



The 2021 tournament was a three-day virtual event with Will Shortz hosting live from the lobby of the Stamford Marriott in Connecticut.

Ready, Set, Solve

INSIDE THE AMERICAN CROSSWORD PUZZLE TOURNAMENT,
INCLUDING LAST YEAR'S FIRST-EVER ONLINE EVENT

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This scene in the ballroom of the Stamford Marriott in 2019 is typical of how the previous in-person tournaments looked.

The American Crossword Puzzle Tournament is the largest and longest-running crossword competition in the world. The first-ever virtual event, necessitated by the pandemic, was the 43rd annual installment. It took place the weekend of April 23, 2021, and attracted 1,032 competitors, plus another 400 or so casual participants, from across the country and beyond.

Many people have never heard of the tournament, and I hadn't before attending my first ACPT in 2002. The atmosphere of the event is infectious, an experience that goes beyond just solving puzzles. It's a yearly pilgrimage of people who share a love of crosswords and wordplay – a “gathering of the tribe,” as the puzzle maker Merl Reagle used to say. I was immediately hooked.

The next year, having become a regular New York Times crossword contributor, I signed on as an official and have been attending ever since. What follows is a bit of what I've witnessed or come of know about this “Super Bowl of Crosswords.”



When not solving puzzles, contestants often gather to play other games.

It all began in late 1977 when Mike Dolan, the manager of the newly built Stamford Marriott in Connecticut was looking for a way to drum up business. He'd read about a British crossword championship in New York magazine and wondered if an event like that might fill some of his hotel rooms on a late-winter weekend.

Dolan found the phone number for Eugene T. Maleska, then the crossword editor of The New York Times, and gave him a call. Maleska wasn't interested, but he referred him to Norton Rhoades, a longtime puzzle maker who lived in Stamford. Rhoades in turn referred Dolan to a young upstart named Will Shortz. Earlier that year, Shortz had graduated from law school and moved to Stamford to start a full-time job at Penny Press, a publisher of newsstand puzzle magazines.

"I had actually thought about having a crossword tournament," Shortz says, "probably the only person in the country who had had this thought, and somehow I happened to be in the city where this hotel wanted to have a tournament." He adds, "It's a crazy coincidence."

Will Shortz addresses the 741 contestants who packed the ballroom at the 2019 ACPT, the last in-person event. The 2020 tournament was canceled.



The inaugural ACPT took place on the weekend of March 4, 1978, with 149 contestants taking part. The entry fee was \$20, which included an awards banquet on Sunday. “I wanted to have it all in one day,” Shortz says. “But of course it’s a hotel, so they wanted people to stay overnight.” Rooms cost \$25.

To time the contestants, Mike Dolan borrowed a large clock from the Stamford High School swim team and then found some black-and-white-striped referee shirts for Shortz and the other officials to wear. He also alerted the media.

“We got a huge amount of publicity that first year,” Shortz says. “Both NBC and CBS national news did stories. AP and UPI put out stories, and Sports Illustrated did a piece, which came out in May 1978. They considered it a sporting event.”

Nancy Schuster, the eventual winner, remembers the media coverage well. “They knew I was leading overnight, and I had TV cameras over my back on Sunday morning,” she says. “It drove me nuts.”

“When she won,” Shortz says, “she said she was a housewife from Queens. And as I found out later, she was actually a crossword constructor.” That’s the official term for a puzzle writer. As it turned out, both statements were true. Schuster had given up a career in chemistry to raise her two children, then started writing crosswords on the side in the ’60s, earning \$5 a puzzle. That eventually led to a job freelance-editing expert crosswords for Dell Magazines.

Miriam Raphael competed for the first time the next year. Although she lived only 20 minutes from the hotel, she didn’t know about the 1978 event until the day after it had ended, by reading about it in a local newspaper. Her first day at the tournament went well, and because she lived nearby, she headed home rather than stay at the hotel. That nearly backfired when she overslept Sunday morning. Thanks to her husband’s “efficient” driving, she arrived just in time – and then discovered, much to her surprise, that she stood in second place.

When Schuster made a mistake on that morning’s final puzzle, Raphael passed her and took home the first-place silver bowl and \$125 in prize money. Both women have returned to every tournament since, and Raphael, at age 95, just won the 90s division in this year’s online event.

And so it went for the next several years, with Dolan and the hotel taking care of the business end of things while Shortz directed the tournament, including commissioning and editing the crosswords. In 1988, however, the hotel decided it had had enough, so Shortz took over complete control of the ACPT.

The number of contestants has slowly grown over the years, first topping 200 in 1993, then 300 in 2001, then making another big jump to 698 after the documentary “Wordplay” came out in 2006. The original intention of that film was to



Longtime competitor Nancy Shack captured this photo in 2011 of one of the perennial attendees, the irrepressible and always-jovial Jim Jenista.

chronicle the life of Will Shortz, but after the director Patrick Creadon and producer Christine O'Malley witnessed the ACPT firsthand, the focus shifted.

