



Northern Ireland Scrabble Championships 9 and 10 February 2008

On 9 and 10 February 2008, 38 players from all over Great Britain and Ireland descended upon the Beechlawn Hotel in Dunmurry, Belfast, to participate in the first NISPA Northern Ireland Scrabble Championships. The competition was not only unique for this reason but also because it was the first ever triple rated Scrabble tournament - ratings produced by RISPA, by ABSP and internationally were all going to be involved. Thirteen games were timetabled for this purpose whilst also deciding who the overall winner of the tournament would be. After much consideration, it was decided by the NISPA committee that the tournament should be open format to allow everyone a shot at the title. However, ratings prizes were on offer to recognise the standout performances in the A, B and C sections within the group.

The beginning of the tournament's play started promptly at 10.00 am. The tournament got off to a flying start with bingos galore being thrown down on table one by top English player, Phil Robertshaw, and RISPA secretary, John Ryan, who scored 994 points between them. After four games, the early pace setter was Robertshaw, who was unbeaten and was well ahead of others on four wins, (Stewart Holden, Feargal Weatherhead and Paul Gallen) in terms of spread having amassed a huge total of +744. Two local players, Richard Kennedy and Liam Donnelly, had also made a great start with a record of 3-1.

However, after another three games the standings table had changed considerably. Robertshaw's tournament took a turn for the worse after three defeats in a row dropped him back to 11th place. At the end of Day 1, it looked like a two horse race for the title between Stewart Holden and Paul Gallen, who both had remained unbeaten for the day on seven wins. However, the chasing pack consisted of six players on five wins, most notably reigning RISPA National Scrabble Champion, Kevin McMahon, who had just demolished Christopher Fenwick and Siobhan Buckley in games 5 and 6 with huge scores of 590 and 595 respectively.

NISPA chairperson Sarah-Jane Jamison concluded the day's play at approximately 6.30 pm adding that the first game of Day 2 began at 9.00 am. Rumours of after hours games live and online proved to have foundation!!

Day 2 began early with a potentially crucial match on table one between Holden and Gallen. But after a phoney, DOOLA*, played at an important stage of the game by Holden, his opponent fought off a late comeback to win 416-391. The day's first round also produced the biggest upset of the tournament where Ireland's WSC 2007 representative, Olajide Ajayi Ademola, lost by four points to a player more than 50 rating points below himself in the RISPA ratings, Brid ni Bhirain, in a close game 375-371. David Mills, the only player who was yet to record a win after day 1, got his confidence back and went on a winning streak of four games eventually finishing on a record of 5-8 overall to complete a good recovery after a difficult first day.

At the top, the overnight leaders decided to make things interesting! After his game 8 defeat to Gallen, Holden lost his next game to the ever improving Alex Balogun Gboye. And Gallen himself proceeded to lose two games consecutively to Kevin McMahon and Richard Kennedy in games 9 and 10. The tournament had now been thrown wide open again with two wins separating the top 11 players. Things began to sort themselves out after round 11 and barring two huge wins for the four players on eight wins, it was now between three players for the big prize - Stewart Holden, Alex Balogun Gboye and Paul Gallen. On table one, Holden and Gboye took 17 turns each in a long grind of a game. Holden's early bonus of ENATIONS preceded Gboye's phoney AGITATOS*. Two further phonies by Gboye left Holden 100 points ahead throughout and Holden reached the final after a 369-312 victory.

In another important game on table 2, NISPA committee representatives Paul Gallen and Richard Kennedy competed in an excellent game where neither player deserved to lose. High scoring plays of ARGYRITE (62), GREWSOME (73) and FORA (56) by Gallen and DAZE (59), BLEAK (67) and JOINT (40) by Kennedy led to a close game throughout but a late bingo of INDENES (75) by the former allowed him to win 457-403.

The final game was crucial for everyone with tournament prizes and ratings points up for grabs. The Northern Ireland Scrabble Champion title was to be contested between Stewart Holden and Paul Gallen in a 'winner takes all' match, despite Holden's superior spread. After seven moves each all the bingos the match was to see had been played, SLATTING and CLAIMANT for Gallen and SATIRIC for Holden leaving the scores at 307-245. On a closed board, the game petered out and Gallen won 418-387 to win the tournament with a record of 11-2.

Holden finished second overall on 10-3 with Alex Gboye Balogun finishing in third on 10-3 also but with a lower spread. The B division rating prize went to Mike Evans with an excellent record of 9-4. Similarly, the C division prize went to another great performance, this time by Joseph McGinley who finished on eight wins and five losses.

The tournament was a huge success but could not have happened without everyone who helped the tournament run smoothly. The NISPA committee would like to thank Sarah-Jane Jamison who directed the tournament excellently, and all the checkers and the runners who also played a crucial role over the weekend. The committee would also like to thank Stewart Holden, whose expertise and equipment was essential to producing the high quality Scrabble tournament we wanted to stage. And most importantly, we would like to thank all 38 competitors who made the effort to come and play and contributing to an exciting and high quality tournament. We look forward to seeing all these players and many more for Belfast 2009!

Paul Gallen
NISPA PR Officer
Northern Ireland Scrabble Champion 2008