



academic bowl celebrates 10th anniversary

A HIT WITH TEENS AND TEACHERS

By Debra Lawson

Consider the following questions:

What is the West African country that elected Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf as its first female president in November 2005?

In Dante Alighieri's three-part epic, The Divine Comedy, the poet Virgil takes Dante on a tour, starting in Hell and ending in Paradise. Where do they visit in between?

Do you know the answers? If you were involved in the Gallaudet University High School Academic Bowl competition, questions like these might be familiar.

Now celebrating its tenth year, the National Academic Bowl has grown from its inception with 12 teams in 1997 to 80 teams in 2006, with more teams on the waiting list every year. Teams are accepted into each of five different regions of the U.S. on a first-come first-served basis.

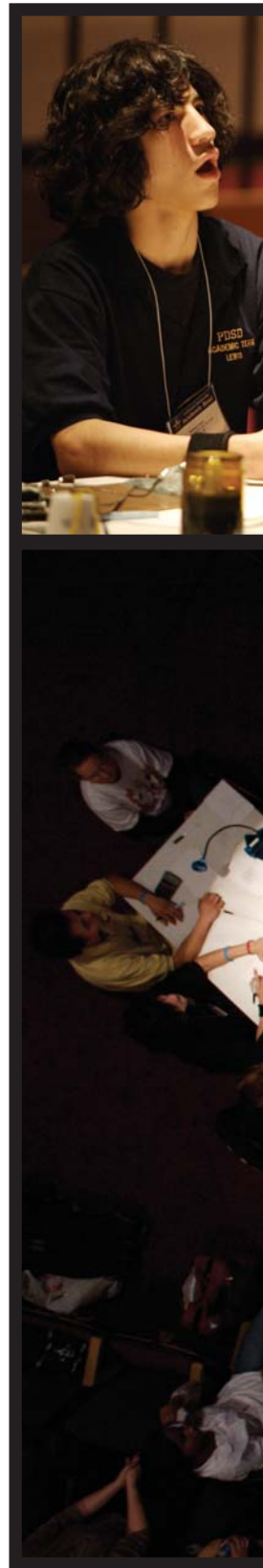
In 2002, after five years with only five regional championship teams vying for the national championship, both the first and second place winners from each region were invited to the national competition. That same year, each of the five regions was expanded from 12 teams to a maximum of 16 teams.

Photography by Hui Zhang

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obtained her B.A. in education at the University of Nebraska at Lincoln and was an elementary and high school teacher for six years. She received her M.A. in counseling from Gallaudet University and has worked at the University since graduating in 1984. Lawson worked as an academic advisor and director of Academic Advising for 12 years and has been the director of Outreach Programs and Publications for 10 years. She has served on the Academic Bowl Executive Committee for 10 years and became the director of the National Academic Bowl in 2001.

Right: Feelings are strong and discussion is intense at the regional competitions where students vie for the chance to come to the National Academic Bowl at Gallaudet University.





Three Rounds Lead to Regional Face-Off

During the competition, teams of players vie for three rounds, answering questions on current events, deaf studies, the arts, geography, history and government, language and literature, mathematics, science and technology, popular culture, sports, and leisure. The competition takes place over two days, with each pool of eight teams playing simultaneously and using the same questions.

Round One consists of 15 toss-up and 15 bonus questions. During toss-up questions, players buzz in for the right to answer questions. No discussion is allowed. If the player's answer is correct, team members receive a bonus question that they may discuss before answering.

In Round Two, one individual player from each team answers a question displayed on the screen at the same time. After answers are shown, the next question is displayed for the next two individual players. This continues until all four players on each team have had a chance to answer four different questions.

The Final Round consists of one theme from any of the nine categories or a potpourri of questions from all categories. The four players on each team work together to answer 10 questions in this round.

Next, the first and second place teams in each pool move on to the cross-pool playoff matches which determine the top two teams in each region. These first and second place teams from each region receive an all-expenses-paid trip to Gallaudet University in Washington, D.C.

Rules and Format Expanded and Refined

After 10 years of tweaking, modifying, and fine-tuning, the Academic Bowl rules and format have undergone significant transformation. The *Rules and Guidelines* booklet, a mere two pages in 1997, is now more than 30 pages of detailed information on every aspect of the competition.

Players previously used and reused overhead transparencies to display their answers. Now they write on plain paper and project their answers with state-of-the-art "Elmo" projectors. Judges have disk-based versions of the *Encyclopedia Britannica* and the *Merriam-Webster Unabridged Dictionary* at their fingertips.

The competitions are coordinated by Gallaudet University Regional Center staff and the Academic Bowl Executive Committee based at Gallaudet.

The Academic Bowl has its own server with a question-and-answer database. The tedious task of assigning teams to pools and generating competition schedules, previously done by hand, is now done using a Microsoft Excel™ template.

As the competition has become more sophisticated, so have

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the teams and coaches. Some schools offer an Academic Bowl preparatory course either as extra credit or as an after-school activity. Other schools set up practices with rival schools in their area or compete against local hearing teams. In addition, some administrators have begun recognizing the Academic Bowl team as part of their school's awards ceremonies. There is even a spin-off of the competition developed by the Laurent Clerc National Deaf Education Center's Kendall Demonstration Elementary School called the Pee Wee Academic Bowl, which focuses on the curriculum learned by elementary school students throughout the year.

Impact on Schools, Teachers, and Students

The impact of this intellectual contest is widespread. At least one teenage player's allowance now includes money for newspaper subscriptions so she can keep up with current events. After surviving a final round on a physics-based theme, another player said he would commit his full attention to his physics teacher to better prepare for next year's competition.

Not only students are catching the Academic Bowl bug. One mathematics teacher uses the Academic Bowl as a method of focusing students' attention in class. When he tells his students a topic might be an Academic Bowl question, they immediately perk up.

Increased interest in academics is not the only boon of this event. Coaches note their Academic Bowl players show increased confidence in social settings, an expansion of language skills, and a mutual respect for varying deaf and hard of hearing educational philosophies. Because the actual question-and-answer portion of the competition is visual, deaf and hard of hearing students with various communication styles participate as equals.

The Gallaudet University Academic Bowl competition is the only nationwide competition of its kind and it has attracted corporate attention. The J. Willard and Alice S. Marriott Foundation has supported the Academic Bowl during its entire 10 years. Along with the Marriott Foundation, this year's major sponsors include Sorenson Communications and Verizon.

Putting on this grand affair in each region would be impossible without the multitude of host school staff and local Gallaudet University alumni who serve as volunteers. Seventy-five to 100 volunteers keep the competition running for 17 hours of actual matches.

(Still curious about the answers to the opening questions? If you answered "Liberia" and "Purgatory," you may be on your way to Academic Bowl stardom!)