

## The Puzzle Champ

**Thomas Snyder** wears a collared shirt, khakis, and sneakers, looking like any other postdoc on the Stanford University campus. He confesses, though, that he has a very different wardrobe in his closet at home—one devoted to sudoku.

His puzzle-based attire—bowling shirts, jackets, t-shirts—is a perk of being on the U.S. sudoku team and the reigning World Sudoku Champion. In April, he successfully defended his title at the 2008 World Sudoku Championship in Goa, India, adding yet another t-shirt and a couple of trophies to his stash.

Snyder, 28, began doing math and logic puzzles as a child but discovered his special talent for sudoku just two years ago. He'd been trying to get into the World Puzzle Championship, which features all types of puzzles, with no luck. In 2006, when they added sudoku to the offerings, Snyder tried out online and earned a spot on the U.S.



team. “I didn’t even know I was that good at it,” he says. He placed second at the World Championship that year and won in 2007.

Snyder can whip through an easy puzzle in less than one minute; the hard ones might take all of three. He has won prize money—\$10,000 in the U.S. National Sudoku Championship last October. Companies like Google and the *Philadelphia Inquirer* sponsor his travel to competitions. He gets hired to test puzzles and he also creates them; his first book, published this spring, features sudokus based on the classic board game Battleship.

But Snyder considers puzzle-solving a hobby. His first priority is his research as a bioengineering postdoc in HHMI investigator Stephen Quake’s

lab at Stanford. Snyder works on finding ways to synthesize genes with microfluidics, a technology often called “lab on a chip” that uses tiny amounts of reagents to make the process fast and cheap. “Solving a sudoku does something to make me happy, but it’s not helping people in developing countries deal with malaria,” he says. “The kind of science we’re doing here in the lab may have those broad-reaching impacts.”

The challenge of solving a new puzzle is also what draws him to research. “What is the secret? Can I find it?” he says. “[Sudoku] is kind of like science in this way. You have a bunch of approaches you can take to a problem you don’t know how to solve yet, but eventually you’re going to find something that starts to work, and then you’re going to build off that.”

Two years of competing helped Snyder keep his cool in Goa, where finalists had to solve their puzzles on stage in front of an audience. “The world’s getting quicker,” he smiles. “I might have to retire pretty soon and just start writing puzzles for the competition.” —*Corinna Wu*

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THOMAS SNYDER



Illustration: Peter Arkle Photo: Thomas Snyder