

**DEMI DEC**  
**RESOURCES**



# DECATHLETE'S PRIMER

Daniel Berdichevsky



2005-2006 Edition



# Decathlete's Primer – 2005

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BY

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HARVARD UNIVERSITY M.P.P. '05

STANFORD UNIVERSITY B.A. & M.A. '02

FOR CHRIS HOAG, ROBERT SHAW AND DAWN NEWTON

THEY WERE ALL THE PRIMERS WE HAD

WITH SECTIONS BY

**KEVIN TEELING**

ARIZONA STATE UNIVERSITY

MOUNTAIN VIEW HIGH SCHOOL

AND

**ROBERT PAZORNIK**

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NOTRE DAME UNIVERSITY B.A. '03

# Introduction

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You find them at colleges across the country. They chance into one another on moonlit nights, on rainy afternoons, on Frisbee fields and in crowded lecture halls—even on flights to China. They become friends, sometimes more than friends. At state schools and at private universities, in the army and in the boardrooms of the largest corporations<sup>1</sup>, they excel. Even as college dropouts, they do remarkably well.

They are the veterans of the Academic Decathlon.

But why all this reference to they? After all, *they* are—or will be—*you*.

\* \* \*

In this primer, we wish to share a little of our<sup>2</sup> own decathlon experiences.

Many of you may be considering joining a team and wondering if you should, or what you stand to gain if you do. While we don't intend this to be a propaganda piece, it does present an undeniably positive outlook on the experience. We acknowledge the occasional drawback and disappointment, but the truth is that we love this program, and we hope that you will too. The following pages touch on how it can shape not just a year of high school, but the college experiences and careers that follow—and on how it can foster the bonds of camaraderie that endure<sup>3</sup>.

Others of you may be returning decathletes seeking insight into how successful teams have prepared in the past and are preparing in the present. Or, you might be pondering how decathlon has impacted people's lives over the long-term. For that reason, we have tried to balance introductory notes for newcomers with added bits to benefit those of you with more experience.

While some schools already have strong decathlon traditions, teams that are new to the program or that haven't yet accumulated a critical mass of past and purpose might find in this primer a way to begin achieving that.

Submissions to the primer have come from decathletes, many of them DemiDec team members, across the United States and even Canada. Included here are their stories, anecdotes, perspectives, and specific event-by-event advice. There is also more where these came from, so if you'd like to read other submissions—just e-mail us.

What you won't find in this booklet is a single fact to memorize. But if that's what you're looking for, don't worry—there'll be plenty of them to study all year long.

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<sup>1</sup> Hopefully not the scandal-tarnished ones...

<sup>2</sup> When I say *our*, I mean both my own—I'm Daniel, DemiDec's founder—and those of other decathletes whose thoughts and stories are included within these pages. Kevin Teeling, my co-author, sometimes says "I" too. Ideally you won't be able to tell us apart.

<sup>3</sup> As I edit this in the summer of 2002, just yesterday I returned from hiking in a Canadian national park with one of my teammates. It went smoothly, except when Canadian immigration questioned me to see if I was there to protest the G7 conference.

# Confessions Of A Demidec Founder

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I'm not just a Harvard dropout<sup>4</sup>, I'm a Decathlon dropout too. As a sophomore at Taft High School, I enrolled in the Academic Decathlon spring semester class. My scores on tests were reasonable—especially in math and essay—but I was afraid of speech and interview. Everyone there seemed so much older than me<sup>5</sup>. How could I ever get to know them as teammates, let alone friends? Worst of all, the class met at 7 am.

“They aren't going to win,” I said to myself (and to my friend Jeff Copps<sup>6</sup>) and quit.

That was my mistake. I've learned since then, time and again, that I should never quit anything without very, very good reasons. Mine weren't very good at all. I must have known it, too, because I still remember how ashamed I was to look Coach Wilson in the eye whenever I passed him in the halls in the months that followed.

That whole next year, I watched from the sidelines<sup>7</sup> as the team that I had dismissed in favor of an extra hour's sleep each morning went on to take first in Los Angeles, first in California, and second at nationals (losing by only a few hundred points.) From my position on the school paper, I stood witness as nine Decathletes became a family. It dawned on me that I had given up the chance to become part of something precious, something lasting, and perhaps—just *perhaps*—even to have made a difference in the outcome.

So when the time came to sign up for the following year's team, I was among the first ones there. Did I come in expecting to win? Not by a long shot. There were no returning team members—and even the coach was in the process of resigning from Taft to go teach in Greece.

It didn't matter. The truth is, I didn't join the team that spring in quest of a championship—I figured that window had already closed—or to try to become the highest scoring student at the national competition, or even to make the friends of a lifetime. Not even to found a company called DemiDec. I joined because I just couldn't deal with the possibility of regretting not doing it—*again*.

I joined against the protests of those who told me it would be a waste of time to give my all to what the school widely considered a mediocre team pieced together by a distracted “lame duck” coach way behind schedule. I joined against the wishes of a girl I was dating who presented me with a very unpleasant ultimatum<sup>8</sup>.

But I joined it at the urging of Steve Shaw, brother to a member of the previous team, and at that of class rebel (and clown) Sage Vaughn, who would become one of our star varsities. I joined it at the urging of a small voice at the back of my head that, despite everything, whispered, “What if?” as I thumbed through a study guide advertising a national competition in Newark, New Jersey.

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<sup>4</sup> Okay, so I finally graduated this last spring—from the Kennedy School of Government—after taking every last possible detour along the way, including one to Ecuador. But once a dropout, always a dropout?

<sup>5</sup> They still do. Whenever I run into someone who was on that team, I feel like a child among giants.

<sup>6</sup> Jeff was the best man at the wedding of the last person cut from our team—Ali. The more things change...

<sup>7</sup> Literally! I was in journalism, which met in B102, across the hall from Decathlon in B101.

<sup>8</sup> It was so unpleasant that a few minutes later I crashed into a sidewalk.

It was a curious time. For a while, rumors trickling down from the principal kept us updated on the hunt for a new coach. One week, a well-regarded English instructor named Dr. Jackson would be the one taking over. Another day, it was an ostensible Communist<sup>9</sup> being recruited from another school to assume control of the program. Or perhaps it would be our geometry instructor, Mrs. Lee—who had a sunny smile and drew perfect circles but had no Acadec experience. We didn't know what to believe.

Yet come June the tide abruptly turned. Taft's coach from the 1980s, a vigorously competitive man who had led the team to a national victory in 1989, emerged from retirement to take on the challenge of winning another title. "We're going to win," he said, and for some reason we believed him.

One by one, he drew in candidates to fill the empty roster spots. He quickly cut a number of those in the scholastic and honors categories, and then—to make up for lost time—scheduled summer sessions where the real work would begin. Week by week we studied harder, both in class with him and on our own in smaller groups, and gained the momentum that came from believing we had at least a fighting chance. 5

When we met for one of our thrice-weekly sessions on my birthday, in mid-July, my new teammates surprised me with a cake—and by then, that's what they had already begun growing into: a team (not a cake.)

We drank Snapple, we studied late, we dared to fear losing<sup>10</sup>.

When our wishes came true, when nine decathletes<sup>11</sup> and a coach again became a family and this time I was one of them, I remembered those early days, mistakes and motivations, and counted as a great blessing this second chance at the chance of a lifetime.



*Dani Bully*  
a.k.a. DemiDec Dan



<sup>9</sup> I have no clue why his political affiliation mattered in the first place, though I suppose the former Communist Bloc did have some very disciplined and medal-winning Olympic teams.

<sup>10</sup> We were also involved in a number of unexpected escapades, among them painting our coach's room, replacing a desk with a toilet, and getting accosted by the police—twice. But those are stories for another day.

<sup>11</sup> Well, eight of us, anyway. We adopted the ninth against her will. We should never have cut Ali... but these things happen. You move on. You remember for next time. And you try to win anyway.

# The Fundamentals

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## Name that competition

Your first challenge as a new Decathlete (particularly if you're on an all-new team) will be to choose a nickname for the experience. In Nebraska and in certain regions of California, Decathlon answers to AcaDeca. More often, students refer to it as Acadec. And certain abbreviation-happy areas, such as Rhode Island and Arizona, have removed yet another syllable to make it "AcDec."<sup>12</sup>

One leading contender: a latecomer, "Deca." My friends from El Camino Real's 1998 national champion team introduced it to me that summer, and for me, at least, it strikes a solid balance between the flip and the cool. Try it. "Deca and I went to the movies this week." Or—"Hey, are you trying out for Deca?" Or even—"Deca approves of our dating"<sup>13</sup>.

