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To Bee or Not to Bee?

By: Mathias Severn

I first realized my talent when I was only eight years old. I was always a bookworm when I was younger. I would spend most of my time poring over books, reading and rereading novels that adults said I couldn't understand.

“You are too young...” they would say, but never in a hurtful way, always kindly trying to ‘help’ me. My parents never saw me as the prodigy that I was; I was always their beautiful, baby boy. They learned how wrong they were to not see the reason behind my seclusion when I found out what a spelling bee was. I was only eight, but I was able to impress my teachers enough with my knowledge that they let me enter the spelling bee a year before I should have. As a third grader against students two, three, and even four years older than me, I wiped the competition, finishing the last round with the word ‘vaccine.’ I don’t know why, but spelling came as easily to me as talking. Maybe it was from my incredible vocabulary that I attained from reading so many novels, or possibly I just got the luck of the draw and just had a natural ability.

When I ended up losing (because yes, I did lose *that* year), the blow crushed me. When I remember it, the memory is crystal clear, and my failure would be the fuel for my train of success later on. I made it all the way to regionals, passing the district and the county levels. The competition was held in Sacramento, and there were 116 different competitors, two per county. Coming from Eureka, California to

Sacramento was quite a shock for me. Sacramento had a population twenty times larger, and I had never been to a big city. I pulled up to the colossal auditorium. It was an architectural masterpiece that was made entirely of metal and tinted glass, and to me, it looked twice the size that it probably was. One of the doors was open to the back end of the stage. I don't remember the preparation very well; it all seemed to pass in a blur. The next thing I knew, my name was called and I was walking across the stage to my chair. I was a small kid, with scraggly blond hair and crooked glasses, and the audience looked like an army to me, ready to shoot me down with heckling at my first mistake. (They were surely all very kind people, but keep in mind I was only eight years of age, and that is what I saw.)

There had to be hundreds of people staring at me, but with the blinding light glaring into my face from above, all that I saw were silhouettes. There was a podium sitting on the platform, front and center, and I didn't see it as it actually was for a few seconds. It was up to my shoulders! The lines of chairs were in perfect, even rows, and there were a lot of them, too. There were 106 contestants, two from each county in California. So many competitors. The words would progressively get more difficult as the competition went on, but not difficult like your normal spelling bee. These words were words that most people had never heard. It started out easy for me; I got the word archetype. "Archetype." I squeaked. "A...R...C...H...E...T...Y...PE! Archetype." I sped up a little at the end. My heart was pounding and I was sweating waterfalls. The old, balding judge peered down his wire-rimmed glasses from the side of the stage at his rule book, then averted his gaze back to me and croaked out...

“**CORRECT**”. I stumbled back to my seat and slumped down in my chair. The rounds progressed, and the words got more difficult. I got the word camouflage, then isthmus, then kaleidoscope. The fifth time that I came up, I got the word reconnaissance. I started out strong with the first four letters, but this was a word I had seen very few times before. I made a simple mistake that would haunt me for years. I spelled reconnaissance with only one N. This was not the last time that I would hear the ding of the bell. The judge droned off in a monotone, “Incorrect. Thank you for participating in the Scripps Regional Spelling Bee.” I got 71st, that first year. Not even the top 50.

It took me three more years to reach the national spelling bee, and two years after that to get back to it. I heard that ding so many times that I grew to hate it. My grades, which used to be straight A's, dropped down to Bs and Cs. Studying consumed all of my time. I didn't just want to make it to nationals anymore, I wanted to win. I wanted to be the best speller in the United States. There were many obstacles along the way: people who doubted that I would have any success, people who tried to blackmail me with money, and people who called me a loser, a nerd, a failure. I persevered time after time again. I ignored the public.

There was a \$40,000 prize pool for the winner from Scripps, with an added \$2,500 from Merriam-Webster. Nowadays, all anyone thinks about is money. If someone is motivated towards something, then all the public wonders is how much money do they get for it? Money was never too much of a concern for me. My parents were not poor, and they were not spendy people either. No, I

wanted the glory of being able to know that I was the best at something. I yearned for that glory, was hungry for it.

When I was 14, I had been studying for six years... without success. I made it to the grand championships in DC for the third time of my life. The first time I got 63rd, the second I made it all the way to 18th. This was the second year in a row that I had made it this far, and I was prepared. By this time, I was accustomed to the brilliant, blaring, bright lights that shone down from the ceiling. I was accustomed to the crowd of hundreds. I was accustomed to the pressure and the nerves. I sat down in my seat, and waited... and waited... and waited. After an eternity of patience, the first round began. I got word after word, from *metastasize* to *weimaraner*. I made it to the final 10, then 5, then 3. The first person walked up to the podium.

“*Scherenschnitte*” The judge boomed out. I saw the contestant take a sharp intake of breath. I had no idea what the word was, and it seemed that neither did she. She got every single letter perfectly, up until the final ones.

“...I...T...E” She said with uncertainty, looking as if she would rather be anywhere else.

The ding of the bell must have been so painful, but she wasn’t out yet. If both me and the other contestant got our words incorrect, she would still be in. I was up.

“*Marocain*” This time I knew it for sure! I spelled the word perfectly, and only felt bad for a split second as I saw the first contestant let her breath out as she

realized she had lost, saw her lower lip tremble a little as she held back tears. The next contestant went up to the podium.

“Feuilleton” ...his demeanor went grim. “F...E...U...I...L...L...I...T...O...N.”

I only remember a few moments from the minutes that followed. The ding of the bell. The roar of the crowd. Then there was applause, the lights came on, the judge walked up to me with a trophy. “Congratulations!” the man said, his old, weather beaten hands held the trophy that was now mine. “You are the 2018 national spelling bee champion!” I couldn’t believe it. All of my hard work had actually payed off! I had done it! I had won! I could feel this ridiculous grin coming onto my face as the trophy was thrust into my hands. My parents came onto the stage and wrapped me in a bear hug that smothered me and completely embarrassed me.

That drive back was the best one of my life, and as I was in the car I realized how lucky I was to have had that opportunity. I had always loved writing, and the title of spelling bee champion would help me achieve my future as a writer. I got lucky for that competition; it was the situation that I had always dreamed of where I knew every single word that I got. One thing that I learned was that if I worked supremely hard for a long period of time, then I could achieve nearly anything that I wanted to. This was, and currently is, something that I will keep in mind for the rest of my life. That is how I became the best speller in the United States of America.