Hip to be Square
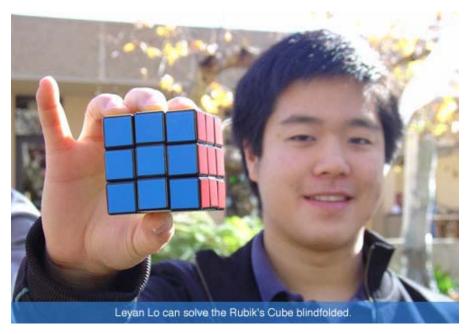

Leyan Lo can solve the Rubik's Cube blindfolded.

In the world of Rubik's Cube competitions, their names are legendary.

By Lynda Lin, Assistant Editor

PASADENA, Calif.- Call them "cubers."

Under the shade of a tree, their hands whir clicking corresponding colored squares into their places. It's an easy pattern taking Leyan Lo about 15 seconds to unscramble before he slaps the cube on the table. It's not his personal best, but it's enough to beat Tyson Mao who is a few seconds behind and admittedly a little out of practice.

They chat briefly about their performance then scramble the colors back up and start over. It's not a sport you would see on ESPN, but it's also not their parents' type of Rubik's Cube either. In peak form, they can solve a scrambled cube under 11 seconds - blindfolded. They call it a hobby, but if this were basketball, Leyan, 21, and Tyson, 22, could be Johnson and Bird.

Standing in the courtyard of the California Institute of Technology (Cal Tech), the West Coast home to math geniuses, engineers and physicists, they try to dispel the misconception that a cuber needs to be good at math or someone with no life.

People trickle over and Tyson slaps hands with a few club members. Yes, Cal Tech has a Rubik's Cube Club that competes in world competitions, and Tyson is the de facto leader.

The Making of a Cuber

The normal version of the Rubik's Cube has nine multicolored squares on each side, which can be arranged into 43 quintillion positions. Most people give the cube a couple of turns before giving it up completely. But Tyson calls it a "focus passion" - an enjoyable activity that helps him track his improvements.

"When I see an avenue towards improvement, I strive for it. I want to solve it faster," said Tyson, who in 2005 broke the world record for solving the Rubik's Cube blindfolded.

Tyson got his first glimpse of the cube at age four when he cupped it in his hands, turned it a few times before turning it back. The memory, he said, is pristine but it's not an epic moment like King Arthur finding Excalibur for the first time. He just forgot about the cube until 2003 when his younger brother Toby brought a cube home from a summer program retreat for talented youths boasting he could solve it. That's when the focusing started.

"[Toby] came home with a Rubik's Cube. My husband and I thought Toby had just wasted our $3,000 because he should've mastered his Etymology and not the Rubik's Cube," said Gina Mao. "The sound of turning Rubik's Cubes drove me crazy and I would ask them to stop turning once in a while. I did not like the colorful square puzzles all over my house."

The Mao brothers, who were born and raised in the San Francisco area, enjoyed a childhood filled with violin and cello lessons. On weekends, Tyson ran track and Toby, now 18, played baseball with his high school team. Still, they focused on improving their solve time.

At Cal Tech in 2004, Tyson told his friend Leyan he wanted to form a Rubik's Cube Club.
"I thought it was kind of nerdy," said Leyan, then a freshman at Cal Tech, about his initial reaction.

World Cube Domination

The cubers wanted a world forum to compete, so Tyson and a peer co-founded the World Cube Association (WCA), the official governing body of competitive Rubik's Cube events.

At his first competition in 2004, there were only 10 competitors, said Leyan. At the Jan. 13 Cal Tech Winter competition at the San Francisco Exploratorium, over 100 competitors from across the globe whirred their cubes in hopes of breaking a world record and gaining as much recognition as Leyan, Tyson and Toby.

Last January, Leyan set the speedcubing world record at 11.13 seconds and was swarmed with reporters after the competition.

"My parents weren't that enthusiastic about it until I was in the newspaper ... ." said Leyan.

Tyson has appeared on "The Today Show," "Anderson Cooper 360" and the second season of "Beauty and the Geek" where he seduced the producers into casting him by - you guessed it - speedcubing. Tyson and Toby were also hired to teach Will Smith the Zen of cubing for the film, "The Pursuit of Happyness."

"The Rubik's Cube has brought me opportunities I would have never dreamed of otherwise," said Tyson.

It's Hard out Here for a Cuber

The life of a cuber isn't gilded. There aren't large cash prizes or material incentives to set a world record, unless you count the homemade prizes.

"We lack funds to give out awards every time the world record is broken," said Leyan. "Since there is so much interest in the Rubik's Cube these days, a lot of records have been broken. Every single competition we've had we've seen a record broken." When he broke the speedcubing record, Tyson bought him a sandwich - that was his prize.

Small and homemade prizes don't keep the competitors away. The latest person to set the speedcubing world record is Toby - the Kobe Bryant of the cubing titans - who last August, solved his cube in 10.48 seconds at the U.S. Nationals competition. In one of the many videos of Toby on the internet, he slams the cube down on the table and celebrates like a rock star.

"It was the final solve of the competition ... it took me awhile to realize [what I did] and I thought 'Wow, that's fast,'" said Toby.

Like any other sport, competition encourages the competitors to strive for their personal bests, but there is no cutthroat malice, they all say - they all help each other. And when it comes to excellence, they all echo the name of Shotaro "Macky" Makisumi, the 17-year-old Japanese phenom who attends high school in Pasadena and wins all the cubing competitions, except when his mom says he can't go, jokes Leyan.

"I know I can never attain that level of excellence," Leyan said.

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