

Steven Sivek tried out for his school's science bowl team as a sophomore, but didn't make the team. Two years later, undaunted, Sivek and his team – the Thomas Jefferson High School for Science and Technology team from Alexandria, Virginia – came to the national competition and went home with the 2002 National Science Bowl championship.

Sivek, currently an instructor and National Science Foundation postdoctoral fellow in the Department of Mathematics at Princeton University, found the tournaments to be a lot of fun. "That's not to say it was easy or anything," said Sivek "and certainly we lost some matches along the way, but we were all there because we were really into science and the quiz bowl aspects of it." Sivek said the most valuable part of the experience was the effort of learning. The span of questions at the National Science Bowl motivated Sivek to learn about fields of science outside his favorites - math and computer science. "It forced me to break out of my comfort zone and realize there was a lot of other interesting stuff out there." Their team was weak on geoscience so Steven stepped up. He took home an earth science textbook and read the whole book – cover to cover – over the weekend. "It paid off, because we scored a whole bunch of points on topics I had barely known anything about two weeks earlier." After that regional tournament, he worked to learn the material well in time for the national competition. "The experience of having to learn a lot on my own was very useful. I'm currently a postdoc in mathematics, and in doing mathematical research, you often have to sit down and teach yourself a subject you didn't previously know. Getting a head start on that sort of experience and learning how to do it is incredibly valuable."

At the finals in Washington, D.C., the idea of competing on a stage in front of a large audience was nerve-wracking. "You tend to be a little more nervous about guessing when there are hundreds of people watching you," said Sivek, "but fortunately we held it together. A team from Maui had brought leis to the tournament and was handing them out to everyone as souvenirs. We wore ours onstage – it's hard to be too stressed when you're wearing a lei."

Sivek did his undergraduate degree at MIT, completing a double major in math and computer science, then his Ph.D. in the MIT math department, and two years as postdoc in math at Harvard before his present position at Princeton. His science bowl teammates all ended up going to colleges in Cambridge, Massachusetts – either at Harvard University or Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT). In 2008, four of them again joined forces – this time for a

science trivia contest at the annual Cambridge Science Festival -- and they won. Their prize was a luncheon with Robert Horvitz, Nobel Prize winner and MIT professor of biology.

"I would absolutely recommend participation in the National Science Bowl," said Sivek. "I do think it's great that so many students are getting involved and I hope it continues to grow."

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