Dominoes: Players lay it on the line at tournament

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played at informal social clubs throughout the Caribbean to a high-stakes affair with standardized rules and international tournaments.

Silva takes the game seriously, perhaps more so than most. In a room where jeans and brightly colored shirts are the norm, the short, unassuming Silva wears a button-down shirt and slacks. Dominoes may be just a hobby, but it's certainly not a casual one.

Despite Silva's best efforts, he and partner-for-the-day Angel Espada, who's driven here from Holyoke, Mass., for the event, lose the first game by 47 points.

Silva, 62, is the treasurer of the Ponce Social Club in Passaic, but for the most part, he's the guy in charge. He opens the club every Friday, Saturday and Sunday night. Regulars trickle in throughout the weekend, buying a beer at the bar and sitting down at one of the domino tables. On each of the walls hang plaques of domino champions from throughout the club's 43-year history.

"All the guys who come in, they want to play us. They want to beat us," Crespo, 41, a Clifton resident, says on a recent Friday evening.

"We're like the Yankees," Silva adds.

Each has been playing for as long as he can remember, but the two first joined forces just three years ago. The key to a good domino partnership, they say, is practice. Partners must be able to read each other's moves quickly during a game. Silva likens it to the relationships of shortstops and second basemen, or catchers and pitchers, in baseball.

"In any sport, you need practice to make a nice combination," Silva says.

They're at the club at least twice each weekend, according to Crespo, depending on "the wife situation." Dubbed "dominoes widows," those wives regularly lose their husbands to the game. While a handful of female competitors show up at each tournament, the majority seem content to watch their husbands play.

"I play among the other women, and I like it," says Silva's wife, Carmen, "but I don't have the understanding that he does."

Silva learned the game in Puerto Rico, from a group of old men who set up domino tables outside a grocery store in his hometown of Manatí. He played there almost every week, sometimes skipping church – where his father was a minister – to learn from the elderly masters. By the time he was 14, he says, other players sought him out as a partner.

At 16, Silva moved to Paterson with his family. He works in real estate now, selling mostly in Passaic, Bergen and Essex counties. He raised his own four children here, and although he taught them the game, none inherited his love of it.

Despite their lack of interest, Silva has seen increased involvement among young people, both at the club and in tournaments. That's important, he says, because it keeps the kids off the streets.

For Silva, playing keeps him young.

"It's a good exercise for your head," he says. "That's how you know if your head is working or not."

"Anibal Silva, *veintitrés*!"

Heeding the announcement, Silva and his partner, Espada, 34, make their way to Table 23 for Round 2. Table assignments are random for the first round, but by the second, a pair's scores dictate seating. The best table, where the big winners sit, is the first; the dead-last players get banished to Table 39.

"The winners play winners, and the losers play losers," explains Rosemarie Vanga-Quiñones, the scorekeeper for the National Domino Federation USA, which sponsors the tournament. "The first three tables are the best place to be."

Despite its size, the regional tournament retains its social club atmosphere. Rapid-fire Spanish flies about the room. Home-style *arroz con gandules*, rice with pigeon peas, fuels the players. They talk to each other while shuffling, but once the dominoes are dealt, the players are all business.

Once a player has gotten rid of his seven dominoes, points for the winning team are tallied by counting the black dots, called pips, of the dominoes remaining in each player's hand. The first pair to accumulate 200 points – or the team with the most points at the 40-minute mark – wins.

An official calculates the difference between the two teams' point totals. If, for example, the totals are 200 and 140, the winning team's score is plus-60, while the losing team's is minus-60. The deeper the hole, the tougher it is to get to those first few tables.

"It's not impossible, but it's tough to climb back from minus-200," Vanga-Quiñones says, as she enters the scores into a spreadsheet.

Silva and Espada already have a 47-point loss. To have any chance of finishing well, they need to win the second game. Silva asks Espada if he has any moves, any special methods of play. When Espada says no, Silva just does the best he can.

"You need to play with the same person all the time," Silva says. "I can't crucify the other kid that he doesn't know how to play. I never saw the kid before."

Silva plays calmly, his gaze focused on the dominoes on the board, glancing occasionally at his partner and competitors. He knows exactly who has played each domino. By the middle of the game, he likely has a good idea of which dominoes are in his competitors' hands.

Silva isn't frustrated with Espada as much as he is with Fernando Turbi and Ferneli Familia, two players from the Ponce Social Club who showed up an hour late – too late to register. He could have played with one of them and represented the club. Instead, they spend the day on the sidelines, cheering for Silva.

"That was a lesson for them, too, because they really wanted to play and they couldn't," Silva says. "They spent the whole day there and couldn't play."

Despite their best efforts, Silva and Espada finish the second game with a 35-point loss.

Domino partnerships mirror real-life relationships: marriages, divorces, one-night stands, love triangles. Partners spend years together, learning each other's mannerisms and methods, only to quarrel and find new partners.

Take Espada, who's paired with Silva. The reason: By the time Espada arrived, his regular partner had chosen a new partner, and Espada, like a jilted lover, was left to find someone new – Silva.

