

Mensa Magazine

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BURNING ISSUES

Is there a God?

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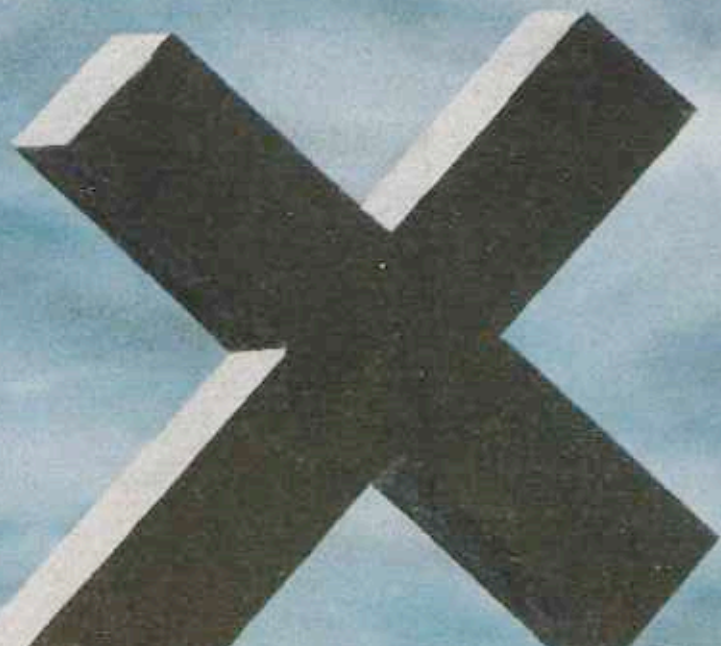
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World Class

Over 2,000 people took part in the first Mind Sports Olympiad in 1997. International chess grandmaster Raymond Keene explains why this year's event looks set to be even bigger.

Since the dawn of civilisation, some ten thousand years ago, history has recorded that men and women have been games players. The earliest writings of ancient civilisations regularly make reference to games similar in concept to tic-tac-toe (noughts and crosses). As civilisation progressed so did the complexity of its games. In 1996 the Atlanta Olympic Games for physical sports attracted, over its three week period, 12 million hits on the Internet. In comparison, the final hour of the final game of the chess match in 1997 between Garry Kasparov and IBM's Deep Blue computer logged a staggering 22 million, real time, hits on the Internet.

Fascinatingly, all major games have followed an identical growth pattern: (1) A single person or small group of people come up with a new idea for testing mental skills; (2) the new game is introduced to a wider range of players and a small band of cognoscenti forms a loose knit group of players; (3) the loose knit group becomes an informal club; (4) the club becomes more formalised and multiplies, giving birth to other clubs similar in form to the original; (5) players emerge who become the recognised leaders, experts and theorists of the game; (6) formal competitions are organised and local champions appear; (7) literature is produced on the background and theory of the game and formalised rules become game law; (8) national and international competitions arise and

a world champion is crowned. Concurrent with this stage is a proliferation of articles, magazines and books on the subject and the evolution of different schools of thought on the game.

In the past, before the advent of the Internet, a natural limitation to the growth of games had been the fact that, in most instances, only between two and four contestants could participate. And, unlike a physical sporting event, the diminutive size of the board limited spectators to just a handful of people. Contrast this with the number of spectators in the Roman Coliseum or the modern sports stadium and at least one reason for the historical dominance of physical sports over mental games can be identified.

Despite these limiting barriers to the growth of mind sports as spectator events, the expansion of these games in recent years has been quite staggering. The game of chess, once perceived as a contest for old men with grey beards, first hit the front page headlines in 1972 when the mercurial American genius Bobby Fischer wrested the world crown from Russia's Boris Spassky in Reykjavik.

A measure of the growth of interest in mind sports is also reflected in the increased prize fund for the major contests. In 1969 the World Chess Championship was worth around 3,000 roubles (less than \$3,000) to the winner. In 1990 Kasparov and Karpov contested a purse of \$2 million, considerably more than the top two prizes at Wimbledon or any golf tournament. The Fischer-Spassky match of 1992 attracted an even larger prize fund of \$5million.

