



Alex Mullen On Mnemonic Speed, Mandarin And Medical Terminology

<http://www.magneticmemorymethod.com/alex-mullen/>

Can This *Incredible* Memory Champion Teach You How To Memorize 52 Playing Cards In 17 Seconds, Ace Med School *And* Get The Upper Hand On Learning A Language?

Have you ever wondered how the world's top performers manage to pull off their tremendous feats?

I'll bet you have. I'll bet you've even felt jealous, and all the

more so when it comes to memory champions.

But as Alex Mullen reveals in this exclusive Magnetic Memory Method interview, you can build your memory skills to epic levels with a shockingly small budget of time.

For an hour a day or less, Alex demonstrates that you can learn to memorize a deck of cards in 17 seconds.

You can win a Guinness World Record for memorizing the most digits in under an hour - Alex clocks in at 3029!

And the best part is that you use the powers of memory you develop to sail through your studies. As a John Hopkins University grad with degrees in Biomedical Engineering and Applied Mathematics and Statistics, Alex is living proof that you really can squeeze it all in and have an excellent memory too.

Currently a medical student at the University of Mississippi School of Medicine, Alex is not only a World Memory Champion. He currently holds the record for scoring the most points since the competitions began 24 years ago.

So what are you waiting for? Tune into this episode of the Magnetic Memory Method Podcast. Download the audio and transcript to your desktop and follow through on the suggestions in this action-packed session with one of the world's greatest living mnemonists.

Episode Transcript

Anthony: Alex, it is really great to have you on the Magnetic Memory Method Podcast, and actually a real honor because you have achieved so much and really at a young age. Maybe tell people what age you are here in 2016 and a little bit about your first memory of being interested in memory.

Alex: Sure, well let me say first of all, I am happy to be here. It's nice to be talking you. I got interested in memory back in March 2013. That was sort of the first time, at least that I can think of, that I was introduced to the techniques. At that point, I think I was either a sophomore or junior in college. Up to that point, I had done things like using acronyms and some basic mnemonic stuff, but I really didn't know about Memory Palaces. I didn't know about any visual mnemonics, anything more advanced than that.

How To Get Your Foot In The Door With Mnemonics

My first exposure was this TED talk by [Joshua Foer](#) called *Feats of Memory Anyone Can Do*. It was a short TED talk but that just really got me hooked. I was blown away about what he talked about in that talk. I ended up reading his book. He had this TED talk and then he wrote this book, a pretty famous one called [Moonwalking with Einstein](#) where he goes into his journey as memory athlete, learning the techniques, competing at the USA Memory Championship. That was really what got me interested.

I tell you, in terms of what was going on in my own life, like I mentioned, I was a student at the time and I probably, and it's hard to remember ironically, but I'm pretty sure I probably felt like I was struggling with my own memory in school. Not really feeling like I was learning in the most efficient way, forgetting things all the time. Seeing these techniques, obviously as many people do, it struck me as something that I could use to improve my academic life. That was really the original motivator for me using memory techniques. I didn't really think

about competitions. I didn't really think about memorizing numbers and cards. I really just wanted to use it for school, and that was my initial sort of entry into the world.

Then, once I read his book I got interested, and I figured why not make a system for numbers, make a system for cards, and then at least even if I don't compete, I can use those to practice techniques and get comfortable with them. That's what I did. I ended up reading a few more books: [Dominic O'Brien's *Quantum Memory Power*](#), [Ron White's *Memory in a Month*](#). I got through those and just made my systems. I started making a PAO system for numbers, a PAO system for cards. Then I just kind of started practicing and doing the events at the competitions and then trained for about a year. My first competition was the 2014 [USA Memory Championship](#).

The Minimalist Guide To the PAO (Person Action Object) System And Beyond

Anthony: There is so much to talk about with what you just said but maybe if we just jump into the bolts and the mechanics and so forth. When you're talking about systems and [PAO](#), what

are you referring to? I think one thing that is super important in what you're saying is you're talking about creating systems. A lot of people look for a system in someone else's mnemonic strategy, but you're talking about creating your own. Why is that important? What do you mean by system? What does it mean to create your own?

