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Varsity sport of the mind

April 29, 2008 ¦ Tara Maxwell

Do you know the name of the British general who won battles at Salamanca, Victoria, Toulouse and Belgium? How about the composer who, at age 17, composed “Gretchen at the Spinning Wheel?” What about the name of the Caribbean city on the Gulf of Paria that is the only world capital to contain the name of a foreign country?

If you knew the answers to be Arthur Wellesley, Schubert and the Port of Spain, you might make a good member of the Liberty University Flames Quiz Bowl team.

The varsity quiz bowl team consisting of Kelly Hamren (captain), Zachary Curtis, Sara Davis-Leonard, Nicholas Orta and Robbie Mullis was crowned champion in January’s Big South Conference Quiz Bowl for its third consecutive tournament victory. Graduate student Jeff Taylor also competes in challenges with the team.

In February Liberty placed sixth out of 15 universities in the regional College Bowl tournament held in Blacksburg.

The team practices using question banks from the National Academic Quiz Tournaments (NAQT) and College Bowl every Tuesday. The questions range from pop culture, music, art and history to biology, sports, mathematics and literature.

“We found that in the Big South Conference some teams practice sporadically and some not at all,” said Liberty’s Honors Director and quiz bowl team co-coach Dr. Jim Nutter. “It’s a huge advantage for us that we practice every week, we know each other’s strengths and can work toward that end.”

The team competes in an on-campus tournament, regional tournament and the Big South bowl every year for a team trophy and individual plaques. In 2007 the team also competed in a tournament against William & Mary.

During competition teams answer toss-up questions for the chance to answer three bonus questions per toss-up, giving a possible 40 points. Also during competition, four players are starters while the fifth is an alternate.

“It’s a little intimidating because it’s very rapid fire,” Nutter said. “They have buzzer systems and as soon as you buzz in, you have to answer immediately.”

Liberty’s Quiz Bowl team was formed three years ago when the Big South Commissioner pushed the schools to compete in activities outside of athletics.

Dr. Emily Heady, director of Liberty’s Graduate Writing Center, assistant professor of English and co-coach of the team, was a member of the Ohio State Quiz Bowl team.

“At Ohio State it was extremely competitive, but in the Big South it’s more fun and everyone enjoys meeting great people from the other schools,” she said.

Heady, who has been with the team since its inception, is moving into a 12-month administration position and will leave her post as coach of the team.

“My role was really to teach them how to play and now they just need to practice and study,” she said. “When we started it was like we had four individuals, now we really play like a team.”

Nutter said the team enjoys friendly rivalry with Radford, VMI and North Carolina at Asheville.

“I remember our first year we played VMI and they only got one question right the entire game and it was about Strawberry Shortcake, and it wasn’t the dessert,” Nutter said. “We thought it was so funny we were beating VMI at military history questions and that’s the question they got right.”

The varsity team practices against the school’s junior varsity team and each fall semester try-outs are held against the Varsity team members for any undergrad who seeks a spot on the team.

Curtis, who has been part of the team all three years of its existence, says he enjoys competition because it gives him a chance to test his knowledge.

“It’s one of the most strenuous and entertaining exercises of intellect and it’s challenging on many levels,” he said.