Concurrent with the explosion of interest in mind games has been a similar upsurge of interest in the measurement of mental skills. The membership of Mensa increased by more than 2,000 people per year in the Eighties and one of the major hobbies listed by the membership is the playing of mental games and puzzles.

The media has increasingly recognised the growing enthusiasm for mental challenges. Virtually all major newspapers and magazines carry articles, columns and feature sections on chess, bridge and brain twisters. In recent years the Mensa-inspired *Tournament of the Mind* in *The Times* and *Mastermind* on BBC TV and Radio have attracted big followings, as have games such as chess, bridge, Scrabble and Monopoly where hundreds and sometimes thousands of competitors have descended on towns and cities to participate in local and national championships.

As an indication of the incredible popularity of mind sports, consider the following, mind boggling, statistics. It is estimated that there are some 60 million people in the world who play bridge. The largest international bridge competition is the Seiko-Epson pairs competition in which the same hands are played simultaneously all over the world. In 1992, 100,000 players competed in this tournament. Even more popular is the game of 8x8 draughts, or checkers, which, it is thought, is played by as many as 150 million people worldwide.

One of the most successful games to have been devised in recent years is Trivial Pursuit. Statistics show that some 50% of the UK's adult population have played the game and approximately 50 million sets have been sold worldwide since it was introduced in 1981. At an international level, world championships have been held in such varied intellectual pursuits as shogi (Japanese chess), crosswords, science knowledge, general knowledge, Trivial Pursuits, intelligence and memory. This last area (memory, in case you had already forgotten!) has pro-

duced a world champion, Dominic O'Brien, and a host of new records, including the memorisation of a pack of cards in less than 40 seconds and the memorisation of the matrix Pi to 10,000 digits.

As in chess, prize money has been increased and sponsors are rapidly growing in number to support



(Above) Mensa member Tony Buzan, co-founder of the Mind Sports Olympiad



not only the mental athletic events but also the mental athletes who combat each other for the increasingly lucrative prizes. The list of sponsors reads much like a list of the Fortune 500 and includes organisations as diverse as 3M, Burmah Oil, Coopers and Lybrand, *The Times*, Skandia and British Airways. A whole new legion of brain stars is now emerging: Kasparov (Russia), O'Brien (UK), and Lana Israel (USA), to name but a few, while The Brain Trust charity, set up by Mensan Tony Buzan, sponsors the prestigious 'Brain of the Year' award.

Whether the game is bridge, backgammon or chess, at the top levels of play the skills rewarded are all vitally important in business. Among them are discipline, memory, coolness under pressure, psychological insightfulness, a readiness to stick to strategy, even when it produces losing streaks in the short run, and rapid intuitive calculation of probabilities – of spotting opportunities and balancing risks against rewards.

It is evident that the dominance of physical sports as the more popular medium of human expression over mental sports was not the reflection of an innate preference, but rather a lack of opportunity to express what is in fact an equal medium. For with the growth of information technology and electronic data systems we reach a point in history where, for the first time, competition on the mental battlefield can be seen instantaneously by the same number of spectators as would watch competitions on the physical battlefield. Or, as we have



Mensa and the Mind Sports Olympiad

● THE SECOND Mind Sports Olympiad takes place at the Novotel Hotel in Hammersmith from 24-30 August. Competitors from all over the world will play each other at a variety of well-known strategy games including chess, bridge, draughts, backgammon and Scrabble. Other events include computer programming, creative thinking, speed reading, mental calculations and memory skills.

● THE FORMAT for most tournaments will be the Swiss system in which all contestants play in every round. No contestant will be knocked-out before the end of the competition. Players will compete for gold, silver and bronze medals and other prizes and all levels of ability are welcome to take part. For further information and an entry form telephone 0171 485 9146.

