

It's All a Matter of Technique

Doctoral student at Max Planck institute holds world record in memory sports

Friends of little notes that are always strewn about, who fight forgetfulness with the help of those small yellow stickers, might be a bit baffled by Boris Konrad. The doctoral student at the Max Planck Institute of Psychiatry holds the world record in remembering names. He is a German champion several times over and has won the World Team Championship in Memory Sports in Series repeatedly since 2005. Once the 26-year-old commits something to memory, he simply doesn't forget it. His credo: "With the right technique and enough practice, anyone can do it."

On closer inspection, he doesn't look all that unusual: neatly trimmed blond hair, rimless glasses, an alert gaze – not at all a couch potato who spends his time poring over columns of figures. In fact, Boris Konrad travels quite a lot, not least because of his hobby. When he is not working away at his thesis at the Munich-based MPI or preparing for a competition, he gives lectures at con-

ferences about memory training, referees soccer games in the regional league, or demonstrates his memory at media events. In the German TV show "Wetten, dass...", he astonished spectators by remembering the orders of 50 guests, each having had the choice of three beverages and three dishes.

At the 19th World Team Championship in China in December 2010, the Bochum-born world champion defended his title together with his group. The event in Guangzhou was the greatest memory sports tournament of all time; 130 participants from 22 countries had travelled far to compete in ten memory sports disciplines. Germany was represented by a team of nine members from the association MemoryXL, of which Konrad is the president. The previous year, he had set not one, but two new records during the German Memory Championships by memorizing 280 words and 195 names and faces in 15 minutes.

Boris Konrad first encountered memory sports eight years ago. Shortly before passing his final exams at school, the then 18-year-old happened to see a memory artist on TV who explained how to memorize a lot in a very short time. Remembering how his career began, Konrad says: "It caught my attention, because I thought it could come in handy when cramming for exams."

Researching the subject, he soon learned about mnemonics (memory technique). "I was amazed at how well it worked, and I remember wondering why no one teaches this at school," he says. The method uses mnemonic tricks and associations to help the gray cells remember more effectively. He himself works hard to explain this ancient art to a broad audience. In his lectures, which he regularly presents at universities, student associations and companies, he is able to convince even the greatest skeptics. "Actually, anyone can remember 20 terms in the right order after only 45 minutes of listening and doing a few exercises." His association now offers seminars for teachers.

Mnemonics is based on figurative associations. "Since the brain finds it easier to remember images than abstract terms, you can improve your memory greatly by converting names into images," Konrad says. In preparation for competitions, he compiles a mental picture book with the most common names. "For example, Thomas – to remember that name, I imagine a tomato." In international competitions, things get more complicated. "In that case, I look up the most common Chinese names in Wikipedia, to be able to work faster in the tournament." This works for numbers, too. "If you imagine number 1 as a candle and number 2 as a swan, you can imagine 21 as a swan with a candle on its back." To memorize longer sequences, however, he prefers the loci technique, used by rhetoricians and philosophers of ancient Greece and Rome. "In my head, I follow a specific route. It can be, say, a tour of my apartment. Along this route,

Football referee, doctoral student and multiple German champion in memory training: Boris Konrad.



Photo: Axel Griesch

I have fixed storage places. In my mind, I deposit the things that I want to remember in these places." This is no mean feat given that, at a world championship, up to a thousand pictures need to be stored for one route.

Boris Konrad is also keen to find out what happens in the brain during these exercises on a scientific level. After obtaining his degree in physics and informatics, he came to the MPI of Psychiatry in Munich to investigate the underlying processes for his doctoral thesis. For over a year, he has been working in the Neuroimaging research group. He instructs test persons to perform memory exercises in the MRI and compares what happens when they tackle the exercises with and without mnemonics. "The difference is very clear," he says. "If words or numbers are associated with images, this activates additional areas of the brain that are also connected to our visual imagination and spatial navigation, but that are not normally used for memorizing something by heart," Konrad explains. "If they are activated during learning, the capacity to remember increases."

Boris Konrad's memory has sometimes even served him well on the soccer field while refereeing games. For instance, when players would have him believe that the foul they were just caught committing was their first during a game. "Then I simply remind them of the three fouls that they seem to have forgotten about." In such situations, however, he also uses a notepad. He also has nothing against using yellow Post-its – because if he doesn't explicitly memorize things using a method, the world champion in memory is every bit as forgetful as the rest of us.

INFO

Boris Konrad on the Internet:
www.boriskonrad.de and www.memoryxl.de