

LIFESTYLE

JIM DANDY

ACTOR BROADBENT ABLE TO SHINE IN LESSER ROLES. 3E

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Brain check

There are enough brain fitness tools out there to make your head spin. It's a \$225 million industry built around staying sharper, longer.

BY MEGAN K. SCOTT
THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

Chester Santos has been training his brain for seven years.

At 32, he's not worried about losing his memory. He's taking advantage of a growing market in "brain fitness" spurred by aging Baby Boomers.

Teenagers cramming for tests and people worried about "senior moments" can now turn to an explosion of brain-assisting video games, such as Nintendo's *Brain Age*; puzzles that are said to ward off dementia, such as Sudoku and crosswords; and online tips that claim to train the brain.

Santos, the 2008 USA Memory Championship winner, can memorize a shuffled deck of cards in three minutes and learn 100 random words and 100 new names and faces in 15.

"People are capable of doing so much more with their brains than they think is possible," says Santos, who recently quit his software job to teach his memory techniques full-time.

The brain fitness boom might seem counterintuitive in an age when technology has eased memory stress: cell phones store numbers, GPS systems give directions, Web sites retain passwords and e-mail programs automatically recall used addresses.

Still, the brain fitness software market reached \$225 million in revenues in 2007, according to a SharpBrains report published ear-

lier this year, up from an estimated \$100 million in 2005. The increase was driven only in part by Nintendo's popular *Brain Age* game, says Alvaro Fernandez, CEO and co-founder of SharpBrains, a market-research firm.

"This is not just a Nintendo-fueled fad," he says. "The brain fitness market passed a tipping point in 2007, thanks to the convergence of a very proactive Boomer generation hitting their 60s."

Many Boomers have watched their parents struggle with Alzheimer's, and an estimated 10 million of them are now expected to develop the disease, according to a recent report from the Alzheimer's Association.

"People are worried," says Dr. John Hart Jr., medical science director of the Center for BrainHealth at the University of Texas at Dallas. "You have a large group of the population getting to the age where they are sort of vulnerable to degenerative neurological diseases that seem to be prevalent."

Hart says there is "reasonable evidence" that challenging your brain by learning new things can stave off the cognitive decline that comes with aging. But brain fitness programs differ from traditional learning by focusing on drills for specific cognitive abilities, such as concentration and retaining information.

Hart says there is no one brain "exercise"

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SERVING A PURPOSE: Memory champ Chester Santos stands in front of a list of the past 50 Wimbledon tennis champions, a tool he uses for improving memory. AP photo/Jeff Chiu

Boomers leading brain fitness wave

■ BRAIN

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that is guaranteed to work for everyone.

That hasn't stopped brain fitness programs from making claims. Posit Science says its computer-based programs will "help you think faster, focus better and remember more." While some include a disclaimer, such as Cogmed Working Memory Training for kids and adults with attention deficits, many of the games do not, says Fernandez.

Some users say they feel the benefits.

Sarah Schultz, 67, of Knoxville, Md., says she can think faster because of Lumosity, an online brain fitness program that claims to "improve cognitive performance and maximize brain health through fun and engaging games." She has been doing the program once a day for the past four months.

"In my age group, everybody complains they forget, that their recall isn't good," says Schultz, a grandmother of

three. "I read. I do crossword puzzles. I just felt like I needed more."

"I feel more alert," she adds. "It helps me to remember things, lists, names, faces. It really helps with recall."

Even teenagers cramming for tests are turning to brain exercises.

Raemon Matthews, a history teacher in New York City, uses some of the techniques in his curriculum and says he's seen a difference in his students' performance. SharpBrains estimates the K-12 market was worth \$60 million in 2007, mostly for children with learning disabilities.

"It's a tool like any other tool," says Matthews. "Children in the 21st century are 30-second people. If you cannot grab them in that 30-second period, they become disillusioned and don't feel they are capable of grabbing it."

Tony Dottino, who founded the USA Memory Championships more than a decade ago and teaches memory tech-

niques, says people have the misperception that the drills are "some awful thing, where you have to sit there and stuff this information into your head."

"It's not a matter of stuffing it into their heads," he says. "It's a matter of helping them organize it in a way that their brains will be able to retain."

For now, the brain fitness market is poised to grow. SharpBrains estimates the software market will reach \$2 billion in 2015 in the United States. Fernandez has visions of certified brain coaches, brain fitness programs in the workplace and government-led efforts.

Hart's goals are more modest: He suggests people find something that is mentally challenging and fun and do it on a regular basis.

"I am hoping that in the future, you will be able to go a health-care provider or other expert who will be able to give folks a brain physical" and prescribe the proper exercises, he says.