Alex: Right, well, when I say I created a [PAO system](#), I was just looking to, as most memory athletes do, create a system that translates numbers or cards into a predetermined image. PAO stands for "person, action, object," and that means, for instance, for numbers you take every 2-digit number and associate it with a person, an action and an object. When you memorize numbers, you take like say 6 digits at a time, you look at the first 2 digits and you would say who is the person associated with those 2 digits. You move to the second 2 digits and you would say what is the action associated with those 2 digits. Then finally the object for the last 2 digits and then you would string them into this story of this person doing this action or an object. Then that would represent a 6-digit string.

That's not something I invented. That's a technique that was around since something like the 2000s or something like that of people the using in competitions. When I say I created my own system, I didn't invent the system. What I did do is choose

which people, which actions, which objects I was going to use in my systems. That's something every memory athlete or person who wants to use systems to memorize numbers or cards or whatever has to make themselves, because they need those associations to be personal and strong for them.

Like I said, I didn't I didn't invent the system but I had to make these images, and I had to choose things that will be personally strong for me. Just talking about systems in general I think is a pretty interesting thing. One thing I do think that I've sort of learned, through memory sports, competitions, etc., is that systems can be somewhat complicated to begin with. Then, once you put enough work into them, they really sort of pay off in the end.

I've since moved on from the PAO system. Now I use a 3-digit system to memorize numbers where every 3 digits becomes some sort of image. If you think about that, having to think of an image for every single 3-digit combination, that's a thousand

images, you know that sounds really complicated. I would not advise that many people to do that unless they want to compete, but it's something that, with enough practice, works really, really well for me. I think it's an interesting lesson that if you put in enough work up front, it can really sort of payoff down the line even if it seems complicated up front.

Anthony: Yes, I think that's an important distinction that there is a lot of self-creation even if you're adopting preexisting models or whatnot. What I wonder is, I mean this is certainly the case for me, I have certain characters that are relatively fixed for cards, for example, but there are times when actually I need to switch between two symbols that I have for the same card. So I use major method for cards. In other words, the queen of clubs can be either a chain or it can be like the queen of clubs literally with a chain, or it can be Fat Bastard from the Austin Powers movies because of all his double chins, or it can be, you know there's a couple other variations. Are you really fixed, or do you have some wiggle room in case it just doesn't work a particular thing that you've created for three digits or cards or whatever the case may be?

How To Reduce Luke Skywalker To The Basics And Remember Anything

Alex: That's a good question. I'd say it's relatively fixed. I don't think I personally really do anything that similar to what you said where you have kind of two separate actual things. I mean the furthest I would go I think is, let me think of an example, for me 570 is Luke Skywalker from *Star Wars* obviously. Like for him for instance, that pops up you know sometimes I might picture Luke Skywalker using his blue lightsaber and you know doing something with it. If it works better, occasionally I'll just use the lightsaber itself, and he won't even be part of it.

I do make sort of adjustments in the moment like that just depending on how it fits into the story, but it's not quite what you're talking about I think. That said though, when I am using memory techniques/Memory Palaces for learning things in school, I'm a medical student right now, and I will sort of have sometimes occasionally, I try not to do this too much, but I have two different images for certain things. Like sometimes, I am trying to think of an example, sometimes I'll represent like a white blood cell, this is kind of a weird example, but a white blood cell could be Luke Skywalker actually, and then sometimes depending on just, I guess it's sort of hard to explain, but sometimes if it's a little better I'll use Stephen Colbert, and he also would represent a white blood cell, but I do kind of use one or the other sometimes just depending on what

which fits better to the story.

Anthony: What interests you in medicine and what brought you to that particular field as opposed to any other course of study?

Alex: I've been interested in medicine for a long time since high school really. Part of the reason was pretty simple. I just like science. I was kind of a science nerd. I like the kind of problem solving aspect of it. I didn't like the fact that it was sort of more practical and you could sort of directly influence people rather than being like an inventor. How do people use what you invent but not really having that personal connection.

I mean, yeah, those main things were sort of what got me interested, and then when I was in college, you know I did some shadowing. I followed some doctors around. I did some other

things too. I tried to do research, things like that and medicine was just sort of, you know, being a physician was sort of just what struck me as most interesting.

Why Memory Techniques Are Something Everyone Should Learn

Anthony: Intuitively we know there's so many ways that memory techniques can help physicians. I wonder if in the future you think that there may be a possibility at some point that in a program like medicine, or any program in law school or whatever the case may be, there might be a place for mnemonics as a course of study or an elective that people could take while there while they're studying a big subject like that?

