

The World Youth Scrabble Championship 2010

Manila, 8-10 December 2010

By Ker Jen Ho

The Malaysian Team to the World Youth Scrabble Champion must be congratulated for their great performance. All representatives selected by MSA showed their mettle and lived up to expectations, 4 out of the 6 were in the top ten spots:-

Champion – Ker Jen Ho, 2nd Runner up – William Kang, 7th - Vinnith Ramamurthi
10th - Looi Yih Feng



Ker Jen Ho (second from right) receiving his trophy, prize money and scrabble board from Karen Richards. From left: Cheah Siu Hean, Robin Rubina, Karen, Jen Ho and Oscar Riviera

Ker Jen Ho's personal account summarises the drama, excitement and emotional roller coaster ride of the WYSC 2010 experience.

My WYSC experience

My father and I entered the gate with plenty of time to spare. After an hour or so of tinkering on the phone, we boarded, and as soon as we had settled in, the plane jiggled slightly on the runway as the plane taxied... and took off, giving me the peculiar feeling of temporary weightlessness. I glanced at my watch. The flight was exactly on time. That was good.

That was how my trip had played out in my mind.

It didn't go that way.

Everything did go smoothly prior to entering the departure gate – we had gotten past immigration with no problems and had spent some time relaxing

while waiting for the gate to open. More waiting was in store even after we were allowed into departure gate - G2, as I remember clearly - but that was normal. What wasn't normal was that we waited for two hours after the scheduled departure time and were starting to wonder what had happened before the first announcement came - there were 'technical problems' that needed to be sorted out before we could board.

I could live with that. After all, we would be getting to Manila eventually, wouldn't we? 'How funny it would be if the flight was cancelled,' I mused, but I promptly forgot about the thought.

Then, they dropped the bombshell - the flight would be delayed until 0800 the next morning! That would not do - the competition was to start at 0930 the next morning! We would be several hours too late - arriving at the hotel in Manila by noon, if we were lucky - meaning that we would miss the first 3 or 4 games of the competition! The announcement sent me reeling with shock and my heart racing at the possibility of lagging far behind in the competition without those crucial starting games. We had to get there before 0930 the next morning, by hook or by crook.

Thus began our 'Amazing Race' adventure.

However, we were not alone. We were joined by my Malaysian teammates, Cheong Yi Wei and Cheong Yi Hua, and their parents, who were also in the same boat/flight. After questioning the (not very helpful) personnel at the gate, we all decided to ask around at the main terminal. That meant that we had to pass through immigration for the second time in less than six hours, rush past baggage reclaim, take a lift up to the main floor, and then go from counter to counter to enquire about the next earliest flights to Manila.



Martin (left) with our Malaysian team – celebrating and having a whale of a time!

After a frantic tour of several airline check-in counters, the only available flight that we could find was from AirAsia which would depart the next day at around the same time as our postponed flight. Taking it would be pointless. We considered going via another airport, maybe Bangkok's, to catch a connecting flight to Manila; the thought of it got me quite exhilarated as it would be exactly like the Amazing Race!

Desperate to find all options, we decided that we would now go to the airline offices, which meant another exhausting hunt, going from office to office – Malaysia Airlines, Cathay Pacific, and Thai Airways. The Thai Airways visit was, thankfully, fruitful! Finally, we had found a direct flight.

The lady there showed us on the computer that Cebu Pacific flew to Manila from KL but then said that she didn't think the flight was from KL. You can imagine how confused I was by this paradox. I think I might've been too tired to think straight at that point! What she meant was they did not fly from KLIA but instead departed from the Low Cost Carrier Terminal.

Using the airport's WiFi connection to check the Cebu Pacific website, we managed to secure a Cebu Pacific flight from the LCCT which would depart at 0100 in the morning and arrive at 0500 in Manila – with a few hours to spare before the competition started!

In the meantime, Yi Wei's father managed to get free accommodation and a meal at the Empress Hotel in Sepang, as compensation for our cancelled flight from the airline. The hotel turned out to be quite clean and tidy, which gave me the opportunity to relax in relief. Two hours before our flight, we arrived at the LCCT, checked in, had hot chocolates all round, boarded, and arrived in Manila quite uneventfully.

The first day of competition went quite well; however, I had lost two close games to Tawan from Thailand and Oluwafemi from Nigeria, which meant I was now tenth. Oluwafemi remained undefeated after 8 games on the first day. Nevertheless, I steeled myself for the next two days ahead – it would be quite tough to move up the ranks after losing the two games, but I told myself that I could do it. After the 'Amazing Race', I could do anything.

The second day went rather well too. Although I had lost to Worawut and Preedee, it also marked the end of the unbeaten streak of Oluwafemi. For twelve games we had watched helplessly on as he defeated every single one of his opponents (including me from the previous day) without any sign of cooling down. He subsequently lost four games, and drew one with Preedee, which meant that William Kang (14 wins and a spread of 1097) and I (14 wins and a spread of 1088) were now placed first and second respectively! What a turn of events!

Before the competition I had only aimed to get into the top ten, but towards the end I soon found myself in the running for champion. After managing to beat William, my long-time 'arch-nemesis' but again losing carelessly to Preedee, I found out to my surprise that due to the Swiss draw, the three of us and Oluwafemi would not be meeting again even though the gap between our points and spread was extremely minimal. I urged myself on, confident for the last games.

In the remaining five games, I was delighted to find the tiles were on my side. Nevertheless, it was a nail-biting few hours. In no time at all, it was the last game, which I managed to win as well! I felt extremely happy as this now gave me a lead of about 300 spread points ahead of William, who was expected to win his last game against compatriot Vinnith. Unfortunately, he lost to compatriot Vinnith in the last game, placing him at third (with 18 wins) with Preedee slightly ahead of him (with 18.5 wins) and me the eventual champion (with 19 wins). As you can see, there was only half a point of difference between me, Preedee and William!

I was congratulated by Martin, the Malaysian team's chaperone, but still could not really believe that I had really become the 2010 WYSC champion. As I was walking over to William's table to confirm the result, I was whisked away by a television crew, which only made the experience more surreal.

Then, I was bombarded with many questions about how I felt about winning the championship. As reality sank in, my reply was simple - I was overjoyed by the fact, especially since I had finally managed the feat after three years of trying! After the interview and many camera flashes later, I retired to my hotel room, where I sank happily into the bed - a wonderful end to a great tournament!



This was definitely one of the most eventful trips of my life! Thank you to everyone who made the tournament possible, and of course to everyone who helped to bring me to Manila for it!