

SPOTLIGHT

DECEMBER 1, 2022

**Drew Woolley**

Like many youngsters, Sean Hartman remembers having a Rubik's Cube around the house when he was growing up. He didn't think much of it until the age of 11, when he discovered an entire world of online videos showing people doing amazing things with the iconic puzzle.

"It's so cool to see people solving these cubes so fast," Sean says. "I looked at probably seven tutorials online, and every time I couldn't remember how to do something, I would watch them over and over until I could do it myself."

That was 2013. Sean has been a dedicated cuber ever since.

Now a senior at Florida State University, he even started his own cubing club at the school last year. It is home to high-level speedcubers and newcomers alike.

"I looked at the clubs at school my first year in college and kept thinking it would be cool if there was a cubing club," Sean says. "It's like my favorite thing. We have a large spread. There's one person who averages 13 or 14 seconds for a 3×3 cube and has been doing it for years. There's another person who knows nothing about cubing, so they learned how to solve a 2×2 cube."

In April, the FSU Cubing Club hosted its first competition—something Sean knows plenty about. In the last six years, he has been to 65 competitions put on by the World Cubing Association, where cubers test their ability to solve the puzzle for speed, by memory and in the fewest moves.

"It's a really fun experience for first-time competitors," Sean says. "My first time, I was wowed by all these people who also solve Rubik's Cubes and are really fast. My main goal is to improve on my personal record. But it's also become about

Piece by Piece

Sean and his friends aren't alone in their passion for the Rubik's Cube.

The puzzle has seen a resurgence in recent years, going back to 2003 when CubingUSA was established. The nonprofit supports speedcubing in the United States, hosting more than 15,000 cubers in more than 700 competitions.

While events can be intimidating, for Christian Cutter—who started a cubing club at Pacific Lutheran University in Washington state—they are ultimately about sharing an excitement for speedcubing with others and setting personal goals.

“There are people of all different ages and ability levels,” Christian says. “Some are there for fun, but you also get to see the super talented, and they'll talk to you. Participation is the reward. Very few people go to place, and I rarely even look at what place I get.”

Christian's freshman year at PLU wasn't exactly what he had imagined it. With pandemic protocols in place for the 2020 school year, many students weren't on campus. Those who were could barely leave their dorms.

The summer before his sophomore year, Christian turned to an old friend: the Rubik's Cube. He decided cubing would be the perfect way to build the campus social circle he was missing.

“I've gotten to let out my inner extrovert and reach out to all my classmates,” he says. “For some of them, I was the first person they'd really talked to in college, which blew my mind. But I found some really close friends that way. We use the Rubik's Cube as an excuse to be close to each other.”

A New World

As competitions from organizations such as CubingUSA and the World Cubing Association have gained popularity, so have cubing clubs in schools.

Ryan Jew, a 2018 graduate of the University of California, Berkeley, was a member of the Cal Cube Club and even taught a student-led course on cubing.

Today, he takes his passion for the puzzle to middle and high schools.

learning how important it is to internalize concepts as opposed to rote memorization.

“I think that really helped me, particularly with my science and math classes,” Ryan says. “I think in the long term, it can also teach discipline. The cool thing about cubing is you can get pretty fast pretty quickly. I think people realize that if they put in a little time, they get really good results.”

Ryan credits the recent spike in cube popularity to YouTube, where interested cubers can see people solve the puzzle in just a few seconds or easily learn how to solve it themselves.

Christian also cites accessibility.

“There’s no biological advantage other than having moving fingers,” he says. “Your gender, ethnicity and age don’t matter. Almost every group can participate with a low price of entry.”

Ultimately, groups such as the FSU Cubing Club aim to demystify the Rubik’s Cube for others and make competitive events less intimidating for newcomers.

Once they experience it for themselves, Sean suspects many will be just as hooked as he is.

“When I first found out about cubing, it was like discovering a whole other world,” he says. “I knew what a Rubik’s Cube was, but I didn’t know anything else. It’s a niche hobby, but not so niche that there isn’t a big community for it. It’s such a cool thing when you see people all around the world solving these cubes.”

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