Competition Makes a Comeback

Academic bees and bowls attract top students

Paige Kimble won the 1981 Scripps National Spelling Bee with "sarcophagus," a word that any middle schooler who has studied a unit on the boy king Tutankhamun can use with aplomb.

Now consider the words tossed at the bee's 2009 finalists, all 12- and 13-year-olds: Laodicean, Maecenas, menhir, apodyterium, herniorrhaphy. Even a computer spell checker doesn't recognize them.

Palatschinken? What's happening here?

"The words are getting harder because the level of competition has risen," says Kimble, who's now the director of the national spelling bee. There are more children spending more hours studying more words, all for "the opportunity to shine on a national stage," she adds.

Today's teachers generally cringe at everything about that development. All those hours spent on one narrow academic focus! All that rote learning! All that stressful competition! And if some children shine on that national stage, what about the self-esteem of every other child whose luster is publicly shown to be not as bright?

Good points, perhaps. But they haven't slowed the apparent growing interest among middle schoolers in the Scripps spell-off or any of the other bees, bowls, and academic olympiads that will climax in national championships this spring. The Scripps bee claims that 10 million children will take part in its spell-offs this year. Last year, 293 of them made it to the televised finals in Washington after winning local or regional runoffs sponsored by newspapers and community businesses. In 1981, there were just 120 finalists.

The National Geographic Bee, run by the National Geographic Society, claims between 4 million and 5 million yearly participants from 14,000 schools. One finalist from each state and territory will compete for $50,000 in scholarships during the televised finals in May.

By JUNE KRONHOLZ

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MATHCOUNTS, sponsored by the National Society of Professional Engineers and technology companies including Raytheon, says participation is up 10 percent in two years. There's also a National Science Bowl sponsored by the U.S. Department of Energy, a Bible Bowl, grammar bowls, and an International Brain Bee, where finalists identify the parts and functions of the brain—using human brains.

There may be an element of 21st-century angst in all of this: kids hoping that a national academic championship on their résumé will increase their chances of being accepted by an Ivy League college, at a time when that competition has never been tougher. "I'm setting my sights high, for Harvard or Yale," says Arjun Kandaswamy, who placed second in the 2009 National Geographic Bee and now, as a 9th grader, has aged out of the contest.

But Arjun would seem to be a strong contender even without a bee victory to his name. He's making "A"s in Advanced Placement U.S. history, honors literature and chemistry, and precalculus at Westview High School in Portland, Oregon. He's a member of his school science and debate teams, mentors 5th graders in science—and expects to make the varsity tennis team this spring. He also gushes endearingly about the joys of geography. Even studying it four hours a day, "geography is never a chore," he assured me.

Indeed, the dozen bee contestants I talked with are high achievers in everything they do: They challenge themselves with the toughest courses their schools offer, and still make time for sports, Key Club, Boy Scouts, piano, or the school robotics team. Some claim Rolodex memories; others attribute their success to hard—really hard—work. "I'm a very goal-oriented person," said Caitlin Snaring, who won the 2007 National Geographic Bee after creating a series of study guides and color-coded maps, analyzing the tapes of past national bees, and grilling past competitors on their study techniques.

If any of them suffered by not taking home the top prize, they don't show it. Zachary Zagorski, who came in 17th in the 2009 spelling bee, said his reaction to misspelling "strepitoso" was "OK, fine, I'm gone." They got involved in their bee, bowl, or olympiad for the same reasons most of us get involved in a hobby or career: they liked it, it held their interest, and "I found out I was good at it," Zachary added.

They're the kind of kids that teachers say they don't have enough of: motivated, articulate, eager, resourceful, and charming. So as bee season swings into high gear, why are some people so uncomfortable about these kids and their victories?

Americans thrive on competition. It's why our phones are smarter, our farms are more productive, our athletes run faster, our pop stars are raunchier, and our lives tend to be better every year.

Keeping Score

Americans thrive on competition. It's why our phones are smarter, our farms are more productive, our athletes run faster, our pop stars are raunchier, and our lives tend to be better—except for the raunchy pop stars—every year.

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But American schools have been suspicious of competition for generations, and are generally horrified by the idea that success should be accompanied by a reward like a title, a trophy, or a cash prize. Knowledge is its own reward, after all.

Carol Tomlinson, who taught in Virginia public schools for 21 years and is now a professor of educational leadership at the University of Virginia, makes the case against competition, even while arguing that schools have taken it to an extreme. Middle school is "the last time we have to get kids from low-income families to buy into school," she told me. The surest way to "incorporate and affiliate" those kids is to show them they can succeed; the surest way to lose them to indifference is to hand them proof of their own failure. And what could be clearer proof than to be knocked out of a spelling bee?

