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NORTHERN CALIFORNIA'S LARGEST NEWSPAPER

'Word Wars'



Documentary. Directed by Eric Chaikin and Julian Petrillo. (Not rated. 78minutes. At the Roxie.)

Take the bright, competitive and quirky kids in "Spellbound," the marvelous documentary about the national spelling bee. Now imagine some of those youngsters as grown-ups, add profanity, drug use and bad facial hair, and you have a rough idea of what "Word Wars" is like.

Tracking four Scrabble fanatics as they travel from tournament to tournament and eventually reach the U.S. nationals in San Diego, the film is a thoroughly entertaining and hilarious look at a board game that's an occasional amusement for some -- and a serious obsession (or disturbing addiction) for others.

One need not play the game, or even own a board, to enjoy this film. And along the way, it won't hurt to learn the definitions of jerrid (a blunt javelin), dourine (a disease of horses) or gentian (a flowering plant). Armed with such knowledge, anyone can travel to Reno on his own dime -- as does one of the film's subjects -- and win a total of \$175 for a fourth-place finish in a tournament.

To say that the men featured in the movie are characters is an understatement. One of them, Joel Sherman, a reed-thin, sunken-eyed introvert, remains unemployed so that he can devote all his time to Scrabble. Bottles of Maalox always by his side to calm his stomach, he goes by the nickname "G.I." Joel -- as in "gastrointestinal." Matt Graham swears by "brain-boosting" pills to help his game. His home is littered with bottles of them, along with obscure dictionaries that allow him to think up anagrams in his sleep. Defending champion Joe Edley, who can be seen performing tai chi before tournaments, offers this unironic explanation for his victory: "When I won, I really felt like the universe was telling me what to do and I was just doing it."

Most riveting of all is Marlon Hill, who grew up playing the game in inner-city Baltimore. Hill could put any trash-talking NBA star to shame, and it's a kick to see him using his gutter mouth (between routine puffs from a joint) when going on about how crazy English is. His agility with the spoken word nearly matches his remarkable skill in putting winning words down on a board.

-- Advisory: This film contains adult language.

-- John McMurtrie