Alex: Yes, I mean I think, obviously I'm a little biased here, but maybe we both are. You know I think that memory techniques is something that everybody should learn. You know medicine, medicine or not, but medicine especially just because there really is just so much information that you know you have to memorize. I mean obviously the best way I think most people would argue to learn information is to really understand what's going on. If you have a really deep understanding, you will remember it.

I mean, unfortunately, that's just not the case in medicine. There's so much information that you can't possibly try to find some sort of root understanding in everything. There's just not enough time in a day. You have to memorize things, if that makes sense. I think memory techniques are something that really can make students learn more efficiently to be able to retain the information longer.

Do You Make The Mistake Of Cramming?

You know just like cramming and forgetting is such a huge thing for the average med student's life. They cram for tests. They forget it in two weeks, that kind of sucks you know. It's not a very good model. I think that memory techniques can definitely help with that. I'm certainly trying my best to use them in my own career to do that, to learn, to keep things more long term. Yeah, I do think that medical students should learn

about memory techniques.

Actually, there are already programs out there. There are web sites or courses for instance that incorporate mnemonics that a lot of medical students use that are actually already very popular. For instance, there's this program called SketchyMicro [now called [Sketchy Medical](#)] that uses sketches. So like drawings of places and then they will images, you know mnemonic images into things to teach you about different bugs in microbiology. It is visual learning and it does incorporate pieces of Memory Palace ideas even though you aren't really using your own personal Memory Palaces per se.

Those have already become quite popular in just a few years. You know I think it is starting to take a little bit of a foothold already. It'll be very interesting to see where that goes.

Anthony: Cool. I wasn't aware of that program but I'm always kind of amazed at the requests that people have for ready-made mnemonics as such. You know images that are created by someone else. I wonder what your genuine take on that is. Is that a is that a winning long-term strategy?

Alex: That's a good question.

The Question That Plagues All Teachers Of Mnemonics (Solved)

Anthony: Is it a point of entry that is legitimate someone could take so long as they develop the ability to create their own images or are you better off, you know, from your own pedagogical opinion, are you just better off just learning the nuts and bolts of making images right from the get go?

Alex: You know that's a question that I really struggle with a lot. I'm not sure what the answer is. There have been many people that I've you know tried to teach memory techniques to for learning specifically, and you know it's just sort of a fact that a lot of people will try it, probably hit a few road blocks and then just sort of give up. I mean, obviously, myself I'm a "memory athlete" and so it was a little easier for me to just be able to do it, and then also to kind of kick myself in the rear

enough to keep trying it to make sure it works.

In that sense, my point is that maybe it is better to give people these pre-made mnemonics. That's what SketchyMicro [Sketchy Medical] does. That's what these other programs like [Picmonic](#) do. People really seem to respond to those because they are very low barrier to entry type things.

You can still get a lot of benefits of mnemonics, maybe not all of them, but a lot of them without really doing much upfront work yourself. It doesn't have to be a very active process. You just watch these videos and they sort of come to you.

That said, like you said, obviously there are benefits to making your own palaces. There are benefits to making your own images. The personal connections are stronger. You can use memories from your own life which make things more memorable.

Even myself, I sort of do a combination of both actually. I

personally use SketchyMicro to learn microbiology. Then I use my own images and palaces for the other courses that I'm taking right now like pathology or pharmacology. Then I also do certain things to still take what is happening in the SketchyMicro world and incorporate into my own personal palaces. SketchyMicro has videos for all these different say bacteria or a video for this type of bacteria or this type of virus or whatever. Then I use my own Memory Palaces. I take the images from those videos and put them in like sort of an organizational palace.

I use my own palace and say okay here are all the gram-positive rod bacteria. Here are all of these. I can sort of see the whole structure using my own Memory Palace. I guess my point is that I'm sort of using a hybrid of my own images and their images. This is my roundabout way of saying that I think there are benefits to both. I think definitely it helps in a sense to get people through the door, so to speak, to give them premade images like SketchyMicro, because it is, in my experience at least, it can be difficult to get people to use the techniques because it is a very off the wall, sort of unintuitive – you know it's intuitive when you're using it, but it's an off the wall thing and people struggle. People run into roadblocks. Hopefully that answers the question.

Anthony: Yeah, I mean it's something I struggle with just how to teach it, how to actually make it palpable for people because so often it sounds like you're giving the instructions for how to build a jet engine.

Alex: Right.

