

A black and white photograph of a hand slapping a red buzzer button. The hand is in the foreground, and the buzzer is in the lower left. The background is a light, abstract pattern of red lines and dots.

The Organized Chaos and Competitive Fury of Quiz Bowl

by Christina Henricks

In the classroom, all eyes are on the moderator. “First toss up,” she says. Then: “This tragic hero must react to the murder of his father. As he contemplates his situation, he delivers several soliloquies, driving his love, Ophelia, to madness. For ten points, name this Prince of Denmark.”

I slap my palm on the buzzer, and the moderator acknowledges me with a nod.

“Hamlet,” I answer.

“Correct for ten points,” she says. “Now your bonuses.”

“Okay guys,” I say, turning to my three teammates. “Now we can confer.”

“Toss up” and “bonuses” may seem like esoteric code words, but they are the jargon of Quiz Bowl. At my school, Quiz Bowl—or Academic Team—also achieved a more iconic name: Nerd Squad. To me, nerd is not a derogatory stereotype. It’s a moniker I embrace.

I began my foray into the organized chaos and competitive fury of Quiz Bowl in my freshman year of high school when my Latin teacher, noticing how happily I spouted random facts in class, recommended that I join the academic team.

The day of my first practice, I was the only freshman in a room full of juniors and seniors. It was fun, but also somewhat intimidating. The older kids had taken more—and more advanced—classes. But I quickly discovered that Quiz Bowl incorporated all I was learning in the classroom and reading in the newspaper, from current scandals in Washington to the Krebs cycle of biology. I watched, learned, and competed, and quickly fell in love with Nerd Squad.

A Team of Specialists

On Wednesdays and Fridays, we brought our lunches to an empty classroom for practice sessions. We got our questions from the National Academic Quiz Tournaments (NAQT) store, and sometimes from previous competitions. In addition to standard subjects such as biology, history, and literature, there were questions

Christina (second row, third from left) and the entire 2008–09 Ranney School Quiz Bowl team.



about art history, economics, music theory, astronomy, current events, and pop culture. The diversity of questions challenged me to recall facts and concepts from a lifetime of experiences.

A good team has members with varied interests. I favored literature, history, art, and current events, but I could be relied upon for the occasional chemistry or pop culture question (I earned points by knowing a few facts about Kanye West). One student on my team handled questions about theater, from technical staging to Broadway musicals. Another guy had an expansive knowledge of astronomy and astrophysics.

Competitions may be organized around a specific theme. Some of the more colorful competition themes have included Technophobia, Harry Potter, Star Trek: The Next Generation, Nintendo, Movies, Mythology, and Pop Culture.

Management and Staffing

At the start of my junior year, the faculty advisor named me team captain. In addition to running the practices, my duties included recruiting new members, ensuring that the buzzer system worked properly, locating and scheduling potential competitions, and nagging—er, reminding—people to attend practice and competitions.

By my senior year, there were only two participating seniors, but 20 freshmen ensured that the team would be staffed for the foreseeable future. When sports practices, theater rehearsals, Mock Trial meetings, and other activities didn't claim our members first, we were able to send one, two, or even three teams to competitions. Sending more than one team increased our chances of winning and offered more team members—especially underclassmen—the opportunity to gain competition experience.

Knowledge in Action

We usually attended several competitions each year in our home state of New Jersey and in areas as far north as Boston and as far south as Delaware. In some schools, teams traveled even farther, or hosted their own tournaments. We also participated in a twice-yearly online competition, working as a team to answer multiple choice questions. We then compared

our score to others in the state, across the nation, and even around the world.

A typical competition was a daylong event held at an area high school or college. We arrived at school as early as 5:30 a.m., boarded a bus, and passed around donuts as a faculty advisor quizzed us. At the competition, two teams of four competed to answer rounds of 20 toss-up questions.

Toss-up questions contain clues about a person, place, concept, mathematical answer, work of art, or other topic. If a team answers the toss-up correctly, it earns bonus questions. In NAQT format, the bonus topic is unrelated to the toss-up topic. For “bonuses,” team members are permitted to confer amongst themselves. Once the bonus set is finished, the next toss-up is read and the cycle begins again. If no one answers a toss-up correctly, a new toss-up is read.

Rounds of play last five to eight games, with a break for lunch and, occasionally, a break in the schedule that provides valuable rest time. If we were lucky, we qualified to compete in one or more playoff rounds before heading back to school.

The Gifts of the Nerd Squad

For someone like me who had self-identified as shy and uncomfortable with public speaking, Quiz Bowl has been a lesson in confidence building. Moments in which I challenged myself, whether I succeeded or failed, proved invaluable. I savored the feeling of correctly answering an obscure question, or a question I wasn't too sure of. And bumping along on the bus at 6:00 on a Saturday morning, sharing donuts and sleepily answering practice questions, there was a wonderful sense of camaraderie and shared enthusiasm for the pursuit of Quiz Bowl. **i**



Christina Henricks graduated from Ranney School in Tinton Falls, NJ, and is a freshman at Princeton University, where she is involved with *The Daily Princetonian* and participates in College Bowl. In her spare time, Christina plays the flute, sings, and participates in numerous community service projects.

Want to join or start a Quiz Bowl team in your school or community? Ask a school administrator or teacher if a Quiz Bowl team exists in your school. If it doesn't, find interested students and form a new group. Organizations such as NAQT (naqt.com) have information about starting a team, ordering practice questions, and participating in tournaments. For an online competition, check out the Knowledge Master Open at greatauk.com.