Owen Gifford

4/30/23

National Japan Bowl

Wow, just wow. That’s all I can say about the experience. To be able to attend such an event, to compete with the future leaders of the Japan-America bond, it’s just spectacular. When I first started my Japanese learning I never thought I would be here. The National Japan Bowl has been an excellent way to learn and push me to grow and improve in Japanese. I look forward to and eagerly await the next year's National Japan Bowl where I hope to participate again and learn even more.

Where do I even begin when talking about the National Japan Bowl? The 4 days seemed to flash by as each day became more exciting than the last. It started when we first arrived, completely exhausted from our late-night flight. I remember sleeping in our Uber as we drove to the hotel. But as soon as I awoke I realized I was no longer in Portland. The sprawling hotel and beautiful plaza were some of the nicest I had ever seen (not to mention the amazing weather). This feeling was further exemplified when we were able to visit the University of Maryland campus which was a spectacular blend of old charm with new touches.

One of my favorite experiences of the whole trip was getting jolted awake in my hotel room by my new roommate Andrew. My Japan Bowl bubble had been very small prior to this event. I had only known a few teams from our regional competition. But this would soon change as I quickly got to interact with so many smart and unique people, all of whom also participated in the competition. Andrew and I talked for thirty minutes as we shared our Japan Bowl experiences. I got to learn how it was run in other states and the road he had to take to get here. We shared stories and different techniques to be successful. He talked about his future and how he was getting ready for college. I had truly forged a bond with someone who I would have never met without Japan Bowl. This trend continued throughout the competition as my path crossed with other people from around the country (and even Guam), sharing our stories.

The first round of competition hit us hard. We quickly realized why three heads are stronger than Monju. While my teammate and I were getting some of the questions correct, we were spread too thin to get the more challenging questions correct, something we will take into account when competing next year. But even though the questions were tough, they weren’t impossible. It always felt like we were so close to the answer; that if we studied just a bit more on the topic we would have got it. This led to some of my favorite moments of the trip, getting a question right. Having my studying pay off on a real question was amazing. The questions that asked about the Naruto Whirpools or the bridge that connected Chugoku and Shikoku were especially my favorites because those were areas I specifically studied. I loved learning about the niche topics of Japan like the Tottori Prefecture and Waka poems. Without Japan Bowl, I would have never studied these concepts but I now have an overall deeper understanding of Japan as a whole. It puts into perspective how complex of a history and culture Japan has that makes me want to learn more.

After the challenging questions of the preliminaries, it was a lot of fun to visit the workshops and participate in the conversation round. Unfortunately, due to some timing issues, I was only able to attend the latter half of the Fukushima Prefecture presentation as well as the edamame champ presentation. The Fukushima Presentation was extremely informative, I got to learn about the local specialties and the unique struggles the prefecture faces. It was especially interesting to hear what a local resident has to say about the daily life there. The edamame champ challenge was equally as entertaining. As someone who struggles with eating disorders, learning about different food options was especially impactful and relevant to my daily life. I plan on implementing a lot of the information I learned there into my daily life. The chopstick challenge at the end of the presentation was very fun and entertaining (even if I did score the lowest). The edamame presentation left such an impact on me that I plan to host a similar event at my own school and have it be a registered event.

To be completely honest, I was very nervous about my conversation round. Our Japanese curriculum does not place a large emphasis on speaking, especially in just daily life interactions, as it does on reading and writing. I spent a lot of time in my hotel room prepping questions and example responses, going over the lines to myself in the mirror. I remember walking to the room and greeting my partner before the conversation round. Thankfully, she was also not an expert and we shared our nervousness together. While those three minutes were definitely not short, it did not feel grueling either. I often felt the words fall out of my mouth, realizing I knew more than I thought I did. It was fun to really push my Japanese to the limit and learn about my Partner.

I also greatly enjoyed the wide variety of booths I got to check out at the information fair. I got to speak and learn about the thrilling new possibilities of hydrogen energy, sharing the information and questions I had from Japan Bowl studying. It feel like the thing I had learned about was coming to life right in front of me. Learning about many different college opportunities was especially important to me as well. Such programs that Temple and Waseda University offer has changed my college plans considerably. I had never really considered a college in Japan before today. But even learning about Japanese programs within the United States like Georgetown was also interesting. My favorite booth however was probably the Fukushima booth. They had so many colorful visuals and a myriad of fascinating topics that I wanted to check out every piece of information presented. All of the booths were great to visit and ask questions to as I considered my future plans.

The closing ceremony was a nice end to the event. The food was great and although I wish I could have been on the stage, it was nice to relax and watch. The wide array of speakers really put into context how important of an event this is and how lucky I was to be a participant. I never intended to stay for the whole ceremony but I just kept wanting to stay and watch more. It was fun to try and answer the questions in real-time, buzzing in and saying the answer with the competitors. The final round motivated me to study harder, even on the flight back home I was studying my kanji, a testament to the impact the event left on me.

While I was sad Japan Bowl was over, the Sakura Matsuri festival was so much fun. As soon I stepped into the venue I was taken aback by the sheer amount of people and booths; I didn’t know what I wanted to check out first. After looking at the map, my partner and I decided to check out the shops. We made sure to pick up a wagasa for the heat while stopping and looking at all the cool items on the way. There were paintings, clothes, and so much more to look at. Leaving the stores we met up with some of our pacific northwest friends who pointed us in the direction of a cool sword demonstration. We marveled at their fine control of the blade and the rigorous steps they took with each move. Moving on we made sure to get some fresh lemonade and watch the concert from the comfort of the shade. On our way out, we stopped by the calligraphy station where we drew our favorite proverb ([七転八起](http://www.romajidesu.com/dictionary/meaning-of-%E4%B8%83%E8%BB%A2%E5%85%AB%E8%B5%B7.html) was mine). The sakura matsuri festival, as well as the National Japan Bowl, was so much fun and I hope I can go again someday. I am truly lucky to have had the opportunity to participate in such a momentous event.