UNUSUAL Puzzle

by Nick Ballard

This puzzle, originally entitled "An UNUSUAL Problem," was composed in 1990, when OSPD-1 was the official North American word source. An expansive analysis of that classic version is linked at the end of this article.

The puzzle version described and illustrated below is updated for **NWL-2023** and relatively simplified.

In a 31-round tournament (with no head-to-head playoff), the top four prizes are:

1st = $10,000 2nd = $6000 3rd = $3000 4th = $1000

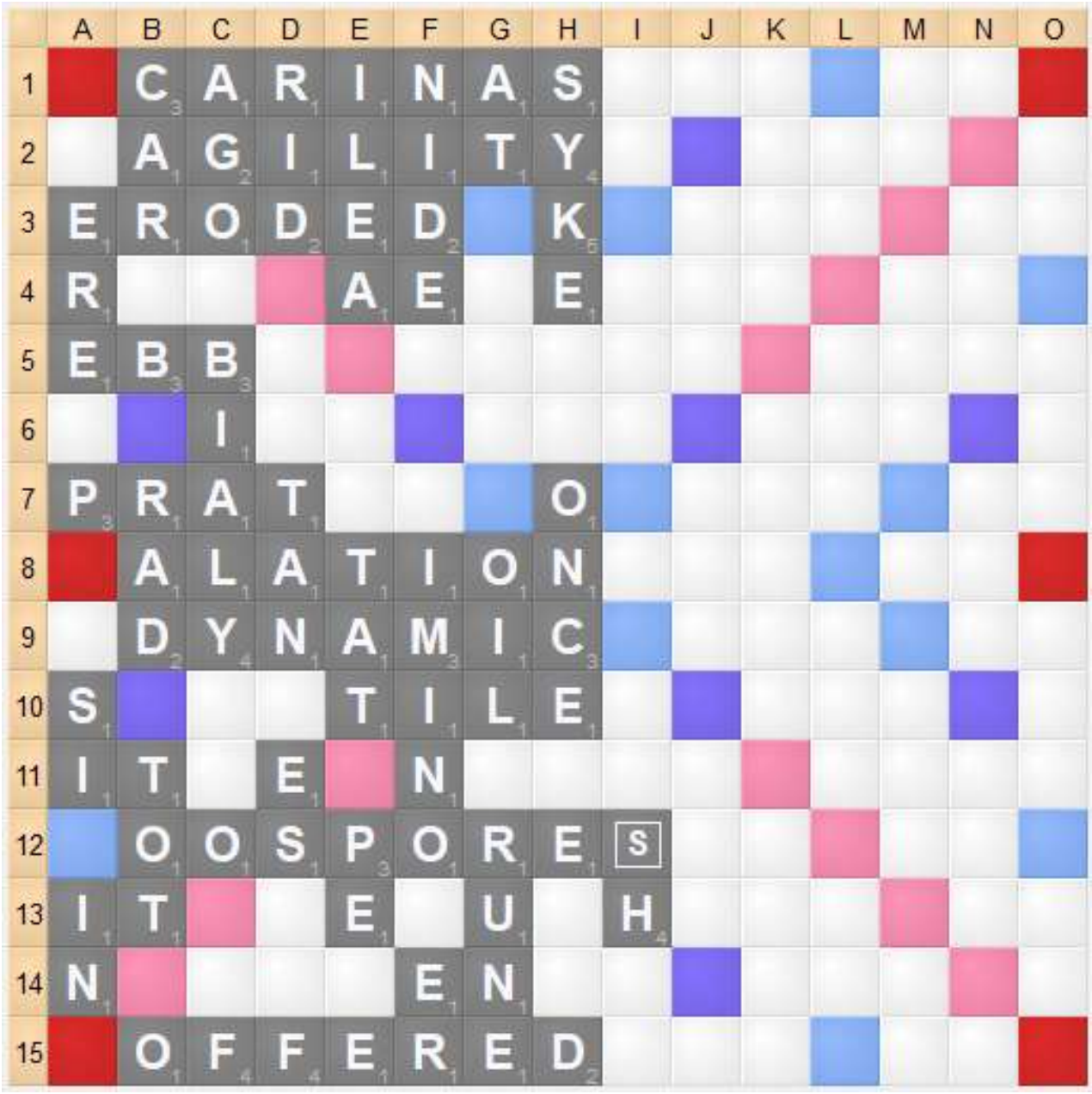
The two leaders have *already finished* the tournament. Here are their final win/losses and point spreads:

Will	24-7,	+2150
Xavier	24-7,	+2074

Through no fault of you or your opponent Zoey, your game started after the top games finished, and you already know Will and Xavier's final spreads. It is expected, though not 100% certain, that you or Zoey will end up in third place and the other in fourth place. (You can do no worse, as no one else started the final round better than 21-9.)

You	23-7,	**+1000**	(final game pending)
Zoey	23-7,	+1000	

Zoey has just bingoed with 15B OFFERED, to take a massive lead of 479 – 144. You are now on turn, trailing in this final game by **335** points! There are six tiles in the bag. Your rack and unseen pool appear below the diagram.
What is your best play in this unusual situation?



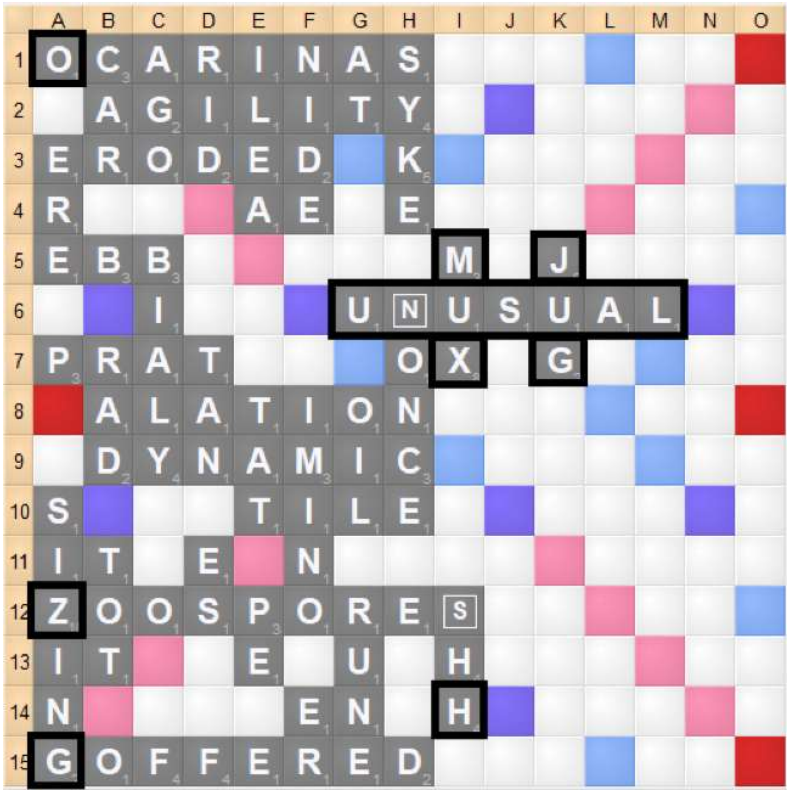
Unseen: **GGHJMOQVVWWXZ (13)**

Solution

Origin

In the autumn of 1990, while traveling to tournaments, I circulated flyers that featured a puzzle—very similar to the one posed above—as a promotion for my Scrabble newsletter, the title of which spelled out my phone number M-E-D-L-E-Y-S (633-5397). The solution was published in the first issue of *Medleys* (January 1991).