Susan Brookhart, former chair of the Department of Foundations and Leadership at Duquesne University's School of Education and now a consultant on testing and motivation, takes that argument one step further. "Anything that sets up a universe where it looks like being smart and dumb are traits that you're born with is not good for learning for anyone except—surprise!—the winners," she told me. She includes classroom star charts in that esteem-crushing universe, as well as anything that ranks youngsters against one another.

Competition "creates this idea among students that there are winners and losers, and 'puts them in their place' in that universe," Brookhart added.

That thinking has reshaped teaching over the past two decades. Classroom work is more collaborative and team-based, especially in math and science, where girls in particular are said to have benefited. Tracking and ability grouping have fallen into disfavor, easing the slower-learner stigma. Portfolio assessments are gaining ground. Report cards set out individualized goals.

"Societally, we view child development differently" than our parents did, and that has spilled over into the classroom, says Frederick J. Morrison, a professor at the University of Michigan's Center for Human Growth and Development. "We're much more prone to feeling that optimal development will come through positive messages than through negative feedback or punishment."

There aren't a lot of data to back that up, however. Daniel Willingham, a University of Virginia cognitive psychologist, says the research on collaboration vs. competition as teaching method is muddled, and not entirely trustworthy. "People who do research like the idea that there ought to be more cooperation—that's the sensibility within the education-research community," he told me. "The danger is that researchers reach the answer they want to find."

The squeamishness about competition reached its extreme with the self-esteem movement of the 1990s, when researchers decided that low-performing kids would do better in school if they just, darn it, felt better about themselves. Schools dropped honor rolls, the class valedictorian, and assemblies that recognized academic stars, but not, of course, assemblies that recognized football or basketball or golf stars. At the feel-good movement's most absurd, "authentic experience" triumphed over standardized spelling and grammar. Ethnocentric math had its proponents. Everyone got a "good job" sticker, good job or not.

The self-esteem movement "probably backfired and made kids arrogant for no cause," said Willingham, who included himself in the self-esteem pack. Willingham and Morrison, among others, now see a change. "It has seeped into the public consciousness that we got that wrong," Willingham said. "Self esteem does not help with learning; high self-esteem goes with high test scores," not the other way around.

By eliminating many of those measures that show youngsters where they stand in the classroom, "we make kids feel a lot better about themselves, but we're not challenging them nearly as much as we did three, four, five generations ago," added Morrison.

The Drive to Compete

It's hard to trace the arc of the pendulum swing, but the standards movement—which led to state tests and from there to No Child Left Behind—seems one place to start. The Bush administration education law defines and punishes failure, and there are no extra points for a cocky walk.

Tough economic times are another place to look, says Aaron M. Pallas, a professor of sociology and education at

Teachers College, Columbia University. Middle-class kids and their parents are worried about getting into and paying for college. A high-school transcript that doesn't report grades or class standing doesn't help; neither does weakness in math and reading.

A national academic championship, or membership in the National Honor Society, might help, though. The number of schools with National Junior Honor Society chapters for middle schoolers has grown to 7,552 from 4,625 since 2000, says the National Association of Secondary School Principals, which runs the program. The number of National Honor Society chapters is up by one-third in the same time.

No Child Left Behind doesn't say anything about spelling and geography bees, of course, but its impact on academic go-getters is a matter of some debate. Teachers and researchers grumble that the law focuses teachers' attention on getting youngsters over a bar of minimal competency. There's no reward for getting stronger students to proficiency, or really bright kids to some advanced level. "Kids in the higher ranges of knowledge or skill find classes pretty desolate these days," said UVa's Tomlinson.

No Child Left Behind critics also contend that the law has narrowed learning to what's on the test, and spelling, geography, and science aren't. And teachers complain that they haven't the time to teach anything else, anyway. Kids looking for a challenge may have to look outside their schools, adds Tomlinson, because "classrooms haven't engaged anyone for a whole academic generation now."

The bee finalists I talked with had a far brighter view of their schools than that (and most of them attended public schools), although some did complain of teachers who asked little of them and classes they claimed they could sleep through. The encouraging news is that bright, motivated youngsters can usually seek out gifted-and-talented programs, accelerated classes, and daunting amounts of extra work, which is what bee contestants appear to do.

Eric Yang, a Colony, Texas, 8th grader who won the 2009 geography bee, is taking pre-AP classes in science, U.S. history, and English at Griffin Middle School, plus geometry at the local high school. William Lee IV, who finished third in the 2008 geography bee, is taking Italian and Spanish at Woburn High School in Massachusetts, plus "honors classes for everything else." Caitlin Snaring took her first AP class—and got a perfect AP test score—as a freshman.

