

The Million Dollar Challenge at TAM 2012

Written by Richard Saunders
Thursday, 06 September 2012 18:01

The James Randi Educational Foundation has made available the full video of our live Million Dollar Challenge at TAM 2012. In this guest post, [Richard Saunders](#) of the Australian Skeptics writes about his experience taking part in the test. You can find the video embedded below, or you can watch on [the JREF's YouTube channel](#)

One of the great institutions of modern skepticism is the James Randi Educational Foundation's (JREF) Million Dollar Challenge, aka the MDC.

A cash prize has been on offer, in one form or another and for varying amounts, for almost 50 years. Indeed, it has inspired many other skeptical groups around the world to also offer a cash prize, including a \$100,000 challenge by Australian Skeptics.

Over the last few years it has become a tradition that, if possible, the annual Amazing Meeting (TAM) should end with a live test of an MDC claim that can be described as paranormal or that it defies our current understanding of science. Such an opportunity presented itself in 2012.

Our story starts in March 2012 when I received an email from Andrew Needles, a resident of California. Mr Needles informed me that he is the inventor of the "Dynactiv SR", a range of sports wristbands and pendants that offers the wearer greater strength, improved balance and so forth via tiny microchips that are embedded into the products. He thought that I would be just the person to help him prove to the world that his invention really worked as opposed to other similar products on the market. (Readers may be familiar with my investigations into the Power Balance, NRG Titanium Ion and Shuzi bands.) I wrote back to Mr Needles saying I would be happy to be involved with any test or demonstration, but suggested his best option was to contact the JREF. Indeed, I wrote to the JREF's MDC director, Banachek, shortly thereafter to inform him of Mr Needles' claim and desire to be tested.

To be brief, his main testable claim was that he could tell if someone was wearing or had about their person one of his Dynactiv SR products by applying a balance and strength test. He claimed that in around 1000 demonstrations, only two people had reacted poorly or in an unexpected way. To quote Mr Needles: "I know for a fact that my product works, and am willing to put my name, and reputation on the line to prove it. I just want a chance to prove it."

The Million Dollar Challenge at TAM 2012

Written by Richard Saunders

Thursday, 06 September 2012 18:01

It's worth noting that after many years of investigating amazing claims (and I am sure this is true for others in the field), I have come to recognize certain 'flags' or indicators that suggests to me whether or not a person is sincere. From beginning to end I had no indication that Mr Needles was not sincere and really did desire an honest and fair test. I found him to be friendly and helpful at every stage.

Over the next few months, many emails flowed between myself and Mr Needles, Banachek, D.J. Grothe, James Randi and others at the JREF, until we all had a better understanding of what was being claimed and how we might go about testing it. As part of this process, Mr Needles posted me two samples of his products: a sports wristband and a pendant. I 'tested' these products as requested by Mr Needles, however they failed to perform for me.

More importantly, I had Ian Bryce, the chief investigator of Australian Skeptics, examine the products in great detail and his technical reports played an important part in designing the MDC test. Ian found that there were indeed tiny circuit boards embedded into the plastic clasp of the wristband, but these circuit boards were inactive having no power source. The pendant did have more circuits and a tiny battery however it was the wristband that was our concern as an identical one would be used in the MDC.

Soon thereafter, I wrote an outline for a test based in part on the protocol used for testing Connie Sonne at TAM in 2009 and also in part on the protocol I used to test the promoters of Power Balance in 2009. After much consideration and consultation with Mr Needles, this outline was skillfully amended by Banachek in order to simplify proceedings. Reworking a testing protocol is normal procedure but it is worth remembering that it can take many weeks if not months, depending on the parties involved. In fact Banachek and I were 'tweaking' aspects of the protocol in the days leading up to the test.

Here is an outline of the test and other parts of the surrounding procedure. Some minor steps have been omitted for brevity.

On the afternoon of the day of the test, Mr Needles was presented with 20 volunteers (one at time) for him to 'test', first with their holding a small cardboard box, then with their holding an identical box only this time with his Dynactiv SR wristband inside. From the 20 volunteers he would choose 11 that he felt best-suited the test. The volunteers were all TAM delegates. On

The Million Dollar Challenge at TAM 2012

Written by Richard Saunders

Thursday, 06 September 2012 18:01

the previous day, Mr Needles had checked and confirmed with us that his wrist band would still work from within the box.