I designed this composition for enjoyment at multiple skill levels. For less experienced players, I wanted the puzzle to seem non-trivial but still easy. The reader could find UnUSUAL and then spot the hook for the blank N above ONCE (possibly needing to check the dictionary for NONCE.) They could then write in to proudly submit their solution and hopefully include with it a $30 subscription check. It worked!



UnUSUAL, JUG, MUX + OCARINAS + SIZING + SHH = –11

If you play your UnUSUAL bingo (at 6G, for 64 points), your best result is for Zoey's rack (which is *random,* noting that she just bingoed with OFFERED) to be GJQVVWW, which makes your final rack GHMOXZ.

In that case, the best endgame sequence for both sides is shown in the caption of the diagram **above**: Zoey JUG for 22, you MUX (37), and then she repeatedly passes while you play OCARINAS (30), SIZING (155) and SHH (8). You gain 52 from Zoey's rack, and when the smoke clears, despite having outscored her by 324 (!), you still come up short by 11 points: you lose the game 490-501.

Heart of the Puzzle

Experts paying attention to the stated problem conditions—realizing that it is a must-win situation—looked beyond UnUSUAL. Examining the 13 unseen tiles, they figured out that if **GHMOVZ** is in the bag and if five or six of these tiles could somehow be combined with the A and/or the blank on their rack, their reward would be to play a word from top square to bottom square on the far left column!

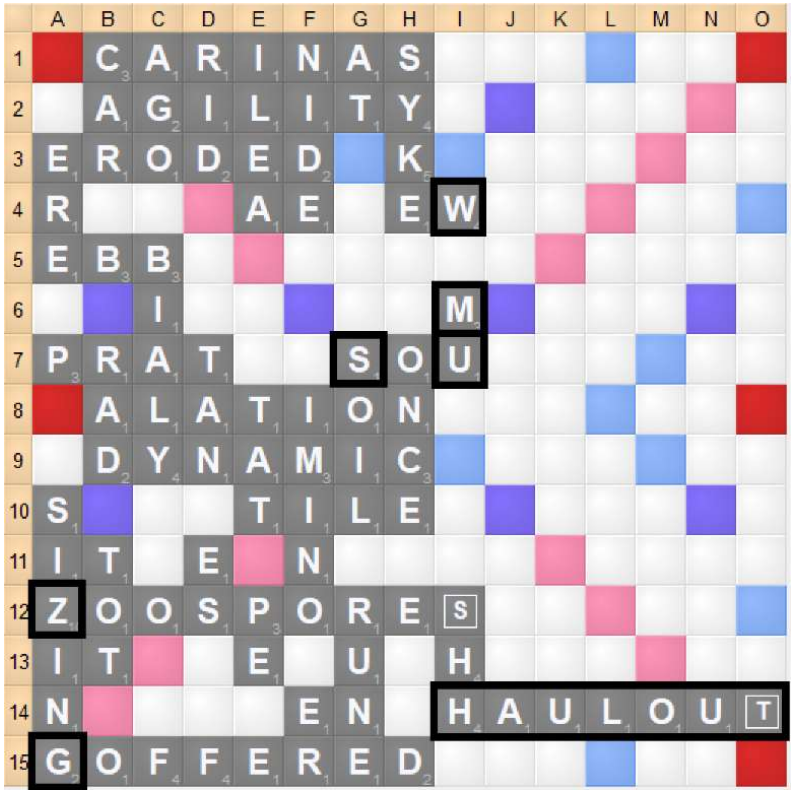
Notwithstanding, the methods by which these savvy experts sought to piece together this gigantic word varied considerably. A few of them recommended exchanging five tiles, keeping the A and the blank. This is certainly the most direct way. However, either they miscounted the (13) unseen tiles, or they forgot a rule; it is illegal to exchange when there are fewer than seven tiles in the bag.

It may seem as if I am overemphasizing the importance of playing a 15-letter word. Some are better than others. In this situation, though, we are potentially looking at a triple-triple-triple bingo that scores up to 1436 points. If you can land it, you will not only turn around the game; you might win the whole tournament!

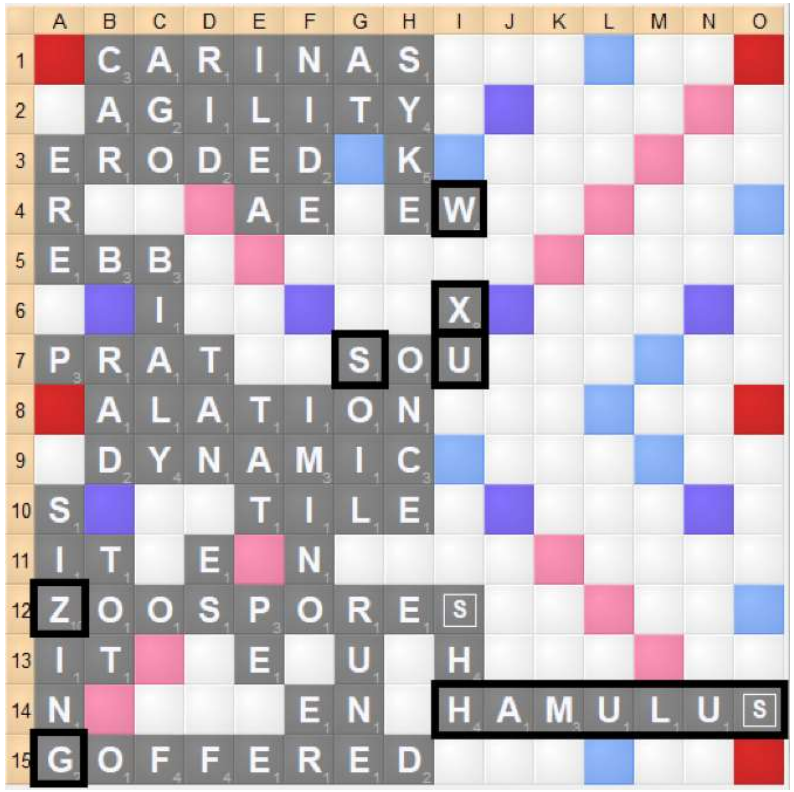
So, SOU me

You can fish for a different bingo by playing 7G SOU. If Zoey has GJQVVWW, she plays 4H EW, and if you draw GZ for SIZING (155), and if Zoey has drawn the M, and X is the last tile in the bag, she plays MU and you go out with HAULOUt (80). You collect 80 from Zoey's rack but still lose by 19. (See **left-hand** diagram **below**.)

