

University High wins U.S. contest

Fresno students win Academic Decathlon online competition in the small schools category.

By Christina Vance
The Fresno Bee

The competition was virtual. The medals, trophy and national championship are real.

Nine University High School students won the national Academic Decathlon small school competition — a competition conducted via the Internet with 20 other schools across the United States.

The Fresno charter became the first school from Fresno County to win at the national level. The Academic Decathlon created the small schools category two years ago.

University High's team won with 31,470

points, outscoring the second-place team by 143.

The runner-up, St. Johns High School in Arizona, was the winner last year.

That point spread isn't as comfortable as it might seem, coach Sean Canfield said Friday. If each member of the school's team had missed one more question, the team wouldn't have won the title.

Canfield, who has coached Academic Decathlon teams for 20 years, said his team members deserve high praise because they didn't get excused from regular school classes to

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Team members

Qainat Khan
Kevin Chen
Trevor Soma
Vitaliy Goncharenko
Magdalena
Yarbrough
Jillian Fruehe
Kieran Kelly
Joseph Bishop
Gregory Austin

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Decathlon: 24 individual medals won

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study for the competition. All of University High's practices were during lunch or outside school hours. Canfield said some schools allow students to use class time to study.

"This is richly deserved in that we were playing by the rules," he said. "This has been done with integrity."

Team member Kieran Kelly described the hours of practice and glory of victory another way. "I recently heard that women, in the hours following childbirth, forget all the pain of it. I think that captures the Academic Decathlon experience," he said.

Academic Decathlon partici-

pants normally compete in 10 categories: art, economics, essay, interview, language and literature, math, music, science, social science and speech. The speech and interview categories are omitted in the national online competition, said Mylene Chafe, director of operations for the U.S. Academic Decathlon.

Chafe said the small schools category gives more schools a

chance to participate in the competition. High schools are considered "small" if they have 650 students or fewer. University High has about 350 students.

Chafe said competition remains tough among smaller and larger school teams.

"I think it's just as fierce," she said.

Besides winning the national title, University High's team

earned 24 individual medals.

Although the team excelled, the members manage to have lives outside the competition. Some play cello or violin. One dances. Another writes. And one is becoming an Eagle Scout.

Team member Gregory Austin said there is a price to be paid — in lack of sleep. He's the one who voiced the sentiment of the entire group at the end of the online testing in April that earned the championship.

He shouted, "Free at last, free at last!"

Canfield said it's been important for team members to have a sense of humor. They don't see much of that in some of their

competitors. "I think some overdo it, and when they fall short, some almost have mental breakdowns and collapses," he said.

Canfield said he's hoping the team will be able to get together to celebrate the championship.

"Maybe we could go to something as upscale as Marie Callender's," he said.

"Oooohh!" the team members exclaimed together.

Celebration or not, three team members will return to compete next year. But they won't have long to relax. Practices begin in two weeks.

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— Sean Canfield,

coach for University High's Academic Decathlon team