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Memory experts meet for UK Championships

Competitors with the some of world's biggest memories have been testing their recall abilities at the UK Open Memory Championships in London. William Langley reports.

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Ben Pridmore, the man with the world's biggest memory, could easily recall whole decks of cards and numerical sequences hundreds of digits long, so why had he forgotten to tie his shoelaces?

It seemed to be a common problem. All around the championships, players were scratching their heads, asking each other if they had met before, and whether anyone happened to have seen a pair of glasses lying around.

Balding Mr Pridmore, a 33-year-old accountant, employed by Boots the

Chemist, dominates the fast growing field of "memory sports" but his spectacular triumphs have yet to deliver him from a bachelor existence in a tiny Nottingham bedsit. Two years ago he became the first human to remember a randomly shuffled deck of cards in under 30 seconds – a feat once held to be impossible and followed this up by winning the World Championship for Britain, dethroning in the process the once dominant Germans and fending off a furious challenge from the rising Chinese.

Yesterday, he was solidly on course to retain his UK title but his cheerful admission of chronic forgetfulness has failed to play well with those who promote the science of mnemonics as a vital aid to learning and intellectual self discipline.

The championship's co-founder, former management consultant Tony Buzan author of a startling 87 books on brain power, including the best-selling *Use Your Head*, insists that the strategic harnessing of memory can make the world a better place.

"It's not about storing up lots of numbers and words in a boring way," he said: "It's about using imagination and creativity. Through using our memory to its fullest we can unlock the vast reservoir of human potential



Every competitor has a preferred method of memorisation ? some claimed to be secret and distinct ? but virtually all are based on a system of transposing letters and numbers into mental pictures Photo: JANE MINGAY

that isn't currently being used".

Every competitor has a preferred method of memorisation – some claimed to be secret and distinct – but virtually all are based on a system of transposing letters and numbers into mental pictures. The human brain turns out to be remarkably useless at remembering abstract symbols but far better when asked to store images.

Memory athletes, as the competitors like to be known, therefore create pictures from the data they are given. The king of spades could be Gordon Brown, the queen of clubs, Britney Spears, the nine of hearts, an ocean liner, and from this the contestant will imagine a little story of a pop singer and a VIP at a floating concert.

This method of using images as a mnemonics device was first formulated by an early Greek poet called Simonides in 477BC. He was at a wedding banquet when the roof fell in killing every other guest. Simonides, stuck with the awkward problem of informing the relatives, managed to recall the names of the entire party by visually placing each guest in position at the table.

According to Daniel Schacter, a Harvard University professor and world authority on memory, the same technique was used by Roman generals to learn the names of the thousands of men who served under them and by medieval scholars to memorise long and intricately detailed religious scripts.

The modern interest explains Buzan, stems from the belief that a strong memory can be a powerful tool in business, personal relationships and domestic life.

"The interest is exploding," he said: "There are competitions all over the world and the number of memory athletes is growing all the time".

Not that there is much to watch when the competition starts. Frankly, you'd get more spectacle at a school SATS exam. The 23 competitors at yesterday's final sat silently at their desks soaking up fusillades of letters, numbers, names and pictures which they had to write down on pieces of paper.

"But it can be really good fun," said the youngest competitor Eva Ball, 15, of Coventry, the current British schools champion: "I have always had a good memory and this is a great way to use it. I need to practise a lot more than I do but I am a teenager so you can't really sit around the house trying to train your memory."

Ben didn't seem so sure that "fun" described the devotion with which he has embraced his destiny.

"It's really hard work," he says: "Hours of practice. You don't get a big social life out of doing this but when it is over, you really feel that you have achieved something out of the ordinary".

He'd love to explain how he first realised his remarkable talent but, strangely, he can't seem to remember.

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