

Winning Mastermind

Gary Grant

I would never have won Mastermind if my ex-girlfriend hadn't dumped me by text message in 2007. So, although I wouldn't have guessed it at the time, she did me a massive favour. Thanks, 'N' - I owe you one.

Let me explain.

I'm not a 'natural' quizzier. Sure, I used to watch the odd quiz show and shout out the answers (who doesn't?) and I had made a solitary appearance on *The Weakest Link* in 2001 notable only for my snatching defeat from the jaws of victory in the final round not once but twice, but I didn't watch or play in quizzes regularly, and I certainly never tried to learn 'facts'. That was something only geeks would do... or so I believed a few years ago.

But in late 2007/early 2008 everything that could possibly go wrong in my life did. My dad became very seriously unwell, my job was a daily source of misery, I was isolated in Scotland away from my friends in Manchester, I had money problems and then, as a wonderful coup de grace, the girl who I loved and who had said she wanted to marry me not two weeks before, dumped me. To go back to the guy she'd been engaged to before she met me. Life, in short, sucked, and I was at the lowest ebb I'd ever been.

It was in this state that I declined an offer to go out to the pub one night, and instead stayed at home alone, watching whatever rubbish was on telly and wallowing in self-pity. As changing the channel was just too much effort in my virtually catatonic state, I left Mastermind on when it came on. And I found myself shouting out the answers. "Don't be stupid, It's Minsk, you idiot". "It's Radiohead - you old people know NOTHING about pop music".

And so on.

And it happened to be one of those shows where John said at the end "if you would like to be a contender...".

I still have no idea why I applied. Maybe I thought I had nothing left to lose. Maybe I thought that I would show my evil bosses at work, and my ex-girlfriend a thing or two, but whatever the reasons, 20 minutes later an e-mail application was winging its way to the BBC. To be honest, I didn't really expect to get on. I had no quiz pedigree, and I thought I would get 'found out' at the auditions. I hadn't even thought about my specialist subjects too hard.

I'd put Jackie Stewart because I like Formula One and had just finished his autobiography, but for the remaining 3 spaces I'd put whatever came into my head - like I'd get to the semi-finals anyway. So, my other choices were 'the Planets' on the grounds that with Pluto's demise, there's only 8 of them and they won't ask about Earth, so how hard can it be? For the final I picked 'Aleister Crowley' because I had a book of his. Never mind the fact that I hadn't read it, or any of his other 20 or so works. Even suggesting a subject that I would use if I got to the Mastermind final seemed like a ridiculous impertinence - I wasn't even going to get on the show.

Except, improbably, I did. And several weeks later I was clutching a piece of paper with a filming date and a bit in bold that said across the middle: 'Gary Grant - Specialist Subject: The Life And Career of Jackie Stewart'. Oh God. This was real. I was going to go on that terribly clever programme, with terribly clever contestants, with its ominous theme music and black chair, and make an utter fool of myself. I could see the local paper's headline "LOCAL DOCTOR IS NATION'S DISASTERMIND"

and the mock humorous article telling the tale of how I'd got locked into a pass spiral and scored the lowest ever total in the show's history; I could see that all too clearly in my mind's eye. So I threw myself into revision - every hour I wasn't at work, assisting some evil surgeon in doing unspeakable things to people's bowels or haemorrhoids I was reading about Jackie Stewart. I might not do brilliantly in general knowledge, but there would be no fact about that man I wouldn't know. I had to avoid shame and humiliation at all costs.

And here's the thing: all that revision, all that work, all that *having something to aim for* - a tangible goal - lifted me out of my depression. It would be over-egging it to say Mastermind saved my life, but it probably saved me flouncing out of my job, and thus at least it saved my career, finances and my mental well-being. For weeks, motivated by sheer fear of failure, I lived and breathed Jackie Stewart. I maybe even started talking in a

mousy West Coast burr... but I was determined and I was focussed. I wanted to do well in this show more than I could ever have predicted.

As it turns out, I did do quite well - certainly beyond my own expectations. I scored 14 out of 16 on Jackie Stewart (the 2 I got wrong were actually questions about F1 engines and were a bit unfair, I thought, but I wasn't going to argue) and then, helped by - all false modesty to one side - the easiest of the 4 GK sets, I garnered another 13 in round 2. I even survived the 'chat' with John that you used to do without making a total fool of myself. And with 27 points, much to my own astonishment, I'd won. I was in the semi-finals. This was both good and bad. Good in that it was far better than I had expected, and most importantly, I hadn't come last with a single-digit score. Bad in that I now had to answer questions on the planets of the solar system - a subject I knew literally next to nothing about and had little interest in. Going to Blackwell's bookshop in Edinburgh and finding there was a densely written 400-page tome on Venus alone possibly suggested that I hadn't, in fact, made the wisest choice.

Nonetheless, I applied myself with the same vigour to my subject, and other than working, eating, sleeping and shopping, for several weeks I did nothing but learn pointless, slightly dull facts about the Solar System. Water-rich plumes erupt from Enceladus, Saturn's sixth-largest moon. Uranus' magnetic field is tilted 59 degrees from where it should be. Not massively interesting, but with the fear factor large and the adrenaline of having won my last heat, it sustained me through otherwise dull and solitary evenings stuck in the Scottish Borders (tourist logo: "Where old people come to die"), and afternoons spent being shouted at by colorectal surgeons for holding the surgical retractors in the wrong place.

Of course, I found my level in the semi-finals. I was actually leading after the SS, having done my homework on the planets well, but Mastermind semi-final general knowledge levels were a bridge too far, and I missed out on winning after scoring a faintly embarrassing six on GK. But it didn't really matter, because the whole experience had given birth to a monster. From nowhere, I had developed the most massive determination I had ever had in my life: I was going to go back on that show, and win it.

