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FREE

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Todd E. Swenson / Daily News

WHIZ KID — Juliana Walton, 13, an eighth-grader from Blach Intermediate in Los Altos, has mastered the Sudoku puzzles. Walton is the 2006 MathEdge Sudoku Tournament champion.

A puzzling skill: Local teen rules at Sudoku tournaments

BY LUKE STANGEL
DAILY NEWS STAFF WRITER

There's no secret to how Juliana Walton solves Sudoku puzzles. The 13-year-old math whiz from Los Altos gets a fresh puzzle, takes one look at it and the numbers start popping out. Fast.

Fast enough to beat a field of 50 adult Sudoku fanatics at a recent competition at the Exploratorium in San Francisco, including a man who writes Scrabble puzzles for a living.

"It comes naturally to me," Walton said in an interview Saturday. "I really don't understand how it doesn't come naturally to other people."

Sudoku, if you haven't heard of it already, is a Japanese numbers puzzle with 81 squares — nine squares across and nine squares down. The 81 squares are further broken into six smaller 3x3 boxes.

The object of the puzzle is to place

Walton's Sudoku Tips:

- When you're just starting out, finish easy puzzles to learn the fundamentals. Move on to harder puzzles as your skills improve.
- Look for the rows, columns and 3x3 boxes with the most numbers, as you are most likely to discover the numbers you need there.
- If you get stuck, look at elimination through association. For example, if you know two horizontal squares in a 3x3 box need to be a one or a five, you can eliminate the ones and fives in the rest of the row.
- And finally, "have fun and don't get stressed. If you get stressed, it kind of makes it harder."

numbers one through nine in each horizontal row, numbers one through nine in each vertical column and

numbers one through nine in each smaller, 3x3 box. No duplicates allowed.

Anywhere from 20 to 30 numbers are provided to you when you start, and you then fill in the remaining blank squares. Confused yet?

Walton has been finishing 20 to 30 Sudoku puzzles a day since August, when her algebra teacher, Marcia Chron, first introduced her to it.

"Well, I didn't really understand what they were saying at first, but once I understood what I had to do, I got it right away and found it really easy," Walton said.

In the last year, she's devoured Sudoku puzzle after Sudoku puzzle, finishing 52 Mensa-level puzzles in 10 hours one day.

Walton has exceptional spatial skills — the ability to look at fragmented pieces of information and

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See SUDOKU, page 10

Rural fire station staffing at risk in budget cuts

Residents, 2 council members want to keep firefighters there

BY LUKE STANGEL
DAILY NEWS STAFF WRITER

As Palo Alto finalizes its budget for the coming year, two council members and a group of residents living in rural Palo Alto will try to convince the city to staff a small fire station at

At a glance

What: Palo Alto City Council meeting.
When: Monday at 7 p.m.
Where: Council Chambers, 250 Hamilton Ave.
Why: The City Council will

done the entire puzzle wrong. She erased everything and started again from the beginning. It took her 10 minutes to finish and she sat back as the other three finalists, including the Scrabble writer, struggled without success.

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other students her age at Math Edge, a math and chess competition training center with locations in Cupertino and Fremont.

She wanted to try again, so her parents signed her up for a second Sudoku tournament at the Exploratorium in San Francisco. In three rounds of competition last weekend — against dozens of adults whom she called "at least one or two decades older than me" — Walton finished each puzzle faster and more accurately than anyone in the room.

This included the seventh and final puzzle, a three-dimensional, triangle-shaped Sudoku-based puzzle written by a worldwide Sudoku champion. There were no instructions, and Walton came to the last square only to find she had

Prizes

Walton won a family membership to the Exploratorium and a backpack full of logic puzzles.

Until the tournaments, Walton never really knew how good she was at Sudoku.

"I think I might want to try some more tournaments, to see what kind of people are out there," Walton said.

Reach Luke Stangel at lstangel@dailynewsgroup.com.

SUDOKU

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form them correctly in her head. Her parents were introduced to their daughter's spatial skills when she was an infant and gravitated toward puzzle pieces, putting them together before she could speak.

Younger sister getting started

Walton is the eldest of four and said her 3-year-old sister is getting good at Sudoku for kids, placing "Dora the Explorer" stickers in the boxes instead of numbers.

Walton entered her first Sudoku tournament in late May, beating a dozen

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