



DISPATCH

from

Connecticut

What it's like to take part in America's premier crossword competition - according to the nation's 218th best solver

By Oliver Roeder

Four-letter word for a fencer's implement?" a stranger asked unprompted in a hotel restaurant. "Épée," came a chorus of replies.

It was an early-spring afternoon in Stamford, Connecticut, on the eve of the 45th annual American Crossword Puzzle Tournament (ACPT). One weekend a year in this town, it's safe to assume that you are surrounded by solvers - people who know that an "etui" is a needle case, an "apse" is a semicircular recess in a church and an "ogee" is an S-shaped curve.

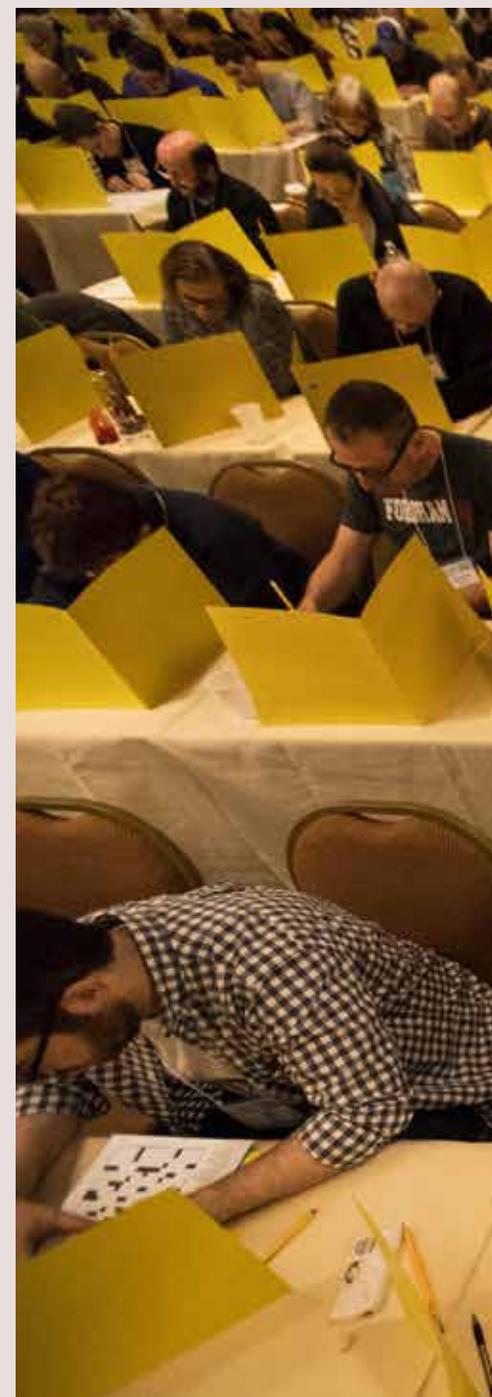
Stamford is an enclave of corporate offices and traffic an hour north of New York City. Save for brief relocations to Brooklyn - and a Covid-induced virtual edition in 2021 - the tournament has been held here since 1978. The venue is the Stamford Marriott, a tired three-star high-rise a short walk from the train station. It features a breakfast buffet, an automatic door that often won't budge and perhaps the worst bar on the East Coast.

But there are gods here. As of last year, Tyler Hinman, 38, a software engineer, had won the ACPT seven times, including the past two. Dan Feyer, 45, a musician, had won the tournament a record eight times, including five in a row. One or both of them have appeared in the finals every year since 2005. There are also entomologists and mathematicians and pianists and actuaries and post-pandemic prodigies just emerging. All share a superhuman skill: filling in boxes with letters faster than is conceivable.

This year there were a record 774 competitors, about 764 of whom are mere mortals who have little chance of winning. That field included some 300 first-time participants, another record. They hailed from 44 US states, four Canadian provinces and England and ranged in age from 17 to 97.

The 97-year-old was Miriam Raphael, tournament champion in 1979. In the 2006 documentary *Wordplay* (in which the Marriott looks exactly the same as it does now), Raphael relates that her husband died in the hotel right after the competition years earlier. "The place is haunted; I can still see faces," she says with a smile. "Not an unpleasant kind of haunting."

Sam Mattson, the tournament's youngest competitor at 17, has been solving crosswords since he was a toddler. He now has dramatic red hair and wears braces and is better



known here by his internet handle, Frisco17, which he scrawled on the back of his lanyard. "The community is very positive - and smart, obviously," he told me. Crosswords provide a useful common ground and language for socialising, he added, which has attracted young people like him.

The community does seem genuinely positive. This is largely a result of the structure of the competition. You're competing against a puzzle, so in essence you're competing mainly against yourself. This is in contrast, for example, to Scrabble, a game I used to play competitively.



Folded yellow sheets of cardboard prevent peeking at the 2018 American Crossword Puzzle Tournament

The games are remarkably similar (both word games; both often played on 15-by-15 grids) but Scrabble, which is played one-on-one and has an element of luck, can breed resentment and scorn.

