

Eulogy Delivered at David Gibson's Memorial Service by Bill Snoddy, Director, Asheville Scrabble Club

I am a retired family physician. The pancreas...is an organ we don't have to think about very much. For most of us, it just works quietly and effectively, managing blood sugar and aiding with digestion. Even diabetics don't actually "feel" much from their pancreas. They take medication to manage their blood sugar, but their pancreas doesn't cause them pain. Pancreatitis can occur but is not common, in those of us who take good care of ourselves. Most of us do have abdominal pain though and often correctly blame other organs that do commonly trouble us, like the stomach, the esophagus, the small intestine, the gallbladder, the colon, and that mysterious appendix.

As cancers go, pancreatic cancer is not one of the common ones. There will probably be no 5K event for pancreatic cancer next week. Lung cancer, on the other hand is very common, and is often self-inflicted. There are ways to help detect colon, breast, and prostate cancer. But pancreatic cancer just sneaks in there... until you have unexplained pain. Ask Alex Trebek. Think of Steve Jobs, Aretha Franklin, Patrick Swayze, and "Little Joe" Michael Landon. These are famous people. And we have lost another famous person to this bad disease, our friend, David Gibson.

Well, I was asked to speak not because I am a physician or any sort of expert about the pancreas or cancer. Others here can talk of his students loving him because of his skills as a college math professor, or his enthusiasm for music and sports. I know him because of his fame as being the very best, the absolute very best, at a particular endeavor. The game of Scrabble. There are many word games. This one was carefully and scientifically designed by an architect in the New York City area in the late 1940's. You have tiles of letters and you make connected words and at the end you have a layout of interesting words that looks like a crossword puzzle.

At the higher levels of play though, this is more than a word game. It is a math game. Players are allowed to track the tiles already played, and when there are no tiles left to draw your opponent knows the tiles remaining on your rack. Now one might not necessarily play the highest scoring word, but a high scoring word that also blocks the other person from making their best play. But even when there are still tiles available in the bag to be drawn, experts will be thinking "what are the odds that a player would have a certain needed tile available, etc."

Word knowledge of course remains the key to winning. Students of the game these days use electronic means of study, visiting sites on the internet, and studying PowerPoint slide shows of high probability words. There are electronic word checkers and word-finders. David was generally not so high-tech. He used homemade flashcards and at one time had as many as 17,000 of them. David used an old Scrabble dictionary with notations made in the margins. But I mean EVERY margin. The notations would remind him of alternate spellings of similar words, and for example, near a six-letter word, he would list the other letters that would go with that word to make a 7 letter word. David's dictionary is available for you to see later today at the reception.

If you use all 7 tiles on your rack, you get 50 extra points and these bonus plays are often referred to as "bingos." In one of the many online tributes to David from Scrabble players, one mentioned that you can switch around the letters in name GIBSON to make the word "bingos." I had never thought of that, but I am sure that David did. It's particularly impressive when a Scrabble player bingos for his last play. It can be like a walk-off home run. You know we use a clock, much like a chess clock, and if you make that last play using all the tiles on your rack, you announce the score and say "and out" , stopping the clock and signifying that there are no tiles left in the bag and the game is over. 59 and out. 62 and out.

So he studied words. He made the effort to become very good at this game. David was obviously a smart man, but I don't know if he was a genius or not. He seemed awfully normal to be a genius. No offense to you geniuses in the room. He said he didn't do well on the verbal part of the SAT test. I know it took dedication and hard work for him to become the best at Scrabble.

John Chew is the Chief Executive Officer of the North American Scrabble Players Association and sends his condolences from Toronto, and also has posted and emailed a beautiful tribute to David as many others have. John first met David at the National Scrabble competition in 1994, describing David this way: a soft-spoken Southern gentleman, who came in and quietly demolished the strongest field of Scrabble players ever assembled up to that time. John Chew went on to describe David's Scrabble playing ability as AMAZING, but said this and I agree: "We need other similar adjectives to amazing to describe David's kindness, his humility, and his generosity."

And we do need those words! Amazing is overused. "Welcome to Wheel of Fortune tonight, Fred, anybody here with you?" "Yes, my amazing wife Maxine, and my amazing children, Little Fred and Amber." Okay. David Gibson truly evoked amazement from those who knew him.

So, he won that 1994 National Championship, won many other tournaments including ten first place wins in our annual Asheville Tournament, that tournament drawing players from all over the country. We do have an active Scrabble Club in Asheville and we were lucky, because David would drive up about twice a month to beat us all, and educate us. He would go home and educate himself, by entering his games into special software that would occasionally point out how he could have made a better play. I think he had a 62 game winning streak at our club at one point. Occasionally one of us would win a game with David, because Scrabble does have that "luck factor" so if you get the right tiles you could beat anybody.

But often you were hearing something from David like "66 and out" and then he would find a way to compliment the best play of your game, or make a suggestion as to what you could have done differently. He won the Scrabble Superstars tournament in 1995, and the Scrabble AllStars tournament in 2003. He would win \$50,000 at these big events, but sometimes instead of keeping the money, he divided it among the top players. Unheard of. And these big tournaments were often covered by ESPN. ESPN? Yes, because Scrabble is considered by many to be a sport. The full-contact, mind sport.