A more likely bingo variation: Zoey has any seven of GJQVVWWX, you draw GZ, and O is the last tile in the bag. She plays EW and XU while you play SIZING and HAMULUs and lose by 34. (See **right-hand** diagram **below**.)



SOU, EW, SIZING, MU, HAULOUt = –19



SOU, EW, SIZING, XU, HAMULUs = –34

However, when followed up properly, SOU aims its sights much higher than a pedestrian bingo. After Zoey plays EW, you can instead empty the bag with J6 ULU (9)! Typical playouts appear in the diagram pair **below**.

Your grand plan culminates in playing the triple-triple-triple OVEREMPHASIZING (abbreviated "OV-" in the chart below) for more than 1300 points, like pulling a rabbit out of a hat. If you succeed, more than half the time you will tie for second place, and you even have a chance to acquire *sole* second place. Poor Xavier!

The "G-rack" scenario occurs when Zoey has initially drawn GJQVWWX, plays the W and draws the other G. This plays out as captioned in the **left-hand** diagram **below**, culminating in your playing OVEREMPHASIZINg (abbreviated "OV-" in the caption). Your result after SOU, etc., is a 1097-point win. When this win margin is added to your current +1000 tournament spread, your final tournament spread becomes +2097, which overtakes poor Xavier's by 23. You are gloriously vaulted into second place for the $6000 prize.

G-rack playout: SOU and SOUL both take 2nd prize
SOU (or SOUL)-EW-ULU-XU-OV- = +1097 (or +1094)

M-rack playout: SOU ties for 2nd prize, SOUL gets 3rd
SOU (or SOUL)-EW-ULU-MUX-OV- = +1074 (or +1071)

The "M-rack" scenario occurs in seven related rack-draw possibilities. Zoey starts with seven of the eight tiles GJMQVWWX, plays the W, and draws whichever replacement tile gives her the follow-up rack of GJMQVWX. This plays out as captioned in the **right-hand** diagram **above**. Your result after SOU, etc., is a 1074-point win and a final tournament spread of +2074, which earns you an exact tie with Xavier for second place ($4500).

The main reason that you outscore Zoey by more in the left-hand diagram (where Zoey gets both G's) is because playing the blank as a G costs you "only" (2 x 27) + (2 x 3) = 60 points relative to playing an actual G tile. By comparison, in the M-rack situation (on the right), replacing the M with a blank costs you 3 x 27 = 81 points.

You also win the game from V-, H- and O-rack situations, though by a margin of less than 1074, and so they limit you to the 3rd prize of $3000. For full charts, click on the "UNUSUAL Problem, Extended" link.

If Zoey can play two tiles immediately after SOU (e.g., EGG, SOUGH), she draws two tiles when you can afford only one. Also, if she gets down the 155-point SIZING, her lead is insurmountable even though you can fire back a sizable (five-tile) triple-triple! In short, if you play SOU and Zoey's initial rack contains GG, GH or GZ, you lose.

SOUL of the Puzzle

You can protect against Zoey holding one of those three tile pairs (GH) by playing SOUL instead of SOU. You can defeat these "H-rack" scenarios: Zoey starts with GHW + [4 of JVQWX], plays off the W and draws whichever tile gets her to the end-rack GHJQVWX. However, the price you pay for beating these extra five racks is that *all* your winning margins are 3 points smaller (the points you would have gotten hooking the L onto SOU). As it happens, these 3 points cost you the tie for second place in the M-rack playout (see right-hand diagram above).

In choosing SOUL over SOU, the dollar equity you gain from the H-racks you beat exactly offset the second-place ties you fall short of attaining in the M-rack playouts. The math is elucidated in the extended version.

In terms of just winning the *game* (ignoring chances to win higher tournament prizes), SOUL is easily better than SOU (by 92 to 64 rack units), and *any* legal play you can make other than SOUL or SOU pales by comparison.

Going for the Gold

Some experts noted the merits of SOU and SOUL, though in the lexicon used in 1990 (OSPD-1), ULU and EW were unacceptable words. The only chance to play the 15-letter word as a bingo was if Zoey held GJQVVWW and you drew the X immediately (so as to shed your second and third U via LUX and XU). As a consequence, you were much less likely to win the game by a four-digit margin, and some variations involved struggling with two-U racks and needing specific tile-picking orders just to play OVEREMPHASIZING in two or three stages.

In this modern version of the puzzle (with ULU being good, and despite EW being good), SOU and SOUL give you more ways not only to win the game (for third place) but also more ways to share second/third or win second prize.

From the standpoint of equity, it is possible to aim *even higher* with this four-step plan:

1. "Freeze" Zoey's rack: block all legal moves she can make if she holds **GJQVWWX**.
2. Play off all your other initial tiles except the A in such a way that Zoey cannot make a play and draw a tile.
3. Accumulate the GHMOVZ tiles from the bag onto your rack.
4. Bingo out with (3x3x3) OVEREMPHASIZING for 1436 points (plus twice Zoey's tile values).

How do you pull off step 1? The key is to *burn your blank!* This has two benefits:

- It blocks both the I4 and I7 squares, thereby preventing Zoey from playing a tile. (No *non*-blank play from your rack can achieve this.) Otherwise, the points that Zoey scores in one or two turns along with some reduction in rack penalty, combined with the A-column points elucidated in the second bullet point (below), will likely determine which of the top three prizes ($10,000, $6000 or $3000) you take home.

- You score higher with a *non*-blank tile on the A-column. The difference is substantial, because the score of each tile is multiplied by 27, plus extra for a premium square and/or hooking a cross word. Compared to the blank, the letter value is boosted as follows: O +30, V +112, M +81, H +120, A +28, Z +560 or G +60.

Blank-burning Plays

To start with, allow me to demonstrate that even a *clumsy* blank-burning play offers winning chances.

No move with the blank gives you any hope if Zoey is able to play a tile before you empty the bag. To prevent that, you can place tiles on both squares adjacent to a vowel with I4 **LUSh** (6): see the **left-hand** "close up" diagram below. You are still in a quandary, though, because the two U's on your rack play nowhere on their own, and you cannot afford to combine them with your A or any of the letters that you draw (GHMOVZ)—you need *all seven* of them for the A-column. Meanwhile, the U's occupy valuable space on your rack; you have to operate around them.