The first thing that struck Creadon was the “strong sense of camaraderie and family the moment you walk through the revolving doors.” And, he adds, “Everyone is so nice!”

What sealed the deal, though, was a tournament finale that was arguably the most exciting in ACPT history. After all the contestants tackle seven puzzles on Saturday and Sunday, the three contestants with the highest scores compete on stage. Each of them solves on a giant crossword board while wearing soundproof headphones. That’s so they won’t hear two play-by-play announcers calling the action as roughly 1,000 spectators watch.

I know what you’re thinking: That sounds like a laughable snorefest ... at best. But here’s how Rene Rodriguez of the Miami Herald described the film: “It manages to turn an

internal, solitary activity into fodder for an engaging, even exciting movie.” And he wasn’t alone. At the end of the year, “Wordplay” won Rotten Tomatoes’ Golden Tomato Award as the highest-rated documentary of the year.

So who are these folks that flock to the ACPT each year? Geniuses? Nerds? Everyday people who enjoy a little mental stimulation? Masochists? Depending on whom you ask, any one of those answers might fit, but it’s not that simple.

The contestants represent a surprisingly wide range of backgrounds and occupations, as indicated by a glance at a list of the jobs they’ve put on their entry forms in years past: attorney, pastry chef, teacher, stagehand, mom, minister, nurse, chemist, dog groomer, war games planner, animator, retiree, reflexologist, architect, barber, midwife, editor, social worker, student, and the list goes on and on.

The same is true of the officials. As an example, one of my many ACPT chores is to prepare the dry-erase puzzle boards

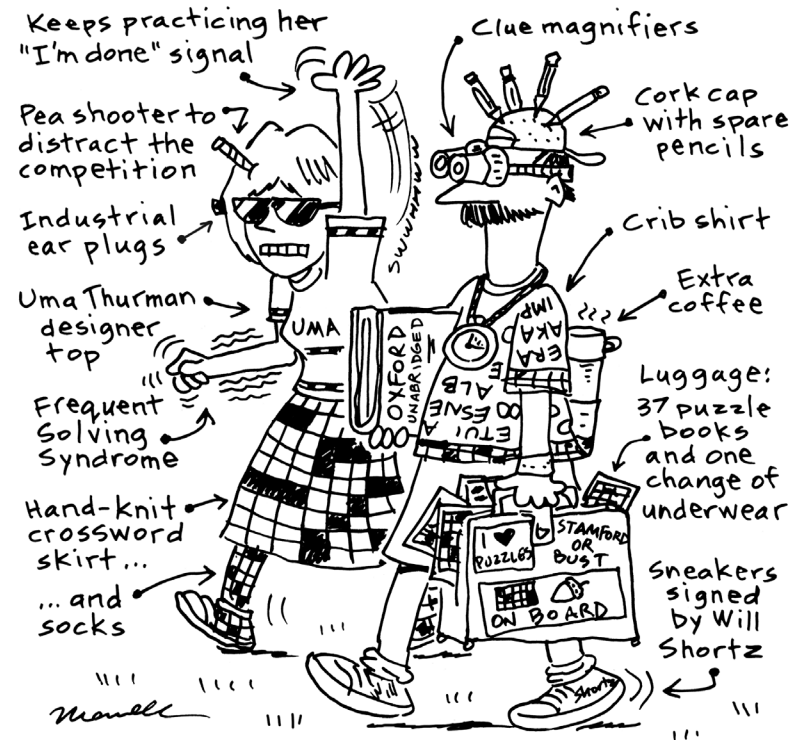
A 2018 shot taken by ACPT photographer Donald Christensen when Erik Agard, in the red shirt, beat the eight-time champ, Dan Feyer, in the black shirt





Left: Matt Ginsberg's Dr. Fill isn't much to look at – just a laptop and printer in front of an empty chair. Right: A cartoon I drew up for the 2003 event.

How to spot the serious STAMFORD COMPETITOR



that are used on stage, a necessary but mundane task that consists of affixing black cardboard squares using loops of masking tape. In prior years, two of the regulars who joined me were Ashish Vengsarkar, the CEO of a high-tech company, and Brad Wilber, then a research librarian at Houghton College. Other officials are, to name a few, a bar owner, a math professor, a musician, a traffic court judge, and an ephemera dealer. Although many of the officials are crossword constructors, that's rarely a primary occupation, given the difficulty of making a living doing that full-time.

One memorable ACPT moment came in 2012, when a computer program named Dr. Fill entered the tournament as an unofficial contestant. There was a lot of hoopla preceding its participation, including a front-page article in *The New York Times*.