But ultimately, I can't renounce my allegiance to "AcaDeca." It's what my teammates and I call it when we reminisce, annually, on someone's porch, or huddled around a campfire in a foreign country. It's what it always was to me, even if some of my friends tell me it sounds like a mock fraternity from *Revenge of the Nerds*.

Then again, you might be more interested in knowing *what* the Decathlon is to you, today, than what you ought to call it. If so, read the following:

*In the beginning, the Decathlon was an academic competition in Orange County, California, a free learning experience built upon the twin premises of a diverse team and a diverse curriculum. The founder, Robert Peterson, had originally conceived the idea while a POW in a German camp during World War II. To this day, the Decathlon requires that teams include nine students of three different grade point averages—3 As, 3 Bs, and 3Cs. All competitors have the chance to contribute equally to the team's success—and the teams with the most dedicated lower-GPA members are often the ones that win it all. Nine students, ten events: Literature, Social Science, Science, Math, Economics, Speech, Interview, Essay, Art, Music and "Super Quiz"—the last of which takes place partly in front of a live audience. (And yes, if you were keeping track, you did count eleven events there—once upon a time, music and art were combined, and ever since their separation in the late 90s, the powers that be have "rotated out" one event a year.)*

## Why Should You Do Decathlon?

No single catch phrase could contain the significance of Decathlon for participants across the country. It provides a forum for creative teamwork and for the best kind of friendship, sown in common purpose and strengthened by an ongoing challenge. It teaches, or at least develops, critical thinking skills. It allows you to defeat the bounds of a traditional high school curriculum (admittedly, this largely means containing yourself within the increasingly rigid bounds of an untraditional Decathlon curriculum, but hey, at least it's challenging.)

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<sup>12</sup> This would fly at Stanford, which abbreviates everything: frozen yogurt becomes, for example, "FroYo."

<sup>13</sup> Since so many teams spawn at least one "AcaCouple", at some point this phrase will probably be relevant to you. Even DemiDec has occasional DemiCouples.

And—as indicated in the competition's original mission statement—it gives you the chance to earn recognition from colleges, peers, and parents alike, for your academic and personal accomplishments. Many universities, such as Stanford, accord special credit to participants, especially to those who have done well (demonstrating this usually requires participating in your junior year, ahead of the college application season—but I do know several instances of students who were rejected from, say, Berkeley, and later successfully appealed based on their senior year Decathlon performances.) In my experience, even the president of Casio prefers to hire job candidates with a history of Decathlon achievement<sup>14</sup>. Certainly the president of DemiDec does!

For students who have found high school confining or even boring, Decathlon translates into intellectual liberty and a chance to shine. The relationship with a coach can inspire both parties. Likewise, the close contact between students of different academic backgrounds lends itself to a shared academic adventure in which people come from many places join to walk one (admittedly sometimes potholed) road.

In short, Decathlon means new friends, new thoughts and new opportunities.

*Now that my Decathlon experience is at least partly behind me, I can look back and honestly say that I treasured every passing moment of the time I spent together with my team. Through the good, bad, and ugly moments of the years we shared, I attained a sense of camaraderie with my fellow Decathletes that could genuinely have been attained nowhere else. Through some incredible miracle from above, the odd collection of individuals I had met only three years prior quickly became my closest and most trusted companions. — Robert Pazornik*

## What is DemiDec?

DemiDec is an organization of Decathletes and coaches from the past and present—many of them state and/or national champions—who gather every summer in cyberspace and at Starbucks around the country to create a complete Course of Studies for fellow Decathletes. You can find members of the DemiDec team in almost every state that competes.

Perhaps you would like to join the DemiDec team one day and help us to craft or proof exams, workbooks, resources, games, and other materials. Or, you might want to submit an anecdote, essay or speech for publication. If so, contact us. Send us e-mail at [team@demidec.com](mailto:team@demidec.com), or visit our web site—[www.demidec.com](http://www.demidec.com)—for more details.

## Ten Thousand Battles And Points For Them All

The SAT is scored out of 2,400 points, the Decathlon out of 10,000. There are ten events, each of which allows an individual to earn a maximum score of 1,000. The top two scores in each student category—honors, scholastic, and varsity—are then pooled to determine the team score.

The top team score possible is six times ten thousand, or 60,000 points. For various reasons, over the course of several years, national champion teams steadily moved closer to this total, but as far as we

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<sup>14</sup> True, my experiences working for Casio (as their U.S. strategic innovation leader, of all things!) fall outside the purview of this primer, but if we ever have the chance to meet in person, I invite you to ask me the significance of the phrase, “Mark, do you agree?”



know, none ever scored above 52,500. Lately, scores have been down a bit from those highs. For most local and regional competitions, scores in the mid-40,000s are more than enough to win it all. Individually, the top scores ever achieved are in the low 9000s, and depending on which GPA category and year you compete in, you can medal with a score of anywhere from the mid-7000s to the high 8000s.

The upward trend in scores may have ended in 2001 when USAD instituted a 50/50 split between test questions based on information in the published USAD compendiums and questions based on additional research. Winning scores at the state and regional level hovered around 40,000, while the national winning score was 46,547. Scores rose again afterward, peaking at over 50,000 in 2003, only to fall again in 2004 and 2005. In short, it's impossible to know what to expect from year to year, but always aim high.

In 2005, Decathlon is continuing to require some independent research, although the exact percentage of outside content versus USAD-published material varies from subject to subject and is relatively minimal outside of science. USAD has been, according to one Academic Decathlon state director, "working hard to present materials that are challenging but not obscure."

LOS ANGELES UNIFIED SCHOOL DISTRICT  
Senior High Schools Division  
Academic Decathlon  
Westchester High School/Loyola Marymount University—November 20, 1993

**TOP 10 TEAM SUMMARY**

| OVERALL SCHOOL WINNERS |        |                    | OVERALL SUPER QUIZ WINNERS |       |   |
|------------------------|--------|--------------------|----------------------------|-------|---|
| 1                      | 50,515 | Taft HS            | 1                          | 5,600 | Taft HS<br>Marshall HS  |
| 2                      | 44,681 | Marshall HS        | 2                          | 5,300 | Westchester HS<br>Venice HS<br>Los Angeles CES  |
| 3                      | 43,744 | Venice HS          | 3                          | 5,200 | Gardena HS<br>South Gate HS<br>Belmont HS   |
| 4                      | 43,282 | Palisades HS       | 4                          | 5,100 | Los Angeles HS<br>Eagle Rock HS<br>Palisades HS   |
| 5                      | 42,757 | El Camino Real HS  | 5                          | 5,000 | Garfield HS<br>Van Nuys HS<br>University HS<br>Canoga Park HS<br>Huntington Park HS       |
| 6                      | 41,415 | Van Nuys HS        | 6                          | 4,900 | El Camino Real HS<br>Bravo Medical Magnet   |
| 7                      | 40,684 | Canoga Park HS     | 7                          | 4,800 | Washington Prep HS  |
| 8                      | 39,913 | University HS      | 8                          | 4,700 | Francis Polytechnic HS<br>Franklin HS<br>Chatsworth HS<br>Fairfax HS                      |
| 9                      | 39,295 | North Hollywood HS | 9                          | 4,600 | Sherman Oaks CES<br>San Pedro HS<br>Banning HS  |
| 10                     | 38,673 | Los Angeles HS     | 10                         | 4,500 | Monroe HS<br>Wilson HS<br>Hamilton HS<br>Dorsey HS<br>Jordan HS<br>Downtown Bus/Fash Mag. |

*Sample scores from my own Decathlon year.*

## How Much Does A Decathlete<sup>15</sup> Study?

Lots. But not as much as you might fear. Even the most successful teams admit they spent nearly as much time playing as they did working. My own national champion team painted rooms, kidnapped toilets, cloned school keys, decorated classrooms, rode a homecoming float, built a wall, and shared lots and lots of meals. The 1998 national champions, down the street from Taft at El Camino, had just as wild a time. One trademark El Camino activity: in Los Angeles, restaurants are rated for their cleanliness on an A, B or C scale. This grade must then be displayed in the window so that potential diners know the kitchen conditions. The El Camino A students...acquired...an A sign, the B students...acquired...a B sign, and the C students...well, the C student story is a wee bit more complicated, but now they own a C sign too.

When I visited the Granada Hills team last year before the state competition to work with them on their speeches and interviews, it's true that they were staying at school till 2 am—but it's also true that for the last hour, several members were just hanging out on the sofa.

One thing to keep in mind about decathlon, then, is that no matter how serious the competition becomes, you and your team will almost always find a way to relax and have fun, to be crazy, be courageous, and be spontaneous.