Anthony: But I think that you and I both know and other mnemonists know that it is so elegant once you know what you're doing. There's like an artistry to it, hence art of memory, but it's kind of ballet. It is just sort of like a kid with a remote control who is up, down, left, right, right, whatever that was – A, B, B, A on the old Nintendo Select Start routine – and there's just a kind of fluidity to it once that you get rolling and so I think that one of the hallmarks and one of the things that I admire about you is that you're not just using these, you're actually teaching them and you have videos now.

Alex: I'm trying to yeah.

Anthony: Well they are excellent and one video in particular, if it's cool with you, to put it on the page for this interview.

Alex: Sure, yeah.

Can't Keep Up With Language Learning? Get Hold Of These Crazy Memory Secrets ...

Anthony: You talk about one of the biggest things that people struggle with in memory in general, apart from medical school, which is foreign language vocabulary acquisition. You can watch that video, but what's your key strategy there?

Alex: I just use sort of the same Memory Palace (a.k.a. Mind Palace) technique that I use for medicine or whatever. Generally, I should probably look into more of some of your stuff. I don't think I have palaces organized quite the way you do. I just sort of do it haphazardly. What I do is I'll start in a Memory Palace, choose one and then for vocabulary I'll just choose locations along the way. I just sort of do the standard mnemonic thing. Create an image for the foreign language word. Create an image for the definition in English, and then have them interact in some way on that locus. That's really it.

Personally I used mnemonics to learn Spanish and also to learn Chinese. Every language obviously presents with its own unique set of challenges. Chinese is obviously much different than Spanish. I do a couple of different tweaks and nuances to learn the Chinese things. It's still all pretty much the general idea of palace images, same idea.

Anthony: Are you doing Mandarin or Cantonese?

Alex: It's Mandarin.

Anthony: All right, we can trade notes because I'm doing Mandarin now too. It's really fascinating.

Alex: It's challenging.

Anthony: There is this absolute relationship between what you can do with Spanish and what you can do with Mandarin, but one thing, and maybe you can add your insight, that I find so fascinating, is I actually find Spanish harder with mnemonics than I do Mandarin because there's so many cognates and I want to get lazy with the cognates and there's an overwhelming amount of them.

Alex: Yeah, that's true.

Anthony: And then there's the 11 cognate rules and it's just like, "Oh my goodness, do I really have to go through all this?" Whereas there is something so fresh about Mandarin and the

tone challenges and so forth that just almost makes it like putting a knife through warm butter. It's not as resistant because it's so different.

Alex: Let me ask you this. So for Mandarin are you learning the characters also?

Anthony: Yes.

Alex: Okay. I'm curious how you would do that. When you do the pronunciation and the character do you sort of have it all in a similar location?

How To Invent The Solutions To Your Language Learning Problems

Anthony: Well I'm sort of "inventing" the process as I go along. One of the first things that I did, and I actually started this with Japanese and then I switched to Chinese, but I memorized the radicals in the Hanzi. That was four Memory Palaces to put together. I've got some repairs to do because it's

actually quite a challenge, but I didn't do any sounds associated with any of them whatsoever, but this practice allows you to see the actual Hanzi characters in a very different way. There are sometimes often logical relationships. Like words that have to do with cooking that will have for example the fire radical in it, often you can even tell how that word is supposed to be pronounced, or you can make really educated guesses.

Alex: I definitely found that to be the case with Chinese (learning the characters, building the radicals) a lot of it makes logical sense.

Anthony: It's weird. It's like learning how to see more than it is learning how to read in some way. So there's different levels of procedure. So there's that, and then I never thought I would do this, but for the characters in and of themselves it's really useful, just hard rote with, with memorize. I haven't quite

figured out how to add a mnemonic component because I just ignore the mnemonics that other people use. I just really don't connect with them.

I just sort of, partly as an experiment, I just resist using them to see what happens and the character recognition builds really nicely. Then for the actual mnemonic strategy, what I'm doing, and I don't know why I never thought of this before, but I got Pimsleur for Mandarin Chinese 1, 2 and 3, and so I went to a cafe and I started to write out by hand my own homophonic transliteration as I call it, which is just to spell it the way I want to spell it, and made lots of mistakes. I was saying like *tway-bo-chi* when it's supposed to be more like *dway* sound with like a "D." But who cares about that initial error. You can't correct yourself if you don't have it in memory. You need it to be in memory to even make proper mistakes.