Shortly after these first big wins he took several years away from Scrabble, and David and Nancy co-wrote many country music songs, both lyrics and music. Nancy said we could just leave this part out, and I don't think we have anyone from Nashville today speaking. Ken Burns did not mention them in his Country Music series. Well after all, to my knowledge, David didn't drink or smoke, didn't have a pick-up truck, and never owned a dog. So? No. But actually Randy Hersom, another Scrabble expert and friend of David's, did send me several links to their music and it is really good listening. But after about 5 years, he returned to the Scrabble scene.

Yes, Scrabble is a sport. David was a sports enthusiast. His obituary includes mention of his golf and tennis and that he followed football, baseball, and basketball. Great guy, David but we do have to forgive him for some things. He did Furman undergraduate work and got his Masters at Tennessee. But he became a Clemson football fan. This was not jumping on the winning bandwagon, but it started back in the day when Clemson was...well...Clemsoning. I think I just saw eight people check their watches. I know, Clemson plays at noon, I will move right along. When he won his second National Championship in Ft. Wayne, Indiana, in 2016, I was in the crowd listening to his acceptance speech. He was acknowledging Nancy, thanking his parents and family, even thanking his opponents, and acknowledging all the Scrabble players present. He received a heart-felt standing ovation.

The Word Game Players have their big annual Scrabble tournament for which they have a great name: the Word Cup. This year's winner of the 2019 Word Cup: Professor David Gibson. That was this past July, just months before he learned of his diagnosis.

Dan Stock has created a special layout of Scrabble Tiles, using the exact 100 tiles available in a game, as a special tribute to David, and that will be available for viewing at the reception.

In the official Scrabble rulebook, there is a term for a player who has locked first place with games remaining to be played. For years now, that player is referred to as being Gibsonized. I feel sure that the name for that will never be changed. But Mike Baron, an expert player from New Mexico, who has written books on how to improve word knowledge for Scrabble and knew David well, says that the word GIBSONIZE needs to have a broader definition. GIBSONIZE needs to mean "to treat others with the utmost kindness, generosity and respect."

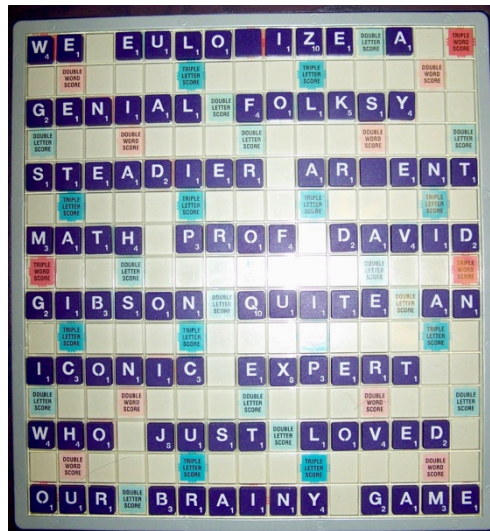
Our David Gibson did seem to Gibsonize every person he met. We could have used another 25 years with David Gibson. He had the genes for it. It was an honor to know him and an honor to be asked to speak today.

David Lawrence Gibson

68... and out.

Thank you, David. And thank you, Nancy.

Dan Stock's Tribute Tableau to David Gibson using all 100 Scrabble Tiles



The first blank is a G, the second a D. David won the National Championship in 1994 and in 2016, as well as winning two huge special events: the 1995 Superstars Showdown and the 2003 All Stars Championship. While David's busy schedule only allowed him to compete in the National Championship 8 times, he amazingly finished in the top ten in 7 of those appearances, and in the top three 5 times. But more than all of that, he was a true gentleman and a wonderful person. He will be greatly missed.



North American Scrabble Players Association Tribute to David Gibson



NASPA CEO John Chew offers the following tribute to David: In Memoriam David Gibson (1951-2019) I learned more than I was expecting to at the 1994 National SCRABBLE Championship (NSC). It was my first and so far only time competing in that event, and I went expecting to see a rich assortment of characters having the time of their lives playing excellent SCRABBLE. You can see that at any NSC, but what everyone remembers about that particular one - the 300 of us who were fortunate enough to attend, at least - was what happened in Division 1. A courtly, soft-spoken Southern gentleman named David Gibson was quietly demolishing the strongest field ever assembled, to end up ahead in the end by an unheard of 4 wins and more than 250 points of spread. He then went on to give away half of his championship prize money to the people that he felt contributed to his success.

The National SCRABBLE Association had to invent a new term to describe what happened - Gibsonization - that is used to this day to describe what happens when a player clinches a prize before a competition finishes. And yet, to call David Gibson an amazing SCRABBLE player is to not leave suitable adjectives to describe his kindness, humility, and personal generosity.

