

# Mind games

Robin Healey with an exclusive behind the scenes look at the recent World Memory Championships in Croydon

They might have held it in a more glamorous setting – previous venues have included Dubai and Sydney – but to the 120 memory athletes gathered in a set of very functional rooms reached by a flight of steps down a dingy side street in Croydon town centre what counted was not location but the chance of winning the most coveted title in the memory stakes.

From humble beginnings in 1991, this annual event, the brain child of former editor of Mensa International Tony Buzan, goes from strength to strength. Every year produces yet more records and further surprises – and 2013 was to prove no exception.

By the time I arrived, late on the last afternoon of the three brain-hurting days, the glittering prizes had essentially been decided. As I walked up the stairs a few contestants hung around and when I reached the main foyer small groups were gathering, chatting excitedly, clutching bits of paper and ball points and texting on their smart phones. It was the last break period before the final speed card trial. Thirty-two nations were represented and from where I stood most seemed to be from the Far East. All were extremely young. Those looking over 30 were either officers or arbiters, who incidentally were usually the only ones in suits. Sweat shirts and jeans were the clothing of choice among most memory athletes. In a corner, Tony Buzan was signing copies of his autobiography with Chess Grandmaster Raymond Keene by his side.

As I had arrived slightly early, the press room was occupied and so I decamped to the room dedicated to filming. As international TV crews came and went, I buttonholed a tousled haired young German who I overheard had become the number-crunching champion. This turned out to be the overall third ranked competitor, Christian Schafer from Wurtzberg. I asked him if he was pleased by his performance. He was.

“I remembered 2,351 digits in one hour. I memorised more numbers, but for every mistake you make you lose 40 points, so this affected my final score. I had two or three gaps, so in the end I got the winning score. I also

had some top three positions, for instance in memorising historic dates, in which you get a date between 1,000 and 20,100 and something that happened in this year – some are fictional dates of course. You are given five minutes to memorise as many as possible and afterwards you have to write down those you remember. I memorised 92 of them.”

He looked no more than a teenager, but he told me he was 21, so I wondered when his memory training had begun. “Five years ago when I saw a TV report on a memory champion. I saw what he could do and I thought wow, that was impressive, and so I began to train and I practised a lot. At 16 I started in junior championships in Germany, then moved into the adult ranks.”

Like most of the competitors Schafer uses the tried and tested loci technique – a well-known method of memorising information by placing each item to be remembered at a point along an imaginary journey. I asked him which journey he envisaged when competing. “I think of a journey around my apartment, because when I am on holiday I have good feelings.”

How did he get on with the people here? So many nations were represented. “I seldom have the chance to meet so many from so many different countries. It’s very cool to talk to them because they are all interested in various memory techniques. At home I can’t really talk about techniques because there are such a low number of people doing that. That’s why I love being here.”

Chris Day, the General Secretary of the Memory Sports Council, turned up. I asked him why Croydon?

Convenience, apparently, was one reason.

“I live in Waddon, a mile or so away, so when it came to finding a home for the championships I felt that the conference centre here was ideal.

Croydon has really taken the championship to its heart. On Friday we had a wonderful welcome from the Mayor, who invited all our competitors into the council chamber for the flag ceremony.

All our 120 competitors from 33 countries were formally presented to the Mayor who gave each a little

crocus – this being the historic flower of Croydon.”

I asked him how different this year’s competition was compared to past years. “This year it’s fascinating to see the big jumps that the competitors are able to achieve. In physical sports people get excited when a thousandth of a second is whittled away. But in memory sports it appears that the brain is capable of vastly more than we ever thought possible. When you look at what the competitors are doing year on year and comparing the results, it’s fascinating to see that our ability to memorise is improving each year.”

I remarked that although the journalist Joshua Foer had won a prestigious memory championship, he admitted in his book that his day to day memory hadn’t improved significantly. Day found this interesting.

“With memory it’s a case of use it or lose it. The level of achievement that these competitors have reached is only possible with constant practise. The techniques themselves are very simple things that anyone can do, but the more you practise the more your brain is capable of achieving. It gets used to making connections. At school they teach people what to learn, they don’t teach people how to learn. The simple techniques that the competitors are learning here and are putting into practice are incredibly valuable for students and indeed anyone who needs to memorise a lot of material.”