So then I would just would write a Memory Palace beside that in an Excel file. I've got columns. I've got a column for the English. I've got a column for my homophonic translation. I don't bother writing down the meaning and then I make a little Memory Palace. I draw the Memory Palace. One case it was the city library here in Berlin or the *Stabi* as it's called, the Staatsbibliothek and just go from there.

Then, listening to those repetitions in the dialog from Pimsleur is not using rote learning to pound stuff into your brain. It's actually, like I press pause after each sentence, I produce the information from the imagery, I decode the imagery, so I'm actually practicing the art of memory as opposed to using it for rote learning. I've memorized now 11 dialogs and it's really fast and it's cool.

Alex: That's great.

Anthony: It's Pimsleur-speak but it's something. I know this is your interview, but just sharing with you.

Alex: That's okay I'm thrilled.

Anthony: The next thing that I do is I have two different speaking partners and I record the calls and they write the

characters. One of them just writes characters. One writes Pinyin numbered and so I have those and I watch them typing this on the screen and it's recorded and I go back. Then I just make Memory Palaces and memorize the vocabulary that came up. Like we did the months which is never on Pimsleur and we did things like, "I'm going to the park" and "I'm going to this with a friend" and then we do substitutions. "I read Shakespeare." "Every day I read Shakespeare." "I love to read Shakespeare." These kinds of things work and it really builds quite quickly and then the next speaking session we go through what we did the last time and I produce it from memory and then get the corrections in pronunciation and it's beautiful.

But I have to apologize! I completely skipped off what we were talking about. What are *you* doing with Mandarin?

How To Ethically "Steal" Memory Techniques

Alex: Yeah, so I wrote like a blog a while ago about it. I'm sort of ripping off this technique from a guy I found online. That's just sort of what I do. I rip off people's techniques. It was an interesting strategy and I didn't really think too hard about it. It

sort of appealed to me at the time. I originally saw it a few years ago and I didn't really put it into practice until sort of recently. The technique is different from the Spanish for me in a sense because when I do Spanish I sort of just look at the words and then I sort of just think of the first thing that comes to my head. Like for instance, and this is an example I gave in some of my videos, but if the Spanish word for apple is *manzana*, I sort of look at that. Maybe I would break it down and it kind of sounds like "man sand." I might think of a man with a bag, like a big sand bag or something like that. That's what I do for Spanish. I just look at the word and think of something that will remind me of the Spanish sound.

But for Chinese, I found that to be, at least personally, difficult. Because it's very dissimilar to English and a lot of the sounds will trigger English words, but then I'll very easily forget the nuance of the Chinese word. There's just sort of all these like these different sounds that are very distinct in Chinese obviously, but sort of when I try to translate them to English words, it doesn't really work quite as well. At least, that was my personal problem.

To get to what I'm actually doing, the technique takes advantage of the fact that Chinese words are monosyllabic and there's sort of this finite set of beginnings and endings to words.

What the technique does is it takes a person and there's a predetermined person to represent every possible beginning. So for instance, one beginning sound is a *ja* sound and so for me that's George Costanza from Seinfeld. Another one is the *ba* sound and that's James Bond for me.

Then there's endings, like for instance "a" or "i", so then you can put the "ba" and the "i" and get "bi." The endings I represent with places.

Then the way I do the tones is I sort of pick four different areas in those places. To be more specific there are 12, assuming I got this technique right, there are 12 different endings and so I have 12 different palaces for each of those endings and then within each of the 12 palaces there are four regions. The first region within Palace 1 will represent that ending and it will be the first tone for the first region if a person is in that region.

For instance, let me see if I can think of a good example. Okay, let me see if I can get this right, for instance so "bank" in Chinese is (loosely transliterated) "yinhang" I think, if I'm remembering it right. For the "yin" part the first sound is a "yi"

sound and so for me that's my grandmother. I call her Grandmother Eddie and so the "ed" kind of sounds like "yi" in Pinyin so that "yi" and then the ending is sort of an "n" ending. So it's "in" and that "n" ending for me is the Old Miss campus which is in the town where I grew up. The second tone, because it is "yinhang," is this sort of sports complex area. So I have my Grandmother Eddie for "yi" in this sports complex and that's the "n" ending with the second tone and then she'll be doing some sort of bank related thing in there.

This kind of goes back to what I'm was saying about systems. Because this sounds very complicated, it took a little while to set up, but I find that I'm able to do that relatively quickly. I can the "yi" think of my Grandmother Eddie and, see the "n," think of the place, think of the region for the tone and it works pretty well. That's one example, but hopefully that makes sense. That's sort of the technique that I use.