As an Academic Decathlete, you'll probably want to spend at least an hour a day, either in a formal class or after school, preparing for the competition. During the month before you compete, you

<sup>15</sup> For several generations, this subheading had a typo – Decatlete instead of Decathlete. Special thanks to Melanie for eradicating it at last! This is no longer a Decatlete's Primer. – Daniel



might devote even more time to it—three, four, even five hours a day. Many decathletes live, sleep, eat, and breathe their curriculum booklets in the two weeks before competition. It's hardly unheard of for teams to meet on weekends; many schools also run programs during the summer to get a head start. A typical summer schedule at a serious competitor in Los Angeles, such as at recent upstart Granada Hills or at the infamous El Camino Real, might include three meetings a week for four to eight hours apiece; teams usually focus on one event at a time. If the team isn't set yet, this is also a good time for the coach to begin choosing who will make the final roster.

Much of your time as a team will be spent teaching one another important concepts and information. You might take practice tests and review them collectively—a good tactic for directly improving scores—or you might buckle down at separate desks and review packets or textbooks on each of the events. You could divide into groups and attempt DemiDec's workbooks, or proceed on your own through the Scimitar TestBanks. Whatever you do, you won't have any choice but to bond<sup>16</sup>.

At some schools, the program is very intense. You may be asked to give up most or all of your other activities in order to focus on Decathlon. Elsewhere it is less rigid, with fewer team meetings and more independent study. But whatever the level of focus, you will find that your social life begins to include things like flashcards or impromptus that really are impromptu (see Robert Pazornik's story later on in this resource). You will begin to crack jokes about art and astronomy or economics<sup>17</sup> and empires. You may even end up as a member of your team's AcaCouple—Decathletes are no strangers to romance (all those late night "study sessions"...) The typical team tends to sport at least one relationship. And some romances can even defy the barriers *between* rival teams, as evidenced by the account below, from Dawn Perlnor of Acton-Boxborough Regional High School in Massachusetts.

*My boyfriend was on a competing team. We traded team secrets, but mostly we looked forward to seeing each other at the meets (neither of us had a driver's license or a car, even though we were high school seniors, and we lived too far away from each other to walk or get our busy parents to drive). My team was the defending champion; we had been to nationals for 7 years in a row. His team was determined to beat us, even though it was their first year ever in Decathlon. But they had beaten us already in math team and science team, so they thought they could do anything. At the regional championships (the November meet) it was very close, all right.*

*As I said, they were good at math and won most of the math medals, but I was a math person too, so I did quite well also. In fact, I got the gold medal as a scholastic for math, but no sooner had I gone up to take it than he was called as a tie. I was so happy I gave him a hi-five as he walked up to receive his award. His team was very confused since they didn't even know we were going out. Eventually, they got to the overall awards and they were calling top scorers in the scholastic category. A teammate of mine was number three. Then, they got to two and it was him. I was happy for him, but also jealous, until they called number one... and it was me. I don't think I was ever so happy to win something before, to know that it was so close and that I had still managed to beat him. In the end, his team was only nine hundred points behind us, and they gave us such a fright that we studied very hard for the state meet, and ended up winning it by six thousand points!*

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<sup>16</sup> Though I've been told that bowling accelerates the process.

<sup>17</sup> I remember trading pickup lines based on the curriculum with my teammates. The one that started it all was from econ – "my demand for you is *perfectly inelastic*". – Kevin

*I learned several things from this experience. First of all, there's nothing to motivate doing well like going out with a member of a competing team, as each person seeks to impress the other and yet beat them; it's pretty interesting. Secondly, a math-and-science school can't cut it at Decathlon by relying only on their own core strengths. His team swept the math event at states, and yet they only came in third overall, and they did quite badly in the essay and speech events. (They did win the new-team award, though, by a landslide.) Thirdly, competing with your significant other can strain a relationship! We broke up a week later at the state science team meet (I guess because I don't like losing; his team won by a landslide for the second year in a row, and they were so obnoxious and arrogant about it!) But this story has a happy ending...we ended up at the same university and now we're back together because, and this is the fourth thing I learned, a good relationship will last...if you really love someone, it will work out somehow, if you keep an open mind and don't let other things get in the way. So if you love Decathlon, if we all love Decathlon enough, it will last forever...*

Even across the years and between different teams, even when your coaches are foes and your Decathlon traditions mutually exclusive—even then, you might stumble into a little something worthy of a Disney song, if not exactly a Mozart symphony.

## **Are There Any Drawbacks To Decathlon?**

Your family may not see you for extended periods of time. Some of your non-Decathlon friends could mistakenly (or not so mistakenly) conclude that you've withdrawn into a very strange alternate reality—and to be honest, if you really throw yourself into the program, it may take a while to reclaim those friendships when Decathlon is done. On a lighter note, you're bound to start humming Haydn or Beethoven in the hallways. And closer to competition, you might find yourself studying during lunch—or delivering impromptus at movie theaters as a novel sort of “pre-show entertainment.”

The greatest drawback—or benefit—to Decathlon could well be that the rest of your classes—indeed, all of high school!—may begin to seem limited and limiting by comparison. You will start quoting Levertov and maybe even Jessica Raasch in your English essays; you will explain to your AP Economics class how the Roman free market system worked—all this, to the amazement and befuddlement of your instructors and peers.

Even your first year at college will seem less challenging once you've prevailed over the scope and depth of a Decathlon curriculum.

## **Will Decathlon Get In The Way Of My Other Studies?**

*I'm taking five AP classes, and it's important that I continue to receive high grades so I can go to an Ivy League school. Should I risk doing Decathlon?*

Decathlon can be, and often is, all-consuming. Nevertheless, from what we've observed, the typical Decathlete's grades actually *improve* while participating in the Decathlon. “I was a varsity on the El Camino team [that won nationals in 1998], and my grades were never as high as they were during my senior year,” says Elana Pelman, national varsity gold medalist, who later graduated from

Brandeis University<sup>18</sup>. Indeed, schools often lose returning varsity and scholastic students to the GPA rules, as they slide into a higher category after a year of decathlon.

Who knows? It could be that the rest of high school becomes less of a challenge when measured up against the Decathlon's ten events—or that Decathletes have a good influence on one another.

As for Advanced Placement Exams, Decathlon proves extraordinarily beneficial to those who take the tests in math, economics, art history, and language and literature. Many Decathletes attempt the AP Economic exam even without having taken a formal AP Economics course. Similarly, the SAT II in mathematics will seem far more manageable after you've finished practicing for the Decathlon math event.

## Is Decathlon Worth It?

In the end, you will have to decide for yourself. But at DemiDec, we strongly believe that Academic Decathlon was—is—worth everything that we put into it: our lives, our energy, our sanity, and, for a time at least, our souls. And we think that if nothing else, it's worth a try.

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<sup>18</sup> And married someone she met on her first day there.

# Roles to Fill

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## Varsity: It's Not A Joke

*Being a varsity competitor is a truly unique experience. It was great for me because I didn't have to be a straight "A" student in order to compete. In fact, that's one of the great parts of Academic Decathlon: everybody has a chance and becomes an equal part of the team. The main thing I learned in Decathlon was teamwork, how everyone pulls together and works towards a common goal. Decathlon demands the best out of students and lets them use it in unique ways. The most meaningful part of decathlon, in my opinion, is meeting and getting to know new people. Whether it is through introducing them to teammates, competitors, coaches, or sponsors, Decathlon gives us students a chance to expand our horizons and creative fields. I know I will never forget the people I've met during my years of competition or the lasting friendships I've developed with my teammates and coaches.*

Julie Roberts, Pine Tree High School, Texas

Varsity students can be the most extraordinary Decathletes of all. Ryan Ramlow, Robert Magee, Chris Harbster, Chris Huie, David Rookhuyzen, Brian Cama—all of them varsities, and, for fifteen minutes at least, legends at their respective schools. Often, outstanding varsities find themselves outscoring their counterparts in other divisions—in 2002, one was the highest scoring Decathlete at the national competition. Some have described the ideal varsity as a gifted underachiever whose passion for learning comes to life in the Decathlon's open, competitive environment or (more cynically) as the kind of student who tests well but doesn't like doing homework or the like and gets 'C's or lower.

Curt Canaday, the coach of 11-time state champion Mountain View High School in Arizona, tells such students this:

*If you want to have the varsity mindset in five other classes, that's fine. But if you take the varsity mindset into Academic Decathlon and slack off there, it's not just you anymore—you're letting eight other people down. So turn off the TV; turn off the video games. Study an hour a night—start there. But you need to put effort into this program because eight other people are counting on you.*

As a varsity student, you can gain points in math. Sit down with a math expert, whether teacher, teammate, or friend, and work on your math skills. Also, strive to get perfect scores in the Super Quiz relay. Like excellence in math, this will set you apart from many of your competitors. Many times, varsity students work too much on the subjective events and place themselves at a disadvantage in other areas. While it is essential to score well in these events, if you are to succeed, you must also study for the tests. You may also find that focusing on one event at a time may be a good strategy to take. Using this method, you can raise your score by as much as a hundred or so points at once and then move on to intensive study in another area.