I don't know where that came from. My theory is that, to me, winning Mastermind would symbolise my triumph over, my recovery from, the terrible pits of despair into which I had sunk 4 years ago. Maybe it was partly about proving my own self-worth after feeling sorry for myself, but I went about my goal with a determination I had never before experienced. I threw myself into quizzing - on coming back to Manchester (thank God!) I joined three local quiz leagues, I went to the national Quizzing events, I watched - and recorded - every quiz show on TV, I did a little bit of 'quiz study' most nights, either reading quiz questions from books or online, or reading about things that I was weak on, such as art, history or classical music. I had become one of those geeks I'd viewed with such disdain before. The thing is, at no point in all this quizzing - and I have to confess that, at first, I really enjoyed it - did I admit to anyone why I was really doing it. Why set yourself up for a fall? After all, it became quickly clear from my attendance at national events that former Mastermind champions such as Kevin Ashman, Pat Gibson and Jesse Honey were on a different quizzing stratosphere to ordinary mortals. Not only could they answer questions beginning "Which Romanian sociologist....?", they would probably worry that they might pick the wrong one. To state openly that I might emulate those guys seemed like hubris of the highest order. But still, I had my grim resolve, and if I didn't do it, I would die trying.

It quickly became apparent from watching the show that there might be ways you could make things easier for yourself, so after some careful study, and I fear to say, some statistical analysis of the show (what was I saying about geeks again?) I came up with the following rules for myself that I would have to obey rigidly to stand any sort of chance:-

1. PICK NARROW SPECIALIST SUBJECTS WITH CLEAR BOUNDARIES OF WHAT YOU CAN AND CAN'T BE ASKED
2. KNOW THOSE SUBJECTS INSIDE OUT
3. ANSWER AS QUICKLY AS HUMANLY POSSIBLE (if you don't know it instantly, concede the point or guess and move on)
4. NEVER PASS (say something silly instead if you must) and
5. ALWAYS, ALWAYS CONCENTRATE ON THE COMING QUESTION - IF YOU GET A COUPLE WRONG IN A ROW, IGNORE IT. Or, to put point 5 more succinctly, DON'T PANIC.

As you may have seen, then, that's just what I did. In the heat and final, I achieved perfect scores on my specialist subjects, The 7 wonders (again, there's only 7 of them, how hard can it be?) and Cetaceans (OK, there's 84 of them but many of them are virtually unknown, and I banked on them not using too many Latin names). My only foul-ups on SS were in the semis, on the Monaco Grand Prix, where I impressively failed to identify my favourite driver ever, David Coulthard, amongst other schoolboy errors. My mistake was in picking

something I thought I knew about anyway, and failing to do the requisite work, and I was lucky I was able to mount a comeback from 3rd place with my GK. So Gary's tip for the top? Pick a specialist subject you previously knew nothing about. Seriously. It forces you to do the work needed, and you can tailor the subject for the show rather than hoping your own interests would make a good specialist subject. If you get to the final, and have to do the filmed bit, where you have to say why you chose 'The Twilight Novels of Stephenie Meyer' (there's only 4 of them, how hard can etc etc), just wing it. After all, I did with whales and dolphins...'always fascinated me' indeed.

So I have achieved what, for 4 years, has been my biggest ambition in life, I am now the proud owner of a beautiful Caithness glass bowl, and I'm one of less than 40 people ever to have won one. I am not going to lie - I know full well that I'm not the greatest champion ever, or even in the top 80%. I won, I think, because of my tactics - in the final answering quickly gave me more questions than anyone else, and thus I had a 4-point lead at half-time which I simply maintained on GK. My general knowledge is good, but not brilliant. I'm a decent player in local quiz leagues, but not the best even there (although I did win the coveted Brain of Bolton last year - oddly I had to give the trophy back on the day of the MM final, which cleared a space on the shelf nicely as it turned out).

Equally, in both rounds where I was given 2 and a half minutes on GK, I still managed to score more points in the lesser time (2 minutes) I was allotted for my specialist subject. I had, through 3 years of quiz work, just enough general knowledge to maintain the leads I'd built up, and I was lucky to get a nice GK set in the semi-finals that allowed me to claw back the only time I had a deficit. But am I a quizzier of the calibre of most of the champions? No. It still amuses me to see my name besides theirs on Wikipedia, to be honest.

But winning Mastermind will do me. I felt a sense of happiness and achievement, yes, but when John announced my total score of 35 in the final, oddly the main emotion was relief. That was 3 and a half years of hard work and single-minded determination, and it hadn't been a waste.

Besides, if you ask a person on the street what the most impressive quizzing accolade is, I'm sure many of them will mention the glass bowl. I could keep going at quizzing, I could put in the hours and hours needed to compete at the truly top level of World and European Championships, but I've done what I set out to achieve and my own opinion is there's only so many facts one brain really needs. I'm happy to learn who the King of England was in 1400, but the King of France, the Tsar of Russia?

Nah - there's other stuff I want to do in life - like climb Aconcagua, my next goal (currently slated for winter 2013). If I can muster even half the determination I had to win MM I'll be sending you a photo from the top in a year or so's time. So I'm going to come along to the Mastermind club functions, and I may even put in the odd casual quiz appearance, but my obsessive quizzing days are now over. I have achieved something that means a massive amount to me personally, and I am now a happy man.

I might even text 'Miss N' now, and thank her for dumping me. Best thing anyone's ever done for me, that.

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