



amazing eats and
lots of gippers
a coach
reflects
ON HER TEAM'S EXPERIENCE

By Kitty Love

Are we a real team? Am I a real coach? Would we ever say anything like, "Let's do it for the Gipper!"? Yes. Yes. And you bet!

I had almost no experience in team competition and I had never been a coach until I started working with the students who formed our academic team. Six years later, a few students call me *Coach* and our team's accomplishments are recognized at our school's awards banquet in the spring with all the other teams. I take pleasure in working with a team of young people that I admire and respect, as well as despair of and "bawl out," at least once a week.

My coaching career began in 2000, when I attended my first regional competition in Cave Spring, Georgia, as a new coach of the Mississippi School for the Deaf (MSD) academic team. I had no clue what to expect. For a person who had never attended a tournament of any kind, the drawing for positions, playoff vocabulary, and talk about "bys" was over my head. The other coach, Lynne Cox, had to explain everything to me. I knew how smart our students were, and I naturally assumed we'd win. After all, smart kids equal a winning team, right? Not right. Or at least not always right. Nerves, experience, and health—everything affects team performance. Every coach knows that on any given day, any team can be beaten. The flip side of that coin is that on any given day, any team can win.

From that time on, I was hooked. I learned what other coaches know. Coaches share time and goals with the team. Special relationships are built between the members of the team and the coach. The pressure of performing during competitions joins the team and the coaches in a special way.

Our practice time varies from two to eight hours per week. We start the school year with after-school practice twice a week for two hours. In January, we increase that time to two hours after school every day, Monday through

Photo courtesy of Kitty Love

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Thursday. We talk strategy. We evaluate performance. We set goals. Just like a basketball team or a football team, we prepare for competition.

During competition time, coaches and students are together outside the classroom for three to five days. We travel together, eat together, and work together. We win and lose together. High points and low points are a shared experience. All the togetherness of travel and practice, plus the emotional experience of competing, builds relationships with students that just don't happen in the regular classroom.

If practice is the drudgery part of the team experience, travel is the fun part.

Our school has been very supportive in giving the team the time and the funds to include some sightseeing. During our travels, we have seen Stone Mountain; CNN headquarters; Centennial Park in Atlanta; the caves in Childersburg, Alabama; the BMW plant in South Carolina; and the Martin Luther King Museum and the Jimmy Carter Presidential Museum in Atlanta. This year we visited the Georgia O'Keeffe exhibit at the Mississippi Museum of Art on the Sunday after our competition. We have been fortunate in being able to make one-day trips to the Louisiana School for the Deaf for practice meets.

Travel is also when you really get to

Above: The 2006 team placed fourth in the regional tournament—"the best performance ever," notes coach and author Kitty Love. First row, left to right: Sarah Soard, junior; Brandi Callahan, junior; Carmen Campbell, junior. Second row, left to right: Geoffrey Boyd, junior; Kitty Love, coach; Wayman Chow, senior.

know each other's personalities. I now know that sometimes the tiniest girls can eat the most amazing amounts of food, and that the guys can sit down at the Waffle House, eat two full breakfasts, and still go to the hospitality room a few moments later and look



Left: Outside of the competition, Academic Bowl participants travel, eat, and “learn who wakes up moody and who wakes up sunny.”
Photo by Hui Zhang.

around for something to eat. Every time the bus stops, some students get off and go buy something to eat and drink. You learn who wakes up moody and who wakes up sunny. You learn who sulks over a loss and who cries. You learn who does well in the first round and not so well in the third. At the same time, of course, the students learn about the coach, too.

For years, the students who played sports were given awards and lauded. They had many opportunities to show their abilities outside their schools. Good students sometimes got awards, too, but the rewards were less dramatic, usually a piece of paper and a handshake. Until we began going to the Gallaudet Regional Academic Bowl, academically successful students didn't get a chance to compete with students outside the school and they were not particularly recognized within the school system. Being a member of the academic team gives them membership in an elite and select team, “the best of the best,” academically speaking.

These are the students at the top end of the academic bell curve. They get good grades. They do not cause problems in the classroom. Sometimes the other students call them nerds. Becoming members of a competing team gives students a chance to travel

outside their normal boundaries, to test themselves against other students, to compare their abilities with those of their peers, and to meet other students who share their skills. It gives cachet to being a good student. It also gives these students the confidence they need to embrace new experiences.

I admire the students I coach. You have to admire and respect students who give that much time and energy to a voluntary activity. They use their free time to prepare for one competition per year. If they are unable to place first or second at the regional competition, then they are finished until the next year. So far, we have not succeeded in going to the national competition. Every year, however, the students re-affirm their commitment to that goal.

In 2005, we returned from the regional competition, analyzed our performance, set new goals, and went back to work. We continued to practice until the end of the school year. In doing this, the students learned to set goals, evaluate performance, and persevere through loss and setbacks. They are winners and the benefits from this experience will serve them throughout their lives.

These benefits include: a sense of belonging for students who are often marginalized by their peers, greater self-

respect, improved goal setting and teamwork, and a chance to meet other students. I think that practicing and competing for the Academic Bowl can relieve some of the anxiety involved with high stakes testing. Preparation for the competition results in an increase in the students' knowledge.

This year we began practicing in August. Whether or not we succeed in the regional competition and go to the National Academic Bowl, we will attend our school's awards banquet in the spring. I will hand out trophies and tell stories about this year's team. A four-year veteran of the team will retire, and I will probably cry as I give Wayman Chow a special award for his years of competition.

But at our school, the role of “the Gipper” is a shared honor. In addition to Chow, there is Grady Gilkey, our assistant coach from 2000 until he went to the Illinois School for the Deaf last year, and Drew Cook, our three-year Academic Bowl veteran, who graduated valedictorian last year.

This year, like every year, we want to do well enough in the regional competition to go to Gallaudet University for the National Academic Bowl. If the national competition doesn't happen for us, then we will do our best to improve our performance from the previous years.

The next activity for the Academic Bowl team is to participate in the Statewide Stock Market Simulation sponsored by the Mississippi Council on Economic Education. This will be MSD's first time to compete, and there will be four teams from MSD under my supervision. Whatever happens, we will do it for ourselves and we will do it for the Gippers—all of them!