● MENSA will be responsible for two events: a 3-day World Intelligence Championship (26-28 August, two hours per day) and on Saturday 29 August a Mini Mind Marathon (three hours). If you enjoy puzzles and IQ tests these are the events for you. The best-placed competitors in last year's event included both a former and a current member of Mensa. For further information write to MSO, Mensa House, St John's Square, Wolverhampton WV2 4AH or call Robert Allen on 01954 230213.

● AS WELL as organising the above events Mensa will be hosting a special reception at the Novotel Hotel on Friday 28 August from 7.00pm when guests will include MSO founders Raymond Keene and Tony Buzan and Mensa President Victor Serebriakoff. Highlight of the evening will be a general knowledge quiz between teams representing Mensa and other organisations. For details see page 36 or call Simon Clark on 0131 467 4040.

seen with the comparison between the Atlanta Olympics and the Garry Kasparov chess match against IBM, considerably more.

The future of mind games looks even more exciting. A natural progression of all these varying competitions is combined in the Mind Sports Olympiad, a competition in which all the events will be thinking contests. A major difference between this event and the Olympic Games is that in the Mind Sports Olympiad anyone can participate.

Since the days of ancient Greece the Olympic ideal has embodied the supreme aspirations of the human race in terms of fellowship, competition and achievement and we feel that it is only fitting that these ideals should be extended from the physical arena to the mental. A paramount precept of classical Greece and Rome was the further ideal of *mens sana in corpore san* – a healthy mind in a healthy body – and the role that mind sports can play in the ageing and mental fitness process has now been fully recognised.

For example, David Snowdon of the Sanders-Brown Centre on Ageing at the University of Kentucky has found that those who earn college degrees, who teach, who constantly challenge their minds, live longer than the less educated. New thinking in brain science suggest that whether someone hits the wall at 65 or at 102 may be partly up to the individual.

So what can the average person do to strengthen his or her mind? The important thing is to be actively involved in areas unfamiliar to you. Anything that's intellectually challenging can probably serve as a kind of stimulus for deditric growth. Do puzzles, try a musical instrument, repair something, try the arts, dance, date provocative people, try tournament bridge, chess, even sail-boat racing.

And remember, researchers agree that it's never too late. All of life should be a learning experience because we are challenging our brain and therefore building brain circuitry. Literally, this is the way the brain operates.

The concept of an overall Olympiad for thinking activities is completely new, although

there have been Olympiads for specific events such as bridge and chess for many years. There is even a computer Olympiad which first took place in 1989.

The Mind Sports Olympiad combines more than 35 thinking activities in one event. The first Mind Sports Olympiad took place at London's Royal Festival Hall in the summer of 1997. Over 2,050 competitors entered the week-long event while no less than 58 countries were represented and 16 separate world championships were contested.

Some people may object that watching a mental sport can never be as engaging or passionately involving as watching a physical one. This is not true – the Internet audience figures already refute it. Ponder also this – when watching an athletic race or swimmers going for speed records, or even discus or javelin throwers and high and long-jumpers, the spectator can only crave, or sometimes pray (depending on who one is supporting), for more of the same. Run faster, throw further, jump higher.

In mind sports, however, the spectator is also a player. Personal identity, brain and mind are also closely involved in predicting particular strategies and tactics. It is not just a question of the spectator crudely demanding that the performer play better, it is a matter of thinking *play this*, and if your opponent *goes there then do that*. Human achievements have been based for millennia on our power of thought and command of precise analytical detail and mind sports reflect this.

Perhaps the most sought-after title within the Mind Sports Olympiad is the 'Decathlon of the Mind'. To make the decamentathlon both broad and deep, ten well-established and complex mind sports were chosen from the categories of board games, card games and mental/abstract skills. They are: bridge, chess, creative thinking, 8x8 draughts, go, intelligence, Mastermind, memory skills, mental calculation and Othello. The climax of the entire Mind Sports Olympiad, the winner is a true Olympian.

Raymond Keene is chess correspondent for The Times and the Spectator and co-organiser of the Mind Sports Olympiad

'Mind sports reflect the fact that human achievements are based on power of thought.'