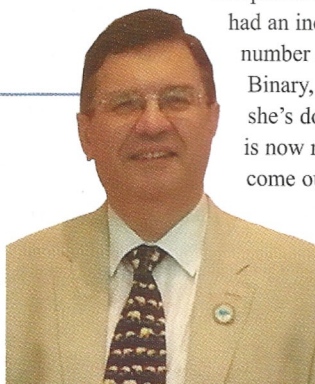
I wondered if any progress had been made in introducing these memory techniques into the school curriculum? Day was positive.

“We are certainly making efforts to do this and Dominic O’Brien is closely involved in doing memory training in schools to spark interest. We are trying to empower teachers into learning these techniques so that they will cascade out into the classroom.”

What response had there been, I wondered.

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Chris Day,  
pictured below



“They can recognise the immediate benefits and so, yes, we have a number of enthusiastic teachers willing to use these techniques. But we have a lot to do in order to get that message across. The trouble is that people see competitors doing such unbelievable feats of memory here and assume that they were born with a good memory or that they are some sort of savant, like the Rain Man. The truth is that they aren’t.”

By everybody, did Day really mean everybody, or just most?

“No... everybody. Everyone has a much more capable brain than they imagine.

Unfortunately, people generally don’t believe that they don’t have a good memory and make excuses for not bothering to improve it. All these exercises are software for your necktop computer. You have an incredible machine up there. All it needs is a bit of software to make it run better. And that’s what these techniques are.”

Did he encourage people to do these exercises at a far less competitive level?

“Oh, yes. We encourage the creation of memory clubs. Memory should be fun. These techniques can be applied at home. Not everyone has to be a competitor.”

I asked if creating exercises at the level of a pub quiz had been tried. “Yes. Very often you’ll see a memory competitor with a pack of cards in a pub. It’s a great way to get a free drink.”

Day was very surprised at the performances of some of the leading competitors this year. “A young Mongolian competitor of just 17, Namutal-Bat Erdene,

had an incredible start. She’s broken a number of junior records – especially in Binary, that is, noughts and ones – though she’s done well overall and as a result she is now number six in the world. She’s come out of nowhere. She is now ranked higher than the US memory champion, Nelson Dellis, and four ranks above UK memory champion Ben Pridmore.

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"She has only been using memory techniques for just over a year. Of course, she practises five hours a day. Another encouraging thing is that this year's champion, Jonas van Essen, has only been doing memory exercises for just over a year – he's now beaten the world memory champion, Johannes Mallow, into second place. It's all down to practise and desire. With these, from a standing start, you can get to a world ranking position in a year, which is very, very encouraging."

I mentioned that I'd interviewed Christian Schafer, who had been competing for five years. Other competitors here are of similar ages. So was it true that you are at your most intellectually able from between the ages of 18 and 21?

Day wouldn't commit. "To be honest, I don't know. But I do know that Dominic O'Brien (eight times world champion) took ten years out of the sport and came back last year and achieved personal bests in each one of his disciplines at the age of 54. It's easy to give ourselves excuses for not doing well, but Dominic has proved it can be done."

I remarked to Day that the Far East seemed to be very well represented. Did Day have an explanation for this, were they, for instance, good at particular disciplines?

"Competitors here tend to be good all-rounders. It's a decathlon and while some people may be better than others in certain disciplines, it helps to be good at everything."

It was time to talk to a few more competitors. I caught James Paterson, a highly placed competitor from Wales, who as a schoolteacher, specialised in psychology. He was introducing memory techniques into the classroom, so I asked him what responses he received from his

## ALL ABOUT... The World Memory Championships

■ The Mind Sport of Memory was founded 21 years ago in the UK by brain expert and the inventor of Mind Mapping, Mensa member Tony Buzan, along with Chess Grandmaster Raymond Keene OBE. They were frustrated that the best selling books of world records celebrated people who could eat the most Smarties in three minutes using chop sticks, or wear the most number of socks on one foot, but totally ignored the achievements of mental athletes. As a result, they staged the first World Memory Championships in 1991. Since then some 28 countries have taken up the sport competing over ten disciplines.

■ In 1991 Dominic O'Brien was the very first World Memory Champion, a feat he repeated a further seven times to become the only person ever to be the eight times World Memory Champion.

■ This year's World Memory Championships saw Sweden's Jonas von Essen, pictured, being crowned as the new world champion.