Clarification: to succeed after LUSh, GHMOVZ must be in the bag, so that you can combine them with your A and play the coveted 15-letter word. You know that this has a non-trivial chance of success once Zoey has passed, though you also need for neither G nor Z to be the last tile in the bag. If such is the case…

Your best initial draw includes GZ so that you can play SIZING (155), emptying the bag. With an accumulated rack AMOVZ (+UU), you play OVEREMPHASIZING as a (five-tile) triple-triple for 409 points, and (as you're stuck with unplayable U's), the game gets passed out and you win by 273. Alternatively, if you do *not* draw GZ, you start with OCARINAS (30) and if your next tile pairs GZ (otherwise you lose), you play SIZING (155) and then OVEREMPHASIZING as a simple (4-tile) triple for 169 points, the game is passed out and you win by 25.

LUSh yields no follow-up U play

pUS + pUL is a blunder, allows XU

uPS+pUL safely rids a second U

Fortunately, you don't have to occupy *both* I4 and I7. A three-tile play, either from I4 to I6, or from I5 to I7, suffices to block both squares. Given that, is there a sequence that allows you to shed *two* U's instead of one?

Yes, but care is required. For example, if you play I5 pUS and then 5I pUL, shown in the **center** diagram above, such exposure of a U lets Zoey beat you by playing the X (at the little blue "x") and drawing the last tile in the bag.

The careful way is shown in the **right-hand** diagram: I5 **UpS** (6) + 6I pUL (or I4 SUp + 6I pUL, which also works). There, the presence of a tile to the left of the little "x" protects you from being punished by XU.

After UpS + pUL, with only one U burdening your rack, you are guaranteed to win by either 278 or 290 points. If the O is in the bag, you play SIZING; otherwise, you play OCARINAS. Either way, you collect the last tile in the bag and play the other five or six tiles together onto the A-column. (You eat the U, and Zoey eats GJQVWWX.)

Mini-1

Mini-2

Mini-3

Mini-4

To achieve a meaningful leap in your winning margin, you need to shed the third U. The key is to get all seven tiles slated for the A-column on your rack *at the same time*, so that you can score a 27-times bingo, instead of a 9-times non-bingo. Moreover, you can go out and collect double- instead of single-value from Zoey's rack.

Suitable for this purpose is a word that you rarely see played: **SUS**—and there are four different (relevant) ways to play it! The first letter can start at either I4 or I5, and the blank can stand for either the first S or the second S. There are subtle differences between these four candidates, each one deserving its own mini-diagram.

As before, let us assume that Zoey holds GJQVWWX, and (therefore) GHMOVZ is in the bag. Otherwise, no blank-burning play can deliver the giant win you crave.

In all four SUS cases (mini-1 through mini-4 **above**), you can shed both the second and third U with SULU next turn. But wait! Zoey gets to make a play (JUG)—isn't that verboten? No. You still win because you already played your sixth tile: you *emptied the bag*. In the previous central diagram (pUS + pUL), you play only *five* tiles; there, Zoey (plays XU and) draws the last tile in the bag and you fail to acquire all the letters you need for the A-column.

In mini-1, after JUG, you play the 15-letter word, stick Zoey with QVWWX, and win the game by 1150 points. Suddenly, you leapfrog over Xavier and *tie for first place*. This is much better than third place after UpS + pUL!

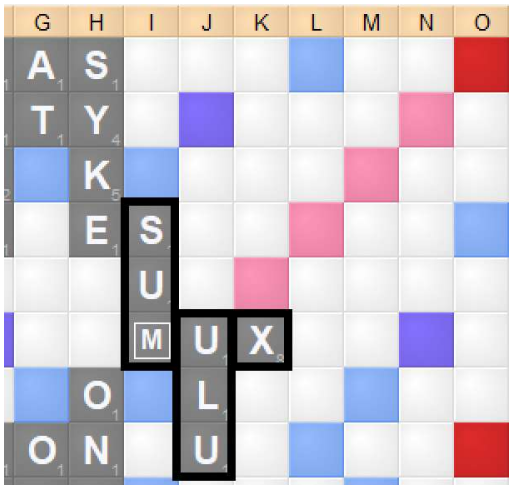
However, mini-1 has two drawbacks relative to mini-2, -3 and -4: (1) Zoey's J is played on a DWS premium; and (2) your blank (instead of a 1-point S) falls on a two-way DLS. In mini-2, -3 and -4, where in each case you suffer only one of those disadvantages, you *win* first prize instead of tie for it—an extra $2000 in your pocket.

Replacing the S's

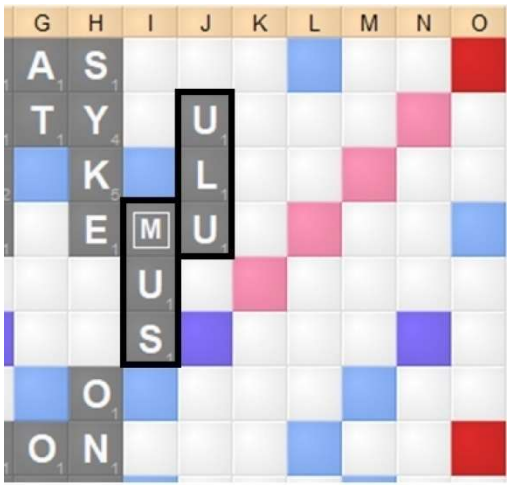
Changing "s" (blank-S) to an "m" (blank-M) or "n" (blank-N) aims at a different follow-up: instead of extending the exposed S (or "s") to SULU, the idea is to play ULU alongside the "m" or "n" (while forming "mU" or "nU"). These plays have the same chance of winning the *tournament* as do mini-2, mini-3 and mini-4, but in some cases they have different supplemental chances to win the game on a small scale—as will be expounded on later.

Not all of the implied "s" substitutions are relevant; replacing the "s" (on I7) in mini-1 with "m" or "n" (or for that matter, with "e," "k" or "p") do not alter any continuations. Also, replacing the "s" on I4 with an "n" doesn't work; Zoey can interfere with En/G. That narrows the number of distinct viable "s" substitutions to five, or arguably three (given that two of the three m/n choices have only minor impacts)—the five/three diagrammed **below.**

I5 mUS + ULU, mUX, OV- = +1157
(or I5 nUS + ULU, nUG, OV- = +1181)



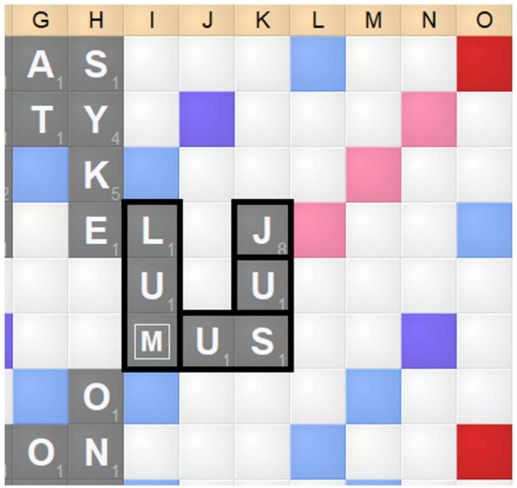
I4 SUm + ULU, mUX, OV- = +1168
(or I4 SUn + ULU, nUG, OV- = +1186)