Every story is now a post-pandemic story, including the ACPT. Thriving communities, often young people, were drawn to puzzles and games during lockdowns. Now, many of those new enthusiasts have ventured outside to chilly suburban Connecticut.

I discussed this with Ben Tausig, an ethnomusicologist and crossword editor, in a hallway at the

Marriott. We debated the redefinitions of work and life that have taken place over the past few years. His view was that games and puzzles had become “a source of self-definition and a valuable ritual”. So it seemed, at least judging by the aesthetic of many participants - black and white gridded sweaters, T-shirts, sweatshirts, socks, scarves, neckties, bracelets and onesies.

Many stories are also now of a divided America and democracy in peril. But the ACPT is a potent democratising force. Anyone can show up here to solve crosswords and sit elbow to elbow with, well,

gods. And crosswords can present a solver with any thing or concept in the world, on equal terms, as answers in boxes in a grid. Crosswords demand an ecumenical worldview.

I forked out the \$220 entry fee. In my pocket was a collection of Bic mechanical pencils, 0.7mm size, and a pink Ticonderoga wedge eraser, which I would need. Despite arriving early, I struggled to find a seat in the cramped ballroom. I eventually wedged between a historical society board member from Connecticut and an insurance attorney from New Jersey. On rows of

long tables, a vast meadow of folded yellow cardboard sheets served as privacy shields, preventing peeking. In the corners of the ballroom, large digital clocks stood ready to count down ominous digits. Points are awarded for accuracy, of course, but also for speed.

Will Shortz, 70, has been the impresario of the ACPT since its founding in 1978 and the editor of the venerable New York Times crossword since 1993. Although his tournament is now the premier competition in the US, it has been joined by others including Lollapuzoola in New York and Boswords in Boston. Shortz's twin passions are puzzles and table tennis - the latter of which he has played literally every day for more than two decades. (Shortz also owns the Westchester Table Tennis Center.)

The tension built. Someone screamed from across the ballroom: "Is anyone a doctor?" A competitor had apparently fainted. Thankfully, the incident did not lead to another haunting.

Standing at the front of the room, Shortz urged us solvers to relax, and to solve as if we were solving at home. Don't rush, he said, or try to alter your handwriting for speed's sake. Take an extra second to check your work. A battalion of volunteers distributed puzzles throughout the ballroom and an overflow conference room downstairs. Each competitor fixed a specially encoded sticker to the back, identifying it as theirs.

Shortz gave a countdown - "On your marks, get set, go!" - and we all exhaled. The sound as hundreds of us flipped over our papers in unison was like a flock of frightened birds taking off. (My neighbour from the historical society fed me this line.) The clock started ticking.

One by one, hundreds of people realised that the answer to every single clue was BLANK, and the puzzle could be successfully completed without writing in a single thing. It was April Fools' Day. The puzzle's author was named "Filip Starr", an anagram of April First.

The next puzzle was real. The bird sound came again and the room fell deathly quiet, save for the faint scribble of graphite and scrub of rubber, for the next 15 minutes. When you finish, you raise your hand and an official collects your puzzle and makes a note of the time. You then tiptoe out and worriedly

'We'll see if you're still clapping after this is over'

Will Shortz

Tournament founder and New York Times crossword editor

discuss the trickiest answers with your fellow solvers. ("Tetley, that's how you spell the tea brand, right?") The puzzles themselves are whisked away to a closed room in the bowels of the hotel, where they are graded by hand. Blank or incorrect squares are marked with a highlighter and are all the more devastating for it (they also hurt your score badly). The puzzles are then put through a scanner, a computer assigns a score and the rankings are updated on a website that everyone constantly checks on their phones.

For the first four puzzles I was "clean" - no mistakes - but not especially fast, and sat about 150th in the results table. Looming was the notorious "Puzzle 5", far and away the most difficult of the weekend's seven, made so by devilish clues and an inscrutable theme. The phrase "Puzzle 5" is uttered throughout the Marriott with a sort of dread; it's meant to separate the wheat from the chaff.

This year's Puzzle 5 was constructed by Sam Ezersky, editor of The New York Times' popular Spelling Bee game. The tradition is that Shortz announces each puzzle's constructor beforehand, and they receive a round of applause for having crafted the next torturous delight. "We'll see if you're still clapping after this is over," Shortz said.

The puzzle was titled "Ding-Dong Ditch", and had to do with sticking synonyms for "ding-dong" - an American term for "nitwit" or "fool" - into many answers. For example, the answer to "Vietnamese soup" became SAPPHO; "One with a crystal ball" became SEERSUCKER. While solving, I never fully understood what was going on, and when I learnt afterwards I felt doubly insulted. My puzzle merited much highlighting in the judges' room below.

