



THE HISTORY OF ACADEMIC COMPETITIONS IN INDIANA

By Rick Reed

State academic competitions in Indiana began when H. Dean Evans, then Indiana's Superintendent of Public Instruction, organized the first Spell Bowl. That competition had grown from the desire to create a contest in which teams of spellers vied to determine not an individual winner but a winning school. By relieving pressure on a single speller and creating a goal for a ten-member squad, this spelling competition was a major departure from the long-standing model of the American spelling bee. Continuing high levels of involvement at elementary, junior, and senior levels testify to its success.

Around 1985, Superintendent Evans called together a committee of some thirty, forty, or so teachers and administrators to create academic contests in the wake of the creation of the Spell Bowl with the intention that they would take their place alongside basketball, football, and the other sports in which Indiana's high schools take competitive pride. After two or three preliminary meetings where participants developed a philosophy of such contests that established the need to place as a high value on the knowledge and skills students gained in the classroom as they developed on the court and field, the chair challenged any members with a plan for a competition to organize their ideas and develop a model to share at the next meeting. Some favored a general knowledge buzzer-lockout competition similar to a television program from the 1960s called *The GE College Bowl* while others called for a contest more along the lines of the US Academic Decathlon.

Two of the committee members, Rick Reed and Steve Comiskey, developed a plan of the latter type. They drew up a five-part competition played by three-member squads working together to answer twenty multiple-choice questions developed from five subject matter outlines and read by an emcee. The model, put together with little research because it was meant only as a model, not an actual study guide as we know them today, was selected by the committee. In their discussions, they added what was then called the "all-around" but is now the "interdisciplinary round," set the answering time at twenty-seconds, and called for a general knowledge pilot to be prepared. Richmond High School agreed to host the event.

Mr. Reed and Mr. Comiskey wrote all the questions for those pilot rounds, served as emcees, and even wrote three tie-breakers for the mathematics round on the spot. That final necessity eventually led to the organization of each round into twenty-five questions organized by increasing difficulty, especially among the last five questions. The competing schools took home ribbons and trophies instead of medals and plaques, but the idea of multiple school winners by class instead of one overall winner triumphed.



The first statewide contest took as its theme “Romance and Revolution.” The somewhat hastily put together original model was used with virtually no review or amendment. Consequently, the English round required competitors to have read far more material than any later competition included. Questions ranged from those that would be familiar today to those that would stymie the most experienced players of Trivial Pursuit. As a result, that first competition led to a years-long series of meetings to revisit and refine the rules until participants arrived at the present format of today’s competition.

Before the first state competition, an organization called Indiana Academic Competitions for Excellence (IACE) was formed under the leadership of Mr. Paul Schuyler and under the auspices of the Indiana Association of School Principals. Soon afterward, an Academic Coaches Association (ACA) formed and in cooperation with IACE developed a training program for competition judges with a focus on developing clarifying rules and guidelines and – in the most difficult situations – favoring the competitor. Volunteers from within the ACA traveled throughout the state offering training sessions. In addition, the ACA cooperated with IASP to organize the annual coaches conference at which new coaches could get tips on competing, all coaches could receive direction from Super Bowl question writers, and other sessions of interest could be offered.

Within a year or two of the creation of the Super Bowl, Dr. Evans called for a short-lived competition based in part on Indiana’s Academic Super Bowl and in part on Kentucky’s general knowledge competition. The competition site alternated between Indianapolis and Louisville with a traveling trophy as the prize. Unfortunately, the hybrid competition gave our competitors south of the Ohio River a distinct advantage, and the inter-state competition eventually died.

However, on the way back to Indianapolis after conferring with counterparts in the Kentucky Department of Education regarding the first competition with that state, an idea emerged for recognizing the outstanding students among each year’s seniors enrolled in Indiana secondary schools. The initial program recognized the forty top students selected from candidates submitted by high schools who chose to participate. A panel of individuals representing the IASP, the Indiana Department of Education, the Indianapolis *Star*, and classroom teachers and school administrators pored over applications sorted first by a formula that took into consideration each student’s GPA and SAT or ACT score as well as honors and recognition earned, participation in extracurricular activities of all kinds, and community service and painstakingly determined the top forty students. Students also recognized influential teachers who, like the students, received a plaque at the annual banquet. When the Department of Education decided to terminate involvement in the program, Franklin College and Earlham College stepped in to lend support. Since that time, sponsorships have changed but still include a number of Indiana institutions of higher learning, including Purdue University, Indiana University, DePauw University, and Marian University as well as Inter-State Studios and Herff-Jones. In addition,



during the directorship of the late Kyle Harrop, a system of distributing winners according to set regions and by large/small school classification was instituted. At about the same time, the program extended to recognize 50 additional regional honorees distinct from the forty state winners.

In the meantime, IACE sanctioned Indiana's participation in the National Academic Decathlon in addition to the Spell Bowl and the Super Bowl. In steadily increasing numbers schools around the state fielded teams in all three competitions with the Spell Bowl usually leading the pack in total number of participating teams. Other competitions arose as well, including at the elementary level, M.A.T.H. Bowl and Science Bowl. As IACE was fully absorbed into the Student Programs side of the Indiana Association of School Principals, cheerleading competitions and leadership training programs developed. Presently, the Academic Decathlon has been discontinued while Future Problem Solving and a buzzer lockout Quiz Bowl competition are both being planned.

Today, academic competitions are set deeply in place. Almost every public high school in Indiana competes at regional competitions. Purdue University sponsors and hosts the state contests. Many former competitors now serve as coaches. The original goal of raising recognition and appreciation of academic excellence to the level enjoyed by high school sport in Indiana continues.