I began watching the Scripps National Spelling Bee when I was very young. I was amazed by how the kids were able to spell such obscure words, which I used to write down in a notebook. After watching the spelling bee in 2007, I decided that I wanted to be on that same stage.

Around that time, my second grade teacher held a spelling bee for my class. When I won, I started to believe that I might have ability in spelling. I competed in a few spelling bees after that, including one conducted at a local test prep center and another at a temple in my neighborhood. I prepared by studying word lists from the vocabulary books in my classroom, and this helped me to advance to higher rounds.

I was convinced that I was on my way to becoming a great speller. But when I competed in the regional level of the South Asian Spelling Bee (for students of South Asian descent) in the summer of 2008, I was eliminated almost instantly after misspelling the word “repentant.” At first I was discouraged. Then, I decided to study much more rigorously. I decided to take on the dictionary.

According to the Dictionary
The official source for the Scripps National Spelling Bee is *Merriam-Webster’s Third New International Dictionary*, a humongous book with over 2,500 pages. The size of this book initially frightened me, but with the help of my parents, I
did a selective study of the dictionary over the course of a year. I highlighted some words and noted them in a separate notebook, focusing on spellings and definitions and not as much on etymology or word origins. When I competed again in the South Asian Spelling Bee the following summer, my placement improved by leaps and bounds: I placed third at the regional level, which qualified me to compete at the national level, where I placed second!

After this, my parents decided that it would be good for me to compete in the National Spelling Bee. They convinced my elementary school to enroll, and in November of 2009, when I was in fifth grade, my school held its spelling bee. I won and moved on to the New York City bee, which was sponsored by the New York Daily News. I faced some tough competition, but I was somehow able to win as well. I was thrilled at being the New York City spelling bee champion—and to be able to compete in the 2010 Scripps National Spelling Bee in Washington, DC.

The competition started with a written test and two oral rounds, and the combined score determined if a speller progressed to the next level. I was excited to meet Dr. Bailly, the official pronouncer of the Bee, for the first time. When I found out that I had made it to the semfinals, I was overjoyed excited to meet Dr. Bailly, the official pronouncer of the Bee, for the first time. When I found out that I had made it to the semfinals, I was overjoyed excited to meet Dr. Bailly, the official pronouncer of the Bee, for the first time.

Eventually, I made it to the semfinals. My goal in 2011 was simply to improve upon my previous performance, so I was overjoyed when I correctly spelled “gutta” in the sixth round. In the seventh round, I received “epigonia,” a word I knew. I made it to the finals and eventually tied for third after being eliminated in the 17th round on “jugendstil.”

After this, my parents thought I should move on to different things, as they were very happy with my third-place finish. However, having come so close to victory, I did not want to give up. I was determined to study harder than ever to realize my dreams.

The following year, I prepared even more intensely and studied more words, focusing on spelling patterns of words from different languages including German, Italian, and Greek. I was excited to make it again to the finals at the National Spelling Bee, but when I finished in third place again, I was devastated not to have improved on my previous placement.

Fortunately, my parents, teachers, and classmates, were very supportive, and they encouraged me to try again.

Try, Try Again

Frustrated at having missed the finals by one word, I decided that I wanted to return and improve my placement the next year. I studied many more words—at least 20,000 more words than I studied earlier—covering a broad range from different languages, and made it back to the National Spelling Bee for another chance to compete.

At the beginning of the contest, I took the written test, which consisted of 25 words. It greatly increased my confidence when I learned that I had obtained one of five perfect scores on the test.

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In the Zone

In April 2013, spellers were informed of the new vocabulary component added to the competition: Spellers would have to answer an equal number of questions on vocabulary and spelling in the preliminary written test and in the newly introduced semfinals test. Performance on the written tests as well as in the oral spelling rounds determined whether a speller would progress to higher rounds. This added some complexity to my preparation, and I had to focus on the meanings of words more than I did before.

In the written test that also included the vocabulary questions, I obtained a perfect score. Eventually, I made it to the semfinals. I knew all the words I received and was able to advance to the finals. This time, my perspective was different. Realizing that making it to the finals was a great accomplishment in itself, I felt free from any pressure and anxiety. I was “in the zone,” as many sports announcers say.

In a few hours, it was time for the finals. My recent epiphany made it much easier for me to focus on the words and not worry about what would happen if I spelled my given word wrong. For the first two rounds, I received words I knew: “glossophagine” and “trichocercous.”

When I received the word “galere,” the correct spelling instantly came to my mind. But it occurred to me that “galaire” could be a possible alternative, and I debated over which spelling would be correct. I settled on “galere” based on the word’s etymology (French, from Old Catalan), which turned out to be correct. After this, I received words I had studied, even as the rounds went on and the words became harder. I received “dehnstufe” and “crapaud,” and I was fortunate to have studied them.

Eventually, the field was narrowed to three contestants: Sriram Hathwar, of New York; Pranav Sivakumar, of Illinois; and me. Sriram was tripped up by the schwa in “ptyalgogae.” Pranav and I both spelled our words correctly in the following round. In the 15th round, Pranav was eliminated on “cyanophycean,” which he misspelled as “cyanophycein.” I correctly spelled “tokonoma” to advance to the next round.

When Dr. Bailly pronounced my next word, I realized that my long journey had come to its desired destination, and “knaidel” instantly became my favorite dish.

Arvind Mahankali is a freshman at Stuyvesant High School. He loves math and science and hopes to one day pursue a career in math and physics. A speaker of Telugu and Spanish, Arvind enjoys tennis, basketball, and drama.

Read more about Arvind’s Spelling Bee experience at https://cogito.cty.jhu.edu/?p=39175.