

Around the World National Geograph

When I was 18 months old, my parents bought me a puzzle of the United States. Through it, I not only learned my states and capitals, but also developed a great interest in geography. In fifth grade, I put my geography knowledge to the test when I participated in the National Geographic Bee at school.

That winter, in my school cafeteria, 19 other fourth- and fifth-graders and I answered questions on the culture, topographical features, economics, and current events of various countries. While it wasn't terribly challenging, participating in the competition reinforced my growing interest in geography. When I won, I was elated—and determined to participate in the state GeoBee.

A Motivating Experience

To qualify for the state bee, I took a 70-question test and placed within the top 100 winners in the state. In April, I traveled to Shenandoah University to compete in the 2011 Virginia State Geographic Bee.

The state competition was much more challenging than the school competition had been. It included such questions as “What East African country on the Equator is known for its exports of

flour and coffee?” I answered “Somalia,” but the correct answer was Kenya, and I missed moving on to the final round by two points. But it was only my first year, and the experience motivated me to go back and try to win the next year's competition.

In sixth grade, I decided to put in more effort to prepare. I read a plethora of geography books and studied three to four hours a week. After qualifying for the state contest, I felt confident—perhaps a bit too confident, because I answered only seven out of eight questions correctly, again missing out on the final round. This time I was extremely disappointed.

Keeping My Confidence in Check

Over the summer, I studied geography every day. I also participated in a geography competition I had learned about on the Internet, the 2012 North South Foundation National Finals for geography. Although I placed sixth, the competition, which had a rigor comparable to the National Geographic Bee, helped me expand my knowledge and identify my weaknesses.

After winning the school bee in seventh grade, I studied harder than ever. I pored over atlases, books, and my favorite source, Wikipedia. I also watched CNN to keep up with current events. As the state competition approached, I was ready. I earned a perfect score in the preliminary rounds, moving on to the tiebreakers that would determine whether I made it to the final (top 10) round. In this round, contestants are asked the same question at the same time and write their responses down. When asked, “Which island, the largest in the Arctic Archipelago, has its largest city at Iqaluit?” I and seven others correctly answered “Nunavut” to advance to the final round.

In the end, it came down to another contestant and me. Feeling the pressure mounting, I worked to remain calm and focused. I got off to an early lead by answering the first question correctly, whereas my competitor got it wrong. We both got the next question correct, making it 2-1. If I got the next ques-



with the ic Bee

by Akhil Rekulapelli

MARK THIES/NATIONAL GEOGRAPHIC



Akhil Rekulapelli celebrates his victory with journalist and Bee moderator Soledad O'Brien and National Geographic President and CEO Gary E. Knell.

tion right, I would be crowned champion. I did not, but neither did my competitor, and I became the 2014 Virginia State Geographic Bee Champion. I felt an enormous sense of accomplishment.

A Starstruck Moment

In late May, I traveled to Washington, DC, for the national competition. My goal was to make it at least to the top 10 round so I could meet the host, Alex Trebek. While the questions in the preliminary rounds were tough, I managed to correctly answer eight out of nine. Still, it wasn't enough to automatically qualify for the final round: one student got a perfect score, so I would compete against 14 other students for nine spots in a tiebreaker round. I answered correctly and made it to the final round of the National Geographic Bee. I also got to meet Alex Trebek and have a starstruck moment. I had been watching him on *Jeopardy!* since first or second grade.

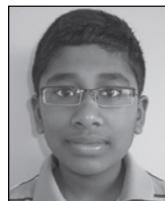
The questions in the final round seemed easier than those in the preliminaries, and I got off to a good start. Some had interesting visuals, including one that depicted a penguin from South Africa. (I had to identify the kind of penguin and also the bay where it lives.) While I ended up placing fourth, I was happy with my performance: I had hoped to make the top 10, but I surprised myself by earning fourth place.

Eyes on the Prize

That summer, I considered not participating in the geography bee in eighth grade. I was exhausted, and I wanted to have some free time. By winter, however, I had decided otherwise: this would be my last chance, and I wanted no regrets. I resumed studying during winter break and, after winning both the school and the state bee, kept my eye on the prize: the title of 2014 National Geographic Bee champion.

This time, the host was Soledad O'Brien. The final rounds were shorter and the questions more challenging. As before, I correctly answered eight of nine questions in the preliminary rounds, but nine students got perfect scores—leaving only one spot up for grabs. I had to face seven other contestants for the spot, and after a hard fight, made it to the top 10 and ultimately to the final question: “The discovery of a major shale oil deposit in the Vaca Muerta formation in 2010 has led to an expansion of oil drilling in the Neuquén province in what country?” I answered Argentina to become the 2014 National Geographic Bee Champion, winning a \$50,000 college scholarship and a trip to the Galápagos Islands.

After four years, winning the nationals felt like winning Olympic gold. I proved to myself that through focus, perseverance, and hard work, I can achieve my dreams. Participating in the geography bee also helped me to know more of the world. We are becoming an increasingly global society, and understanding geography allows us to better understand events such as the recent Ebola outbreak in West Africa and the strife in the Middle East. It allows us to strengthen our global citizenship—something we can all benefit from. ■



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Learn more about the National Geographic Bee at www.nationalgeographic.com/geobee.