



FINGERPRINT

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All Eyes on You: Inside the World Championship in Massage 2019 with Ryan McKeen by Sam Mendonca '17

Throughout my time at S-C, among the many things that made me anxious was the notion of being watched and judged while I treated. Whether it was an Oral/Practical exam where a stone-faced instructor sat across from me, clipboard in hand, leaving me wondering what the pen-to-paper sounds could possibly mean, or in Student Clinic, where an instructor would simply watch me in my cubicle as I nervously over-effleuraged my patients' backs, I thoroughly disliked having my massages analyzed. Imagine my surprise when I learned that massage therapists voluntarily sign up to have their massage skills evaluated in a competitive setting! The World Championship in Massage is an annual event organized by the International Massage Association, where massage therapists from all over the world come and showcase their skills in various judged competitions. The event is in its third year, which may explain why some of us haven't heard much about it. S-C graduate Ryan McKeen '14 attended the 2019 event, so I connected with him to find out about his experience.

How did you become a participant in this event?

It started with a Facebook post one of my mentors shared from the IMA. The caption read "Did you know there is a World Championship in Massage?!" and no, I didn't. So I watched the YouTube video summarizing the previous year, I did a little research, and I wrestled with the idea for about a month before I accepted that it was something I wanted to do. After I initially registered my information, it took a day or two before they got back to me accepting me into the competition. I registered for the June competition back in February. It gave me ample time to look into flights and accommodations in Copenhagen.

How exactly are the events set up?

There are six categories of massage: Swedish, Wellness, Eastern Inspired Freestyle, Western Inspired Freestyle, Asian, and Chair. Each therapist registers for the category(ies) they want to compete in each day. You give a 60-minute massage to another therapist in the same category. The person on the table is critiquing things like pressure and contact. Meanwhile, judges are walking around the room evaluating additional things like body mechanics, flow, and technique creativity.





How do judges determine who wins an event?

The judges make comments based on the specific criteria for that event, including the massage recipients' comments, and assign a score out of 15. At the end of each round the judges compare notes and pick whom they believe best demonstrated the massage style. They pick first, second, and third in each of the six categories. Then all the first-place therapists compete in the finals. Therapists in the audience could award one point to their preferred winner, the massage recipients could award up to three, and the judges could award up to six. The overall winner is then declared the World Champion of Massage for 2019. Not a bad resumé title.

Massage is a funny thing, it's very subjective. So, the question everyone asks is, "How can you judge a massage?" When really, I get judged six times a day, five days a week on my massages. Every client I treat has some kind of judgment. A competition just provides opportunity for more constructive feedback.

Did you place in any of the competitions?

Outside of coming in the top three, you never receive any comments on how your treatment was scored. I didn't place in a medal position, but that's okay. I didn't go into the competition with the idea of winning. I wanted to learn, and to gain some new experience. I'm very happy with the outcome of the competition. The overall winner was a therapist from the UK, competing in Chair Massage. It was pretty amazing to see some of the techniques he could do in a 60-minute full body chair treatment!

I did have a judge give me some feedback following my wellness massage. He told me that he really admired my style, and that he could tell I really cared about the person on the table, that it wasn't just a show for me. "Keep doing what you're doing, because it's amazing work." I think that meant more to me than any medal ever could.

Did you get the opportunity to meet massage practitioners from all over the world?

There were 200 therapists competing from 42 different nations! One of the big reasons I wanted to compete was to proudly wear the maple leaf in an international competition. It was such an amazing feeling to be representing our country, not every profession gets to experience that.

Because you get split into triads (A massages B while C observes and then rotate) you immediately get to meet other therapists. I worked with a woman from Israel, and men from Bulgaria, Greece, and Switzerland. I spent a bunch of time in the auditorium with a group of Filipina therapists. I ate lunch with a pair of Americans. And at one point tossed paper airplanes around with a German. It was a truly unique experience.

Did you witness any unique modalities or techniques?

The wellness category was filled with all sorts of modalities I didn't even know were used for massage. The treatment I received included candle wax being sprinkled on me, and then candles being placed on my back! I saw someone massaging with feathers at one point - big brown ostrich looking feathers. I saw someone place a towel on the leg of her client, light it on fire and then drag it across the body. It was more about exposure for me than anything else. It showed me how vast the massage umbrella really is, and all the different ways people can achieve their personal goals in receiving a treatment.

How do you think this event adds value to the profession?

It all comes down to how we perceive the idea of a massage competition. I think it's unfortunate that some therapists believe that this is a step backwards for our profession, or that this somehow leads to us not being respected as health care practitioners. First of all, it's for fun! You hear people talk about burnout in the profession; I felt completely rejuvenated and excited about my profession as the competition got closer. I was more aware of my body mechanics, I worked more on my flow and contact – all while still providing outcome-based therapeutic massage treatments. It was an exciting way to try to better myself. Yes, it's a competition. Yes, there is a winner but there are no losers – we were all there to learn. We all helped each other set up, made sure we had enough room around tables, and shared our massage stories. What this adds to the profession is some semblance of unity. Massage is a universal therapy, albeit at different levels of regulation and standards of practice. The competition provides us with an opportunity to celebrate massage styles from around the world, to showcase ourselves and to support others. It just feels like something we can be lacking today, not just as massage therapists, but as human beings.



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Any words of advice for anyone who may be considering this event in the future?

A wise Sutherland-Chan instructor (Michael Bard '84) taught me that if you get perfect on a test you just got lucky, but get an answer wrong and you'll actually learn from your mistake. I bring this up because you should never be afraid to fail. In the time I deliberated if I should compete or not, I was terrified by the possibility of absolutely embarrassing myself. I considered that I could be so far out of my league they would just ask me to stop and escort me out. But the prospect of being able to observe, treat, and be treated by some of the most unique therapists in the world far outweighed my nerves. Win or lose, I just wanted to learn. Don't let the fear of failure hold you back from trying something new, learning from your mistakes and improving yourself!

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While the nature of this event still sounds extremely daunting to me, Ryan is right in that we get judged every time we put our hands on our patients. Massage is so subjective that being able to receive feedback from the person on the table is really valuable, especially when they too are a therapist and can understand the intention behind a certain technique you are executing. For anyone who feels they may want to be a part of something like this, Ryan is excited to announce that he is working with One Concept (they're the team behind the annual Canadian Massage Conference). In September 2020 they will be holding the first Canadian Massage Championships! He hopes to inspire Canadian therapists to learn from each other and to have fun engaging in a unique approach to our profession.

Ryan McKeen started his career at Hand and Stone Spa. He is now the lead therapist at the Etobicoke Bloor-West location and is also the corporate trainer for Hand and Stone Canada. He authors [Under Pressure: A Massage Blog](#) and has co-authored an anthology [You Have So Much Potential: Inspiring Healing in Your Client's Transformation](#) set for publication in January 2020. You can find Ryan on FB: "McKeen Massage" and on Instagram: @ryanmckeenrmt

Do you know someone who should be at Sutherland-Chan?

You see them in your clinic – meet them in your neighborhood – they may be acquaintances; they may ask you about your profession and more importantly they may inquire about your education. We know that our greatest source of referrals is from those who say, "A Sutherland-Chan grad told me about the school!"

Please encourage those who express interest in the massage field to consider Sutherland-Chan. Direct them to our website or suggest they contact the school for a tour.

Our grads are our best resource – we thank you for your ongoing support of the school!

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