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Japan Bowl Reflection 2026

As of writing this, I've competed in two separate Japan Bowl competitions—the 2025 competition and this year's 2026 competitions—and placed first in both of them. In 2025, I competed in Level 2, and ended up skipping Level 3 entirely to compete in Level 4 this year. The jump from skipping an entire year of learning was daunting for me, especially as somebody who is not necessarily confident in their skills. Equally so, knowing how much work goes into studying and preparing for Japan Bowl made me feel as though there was an immense pressure to push myself to do better, or not do well at all; everybody I've competed against—and especially those I've competed *with*—have all been such hard-working, admirable people, and so naturally they're all a little intimidating, if not inspiring just the same. Despite the perceived deficit I felt I had compared to all of the other Level 4 teams, I went into the competition with a mostly clear head and the hope that my team and I would do well, anyway.

The Preliminary Rounds were similar enough to the previous year's round that, as our team began to answer questions, it felt like sinking back into familiar form, and it did a lot to quiet most of the lingering nerves from the reception prior. It was simple, pleasant, but not without its challenges. The first 25 questions felt like where our team was its weakest, upon reflection, and while we missed questions that, in hindsight, felt almost too obvious once they were revealed (I still remember, very clearly, thinking the answer "*kawaii*" was too simple to the question about a "*Japanese sub-culture dedicated to 'cuteness,' featuring childlike elements...*"), we also got questions correct that were much more difficult than that, and the major blunders we felt we had dropped off after we resumed to the second part of the round.

Networking has always been the funniest part of Japan Bowl to me, since I am a very awkward person, and as such, it's felt as though I've fumbled at least one part of the whole ordeal both times I've done it. During the second section, in which we were split into groups and made to talk with one another, I ended up talking with a foreign exchange student from Japan; he complimented me on my speaking skills, which I thought was amusing, because I hadn't really spoken at all at that point, and as a group we ended up discussing cultural differences between America and Japan. Something I've always found so endearing about Japanese culture is how proud of it Japanese people seem to be—there's always a comment to be made, or something deeper about it to be spoken about, and the enthusiasm is downright contagious. Watching somebody so earnestly talk about something so entwined to their identity will never not be a guilty pleasure of mine.

As the Championship Round loomed over us, I felt the previous anxiety that I'd largely squandered begin to resurface, akin to the feeling of waiting in line for a rollercoaster. Even

despite the fact we weren't going to be called until nearly two hours after the rounds began, the feeling gnawed at me as we competed alongside the other levels' competitors. In trying to describe what Japan Bowl is like to my friends and family who've never been, this has always been the hardest part for me: describing the friendly-yet-competitive nature of the event. I've never felt healthier sportsmanship among any other section of people. Everybody within the event wants to do well—and in order to do well, that requires that you, as their competitor, don't—but equally so understands and respects the work that everybody else has put into getting as far as they have. When being called up onto stage and shaking hands with everybody, and even during the competition itself, there's an equal amount of support and encouragement as there is a motivational, competitive streak.

Another bout of anxiety resurfaced as we waited for the winners of each division to be announced—I'd thought that, this year, me and my team had done very well, and I was especially happy with myself for how I'd scored on the individual questions, in which I had to construct a sentence (something I had bombed *miserably* the year prior). Of course, there was the hope that we'd win, but I also felt that I was completely content with the idea of placing at all, drawing back to that understanding that both of the teams I'd competed against were just as competent and impressive, and felt that, even if we were to place worse than them, that wouldn't be a reflection of our lack of skill, rather, an issue of performance. Winning only surpassed my hopes, and winning two years in a row is a unique flex that I'm incredibly glad to boast about.

I'd like to thank everybody that works to make Japan Bowl happen—sponsors, community members, contributors, judges and panel members, etc.. It's not only a valuable learning opportunity for me, but an important place to seek out community, and a foundational part of what has helped me build my understanding of, and interest in, Japan and Japanese culture. Beyond being a competition, it helps to cultivate and stir interest in Japan and is easily one of the most accepting places I've ever been to. The people who participate are earnest, kind, and authentic. I'm forever appreciative towards those who make Japan Bowl happen for allowing me the opportunity to compete, learn, and enrich myself culturally. ジャパンボウルありがとうございます。全国大会で頑張ります！！