

Players across all ages at a Scrabble tournament in Delhi; (right) Ishika Shivalingaiah, India's top-ranked woman player



Bingo! India has a youth world champion



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Madhav Gopal Kamath's first memory of Scrabble is watching a game and pointing out how the player had missed out on the word, 'aediles', the plural for magistrates in ancient Rome. He had seen his father use the word a fortnight before that and remembered. He was five.

The boy could remember well even before he had properly begun to read. When four, he learned the names of 80 dinosaurs from flash-cards. "From a very young age, he could concentrate well. We knew he was gifted," says his entrepreneur father, Sudhir.

By the time he was eight, Madhav would occasionally beat Sudhir. "But in the last two years, it has been eight out of 10," he says. Sudhir is ranked 28 in Scrabble Association of India's latest official ratings. Madhav is India No.3 — and No.1 among juniors.

The Class 10 student of Delhi's Sanskriti School has bigger plaudits to his name, though. When he became the world youth champion in Malaysia last month, he also pocketed a cash prize of $1,000. He is also the national champion. His ambition is to be world champ. "But I have a long way to go," he says.

"What makes Madhav special is his ability to stay cool under pressure, which is crucial during end games," says Neeta Bhatia, who was coach and team manager at the Malaysia event.

In the Scrabble Association of India (SAI) magazine, Endgame, Madhav spelt out a small list of dream playable words back in Sept 2021. Two of them were: "Caziques" and "Mbaqanga". Do you know what they mean?

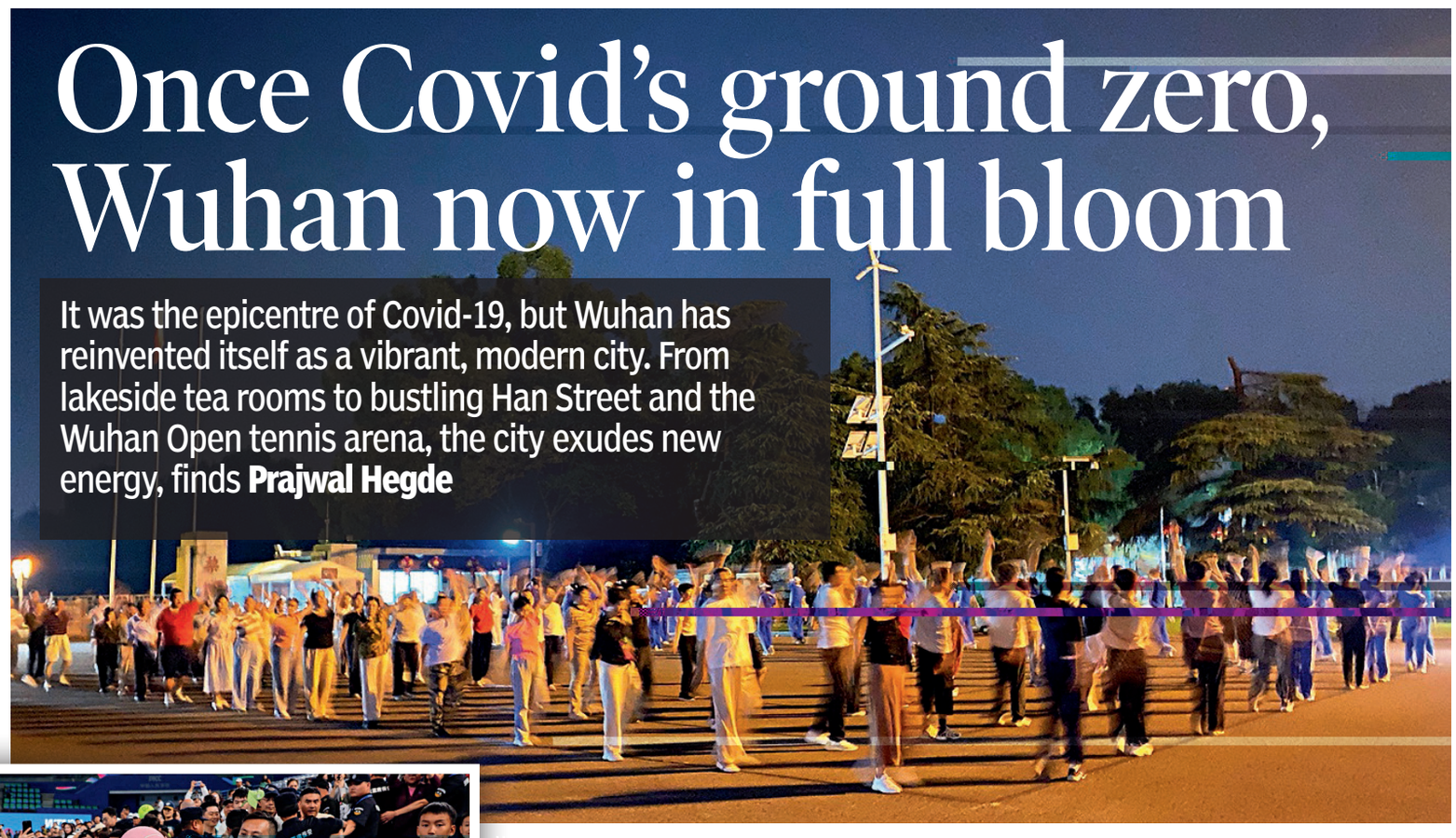
Did You Know?

