

'Word Wars': Scrabble's Alphabet Super Bowl

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Friday, May 14, 2004; Page C05

One of the best films of last year was "Spellbound," a documentary that followed eight kids as they traveled the spelling bee circuit, ultimately ending up at the national championships in Washington, D.C.

"Word Wars," by Eric Chaikin and Julian Petrillo, aspires to the same heights of narrative tension, and clearly it is aimed at the same core audience of word fans. Indeed, hard-core aficionados of the English language and all its complexity, nuance and infuriating idiosyncrasy will no doubt delight in this documentary about competitive Scrabble. If "Word Wars" doesn't begin to reach the same dramatic heights as its predecessor, it will still be a welcome fix to audiences for whom today's Jumble game just isn't enough.

"Word Wars" begins in December 2001, nine months before the national Scrabble championships in San Diego. The film follows four players as they play local and regional tournaments, pickup games in New York's Washington Square Park, and high stakes after-hours games that could have been plucked out of a scene in "The Sopranos." Unlike the appealing, if quirky, children of "Spellbound," the men of "Word Wars" aren't particularly easy to root for. Each of them is a misanthropic bundle of compulsion and competitive animus, a self-absorbed misfit who secretly -- or not so secretly -- believes he's smarter than the rest of the world.

We meet: Matthew, a bitter stand-up comedian who's addicted to herbal "brain boosting" supplements, which he chases down with copious amounts of Starbucks coffee; "G.I. Joel," so named because of a chronic gastrointestinal condition that he insists makes it impossible for him to hold down a regular job; Joe, the reigning champ who practices Tai Chi and meditation before every game; and Marlon, a hotheaded tyro from East Baltimore who insists that he despises the racism of the English language even as he teases out anagrams and obscure meanings with offhanded ease. (The filmmakers found their characters through Wall Street Journal reporter Stefan Fatsis, on whose book "Word Freak" the movie is loosely based. Fatsis appears in the film as a commentator.)

As in most good films about competition, "Word Wars" foreshadows its protagonists' potential downfalls early on (will Matthew OD on chromium picolinate? Will Marlon oversleep? Will G.I. Joel succumb to a fatal bout of hypochondria?). And Chaikin and Petrillo keep the action moving at a bright clip, adding screen graphics of words, anagrams and Scrabble information that provide a touch of humor and, during the tense final moments of the championship, a taut note of drama.

What's more, the filmmakers manage to get extraordinarily intimate glimpses of their subjects' lives, and it's in these moments, more than the Scrabble games themselves, that "Word Wars" is the most fascinating. As interesting as it is to know how many words begin with "q" without a "u," or that "poltroon" is another word for a base coward, it's far more absorbing to watch Marlon play Scrabble with his boisterous extended family, or to observe as a desperate Matthew plays Joel for \$1,000, then is forced to buy himself out of the game with \$500.

It's during these poignant, often deeply sad moments of the men's lives that their true isolation from the rest of the world comes into sharp relief. By the time the San Diego championship rolls around and the audience has witnessed the petty arguments, in-fights, backbiting and temper tantrums that most of the players have engaged in, it will be difficult to choose a favorite. And it will come as no surprise that, when the winner finally collects his \$25,000 prize, never has a champion looked so miserable.

Word Wars (76 minutes, at the AFI Silver) is not rated. It contains profanity and some drug use.