Whatever you do, remember that you don't have to fit the stereotype of the lazy or disinterested varsity. If you work and work and work, you can score well, accomplish a lot, and end up with an experience worth having. And maybe, along the way, you might just surprise a few people who thought "'C' students" couldn't achieve anything worthwhile.

## A Mandate For Scholastics

Scholastics are like middle children—the honors get all the attention because of their starring roles, and the varsities get all the attention because—well, they're varsities. Meanwhile, the scholastics blend into the background and sometimes get lost in the shuffle. But the fact of the matter is that a good scholastic can make the difference between the team that wins and the team that finishes second. The key to being successful in scholastic is in the next section of this primer—the honors section. So what if your grades aren't quite as high as your counterparts in honors? There's no reason you can't compete with—and even outscore—they. You shouldn't hold yourself to a different standard.

That is the mandate for scholastics. Don't use your lower GPA as an excuse. Don't sell yourself short because you have some 'B's and 'C's. Don't be intimidated by the honors category. Instead, challenge them. Match their intensity in study and preparation. Work harder than they do. Aim to beat them. That's the best advice we can give.

You can nevertheless take advantage of the lower expectations for scholastics to win medals and gain points on other competitors. Shine in the subjective events; work toward gold medals on your subject tests. And at the end of the day, you can make the difference for your team.

## High honors, high expectations

No choice. To make a difference, you've got to try your best to break 8,000, even 9,000 points, and at the very least, you need to match your competitors from other schools. Erika Vause, Nancy Fu, Greta Baranowski, Erin Hutchinson, Andrew Miller—these are among your peers who have gone the distance, all scoring 9,000+ points. You can check out [www.acadecscores.com](http://www.acadecscores.com) for more examples. It may seem difficult to distinguish yourself at the top, but with attention to detail and a focus on victory, you can do it. Hold yourself to an improbable standard. Aim for perfect thousands in your subject tests. Make the judges laugh, cry, and gasp in astonishment in your speeches, interviews, and essays. Read the material, and teach it to your teammates. Practice doing your best, and then do a bit better when it counts. You have to give your all to the competition and to your team. Curt Canaday says:

*At some point, outstanding honors students will make a sacrifice. During the competition season, you have to make AcDec your priority. If this means that you get a B on a test or in a class because you didn't have time to prepare, so be it. It's not the end of the world. During the first semester, go ahead and maintain your grades—but maintain your study habits as well. And when the second semester comes around, go all-out. Sacrifice. You do what you have to do.*

When it comes to competition, remember that everyone faces the same tests, and when you compete in the subjective events, you're going up against people whose academic record is probably as impressive as yours. This means that you can't relax your standards at all. Grant Penrod, a national silver medalist from Mountain View, explains:

*I found it best not to think of the GPA distinctions for testing purposes since competing with scholastics and varsities proved very helpful. Furthermore, the subjective events require honors students to discourse on a more intellectual level, but thinking about it really gets in the way of fluidity. It's best to just go in with the idea of being as good as you can possibly be.*

You cannot apply this standard haphazardly. Many times, honors competitors with four or five (sometimes more!) event medals find themselves with lower overall scores than their counterparts who have won only one or two. The difference? While the first group is busy working to shine in certain areas, the second group is working for *all* of them—so, when the first group mixes medals with disappointingly low scores, the second group scores in the top ten or top five in most or all of the events, even if they miss most medals by a question or so. So don't forsake the events you hate to study events you like better; you must strive for perfection in everything.

Most of all, make sure all your teammates are holding themselves to that standard too. Prematurely broken is the quest of the 9,000-point Decathlete who never goes to nationals because his team didn't win a state competition. Thus, you must challenge your teammates to outstudy, outwork, and outscore you, and then you must study as much or more and work as hard and score as well as they do. You must set the example. Sometimes, you can use the knowledge you've accumulated to advantage, tutoring a less advanced student in math, for example, or answering questions about subjects you've studied more comprehensively. But you must hold yourself responsible for the success of the team as well as your own success.

## **The stagehands: Alternates and support team**

Now, it is time to address the importance of the behind-the-scenes players in the Academic Decathlon game: alternates and support team. Alternates vary from state to state, even from city to city. At all competitions, only the top two students in each category "count" toward the final team score, and the third in each category is designated the alternate. You can never know in advance who that alternate will be, so everyone competing must try as hard as possible.

In some areas, there are also alternates that can compete for individual medals. Sometimes, they can step in to replace teammates who become ill or drop out. The occasional region even allows one school to send in two or three teams of nine—often, with one team composed of younger students who are being groomed to take over when the seniors graduate.

It's easy to think that if you didn't make the team, you don't have to care about the results anymore. But oftentimes, the support group—those who didn't make the team, sometimes those who didn't even try out—can make things much easier for the competing team and the coach by compiling research, helping with tests, or just generally being available to work. However you end up supporting the team, do it wholeheartedly. There's no other way.

## **Returning members**

Earlier in this section, I noted that honors students often find themselves in leadership roles. While this is true, returning members are usually almost guaranteed a leadership role. If you've done the Decathlon before, your experience with the competition makes you a focal point for the team. They look up to you and what you've done.

This means that you have to be a leader. You must take responsibility for pointing the team in the right direction. You must share your experience with your teammates. You can tell them which study materials and practices worked for you. You can tutor them in events like economics or art, where you already have the background in fundamentals by virtue of the time you've already

spent in the program. You can tell them how USAD writes its tests, how the speech and interview rooms are set up, how the relay works. You have knowledge that will help them, and you should share it with them.

Whatever category you're in, you need to help your coach shape the team. Because you've been through it all already, you know what to do. And that makes you an invaluable resource to everyone involved. But if you shirk your responsibility, you're letting everyone else down. So take the role you need to take—step up and lead.

## Do You Need To Be A Genius?

Of course not. Decathletes must simply be devoted and hardworking, and many have a special flair for taking multiple-choice tests<sup>19</sup>. In a certain way, all Decathletes are prodigies if one judges by their willingness to confront the curriculum and conquer it. On the other hand, it *does* aid a Decathlon team to possess a superstar or two, someone who leads the way—as described by two-time New Mexico state champion Grant Farnsworth in this excerpt from his own primer on the Decathlon.

*One or two truly outstanding students are beneficial, even more than their scores indicate. They have an incredible effect on the other team members. There are quintillions of schools whose team members consider the cool behavior to be winning without studying. This may be cool, but it is not the path to victory. When there are one or two examples of truly dedicated students who spend long hours studying or show signs of real intent to win, they can inspire and pull along the whole team. For instance, on our 1997 team (an outstanding one by our standards), there were 4 people who were really serious about AD. They inspired one another and the rest of the Decathletes. The opposite of a good team member is one that has ability, but publicly shows apathy for the subject. He can hurt the motivation in the good students and generally will not excel. I therefore do not recommend the presence of too many alternates. There should be a maximum of 12 students involved in AD. Alternates, after all, do not need to study. When the team consists of only a small, select group of students, there is a great cohesive force that binds them all together. Their minds combine to achieve not just the sum, but the product of their individual capabilities.*

## You're All In It Together

The best attitude to have with your teammates is a friendly competitiveness. Internal competition often has the effect of raising everyone's scores. So hold your teammates to the highest of standards, and make sure that they hold you to that standard. Try to beat each other—it's fun, and challenging, and the best part comes when you end up beating other competitors as well.

While groups will tend to form on teams—a trio of close friends, or a couple—the team should not become so fractured that relationships are strained. Remember, there are nine of you all working

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<sup>19</sup> Students from Arizona's Corona del Sol High School ran an experiment to try and confirm this. Two students, one who "guesses well" and one who "guesses badly" were told to write a series of ten letters down at random from the choices A, B, C, D, or E. The "guesses well" student scored 60%, while the "guesses badly" student managed to match probability with 20%. The implications of this are debatable.



toward the same goal. You can't go to state or nationals by yourself. So work together, study together, and be a team.

When Curt Canaday hands out the binders of study material every year, on the front of each one is a classic quote from Yoda:

**Do or do not. There is no try.**

In other words, don't use "I tried" as an excuse. Study instead of trying to study. Read the material instead of trying to read it. Put everything you have into this program, and even if you fall short at the end of the day, you won't let your team down, you won't let your coach down, and you won't let yourself down.

# Preparation

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## How to prepare

Study, study, study...but don't just study. Talk about it. Live and breathe Haydn and the life cycle of main sequence stars. Let the intellectual romance of Decathlon sweep you off your feet.

