

Mind Sports – Current Status and Prospects

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The concept of “mind sports” is relatively modern and originated from the United Kingdom. The first international event for mind sports, the “Mind Sport Olympiad”¹, was held in 1997 in London that included a large number of competitions on games played on boards and/or with cards. Some of the games were familiar ones, such as Backgammon, Draughts, Chess, Bridge, Weiqi, Othello, and Poker. Many others were less well known, for example cribbage, Boku, Abalone, etc. The number of events was very large and a Pentathlon medal item was created for players who could demonstrate skills in five *dissimilar* games. This “Pentamind” event was later expanded to a 10-game “Decamentathlon”!

But exactly what constitutes a mind sport? The term “sport” gives the connotation of physical activity. The Chinese equivalent, “运动” further suggests active physical motion. But from the items included in the Mind Sport Olympiad, these “mind sports” were perhaps the most sedentary activities one can engage in: they run totally opposite to the traditional definition of a physical sport!

It took a number of years for the concept of “mind sport” to distill into a clear definition. The umbrella organization for all international sport federations, SportAccord, now gives the definition of sport as an activity that:²

- includes the element of competition;
- does not rely on any element of “luck” specifically integrated into the competition;
- is not judged to pose an undue risk to the health and safety of its participants;
- is in no way harmful to any living creature;
- does not rely on equipment provided by a single supplier.

Based on this definition, SportAccord further classifies sports into five categories:

- physical sports
- mind sports
- motorized sports
- synchronized or coordinated sports
- animal-assisted sports

These definitions have simmered in various forms since the founding of the General Association of International Sport Federation (GAISF) in 1976. GAISF changed its name to “SportAccord” in 2009 and the lists above were documented as part of the inaugural celebration of the new organization. A common theme for all the sports is *one plays to win* (“competition”) and, in order to win, one must have *high concentration, fighting spirit, quick reflection, and strong will*. The other criteria further require that the sport contain elements of *fair play, discipline, rules, moral code, training, competition, and performance*.

These definitions clearly gave the legitimacy of calling some traditional, leisurely activities “sports”. But at the same time, they also placed a new restriction on mind sports, namely *the sport may not include an integrated element of luck*. With this provision, *rubber bridge* is not considered a mind sport, while *duplicate bridge* is, for example. Many of the items in the original “Mind Sport Olympiad” would now be excluded, such as poker, backgammon, scrabble, etc., although it should be noted that new variants of these games might yet come back to the mind sport family. Duplicate poker, inaugurated in 2011, is such an example.³

Separate from the Mind Sport Olympiad effort, a small group of international federations representing the major mind sports has gotten together since early 2000’s to contemplate ways of working together for the common good. These federations included the World Bridge Federation (WBF), the World Chess Federation (FIDE), the World Draughts Federation (FMJD), and the International Go Federation (IGF). Over the years, one by one they all became members of GAISF. As such, there was now an annual forum – the SportAccord Convention – during which leaders from these sports could get together for extended interaction and dialog. As a result, on

April 19th 2005, a subgroup within GAISF was formed – the International Mind Sport Association (IMSA).⁴

In addition to the founding members, a number of other sports have explored possibly joining IMSA. The latter had set its rules for acceptance as:

- The sport must be free from the element of luck;
- The sport must be universal – it must not be dependent on any particular culture;
- The sport must be wide spread – played over many continents and in many countries;
- The sport must be accepted into the SportAccord prior to joining IMSA.

These restrictive rules placed a high threshold for most mind sports to join IMSA. At this time, there are only two sports that have been granted observer status: xiangqi and duplicate poker, with scrabble possibly becoming the next. However, there are many potential suitors such as electronic games, Sudoku, speed-reading, renju, shogi, etc, that could join. In the long term, it is possible that two groups of mind sports could be established, one for those that satisfy the strict criteria, and another for those sports more culturally restrictive and/or regional.

The four original members of IMSA shared a vision of holding an Olympic-style event that would become the mind sports' complement to the Summer Olympics. The WBF president José Damiani served as the first IMSA president and used the financial strength of WBF to support the developmental activities of IMSA. Representing weiqi was IGF vice president Eric Puyt and secretary general Riichi Yamamoto. In 2006 Yuki Shigeno replaced Yamamoto and in early 2008 I replaced Puyt; we have worked within IMSA on weiqi's behalf since.

