

# Consonant please, Carol

STEERING CLEAR OF MORNING TELEVISION AND AVOIDING BEING PUT INTO A RETIREMENT HOME IS ONE THING, BUT MISSING THE LURE OF COUNTDOWN PROVES A TOUGH CALL.

Like every wrinkle in the land, I was saddened to hear of the death of Richard Whiteley. His jackets and ties were in bad taste, and his puns were appalling, but he was a genial television host. I will miss him.

Although retired, I still try to keep up to the high standards expected of a corporate treasurer. I never watch morning television. I know that, if I did so, not only would I let down the reputation of the ACT, but my family would see this as an excuse to whisk me into a retirement home. I turn on the set in the afternoon, but only to watch serious programmes that I have videoed from the night before. Occasionally, I will watch last night's baseball game if the Yankees have been playing, but mostly I watch serious programmes. After all, I must keep up my standards.

I always tried to catch the last, exciting moments of *Countdown*. You must have heard of *Countdown*. It was the first programme ever shown on Channel 4, and it has appeared every weekday ever since – with a repeat shown at 4.30am the following morning – apart from Christmas Day and days when Channel 4 was showing test cricket. *Countdown* is very simple to describe. Richard Whiteley was the question-master, as he had been since its birth. The two contestants sat side by side – usually both pensioners, but occasionally a pensioner and a seven-year-old prodigy (after the style of the young Mozart, although Mozart, as far as I know, was not a genius at *Countdown*). In turn, the contestants would ask Richard's assistant, Carol Vordeman, to select nine random letters. To do so, they would say, "Consonant, please, Carol", or "Vowel, please, Carol". Carol placed the random letters on a magnetic board. The contestants were then given 30 seconds, with the big clock ticking down, to turn the nine letters into the longest word they could find. Oh, it could be so exciting.

There was a numbers round three times in each programme. In this, the contestants asked Carol to select six large or small random numbers, which she then placed on the magnetic board... a not-so-high-tech random number generator produced a target number, which the contestants had to try to achieve by adding or subtracting or multiplying or dividing the six random numbers. I found this round even more exciting than the letters rounds. I fear that I might confuse you if I tried to explain the scoring system for the entire game.

Not being a literate person, I admit that I struggled during the letters rounds. I usually could find a two-letter word, like AT; and I was proud when I could spot SAT; and I got up from my armchair

and danced round the room if I got SEAT; but all these clever oldsters seem to average six or seven letters. With my background in treasury, I was better in the numbers rounds, though I could really have shown my superiority if Carol had dealt in fractions like sixteenths or thirty-seconds.

I used to have a dream. I fight my way through the qualifying rounds, and find myself in a contestant's chair on *Countdown*. I am very nervous, but, glancing over to the other contestant, I judge him to be even older than me. Carol is very friendly, and I would smile politely at Richard's opening puns. Towards the end of the game I am trailing my opponent.

As you might expect, I have done well in the numbers rounds, but my opponent has surged ahead on the letters rounds, making me think that he has fallen asleep reading the Concise Oxford Dictionary. I am getting desperate, for I know that, unless I survive this game, I will not qualify for a commemorative *Countdown* teapot.

It is my turn to choose the letters. "Ah'll hiv a wee Consonant, please, Carol," I say. She pretends not to understand my Scottish accent, and I have to repeat my request. R is put onto the board. "Anither wan, please, Carol," I say. Another R.

I ask for another consonant. Yet another R. Carol laughs. The audience laughs. Even I laugh. "A better wan, please, Carol," I say. T comes up. "And anither, please, Carol," I say. This time it is an S.

That makes five consonants, and I think that it is time that I had some vowels. "A wee vowel, please, Carol," I ask. An E. "And anither." E again. "And anither." An A. "I look at the letters on the board. Should I ask for a vowel or a consonant? I make up my mind. "And anither vowel, please, Carol." A U.

Running from left to right, the letters now read RRRRTSEEAU. The clock ticks down and Richard asks how many letters we have to declare. Five says my opponent. TEARS, I guess. I see an eight, TREASURE. At the last moment, I declare smugly that I have a nine letter word. The audience gasps, and I proudly say TREASURER.

Susie Dent in Dictionary Corner looks up the word and says with a beam: "What a marvelous word. The definition of a treasurer is a person appointed to look after the funds of a society, company, city or other governing body."

The audience erupts in applause. I will win a commemorative *Countdown* teapot, and the ACT will be very happy. J.F.

