

He’s the Kiwi world champion you’ve never heard of, and that’s just the way the ‘Tiger Woods of Scrabble’ likes it. Tim Hume reveals the brilliant and enigmatic Nigel Richards.

Away With Words



Word champion: Nigel Richards did not start playing Scrabble until the age of 28, and became the competitor others are measured against.

IN THE eyes of Aucklander Howard Warner, the most internationally dominant New Zealander in any sport over the past decade is not Valerie Vili, not Mahe Drysdale, not even Beef and Lamb. That accolade rightly belongs to Nigel Richards, a spindly 43-year-old Peter Davis lookalike whose brilliant, mysterious mind has made him a superstar of the world Scrabble circuit.

“Without a doubt he’s the greatest player in our sport, ever,” says national Scrabble representative Warner, who, like many serious exponents of the game, considers it a sport.

He has roomed with and squared off against Richards at international tournaments. “I can’t think of any other New Zealander who’s been so indisputably the best in the world at what they do, for so long. He’s like a computer with a big ginger beard.”

Many modern sporting celebrities are freakish physical specimens: Michael Phelps with his rowboat oars, Lance Armstrong with his horse’s heart. Richards’ biological advantage comes in the form of the distinctive mental circuitry which has made him the great enigma of the Scrabble world.

“You go to international tournaments and everyone’s sitting around at the end of the day telling Nigel stories,” says Warner. “Of course, he’s never there, so the legend grows.”

Richards is notoriously reclusive. Tournament profiles typically list his age, occupation, and place of residence as “not disclosed”. Even his mother, Adrienne Fischer, is uncertain exactly what his job entails, although it is something to do with closed circuit televisions and security in Kuala Lumpur, where he has lived since leaving his home town of Christchurch in 2000.

He is monklike in his personal habits. “There’s not a lot of excess in the way he conducts himself,” says Warner. He’s vegetarian, doesn’t drink or smoke, and is frugal, wearing the same modest clothes and oversized glasses he has for years. He has no interest in television, radio, current events.

“If you asked him how the Crusaders went, I don’t think he’d know who they were,” says Fischer. “I

don’t think he’s ever read a book, apart from the dictionary.”

Richards’ only two interests are obsessions: Scrabble, and cycling. He cycles 600km a week, including long rides before the 8am start of each day of tournament play. Everyone in Scrabble knows the story of Richards’ first appearance at a New Zealand championship, when he knocked off his job in the Christchurch City Council’s water department at 5pm, cycled for 14 hours to Dunedin in atrocious conditions overnight, played all his games over the weekend, then cycled home having won his division, spurning offers of a lift.

While for most people, Scrabble is a wholesome if unenthusing family pastime, for thousands around the world it is serious competitive sport. Two colourful international circuits tour North America and the rest of the world, populated with eccentrically gifted players who devote their days to programming dictionaries into their brains. (There are about 140,000 words up to nine letters long which are acceptable on the “world” circuit, about 40,000 fewer on the North American tour.) For all the feistiness of the competition, the financial stakes are not high. “No one expects to make money in Scrabble,” says Paul Lister, president of the New Zealand Association of Scrabble Players. Yet Richards, who won the European Open in Malta last month with several rounds to spare, has made about \$200,000 over the past 12 years.

For top-flight players, definitions of words are immaterial; they earn no points, and simply take up valuable mental bandwidth. Words are strings of letters, mathematical possibilities. The centre of the world game is South-East Asia, where the shaky English exhibited by many top players is no barrier to success. Warner estimates the average English speaker has a working vocabulary of 5000-6000 words; he himself would know about 70,000. Richards, who has an uncanny natural ability to store words in his head and pluck them out at will, would know double that.

Richards is the only player to have held both the North American and

world champion titles concurrently. “To play in America he has to unlearn 40,000 words for the tournament, then input them back in his memory banks when he’s done,” says Warner. “It’s incredible. Most of the North Americans don’t bother trying; to Nigel, it makes no difference.”

Michael Tang is the Malaysian organiser of one of the world’s biggest Scrabble tournaments, the Causeway Challenge. He says Richards is the biggest drawcard at the event. “He’s considered the Tiger Woods of Scrabble.”

Comparisons are consistently made to chess prodigies like Garry Kasparov and Bobby Fischer, for the seemingly unparalleled breadth of his word knowledge, his ability to punish opponents with massive scoring plays, his robotic demeanour. “He’s what we call a freak,” says Tang. At tournaments like the King’s Cup in Thailand (the Thai King is an avid player), thousands of fans turn up to watch, and Richards is often mobbed, something he finds exceptionally difficult to deal with.

The king of Scrabble is a man of surprisingly few words. He cuts an awkward figure following his tournament victories, preferring to slip off as soon as possible rather than engage in celebrations or dissections of the matches. Richards lives alone, and seems to have little need of human contact. “He’s always been like that, happy in his own company. He hasn’t particularly needed other people around him,” says Liz Fagerlund, an Auckland Scrabbler who is one of Richards’ closest friends. “People, when they first meet him, probably think he’s shy; I think it’s more he’s not into making small talk.”

“While he doesn’t go out of his way to have a social life,” says his mother, “he’s not unsociable.”

INDEED, RICHARDS is widely admired on the circuit for his gentlemanly approach to the game, in contrast to some of the blowhards with whom he sometimes shares the podium. Win or lose, he betrays no

emotion. Stefan Fatsis, a *Wall Street Journal* reporter and author of *Word Freak*, a bestseller on the carnival of misfits that is the American Scrabble tour, rates Richards as among five inseparable all-time greats of the game. He says Richards stands out most of all for his unflappable, “zen-like” approach to competition.

“Once the word is played, it’s played, and there’s nothing you can do to take it back. It’s really reassuring in this world of hyperactive and emotional minds to see someone who has this complete sense of calm and sangfroid about his ability.

“He’s the best in the world at what he does, yet there’s no bravado, no ego, no aggression. He just plays the game then rides his bike off.”

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In an excised section of his book, Fatsis relates an encounter between Richards and an American Scrabble great, who told the New Zealander: “I can never tell whether you won or lost.”

“That’s because I don’t care,” replied Richards.

Richards’ talents have drawn attention from women on the circuit. “There are certainly women in the Scrabble world who are fascinated by him, despite the fact he’s no Dan Carter,” says Warner. “Some women find a big brain sexy.”

He is as indifferent to their interest as he is to everything other than Scrabble and cycling. The only thing that gets him riled are journalists.

“That’s the only time he’ll show any emotion and get a little annoyed, because he doesn’t like the fuss,” says Warner.

He and Richards’ other friends are amused at the naive of a reporter seeking to talk to him. Richards doesn’t respond to a request for an interview.

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