Oxyphenbutazone is potentially the highest scoring word in Scrabble. It can net up to 1,778 points

Akshay Bhandarkar, currently India's top-ranked player, won the World English-language Scrabble Players Association (WESPA) title in 2017. He had represented Bahrain then

Once Covid's ground zero, Wuhan now in full bloom

It was the epicentre of Covid-19, but Wuhan has reinvented itself as a vibrant, modern city. From lakeside tea rooms to bustling Han Street and the Wuhan Open tennis arena, the city exudes new energy, finds Prajwal Hegde



The pink muhly grass fields in Wuhan make for a fairy-tale setting. Droves of Wuhanese, a large number of them women — from influencers and aspiring models to friends in their 40s and 50s — strike poses, holding dainty oil-paper umbrellas against a picturesque backdrop.

That is not the image that comes to mind when one talks of Wuhan, a one-time industrial city, now known the world over as the birthplace of the novel coronavirus — Sars-CoV-2 — the deadliest virus in over a century that brought the world to a halt for nearly two years. Almost six years on, the world is still curious about the city for that very reason, except that Wuhan has moved on.

Wuhan, the capital of Hubei, in Central China, is divided by the Yangtze and the Han rivers.

The muhly fields are among several spots in the city where Wuhanese like to disappear for the day.

There's also the botanical gardens, and museums like Hubei's Provincial, with its long queues of people waiting to see the 140,000 artefacts housed inside. Han Street, which runs along the south bank of the Chu River, has a number of nooks, between rows of retail therapy. China's own Luckin Coffee, which serves an innovative coconut water Americano, is starting to make its presence felt, lodged beside tea shops that are the order here. The Chinese love their milk tea.

Across the city, which is an hour-long drive, the spectacular East Lake — from where the iconic Yellow Crane Tower, a symbol of Wuhan, is visible — features tea rooms, bakeries, running tracks and biking paths.

This is where one can see the evenings play out. While the young, or those who share that vibe, are seen running and cycling, older residents from neighbouring localities come together for the square dance, an hour-long, after-dinner tradition.

A City Full Of Students

Wuhan, home to 82 higher educational institutions and 1.3 million students, has a large youth population, who had to scale back during the pandemic, when they spent nearly three years in lockdown. After a while, they shifted to online classes, not unlike the rest of the world.

Interestingly, despite the big presence of students, the city doesn't have much of a drinking or pub culture. People come together over food instead, a range of hot pots and hot dry noodles, the specialty of the region. The popular hangout spaces are the karaoke rooms, also known as K-TV. Friends rent these soundproof rooms that are located in malls. Room rates start at $15 (for an hour), depending on the size of the room and the number

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stayed sealed off at ground level, with only a few unrelated upstairs optical stalls operating. Environmental swabs taken there tested positive for Sars-CoV-2, but no infected animals were ever found, leaving scientists divided over whether the market was indeed where the pandemic originated or simply an early amplifier.