

IMSA – A Prospectus

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“Mind sport” is a relatively modern term that started being used in the 1970’s. A major breakthrough came in 1995, when then-president of the World Bridge Federation, José Damiani, sought and won the recognition of bridge as a *sport* by the International Olympic Committee (IOC). In 1998, IOC president Juan Antonio Samaranch declared at the first IOC Grand Prix for Bridge in Lausanne, Switzerland: *“Bridge is a sport and, as such, its place is here (at the Olympic Museum) like all other sports”*.

But exactly what constitutes a mind sport? The term “sport” gives the connotation of physical activity. The Chinese equivalent, “运动”, further suggests active physical *motion*. However, the currently recognized mind sports represent perhaps some of the most sedentary activities one can engage in: they run totally contrary to the traditional definition of a physical sport!

It took a number of years for the concept of “mind sport” to distill into a clear definition. The umbrella organization for all international sport federations, SportAccord, now defines sport as an activity that:

- includes the element of competition;
- does not rely on any element of “luck” integrated into the competition;
- is not judged to pose an undue risk to the health and safety of its participants;
- is in no way harmful to any living creature;
- does not rely on equipment provided by a single supplier.

Based on this definition, SportAccord classifies sports into five categories:

- physical sports
- mind sports

- motorized sports
- synchronized or coordinated sports
- animal-assisted sports

These concepts have simmered in various forms since the founding of the General Association of International Sport Federation (GAISF) in 1976. GAISF changed its name to “SportAccord” in 2009 and the lists above were documented as part of the inaugural celebration of the new organization. A common theme for all sports is then *one plays to win* (“competition”) and, in order to win, one must have *high concentration, fighting spirit, quick reflection, and strong will*. The other criteria further require that the sport contain elements of *fair play, discipline, universal rules, ethical code, training, competition, and performance*.

This clear definition lends legitimacy to calling some traditional, leisurely, activities “sport”. At the same time, they also placed a new restriction on mind sports, namely *the sport must not include an integrated element of luck*. With this provision, *rubber bridge* is not considered a mind sport, while *duplicate bridge* is; for example. Many traditional card and board games would be excluded as well, such as poker, backgammon, scrabble, etc., although it should be noted that new variants of these games, designed to eliminate the luck factor, may yet find their way back to the mind sport family. *Duplicate poker* and *duplicate mahjong* are such examples, along with others based on new generations of technology, such as *electronic games*.

Led by José Damiani and the World Bridge Federation, a small group of international federations representing the major mind sports came together in early 2000’s to contemplate ways of working together for the common good. They included the *World Bridge Federation* (WBF), the *World Chess Federation* (FIDE), the *World Draughts Federation* (FMJD), and the *International Go Federation* (IGF). Over the years, one by one they became members of GAISF. As such, there was now an annual forum – the SportAccord Convention – where representatives from these sports could get together for extended interaction and dialogue. On April 19th 2005, a subgroup within GAISF was formed – the *International Mind Sport Association* (IMSA).

The original members of IMSA shared a vision of holding an Olympics-styled event that would become the mind sports' complement to the Olympic Games.

With the strong push by IMSA, several international events for multiple mind sports have been held, the number and scale of which far exceeded anyone's reasonable expectations. They include, in chronological order:

- The 2008 World Mind Sport Games (WMSG-I), Beijing, China
- The 2010 Asian Games, Guangzhou, China
- The 2011-2014 SportAccord World Mind Games (SAWMG-1 through -4), Beijing, China
- The 2012 WMSG-II, Lille, France
- The 2013 Asian Indoor and Martial-Art Games, Incheon, Korea
- The 2016 IMSA Elite Mind Games (IEMG), Huai'an, China

Of these events, the first World Mind Sport Games, WMSG-I, represented a conceptual breakthrough and posed a new protocol for other events to follow. Held at the Beijing Olympic Park two months after the Summer Olympics, WMSG-I was attended by over 2,700 athletes from 140 countries, with an additional ~800 staff members and ~300 reporters from 109 news agencies worldwide. A total of 105 medals were awarded in five sports – bridge, chess, draughts, go, and xiangqi. China, with 12 golds, 8 silvers, and 6 bronzes, led all nations.