Friends and family of Mr Needles were welcome to attend and oversee the selection of the final volunteers, but come the test they were situated at the back of the auditorium and in the company of skeptic Karen Stollznow.

Before Mr Needles entered the testing area, he was checked by Bryan Bonner and Matthew Baxter to see if he had any device about his person that could aid him in detecting the Dynactiv SR wristband. This action was purely routine and should not be read as a negative comment on the honesty of Mr Needles.

James Randi also took some time to inspect the stage with me before the test and made sure he had a good understanding of what was to follow.

Those present on stage during the test were Mr Needles, Banachek (who acted as host and directed the protocol), Jamy Ian Swiss (observer and consultant), Chip Denman from the JREF (observer), Matthew Baxter (scorekeeper, posting details on a scoreboard), our 11 volunteers and finally me, Richard Saunders, who had the job of placing the Dynactiv SR and the dummy wristbands into the boxes during the test.

For the test itself, in order to pass (and bear in mind that the test was the preliminary stage of the MDC) Mr Needles needed to beat odds of 1000 to 1. To do this, he had to determine what was in a box held by a volunteer. It could be his Dynactiv SR band or it could be the dummy wristband. Each trial gave him a potential 50% success rate through chance alone. If he could do this 10 out of 10 trials or at least 17 out of 20, it would satisfy the agreed score of a successful test.

After he demonstrated his testing technique to the audience using the extra or 11th volunteer (he used the standard 'Body Balance' or applied kinesiology test by pushing down on the outstretched arm of the volunteer), Mr Needles confirmed that his band was working as expected. I then placed the Dynactiv SR band and the dummy band into the boxes and randomized them by putting them both into a large paper bag and giving it a good shake. When the next volunteer reached into the paper bag to pick up one of the boxes, no one at all knew which box held which band.

The Million Dollar Challenge at TAM 2012

Written by Richard Saunders

Thursday, 06 September 2012 18:01

Mr Needles tested each volunteer, sometimes several times, with the first box drawn out of the paper bag, then the second. When he was satisfied he knew which box held his Dynactiv SR band, he stepped up to a microphone and announced it was either "A" or "B". That call was recorded on the scoreboard at which time I slowly opened both boxes for all to see. The result was also recorded and given a "Pass" or "Fail". Here are the recorded results for each of the eventual 10 trials:

1. Call was "A" - Fail
2. Call was "B" - Pass
3. Call was "B" - Fail
4. Call was "A" - Pass
5. Call was "B" - Pass
6. Call was "B" - Fail
7. Call was "A" - Fail (at this stage the overall test could not be passed)
8. Call was "B" - Fail
9. Call was "B" - Pass
10. Call was "B" - Fail

After 10 trials Mr Needles was offered the choice of continuing to get a final score out of 20, or stopping the test as he had already failed in beating the 1000 to 1 odds. He elected to end the test at this point and received a warm round of applause from the audience.

To his credit, Mr Needles then took questions from the audience. He maintained that product still worked but maybe the conditions for the test were not appropriate. (I recommend hearing what Mr. Needles had to say by watching the video of the event.) I need not remind you that he was happy with and agreed to the conditions, in writing, before the test.

I left the stage and headed out to the large hallway only to find James Randi. We both knew what the other one was thinking... no mind reading needed. We had seen it all before. It seems that Mr. Needles may well be a victim of the ideomotor effect that is commonly observed in water dowzers. In other words he seemed to have applied a different force or a force in a differing direction in order to make a subject either fall off or stay on balance. I have no reason at this stage to think that the Dynactiv SR band lives up to the claims.

I would like to thank all those involved, over many months, in making the MDC a reality for TAM 2012. For me it was a thrill to be part of such an event.

The Million Dollar Challenge at TAM 2012

Written by Richard Saunders

Thursday, 06 September 2012 18:01

Richard Saunders is a Life Member of Australian Skeptics, a CSI Fellow, one of the organizers of TAM Australia in 2010, producer of

the Skeptic Zone podcast, and inventor of “Origami Pigasus”.