Our recommendation is that you begin by carefully reading necessary resources in each event. This may mean primarily conducting your own research or relying on a combination of USAD's booklets and expanded outlines with resources from DemiDec.



To make sure that your focus is meticulous, divide into small groups, and explore DemiDec's workbooks, collections of exercises and activities in each event. They require that you pay attention to everything that matters—and while workbooks aren't necessarily the only or best way to memorize, we like to think that they help you learn and retain.

As you finish each section of an event, take a focused exam in it—not just to assess your comprehension, but also to guide your further studies. Review exams either as a group or on your own. Each method has its advantages—one allows you to teach one another, the other permits you to advance at your own pace. Generally, at the beginning of your preparation, you should review collectively, moving toward increasingly individual work as the months pass. And just keep reading, over and over again.

## What Do Penthouses And the Letter M Have in Common?

I've had the chance to visit many successful Decathlon teams over the years, and they all have a lot in common—from coaches that care, to long hours spent taking tests. But one thing you might not expect is that almost every one of them has a *special place to study*.

Some examples: the team from Catholic Memorial in Wisconsin has an enormous library, as do the Decathletes of West High School in Torrance, California (their library isn't just large, but also round.) The recent national champions from El Camino Real have the top floor of a school building, which they dub "the penthouse." It offers special features such as closets and balconies where decathletes can demonstrate they are not afraid of heights.



***Between the city and state competitions, we painted our classroom Red Onion Blue and decorated it with maps of our social science topic, Eastern Europe.***

As for my own team—we had all of what our school's imaginative planners had titled "M Building." In addition to our time spent as a team, each of us studied at least an hour a day in a

separate room in that building, alone or with just one other person for company. This helped minimize distraction. To make sure everything was going well, I would wander down the hallway waving a meter stick and asking what everyone wanted for dinner<sup>20</sup>.

## Forget Track Meets, Track Scores Instead

Take practice tests, and then measure yourself against your own past performances. Our coach kept our scores posted on the wall and calculated our average scores over time, our best scores ever, our most recent scores, our scores compared to the previous year's team, our scores compared to his team in 1989, our scores compared to one another, our scores compared to the election results in Florida—in short, he empowered and drove us with statistics. This year, DemiDec is introducing online testing with score tracking, which should be available by the time (or soon after) you read this. If you have a chance, please give it a try.

## Too Many Medals? Blame It On The Parenting

Early on, my own coach compared parents to a “second team” that would stand behind us at every step along the way. He even called them all in for a special session in which he explained to them the challenges we would all be facing, and asked them to be patient and flexible with us. This helped enormously when the hours grew long and the mischief more involved. Similarly, if your parents wonder why you are putting so much time into this program or set down rules preventing you from studying with your teammates, be sure to put them in touch with your coach or to provide them with reading material that explains what this program is all about. In the end, they usually understand. Try to enlist your parents to help you by providing houses to study in or food, or any kind of support.

## Every Point Counts: Making The Final Cut

How will your team be chosen? It varies from school to school, of course, but in general there are two approaches: either the team is selected based on performances at a November scrimmage competition, or it is selected much earlier on the basis of performance on practice tests and subjective events. Some coaches give more weight to factors such as effort and team chemistry; others are purely score-based. Because only the top two scores in each category count, it's not uncommon for a team to compete with only two students in one or more of them—usually varsity.

The Mountain View team in Arizona, which took second at nationals in both 2004 and 2005, reputedly has a novel method for *revealing* the team selections. On January 1 (later than at most schools), the 12 prospective team members are divided into groups of three and sent to different classrooms. Each group contains one honor, one scholastic and one varsity competitor. One of the coaches then enters each classroom and says, “Congrats, the three of you are in, and here's why,” or, “The three of you won't be competing... and here's why<sup>21</sup>.”

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<sup>20</sup> And also removing visiting significant others. Though it occurs to me now that they always returned eventually.

<sup>21</sup> This is clearly laying the groundwork for a new reality TV show, *America's Decathlete*.

# Event By Event

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## A Note

Each of the tips in this section was contributed by a former Decathlete who has been successful in the specific event or in the Decathlon in general. We hope you will be able to emulate their success as you take advantage of these tips in your own study. For more detailed tips and help that is specifically tailored to this year's curriculum, we recommend DemiDec's Resource Kits.

## Art Fundamentals/History

Visuals are always helpful. The more demonstrations you can get, the better. Have an art expert give a slideshow that takes a chronological look at art history with representative pieces. Find examples of various techniques. The better you can visualize the art, the more you will know, and you will be better able to answer questions as a result. — Kevin Teeling

Go through the art basics packet and try to make up your own questions—you'll realize there are only about 40 they can pull from there that aren't completely obvious. — Craig Reeson

## Art, Selected Pieces

Even if you have study materials to guide you, it always helps for an expert, such as an art teacher, or a practitioner to go over the pieces individually with you. While the facts on paper might teach you a great deal, assistance from a trained professional adds a unique degree of comprehension that is difficult to attain by any other means. — Robert Pazornik

Last year, to learn the artists' life and artwork, I read each one and then tried to write out my own version of it similar to the USAD one. I then went through and reread the packet and added in the parts I missed. After that, I almost never missed a question on an artist/artwork. — Craig Reeson

## Economics

Use non-AcDec materials to study for the micro and macro sections. Probably the best materials are those that focus on the AP Econ tests; my team had success with the Princeton Review books; others have used Cliff's notes or Barron's to good effect. An excellent book to use for a general picture of economics is *Economics Explained*, by Robert Heilbroner and Lester Thurow. — Kevin Teeling (multiple medals in economics, including a state gold)

My team had great success sitting in circles of about eight to twelve members and going through an economics textbook together; many of us used Baumol and Binder's *Principles of Economics* or the HBJ Outlines, which are shorter but still hit all the testable information. The key was talking things out, making clear what was common sense and what had to be thought about hard and long. — Daniel Berdichevsky (gold medal in economics at nationals)

## Essay

Get inspiration from outside sources on the Super Quiz topic, especially the introduction or afterword in a book where the author usually offers insightful commentary on the subject's significance. You might come across a really great phrase that captures the essence of astronomy, and you can incorporate it into your essay. — Connie Yu

Several teams have told me over the years that they use metaphors to “frame” their essay-writing. As for me, I went for a combination of memorable phrases and legible handwriting and also wrote my outline in the margins to make it clear to judges that I had planned something in advance. — Daniel Berdichevsky (silver medal in essay at city.)

## Interview

This may seem off the wall, but it definitely worked for me. I was once told that when you walk into your interview, your goal should be to make the judges want to take you home to their child. Logically, you want to make the same impression as when you talk to your date's parents—you want to come across as responsible, mature, and someone they feel good and safe about their child spending time with. I ended up with a perfect score in interview at Nationals in 2002! Not too bad a way to go out. — Jeffery Vautin

Make sure that you actually have something meaningful to say about everything on your resume. If it helps, think of things to say about each thing you wrote down, and then adapt your response to the actual question your interviewer poses. If your interviewer asks a multi-part question, make sure to answer all the parts. "Because" should be your favorite word, since it allows you to expand the fatal yes-or-no answer to a more in-depth response. Maintain eye contact and make sure to distribute the amount of attention you give each interviewer equally. Judges like honesty, not perfection. Don't be afraid to have a sense of humor or to be self-deprecating. Having flaws doesn't make you flawed—it makes you human. — Cherry Miao (who has scored a perfect 1000 in interview at the state level)

I agree completely with Cherry on the self-deprecating angle; I found displaying humility and a sense of humor to be very helpful no matter who the judges were. But speaking of who your judges might be, be sure to practice with a number of different panels. Parents make great volunteers as well as other teachers at the school; even community members... don't just practice your interview with people who already know you. — Daniel Berdichevsky (gold and silver medalist in the interview event.)

## Lang/Lit—Critical reading

From my experience, the critical reading section goes better under as little pressure as possible since a rushed reading leads you to skip details and restrict your view of the selection. Poetry and novel questions are fairly cut-and-dried by comparison. Thus, I prefer to leave those as the section to fill the time remaining after I finish the critical reading since I can rush them without as much trouble. — Grant Penrod (who won multiple Lang/Lit medals, including a nationals gold)

Try to make sure your answers are consistent with one another. If you decide the tone of the passage is "aggressive," then your other answers should fit this (perhaps the author is writing an "argumentative piece.") If your answers seem inconsistent, reread the passage to try and clear things up one way or the other. — Daniel Berdichevsky

## Lang/Lit—Novel or Drama

The more you read the novel or drama, the better you understand and remember it. Write down key quotes; outline the plot; profile the characters—all of these will help solidify the story in your mind. But ultimately, no review or outline or anything like that will substitute repeated reading. — Kevin Teeling (who medalled in Lang/Lit at every competition he was in)

I have read *A Tale of Two Cities* enough times that I could have written a tale of four cities in the same amount of time. So I agree with Kevin: read, read, reread. — Daniel Berdichevsky (who doesn't remember quite, but believes he medaled in Lang/Lit at all his competitions too.)

