Memory athletes show off skills at S'pore championships

Tiffany Fumiko Tay

Even though he had only two months of training, Singapore Polytechnic (SP) student Ng Cheng Yu was able to memorise a string of 132 binary numbers and recall the order of 25 playing cards in a deck.

Cheng Yu, 18, was taking part in the second Singapore Open Memory Championships, held over the weekend at SP.

Competing in all 10 events, he chalked up several personal bests and climbed his way to 48th place among 82 competitors from around the world, who ranged in age from eight to 81.

SP students, all of whom were taking part for the first time, made up 11 of Team Singapore's 14 memory athletes.

Malaysian Soh Wee Teng, 20, emerged as overall champion and walked away with $1,500 at the event, which was co-organised by SP, the SP Graduates' Guild and the Singapore Memory Sports Association (SMSA). There were participants from 12 countries, including Indonesia, England and Mongolia.

Singapore Management University student Kenneth Tan was Team Singapore's top scorer, placing seventh overall. The 23-year-old has six Singapore records under his belt, and is ranked 181 in the world, according to the International Association of Memory.

During the final speed-card round, Cheng Yu, a second-year engineering and business student, was given five minutes to memorise a shuffled deck of 52 cards, and a further five minutes to rearrange another deck in matching order.

Using the linking technique, which aids memorisation by helping users to create a story through images and items, he surpassed his own personal record by seven cards. He weaved a tale of a hunter chasing animals in the forest, but ran out of time to memorise the whole deck.

"I still need to practise... Around 50 out of 80 isn't bad for my first (competition) though," he said.

He and a group of friends from SP formed an interest group two months ago to learn memory techniques, and they received training for the competition from SMSA

Student Ng Cheng Yu at the Singapore Open Memory Championships over the weekend. Team Singapore fielded 14 contestants at the event, which drew a total of 82 participants from around the world. PHOTO: AZMI ATHNI FOR THE STRAITS TIMES

president Wellon Chou and vice-president Gerald Lim, both of whom are SP alumni.

"It would have helped with our exams but we started after exams, so it's a bit wasted," quipped Cheng Yu.

Japanese contestant Hiroshi Abe, 67, emerged as champion in the senior category – garnering his sixth medal in as many international memory championships.

Mr Abe, who flew to Singapore for the competition, was placed second in the same category of the World Memory Championships, which were held here last year.

The retired schoolteacher started doing memory exercises six years ago to help himself learn various languages, and he can now speak English, Korean and Mandarin, which he demonstrated to The Straits Times.

"I want to make my world wider... I will keep doing this until the end," he said.

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