For many of these superachievers, bees and bowls are just one more academic challenge, one more way to test themselves. "It's about me working to improve myself," said Sidharth Chand, who was knocked out of the 2009 spelling-bee finals on "apodeiterium." "I didn't get involved because I didn't find school challenging; it was an extra thing." Sidharth, who went to the 2008 spelling bee finals, too, is taking six honors classes at Detroit Country Day School and, as "an extra thing," is on the school Quiz Bowl and Science Olympiad teams.

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Indeed, the kids I talked to load themselves with extra challenges. Eric Yang has been entering science, math, art, and impromptu-speaking competitions sponsored by the University of Texas in Austin since he was in 4th grade—and that's in addition to the piano competitions he likes. Caitlin Snaring was in a Bible memory program.

Tim Ruiter, a Centreville, Virginia, home schooler, competed in the finals of a national math and science bowl two weeks before the 2009 spelling-bee finals, where he tied for second place after flubbing "Maecenas."

The internal challenge isn't the only reason youngsters take on the incredible workload of a national bee, though. There's the honor of representing their state or hometown, some of them told me. There's the prospect of a trip to Washington, D.C., for the finals. There's the chance to spend time with youngsters who share their passion for word roots or river systems or algebra, many said. "I thought it would be fun to meet people who know geography like I did," said Eric Yang.

Many kids talked of the thrill, and benefits, of competition. "I'm competitive; I just like to win," said Kirsi Anselmi-Stith, a Rock Springs, Wyoming, 8th grader who will compete in the geography-bee finals this spring for the third time.

"It's good to have rivals—they push you to be your best," added Kennyi Aouad, who reached the 2007, 2008, and 2009 spelling-bee finals. Kennyi, the son of Ghanaian immigrants who live in Terra Haute, Indiana, apparently found the pushing helpful: He's now attending Choate Rosemary Hall in Connecticut on a full scholarship.

A bee is "something you really like doing, and it's showing everyone I'm the best at what I'm doing and it's the

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Webster's Third New International Dictionary, the spelling bee's definitive source, lists 476,000 words that might be called out. The geography bee directs contestants to a 500-page reference book.

competition. It was everything coming together," said Arjun Kandaswamy, the 2009 geography bee runner-up.

The most common refrain I heard, though, was much simpler than any of that. "It was pretty fun," said Kennyi Aouad.

"It was real great fun," added Sidharth Chand.

"It was very fun," said Aishwarya Pastapur, who competed in the 2009 spelling bee.

"It was always fun," agreed William Lee.

Fun?

Handling Defeat

That's hard for detractors to imagine. They fret about the stress heaped on the young shoulders of bee finalists and the agony of defeat on tender egos. Indeed, newspaper accounts of the 2009 spelling-bee finals suggest swirling drama, tension, and heartbreak. Sidharth Chand "buried his head in his hands for about a minute" after flubbing his word, the Associated Press reported. A contestant from Las Vegas "took a seat in her mother's lap and wiped a tear or two."

The auditorium was "tension-packed," the audience let out sighs of "nervous exhalation," young faces "drooped," and eliminated contestants mingled in the hallway, "stunned by defeat," the AP added. Talk about child abuse!

The popular image of bee contestants, moreover, is that they spend hours on grinding memorization and mind-numbing rote that robs them of time for creative thought and interdisciplinary learning. Webster's Third New International Dictionary,

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The kids I talked to saw their bees as a happy experience that broadened their knowledge rather than narrowed it.

the spelling bee's definitive source, lists 476,000 words that might be called out. The geography bee directs contestants to a 500-page reference book written by a past winner. Are these the kinds of thinkers we want in a 21st-century economy?

But the kids I talked to saw their bees as a happy experience that broadened their knowledge rather than narrowed it. Sidharth Chand may have buried his head in his hands as the AP reported, but "after that, I became involved in my schoolwork again and then it was preparation for high school. There was other work to do and that took precedence over moping around," he said.

Aishwarya Pastapur, who spelled the Dutch homonym "mynheer" for "menhir," admitted she "cried for a few days" after tying for second place. "I felt so horrible because I know both words. I still feel horrible sometimes," she said.

But that hasn't stopped Aishwarya from going out for the scholastic bowl at her Springfield, Illinois, high school or the International Brain Bee, which was founded by University of Maryland neuroscientist Norbert Myslinski. That contest, for high schoolers only, includes a neuroanatomy practical and a patient diagnosis that Dr. Myslinski pegs to the second year of medical school.

Most of the kids I talked with told me that they were proud that they had come so far, not dismayed that they had fallen just short. "That was the best I'd ever done. My family was proud of me, so there was no reason to be disappointed," said Kennyi Aouad.