■ Ten different disciplines are conducted over the three days of the Championships.  
1. Spoken Numbers; 2. Playing Cards; 3. Historic/Future Dates; 4. Binary Numbers; 5. Random Words; 6. Abstract Images; 7. Names and Faces; 8. Random Numbers; 9. Speed Numbers; 10. Speed Cards



students. "Mixed really. Those that have been gaining A Stars throughout their careers take some persuading that these memory techniques will help them, but others who are doing less well academically will be interested. I do a few demonstrations to show exactly how it's done and then invite them to try for themselves. Those who are perhaps disengaged with the traditional learning process, also those who are a bit naughty, who have creative excuses for not handing in their homework, those guys are excellent. The techniques are all about imagination and creating visual imagery, and these guys are really good at it. They are the sort of people who ordinarily wouldn't find themselves taking up things like maths challenges. However, they are surprisingly good at these memory techniques."

Did he put himself in this category?

"In a way. I got the grades I needed to get into university but I also wanted studying to be fun. Now, as a teacher I want to put fun back into learning and these guys respond to that."

Was there a high take-up generally, I wondered. "It's early days yet. It's a whole school initiative. We're trying to get study and memory skills introduced into all classes. We're doing competitions after Christmas and it's only then will I find out who are likely to come to this competition next year."

How had he done this time?

"Not bad. I won a gold medal in the random words event, which I am really pleased about. I managed to remember 224 words from the sheet of 380 words, which you are given 15 minutes to memorise.



"Also a silver in the names and faces. In the other events I was a bit rubbish and wasn't even in the top 20.

Overall, I managed to beat my personal best and am now the number one in Wales. I also improved my place in the world rankings, which is good."

What about setbacks? How did he deal with them?

"It can be difficult. You are sitting there trying to recall stuff. You are halfway through and you suddenly have a blank. You have to do what I tell my students to do in exams – that it will come back and you can move on. It's when you stop thinking about it that it slowly comes back. If you put pressure on yourself to recall something it will take longer. Being relaxed and chilled is what's necessary on these occasions."

How much practise had he done for the competition?

"It's very strange, actually. In previous competitions I've done a lot and put pressure on myself. But this time I've been so busy at school that I've hardly done any. So, I've come into the competition feeling relaxed and all the practise that I've done over the years seems to be showing now. I've beaten two or three personal bests and I'm very pleased at the way it's gone."

Next, I found that for 21-year-old Jonas, who runs a restaurant in Finland with his wife, this was his first championship, having only been doing memory exercises for three months. Even so, he had done well, gaining 1,000 points, which included 100 points for his best discipline, Abstract Images. I asked him how he had got into the memory game.

"I accidentally discovered this book which taught me the methods. Then I read other books and I got hooked."

Did he want to improve his working memory or was it

the intellectual challenge that he enjoyed? "Both. It's fun, but you can use the techniques in every day life, during school and doing other tests."

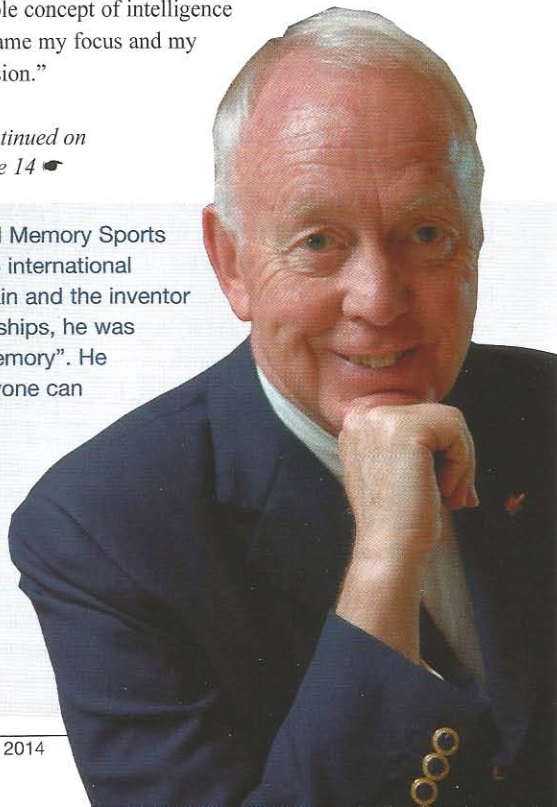
What did his friends think about his astonishing memory? "They are amazed that I can memorise whole decks of cards and I am trying to get them to do it, too. Maybe next year I will bring a couple of them with me to a championship."

