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Champions of the word At the American Crossword Puzzle Tournament, contestants solve the puzzle of who's best, fair and square.

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STAMFORD, Conn. -- On the stage to Doug Hoylman's far right, Ellen Ripstein, the Susan Lucci of the crossword puzzle world, is stabbing her erasable marker at the grid in front of her, filling in one corner, then another, trying to get the easy stuff out of the way first. This year, it seems, she is determined to finally break her string of near-misses.

Next to Hoylman, Trip Payne, who was crowned king of crosswording as a mere babe of 24 in 1993, is careening around his board, furiously slapping all the "ing" and "ed" endings on wherever they belong without solving the whole clue.

Hoylman, an actuary from [Chevy Chase](#) known as "The Iceman," is unperturbed. He is facing the audience, marker still capped, when he is told to begin solving this, the final puzzle of the 1997 American Crossword Puzzle Tournament.

The ballroom of the Stamford Marriott is respectfully silent. There had been fun and games all weekend, late-night cards and Scrabble, even some cut-throat charades in the wee hours (you try miming the lyrics to the "Laverne and Shirley" theme song). But this is serious. A \$1,000 prize awaits today's winner, but that is hardly the point. Something far more important is at stake: the grail of cruciverbalists across the country, the title of undisputed heavyweight U.S. crossword champion.

As crossword groupies and hundreds of vanquished solvers look on, Hoylman, a four-time winner here, methodically turns to his board and begins filling it in. His marker moves deliberately across the grid, letter by letter, square by square.

In my seat among the also-rans, I am riveted. It is almost too exciting for, well, words.

Like the swallows to Capistrano and the buzzards to Hinkley, Ohio, crossworders return to Stamford each year in late March, for a weekend of mind-bending, patience-testing, groan-producing championship puzzle-solving.

I had come this year on a mission, albeit a modest one. The year before, I had come from my Maryland home with no tournament experience and few expectations, and finished 198th out of

249 entrants. Since then, I'd pumped up my solving skills, doing up to a dozen puzzles a week. I'd returned for this, the 20th anniversary tournament, hopeful of a better finish.

There are 258 of us this year, half men, half women, ages 20 to 82. We've come from 30 states (and Canada), and are mostly "word" people: lawyers, teachers, librarians, computer programmers. But there's also a UPS driver, a nuclear medicine specialist, a steam fitter, an airline route planner, and the ad exec who gave the world the "Please Don't Squeeze the Charmin" slogan.

It's an "open" tournament, there's no qualifying and anybody could -- theoretically -- win. But we are handicapped according to skill level. And there are divisions based on age and geography, meaning that besides the prizes for the top three finishers, there are more than a dozen other trophies handed out.

Not that this means much for me. I mean, in this tournament, I am in the same age group and geographic area as the defending champion, The Iceman, Doug Hoylman. And I am no Doug Hoylman. In fact, for us amateurs, guys like Hoylman are marathoners to our joggers, power lifters to our 97-pound weaklings. Leading up to the tournament, they have solved as many as 300 puzzles a month.

As we begin arriving on a Friday night, for dinner and a panel discussion by crossword constructing heroes like Henry Rathvon (the Atlantic), Mike Shenk (Games magazine), and Maura Jacobson (New York magazine), it's easy to separate the tournament's contenders from its pretenders. Just listen for the solving times casually sprinkled into the conversation.

Weekday and Sunday New York Times puzzles are the usual standard. On a good day, I can complete a weekday crossword in under 10 minutes, the bigger and tougher Sunday puzzle in an hour. These are times I'm proud of, but they are no great shakes here.

Take Joel Darrow of New Jersey, who's been here 19 of 20 years and finished as high as second place. His best weekday and Sunday times, respectively, are 2: 40 and 6: 30 -- as in minutes. Fortunately, he is gracious enough not to rub this in. He's serious about puzzling, but pokes fun at himself as a perpetual also-ran, "the Harold Stassen of crosswords."

I do share some of the champions' savvy, though. When I fill out the answers to clues, for instance, I enter many of the letters in lower case. Why? It saves time. Compare the four, time-consuming strokes needed to make an upper-case "E" with the single, swift stroke used to make the lower-case "e." With as many as 30 "e's" in the average puzzle, this can save precious seconds, and in competitive puzzling, every second counts.

For serious cruciverbalists, there is no issue too obvious or arcane to be discussed. Pen or pencil? Most here use a pencil. But a No. 2 lead -- or softer? What about lighting? Is it better to find a seat directly beneath an overhead light, or to the side, so there won't be as much glare on your puzzle?

Distraction is the puzzler's enemy. So in the ballroom, our arena for three puzzles each Saturday morning and afternoon and the final puzzle Sunday, tournament officials try to keep it to a minimum. Green cardboard dividers separate each place at the long tables. Puzzles are distributed face down, and no dictionaries or hand-held puzzle computers are allowed. A huge clock keeps the time; cards are flashed at intervals to announce the time remaining.