Four years later, WMSG-II was held at the Lille Grand Palais, Lille, France, closely in parallel to the London Summer Olympics. The event was more modest in scale, but still was participated by about 2,000 players from 120 countries, along with 500 support staff. The same five sports were featured.

The 2010 Asian Games, held in Guangzhou, China, included three mind sports – chess, go, and xiangqi. While this event was restricted to the Asian countries, its significance was not overlooked: it was the first time mind sports were integrated with regular Olympic-style physical sports in the same setting. Held at the luscious and brand new Guangzhou Qiyuan, the event had a very different appearance as all mind-sport athletes lived in the same athletes' park with other physical-sport athletes and were dressed routinely in sport uniforms.

In 2011, yet a different type of international mind-sport event was conceived and born. That was the SportAccord World Mind Games, or SAWMG. The host country, China, termed the event 国际精英智运会, literally meaning “*mind-sport games for the elite*”. This name accurately captures the essence of this event: it is intended for a small number of the best professional players in all mind sports to come and compete for a claim as the world champions.

SAWMG became very popular with the international fan base. In its second version, an online competition was added to invite worldwide amateur participation, which exceeded 500,000 in 2014! Unfortunately, SAWMG was suspended in 2015 following an internal turmoil at the SportAccord. In its place, a similar event was organized by IMSA - the *ISMA Elite Mind Games*, or IEMG. The first version, held in February 2016 in Huai’an, China, was again greeted with worldwide fanfare.

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While the competition aspects of mind sports have had a meteoric start, other important components – for example *education* and *promotion* – have also been advancing at a rapid rate.

Youth movement is always front-and-center to the sport scene. Whether physical or mind, all sports recognize that their sustainability depends on youth development. For mind sports, there is further a sense of moral obligation to the society in providing the training and conditioning of the young minds to enter the main stream of a rapidly advancing civilization. At no other point of human history is the demand on intellectual capacity, curiosity, and creativity of its citizenship so high; and mind sports can uniquely provide the training ground for these qualities.

All children start their learning by playing games that are the precursor to mind sports. These games, according to their manufacturers, may be intended for honing mathematics, vocabulary, logic thinking, strategizing, and organization. There is no

question that these are the same skills that will contribute to the children's success in all aspects of their lives.

At the other end of the spectrum, mind sports are also useful for the underprivileged children in providing a low-cost, healthful, after-school activity that has tangible benefit beyond just a pastime. In 2009, FIDE started a program that donates chess sets to inner-city children in the Latin Americas. Draughts has had a long-standing focus on African schools. In go, the IGF funded a pilot project in Venezuela starting 2012 that develops Spanish-language go teaching materials and teacher training in schools.

But nowhere other than in China are the mind sport programs so intimately integrated into the school curricula. In Beijing and many other Chinese cities, students in lower schools are provided with multiple options of mind sports as part of their curriculum, just as they would with physical education and art. This is the clearest indication yet that mind sports' inherent values are recognized by educators and parents alike. The "China model" is a standard for all mind-sport promoters to emulate.

Mind sports are also noted for their health benefit to aging.

Most of us have stories about an elderly relative who maintains a sharp mind with an active lifestyle, including both physical and leisurely activities: "*he played bridge until his last day!*" Substitute bridge with go, xiangqi, mahjong, chess, draughts, etc., and you have many familiar stories.

In the past ~20 years, there have been a number of rigorous studies that demonstrated how mind sports directly contributed to the improvement of cognitive functions and to the slowing down of aging. All mind-sport organizations recognize the importance of serving the elders. The elders in turn represent the single largest volunteer group that helps promote the mind sports.

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As a summary to this *prospectus*, it is noted that the competition aspect of mind-sport movement has seen an auspicious start since organized international promotion began

at the end of the previous century. Building on this success, the next phase of growth is in the area of education and promotion. Youth and elderly are the two groups that warrant close attention, as meeting their needs will ensure the continued growth of the mind sports.

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