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TOWN SQUARE

It's a caTASStroke in national math contest for Lehigh Valley team

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5:07 PM EDT, June 5, 2012

The world's greatest mathematician was upset that the Lehigh Valley Fire Team did not win this year's national math competition for students from all over the country.

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"What the hell's the matter with them?" he asked, observing that the Fire Team won the national math championship for three straight years, in 2009, 2010 and 2011. The 15-member team also won in 2005.

This year's first-place team is (gasp) from North Carolina. "What a caTASStroke!" as Jimmy Durante used to say.

My brother Neal teaches math in California and follows the exploits of the Lehigh Valley math teams from time to time, mainly because I keep bugging him about how they do in the American Regions Mathematics League's competitions.

The Lehigh Valley-based teams are coached by Don Davis, a math professor at Lehigh University. This year's ARML event featured 78 teams in the "A division," plus another 62 teams in the "B division," and was held simultaneously at four locations — Georgia, Iowa, Nevada and in Pennsylvania at Penn State University. Two teams from the Lehigh Valley, both in the tougher A division, competed at Penn State.

The Lehigh Valley Fire Team was able to beat only 76 of those 78 teams (or 138 teams if you count the ARML's B division), placing second in a neck-and-neck battle with the youngsters from North Carolina. The contest was not decided until the very last round of questions on Saturday.

"They beat us by 10 points," Davis told me after the competition ended.

There was one consolation for my brother. In third place was the San Francisco Bay Area/Northern California team, which represents his region. Also, the team from the sun-drenched San Diego region, where I lived as a boy and where my brother was conceived (before the family moved to the blizzards of New York State's snow belt), took fourth. They all beat the vaunted Phillips Exeter Academy Red Lion team from New Hampshire.

"Phillips Exeter recruits the best students in the world," Davis told me after his team took the runner-up spot, three notches above PEARL. His Lehigh Valley Ice Team placed 21st in the A division. "It's a very high level of competition," he said. "I'm very proud of what we've accomplished."

Members of the Lehigh Valley Fire Team are from all over eastern Pennsylvania and parts of New Jersey, and this year the team has only one math whiz from the Lehigh Valley region, Chris Hunt, a senior at Weatherly High School in Carbon County.

"He did great," Davis said of Hunt. "He's a senior and this is his second year on the team." Among other things, Hunt was

on the Fire Team's three-person relay squad, which got a perfect score.

The Ice team, which did better in the A division than several teams representing entire states, includes Abhinav Rangarajan, a senior at Freedom High School in Bethlehem, and Yogeshwar Velingker, a seventh-grader at Orefield Middle School.

Davis said Rangarajan is captain of the Ice Team and Yogeshwar, the only member who made it as a fifth-grader, is in his third year on the team. Yogeshwar, Davis said, "is one of the top seventh-grade math students in the country. ... His older brother, Ameya, was on our 2005 national championship team." By the way, Davis said, Yogeshwar will be taking an advanced course at Lehigh University in the fall.

Davis sent me a couple of the questions on this year's tests and I forwarded them to my brother, who also looked over the questions on last year's test. "The problems are tricky," he acknowledged.

Tricky? I was totally snowed by just about all of them, although I was able to figure out one plain geometry question. When Neal started explaining something about "factorials," I gave up.

My idea of a difficult problem is how to get the last dab of toothpaste out of a tube, so I understand modern math about as well as I understand Lithuanian. I do understand, however, that the world's toughest problems will be solved by these kinds of students — along with others who understand science, social studies and other subjects that require the brightest minds.

In 2009, discussing that year's triumph by the Lehigh Valley Fire Team, I blasted news media priorities that gave us big stories on a baton-twirling event, a victory by the next-to-last-place IronPigs baseball team, and a lonesome cat in Dauphin County. "Someday," I asked, "when America's future depends on solving difficult and crucial technical problems, will the nation be saved by baton twirlers and baseball players?"

My brother agreed. "These kids," he said of the youngsters competing in ARML events, "are important to our civilization. They really are. These kids are the people who figure things out, but they are relegated to the back pages of newspapers."

He said some bright students, such as those who win spelling bees, get attention only because news people can understand the concept of spelling words correctly — but those who can memorize spellings may not necessarily be able to solve complex technical problems.

Now that a local team is only in second place in a competition involving thousands of America's brightest students, their brilliant accomplishments probably will be ignored completely.

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[Paul Carpenter's](#) commentary appears Sundays, Wednesdays and Fridays.

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