## Lang/Lit—Poetry

Memorize the shorter poems. For the longer ones, memorize the most important lines. Know how to identify sound patterns and figurative language; USAD loves to throw in questions about both of those. You don't have to know everything about the poets themselves, though; USAD will test you almost exclusively about the selected poetry. — Kevin Teeling

Try writing a few lines in the style of each poem. You'll internalize a lot about the structure, approach, and message. — Daniel Berdichevsky

## Math

The math test is an individual, not a team, test. Treat it accordingly. It has been my team's experience that the only way to improve an individual's math score is to have him or her spend some time alone with a personal instructor. While preparing for this competition as a team might be a noble idea, it is nearly impossible. You will invariably find that each member of the team possesses a different level of math skills, and general teaching becomes redundant. — Robert Pazornik

The only thing that can be said is to practice, practice, and practice some more. Math is the only objective test most years that is not simply recalling information. Instead, it is a test of your ability to realize what concepts could be useful in solving a problem and applying those concepts correctly. You won't see "State the quadratic formula", but you could see "Solve for  $x$ ..." where knowledge of the quadratic formula is a necessary key to solving the problem. Another thing is to know your calculator. Does it follow order of operations? How do you do an arcsine? a secant? Spending precious minutes battling your calculator is a far worse use of time than pondering that last difficult question. Finally, a two-pass system works extremely well for the math event. Do the questions quickly, skipping those that you don't see a solution for in a minute, then go back through the whole test, even the questions you did, and double-check your work. (Bubble in answers on the answer sheet in the second pass, so there's less likelihood of filling in a wrong

answer. There are always a few tough questions. You should have the last five minutes to spend on those last questions, and, if necessary, the last minute to put down a final guess (or guesses). — Yuliy Pisetsky (who has medalled multiple times in math, including two perfect 1000s)

To be successful in the Math portion of Academic Decathlon, you have to practice. The key in Math for USAD is not how much math you know, but the ability to perform errorless math. Math is probably the only subject in which a good background in high school math will help you to succeed. Use the DemiDec Math Workbook in conjunction with the DemiDec Math Resource to get an "idea" as to the advanced material so that you will recognize it if it comes to an exam. Our 2004 Team worked with our AP calc teacher (even those of us who were not in calculus) to learn differentiation and basic calculus for the decathlon test. A teammate of mine went from a score of 480 at our scrimmages to 880 at regionals with a silver medal to boot. My advice to any person who struggles with math in Academic Decathlon is to work with a *good* math teacher in your building, preferably one who is familiar with your learning style. Many teachers (although ignorant sometimes as to what exactly Academic Decathlon entails) are pulling for you and will help you if asked. One thing I would also add is to not study math with your team all at once. It tends to leave those who are behind, behind and just boosts egos of those who are good at math on your team. Study it one-on-one with someone who knows what they're doing and can show you step-by-step how to do sample problems or explain concepts. Math seems to be one of those subjects that makes or breaks a team. A good math team has a natural advantage over many other teams. Remember that in 30 minutes you must answer 25 questions<sup>22</sup>. So if you get stuck, move on IMMEDIATELY. Come back to it. You're answering as many as possible in 30 minutes. Good luck to all Decathletes in the 2005 season! I wish all of you a friendly season of competition!—Phil Cerami (who has medalled multiple times in math, including a perfect 1000 at 2004 nationals)

## Music Theory

My team treated this topic as a completely separate event of its own—it is far different from general knowledge of musical history. Attempt to employ the help of a music expert / teacher who is knowledgeable in this field. — Robert Pazornik (music gold medal winner)

## Music History/Selected Pieces

We had the assistance of the school music teacher who walked us through each piece one measure at a time, stopping to explain techniques and inserting biographical notes whenever appropriate. This was at the very beginning, but it made a lasting difference in helping us to distinguish and understand our selections. — Daniel Berdichevsky (music gold medal winner)

## Science

I have a tip for science—look at science textbooks for diagrams and other information, as USAD guides do not always explain the information in the best way. This was especially true for the "independent research topics" in Science last year. — Vivian Wu (who has medalled multiple times in science, including silver at 2004 nationals)

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<sup>22</sup> And at the 2005 USAD nationals, there will be 35 questions on the math test. — Kevin



Bring in an outside instructor to orient you, but after that, trust as much as possible in taking exams and reviewing the explanations. This is one event where students with a real strength in the subject at hand can make a genuine difference tutoring those who grasp it less well. Science is more easily shared in this way than math and depends far more on understanding than on nit-picky details. — Robert Pazornik (science gold medal winner)

## Social Science

No matter what type of social science the test covers, it always helps to know your geography. If you don't happen to be an expert in this area, it might help to spend a week or so of your preparation time with an atlas. Last year, my team found that the Nystrom Desk Atlas worked particularly well for our study needs. — Robert Pazornik (social science gold medal winner)

Don't rely on just one source. Read multiple perspectives on the same events and areas; this will help you to interpolate when you come across a question for which you haven't specifically prepared. — Daniel Berdichevsky (social science gold medal winner)

## Speech—Prepared

In this event, success depends on several things, but it all starts with a good speech topic. Also, keep in mind that judges spend an entire day listening to cookie-cutter speeches that tend to be boring and uninteresting. Attempt to spark their interest with a pertinent social topic (sans controversy, mind you) as well as varied movements and tone. — Robert Pazornik

As we all know, those subjectives are just that. You will not know who your audience is, so you don't know what they want to hear. Consider this a double-edged sword. (A speech deriding obesity as a personal problem might not go over well with plus-size judges.) At the same time, you should also be able to say this speech in your sleep. Your teammates will recite your speech for you by the time you've finished with this. (I can still remember bits and pieces of my teammates' speeches, and this is not recent history.) So think carefully when you're writing it because you will take ownership of it. This is the only time you have to really revise it to say exactly what you want to say. However you practice it will be how you perform it. A note on performing as well: You are performing. You will only say this speech once. The judges will only hear you say this once. You will have this down cold, but they will not. (And if you talk like a sleepwalker, well, when was the last time you understood someone talking in their sleep?) For more help, you might want to look up some resources on voice training for actors. You should want to listen to your voice. Projection, enunciation, and the elusive "stage presence" never hurt anyone. (However, it is possible. Another teammate of mine had amazing diction, and projection and was very well trained in theatre...and you could hear him through the walls. He'd give his speech in a room down the hall, and you could hear every word.)—Amye Scavarda

Stand still! There's nothing more distracting to a listener than to watch a speaker who is shifting back and forth. Many people move unconsciously while they speak as a nervous habit. However, when you do, it makes you look like you're not sure of your point and generally detracts from your apparent confidence and preparedness. If you have trouble memorizing, focus on transitions. You'll be surprised how much you can remember if you know the general path of your speech. If you can't remember the exact wording of a sentence or if you mispronounce a word, just keep going.

Very rarely will a judge notice a mistake unless you stop and correct yourself. If you say a word out of order, switch to impromptu mode and get yourself to the next sentence using creative wording, if necessary. I've done this many times at both AcaDec and in speech and debate, and I've never gotten a negative mark on memorization. Find your "comfort position." People have different ways of standing when they're relaxed and speaking. Some people tend to put their hands at their sides while others will keep their hands up. Both are fine, as long as your gestures remain distinct. Find the position that is right for you. If you allow yourself to adopt it, you'll be more at ease during your speech. If you're going to gesture, *gesture*. Don't make half-movements. There's no one else on "stage," so feel free to use your space. If your tone or topic calls for sweeping arm movements, do them. The worse thing you can do is just flail your hand a little bit to "gesture." It's very un-polished looking. — Cherry Miao (two-time state champion in speech)

## Speech—Impromptu

Have something that you know well enough to tie into a large variety of topics, and use this as a framing device for your impromptu. For me, it was *Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy*; teammates of mine used *The Simpsons* or *Seinfeld* as theirs. The best thing you can do is practice over and over again. Use DemiDec's practice topics, or have your teammates make up some, but the only way to become a good impromptu speaker is practice. — Kevin Teeling

Relax and make it through. Practice with light-hearted topics to break the ice, then with serious topics to challenge your thinking on the spot. Don't look at your index card while you speak—after all, how much can it possibly hold? Feel free to be conversational. And again, relax... and make it through. That alone will put you ahead of many Decathletes who freeze at about the minute mark. — Daniel Berdichevsky (national speech showcase bronze medalist)

