

4/23/2026

### National Japan Bowl 2026 Reflection

As a prerequisite to competing in National Japan Bowl, they ask you and your team members to write a small, introductory statement about yourself, in the event you make it to the Championship Round; a *Team Shoukai*. At the time that I had written my introduction, I defaulted to what I always say when coming up with an icebreaker: I have misophonia, a neurodevelopmental condition that makes everyday, mundane sounds trigger my fight-or-flight response. The reason that this is my default is as much because it's a convenient excuse to contextualize any strange behavior as it is that it's, in actuality, the easiest thing I know about me to explain. I've had seventeen years to perfect the art of putting together the tightest-woven synopsis of a disorder that affects every aspect of my life into three precise, well-practiced sentences, concise enough to fit on a notecard. And so, because it's always been my crutch in situations such as these, I wrote my section of *Team Shoukai* according to this life-long script, neglecting to realize that I would have to reinvent said script in a language that I've been speaking for barely three years, and not since babbling age. Two months prior to the opening ceremony I'd be attending in D.C., all the way across the country, Japan Bowl had already begun to spur my Japanese studies forward.

Oddly, this pattern of Japan Bowl studying worming itself into the most unpredictable things in my life would stay consistent, all throughout the time I had to prepare for the tournament. Much of studying for Japan Bowl, to me, means slamming gracelessly into millions of one-off curiosities that let me discover questions I would've never encountered otherwise. If not for being situationally forced to figure out how to accurately explain what misophonia is, I would never have learned of the official Japan Misophonia Association (*NPO*法人日本のミソフォニア協会), which allowed me to glean from it the real terms I needed to defer to. And while I would spend most of my time reviewing the more generalizable things on the study guide, I'd argue that the most influential thing about my experience with Japan Bowl this year was that it's given me new perspectives to interpret the world through, that I will continue to use.

As for the tournament itself, I'd been stuck on the thin line between excitement and anxiety ever since our team gathered in the hotel lobby. I think, in hindsight, the jet lag must've been what was stabilizing me from tottering too far in either direction; the clocks on the east coast said it was 11 A.M., but my brain was still sleep-addled and operating under the assumption that I'd be reviewing APUSH IDs in thirty minutes time. The only other team from the Pacific Northwest joined us up on one of the balconies atop John Hopkins University while we searched for the Embassy of Japan among the sea of buildings, and we floated around one another until the first round began. My nerves had finally settled as the announcers regaled us with the tournament rules, because, for all the new things I had been exposed to in the past few

hours, the actual mechanics of the competition were pleasantly familiar. All-in-all, the round progressed into what I would call a more challenging rendition of what Regional Japan Bowl is; difficult in a stimulating, engaging manner. We plucked through sixty questions split between two rounds, during which I keenly identified that I was still unforgivably awful at history recall, and that, when hearing and reading Japanese, funnelling the sounds or characters into something meaningful took less time than it did the last time I'd competed. I felt proud about that.

My Japanese comprehension skills would be truly tested after the answer review session finished, and we ventured back to the balcony floor for the "Welcome Registration," which was a politely presented dinner-after-dinner where we were supposed to socialize with other competitors. I'm not sure anybody in our team had intended to stay as long as we did, but we'd been approached by a team of first-time competitors from New York (Queens borough!) whom we'd gingerly informed that they wouldn't have to take notes during the review session prior, and conversation bloomed from there on. The predominant language spoken between us was Japanese, with English relegated to accessorizing the sentences we didn't know all the words for, yet. By the time we said our goodbyes, it was just us and the staff inside the university—a fact I'd normally feel awful about, but I was too preoccupied with the light, giddy feeling of cognizance that I'd actually gotten somewhere tangible with my studies; I knew enough Japanese, now, to actually navigate on-the-fly conversations with strangers.