With the strong push of IMSA, several new international events for multiple mind sports have been held, the number and scale of which far exceeded anyone's reasonable expectations. They include (in chronological order):

- The 2008 World Mind Sport Games (WMSG-I), Beijing, China
- The 2010 Asian Games, Guangzhou, China

- The 2011-2013 SportAccord World Mind Games (SAWMG-1 through 3), Beijing, China
- The 2012 WMSG-II, Lille, France
- The 2013 Asian Indoor and Martial Art Games, Incheon, Korea

On a regional level, China has led all nations in holding its first two national mind-sport games in 2009 and 2011, to be followed by a quadrennial All-China Mind Sport Games starting 2015.

Of these events, the first World Mind Sport Games, WMSG-I, represented a conceptual breakthrough and posed a new format and protocol for other events to follow. Held at the Beijing Olympic Park two months after the Summer Olympics, WMSG-I was attended by over 2,700 athletes from 140 countries, with an additional ~800 staff members and ~300 reporters from 109 news agencies worldwide. A total of 105 medals were awarded in five sports – bridge, chess, draughts, weiqi, and xiangqi. China, with 12 golds, 8 silvers, and 6 bronzes, led all nations.

Four years later, WMSG-II was held at the Lille Grand Palais, Lille, France, closely in parallel to the London Summer Olympics. The event was more modest in scale, but still was participated by about 2,000 players from 120 countries, along with 500 support staff. The same five sports were featured.

The 2010 Asian Games, held in Guangzhou, China, included three mind sports – chess, weiqi, and xiangqi. While this event was restricted to the Asian countries, its significance was not overlooked: it is the first time mind sports were played along side with regular Olympic physical sports! Held at the luscious and brand new Guangzhou Qiyuan, the event had a very different appearance as all athletes lived in the athletes' park together with physical-sport athletes and were dressed routinely in sport gears. The high hope was that weiqi would continue to be an Asian Games item, eventually gaining a permanent entry to the Asian Games.

This expectation was not unreasonable because the next event in 2014 would be held in Korea, a hot bed for weiqi. Immediately after the Guangzhou event, the world weiqi community went to work to petition the Olympic Council of Asia that organizes

the Asian Games. This effort, however, fell short: OCS has by now announced that no board games will be included in the 2014 event. There was a silver lining, however: in the process, weiqi perhaps found a regular home in the Asian Indoor and Martial Art Games. In the 2013 event of the latter, weiqi was indeed included and will continue to be included for the indefinite future.

In 2011, a very different type of international mind-sport event was conceived and born. That was the SportAccord World Mind Games, or SAWMG. In Chinese, the event is called 国际精英智运会, literally meaning “*mind-sport games for the elite*”. This name accurately captures the essence of this event: it is intended to be for a small number of the best professional players in all mind sports to come and compete for a claim as the world champions. With commercial sponsorship, generous cash support was provided to the participants. While this format of support had previously been the norm for chess and weiqi, they were a new experience for bridge and draughts. For example, in bridge traditionally the top tournaments were open to all players, professional and amateur alike, and amateur groups “coming out of nowhere” often emerged as champions. Also, bridge players traditionally pay heavy entry fees for the right of competing and winning trophies but not cash; it was a new experience for them to be paid by the tournament organizers! Likewise, playing for lucrative cash prizes was totally new to draughts players and it was inconceivable prior to the SAWMG that anyone could be a “professional draughts player” – by definition making a living by competing in the game!

The former SportAccord president Hein Verbruggen personally championed the effort leading to the first SAWMG, which has become a symbol of success for SportAccord – it is the largest event the organization has ever directly organized. SAWMG will continue to be held in Beijing, China, through 2014. Its future after that appears promising as well.

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While the competition aspects of mind sports have had a meteoric start, another equally important component – *education* and *promotion* – has also been advancing at a rapid rate.

Youth movement is always front-and-center to all sport scenes. Within the Olympic Charter, an emphasis is always placed on the blending of sports with culture and education. Whether physical or mind sports, all recognize that the sustainability of their discipline depends on youth development, which is most effective when combined with education. For mind sports, there is further a sense of moral obligation to the society – in providing the training and conditioning of the young minds to enter the main stream of a rapidly advancing civilization. In no other point of human history is the demand on intellectual capacity, curiosity, and creativity of its citizenship so high; and mind sports can uniquely provide the training ground for these qualities.

