

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.



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

AWAY WITH WORDS

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 unenthusiastic 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 Scabbler 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."

'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.'

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 naivete of a reporter seeking to talk to him. Richards doesn't respond to a request for an interview.

EVERYONE SAYS Richards' talent is the product of a brilliant mathematical mind that is somehow "wired differently", although no one is sure quite how. "When he was learning to talk, he was not interested in words, just numbers," says his mother. "He used to point to the calendars. He related everything to numbers. We just thought it was normal. We've always just treated Nigel as Nigel."

Despite early indications of his special talents, Richards stayed in mainstream schooling, attending the low-decile Aranui High then completing his education at Lincoln High, when his family moved to Burnham Military Camp for his stepfather's career. He spent a lot of time on his own, playing video games. "He never went to discos," says Fischer. He got a scholarship to university, but never went, taking a job at the post office instead.

Richards didn't play Scrabble until he was 28. His mother introduced him to the game, frustrated that his card-counting had turned their Sunday games of 500 into a no-contest. "I said, 'I know a game you're not going to be very good at, because you can't spell very well and you weren't very good at English at school.'" Despite his poor affinity with language, he turned out to be a prodigious talent, and in 1997 won the national champs on his first attempt.

Richards provided an insight into his mind by revealing his studying technique to Fatsis. He compiles dense word lists, scanning through them along with a dictionary, and somehow the words stay in there. "I just have to view the word," he told Fatsis. "As long as I've seen the word, I can bring it back. But if I've only heard it or spoken it, I can't do it at all."

But that is only half his gift, says Fatsis. "I've never been around a player who had such a facility with recall. It's one thing to be able to have a photographic image of a page of the dictionary inside your head. It's altogether another task to look at the seven tiles on your rack and look at the letters already played on the board and decipher the riddle contained in them. Nigel has it all."

Warner believes Richards has an eidetic, or photographic, memory.

"He told me whenever he looked up a word in his memory banks, he would see its position," he says. "That's an extremely rare mathematical mind."

"It's uncanny playing him. He doesn't give anything away. You had a sense his eyes were rolling around in his head, as if they were scrolling through a computer screen."

Warner and others were surprised when, in 2000, Richards upped sticks and took a job offered by a Malaysian Scrabble aficionado. "He doesn't like spicy food, and he loved the outdoors here," says Warner. It hasn't all gone smoothly. Richards has kept to his cycling regimen in Kuala Lumpur, leading to a number of traffic accidents, and the lack of a New Zealand ranking saw him disqualified from international competition for several years, until a "Nigel clause" was instituted, which allowed him to represent his country in perpetuity.

But ultimately, says Warner, Richards has benefited being closer to numerous major competitions; perhaps, too, the character of Malaysian life - "people there are friendly, but private" - suits him.

His increased involvement in international competition since the move has raised the bar in the sport. "Ganesh [Asirvatham, a Malaysian who has become one of the world's top players] took a year out in his life to do nothing but word learning to try to catch up with Nigel," says Warner. Asirvatham eventually became one of Richards' biggest rivals, besting him for a streak, until Richards regained the upper hand and Asirvatham dropped out of competition.

Richards keeps performing. "He's been at the pinnacle for 12 years now," says Warner. As a man of such rigorous habit that seems unlikely to change.

"We probably assumed he would have dropped out some time ago, because he's done everything. But no. He just seems to love the challenge of playing. It doesn't matter to him if he wins or loses tournaments. He just likes to be in the moment, playing the game."

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