## Super Quiz

Remember one important fact: you can never ask enough practice questions. Just when you think you've heard enough pointless facts and names, quiz yourself or your teammates on 100 more. Know the guide cover to cover. Also, on a serious note, please do not attempt to cheat, no matter how many teams you see on the test floor with clever signaling codes and devices. Remember that you don't need to employ unethical tactics in this competition to win. — Robert Pazornik

The Super Quiz is the one single event where you know exactly where USAD will find the questions. Your time in Super Quiz is therefore best spent reading the USAD Super Quiz guide over and over again. Break it up into sections—read Section I, or the first two articles, or all the articles written by one person. You don't have to start at the beginning of the resource; often it helps to vary the order in which you read the articles. Know the title and author of each article as USAD often won't give you both pieces of information. And read the material obsessively. — Kevin Teeling (multiple Super Quiz medals)

A couple less-common techniques: (1) record the Super Quiz booklet as a team, then play it on your computer or car stereo. (2) retype the booklet verbatim one page at a time in Word, or create flashcard questions for every sentence in it. — Daniel Berdichevsky (perfect Super Quiz relay scores at nationals and state, back before there was a written test)

## A Final Overall Tip

As far as the subjective events are concerned, give a speech like the judges paid to see you and you're Winston Churchill—confidence is key in speech and interviews. Make a frame for your essays (an allusion to an image that can be split into parts and which you can force each prompt to adhere to, like the roots of a tree; I myself used the story of John Locke's belief in the different parts of the world: the marketplace (economics), the cave (primitive), etc., which could be feasibly molded to every prompt. It should be general enough to be adapted, but it should allow itself to be specific in its application (the cave can stand for our primitive desires, which could denote love, anger, murder, sadness, and lost innocence, for example). As far as the guides, ESPECIALLY in Super Quiz, the most difficult barrier to truly remembering information is reading carefully. This seems easy enough—but in fact it is very hard to recall information like this...the thing that made me truly remember the information was reading the guides out loud to myself, paying full attention and proceeding slowly. It may seem tedious at first, but in fact reading the materials once aloud and slowly was equivalent to reading them in my head ten times. Also, if you are reaching to get the highest scores possible and have a lot of time, make a flashcard for each sentence with fill-in-the-blank spots as a way to filter out what you know from what you don't know quite yet. — Daniel Lenhoff, top overall scorer at 2001 nationals

# Additional Anecdotes

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## Kevin Teeling - Behind The Scores

One day in August, at the beginning of my junior year, I asked my physics teacher, Curt Canaday (who also happens to be Mountain View's Academic Decathlon coach), what he thought of the idea of me doing AcDec. He said he thought I should, so we walked over to his office, and I got a CD (of country music, ugh) and a binder chock-full of material. "You can take the practice tests with us after school," he told me. And with that, I was on my way, though I had no idea where.

The day the team was announced, Canaday came in before school, told us who the team was, and showed us the score sheets. Afterward, he gave us a talk. To me, he said, "You should be doing a lot better than you are. Don't tell me that you can't do well." He told the team, "Stop slacking off, or you're going to lose, and that's unacceptable." Canaday's talk must have worked because we won the regional competition by about four thousand points. Personally, I improved my score by more than 1600 points and was amazed to find myself in second place in scholastic—far more than I had hoped for.

We went to a cabin in Greer for a study weekend, spent with flashcards and materials and a few tests for good measure. But there were also delicious dinners and a nature walk. I remember all of us sliding on the ice, and all of us—eventually—falling down. Then, we went back to school and studied. After we won state, we walked over to the library with the state Decathlon officials and tried to pay attention to what they were telling us about nationals, but it was a good thing our coaches were taking notes because we were too busy feeling amazing.

What I remember from that nationals, other than the stress, is waking up early one morning and walking down to Starbucks with Canaday (who was there when it opened, every morning), Becky Ong, and Robby Prince (the latter two being our team's AcaCouple) and meeting a couple of coaches from the Waukesha team there. There was also the night I spent awake with Kris Holmgren and half the other Arizona team. In addition, I played with the Mountain View jazz band at the awards banquet because the competition was in Phoenix. I took home a Lang/Lit medal; the team won a few medals and finished third in Super Quiz and fourth overall in Division I. That night, I crashed on my bed and thought about the next year. And in a couple weeks, I started getting ready.

I have to admit that although my junior year team was a great team, I liked my senior year team more. Part of this was that the people on my team were people I had known for years—my closest friends, in fact. Well, a few of them were. The rest of them were about to be.

From the very beginning, we wanted to win. When the team was finally made, our study intensity doubled, and our competitiveness only grew. We found ourselves betting with each other about scores. Four of us—Grant Penrod, Greta Baranowski, Todd Decker, and I—were particularly competitive; we called ourselves "the core of four", and we thrived on beating each other. We also thrived on study sessions that devolved into chaos after a bit and such crazy things as our re-enactment of *Far from the Madding Crowd* on top of tables in Canaday's classroom after the performance section of a scrimmage.

Throughout the year, we studied so much, going to school an hour early, staying an hour late, studying all through lunch and the sixth hour AcDec class, and at night. We pretended other classes didn't exist. We did flashcards and tests and practiced everything, including what we called "death impromptus"—only five seconds of preparation time. We all knew each other's speeches, could mimic each other's interview style. We wrote each other's tests showed no mercy, and then turned in answer sheets that looked surprisingly like the keys. David Walser, our Super Quiz expert, found his superhero alter ego in the Super Quiz Resource. Our study materials were constant companions.

As for Canaday, the man was amazing. He posted our scores on the wall and made sure we knew all about them. He bought us food and kept his classroom open seemingly all the time. He talked with each of us as individuals and as a team, making sure we knew what he expected of us—but, more importantly, making sure we were up to the task, making sure we were staying healthy, making sure things were going well. He brought us together as a team and made sure we knew we were a team. In the end, he made the difference between a group of people who were good at AcDec and the AcDec team that we became, and I'm positive our scores reflected that.

Danny Anderson, one of our varsities, needed the regionals scholarship, and our regionals theme became "win Danny a scholarship." The competition was fantastic, especially for me—I medaled in every event but speech; my essay was voted the outstanding essay of the competition; and I finished first in scholastic. Even better, we won Danny his scholarship, among other things. And it felt so much better than last year had felt, particularly when we ended up at Denny's after it was all over.

We survived a blown-out tire to get to the awards banquet at state, where I was so excited to score a 1000 on math that I skipped up to get my medal. We cheered when Kris won speech in varsity after all the hours he had spent making that speech essentially perfect and cheered even more when he surprised pretty much everyone by finishing first overall in varsity. Possibly my favorite moment, though, was walking up with Todd, arms around each other's shoulders, when we finished first and second in scholastic. And then we won, setting a state record along the way, and went home tired but happy.

We arrived at Erie and studied a lot. In the lobby studying, I overheard a Maine decathlete telling his teammate about the "blonde Arizona chick" that had a crush on him—hilarious, because Greta, the only girl on our team, was anything but blonde. The Maine kids and I had a good chuckle over this and then a good chat; all this long after midnight, mind you. Later, I broke a lamp in the lobby in front of Greta and Danny and the Colorado team. The Super Quiz relay came around; we ended up tied with California and Wisconsin for second. Then, we went out to dinner with the state officials and parents who had come and watched Kris perform in the speech showcase. The following day, before the awards, we went bowling. The end result was almost anticlimactic, partially because we had been hoping for more, but also because we had done so much together, and that sure wasn't going to stop. And, really, it hasn't yet.

You see, I got so much more than medals and money from Academic Decathlon. I was exposed to subjects I'd otherwise never have even been interested in—art history, for example, or economics. Or oceanography, for that matter, even if I hated it. I learned how to study seven different things and still keep some kind of perspective on each. And even more importantly, I have friends and memories. I know people in Chicago and California and even from other Arizona schools that I'd never otherwise have met. Sure, I'll remember how we did at the competitions, but I'll also

remember doing a puppet show with Grant and Greta in a hotel room in Erie and giving speeches in restaurants, the quirky little inside jokes that each team had and poorly-timed snowball fights with Josh Basham. I'll remember Becky, David Rookhuyzen, and David Gerber trading jokes, the team kidnapping Greta on her birthday, and the way that when Patrick Rottas couldn't make the end-of-the-year banquet, the rest of us gave his speech—more or less in unison—for him. As I write this, Greta and I have been going out for about fifteen months. When our team accepted the permanent state trophy at the 2004 state competition, eight of the nine team members showed up, and we had a cutout of Walser, the ninth (who was on his mission for the LDS church). When Todd left for his mission, there were six of us at his party. Every time a birthday comes around, five or six of us are there to celebrate. We take classes together; some of us room together. In short, we're still a team, even if we no longer compete together. *That* is what I got from AcDec, and it was worth every minute.