All children start their learning by playing games. These games, according to their manufacturers, may be intended for honing math skills, vocabulary, logic thinking, strategy and organization. There is no question that they are the same skills that will contribute to the children's success when they grow up.

As an example that shows the value of the mind sport, Mr. Korsak Chairamisak, (蔡绪峰先生), CEO of Seven-Eleven of Thailand and president of the World Chinese Weichi Association, leads a program in Thailand⁵ where any student who achieves a shodan status in weiqi while studying in college would be guaranteed a job after graduation. With many years of proven success in producing the sharpest-minded workers, this program is now joined by over 20 large businesses from all walks of the Thai society!

On the other end of the spectrum, mind sports are also useful for the underprivileged children in providing a low-cost, healthful, after-school activity that has tangible benefit beyond just a pastime. In 2009-2010, FIDE started a program where they gave away chess sets to inner-city children in the Latin Americas. Draughts has had a focus on the African schools. In wieqi, the IGF funded a pilot project in Venezuela,

starting 2012, for developing Spanish-language weiqi teaching materials and teacher training to a group of Catholic schools. With its initial success, we are now looking for ways to fund a more expanded project to cover more schools and more countries. One interesting surprise from this program was that, of the initial group of schools, one was a school of the deaf. The teachers found that the deaf children were more at ease with their social peers on the weiqi board than in any other social settings! – This represents yet another unexpected benefit of mind sports. With coordinated efforts, there will surely be many more such projects worldwide to come.

But nowhere other than in China are the mind sport programs so directly integrated into the school curricula. In 2011-2012 my colleagues and I toured several schools in the Beijing area during the last two SAWMG events. To our amazement, we found that the students in these schools were all provided with multiple options of mind sports as part of their curriculum, just as they would with physical education and art! I was told that a few other cities also have such programs. Having mind sports accepted into school curriculum is the clearest indication that the sports' inherent values are recognized and appreciated by educators and parents alike. The “China model” is a target for all mind sport promoters to follow.

Chess is perhaps the mind sport that has previously penetrated the schools to the deepest extent. In schools worldwide, you can find chess clubs (or their variations in xiangqi, shogi, etc) on the extracurricular activity list. In Eastern Europe and Africa, I am told that Draughts is just as popular as an afterschool program as chess. Often, chess and/or draughts are second only to soccer as the major afterschool activity there! They offer some important lessons and guidance on how similar successes may be achieved in other mind sports.

Moving on to higher education, here weiqi perhaps has made the most advances compared with its peers. In Korea, for example, there is a baccalaureate program for Baduk (weiqi) Studies at the Myongji University.⁶ In many Asian countries, there are university courses that teach weiqi and the cultural elements accompanying the game. Weiqi was singled out because of the thousand-year old concept of the “*four arts (or four skills) of the literati*” – musical instrument, weiqi, calligraphy, and painting, where weiqi was given a higher status than other games. In the West, there have been

many college courses offered as well.⁷ These courses all shared the characteristics that, in addition to teaching the rudiments of the game, they used weiqi as a window to make inquiry into the cultures behind the game.

For all mind sports, integrating modern technology with the games is a very most important topic. There are many such efforts, perhaps too many to enumerate; so I will just name one that immediately comes to mind. On a big scale, there is under development a project known as the Mindsports Research Network (MRN).⁸ This project, led by Harvard University's Berkman Center for Internet and Society and MIT's Media Lab, aims to bring scientists, engineers, and mind sport masters together with software designers, marketing and gaming specialists, educators, and commercial developers to effect advancement of mind sports. Their target activities include organizing conferences to provide forums wherein scholars, athletes, and media may interact and disseminate their work; developing curriculum and outreach using the most modern IT tools; and building and promoting "sporting models".

Some of these items perhaps require further explanation. For example, on curriculum development and outreach, the first MRN project started in 2012 during a *development sprint*, offered by MIT Media Lab's Joi Ito and attended by several mind sport masters and educators. Ito challenged us to create a concept for a "tool box" of skill sets for games and to incorporate games into the classroom curriculum. In return, the geniuses of the Media Lab promised totally revolutionary "tools" beyond what "we could imagine" at the time! This effort continued into a tangible "chessX" program led by Harvard's Charles Nesson, MIT's Ethan Zuckerman, and American chess grandmaster Maurice Ashley, that is part of the Harvard-MIT "edX" initiative.⁹ More than just an online curriculum, the edX project aims to transform technology into new learning experiences. Signed on by 33 of the world's top universities (the "*Xconsortium*", including MIT, Harvard, Caltech, Berkeley, Tsinghua, Beida, Seoul, École Polytech, München, etc), the edX program is off to a running start and we hope to add other mind sports in the future.

