

Total recall: N. Koreans in memory championship surprise

August 1 2019, by Sebastien Berger



North Korean Pang Un Sim memorised 5,187 binary numbers at the World Memory Championships

In silence, Pang Un Sim stares down at the jumbled-up playing cards for one minute, slowly shuffling through them.

Putting the pile aside, she takes a second pack and arranges them in order. One by one, the two sets are turned over. They match perfectly.

Behind her stand four trophies and a tableful of medals, the North Korean haul from the World Memory Championships in December — the first time the country had entered.

Despite fielding a team of just three contestants, led by Pang, they collected seven gold medals, seven silvers and five bronze.

"I wouldn't say it's easy, but when you put in the time and make an effort, you can remember," said Pang.

"When you are having fun memorising, it is not as hard as people think," the 22-year-old added.

At the championships Pang came second overall, her feats including memorising 5,187 binary numbers in order and 1,772 cards in an hour, while her fastest time memorising a pack of playing cards was 17.67 seconds.

Her teammate Ri Song Mi — who came 7th overall—set a world record by recalling 302 words in 15 minutes.

And in the hour numbers event, when competitors have 60 minutes to memorise as many digits as possible, all three North Koreans came in the top five. Two of them beat the previous world record, with Pang scoring 3,240.



Three North Koreans came in the top five out of more than 250 competitors in the hour numbers discipline at the World Memory Championships — the first time the country entered

Organisers had no idea until the last minute that a North Korean team was entering the contest in Hong Kong.

"They arrived and registered just before registration closed," said the championships' founder Tony Buzan.

"It was like a battering ram of surprises because every one of the ten events featured a North Korean in the top three," Buzan, who has since died, wrote in the magazine of his Brain Trust charity earlier this year.

"Out of nowhere came this meteorite and shooting star and it was shocking in the most delightful sense."

'National discipline'

Every January, North Koreans are required to study leader Kim Jong Un's annual New Year speech extensively, and the team's coach Cha Yong Ho said that memorisation techniques are taught as standard during middle school.

Cha heads the speed reading research department at the Kim Hyong Jik university of education in Pyongyang, where all three teammates were students – and Pang, whose subject was mathematics, has now joined the faculty.



Photo prise le 17 avril 2019 montrant les trois concurrentes nord-coréennes (de G à D: Kim Su Rim, Pang Un Sim et Ri Song Mi) au championnat du monde de mémoire de Hong Kong, posant avec leurs trophées, à l'université Kim Hyong Jik de Pyongyang

Many memory competitors use a technique known as the Dominic System that replaces numbers with letters and represents them as images and actions that they connect by making up a story. By re-telling the story to themselves, they decipher the items to be recalled.

"For example, this is an ox and the next one is a bed," Pang told AFP. "The ox is sleeping on the bed and the bed is wobbly and because an ox is sleeping in the bed instead of a person, the bed breaks in the end. That's the scene I see... I use my imagination."

But the North Koreans have broadened the standard method to bring in other variables, enabling them to memorise faster and remember more, said coach Cha.

"We use all the senses for association," he explained. "Feeling, taste, movement, imagination, rhyme and everything you could do in your brain."

Entering the championships was intended to test their system on the world stage, he added. "It works very well."

The team trained six hours a day for two months before the event.

The championships' global president Raymond Keene said: "I put their success down to national discipline and determination."



Photo prise le 17 avril 2019 montrant Kim Su Rim mémorisant un paquet de cartes à l'université Kim Hyong Jik de Pyongyang

North Korea is diplomatically isolated and subject to multiple sanctions over its nuclear weapons and ballistic missile programmes, but its authorities constantly reinforce national pride and faith in its leaders — one popular song is called "We have nothing to envy in the world."

"When we actually competed, I learned that we Korean people are smart," said Pang, who wore a badge depicting the country's founder Kim Il Sung and his son and successor Kim Jong Il - all North Koreans display a pin showing one or both men.

"We were far superior than contenders from other countries and our memorisation techniques did not lag behind but were enough to compete squarely with the world." Pang added.

"Because we had mental strength we swept the competition."

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