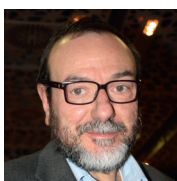




MASTER OF ALL

With over 80 Mind Sports Olympiad medals to his name, Studiogiocchi founder Dario de Toffoli is one of the world's best multi-game competitors.

He reveals his secret to excelling across the entire tabletop



Most players spend a lifetime enjoying many different games, but without taking their skill past the level needed to simply have fun. Some

are lucky enough to become an expert at a single game. A smaller number accomplish the feat of mastering two or three. Very few will reach the point of Dario de Toffoli.

The founder of Italian publisher Studiogiocchi, de Toffoli is one of the world's leading competitors at the Mind Sports Olympiad, a 20-year-old annual tournament that aims to discover the best all-around tabletop players from around the globe.

"In 1996 I was in Essen for the annual Spieltage, leading the Italian team at the European Board Game Championship – at that time it was called Intergame – and I found a flyer regarding the first MSO which happened in 1997," de Toffoli recalls. "I immediately decided that it was something I could not miss. Since then, I've only missed three editions."

As with its athletic namesake, the MSO divides competition across a wide-reaching selection of games and genres, from modern favourites *Agricola*, *Carcassonne* and *Ticket to Ride* to abstract classics such as chess, backgammon and *Go*. There's even a *Monopoly* tournament.

The ultimate honour goes to the winner of the Pentamind, an event that tallies participants' scores in five drastically different games – which rotate every year – to decide an overall victor. In addition to his 87 other MSO medals, de Toffoli has won the esteemed accolade twice, in 2002 and 2012, with his first victory making him the oldest champion crowned.

"I don't like being dedicated to one single game, it looks like a kind of waste to me and it becomes boring," he says. "If you go too deep into one single thing – not necessarily a game – you can also lose the framework, the larger picture. It's much better for me to exploit the flexibility of the mind, to apply what you've learned in different contests and situations."

With Pentamind hopefuls having to prove their prowess in such vastly dissimilar game mechanics, I ask de Toffoli how he ensures his tabletop talents remain comprehensive.

"The skills cannot really be universal," he replies. "But I try to have a universal approach to the competitions and remain ready to face unpredictable and difficult situations. Sometimes you succeed and sometimes you don't – it's very important learning to lose."

Of course, there can be an upside to the Pentamind's random selection of events – good fortune can win out.

"I have to say that in 2012 I won the Pentamind having a very, very poor preparation," de Toffoli admits. "I went to London with nothing

to lose, so I had no fear to lose my matches. Maybe that was key. With a bit of luck, of course."

While many of the games featured at the MSO are long-term staples, with competitors bringing years or even decades of experience to the table, de Toffoli expresses a particular fondness for competitions that are deliberately impossible to prepare for.

"When possible I like the 'learn and play' contests: playing a tournament of a new game that nobody knows," he effuses. "The quickest to work out the best strategy wins!"

As for the ingredients required for a successful competitive mind sport, de Toffoli praises "a good mixture of 'agon' and 'alea'" – the Latin terms for a contest and the rolling of dice.

"I mean, an aleatory engine but the possibility to make choices to take the best from any possible situation. Backgammon is the perfect example of the mixture."

Given the aptitude of its polymathic stars, the MSO continues to stand out as one of the tabletop's most illustrious contests. de Toffoli remains optimistic that competitive tabletop gaming and its stars will only grow in wider recognition and prestige – if the right support is offered.

"The scene is growing and this is good," he says. "I hope the trend will continue."

"I think that a serious international association of 'multi-players' – players who compete in different games – has to be started." ■