

Math team's victory 'lost in the shuffle'

Tattoo parlors know they do not need to target the upper intellects to stay in business. They thrive by serving a customer base that consists primarily of lunkheads — certainly not Rhodes scholars, classical musicians, physicists or anyone else who thinks.

It may not be practical for newspapers to target Rhodes scholars exclusively, but you'd think journalists would cater to a customer base comprising people with at least *some* degree of intellect.

We are a product, after all, that assumes customers are both literate and interested in things that matter. If they were interested only in the frivolous, they would cancel their subscriptions and rely on television.

At a time newspapers are crying the blues about shrinking circulation and concomitant advertising dollar droughts, however, we seem to see an ever-increasing reliance on frivolity instead of substance.

Please understand that I always have loved fun (perhaps more than is good for me) and there is a place for it on newspaper pages, but not at the expense of things that matter. Just as tattoo parlors must depend on people who do not think, newspapers ultimately must depend on people who do.

Four years ago this month, I bashed *The Morning Call* for giving short shrift to what I called a "stunning triumph." When a team of students based in the Lehigh Val-

ley became national champions in a prestigious math competition, a small story ran deep inside the paper in only certain editions. That was called to my attention by Terry Delph of Coopersburg, who teaches at Lehigh University. "By rights, this kind of achievement should have been front-page news," he said. "I'll leave you to imagine the coverage that a comparable sports performance would have received."

My brother Neal, a math teacher in California, was even angrier when he learned of the play my newspaper gave the story.

"That's nuts," he said. "Raise a stink. See if you can get fired or something."

I did raise a stink, calling it a "journalistic disgrace," but I did not get fired, knock wood. In fact, Assistant Managing Editor Michael Miorelli agreed with me. "We screwed up. It should have gotten better play," he said of the math championship.

This past weekend, the Lehigh Valley Fire, a team of 15 students from all over eastern Pennsylvania and New Jersey, including Ben Kraft of Bethlehem's Liberty High School, won the championship of the American Regions Math League competition, held simultaneously in four states.

The Fire won decidedly, with 215 points. A team representing much of California was second with 197 and teams from New York and Maryland were tied at 196.

The Fire (the same team that won in 2005) is coached by Don Davis, a Lehigh math professor, and competes in division A, the top level of the national math tournament. The Ice, one of three other teams coached by Davis, got third place in division B. The Ice team includes five Lehigh Valley students.

It is embarrassing to admit that *The Express-Times*, based in Easton, had a front-page story (albeit a small one) on Monday about the math event, referring readers to a Web page for details.

It also was on Monday that I asked an editor at this newspaper about the story, noting that all local media were notified on Sunday, by e-mail, of the results of the national math competition. "It's probably in the loop," the editor said.

There were other stories in that day's *Morning Call* not relegated to the loop, such as a front-page item on Allentown shutting down a nuisance bar and a big feature inside about a lonesome cat in Dauphin County. Much of one page was devoted to a baton twirling event.

The sports section had a huge splash, with a color photo, on the IronPigs winning a baseball game, although they are mired in next-to-last place in the International League. If the IronPigs were to suddenly find themselves in the majors, and if they then won the World Series, would the story get buried in a loop somewhere?

(Someday, when America's future depends on solving difficult and crucial technical problems, will the nation be saved by baton twirlers and baseball players?)

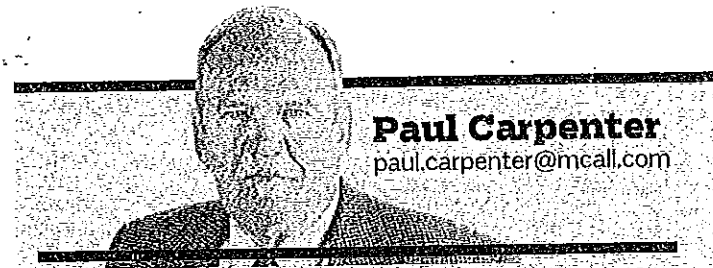
In any case, when Tuesday's paper landed on my porch and there still was nothing about the math competition, I lost my temper and started writing this column.

I know I should not bite the hand that feeds me, and *The Morning Call* has been feeding me a long time. But the following paragraph may fulfill my brother's wish.

If this newspaper thinks a regular-season victory by the next-to-last-place IronPigs (not a single Lehigh Valley native on the team) is more significant than a national math championship by a team of youngsters based in the Lehigh Valley, we should get out of the newspaper business and open a tattoo parlor.

*'Will the nation be saved
by baton twirlers
and baseball players?'*

THE MORNING CALL



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