Matt Ginsberg, an Oxford-educated astrophysicist, computer scientist and expert on artificial intelligence, created Dr. Fill to solve a crossword better than he could, which wasn't saying much. He once described himself as a "terrible crossword solver." But the ultimate goal was for Dr. Fill to do well in the ACPT – maybe even win it. Simulations had indicated that was a possibility.

That year, St. Patrick's Day fell on the Saturday of the tour-

name and Will Shortz decided to line up three "Patrick's" to write half of that day's six puzzles: Patrick Berry, Patrick Blindauer, and myself. Mine was the first Patrick puzzle to run that day. Its title and subtitle pretty much spilled the beans: "Boustrophedon – adj. (and n.): having alternate lines running from left to right and right to left." The answers across the top row of the grid read left to right, the next row down read right to left, and so on.

Most of the humans knew what was up before entering the first letter, but Dr. Fill was ... well, clueless. It didn't understand the hint, and the software hadn't been programmed to deal with the trick. As Ginsberg later said, he'd been aware of a previous puzzle that had done something similar, but he dismissed it as a one-off idea that Dr. Fill would never encounter.

Blindauer's puzzle No. 5, another crossword with answers going in unexpected directions, also flummoxed Dr. Fill. Still, despite those two stumbles, Ginsberg's program finished the tournament in an impressive 141st place out of 655 contestants.

During a break at the end of the day, I posed an anagram puzzle to Will Shortz: What one word can be spelled by rearranging the letters in IRKS ACPT? He was surprised he didn't immediately get it, but it was a bit of a trick, since the



In 2019, a group of judges toil away in the bunkerlike “quiet room,” scanning and sorting solved puzzles, calculating scores, and updating the standings.

answer was a proper noun. Dr. Fill would have likely gotten it instantly: PATRICKS.

Ginsberg continued working on Dr. Fill, and it improved nearly every year, finishing as high as 11th place in the 2017 event. This year, at long last, all those countless hours paid off. Dr. Fill solved all but one of the puzzles in under a minute and made just three mistakes, accumulating the highest score after completing all seven of the regular puzzles – 12,825 points, 15 points ahead of the top human, Erik Agard.

“I was thrilled,” Ginsberg says. So was Dan Klein, a professor at UC Berkeley who earlier that year had led a team of three PhD students and two undergrads in creating a crossword-solving engine that uses state-of-the-art natural language processing. A month before the ACPT, his team contacted Ginsberg, and they soon began merging their Berkeley Crossword Solver with Dr. Fill. “I want to give total credit to the Berkeley folks,” Ginsberg said in a livestreamed talk with Will Shortz. “They made a huge difference.”

Meanwhile ... back at the tournament, there was a 2021 champion to crown. Instead of coming up on stage to solve on large boards, the three finalists – Agard, Tyler Hinman, and

David Plotkin – would be solving the playoff puzzle online from locations across the country.

Agard sat in his apartment in College Park, Maryland, 800 miles north of Plotkin, who was in the office space where he works in Gainesville, Florida. He’s a member of the Kawahara Lab at the Florida Museum of Natural History, which studies the evolution of butterflies and moths. No one else was in the office that day, so it was nice and quiet. “I did put up a ‘Do Not Disturb’ sign on the door just in case,” Plotkin says.

Finally, about 2,700 miles away from both of them, Hinman was solving at a desk in his bedroom in San Francisco. A combined 6,200 miles separated the three men, a fact I think illustrates the lengths to which Shortz will go to keep the finalists from looking over each others’ shoulders. I joke, of course, because the truth is that the top solvers at the ACPT are an incredibly honest and ethical group of people. There have been numerous examples over the years to prove that characterization, including contestants reporting discrepancies that helped an opponent or harmed their own standing.

The finalists solved the final puzzle privately, to be live-streamed about an hour later. That gave everyone else a

chance to tackle the crossword themselves, to see how quickly they could solve it. It also gave them a chance to comment on it, and the global chat feed on the ACPT site lit up after only a few minutes. “The finalists are going to kill this puzzle!” one commenter said, followed by many others who predicted times of three minutes or less. Given that the previous playoff record was an astounding 4:58 by Agard in 2018, that prediction sounded crazy.

But it’s exactly what happened. Plotkin finished first in 2:55 – which, you have to remember, is for a difficult 15-by-15 crossword. That equates to filling in a complete answer every

2.5 seconds. Unfortunately, in his rush, he made a simple typo by entering an “S” in one square instead of the correct letter, “E.” At three minutes exactly, Hinman hit “submit” with a perfect puzzle and Agard did likewise in 3:08. After being penalized for a wrong letter, Plotkin finished third.

So, was this online “gathering of the tribe” a success? The 2016 champion Howard Barkin, might have summed it up best. “The chats between participants were lively, funny and interesting,” he said, “and the puzzles themselves still made me laugh and smile. So it was certainly a nice alternative, but nothing replaces the full, in-person experience.” ☺



Last year, the three finalists faced off digitally from across the country.