In a corner of the foyer, Tony Buzan was still signing copies of his autobiography. By now the queue of eager competitors, all clutching copies of his book, had diminished somewhat. Hew finally escaped and we adjourned to the press room. How had it gone this year, I asked him.

He beamed. "Extremely well, in fact, almost spectacularly well. This is our 22nd championship and the improvement in performances over the decathlon has expanded exponentially in every discipline. And what this demonstrates is that the manacles put on the brain are unreal. When the brain is given the opportunity of showing what it can achieve the results are extraordinary. It's like a bird in a cage. The bird survives; it is there, as the brain is, but it isn't allowed to fly. Ever since I was seven I wanted to know what 'smart' means. Who says 'smart' and who has the right to say 'not smart' and what does that mean. What do we mean by intelligence? The whole concept of intelligence became my focus and my passion."

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Mensa member Tony Buzan is the President of the World Memory Sports Council, the governing body of the sport. He's also a top international businessman, the author of almost 100 books on the brain and the inventor of Mind Maps. The co-founder of the memory championships, he was described by the New Yorker as "the biggest name in memory". He says: "The great thing about memory sports is that everyone can compete in them. The championships are based on fundamental cognitive skills that are essential for everybody's survival. All of us, no matter how appalling we might think our memories are, can – with the correct formulae and a little bit of practice – train our brains and memories to function more efficiently and effectively. The contestants at the UK Memory Championship are people just like you and me who've trained their own brains at a level reflecting their true potential."



"In the 1980s I realised there were world championships in chess, in bridge, in soccer, in cricket, in tiddlywinks, in finger nail growing, but not memory. If the world didn't have finger nail growing championships would it survive? Yes it would. If there were no chess championships would the world survive? Yes it would. If it didn't have soccer or cricket or bridge it would still survive. But if it didn't have memory the world would be dead in a millisecond.

"Because if you suck memory out of the brain you have nothing, and certainly not IQ."

So, memory is correlated with IQ?

"Absolutely. For instance, the ability to recall spoken numbers is a sub-IQ branch. The ability to recite the same numbers in reverse is another sign of a more refined intelligence.

"The average person collapses at seven digits when it's spoken. If they can do eight that's very significant. If they do nine that's an IQ of 180.

"Ten numbers is almost impossible for an average person, so imagine going to a psychologist and reciting ten digits immediately. You ask for a few more and they give you 30 digits spoken at one second per digit, which is faster than in the IQ test."

Was memory technique all about creative thinking, I asked. Buzan thought it was.

"I applied my IQ to creativity tests because no-one knew what creativity was. But I studied memory and IQ and started to apply then to the creativity tests. I cracked Toller's Creativity tests. I blew them out of the water because I knew how the mind worked and

therefore anyone can do what I did. If you don't have a good memory you cannot be creative."

I move on to an overview of this year. Walking around, it was hard to ignore the dominance of males over females at these championships – 27 per cent female as against 73 per cent. And indeed the world ranking reflected this dominance. How did Buzan account for that?

He couldn't – but he disagreed that men performed better

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than women in memory tests.

"The perception is that in intellectual contests males predominate—more male chess players, more male memory champions, people with the very highest IQs are always male – but it's actually not true, not when you analyse the facts. In the schools memory championships held in the UK there are four female champions and two male ones.

"When you examine it the female brain isn't that different. In a memory test, when they examine how they do it, they cannot distinguish the male contestant from the female.

"In the multi-dimension mnemonic test no psychologist in the world has been able to identify which is the male and which is the female.

"If you are a male your brain works with images and associations, but so does the female brain."

What did he think of the old argument that in primitive society – going back to the world of the male hunter gatherer – the female has less need of a strong visual intelligence than the male does?

"It's nonsense. If you look at the animal kingdom, the brain cells are basically the same. A male bird is usually totally colourful, totally magnificent. Why? Because the female brain wants the best image, whereas that male bird sees the female, who is often in very drab colours, and isn't interested in the best image. He just wants a mate.

"So all this discriminatory stuff about the female brain is a load of rubbish."

It was time to go. The exercises had been completed and the awards decided.

I didn't wait for the prize ceremony. It

would have seemed like an intrusion.

But I did discover that the new World Memory Champion, Jonas von Essen, had knocked veteran Johannes Mallow from Germany, off his perch. All this memory athleticism was exciting stuff. I had been hugely impressed by all of the competitors I encountered. Leaving, I vowed to try a few exercises... if I could remember.