Anthony: That's cool. I'm going to get tons of emails asking me for the link to that blog post or that site that you are referring to. Let's make sure to link to that (see the resources section below).

Alex: Yeah, I'll send it to you.

Anthony: That would be cool.

Exactly How To Know When You've Got The Best Memory Technique

Alex: I don't know if it's the best technique. I don't know if it's the best technique for me. It seems to work so far. Yeah, I just wanted to add that qualifier.

Anthony: I always tell people that it's the best technique relative to the outcome that it gets you.

Alex: Right.

Anthony: Is medicine a foreign language would you say?

Alex: In a way, yeah. I mean there's certainly lots of terms to know. One thing I always try to be careful about is, and this is something I'm guessing other people struggle with and I certainly struggle with it myself. When you're using a lot of mnemonics, you just need to be little careful, a little wary about not, I guess, losing the forest for the trees in terms of focusing too much on the memorization and sort of maybe missing out on some of the underlying concepts going on.

I don't think that's too big of a problem. I think it's relatively easily combated just by forcing yourself to actively think about it. For instance, whenever I'm trying to recall something from a palace, I will always try to prompt myself by asking, "Okay, what's going in real life?" Not in the palace, like visualize what's happening in the body for instance and then just sort of always trying to ask myself why is this happening, what's going on, how can I explain this in terms of cause and effect, I guess.

I think that to me is sort of the difference. I mean, obviously,

there are concepts and grammar and things to learn for foreign language, but I found myself needing to be more careful about the understanding in terms of learning medicine.

Anthony: This leads me to something interesting that we haven't talked about yet which is you mentioned being a memory athlete. The reality is that you are more than a memory athlete. You've won the World Memory Championship. Right?

Alex: Right.

Anthony: We all appreciate modesty and that's fantastic but I mean that's the World Memory Championship and we're talking about a deck of cards in 17 seconds. What does that feel like first of all?

Alex: Yeah, it feels good. It's hard to say. I've been a memory competitor for a long time, about 3 years going back to the time March 2013. I had progressed a lot, obviously, and I felt good about where I was at, but even going into the competition last

December, I didn't feel like I was going to win by any stretch of the imagination. I knew that I could kind of compete for the sort of top couple spots if I really did my absolute best in everything, but I didn't that was going to happen. It sort of was what happened, luckily for me. Definitely, the whole thing was surreal experience and it just felt like things kind of were going my way the entire time.

When it actually ended up happening, and I ended up winning on the last event, I didn't even really know how to react because I hadn't really mentally prepared for it. It feels great and I love the fact that hopefully it gives me a little bit of credibility in terms of being able to spread the techniques. I love competing but that's really where my passion is at I think. I want to help people use the techniques especially for learning applications and for students or people in daily life as well to learn languages, etc. I personally like to focus on students, because there are so many inefficiencies with the way learning is done today, and I just think it needs to be done.

What A Card Memory Master Can Teach Us About Our Fitting Memory Fitness In

In terms of cards, cards is my favorite event. I love them because I like the sort of manual feel of the cards. It's kind of random but that's really one of the reasons I like it. Just being able to sort of speed through the deck by using your hands very quickly. I just like how it's a fast event. That speed cards event, just memorizing one deck of cards as quickly as you can, has really kind of been like a big part of me doing memory sports. Because it's very easy to just pick up a pack of cards and just go through it quickly, take a pack of cards with you on the train, the bus or in the car or wherever. I really like that event. Hopefully that answered the question.

Anthony: Yeah, it's amazing. I've gotten just over the 3-minute mark myself and to me that's really, really amazing.

Alex: Yeah, it is.

Anthony: The most I've done in competition, and I only ever competed once, but that was I did 14 cards in 2 minutes. So 52 in 17 seconds! But in my particular case, having never competed before, I didn't even know we were going to play rock-paper-

scissors and then alternate the cards. It just totally blew my brain that I had to sort of compensate for what the other person was doing and track whether they made a mistake or not. It was really kind of juggling. The recall was on the clock also. Very fascinating experience and so I can only imagine what that must of been like to be able to pace through a deck that fast. Take us through how you prepared for that. What's an average training day like?

Alex: I try to keep my training sessions pretty short. Being in med school obviously I don't have a whole lot of time to train a lot. I do my best to make each session as efficient as I can. I try to train sort of throughout the day. I mentioned maybe bringing a pack of cards while you're going somewhere or doing it in sort of these transitional periods. That's how I try to get some training in to not really add the extra time to my day.

