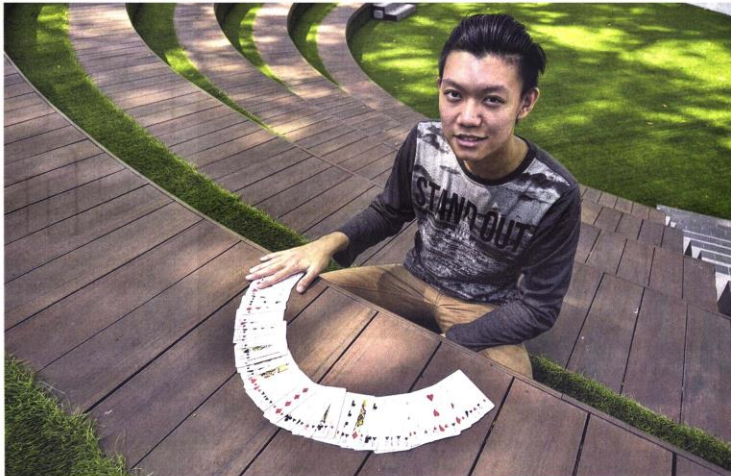


Publication: The Sunday Times, pC02
 Date: 17 September 2017
 Headline: Masters of memory

Masters of memory



Mr. Kenneth Tan is a top memory athlete in Singapore, holding six memory records. PHOTO: DOB WINDY SJ FOR THE SUNDAY TIMES

VIDEO Watch Kenneth Tan memorise the sequence for a deck of cards <http://str.sg/4py>

A group of Singaporeans is taking on the mental challenge of working their memory and joining international competitions



Boon Chan
Media Correspondent

For those who dread memorising multiplication tables or dates for history exams, a memory competition might seem like a particularly excruciating type of punishment. But there is a niche community in Singapore that embraces the mental challenge of such events.

Mr Welson Chou, 28, president of the Singapore Memory Sports Association, reckons there are five to 10 Singaporeans actively taking part in international memory competitions.

The Singapore Polytechnic graduate co-founded Memory Ark in 2014, a school that teaches "special memory techniques for people of all ages to apply", according to his website. He says it has had thousands of learners, from students to working adults and whose ages range from two to 78.

The memory sport scene was a lot less lively when he took part in the World Memory Championships in 2014. "I was the only participant from Singapore," he said.

His interest in the field started in 2008, when he saw a YouTube clip of someone memorising the sequence of a deck of cards in less than two minutes.

After some training, he attended his first World Memory Championships in Hainan, China, in 2014. The contest has been organised since 1991 and participants com-



Mr Welson Chou, 28, president of the Singapore Memory Sports Association, was named an International Master of Memory at the 24th World Memory Championships in Chengdu in 2015. PHOTO COURTESY OF WELSON CHOU

pete to see who can memorise more information in a given time frame, in categories such as numbers, words, faces and abstract images.

This year's event is slated to be held in Shenzhen in December. Those who are able to cross three hurdles are anointed as International Masters of Memory. The challenges are: memorise 1,000 numbers in an hour; memorise 10 decks of cards in an hour; and memorise one deck of cards in two minutes or less.

Mr Chou earned the accolade at the 24th World Memory Championships in Chengdu in 2015 – just one of three Singaporeans to have done so.

The other two are Mr Joshua Koh, 23, who does business development for an online booking platform for enrichment classes, and Ms Grace Ng, 19, who represented Singapore at the World Memory Championships held here last year while studying at the Singapore Accountancy Academy.

To spread awareness of the sport here, the Singapore Memory Sports Association is co-organising the Singapore Open Memory Championships 2017 with Singapore Polytechnic and Singapore Polytechnic Graduates' Guild.

It takes place on Sept 30 and Oct 1 at the polytechnic and 80 participants from 11 countries have registered. Eleven students from Singapore Polytechnic will be taking part, all of them for the first time.

One of them is Mr Ng Cheng Yu, 18, who is studying engineering with business. He took a course at Memory Ark last month and is already aiming to break the Singapore record for the number of words memorised in five minutes – 52, achieved by Mr Gerald Lim at a Singapore Polytechnic memory competition in 2013.