The next two puzzles were far less punishing, and I solved them cleanly but slowly. One involved goofy confectionery clues. ("Placetodrink that's out of this world?" = MARS-BAR.) Another involved adding "DING" - ie, "you're right!" - to the ends of common phrases. ("Classic tale about a bunch of rodents with holey socks?" = OFMICEAND-MENDING.) I am, for the next year anyway, the 218th best crossword solver in the nation. I consider it an athletic achievement; my neck and forearm were sore for days.

The three solvers with the highest scores after seven puzzles advance

to the championship final. They solve the championship puzzle on giant gridded whiteboards on stage in front of the rest of their competitors. They hold the clues in one hand and an erasable marker in the other. They wear large headphones into which is piped multilingual audio akin to white noise recorded long ago at the UN. This blocks out the live commentary and lively crowd.

The gods - Feyer and Hinman - both qualified for the final yet again. They were joined by Paolo Pasco, a 22-year-old Harvard grad and puzzle constructor. Though he be but young, he is fierce. Pasco recently tweeted that he'd solved a New York Times crossword in 53 seconds. One respondent to the tweet, also an elite solver, said this made his blood run cold.

"This is the longest two hours of my year," Hinman told me, as we waited for the stage to be set and the finals to begin. He had tied with David Plotkin for third, then advanced on a tiebreaker. The two had a touching moment in the hotel lobby. "I guess I'll be rooting for you," Plotkin said.

The finals were preceded by an opening act: a crossworders' talent show, which included a shockingly good rendition of "Rocket Man", followed by an original crossword-themed song. Sample lyric: "People think we're nerdy and maybe it's true, but with our lexophilia you would be, too." Feyer sat in the audience - through the Elton John and the juggling act and the karaoke rapper - solving a warm-up puzzle.

Next, consolation trophies were handed out based on age and geography. Despite the insurgent youth movement, the "senior" division at a crossword tournament is still restricted to people over 80. I sat next to Feyer and Peter Gordon, creator of the fiendishly difficult Fireball Crosswords series, which are delivered by email to paying subscribers. Gordon said that the hundreds of his puzzles he'd brought along as printouts had been immediately snatched up; he was hopeful for new sign-ups. "This could be the most competitive final ever," Gordon said. "You've got two guys who've won 15 times, and one guy who's just been tearing it up."

An options trader friend of mine was sitting nearby so, naturally, we tried to make book on the finals. After some deliberation, we decided that Pasco on one side of the bet and Feyer and Hinman on the other would be fair. One speedy youngster equals two ageing legends.



Feyer can feel himself slowing down. “It’s natural: in your forties, your brain cells don’t fire the same way,” he told me. Plus he’s got a kid and a life now, and only barely arranged leave to come to the tournament in the first place, from his job playing in the band for a production of *Hamilton* in Toronto.

Feyer bid me farewell, and the three finalists were taken into brief conclave as last preparations were made. The championship puzzle’s constructor, Kameron Austin Collins, took the stage to great applause and addressed his future solvers with a single word: “Sorry.”

Feyer, Hinman and Pasco re-emerged and climbed on stage. Feyer, bald, glasses, in the centre. Hinman, bright-red uncontained hair, on the right. Pasco on the left, looking barely tall enough to reach the squares on the top of his grid. The first person to correctly solve this puzzle would be crowned champion.

After a few minutes of scribbling, Pasco held a small edge over Feyer and a large one over Hinman, who was struggling. They worked

The tension built. Someone screamed from across the ballroom: ‘Is anyone a doctor?’ A competitor had apparently fainted

through clues driven by trivia, opacity, misdirection and culture. A small sample: “___ Antall, first democratically elected prime minister of Hungary” (JOZSEF); “No. 18” (ARGON); “Many start in garages” (LIVEBANDS); “2000 #1 Radiohead album” (KIDA).

After about five minutes, Pasco had just one square left to fill. If he succeeded, he would win the tournament and cement the arrival of the new generation. But first he took a step back from the giant grid to consider his options. The one blank square was the first letter of both _ADRE (“Texas’ Laguna ___”) and _ACKAY (“Queensland city with a Scottish name”). It could conceivably be an M or a P, or perhaps something else entirely. While Pasco was pondering this choice, Feyer swept through his own empty squares and raised his hand.

Feyer finished in 5:24, Pasco in 5:25. It was one of the closest finishes in the history of the tournament. There were tears in Will Shortz’s eyes. Pasco later changed his Twitter name to “MACKAY knower”. From

my seat in the audience, I solved the championship puzzle in 16:30.

Pasco appeared happy enough after his nerve-racking loss, surrounded by beaming young solvers who hailed him as a hero. Pasco lives in California now and is “just hanging out”. When I told him I was writing an article about the weekend, he said: “If you could use the words ‘boyish charm’ - just put that in there and don’t tell them I said that.”

On stage, the elder statesman Feyer hoisted aloft the silver cup for a ninth time and claimed the \$7,000 grand prize. A phalanx of beaming fellow solvers and admirers looked up at him, and when he climbed down many embraced him.

On the train back to New York, I sat near a group of competitors also heading back to real life. “See, this is why I love crosswords,” one of them said. “They make you erudite by osmosis.” **FT**

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