How To Create Your Own Schedule For Memory Improvement And Mastery

On a daily basis I would say I train somewhere between 0 and 60 minutes a day. It tends to be in that range. Then I like to do a lot of speed drills. I will take a deck of cards and sort of go

through it and see my images, like visualize my images but not actually put it in a palace and try to recall it. I just sort of see it and try to go as fast as I can. To get to something like 20 or 17 seconds, you need to be able to see the cards and translate the images pretty much instantly. That's really the essential skill in terms of getting fast. That's personally what I train a lot of.

I try to keep it pretty short on a day-to-day basis and that I think helps because I don't feel like I'm spending a whole lot of extra time training. I don't really feel like I'm getting tired of training. It doesn't ever feel like a slough, because every day it's kind of little burst of training I can do and it's always very exciting for me.

Anthony: They do say short bursts are really the way to go. [Note: Check out [Dave Farrow's ideas about using short bursts for study success](#)]. Do you have a protocol or you just pick up cards and go at it?

Alex: I do. I have sort of a weekly schedule that I try to adhere to, trying to get through all the events in these competitions out of the way. It would be something like cards every couple of

days, numbers every couple of days, names and faces, words every couple of days, just something like that. I sort of spend some of the time each day doing speed drills, just going through cards or going through numbers and just try to see my images. Then part of it is just doing the actual events in the competitions, spending 5 minutes memorizing numbers and then another 10 or 15 minutes recalling it. I try to stick to that schedule.

Anthony: I think scheduling is really powerful even just for memorizing like knowledge, for example, for studies and so on to have a sift and sort pattern so to speak. [You offer coaching on your site](#). What would a person expect if they came to you for coaching as ground zero or Session 1?

How To Know That You're Doing It Right

Alex: You always are sort of wondering, "Am I doing this right?" Like okay, is there something or is there one little thing that I'm sort of missing that's going to be the difference between getting it to be really successful versus not. I think just being able to talk to somebody else, hopefully somebody more

experienced than you about it, is very helpful. But in terms of the ground zero student, I would just start with the basics. Try to go through Memory Palaces, the basic ideas of creating images and how doing certain things can really do a lot to make those images stick better in your palaces. Going through the importance of review schedules or like using spaced repetition. I think that's very important obviously in terms of learning. I just sort of try to cater to whatever the student's needs are. If they're interested in competitions, if they're interested in learning, I would started with those basics and sort of move forward depending on what their questions are.

Anthony: I would imagine that by going to these competitions, you get coaching by default because you're around all these great people who have this similar interest or is it completely the opposite? The reason why I'm thinking that is I was watching a lecture by a magician the other day, and he said that going to like [FISM](#) (Fédération Internationale des Sociétés Magiques), which is a magic organization with a competition, is one of the best things that he ever did because all his best friends he met at the competition, and they actually help each other get better at magic. I'm just kind of curious about that.

Alex: Yeah, I definitely think that's the case for memory. Most

people, for sure, are willing to talk about the techniques they use, discuss their strategies, their ideas for what works and what doesn't. I've definitely found going to competitions to be very helpful to learn personally. Also, just the memory competition sort of community in general has been very helpful, because you meet some of these people at competitions or you just meet them online and you can communicate online very easily and I do that a with different people. That's always very helpful.

Anthony: You know one thing that I think that is really key, and I'm sure you have insight about this, is that a lot of people get this. They understand it. They don't feel like they've had a jet engine described to them. It just snaps. They are like okay make a Memory Palace, location dependent mnemonic, we put this image here, we go back, we recall it, and decode it. This is not rocket science to them whatsoever.

Alex: Yeah.

Anthony: However, they find it really boring. They're not in love with it so to speak. Is there a way to fall in love with

mnemonics? Is there a way to become so passionate about it that even if they don't want to go compete, they are able to apply it to the information that makes a difference in their life, or just something that creates pleasure, which also makes a difference to your life?

How To Crush Boredom And Make All Your Memory Development The Most Interesting Activity In The World

Alex: Yeah, I think so. I think that's the case. I think the great thing about mnemonics is you can really make them as personal as you want to. So whatever you're interested in, you can sort of adapt your images or your stories to sort of match that.

