

## Real Lives



# Scrabble Rouser

Katie Devanney plans to dominate the world — one triple word score at a time **By Caroline Tiger**

**K**ATIE DEVANNEY HUNCHES OVER THE BLUE-AND-WHITE TILES ON HER Scrabble rack: PNTSCMW. Her eyes dart from the rack to the board that divides her and her opponent, Jim Fonti. They're playing the final round of a three-day tournament at the Sheraton in Parsippany, New Jersey, and to place in her division, Katie has to beat Jim. If she wins, she'll be one step closer to becoming the best Scrabble player in the world. And right now, that's all Katie Devanney wants out of life. Jamming the toes of her Skechers into the floor, she scrambles the tiles on her rack to form one word, then another, waiting for Jim to make his move. But Jim is distracted. He admitted to it when they sat down to play. "You could live three lifetimes and still be younger than me," he told her. Jim Fonti, a probation officer from Long Island, is 42. Katie Devanney is 13.

Jim lays down WEEZER.

"Hold!" Katie calls out. She hits the red button on the clock. "Challenge." Katie could care less about the age difference. She beats people his age all the time. She beats

people who've been playing Scrabble longer than Jim Fonti's even been alive. For kicks, she plays her parents after dinner at their home in Paoli. Her mom teaches math at Cabrini College, and her dad's an attorney—they met through a Mensa singles directory. Katie almost always beats them. (When they win, it's because she lets them.) Of the 9,000 ranked competitive Scrabble players in the country, Katie is in the top 1.5 percent.

Katie's got her game face on—a mixture of pissed off and bored to tears—but when she stops the clock and makes the challenge, she adds a cold-fish stare. That's part of her strategy—psyching out her opponents. A tournament proctor weaves his way through the 124 other players who are ensconced in final-round matches. He looks at the board. "That play is unacceptable," he announces.

Jim picks up the offending tiles. "I must've been thinking 'geezer,'" he mutters. The play costs him a turn, Katie jumps ahead 30 points with CHURN.

"You win big, you lose big." That's Katie's motto. She plans to win big later this month when she competes at the National School Scrabble Championship in Boston. No—Katie plans to "shred" the competition, all kids around her age. Just thinking about it makes her smile. She's totally going to psych them out.

Jim plays BARF. "This is what *you* make me want to do," he says, leaning into the board and mimicking her steely expression. Katie flashes a tangle of metal braces. She can't help it. Jim's funny. Plus, he set her up for a bingo—a play using all seven letters that scores a bonus 50 points. She plays MINARET, and the score jumps to 214 (Katie) to 132 (Jim).

"Very nice," says Jim. "Now why don't you go watch TV or something?"

Katie watches TV: *I Love Lucy* on TV Land, and the game show *Lingo*. She and her group of friends at the Academy of Notre Dame de Namur in Villanova are the "random" or "crazy" ones in the seventh grade. They burst out singing in the lunchroom—songs like "Sk8ter Boi" by Avril Lavigne—and they make up silly sayings like "Beware the duckies" and then giggle whenever one of them says it. Katie and her friends characterize most situations

with two phrases: "It's cool" and "It's all good." When she and her mom drove to Parsippany from Paoli on Friday, the car's temperature gauge started to soar after a half hour on the road. They pulled into a gas station, and the mechanic told them it wasn't safe to drive. That was *not* cool, because Katie did *not* want to miss a second of the early-bird rounds. But then Katie's dad came and swapped vehicles with them in King of Prussia, and they arrived in time. It was all good. Generally, as the bumper stickers on just about every car in the parking lot in Parsippany say, Katie would "rather be playing Scrabble."

She started playing with her parents when she was seven. When she was 11, she saw an announcement in the *Inquirer* for a weekly Scrabble club in Exton, and she asked her mom to take her. It was awesome. Everyone there had memorized the lists of two- and three-letter words. They knew how to track letters and calculate the math of the game. They had strategies. They wanted to win. It didn't take long for Katie to become just like them. Katie's mom thinks Katie loves Scrabble because she's an only child and likes having "captive playmates." Katie shrugs that off. Whatever. Her adult Scrabble buddies at the Exton club are cool. When she won the early-bird round in last year's Parsippany tournament, they gave her a standing

ovation. Some adult players are not so cool, like the one at the Atlantic City tournament who called her a brat. Beating players like that and beating the few adults in her club who can still beat her is part of her master plan for world domination: Beat Jim Fonti; win the School Scrabble tournament in April; beat the top guns in her club; and, eventually, win the Nationals. Last year at

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the Exton club, when she beat the 21st-ranked player in the country 343-327, John Williams Jr., the executive director of the National Scrabble Association, took notice. "She's an up-and-coming star," he says. But no matter how much she begs, her parents won't let her go to Nationals in New Orleans this July. It's just too far.

When Katie grows up, she wants to be a

doctor—a general physician. Science is her favorite subject. She likes to help people. Plus, that way she can make enough money to go to every Scrabble tournament she wants, no matter how far from Paoli. At night, when she finishes her homework, she reads about the tournaments in her *Scrabble News* newsletter, plays Scrabble online, memorizes lists of five- and six-letter stems and anagrams. (Sitting down for dinner at Bennigan's on Friday night, she notices the Gaelic toast "slainte" printed on her water glass and immediately anagrams it: entails, salient.) Still, along with being a doctor and playing Scrabble, she plans to have other things going on. "I don't want to be totally obsessed," she says.

Katie challenges two more of Jim's words—OUTAGED and OUTRAIL—and finds a way to play her Q on a triple word score with SUQ. At 398 to 181, it's looking like Katie will place. Jim has 42 seconds left on his clock and a bingo on his rack. But even a bingo won't save him now.

"Just give me one hook," Jim pleads with the board, searching for a hole. Finally he abandons the bingo and lays down TARE.

"Hold," Katie says. "Challenge."

"You don't give up anything, do you?" **T**

Caroline Tiger is a contributing writer for *Philadelphia* magazine.

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