Mr Ng says: "The first time they demonstrated the linking method, I thought it was impossible to memorise so many things at once."

He adds that with this technique, "(we) imagine the colour, size and feeling of the word we see and from there, we get a good grasp of the word and can easily recall it."

In the end, Mr Ng, who had previously considered his memory to be "average, but kind of short-term", managed to recall a "pretty amazing" 30 words in that first lesson.

"Since we were already practicing the technique, I wanted to try and expose myself to a competitive environment and boost my technique at the same time."

Meanwhile, Mr Koh has greater ambitions. He was the youngest person in South-east Asia then to earn the title of International Master of Memory two years ago at the World Memory Championships in Chengdu and now wants a shot at other accolades.

Next up is Grandmaster of Memory, which is awarded at a World Memory Championship to the top five competitors who have achieved at least 5,000 cumulative points that year. Points are awarded based on one's performance in the various categories at the championships.

He says: "When I try something, I want to be the best. I want to see how far I can push myself. Every time I break a personal best, I get a sense of accomplishment."

As for Memory Ark's Mr Chou, his target is not about personally breaking more records. As he puts it: "The record will always be broken by someone else. But for me, the sense of achievement will come when I am able to train my disciples to break more records."

bchan@sph.com.sg

Record-holder spends two hours daily training his brain muscle

With six Singapore memory records under his belt, Mr Kenneth Tan, 23, has one of the best memories in the country.

Four of them were achieved on Sept 1: Fastest recall of two decks of cards (11 minutes 55 seconds); most binary digits memorised (524); most single digits memorised (228) and most number of historic/future dates memorised (41). In the last three categories, he had five minutes to memorise and 15 minutes to recall.

The feats were witnessed by the president of the Singapore Book of Records, Mr Ong Eng Huat, who says that it recognises about 30 categories of memory records.

Being a memory athlete does give Mr Tan, who is studying Information Systems at Singapore Management University, an edge in his studies – up to a point. "If the module is about memorising, I will ace it. But besides memorising, application is something else that the university looks for."

The elder son of a taxi driver and housewife stumbled into memory sports while doing his national service as he had a bit of free time then.

He was intrigued by an article in The Straits Times on memory record-holder Welson Chou, who could memorise the value of pi to an impressive degree.

He got in touch with Mr Chou and attended one of his Memory Ark memory technique courses.

Mr Tan went from using sheer willpower to picking up techniques from the Internet. What works for him is the well-known memory palace or memory journey method: "You place objects around this place in your mind, so when you walk through it, you know which object is placed in which location."

For those who think that memorisation is dry-as-dust rote learning, he points out that a lot of creativity is needed in order to make something stick.

"It cannot be logical because we tend to forget logical stuff more than creative stuff."

For example, he is currently committing the menagerie of creatures from the popular Pokemon game to memory for fun.

No. 75 is Graveler, a fact which he recalls on the spot after asking this reporter for a number between one and 100. He associates the number with a picture and the picture to the Pokemon.

"To me, 75 represents glue and it glues together a huge pile of rocks to become gravel, and it converts to Graveler. It's quite a tedious process at first, but once you get used to it, it's pretty fun."

He does not set much store by memory-improving foods or supplements. Instead, what works for him is medication. "It calms your mind before you start training and clears your thoughts."

And yes, like any other type of athlete, regular training is crucial and he tries to put in at least two hours of practice a day. "If you don't train your muscle, your muscle will sag. Likewise your brain muscle."

There are various lists on the rankings of memory athletes and according to the World Memory Championships' Singapore rankings, he is at No. 3. According to the International Association of Memory, he is ranked 180 in the world, which would make him No. 1 in Singapore.

Given that the community of memory athletes is so small here, they know, or at least know of, one another. While they seem quite supportive of one another, they are also, after all, competitors.

Mr Tan will be taking part in the upcoming Singapore Open Memory Championships 2017 and the mild-mannered student says with a laugh: "Who doesn't want to be No. 1 right? It'll be tough to get first in the international section, but in the national category, yes, I'm going for it."

Source: The Sunday Times @ Singapore Press Holdings Limited. Permission required for reproduction