

LIFESTYLES

A king of the Cube heads to Toronto

By Sarah Andrews / Staff Writer

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At 14, Rubik's Cube wiz in World Championship

The first time he did it, he failed. The second time, it took 50 minutes. The third took four-and-a-half.

And now he can do it in 20 seconds flat while watching TV, eating dinner, walking around or holding down a conversation.

Andy Camann, 14, of Waban, sits perched on the edge of his neatly tucked bed, twisting and cranking a well-oiled Rubik's cube back and forth until the like-colored stickers are lined up straight. A cubing wiz, Camann works his way mechanically through the eight scrambled cubes scattered on his mattress, tossing each one aside when he's done.

The whole time he talks - fluently answering questions and even glancing up now and then.

"Once you know how to solve it, it's easy. And as you practice, you can improve your speed," said the Newton South freshman.

This weekend, Camann will travel to Toronto with his family to participate in the 2003 Rubik's Cube Championships, the first one since 1982.

Like the Olympics for the cubing-gifted, participants of every age come from all over the world and the weekend-long competition has several different events, ranging from standard speed solving, to one-handed speed solving to blindfolded speed solving.

Camann will be participating in the 3-by-3 standard speed solve, which is performed using the standard cube - 3 squares by 3 squares. And although Camann says he can't really explain how he solves it, he says the way the cube is scrambled has a big effect on how quickly it can be solved.

But whatever the difficulty level of the configuration, Camann solves it using the same method every time.

"Using more than one method is interesting because you get a better understanding of the cube," he said. "But if you stick to one method, you will get faster."

Using one method, Camann has perfected his speed to the point that he is now "unofficially" tied for second fastest in the world. His time, under 20 seconds, is unofficial because the lack of frequent cubing competitions has left most scores to remain self-timed.

One aspect of the competition that Camann says he is looking forward to is the fact that his event takes place on Sunday - typically, his lucky day for cubing.

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Camann got into cubing two years ago, when he found an old strategy book with cube-solving methods. He started practicing, holding the cube in front of the book and following the steps. After he could do it alone, he became more serious about his timing and began training for the championships last August, training three to four hours a day.

"The cube goes with him everywhere," said his mother, Rhonda Camann.

As one can imagine, someone with this type of habit can quickly blow through cubes, which is why Camann keeps about 10 on hand, lubing them up with silicone every couple of weeks.

"My cubes don't seem to last very long," he said.

Invented in 1974 by a Hungarian professor with a passion for geometry, Erno Rubik, the Rubik's cube, once a staple of any teen in the 1980s, has 43,252,003,274,489,856,000 different combinations, of which only one yields a solution.

Though the cube has become more or less a bygone fad, the resurgence of the championship 20 years later shows that not everyone has dropped their obsession with this game. Camann said the cubing world is still thriving, although somewhat underground. He frequently logs onto the online club (www.rubiks.com) where members can chat and register to win Rubik's Cube parapheneilia.

If Camann takes first place, he will win \$5,000, a gold trophy and become a celebrity. When asked which prize would be the best of the three, he said, "Well, not the trophy... maybe the money. But I have to win first."

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