I think one thing that's important, for myself and for others, is to really try to focus on making something that's interesting to you. Sometimes I'll get a little bored at memorizing numbers or whatever, and then I always try to take it back and force myself to think about, "What can I do to make these stories more interesting?" I always sort of see two images together on one locus when I memorize numbers. I always really try to do my best to make it seem interesting and doing that and just sort of focusing on making something funny or interesting in that way is enough to kind of keep me interested even if I'm having a bad

or a boring day.

My advice really is to think about what you find interesting and really try to capitalize on that when you're using mnemonics.

Anthony: Now to take this from the other angle, what about somebody who really is interested in this, but they don't get it all? They are just hearing all this stuff about Memory Palaces, crazy images, PAO, numbers, three digits per, –

Alex: Yeah it's a lot to process.

Anthony: You mentioned Dominic O'Brien's book and Ron White's book and so forth, what would be your go to manual besides your website which I actually highly recommend to everybody to go check it out. It really is awesome and the videos that you put together are very clear and distinct. Let me ask this a different way. Who is your hero in the world of memory?

Alex: I really admire a lot of different people. I guess one of them would [Nelson Dellis](#) from the U.S. He's done just a huge amount just to promote the techniques here, and he's obviously a very talented memory competitor. In terms of the world, I guess if you ask me in terms from a memory competitor standpoint it would have to be the German guy Johannes Mallow because he's the No. 1 ranked memory athlete in the world right now. The way I created a lot of the systems that I use now for cards and numbers, I sort of stole from him and adapted to my own benefit. In that sense, he's definitely my idol because I really tried my best to copy him and emulate him.

Anthony: I really want to thank you for being on the podcast today. It has been incredibly inspiring.

Alex: Thanks for having me. I appreciate it.

Anthony: It's been insightful and I hope to speak again. So you've got your website and a lot of great trainings there. What else is coming up next for you and how can people connect both on your site and perhaps elsewhere with social media and the

like.

Alex: One thing I guess I wanted to mention was you talked about how for some people having the experience of it being something like putting a jet engine together. Talking about my site also, the way I've sort of found is the best way to combat the problem is to sort of just have them do it themselves. Just go through one example and have them do it and see what it's actually like to do it. On my website I have something I came out with called the 20-word challenge, that's I call it. It's just memorizing a list of 20 random words. What I do, it's a video, and I'm in this place that we'll use as the Memory Palace and then I go through 20 different locations in that palace and memorize a list of 20 words.

That's something I like to do with people who struggle initially just to show them that they really can do it and it gives them some confidence and also just an idea of what the techniques are actually like. I just wanted to bring that up real quick.

In terms of contacting me, a lot of the content that I put out is on my site, on the tutorials. A lot of what I focus on is trying to

explain the basics but then also give people some examples of how to actually use techniques of learning. That's something that I sort of couldn't really find when I was trying to learn these techniques and use them in my life. I wasn't really able to find a lot of learning examples or people explaining how to use them in medicine effectively for instance.

If people want to go to my site, that would be great. There's a contact page on my site. They can always contact me and ask any questions that they have. I'm also on [Facebook](#) or Twitter at [Mullen Memory](#), you can contact me there as well. All those places are good places to get in contact with me.

Anthony: Very cool. Well thank you so much and thank you for being a leader in the field of memory techniques.

Alex: You as well.

Anthony: One last question. Are you going to compete again

and can you beat 17 seconds?

Alex: I would love to compete again. I'm still training right now. I took a little bit of a break after the competition but I'm back in it again. I couldn't put it down for too long. I want to keep competing as much as I can. I haven't beaten it yet, but I would love to break 17.

Anthony: That's awesome. Nelson has been on the show twice and he told me one of the best things that you'll ever do is go to a competition. I didn't believe him but almost by accident I wound up at one, and it really was the greatest way to learn so much.

Alex: Yeah, it's a good experience.

Anthony: Thank you again for being inspiring on that account and I hope that people listening will go and check out Alex's website and really take the time to study your approach and learn from you and listen to this interview again because it is

just filled with great information.

Alex: Thank you. I appreciate it.

Further Resources, People and Items Mentioned in the Podcast

[Alex Mullen's website](#)

[Alex's World Memory Statistics](#)

[Getting Started with Memory Techniques #4: Learning Foreign Language Vocabulary](#)

Great article about [using mnemonics to learn Chinese](#) from Country of the Blind

[Alex's YouTube Channel](#)

Interview with Alex Mullen on Florian Dellé's [Memory Sports](#)