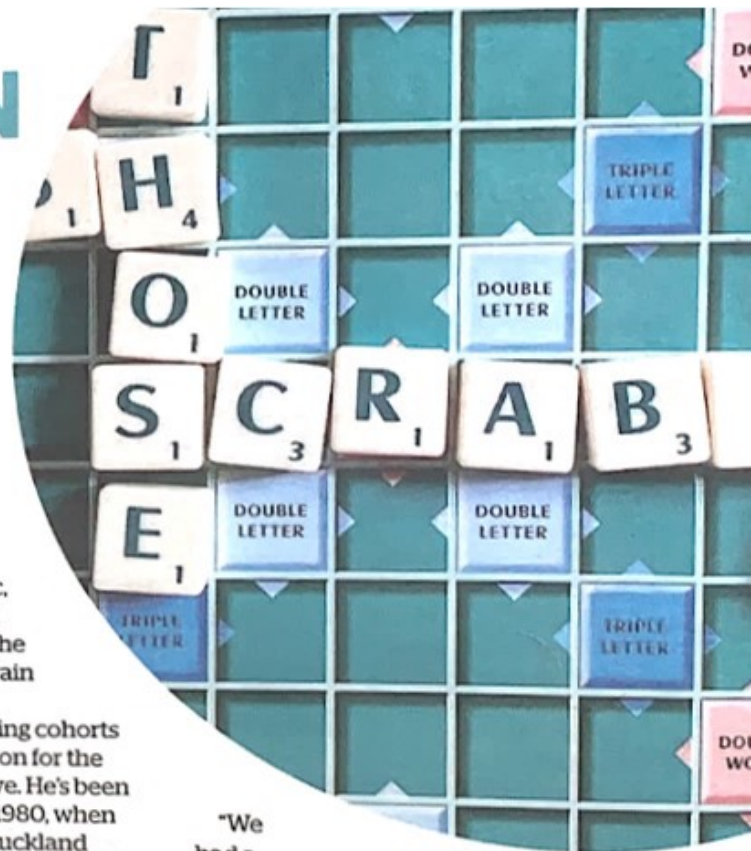
However people play Scrabble, the infinite possibilities, and the strategic, analytical and mathematical thinking required to master the game, make it an excellent brain workout for older people.

Lister and his Scrabble-loving cohorts across the globe have a passion for the game that verges on obsessive. He's been playing competitively since 1980, when he joined the University of Auckland Scrabble Club. The multi-linguist (he boasts four languages) loves uncovering the origins of words, which gives him a distinct advantage at the Scrabble table.

He's a major player in the New Zealand scene, most recently being part of a small team who compiled, then presented, a few hundred Maori words for official approval to WESPA in 2017.

It's the WESPA "Scrabble scholars" who decide what is acceptable, he explains. And they don't always get it right: "There was a bit of a fuss over 'jandal' recently, which they decided was a brand name and couldn't be used. They allowed 'thong' in Australia! It can get a bit heated at times."

Competitive Scrabble is predominately the preserve of those with more than a few decades under their belts, with a few notable exceptions.



"We had a prodigious 11-year-old in New Zealand who represented the country overseas a few years ago," says Lister. "The problem is as kids get older, they start being taunted for playing Scrabble by classmates at school. This can put them off."

But, as the research shows, the numbers of older people involved with this word game could be a good thing.

Lister says his local Scrabble Club boasts around 40 members - and believes there are hundreds of "unofficial" clubs around New Zealand who meet on a regular basis: "Many people meet to play Scrabble, which is great. But they aren't following the official rules, which state that Scrabble should be played between two people. So the results aren't counted."