



Students head to national spelling bee

By Denise Smith Amos • damos@enquirer.com • May 24, 2010

Just because Matthew Luczaj is a quiet, shy eighth-grader doesn't mean he's a young man of few words.

Matthew knows hundreds of words, many of them large and unusual, but the 14-year-old Bridgetown Middle School student can spell and define them with ease.

Words like turruculate (having or resembling a turret or tower) and pangolin (a toothless mammal that eats ants and termites).

Matthew also loves languages. Although he has yet to reach high school, he has learned some Chinese, Spanish, Latin and German. He plans to add French next.

It's this love for words, in any language, that makes him one of the Cincinnati region's best young spellers.

Matthew and Szofia Komaromy-Hiller, an eighth-grader at St. Pius X School in Edgewood, will travel to Washington to compete in the annual Scripps National Spelling Bee, June 2-4.

Matthew is an advanced student who excels at a variety of activities. He plays several instruments - flute, harp, string bass and piano - and is learning to play the chanter (a part of bagpipes). He ran track and participates in Boy Scouts, Lego league and science clubs.

He and his twin, Alexander, also volunteer, sometimes in period costume, at Sharon Woods' Heritage Village Museum.

And he also reads voraciously, usually fiction.

Schoolmates said he once consumed a Harry Potter book in a day. He has a growing stack of National Geographic and science magazines.

But when it comes to spelling, he doesn't take a typical route to memorizing words.

"I read a lot," he said. "I don't read the dictionary and I don't have a (spelling) coach. I learn things better if I see them, rather than hear them."

To him, it's more important to learn how a new word is used than to learn its spelling or pronunciation.

Keeping with advice from a former teacher, Matthew often asks spelling bee judges for the definitions of words or to use them in a sentence. That kind of context helps him grasp a word's root and lets him use the word later.

"If I see it in context, I can remember it," he said.

Like the word pangolin, for instance. He lost a fifth-grade spelling bee because he spelled it incorrectly.

But Matthew was so intrigued by the word that he researched the termite eaters from Asia and South Africa and gave a presentation on them.

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"They're called walking artichokes because they have scales," he said.

His father, Eric Luczaj, said Matthew taught himself to read at age 3 by watching phonics videos.

When the tot ordered from a restaurant menu, the wait staff was surprised.

This will be Matthew's first time in the national bee, against 272 other spellers, including Szofia.

Like Matthew, the Northern Kentuckian is an academic award-winner, budding writer, multi-instrument musician and polyglot. She speaks Spanish and Hungarian.

Matthew says he knows the national bee will attract stiff competition. He's already a naturally hesitant speaker who chooses words carefully.

But he's brave enough to show what he knows on national TV.

"I just want to try as hard as I can," he said.

"You should always try, even if you don't get very far. ... There's still a lot of words I don't know. But I've been very lucky with words."



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The Enquirer/Malinda Hartong
Matthew Luczaj, 14, of Green Township, is going to Washington to compete in the Scripps National Spelling Bee.



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The Enquirer/Tom Miller
Szofia Komaromy-Hiller, an eighth-grader at St. Pius X School in Edgewood, sits with awards she has won. She became the Region 1 (Indiana/Kentucky) Champion of the Scripps Regional Spelling Bee after defeating 70 other participants.

About the bee

What: Scripps National Spelling Bee, June 2-4, the nation's largest and longest-running educational promotion, a nonprofit competition. The first Bee was in 1925.

Run by: E.W. Scripps Co. Local spelling bees are sponsored by media and other companies in the United States, American Samoa, Guam, Puerto Rico, U. S. Virgin Islands, and Department of Defense Schools in Europe; also, in the Bahamas, Canada, China, Ghana, Jamaica, New Zealand and South Korea.

How are spellers chosen? During fall and winter, schools conduct spelling bees. Their champs compete

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on local and regional bees. Winners go to the national bee.

Who qualifies? Children under age 16 who have not passed eighth grade.

Rules: In the first three rounds, students take a spelling test on computer and two oral tests on stage. Students receive points for certain words. The top 50 scorers compete in semifinal rounds, where spellers get two minutes and 30 seconds per word at the microphone. They can ask for a word's definition, use in a sentence, part of speech, language of origin, and alternate pronunciation. Spellers leave if they misspell a word. If at the beginning of a round only two or three spellers remain, the pronouncer moves to the 25-word Championship section of the word list. Anyone still standing at the end of that list is champion or co-champion of the Bee.

Prizes: The champion wins \$30,000 cash, a trophy, a \$2,500 savings bond, a reference library, a \$5,000 scholarship, and \$2,700 in reference work and software. All spellers in the preliminaries receive a commemorative watch and a cash prize of at least \$100.

Information: www.spellingbee.com

The Bee on TV

Preliminaries: Round one and two - a computer test and oral test - are not televised. Round three - on-stage spelling - will be shown at ESPN3.com, 1:15-5:15 p.m. June 3.

Semifinals: Live on ESPN, 10 a.m. to 1 p.m. June 4.

Championship Finals: Live on ABC, 8-10 p.m. June 4.

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