The Michael Jordan of Crossword Puzzles
Douglas J. Hoylman (FCAS 1979)
1943-2015

Douglas J. Hoylman, the six-time national champion of the American Crossword Puzzle Tournament, died at his home on November 2, 2015, in Chevy Chase, Maryland. An actuary for GEICO from 1970 to the 1990s, he was born July 2, 1943, in Kalispell, Montana, to Byron G. Hoylman and Nona Marie (Velten) Hoylman.

He earned a mathematics degree at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology and completed his doctorate in mathematics at the University of Arizona in Tucson in 1969. In high school, Hoylman won several accolades for his mathematical acumen, including double honors and the highest score in the Mathematics Association of America and the Society of Actuaries’ math contest in 1959.

While living in an apartment across the street from his employer, Hoylman rose to fame as a crosswords champion. He was dubbed “the Michael Jordan of crossword puzzles” during a radio interview and was the subject of a November 1998 Actuarial Review column, “Nonactuarial Pursuits of Casualty Actuaries.” He acquired his love for the word game from his mother and also played Scrabble and Trivial Pursuit competitively.

He is buried at Conrad Memorial Cemetery in Kalispell with a headstone featuring a crossword puzzle connecting the words “Crossword Puzzles Champ.” His brother survives him.

Nonactuarial Pursuits of Casualty Actuaries

A Modest Champion

by Elizabeth A. Smith

Editor’s note: Brian Haney is taking a break from the column this quarter. He’s off to Italy to get married. The Actuarial Review staff wishes Brian and his wife Elizabeth all the best.

Within GEICO’s Washington, DC office, a champion works.

This Fellow got his start competing in the U.S. Open. He was truly surprised when he took 8th place—he didn’t think that he was that good. Spurred by this early success, he was inspired to compete in his sport’s grand tournament. From his competitive beginning in 1987, he was impressive. By 1997 he was a record-breaking champion.

He’s not a golfer or a tennis player. What he does is more mind boggling than those sports. His pursuit is one of nuance. It challenges him to decipher the tricky into something familiar. It combines his love of words and of games. He is a crossword puzzle champion.

A Champ’s Beginnings

Our Fellow began solving crossword puzzles as a child. He has enjoyed playing with words and doing puzzles of different types for as long as he remembers. He first read about the U.S. Open Tournament in Games Magazine and decided to give it a try. After his strong finish in that competition, our Fellow entered his first American Crossword Puzzle Tournament in 1987, placing 4th in Division A. The next year this sleeper won the tournament outright, which started him on his way to becoming the contest’s record-holder for most wins.


Racing the Clock

While the competition is intense at tournaments, it doesn’t come from the competitors. They employ no “dirty tricks” or “psyche outs.” Beating the clock to solve the puzzle in time or ahead of time is what drives them. They are a friendly group of people who enjoy getting together every year and solving puzzles. Many have developed friendships from years of competing against one another. Most come back year after year to compete.

In Division A’s final round, the contestants solve the puzzles on big boards displayed on stage. Completely calm when it comes to tournament competition, our Fellow finds the final puzzles the most challenging and fun. He shrugs off any indication of nervousness saying, “It’s only a game. It’s not that big of a deal if I win or lose.” The clock is his main competitor.

Today and the Future

Our Fellow continues to solve crossword puzzles just about every day, mostly from books and magazines. “The puzzles in the daily papers aren’t as interesting,” he claims. Our mystery actuary has also branched out to include Scrabble tournaments. He has been in several such tournaments and describes himself as somewhere between intermediate and expert. (Just give him a couple of years.)

Following his fifth win in 1997, our Fellow decided to take a break from competition. While he was content to be an observer this year, he does intend to compete next year. Watch for him in 1999.

So the next time you run into Doug Hoyman, be sure to congratulate him on his wins. And while you’re at it, ask him, “What’s a seven-letter word for ‘surprise success’?”

The Tournament

Started in 1978, the American Crossword Puzzle Tournament is the first major crossword puzzle competition to be held in the U.S. since the 1940s. The tournament has several different divisions with Division A including everyone—tweens, regional players, young and old. The tournament awards cash prizes and trophies to winners in all divisions. Division A’s prize purse is $1,000. All tournament crosswords are specially created and edited for the competition.

To learn more about the American Crossword Puzzle Tournament, visit the official website at http://www.crosswordtourney.com/index.htm.
A Modest Champion

by Elizabeth A. Smith

Editor's note: Brian Haney is taking a break from the column this quarter. He's off to Italy to get married. The Actuarial Review staff wishes Brian and his wife Elizabeth all the best.

Within GEICO's Washington, DC office, a champion works.

This Fellow got his start competing in the U.S. Open. He was truly surprised when he took 8th place—he didn't think that he was that good. Spurred by this early success, he was inspired to compete in his sport's grand tournament. From his competitive beginning in 1987, he was impressive. By 1997 he was a record-breaking champion.

He's not a golfer or a tennis player. What he does is more mind-boggling than those sports. His pursuit is one of nuance. It challenges him to decipher the tricky into something familiar. It combines his love of words and of games. He is a crossword puzzle champion.

A Champ's Beginnings

Our Fellow began solving crossword puzzles as a child. He has enjoyed playing with words and doing puzzles of different types for as long as he remembers. He first read about the U.S. Open Tournament in Games Magazine and decided to give it a try. After his strong finish in that competition, our Fellow entered his first American Crossword Puzzle Tournament in 1987, placing 4th in Division A. The next year this sleeper won the tournament outright, which started him on his way to becoming the contest's record-holder for most wins.


Racing the Clock

While the competition is intense at tournaments, it doesn't come from the competitors. They employ no "dirty tricks" or "psyche outs." Beating the clock to solve the puzzle in time or ahead of time is what drives them. They are a friendly group of people who enjoy getting together every year and solving puzzles. Many have developed friendships from years of competing against one another. Most come back year after year to compete.

In Division A's final round, the contestants solve the puzzles on big boards displayed on stage. Completely calm when it comes to tournament competition, our Fellow finds the final puzzles the most challenging and fun. He shrugs off any indication of nervousness saying, "It's only a game. It's not that big of a deal if I win or lose."

The clock is his main competitor.

Today and the Future

Our Fellow continues to solve crossword puzzles just about every day, mostly from books and magazines. "The puzzles in the daily papers aren't as interesting," he claims. Our mystery actuary has also branched out to include Scrabble tournaments. He has been in several such tournaments and describes himself as somewhere between intermediate and expert. (Just give him a couple of years.)

Following his fifth win in 1997, our Fellow decided to take a break from competition. While he was content to be an observer this year, he does intend to compete next year. Watch for him in 1999.

So the next time you run into Doug Hoyzman, be sure to congratulate him on his wins. And while you're at it, ask him, "What's a seven-letter word for 'surprise success'?"

The Tournament

Started in 1978, the American Crossword Puzzle Tournament is the first major crossword puzzle competition to be held in the U.S. since the 1940s. The tournament has several different divisions with Division A including everyone, from seasoned solvers to young and old. The tournament awards cash prizes and trophies to winners in all divisions. Division A's prize purse is $1,000. All tournament crosswords are specially created and edited for the competition.

To learn more about the American Crossword Puzzle Tournament, visit the official website at http://www.crosswordtournament.com/index.htm.