

Although 23 years have passed, Jason Tumlinson remembers his fellow teammates and the year - 1992 - they brought home the National Science Bowl Championship.

"We were all of us just math / science geeks - living and breathing it all the time," said Tumlinson. Each one had a specialty - the astronomy guy, the math guy (whose mom was a math professor at Texas Tech University), the chemistry guy, the biology guy (now an M.D.). Tumlinson was the astronomy guy, active in the local astronomy club, and serving as president at one point. "We spent a lot of time together," said Tumlinson "and there were certainly hijinks of the harmless variety, lots of obscure in-jokes, and probably Star Trek references."

Tumlinson and his four teammates - Jesse Martin, Jeremy Martin, Juny Sridhara, and Michael Hsia - attended Lubbock High School (LHS), a magnet program with a very strong math and science team that competed in Texas' state level scholarly tournaments - the University Interscholastic League. "We [LHS] had individual and team championships almost every year, up against much larger and better funded schools from Austin, Houston, Dallas, etc.," said Tumlinson. "But we had incredibly dedicated coaches, in particular, Ann Sims. And, not a lot of options for stuff to do in Lubbock. So we were able to punch above our weight." They felt ready for the national competition.

"We had the confidence of knowing our own subjects very well. We were all so self-motivated to learn the content, that I don't think studying was an issue for the coaches to work on," said Tumlinson. "They did have to instill some discipline so that we would choose the right question, answer in the right way, and think before answering. We certainly did practice - especially using the buzzer and answering questions under time pressure.

"Winning was just unbelievable. To be in Washington, D.C., then at the White House, then in London, was all a major shock," said Tumlinson. The championship prize in those halcyon days was a trip to the London International Youth Science Forum in England. "Keep in mind that we were from a relatively small city that feels like a small town. Today, as a professional astronomer I've been all over the world but that was really my first taste of the wider world beyond Lubbock and Texas. That was probably the best part.

"It was also nice that we were treated like local heroes - met by a crowd and TV cameras at the airport when we got home from D.C., celebrated at a school assembly, written up in the newspaper. That was great while it lasted. I clearly recall being in the dentist's office months later when some nice elderly couple actually recognized me! That was strange.

"It [the National Science Bowl] was one of my most formative experiences as a young man, and I think it's great that DOE has kept it going," said Tumlinson. "Our team and school were so hard core that we would have competed anywhere, and actually were competing at the state level before National Science Bowl came along. It was a great step to the national level of something we were doing already. As a national competition, the reach of this into smaller, less advantaged places is important to making inroads for STEM recruitment.

"For me, the National Science Bowl competition was a great confidence builder, showing me that I was actually good at this science thing, and there could be a future in it. It was a major factor in taking me out of my hometown and into the larger world.

"I am now a staff astronomer at the Space Telescope Science Institute in Baltimore, living my lifelong dream to do astronomy," said Tumlinson. He is involved every day in the operation of the Hubble Space Telescope, the plans for the launch of NASA's James Webb Space Telescope in 2018, and in conceptual planning for the astronomy missions that come later on in the 2020s and 2030s.

"I get to work in one of the beating hearts of astronomy, and I have no doubt that competing in the National Science Bowl and our other competitions were a key part of me getting to this stage.

"To anyone considering [entering the National Science Bowl], I'd say: do it! You never know what it will lead to!"

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