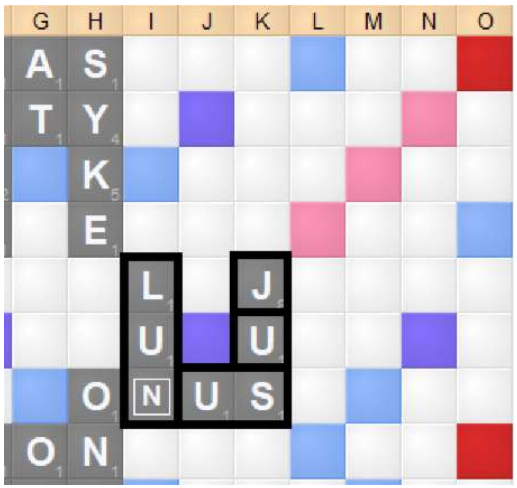
I4 mUS + ULU + OV- = +1191

That encapsulates the "s" (blank-S) substitutions. The other substitutional upgrade involves initially playing the L while keeping the more universally prolific S (the non-blank S).

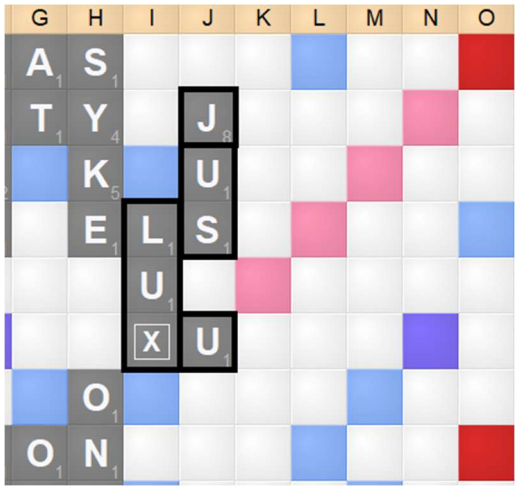
As using the L gives up ULU options, and the other consonant needs to accommodate U's, and "MUL" and "NUL" are phonies, the field is narrowed down to LUm, LUn and LUx, with one of those words (LUn) having two viable placements. These L-word candidates are diagrammed **below**, along with their tournament-winning sequences.



I4 LUm +mUS+US, JUS, OV- = +1167
(or **I4** LUn +nUS+US, JUS, OV- = +1167)



I5 LUn+ONUS+US, JUS, OV- = +1153



LUx + xU + US, JUS, OV- = +1151

Third-prize Consolation

After your blank-burning gambit for a puny 3–6 points, if you can't play OVEREMPHASIZING, should you give up? Not yet: you still have a chance at *third prize* by saving this game despite your initial 335-point deficit. The Z and G (i.e., SIZING) are worth 155, the O (i.e., OCARINAS) 30, and rack penalty is 72–84 (twice the points on Zoey's unplayable rack). That leaves a shortfall of 60–75 points that you need to score with whatever set of seven tiles you're milking, two of which are mere U's. That's a big ask, but with efficient tile usage it is often doable.

The unseen pool is GGHJMOQVVWWXZ. For you to burn the blank and have any chances to win, the H or M (playable near I13) cannot be on Zoey's rack. Nor can she have the Z or second G, because at a minimum, you need to play SIZING. You must assume she has a frozen rack of **GJQVVWWX minus one** tile (six possibilities).

For a crisper explanation, I describe these racks as –G, –J, –Q, –V, –W and –X. The correlating bag content is GHMOZ +1, described as +G, +J, +Q, +V, +W and +X. Example 1: if Zoey's frozen rack is –J (i.e., GQVVWWX), the bag is **+J** (i.e., GH**J**MOZ). Example 2: if her frozen rack is –V (the "main rack"), the bag is **+V** (the main bag), when you are poised to draw the perfect six tiles and you can win not only the game but also the whole tournament.

After the initial three-tile play, your replacement draw gives you a lot of information. If you get three of GHMOVZ, you keep trying to win the tournament (e.g., if you've played I4 LUm, you follow with 6I mUS, etc.) On the other hand, if you draw two of GHMOZ plus any tile other than a (good) V or (bad) Q, and the three-tile play you made is compatible, you should lower your sights: switch to a different sequence with hopes of still winning the game.

eXcelling with the X

Let's start with the +X bag, which means Zoey holds GJQVVWW. If the X appears in your initial three-tile draw, you know you can no longer win the tournament, but it is better that you receive the bad news now. Below (with the empty rightmost third of each board cut off) is a representative sample of +X sequences that win the game.

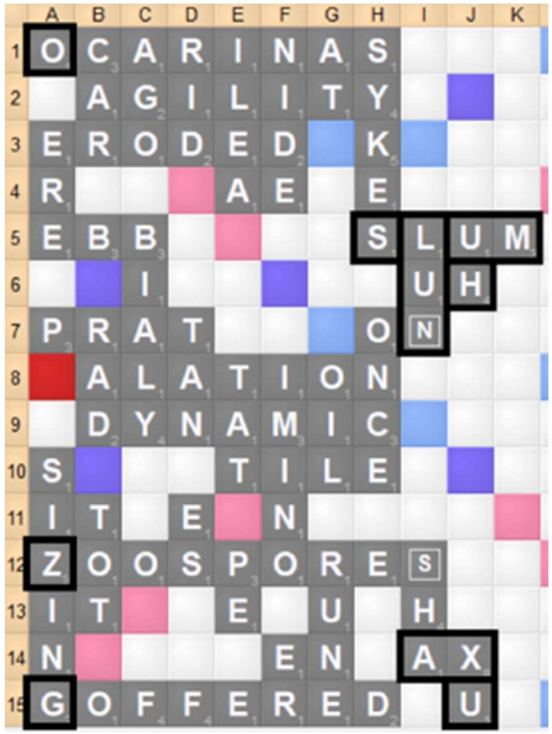
In each of the three situations depicted, you play AX and XU with three tiles, for 34 points. In two of the diagrams, the S extends DYNAMIC for another 17. If your initial play was LUm (**left-hand** diagram), you dispense of the last three tiles (M, U, H) with 7G MO and J6 UH (which is the *out*-play), for a relatively comfortable 8-point win.

In the **center** diagram, where LUn was the initial play, you would similarly have to play UH last to prevent nU**G**, but you would also have to play MO last to avoid MOG/LUn**G**. *Both* plays cannot be last, so that combination fails. Fortunately, you can repurpose all three tiles with the back-up resource J2 HUM, allowing you to win by 3.