David was rated 2200 at the time of his death, five points short of his career high, and more than 40 points ahead of his next nearest rival, a World Champion. His career was not lacking for brilliant plays and glorious triumphs. But as I read hundreds of Facebook tributes about him this week, what struck me was that the anecdotes that people told about him were generally not about his game. They were instead about what a good friend, mentor, and person he was: sharing freely his advice equally to aspiring newcomers and seasoned veterans, his prize winnings with players at the NSC, and to everyone that most precious commodity of all, his time. David has, through his magnificent example, shown us how a life well lived can enrich so many other lives. Rest now in well-earned peace.



In 2003, David Gibson won the SCRABBLE All-Stars tournament sponsored by Hasbro and ESPN. David defeated Ron Tiekert in a 5-game playoff after 18 games of competition among the top 24 players in North America. People have been sharing their thoughts and anecdotes about David in the NASPA Facebook Group - a few of which appear below:

Dallas Johnson - An impressive man in every respect. I loved his worn old word list that he updated by hand with every update, and his acceptance speech when he won the North American championship (again), which he began with, "My name is David, and I make mistakes." I'm honored to have known him. Condolences to his family.



Watch the acceptance speech [here](#).

Sheldon Gartner - At the Nationals in Indiana, a very nice man approached me and asked if I was Sheldon. He then said that he heard that I had written and performed Gibsonized at the Musicale but he missed it. My first thought was "Who is this gentle, curious man?" Then he said, "I'm David Gibson." What a surprise and thrill. Today's news is a surprise and a tragedy.

Matt Bernardina - David was a stalwart in our region, both for his mastery of the game and his impeccable sportsmanship. Whenever we played, he always found a play of mine to compliment, even though way more often than not he thrashed me over the board. Playing him in his personal study, on his board, and pulling out a win with an out bingo SCALADO will always be a personal highlight of mine. David will be dearly missed, but his example will never be forgotten.

Judy Horn - This is so sad. My favorite memory of him: many years ago when he won the 1994 Nationals, he sent a check for \$25 to each non-winner who had played in the tournament. It made me feel like a winner knowing our sport had such a wonderful person.

Read about David's victory at the 1994 Nationals [here](#).

Alan Stern - A perfect gentleman dripping with class in every way. So great a player a term had to be named after him for those dominating a division with no chance to lose it. Even his last name anagrammed to BINGOS. Never to be matched, never to be forgotten. RIP David.

John D. Williams Jr. - One of the greatest SCRABBLE players ever and even better human being. I treasure the countless hours we spent together traveling as he was always passionate about promoting the game. This is a tough one to absorb. May he rest in peace.

Michael Baron - I'd like to propose another definition of Gibsonize: to treat others with kindness, generosity, and respect. By that definition, David Gibsonized everyone who was lucky enough to meet him.

Notes and messages may be sent to: Nancy Gibson, 235 Dunbarton Drive, Spartanburg, SC 29307.



Word Game Players Organization Tribute to David Gibson

by [Ruth Hamilton](#) • November 23, 2019 •



David at Word Cup IX

David Gibson passed away on November 22, 2019 after a fight with pancreatic cancer. It's hard to say he lost that fight, because he and wife Nancy are devout Christians who see this as just another step in their journey of faith. Nevertheless, he will be missed by many in the various circles in which he moved. He was a gentle man, and a gentleman, and yet was a fierce competitor in the game he loved and mastered to a degree unmatched by all but a very few.

He didn't play as often as many others, but when he did he often dominated the field with his somewhat unorthodox defensive style that stymied so many of his opponents. He leaves the Scrabble® world with the top ratings in both NASPA (2200) and WGPO (2166). His legacy includes the giving of his name to tournament lore and terminology, when in 1995 he dominated the strongest field of players ever assembled at that time for the Superstars tournament.

The term Gibsonization was born when tournament organizers were faced with an unexpected dilemma. 54 of the highest rated players in North America gathered in Las Vegas to compete for an unprecedented \$50,000 first prize. But there were also significant lower prizes to be had with the \$100,000 prize fund, and going into the last day of the 24 round event, David Gibson held a four game lead with three games to play. He had already clinched first place, and the organizers were concerned that David would either not play optimally with nothing on the line, or would continue to dominate the next ranked players in the king of hill format in a way that would somewhat unfairly give lower ranked players who wouldn't have to play him a chance to move up in the final standings.

In a stroke of debatable genius, a decision was made to pair David with the players with the worst records for the last three games, thereby allowing the remaining equally motivated contenders to play amongst themselves for the lesser prizes. Ironically, in the final game, the last place player, Rodney Nivison, defeated Gibson. Some of the players started using the term "Gibsonizing" to humorously describe what happened on that last day. The relief felt by the top contenders was balanced by the dismay the last place players felt when, after obviously struggling to no avail for three days, seeing they were paired with

David. That dismay disappeared when David, in another unprecedented act, generously shared a significant portion of his winnings with every other player.

Tournament pairings changed forever on that day, as more and more directors used the same approach in their tournaments. Today Gibsonization is routinely used, though it has been modified to match the winner with the highest ranked players that cannot win a place prize. The last place players are no longer dismayed, and, David Gibson, ever the gentleman, would like that.