The MRN "sporting models" include such items as interschool regional tournaments, "little league" of mind sports, a global Mind Sport Day, and promotional programs through UNESCO, etc. These programs clearly aim to take mind sport activities onto

the next level. I personally have the greatest interest in Mind Sport Day, not just because it is a concept that I first proposed, but also because I think it will go a long way towards connecting mind sports to the larger gaming and publishing industries so as to leverage on the latter's marketing prowess. I should add that, at IGF, we have recently started the discussion of a possible "International Go Day" as well.

The use of internet is prevalent in mind sports. All major mind sports have multiple online servers where players from across the globe may reach out to play others 24-7. There are many online blog sites and news sites for each mind sport. Much less used, however, is the online social media. For the latter, most mind sports have stayed at the "discussion forum/chat room" stage. There is more that can be exploited. At the American Go Association, we recently started a Facebook presence for both the AGA and for the World Pair Go Association. Direct participation and rapid yet individualized interaction in the social media is strongly appealing to the technology-savvy generation that is also our young audience and will surely become an essential component of mind sport development.

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Another topic for mind sports is their benefit to aging.

Most of us have stories to tell about an elderly relative who maintains a sharp mind as he/she ages. Almost always, such remarkable state is observed along with an active lifestyle, including both physical and leisurely activities: "he played Bridge until his last day!" Substitute Bridge with weiqi, xiangqi, mahjong, gin rummy, chess, checkers (draughts) – you name it – and you have a familiar story.

The first credible scientific research on the possible benefit of "mind sports" is perhaps from 2003. A group of scientists at the Aging Research Center of Stockholm University reported accumulated evidence of possible positive impact of leisure games on cognitive functions and dementia.¹⁰ Many other groups followed up on this work and carried out sociological and clinical studies. Their work has been largely inconclusive, however. While most researchers have observed cognitive improvement with game playing, they cannot eliminate other factors that may color

the data. For example, does game playing improve cognitive function? Or is it that those with better cognitive functions prefer to play games? It is the difficulty of humanely implementing standardized levels of activities for different groups of participants that frustrated the scientists.

More recently, improved data collection produced some more convincing results. For example, a group of scientist in London, Paris, and Bordeaux examined a large sample of community-dwelling, dementia-free, elders.¹¹ Setting different levels for cognitively stimulating leisure activities clearly showed significant effect of delaying the onset of dementia among the most active. Another “vertical study” at Rush University of Chicago showed that,¹² for a large group of elders with very similar baseline health conditions, over a period of almost five years those who regularly play leisure games displayed much better cognitive functions.

Perhaps most impressive is a work published last month in the prestigious journal *Nature* that directly links *just 12 hours of video game-playing* over a one-month period to markedly improved driving and sign-recognition capabilities in elders!¹³

All mind-sport organizations recognize the importance of serving the elders. It is a relatively low-cost endeavor; a minimal amount of organizing can mobilize a large following with rewarding results. The elders collectively also represent the single largest volunteer group that can help promote the mind sports, just as they have been with physical sports.

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To summarize this report, the competition aspect of mind sport movement has seen an auspicious start since organized international promotion began at the turn of this century. Building on this success, the next phase of growth is in the area of education and promotion. Youth and elderly are the two groups that warrant especially close attention, as meeting their needs will ensure the continued growth of the mind sports.

There are topics that I did not touch upon. For example, the question of building the commercial value of mind sport broadcasting. On television it is quite easy to capture

the instantaneous and skillful performance of a basketball player, but much harder to capture an inspiration, or a very complex thought process, behind a move on the weiqi board. Solving this problem will go a long way towards building commercial sponsorship of mind sports. Another question is how to set up a standardized reward system for players to engage and improve. So far, chess is the only sport that has such a system recognized internationally – the Elo rating system. Much less sophisticated is the bridge’s Master Point system. For weiqi, we are still at the infancy of anything that can be universally accepted; but implementing such a system would clearly be essential for youth development – witness the success of FIDE in this respect!

What will the future of mind sports be like? I look forward to giving you an update a few years from now and I am sure it will be filled with more wonderful developments!

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