

WORD WARS

SCREENED AT THE 2004 SUNDANCE FILM FESTIVAL: It's exciting to see what's happening with documentaries these days. 2003 saw a resurgence in success, both critical and popular, in the genre, and now we begin to see a sub-genre: the documentary about competitors in word-based tournaments.

First was "Spellbound," about kids competing in the National Spelling Bee. Now, related to it and probably hereafter and forever mentioned in the same breath as it, is Julian Petrillo's "Word Wars," a perfectly good, if not quite as scintillating, documentary about hardcore Scrabble players. (I mean the players are hardcore, not the Scrabble. The Scrabble itself is regular soft-core Scrabble, with no dirty words allowed.)

Four word nerds are followed through the preparations and smaller tournaments leading to the national championship tourney in San Diego in August 2002. These men are dedicated, obsessed, even; the fact that this film contains abundant harsh profanity and some drug use should be a clue that this is not your grandmother's Scrabble we're talking about.

Matt Graham is a handsome-ish, 30-ish guy who favors torn T-shirts and occasionally works as a stand-up comic. Then there's Joel Sherman, a true nerd with acid reflux trouble (he guzzles Maalox constantly) and no job other than Scrabble. (Underemployment is a recurring theme among people who must practice Scrabble for three or four hours a day.)

We also meet Joe Edley, the reigning national champion, a calm family man who uses tai chi to focus himself. His contrast -- in fact, the contrast of most Scrabble pros -- is Marlon Hill, a dreadlocked black man from the Baltimore 'hoods who swears like a sailor and smokes pot like, um, a sailor. Everything about him suggests a Spike Lee film or a UPN sitcom, yet he wins game after game of Scrabble. His formal education is lacking, but his knowledge of Scrabble-friendly vocabulary is immense.

They're a quirky, funny lot of guys, friendly but still competitive with each other, each plagued by insecurity and anxiety over the coming nationals.

Not a lot of time is spent on actual plays in the games. We see highlights and final scores, with more emphasis placed on the men's pre-game jitters and mid-tournament woes.

Still, it is enough to demonstrate the awesome ability involved here, even if suspense and dramatic tension are not built quite as well as they might have been. For those of us who, like Bart Simpson, rely on words like "qwijibo" to make high scores, it's an entertaining look at the ones who make the game look easy.

Worth A Look

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