"I feel like pulling his ears out," Espada says of his regular partner, laughing. "You need to know each other, how he plays. It takes a while."

Domino partners sit opposite each other, four to a table. Each player draws seven *fichas*, or dominoes, from the pile of 28. Play moves counter-clockwise. With each turn, a player lays down a domino that matches either end of the domino on the table. The first person to get rid of all his dominoes wins.

Partners work together to control the board by playing dominoes they know the other two players don't have, forcing them to pass. But they must accomplish this without seeing each other's dominoes. That's where the *seña*, or sign, comes in: a tap of the nose, a tug on the ear, a shrug of the shoulder to let a partner know what dominoes you're hiding. Technically, the *seña* is illegal in competition, but it's difficult to enforce.

"There's a big problem with cheating," Vanga-Quiñones says. "We get very angry people."

Sure enough, a heated debate, complete with frantic gestures and angry words in Spanish, breaks out at Table 2 during the third round. It lasts for several minutes.

"This is a game," Silva says, with a dismissive gesture. "You don't argue in a game. It's fun."

And Silva is having fun, playing his opponents right down to the wire. Once the points are tallied, he stands up and laughs. He and Espada are 82 points in the hole, but they've won the third game – their first victory – by a single point.

Silva's 39 years of competition have been mostly small affairs, run by citywide leagues or between rival social clubs. But now he's grown interested in the burgeoning domino scene – a move toward more regional, national and international tournaments that followed the 2002 creation of the International Federation of Dominoes in Barcelona. The sport's popularity surprises even some event organizers: At a recent tournament in Kissimmee, Fla., 550 players showed up, overflowing the tables set up for 400.

And now TV has gotten in on the action.

"We started dominoes earlier this year," says ESPN Deportes spokeswoman Santa Brito. "It's considered a sport because it's very competitive."

The success of televised poker led ESPN to air dominoes, Brito says. The game – popular in Mexico, Central America and some parts of South America as well as the Caribbean – has wide appeal on the network's Spanish-language channel. It now also airs on English-language ESPN2.

"When we produced our first domino tournament in Vegas, we found that it was also extremely popular in English-speaking Caribbean countries," Brito says. "We knew that it had a lot of crossover appeal."

It was through ESPN that Silva and Crespo learned about the World Domino Championship coming to Las Vegas in November. It requires no qualifying standards; any team that plunks down the $300 entry fee can play.

"We saw it on TV and said this is something we need to get involved in," Crespo says.

Silva thinks he has a shot at winning – at roulette if not at the domino table.

As the tournaments have grown, so have the stakes. The Las Vegas tournament promises a first-place $15,000 prize, huge in a sport where $1,000 to $3,000 prizes are the norm. Most U.S. tournaments are held in New York, northern New Jersey, Orlando and Miami, but Cuba, Spain, Mexico and Jamaica also have held recent international events.

Twenty or so years ago, Silva won big in a series of Newark tournaments: six all-inclusive trips to tournaments in the Dominican Republic.

His luck is beginning to turn in Perth Amboy, where he and Espada win the fourth game by 35 points. It's their second win, but it does little to help them climb out of their hole. For the fifth and final game, they head back to where they began: Table 22.

Dominoes, like poker, is a game of both skill and chance. To win, a player needs to get lucky with a good hand, but he also needs the skill to play the hand well. A hand including several dominoes with the same number can be used to control the game and force other players to pass, but goes to waste in the hands of an unskilled player.

Today, the Silva-Espada team is out of luck.

"It takes a while before I can get the hang of it," Espada says. "Now we've won two, maybe we can win another one."

Not so. They lose the fifth and final game by 125 points, bringing their total to minus-171, good enough for 56th place.

Hands in his pockets, smile on his face, Silva says he had fun. Early on, he knew he wouldn't win this tournament.

"I didn't lose," Silva says. "I got beaten."

And already, he's looking forward to the next tournament: the World Domino Championship in Las Vegas. But can he win?

"Oh yeah, I think so," he says. "If I go with the right person, yes."

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RULES OF THE GAME

Each player takes seven dominoes from the shuffled, face-down pile of 28. The player with the double-six domino starts the game. Play moves to the left.

Each player must match a domino to either end of the domino chain on the table. For example, the player with the second move may lay down a domino with six pips on one side and four on the other. The next player must then match a domino to either the six (from the original six-six opening domino) or the four. If a player has no matching dominoes, he or she must pass.

The first player to get rid of all seven dominoes wins. In Spanish-speaking Caribbean countries, the pips of the other players' leftover dominoes are tallied as points for the winning player's team. The first team to 200 points wins the game. But in Jamaica, the scoring system resembles that of tennis: The pair that wins six hands first wins a set, and the first to win two sets wins the match.

So far, home rule has dictated scoring for tournaments, but officials are looking into developing a universal standard, in the hopes that the sport will eventually be up for Olympic consideration.

– Carolina Bolado