Losing "made me want to win even more," said Caitlin Snaring, who said her defeat in the 2006 geography bee "got me fired up" to win the 2007 contest.

"It could have gone either way," said Arjun Kandaswarmy, who lost the 2009 geography bee to Eric Yang on a question that they both were asked about the Timiş River in Romania. "I studied hard, he studied hard. I did everything I could. It's just bad luck that I got that close and didn't make it," Arjun said with amazing equipoise.

Even in losing, some found themselves hometown celebrities, which certainly would have salved any sting of defeat. "Oceanside just embraced him totally," Shari Zagorski told me about her son, Zachary, and their Long Island, New York, community's reaction to his trip to the 2009 spelling-bee finals. Oceanside youngsters accounted for 6 of the 31 contestants at the Long Island regional contest this fall, she said. "Spelling suddenly became cool."

If youngsters are indeed "stunned by defeat," Mary Lee Elden said she doesn't see it. Elden started and still runs the geography bee for the National Geographic Society, which fetes the finalists with a tour-filled weekend in Washington before the televised face-off. Elden said she keeps cookies and juice backstage for eliminated contestants, and some years "we've had to send people back there to tell them to keep quiet, they're having so much fun."

Of course, kids who can't handle defeat don't generally get involved in such a high-pressure contest, or don't make it to the national finals in the first place.

Winning Ways

In the same self-selecting way, kids who don't find pleasure in the hours of study that generally are part of bee preparations don't get involved, either.

Several youngsters told me they have near-photographic memories that kept preparations for their bees to a mere hour or so a night. But most said they worked darn hard—and often quite creatively—to master their subjects. Tim Ruiter, the Virginia home schooler, took a class in Greek and Latin word roots to prepare for the 2009 spelling-bee finals. This year, with one year of eligibility left (the bee is open only to those in 8th grade or lower), he is studying German to better understand the spelling patterns in words with Germanic roots.

The best spellers aren't memorizers, "they're word sleuths," the spelling bee's Paige Kimble told me, spelling out "sleuth," just as you'd expect a spelling maven to do. The most successful contestants are kids who learn about language patterns and "have an incredible sense of how language is put together," she added.

Some kids assembled mountains of flashcards and binders of maps, lists, and fact sheets. Arjun Kandaswamy said he studied for the geography bee finals by "layering"—starting with "the basic stuff" like continents and countries, and gradually adding layers of geographic complexity. Remarkably, I thought, only one youngster said he got any help from a teacher: a Bridgewater (MA) State College professor offered William Lee several all-day tutorials before the geography bee.

I checked the spelling and geography bee web sites for the names of bee winners for the past 12 years (the period of the greatest surge in immigration in a century), and found that exactly half were youngsters whose names suggested they are Asian immigrants or the children of Asian immigrants, and that most of those were Indian or Indian American.

Daniel Willingham attributes that in part to the Asian esteem of knowledge and tradition of rote learning. A simpler answer is that the Indian American community has embraced spelling bees in a way no other group has. There are chat rooms and blogs where Indian Americans discuss spelling, bees are widely reported in Indian papers, and winners are heroes—even back in Bangalore and Delhi. Spelling is to Indians, it seems, as baseball is to Dominicans or football to Samoans: a way for strivers to shine.

Anyone uncomfortable with that only has to look at the names of the other winners: Williams, O'Dorney, Wojtanik, Haddad-Fonda. As American as apple pie.

The one common denominator among the kids I talked to is that they read—a lot. Newspapers, cookbooks, novels, travel magazines, nonfiction. "Pretty much everything," said Zachary Zagorski, whose current favorite is a series of novels about Artemis Fowl, a boy described as "the world's greatest criminal mastermind." Geography bee finalists said they also pore over maps, atlases, foreign money, and Google Earth—and have ever since a parent first traveled to Bern or a friend sent a postcard from Kashmir.

The few studies of Nobel laureates and other groundbreaking thinkers suggests that doggedness, even more than raw ability, separates them from other high-level experts in their field, says Daniel Willingham. Nobel winners "tend to be very good, but not amazing," he told me. "What differentiates them is not that the Nobel winners have more raw horsepower, but that they have a very high threshold for mental exhaustion. They keep working at problems when the rest of us have to get up and go watch 'So You Think You Can Dance' or something."

Maybe that tells us something about bee contestants, and maybe bee contestants tell us something about our kids and our schools. "Standards increase the effort; effort increases the knowledge level," says the University of Michigan's Frederick Morrison.

Okay, everyone: Where's the Limpopo, what's the currency of Nauru, and is it a-p-o-g-g-i-a-t-u-r-a or a-p-p-o-g-g-i-a-t-u-r-a?

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