



USA and Canada Teams Bring Home Awards from the 2016 International Linguistics Olympiad in Mysore, India

Two USA teams and one Canada team, each consisting of four high school students, brought back huge success from the 14th International Linguistics Olympiad, held on July 25-29 in Mysore, India. The teams took home six medals, five honorable mentions, and one team trophy for the highest team average in the individual round, won by Team USA Red.

August 3, 2016

Hosted by Infosys

July 25 – 29, 2016, Mysore, India



On July 22, eight USA students and four Canadian students traveled to the Infosys campus in Mysore, India, joining 41 other teams from 29 other countries to compete in the 14th International Linguistics Olympiad (IOL). The three North American teams, organized and selected by the North American Computational Linguistics Olympiad (NACLO) brought back huge success.

The IOL, one of twelve International Science Olympiads for secondary school students, consists of two events. The first part is the individual contest, a six-hour exam with five problems. This year, the individual round featured the following languages: Aralle-Tabulahan, Luwian, Kunuz Nubian, Iatmül, and Jaqaru. The team contest is the second event of the IOL, in which team members collaborate to solve one particularly challenging problem. This year, teams were tasked with matching the pronunciation of 114 Taa words with their transcriptions. Problem solving at the IOL stresses the ability of contestants to decipher the mechanisms of languages by using logic and reasoning to explore a wide range of hypotheses.

US contestant James Wedgwood of Washington won a gold medal in the individual round. Silver medals went to three US contestants, Margarita Misirpashayeva of New Jersey, Shuheng “Nelson” Niu of California, and Erik Metz of Maryland. Wyatt Reeves of Texas and Siye “Annie” Zhu of Massachusetts won bronze medals. Finally, Kevin Sun, Minh-Tam Nguyen and James Hogan, all of Ontario, along with Laurestine Bradford of Washington and Jack LaFleur of Washington, DC were awarded honorable mentions. Kevin Sun also received a Best Solution Award for Problem 1. Team USA Red received the blue cup for the highest combined score on the individual event, scoring 61.75 points, and ahead of two teams from Russia.

In addition to the competition, the IOL also provided contestants with an introduction to the cultural and natural landscape of India. This year, in addition to the fascinating problems, students enjoyed performances of traditional Indian dancing and visited Chennakesava Temple of Somanathapura and Shivanasamudra Waterfalls. James Wedgwood of USA Red, who also won a gold medal in IOL 2015, commented, “Coming into this year's IOL, I was skeptical that it would be able to match the high standard set by last year's Olympiad. However, I was pleasantly surprised — the campus was beautiful, the food was delicious, the activities were interesting, and the competition itself was of course enjoyable and rewarding.” The social aspect turned out to be the most memorable component of the event. Nelson Niu of USA Red reflected, “More than anything, IOL was an excellent opportunity to get to know like-minded people and share these experiences with them.” “I was once again amazed by how quickly people who had never met in person before could become truly close, and how I ended the week not only with great memories but with more than a dozen new friends,” added Minh-Tam Nguyen

of Canada. Margarita Misirpashayeva of USA Blue concurred, “By the end, I felt very close to the US and Canadian teams and was sorry to say goodbye.” Jack LaFleur of USA Blue concluded, “All in all, it was a week I’ll never forget.”

The three North American teams were selected through the North American Computational Linguistics Olympiad (NACLO). This annual competition, held since 2007, has two rounds, which are held at universities and high schools throughout the USA and Canada. This year over 1,700 students took the open round, a three-hour test. Approximately the top 10% of the students from the open round were invited to the next round, a more difficult, four-hour test. The joint US-Canadian practices, which were conducted online and in person by the USA coaches Dragomir Radev, a professor at the University of Michigan, and Aleka Blackwell, a professor at Middle Tennessee State University, and the Canadian coach Heather Newell of the Université du Québec à Montréal, as well as assistant coaches Pat Littell of Carnegie Mellon University, Tom McCoy of Yale University, and Adam Hesterberg of MIT. Professor James Pustejovsky of Brandeis University chaired the fundraising committee for the team. The teams’ sponsors include the Linguistic Society of America (LSA), the North American Chapter of the Association for Computational Linguistics (NAACL), the US National Science Foundation (NSF), Yahoo!, Brandeis University, Carnegie Mellon University, the University of Maryland, the University of Michigan, and individual donors.

The next IOL will be held in Dublin, Ireland, from July 31 to August 4, 2017.

More Info

NACLO - <http://www.nacloweb.org/> - contains practice problems, contest rules, and registration details for NACLO’s competitions.

IOL - <http://www.ioling.org/> - contains a record of all past IOL problems and results

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