+X

I4 LUm + DYNAMICS+AX+XU + OC-+SIZ-+MO+UH(last) = +8

I4 LUn + DYNAMICS+ AX+XU+ +OC-+SIZ-+HUM= +3



I5 LUn + AX + XU + OC- + SIZ- + LUM + SLUM + UH = +18

If the initial left-hand play is SUm (instead of LUm), the sequence is the same except you score only 10 for the L (ILEAL) instead of 17 for the S. Thankfully, you have just enough cushion to absorb those 7 points; you win by 1. If you started with I4 SUn, though, you have additional liabilities: The MO + UH combination fails due to SUn/G, and J2 HUM is nixed because ES/M is not a legitimate hook (whereas EL/M is) even if it were enough points.

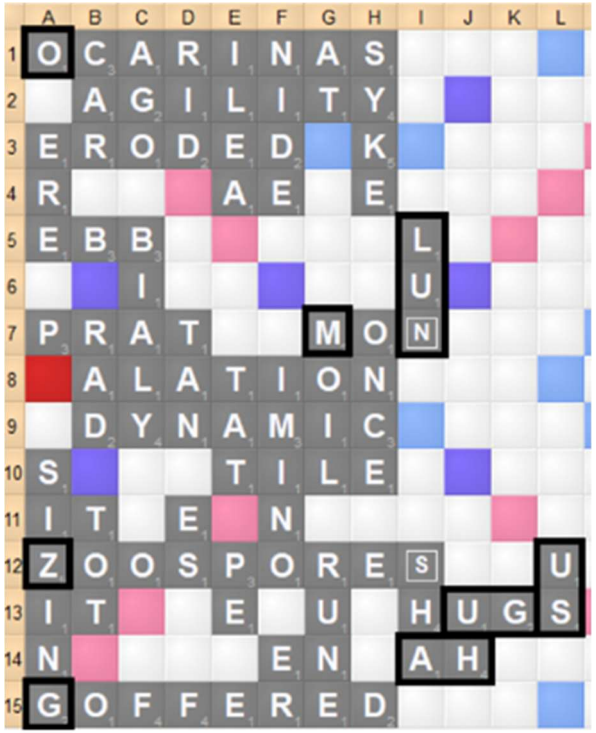
In the **right-hand** diagram, LUn is played a square lower (at I5). Here, you take less for the M and slightly more for the S. Your large (+18) margin is primarily due to the six-times H setup; playing LUM prior to UH exposes a naked U, but with the +X bag Zoey has no X for XU (and GU# is invalid in NWL-2023.)

Genuine G-wins

If, after your initial play, you immediately draw two G's (a 20% chance)—i.e., GGH, GGM, GGO or GGZ—your hoped-for +V bag (GHMOVZ) has been disproved, so you abandon ULU or SULU and go to work in the trenches. Below (with the empty rightmost third of each board cut off) is a sample of +G bag sequences that succeed:

+G

I4 LUn + DYNAMICS+HUG+AH + OC- + SIZ- + MO + nU = +12



I5 LUn +HUG+AH+OC-+SIZ- +MOn+US (last) = +3

I4 mUS + ILEAL + OC- + SIZ- + MO + HUG + AmUS + EmU = +4

The main distinctions between +X and +G sequences are: (a) the former attains three times X; (b) the latter more often attain six-times H, and they gain an extra 12 in rack penalty (twice the point difference between X and G on Zoey's frozen rack). The G's are inflexible but typically don't give back too much—they score enough to get by.

In the **left-hand** diagram, either LUm or LUn at I4 can lead off the sequence. There is no out-play quandary from LUn/G and nU/G; they're both safe because Zoey has no G (you have them both). If it's LUm (instead of LUn), just make sure that your out-play is mU (to dodge mU/X) or play your M and U together as out-play J6 MU.

If I5 LUn (a square lower) is played—see **center** diagram, your third U is more toxic, but L12 US (12) pulls you over the finish line. If the initial play is instead SUn (or SUs, etc.), the best play with the third U is K11 LUG (8) and your punishment for keeping the L instead of the S is that you lose by 1 point (instead of winning by 3).

I4 mUS in the **right-hand** diagram shows a case where a different two-way TWS should be employed for the H. The position is just right to maximize L, M and A scores, while still retaining a spot to dump the third U (Em/U).

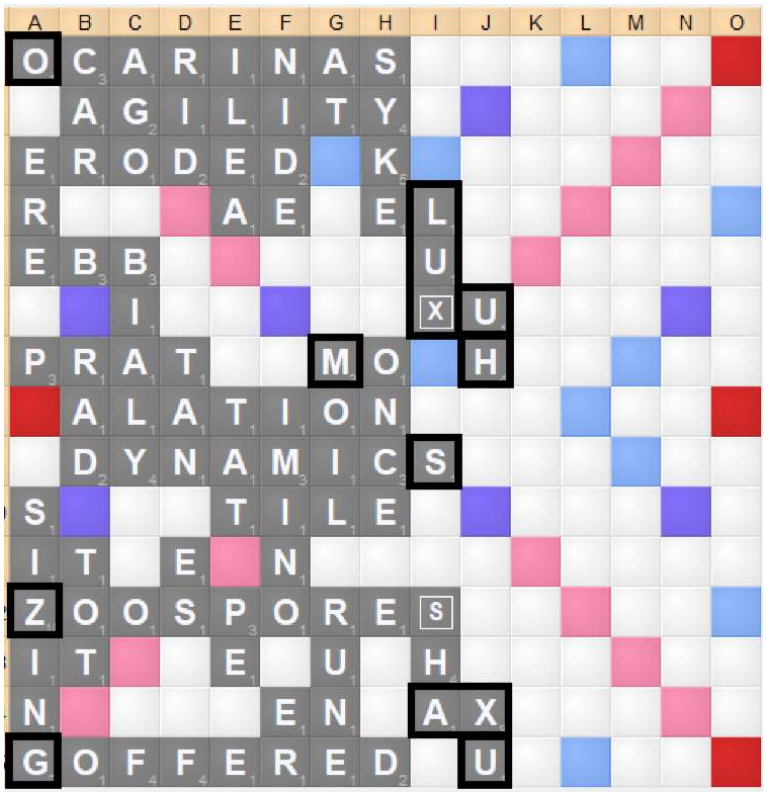
[Sidelight: the initial play I4 mUS has another distinction: it has the only +V continuation (J2 ULU) that prevents Zoey from even playing a tile after you empty the bag. Your winning margin is +1191, the highest achievable.]

Fourth-tile Fortune

When the bag is +V, your first-prize follow-up (see the last small LUx diagram previously shown) includes 6I xU, which *also* dovetails with the +X and +G bags. The same plays (albeit in a different order) apply after LUx as after LUn or LUm in the left-most diagram of the previous two sets (i.e., where "n" or "m" is replaced by "x" below). The only difference is that on the left here, U and H are played separately (for 2 fewer points; not meaningful).

