

I joined MathCounts in 6th grade. New to the building, I had trouble finding the room. I stumbled into detention before getting to the correct classroom. That first day, we were arbitrarily split up into groups of 4. There was a girl in my group, Hannah, who seemed to know everything. I felt pretty dumb by comparison. I assumed there was someone like her in every group of 4. I later learned that she was easily the best in the school.

Every week I would go home and my mom and I would puzzle over the problems assigned for homework. There was one geometry problem that I remember in particular: It made perfect sense until the end when it asked what quadrant something was in. No matter how many times we read the problem, my mother and I couldn't figure out where these quadrants were coming from. This is how little math I knew. None the less, I attempted all of the problems anyway. I solved many of them using nontraditional methods that I made up along the way, all the while developing a combinatorial intuition and honing my guess-and-check skills.

I'd come in each week and ask questions on almost half of the problems. My coach, Mrs. Loucks, and some of the older students would go over them for me and anyone else who was interested. While it was difficult and a little embarrassing to ask so many questions, I did so anyway and I learned a lot. At the time, I was afraid I was being quite a nuisance by asking all those questions, but now, as a coach, I see that my worries had no basis. I'm always happy when students ask me questions; It shows they're engaged and proactive and it gives me an opportunity to explain the problems to the students who were too shy to ask. I didn't make the team that year, and my school only took one team and one alternate to the competition back then, but I had a lot of fun and learned a ton.

Eagerly, I signed up again in 7th grade. I knew a lot more than I had the year before, but there was still a long ways to go. I was able to do most of the problems on my own, but I still had questions on a lot of them. Once again, it was hard to get the courage to ask for help, especially now that I was in 7th grade and there were kids there in MathCounts with me that I knew from class. In class I had a reputation as being one of the smartest students, especially in math, and I didn't want to embarrass myself in front of these people by showing how much help I really needed with some of this stuff. However, I swallowed my pride and took every opportunity to ask questions and learn more. That year, on the school test, there was a three way tie for third place. The other two students were 8th graders, so they took the third and fourth spots and I was made captain of the alternate team.

I came in 11th at chapter (back then only top 10 made countdown.....), beating the two girls I had tied with on the school round. The other two members of the team however, Hannah and Jack, placed 1st and 2nd (another tie!) so the team came in 2nd (Iroquois was 1st). We proceeded onto state where we beat Iroquois and placed 3rd. This all was of no thanks me. I was just the alternate and how I did was of no consequence. It was a no-stakes game. However, the team and the coach never made me feel bad about this in anyway. They included me in everything; I was along for the ride and I shared in the victories.

That spring, I continued to work on math in preparation for the following year, when I expected to make the real team. I came down with the flu that April. Bed-bound, I spent the week reading and working on math, going through every warm-up and workout problem from 6th and 7th grade that I had not yet done. I wished we had MathCounts year round.

Eighth grade was beautiful. I want to say everything went right. None of us made nationals or anything like that, but we accomplished everything I hoped for. We had a change of leadership that year and I didn't have Mrs. Loucks or any older students to help me. At this point though, I didn't need much help. I could figure

out most of the problems on my own and my teammates and I took turns teaching each other. We were a tight team that year, the four of us, and very evenly matched. We worked hard and we played hard. Not a practice went by without intense concentration and unabashed laughter. Our coaches had trouble finding enough for us to do, as anything they proposed, at least one of us had already downloaded and done off the internet. (Not that this should ever be a concern to any of you-your coaches are much more resourceful than mine were!)

At the chapter competition, I came in 3rd and Jack was 5th. The other two boys on my team tied for 9th and the difference between 9th and 10th was decided alphabetically. All of us had made countdown! As a team we came in 2nd again, this time to Shaker. We proceeded on to states where we placed 6th. No one did stupendously, but we all did fairly well. RPI was giving out a \$1000 scholarship to the top boy and the top girl at the competition, as they do every year. I missed this by one point (Not that I would have had the chance to use it anyway, so it's just as well).

After the state competition, I started looking at high school material, quickly seeing that it was way out of my league. This was baffling to me; Despite all that I had learned and accomplished, there was still a world of math that I had not even begun to discover. Simultaneously frustrated and excited, I plunged ahead. I visited www.artofproblemsolving.com a lot that summer and was continually disappointed that most of the problems in the "Beginners" forum were too hard.

In the fall, I joined Albany Area Math Circle. The math was over my head and everyone was smarter than me. It was 6th grade all over again. I loved it. Once again, I had to spend a considerable amount of time asking the older students for help on what seemed like every single problem. This was particularly difficult to do because I didn't *know* anybody there and I had a hard time remembering names. I was glad to discover though, that most of the other members were happy to help me out, even if we hadn't met before.

That's the year Alison was a senior. She seemed absolutely brilliant and I almost felt like I had no business going to mathcircle alongside people like that. I figured there was someone like her in every city. I later learned she was amongst the top five in the country. Sometimes the girl-next-door isn't so average after all. I learned a lot that year, and the story goes on from there.....