That conversation must've hewed a magnet for similar situations to gravitate toward me, because, after that first day, I'd been encountering more and more places to apply the Japanese knowledge I'd accumulated at an ever-increasing frequency. After finishing our final rounds the next morning, us and the Washingtonian team chanced upon each other during a grace period in the hotel elevator, and explored the Smithsonian for a few hours before we had to be back for Championship Rounds. Neither of our teams had qualified as competitors (though their team had made it onto the Level III podium, at top 5!), but I wasn't particularly upset about the whole ordeal—regardless of our placement, I'd felt like my personal achievements were gratifying enough as it were, even if it would've been nice to bring a medal back with me—and so our group splintered off from one another and browsed the national history museum halls for an hour or two.

Right beside the "modern technology" section was the insect zoo, which is what I had come upstairs for after stumbling upon a sign that promised a live butterfly enclosure. Yet, when I got to the hall where the butterfly enclosure allegedly lived, it was unusually deserted. I considered that maybe other people's definitions of "self-enrichment time" didn't include sitting in a room with a bunch of colorful bugs, until I caught wind of the sign parallel to the door: a lengthy apology explaining an indefinite closure for the rest of the day, because *even butterflies need rest*. I ended up loitering around the exhibit instead, looking at the bug pinnings on display until chatter reintroduced itself to the hall as a new group of people approached. As I finished reading one of the informational blurbs, I recognized the cadence of their speech as suspiciously similar to the language I'd been tuning my ears to for the past two days, and, with enough clarity

to recognize this was very impolite of me to do, I honed my attention onto their conversation. They were talking far too fast for me to really say I *understood* them, but I caught trace words like “蝶々” and pieced together that they were probably here for the already-closed butterfly exhibit. I apprehensively approached to inform them of what the sign said about the closure for the day, only to realize that I didn't know *how* to say what the sign said. Not without sounding very juvenile, at least. I ended up stumbling through a conversation after apologizing for any poor Japanese in advance, but I was able to relay to them the fact that the butterflies probably wouldn't be available for the rest of the day, albeit chipped—what I said only really encompassed the final, silly anecdote on the bottom of the note, “今、蝶々は休んでいます…,” but it seemed sufficient enough, since the conversation progressed. I had to consciously deflect a compliment and a few more ‘thank-you’s, and then they were shuffling out of the insect hall.

With my latest stilted interaction with tourists in mind, it made the Level IV Championship Round even more impressive in nearly every aspect. I could follow along with the questions being asked, and could roll around acceptable responses in my head, but the entire stage's performance during the Individual Round was almost intimidating in how seamless it was. Speaking has never been my strong suit, in either English or Japanese, and the first ever Japan Bowl I'd participated in, I bombed my Individual Round miserably after getting the first envelope and being met face-to-card with a word I had no idea what to do with. The following Japan Bowl, I did much better than my previous record of *zero* points, but it still roused a concerning amount of anxiety in me to complete said round. In comparison, the people on the stage spoke with a comfortable ease. They'd glance absently at the full idiom assigned to them, lean into the microphone, talk, and get full points, as though what they were doing required as much thought as breathing. Everybody on the stage looked completely in their element, keen, but not the slightest bit wiry or stressed. All of it brought me to the conclusion that I really, really want to be skilled enough to find myself on that stage.

In reflecting upon my experience at National Japan Bowl 2026, I cannot find the words to accurately convey how overwhelmingly positive the experience ended up being. Even before being flown out to D.C. (of which I'd also like to thank JASO for) I was being exposed to new, interesting pieces of knowledge through studying for Japan Bowl that I can confidently say I only know of, now, *because* of Japan Bowl. My time spent in D.C. enabled me to truly reflect on my Japanese-learning process over the years, with respect to how much I've grown, and how much more I have to learn. I think it's easy to forget, when you're in the middle of learning anything—but especially **with something as time-intensive as a foreign**

language—the reason you committed yourself to learning it initially. This year’s National Japan Bowl helped me to remember that I started learning Japanese with the goal of reaching fluency, and I intend to continue learning even after I reach that goal. I extend my utmost gratitude to all of the volunteers, society members, sponsors, teachers, and the several Japan–America Society groups dispersed across the States that sustain, cultivate, and give us Japan Bowl: 全部  
でありありがとうございました。ジャパnbowlの人は何か特別なものを作りました。来年  
も見たいです。