

South China Morning Post



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young post

Playing mind games

Mental athlete Michael Chan is ready to do battle in Beijing, writes **Miranda Yeung**

Not long after the last gold medal has been hung around the neck of the triumphant Olympic athlete, the Chinese capital will brace itself for some equally intense, if less strenuous, battles.

More than 3,000 competitors, from 100 countries, will gather in Beijing from October 13 to 18 for the first World Mind Sports Games. Their finely honed intellects will fight it out for 35 gold medals split across five games - bridge, chess, *go*, draughts, *xiangqi* (Chinese chess).

The upcoming competition has excited millions of players worldwide. One of them is 15-year-old Michael Chan Naisan, who is likely to represent Hong Kong in Beijing.

Inspired by his father, Michael started playing *go* at the age of six. Last week he collected yet another trophy when he took fourth place at the 29th World Amateur *Go* Championship in Tokyo, the most prestigious event for the world's amateur players.

"To succeed, talent helps but hard work and experience play a bigger part. You also need to focus intently, thinking only of where to place the next stone,"

said Michael. "But the most difficult part is keeping the whole picture in your mind. You can't just focus on one corner."

This is a challenge, given that the board's 19 x 19 grid size produces 361 intersections on which to place the black and white stones, allowing an infinite number of variations. Players take turns to place a

stone and the winner is the one who encloses the most territory.

Michael is one of the handful of six *dan* players in Hong Kong, and he's also the youngest. Seven *dan* is the highest level for amateur players but is only awarded to national champions in China, Korea and Japan, the countries that train *go* professionals.

"*Go* players reach their peak between 15 and 25. With so many possibilities in *go*, young minds, more flexible and less restrained, are always able to come up with new strategies that the old couldn't conceive. Even Chan plays better than me now," Yung Po-hang, managing director of Hong Kong *Go* Association Ltd, explained.

"The popularity of *go* has recovered since the Leisure and Cultural Services Department started to promote it in 2000.

"And the tremendous popularity of Japanese manga *Hikaru no Go*, the story of a boy who finds a haunted *go* board and becomes a professional *go* player, fuelled the trend."

MICHAEL CHAN STARTED PLAYING GO AT THE AGE OF SIX. PHOTO: OLIVER TSANG