Will Shortz, the popular puzzle editor of the Times who founded the tournament in 1978, had warned us that puzzles 2, 3 and 5 would be the tough ones in the preliminary rounds. But even during the more "fun" puzzles, the ballroom is nearly silent, the occasional tinkle of chandelier crystals and the scrub of erasers the only sounds. A dozen or so officials flutter around us, poised to dash over and collect completed puzzles.

Each puzzle has a different time limit; points are awarded for accuracy and time, subtracted for incorrect letters. A completed puzzle earns bonus points.

The points don't come easily. The puzzle constructors, some of whom are on hand to watch us squirm and sweat, have created some pun-filled monsters.

Fred Piscop's "Hand-lettered" is Puzzle No. 1. His hint: It's a "not-so-difficult puzzle to get you off to a good start (cross your fingers)." Thus, the answer to the first clue on this theme -- "Approval from Siskel and Ebert" -- is THUMBSUP. Others are "Recipe location, maybe" (INDEXCARD) and "'50s TV star in a checkered coat" (PINKYLEE).

I zip through this one in nine of the allotted 15 minutes, trying not to be depressed that the first solvers were done in just three.

Mike Shenk's puzzle is titled "Headlines," with the theme of "world news you may not have heard." So, the 12-letter answer to "Overpopulation cripples European capital" is WARSAWPACKED. No, I didn't get it, though I did figure out the 12-letter solution to "Supermarket worker victim of ennui" -- CHECKERBORED.

Puzzle No. 5 is Bob and Sharon Klahn's "Nowhere." A pun within a pun, as it turns out. See, the title isn't pronounced "no-where" -- it's "no-w-here." So the 10-letter answer to a theme clue like "Heavy-duty facial hair trimmer" is "MUSTACHEAX." I don't finish this one.

Sticking it out

By Sunday morning, the crowd has thinned out. Some puzzlers have given up, or can't stay. Staying true to my mission, I've decided to stick it out.

Before we start again, everyone checks the standings. The top seeds scan them carefully to see who is still in the running. Last year, the top 20 finishers were separated by just 750 points. This year, it looks like the spread will be much wider -- and there may be some changing of the guard. Joel Darrow, for instance, who has never finished out of the top 20, stands at 29th. He must be appalled, I think. As good-natured as he is, I know better than to talk with him this morning.

Showered, breakfasted, and currently 208th in the standings, I feel ready to take on the tough seventh puzzle, by syndicated pun-and-anagram specialist Merl Reagle. Today I choose a seat at the front of the room. I don't want to see the hordes of people who finish before me streaming by.

The theme to this one is easy -- if you're up on movie titles. With the Oscars being presented the following night, Reagle's theme is "I'd like to thank ..." The answers are the names of 12 movies that logically follow that phrase: "The Producers," "My Bodyguard," "My Cousin Vinny." This one has a generous solving time limit of 45 minutes, but it's over almost before you can say "cruciverbalist."

An hour later, the three top scorers in the three top flights are announced, the cream of this year's crossword crop. All this puzzling has earned them the right to solve yet another puzzle, this time in just 15 minutes, on a stage with the rest of us watching.

Making of a winner

We are attentive and polite as the first two groups of finalists, from the B and C levels, complete their puzzles. These are folks some of us might actually hope to compete with someday. But what everyone has really stuck around for is the final puzzle-off, the A level showdown among Ripstein, Payne and Hoylman.

Hoylman ambles onto the stage. The younger Payne, an Atlanta-based puzzle maker, fairly jumps up. Ripstein, a proofreader from Manhattan, comments about how short she is and how tall the board is and how she'll have to stand on tip-toe to reach the top letters.

Ripstein is the sentimental favorite here. Like Lucci, the popular soap opera star who has been nominated and missed winning an Emmy 16 times, she seems due to finally win after finishing in the top five more than a dozen times.

The timer is set and the puzzling begins. It seems an eternity before the first letters are entered on the board. Having seen the previous competitors solve the same puzzle (although with easier clues), we know where every trick answer on the board is, and watch to see where these masters might be tripped up.

In 12: 19, it's all over. Hoylman, the unflappable Iceman, has done it again. He celebrates with a big grin cracking his usual poker face. Ripstein, the perennial bridesmaid, finishes second -- again. Payne, whose early jauntiness disappeared after he blew a couple of words, takes a surprising 14: 45 to complete his grid.

"I didn't get anything right," he mutters as he leaves the stage. "But at least I beat the buzzer."

With a finish at No. 206, eight places lower than I was the year before, that's a sentiment I can share.

For information about the tournament, call 914-769-9128, or visit the Web site at <http://www.crosswordtournament.com>.

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