



| Freshman Avery Mojica spends his free time studying words to prepare for his participation in Scrabble tournaments.

Story by: Sidney Hallak

The timer ticks away as freshman Avery Mojica looks at the tiles on his rack. Hundreds of possible combinations flying through his head. He carefully places the letters on the Scrabble board, s-a-n-s-e-r-i-f and places the last tile, knowing it is his best play yet. This is not a part of a competitive family game night, it is a high stakes Scrabble tournament.

Mojica travels throughout the Midwest participating in Scrabble tournaments hosted by the North American Scrabble Players Association. He said this activity has become a family tradition. Mojica said he studies words and practices new strategies every day.

"There are a lot of different strategies," Mojica said. "There are countless ways you can play better."

His strategies come into play during tournaments, which follow a different set of rules than the original board game. Mojica said a tournament is much more intense, quiet and serious. In a typical set for a board game, the tiles have indentations where the letter is, but regulation tiles in competitions are smooth.

"There are also timers and a challenge system," Mojica said. "There are a lot of different rules; it's very different from a casual game."

The challenge system allows a player to question the other player's word if they do not think it is legitimate. If the word is legal then the challenger loses their turn, but if it is illegal, it is taken off the board and the person who played it loses their turn. Mojica said that he has both won and lost challenges during tournaments.

"It feels good [when I win] because then I get another turn," Mojica said. "If I lose, I learn that I made a mistake and we learn from our mistakes."

Mistakes are not as important in a casual game. Mojica said he rarely plays casual games with his friends, however he does play with his father, Efen Mojica, who competes in tournaments as well.

"I try to [not lose by more than 100]," Efen said. "I can't remember all the hard words [Mojica] knows, so I try to play close."

Efen said he played a lot of word games growing up because his family didn't have cell phones or computers so they spent more time together. Efen is now carrying on the tradition with his kids, Mojica said his family helped him develop his love for the game from a young age.

"Ever since I was young, I wanted to become good at

[Scrabble] because I have the natural ability of finding things," Mojica said.

Mojica said Scrabble comes easily because he has a good memory. His abilities have helped him win first place in four of the 10 tournaments he has competed in, earning him around \$1050.

"My ranking nationally has gone significantly up and it hasn't plateaued yet," Mojica said.

During tournaments, Mojica said he is usually confident, but it can be nerve-wracking. He said his toughest competitor is 40-year-old Matthew Ridout.

"First I was really intimidated but now I've actually surpassed him by beating him in a recent tournament," Mojica said.

Ridout and Mojica keep in touch in between tournaments, playing both competitive and recreational games online. Ridout said playing with Mojica is a great way to boost his skills or just relax and enjoy a recreational game.

"[Mojica] is absolutely a good player," Ridout said. "I play with him frequently and he's a fun challenge."

To make sure that he continues to be a challenging player, Mojica reads a book that contains every two to eight letter word in the English language.

Studying new words helps Mojica prepare for the tournaments that happen most frequently in the summer. He also eats healthier to give him brain power before each tournament and uses a computer software program to practice.

"I want to stay good at [Scrabble], and I don't want to lose my interest in it," Mojica said.

Mojica said that he enjoys playing most and that studying is only the work that leads up to it. Sharing his love of the game is part of what makes the tournaments fun.