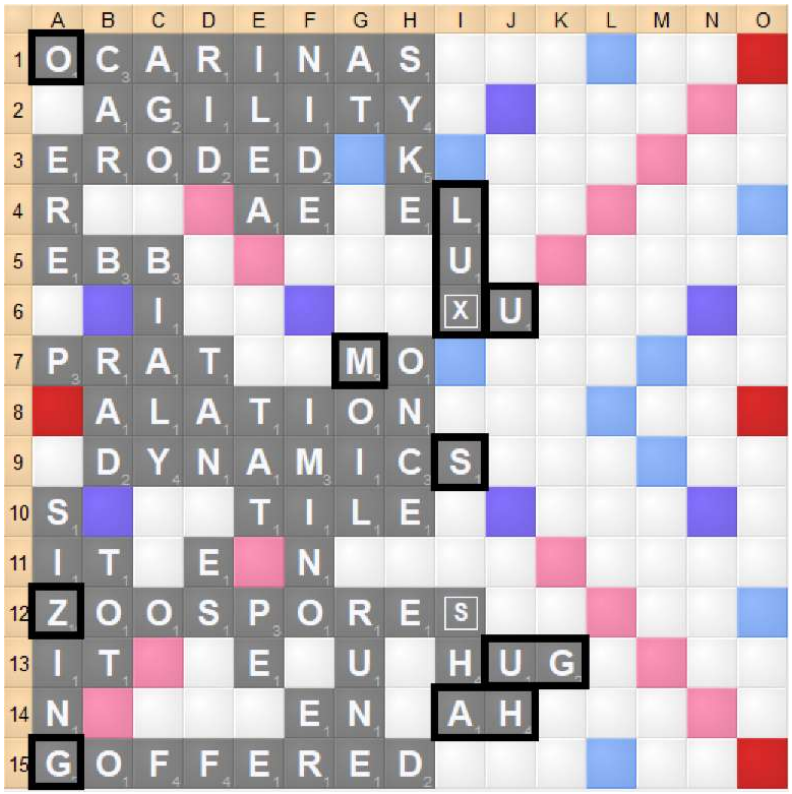
Revisit the various small diagrams prior to the header "Third-prize Consolation." I4 LUm and I4 LUn (and several other initial plays, including I5 LUn) are just as likely to win first prize as is I4 LUx (one of the rightmost diagrams there). However, LUx's path has an advantageous element that the others do not in regards to taking *third* prize (via a small game-winning margin): when the U is played by itself (forming the unhookable xU) and the S retained, you can still win the game if the *fourth* tile drawn is the X (an extra 1/6 chance) or the second G (an extra 20%).

+X



The X is the *fourth* tile drawn: LUx + xU + DYNAMICS + AX + XU + OC- + SIZ- + MO + UH = +6

+G



The second G is the *fourth* tile drawn: LUx + xU + DYNAMICS + HUG + AH- + OC- + SIZ- + MO = +12

In other words, as long as your (valuable) S is not yet committed to J4, xU can be part of a winning sequence with *all three bags* (+V, +X, +G). Further clarification: the leftmost diagram from each of the previous two sets (this time showing full board instead of 2/3 board) is reproduced above, except that I4 LUm or LUn is replaced by LUx.

The sole difference in scoring arises in the fourth-tile X scenario (represented by the left-hand diagram), where the U is played separately from the later H: that change (meaninglessly) reduces the winning margin from +8 to +6.

Juicing the J

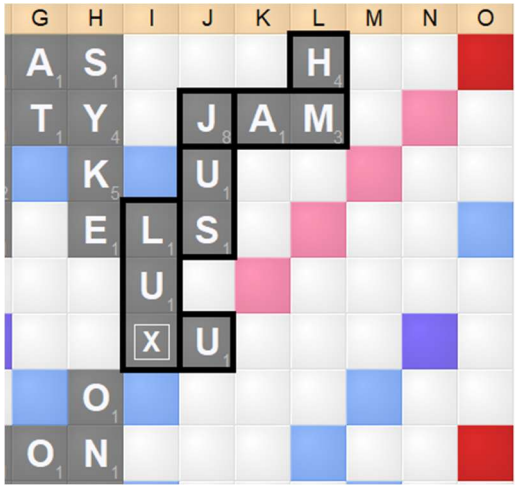
Amazingly, it is even possible to save the game when the bag is **+J**, though it is possible only after I4 LUm, LUn or LUx. If the J is one of the three tiles in your initial draw (a 50% chance), you switch (from mUS, nUS or xU) to J3 US (!), setting up a six-times J-spot. With the sequence captioned under the **left-hand** diagram **below**, you eke out a **tie**. (OC- and SIZ- are abbreviations for OCARINAS and SIZING, played on the A-column.)

If J is the *fourth, fifth or sixth* tile drawn, does LUx gain an edge over LUm and LUn? After all, you can play xU and US in any case, seemingly keeping both +V and +J bags alive. The flaw in that logic is that xU + HM in the **right-hand** diagram **below** scores 1 point less than UM + AH on the left, a difference that turns a tie into a 1-point loss. In a nutshell, xU (correctly prioritizing the +V bag) burns the +J bridge just as surely as does mUS or nUS.

Therefore, I4 LUx's fourth-tile-drawn edge (from +G and +X) over I4 LUm and LUn is *not increased* by the effect of the +J bag. However, it is still the case that +J elevates those three candidates relative to all others.

+J

J appears immediately: LUm/LUn/LUx + US + JAM + UM + AH + OC- + SIZ- = Tie



J appears as the fourth tile: LUx + xU + US + JAM + OC- + SIZ- + HM = you lose by 1

Wielding the W

Originally, I had not realized it is possible for a principal first candidate to also defeat a **+W** bag. This is uniquely achieved by **I5 LUn**, the L-play that has been hiding in the back seat, as if it ranked no better than fourth best.

The key sequence appears in the **left-hand** diagram **below**. As the bag +W is twice as likely to occur as +X or +J (and the plays that work with +J only tie the game), and two G's are less likely to be drawn, the +W sequence has an outsized share of the equity teased out from all the various (non +V) bags. We have a new leader: **I5 LUn**.

+W

The W appears immediately: I5 LUn +
LAW + SLAW + OC- + SIZ- + HUM + AH + UM = +2

+Q

The Q appears immediately: I5 LUn +
DYNAMICS + OC- + SIZ- + UH + LUM + QUA = –4

No play can win with bag +Q. For reference, the nearest-miss sequence is shown in the **right-hand** diagram.

Summary table: When you judiciously burn your blank and Zoey passes, you encounter six possible bag situations. With five of the six, you can win or tie the game with the candidate plays listed in the table below.

