USA and Canada teams win nine medals at the 2015 International Linguistics Olympiad in Blagoevgrad, Bulgaria

Two USA teams and one Canada team, each consisting of four high school students, won eight individual medals and a team medal at the 13th International Linguistics Olympiad, held July 20-24 in Blagoevgrad, Bulgaria. The USA contestants also took five of the top ten places in the individual contest, including three gold medals. USA Red also finished in first place among 44 teams based on the combined score of its members in the individual contest.

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On July 18, eight USA students and four Canada students traveled to the American University in Blagoevgrad, Bulgaria, joining 40 other teams from 27 other countries to compete in the 13th International Linguistics Olympiad (IOL). The three North American teams, organized, selected, and coached by the North American Computational Linguistics Olympiad saw immense success.

The IOL, one of twelve international science olympiads, consists of two events. The first is the individual contest, a six hour exam with five problems, which this year focused on Kabardian, Wambaya, Somali Masafo, Nahuatl, and Arammba, as well as on Soundex, an algorithm for phonetic classification of names. The team contest is the second event of the IOL, in which team members collaborate to solve one particularly challenging problem. This year, teams were tasked with translating excerpts from a Northern Sotho dictionary. Problem solving at the IOL stresses the ability of contestants to decipher the mechanisms of languages by using logic and reasoning to explore a wide range of hypotheses.

Individual Round: Three US contestants, James Wedgwood of Washington, James Bloxham of Massachusetts, and Kevin Yang of Washington, won gold medals in the individual round, with James Wedgwood also earning the top individual score from among 165 contestants from 29 countries. Silver medals went to three US contestants, Kevin M Li of California, Conor Stuart-Roe of North Carolina, and Julian Gau of New Jersey. Nilai Sarda of Georgia and Emma McLean of Nova Scotia won bronze medals. Finally, Kevin Q Li of New Jersey, Ben Zhang of Ontario, and James Hyett of Ontario were awarded honorable mentions. James Bloxham and James Wedgwood received best solution awards for Problem 3 and Problem 5, respectively. Team USA Red's combined scores on the individual score were the highest of any team. The two US teams (Red and Blue) had a massive average score of 62 points, way above all other teams.

Team Round: Team USA Red finished second on the team problem, following Team UK West. Team Poland White and Team Netherlands tied for third place.

In addition to the competition, the IOL also provided contestants with a fantastic introduction to the culture of Bulgaria and the other countries represented at the olympiad. This year, students saw scenes ranging from performances of traditional Bulgarian dancing and singing to a tour of Rila Monastery, an Eastern Orthodox landmark established in 927. Kevin Yang of USA Red said, "The IOL was really fun because the problems were interesting and we got to meet lots of new people. Also we played cards a lot and stayed up late so that was pretty great." Jamie Bloxham added, "Once again, the IOL exceeded my expectations, and I had a truly fantastic time! The problems were great and meeting so many like-minded people was great, and I know I will miss my time in Bulgaria."

The three North American teams were selected through the North American Computational Linguistics Olympiad (NACLO). This annual competition, held since 2007, has two rounds, which are held at universities and high schools throughout the USA and Canada. This year over 1,700 students took the open round, a three-hour test. Approximately the top 10% of the students from the open round were invited to the next round, a more difficult, three-hour test. The joint US-Canadian practices, which were conducted via Skype and in person by the USA coaches Dragomir Radev, a professor at the University of Michigan, and Lori Levin, a professor at Carnegie Mellon University, and the Canadian coach Patrick Littel of University of British Columbia, as well as assistant coaches Tom McCoy of Yale University and Adam Hesterberg of

MIT. Professor James Pustejovsky of Brandeis University chaired the fundraising committee for the team. The teams' sponsors include the North American Chapter of the Association for Computational Linguistics (NAACL), the Linguistic Society of America (LSA), The US National Science Foundation (NSF), the Association for Computing Machinery Special Interest Group on Information Retrieval (SIGIR), The Linguistic Data Consortium (LDC), Brandeis University, Carnegie Mellon University, the University of Michigan, the University of Washington, Yahoo! Choosito!, and Yieldpoint, as well as individual donors and parents.

The next IOL will be held in Mysore, India, from July 25-29, 2016.

More Info
NACLO - http://www.nacloweb.org/ - contains practice problems, contest rules, and registration details for NACLO's competitions.
IOL - http://www.ioling.org/ - contains a record of all past IOL problems and results

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