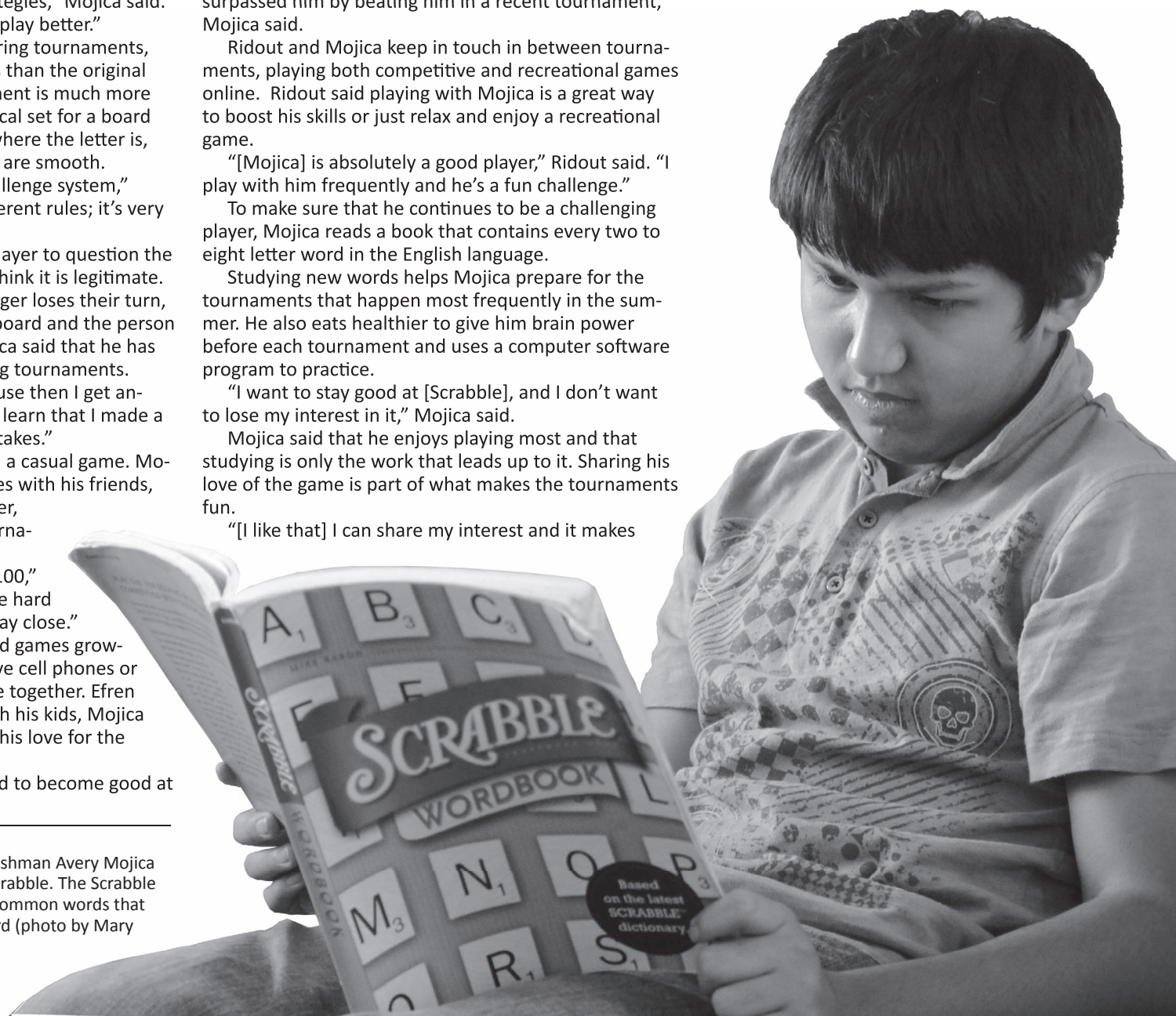
"[I like that] I can share my interest and it makes

me unique because not many people do it, at this age especially," Mojica said.

At the tournaments, Mojica said he is usually the only kid among many adults. Mojica hopes to interest more youth by starting a Scrabble club at BVNW.

As he gets older, Mojica said he is growing in his Scrabble abilities and the constant preparation for the tournaments has paid off.

"This is only the start of what could be something really big, and I don't plan on stopping," Mojica said. "I'm going to keep getting better."



As he prepares for his tournaments, freshman Avery Mojica learns new words that he can play in Scrabble. The Scrabble Wordbook consists of 335 pages of uncommon words that can score Mojica big points on the board (photo by Mary Kaster).