Blank-burners: Success with Various Bags	
Bag	Game-winning (or tying) candidate plays and percentage
+G	I4 LUx (40%). I4 LUm, I4 or I5 LUn, I4 or I5 mUS, I5 nUS, I5 sUS, I4 SUm, I4 SUn and I4 SUs (tie) all 20%
+J	I4 LUx, I4 LUm and I4 LUn are all 50% ties
+Q	None
+V	All plays appearing in this table
+W	I5 LUn (50%)—very weighty
+X	I4 LUx (2/3). I4 LUm, I4/I5 LUn, I4/I5 mUS, I5 nUS, I4/I5 sUS, I4/I5 SUs, I5 USe and I5 SUm are all 50%

Wrap-up

The question posed at the outset of this article was "**What is your best play in this unusual situation**?"

The answer is I5 **LUn**. It wins the tournament 100% of the time with the +V bag, and it wins the game 50% of the time with +W and +X, and it wins 20% of the time with +G. It is I5 LUn's +W equity that separates itself from the extra +X and +G (fourth tile) vig earned by the second-best play I4 LUx.

If the question is altered to "What play is most likely to win the game?" SOUL stands out; it wins more than twice as often as I5 LUn, which is in distant third behind SOU. However, with the puzzle conditions as stated, several blank-burning plays, which are in close rivalry for the top equity spot, outrank SOUL. Below is a summary chart.

UNUSUAL Puzzle: Ranking of Plays			
Candidate	Live Bags	$ Gain /10296	Games / 10296
I5 LUn	+V+X+G+W	254,400	43.2
I4 LUx	+V+X+G+J	242,800	37.4
I4 LUm or LUn	+V+X+G+J	236,400	34.2
I4 SUm mUS, I5 mUS nUS sUS	+V+X+G	230,400	31.2
I4 SUs	+V+X+G	229,200	30.6
I4 sUS, I5 USe	+V+X	228,000	30
I4 SUn	+V+G	218,400	25.2
SOUL	n/a	188,000	88
SOU	n/a	188,000	64
I5 SUs (or Sue, SUm, SUn, SUp, Suk)	+V+X	180,000	30

I5 LUn has the highest $ Gain / 10296. To calculate prize equity, add the $1000.00 (fourth prize) you're guaranteed to win as a minimum at the start of the game. Your average prize money when playing I5 LUn is $1024.71.

I5 LUn is not the first play that an expert typically ponders. It scores only 3 points while burning the blank!

About the author:

NICK BALLARD, also known as "Nack," is an expert of many games, including Chess, Go, Color Lines and Scrabble (rated 2026). He is currently writing a seven-volume series: *Backgammon Openings: Early Doubles.*

The detailed version of this article, **UNUSUAL Puzzle, Extended version**, which includes a complete chart of play-equity breakdowns and an illustrative Index of Positions, can be found at

https://nackbg.com/scrabble/

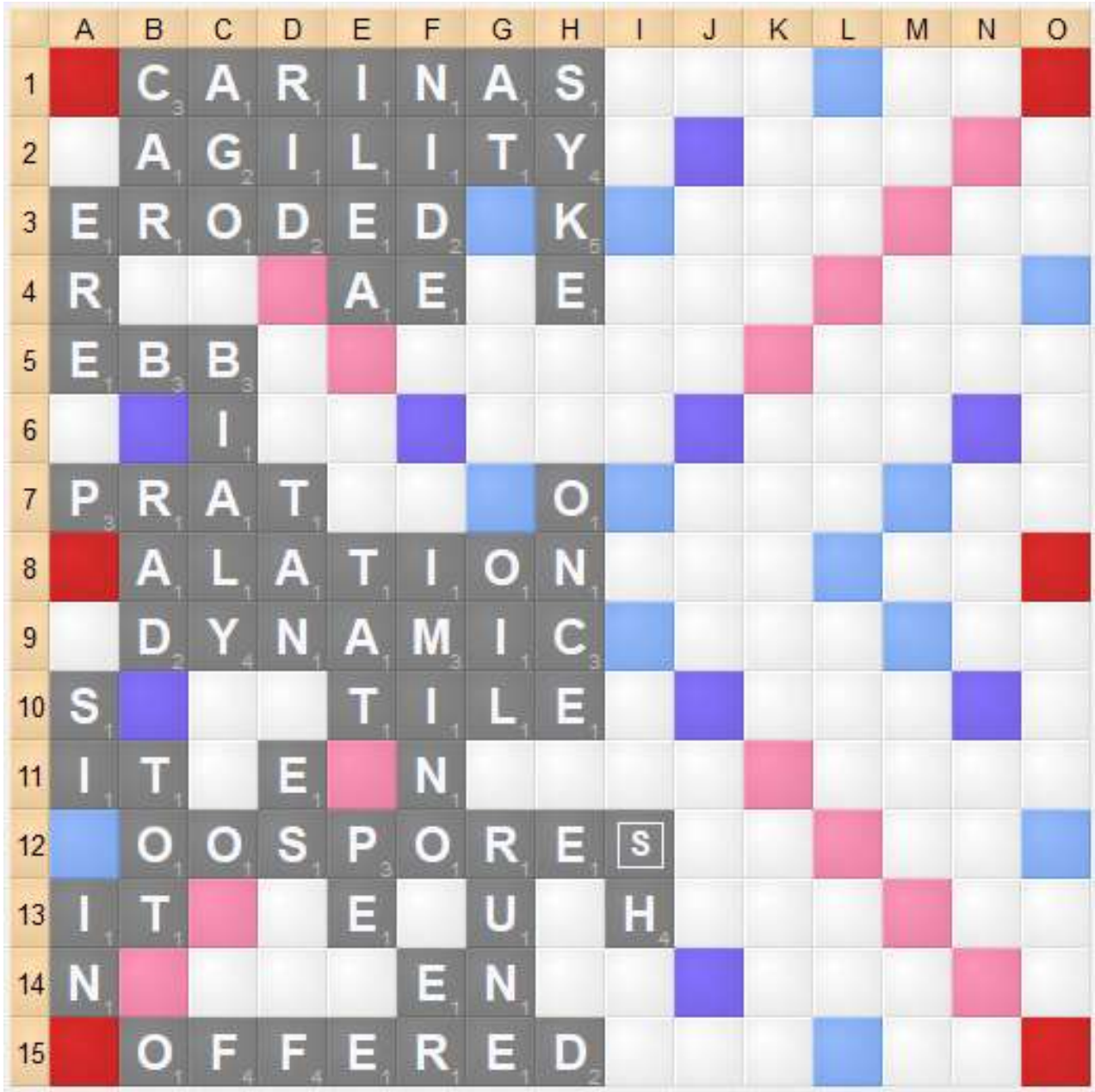
On that webpage, you will also find Nick Ballard's other recent Scrabble works.

On that website, you can also navigate to Nick (Nack) Ballard's puzzles, analysis, etc. on other popular games.

If you have comments or questions, please e-mail Nick Ballard at

nack2000@sbcglobal.net

Convenience diagram below



Unseen: **GGHJMOQVVWWXZ (13)**