

“Oh my gosh! Look at all of that!”

My friends and I gaped at the endless amounts of delicious bread displayed when we first entered the contest. We all looked at one another and nodded, agreeing this was worth waking up early for. While devouring the amazing breakfast provided, our two groups quizzed each other. “Use いきなり in a sentence! What is the population of Japan?”

Soon, we began our morning dance, which was a lot more enjoyable than I expected, and it was soon time for us to begin our first round. We were all rounded up and brought to the room upstairs to start our questions. My team and I were pretty nervous, although we had done it the year before, but we looked at each other, said good luck, and began.

We tried our best in the first round, and were happily surprised to find out some of our answers we had guessed were correct. We moved onto the second round after a quick snack break, and refreshed our minds. Our group was filled with laughter and some unusual answer choices, but we still had lots and lots of fun.

After both rounds, both of the Westview teams went down to eat our delicious bento. Bang Sensei talked to us about some of his experiences with Japanese, where we learned a lot of things we had never known about through discussions in class.

Afterwards, we moved to the college pop-ups where we explored all the different types of language and study abroad programs at various universities, and to a networking session, where we were put into groups to talk about our experiences. My group was especially great because I got a lot of exposure to Japanese. Our whole group tried our best to talk in mainly Japanese, which was really interesting and an amazing experience.

When we were done, we moved back to the main room and heard an amazing performance. After it ended, they began the Championship Round for Level 2, which is where my group tensed up a little bit. Soon, they would be announcing Level 3’s top 3, which we weren’t sure we were going to make. Nevertheless, we watched Level 2’s round eagerly, trying to answer the questions on our own as well. When it was over, my group held our breath. We were extremely happy to make it onto the stage.

In the midst of the Championship Buzzer Round, a question popped up. I didn't know what the question was, but I took a close look at the map of Japan, and a single prefecture was highlighted. I knew it was Nara prefecture, as I had studied and memorized all 47 of them earlier. I held my breath and pressed the buzzer.

"Westview High School," the moderator said.

"Nara Prefecture," I announced, still slightly doubting myself.

I took a couple glances among the audience and then heard, "Westview High School, you are correct," and finally let out a deep breath. My teammates cheered me on and I could also see my other friends from my school cheering from a distance.

After our adrenaline filled Championship Round was complete, we relaxed while watching Level 4's competition and tried to answer questions ourselves for fun. Oftentimes, my friends and I looked at each other in shock at how difficult the answers seemed. It later occurred to me that it felt that way for Level 3 when I was in Level 2 the previous year, which reassured me and made me proud— this was how much we had improved over the last year.

At the end, when the awards were being distributed, my whole group was in complete shock that we had managed to place first. Although we hoped to do well, we never expected we would be able to place first in all of Level 3. The moment went by in a blur, but is something I am very grateful for.

The Pacific Northwest Japan Bowl was clearly an overall amazing experience for me. I learned so much about Japan's language and culture, testing my limits in different aspects such as geography and Kanji. Not only did I gain this new knowledge, but I also learned a lot about teamwork. There were many times I was worried, because I felt my mistake had ruined all chances for our team, but there were also times I was proud of myself for getting an answer right. This was true for all of my teammates, which made us, as a team, very strong and supportive. Our trust in one another and combined knowledge was what enabled us to get so far into the competition. I am truly grateful for this experience and further opportunity to go to Washington D.C. for the National Japan Bowl in April.

I would like to thank everyone that made such an experience possible for myself and all of the other Japanese-learning students that were there. There is no doubt in my mind that I would like to come again next year.