

Exhilarating, Educational...

ENVIROTHON!

by Rachel Hughes

THWACK! A stack of papers the size of my backpack landed on the desk in front of me. My eyes grew wide as I looked up at Mr. Samilenko, but he had already moved on to the next student. I left my first Envirothon meeting freshman year with pages upon pages describing the ins and outs of aquatic ecology, and also a bit of a knot in my stomach. I'd always thought of myself as an English lit girl, but I'd decided to join my school's Envirothon team because I loved Mr. Samilenko: His intro to environmental science course was fascinating! As I trudged out to my mom's car, though, I began to second-guess my choice.

If I could go back to that moment now, I have no doubt what I would say to myself: "Hang in there, Rachel—you are in for one exhilarating, exhausting, rollercoaster, won't-want-to-leave, four-year ride!"

Backswimmers and Boatmen

Envirothon teams have five members, each specializing in a specific category: wildlife, forestry, aquatics, soils, or a current issue that changes annually. My school, Penncrest, has two faculty advisors, Mr. Samilenko and Mrs. Kuntz, and two teams, the freshman/sophomore (Red) team, which competes only at the county level; and the junior/senior (Gold) team, which competes at the county and—hopefully—state and national levels.

As the Red team's aquatics specialist, I was responsible for anything that lived in, polluted, or had to do with water. Through my freshman and sophomore years, I worked hard to be able to tell the difference between backswimmers and water boatmen and to list 10 reasons why we should stop draining our wetlands. Both years, our Red team came in second to our Gold team at counties, and the Gold team went on to win at states; in 2015, they placed second at nationals.

As juniors, my classmate Dennis Harrsch and I moved up from the Red team, joining three seniors to comprise the Gold team. We worked harder than ever, studying and doing practice tests and ultimately crushing all five subject tests at the county competition. States added an extra element: A week before the competition, we received a prompt for a 10-minute oral presentation. This would be followed by a day of testing in each subject area. Once again, Penncrest triumphed at states.

The weeklong national competition was hosted by Trent University in Ontario. On testing day, we felt good, whipping up a 20-minute presentation for a panel of five judges on a plan to rid a local lake of invasive silver carp. As one of the top three teams, we presented again, this time before seven judges. We finished four points behind the first-place team—runners-up again. Proud of our accomplishments, yet not satisfied with the result, we headed home.

Surprise, Surprise

The following year, after winning counties, we trained hard for states. On testing day, however, we faced a couple of surprises, including tough bird calls and tree identifications and multi-layered questions about aquatic species in their habitats. After missing several questions, we felt there was no way we'd win, but as they counted down the top 10 teams, we were still seated in the audience. The announcer paused for a painful couple of seconds before announcing second place. I barely heard anything after they didn't call our name: We had won! We were going to nationals!

The battle wasn't over, though. We still had to prepare for nationals. Then, in June, I fell in the bathroom and hit my head on the tile floor. I found myself bedridden with whiplash and a mild concussion. Initially, I couldn't read for more than five minutes without a headache. Terrified I wouldn't be able to study for nationals, I asked my parents to read my study materials aloud to me. My dad recorded an entire report on stormwater's impact on people and ecosystems, and I was able to read a little more each day. After 10 days, I was back to studying several hours a day.

Go Time

In July, we worked through practice tests and presentation prompts, eventually spending upwards of seven hours a day at school. Finally, with Mr. Sam and Mrs. Kuntz, we headed to St. Mary's College in Maryland, the site of this year's competition.

Teams gathered at a local farm that was divided into five "stations," each featuring a written exam focusing on a specific category. We also had to demonstrate various skills to show our competence in the field. While Thy-Lan worked through forestry questions, Cole, Abby, and I measured a tree using a clinometer, a device that uses basic trigonometry to estimate height. At the soils station, Den-



The 2017 Envirothon was held in Maryland, where terrapins reign supreme.

nis had to determine the type and health of soils. Some tests went more smoothly than others, but overall, we left that day feeling pretty good.

Two days later, we received our prompt for the following day's presentation: We were tasked with developing sustainable, profitable enhancements for a local farm, such as an apple orchard or education center. We spent hours composing and divvying up our 20-minute presentation, which featured six posters illustrating our plan to mitigate excess runoff and erosion. That evening, we rehearsed our parts.

The next morning, the presentation went smoothly. After several long hours of waiting, all 62 teams gathered in the auditorium to hear the top three teams announced. They called two team numbers, neither of which was ours. With only one team left to be called, we sat gripping each other's hands. Then they called our number! We shot out of our seats, and after a quick hug for Mrs. Kuntz and

a pat on the back from Mr. Sam, we were off to the holding room before returning to the stage for our final presentation—the one that would determine the national winner.

I was responsible for the conclusion, which normally took 45 seconds, but our presentation was running long. Dennis was still talking when the judges gave the one-minute warning! He threw in a concluding sentence, and I jumped up, speaking quickly and skipping my usual pauses. "Thank you," I said definitively. And just like that, we were done. All that was left to do now was wait.

Motivated for a Healthier Future

I remember the hope glittering in the eyes of my teammates as we waited for the announcer to call second place; remembered the feeling the year before when we sat in the same positions with the same hopes. And then we were on stage, holding the first-place plaque and smiling at the cameras. All those late nights and summer hours spent studying had finally paid off!

Most people would consider it a burden to work so hard into the summer, but Envirothon was not a chore for us. We came to school each day with not just a motivation to win, but also a strong drive to spread the word about why environmental science is important. Envirothon taught us about the changes that need to be made in our society and instilled in us the skills and confidence we need to make them. ■



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Learn more about Envirothon: envirothon.org