## Robert Pazornik - Because it Sounded Like Fun

Originally, I decided to check out the Academic Decathlon program because it sounded like fun. From what I understood, there hadn't been a team at our school for a decade, so we were pretty much starting the whole operation from scratch, and that appealed to me. Several of my friends, I remember, were originally turned off to the idea of after-school studying and extra testing on weekends, but soon after we began preparing and organizing the team, I slowly began to realize that the Academic Decathlon was about much more than exams and study sessions. Rather, it was actually a place where I would go on to make new friends and form relationships that would last a lifetime. To this day, my friends and I still relate old Orange County Academic Decathlon anecdotes and share an occasional laugh together. But no matter how much we know we accomplished or how far we came, I know deep inside that we wished we could do it all over again.<sup>23</sup>

Until we discovered the miracles of DemiDec and other resources late in the summer, we mostly spent our June-July-early August months researching and compiling information. We also did prepared for impromptu / prepared speeches and the interview events; apparently, our preparation paid off, as we went on to become the highest scoring team in these events at the county level. After receiving preparation materials, however, our strategies of research dramatically changed. Instead of spending time in the library or on the Internet with a voluminous pile of sources and materials, we were instead able to direct our studying regime solely in the classroom, quizzing and preparing our teammates. After class, each of us would take a specific study guide home along with focused and sequenced tests; we would return the next day for more testing and preparation, often spending Saturdays at our coach's house for all-day study sessions.

Since our school's decathlon history essentially began with our team, we were left with the ultimate disadvantage of not really knowing how to prepare for the competition. However, since we were all exceptional students in our own right, we generally took responsibility upon ourselves to thoroughly prepare ourselves on our own time. But in the end, what probably made our team unique in its preparation methods was our coach's personal involvement. Each day, our coach would arrive in class with sample tests he had created at home from the points he had highlighted in the study guides or supplemental materials. He would direct us in speech preparation, music

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<sup>23</sup> Robert has agreed that if he ever figures out how to do this, he will share the secret with me at once. – Daniel

theory, artistic analysis, and any other subject that, until the previous night, he probably had not known well enough to teach. But nonetheless, his perseverance and effort lit a fire deep inside each one of us, a competitive urge that I cannot begin to explain. With the end of each class or session, he would lead us all in a team huddle, and, on frequent, memorable occasions, he would share a classic “I want it more” poem with his inspired pupils. If I could attempt to isolate the most unique part of my decathlon experience, it would definitely be the close relationship we each shared with him.

My teammates and I grew inseparable as our pre-school year summer study days drew to a close. Even outside the classroom, we would constantly quiz each other on music, art, and Super Quiz. Some likened our AcaDeca addiction to an incurable disease. On one particular night, we happened to be heading out toward the local movie theater to take in a flick, *Scream 2*, if I remember correctly. But as it turns out, while Decathletes might be experts in a variety of subjects, time management is not one of them; we arrived at the movie theater half an hour late. Undaunted however, we bought tickets for the next showing, which was scheduled to begin 20 minutes later. So the nine of us filed into the theater, occupying the greater part of the front row, amply prepared to crane our heads in the sore-neck position for the whole of the presentation. However, with nearly half an hour to kill, we needed to find some alternative amusement to occupy our short attention spans. Instantly, my friend had an idea: we would have a round robin Decathlon Q and A session; when someone missed he would be subjected to the ultimate punishment—death by impromptu speech.

We all knew the consequences going in: forgetting the capital of Sri Lanka or the correct number of symphonies Mahler produced in his lifetime would mean standing in front of an entire movie-going audience and delivering a 1.5 to 2 minute unprepared speech on a topic of the team’s choosing. By any standards—not a pretty picture. But throwing caution to the wind, we rejected the possibility that we would personally be subjected to this torture, and we took a few collective minutes to devise our questions.

So the game began. Andrew opened with social science: “What’s the name of the first female president of a Muslim nation?” R.J., sitting to his left, answered correctly: “Bhutto.” He turned to his left and delivered a musical query to Aaron: “Who wrote ‘Horsepower’?” Aaron responded immediately with the correct response: “Chavez.” Aaron, who just so happened to be our resident 80’s pop culture expert turned to his left and asked me, “Who was the lead singer of Culture Club?”

My heart skipped a beat, my mind raced. I hated pop-culture, and Aaron knew it. If only he had asked me what chiaroscuro meant or who invented leitmotif—but my time was rapidly decreasing toward zero. I had to come up with an answer or face the horrible penalty—

“George Michael?” I said, hopefully. The large grin on my teammate’s face told me otherwise. “Nice try—Boy George,” he corrected me. I knew what I had to do. I stood, reluctantly, took a few steps forward, and turned slowly to face the crowd. It was about 10 minutes before the movie was scheduled to begin, and throngs of moviegoers had just begun to fill the auditorium. Though a modest crowd of forty to fifty, I still felt my nerve endings tingling and my stomach muscles twisting.

“Topic,” I demanded.

Aaron looked up. “Reaganomics versus Chernobyl: which was a bigger mess and why.”



I composed my nerves. "Difficult, but not impossible," I silently reassured myself. I stared toward the theatre's high ceiling as I took my full minute's worth of preparation.

"Time—Begin," commanded Aaron.

I took a deep, deep breath, and I heard a stopwatch beep as I began speaking. At first, my tone was cautious, shy—but my nervous delivery eventually developed into a full-scale discourse as the crowd became quiet and stared in shocked curiosity. As I continued through the first lines of my introduction and into the main body of my speech, I could hear that the noisy pre-movie ramblings of the audience had quieted into curious whispers as their surprised ears and eyes focused on the words and face of the strange boy who was delivering a speech of some sort in the front row. I managed to achieve some sort of brief chuckle from the onlookers as I compared Russia's failure to disclose a nuclear disaster to an Alzheimer's induced "memory lapse" of the Great Communicator, and I achieved another when I suggested that toxic nuclear waste had the same "trickle down effect" throughout Eurasia as did Reagan's supposed plans for economic security. By the time I had meandered my way into a conclusion, I began to notice the smiles on the faces of my Decathlete counterparts as I spoke, despite the mildly sadistic theme. When I hit my final word, they stood instantly and applauded as Aaron clicked his timer—"1 minute, forty seven seconds. Perfect."

Though I received only a few sporadic bits of confused ovation from the theatre audience, the enthusiastic words of my friends seemed to be all that I needed. I returned to my seat amidst a sea of backslapping and hi-fives as the game resumed. Fifteen questions and four impromptus from various Decathletes later, the movie began. As the theatre darkened and the film reel began to spin, I smiled to myself and grinned stupidly. Like Decathlon, it was something that I would never forget<sup>24</sup>.

## **Catherine Di Cesare - My Decathlon Team That Lives In Canada**

If you are reading this, you are probably somehow associated with the United States Academic Decathlon. However, despite the name, this program can be found in other countries as well, and in 1982 it found its way into Canada. I am a student who has participated in the Academic Decathlon in Ontario, Canada for two years now (96/97-97/98) on an award-winning team, and I would like to share my experiences with you. The largest aspect of the program we share is that we take the same tests for competition and study the same materials as you. Our speech, interview, and essay judges use the same marking schemes, and the time limits for these events do not change either.

Now, if you were to ask me to point out the differences between the two programs, I could probably write forever. Unfortunately, the decathlon program is not as big in Canada as it is in the US. As a matter of fact, we have very few schools throughout the country that participate, and the number is shrinking annually due to cuts in school budgets across the country<sup>25</sup>. The majority of the

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<sup>24</sup> Robert ultimately worked with me not just at DemiDec but at VentureNova, an Internet appliance venture fund and incubator in the Silicon Valley. We've hiked trails with our respective teammates in Canada and California. We've become friends, in fact, almost as if we, too, had done Decathlon together—which, in a sense, as DemiDec teammates for so many years, we have. – Daniel

<sup>25</sup> Since Catherine wrote this in 1998, the program closed down altogether. However, in 2004 a new team represented Canada at the U.S. national competition, and the hope is that Decathlon will continue to expand throughout the country. – Daniel

teams come from within Ontario, with only one from Alberta and none from any other provinces (there used to be more in Alberta and one or two from British Columbia). Due to the small number of teams it is unnecessary for us to have regional, or even provincial, competitions to determine who makes it to the nationals- everyone goes. Another difference is that nobody has to try out to be on a team because one school is permitted to send 2 (or more) teams to compete if it wishes and if it is able to conjure up enough students. In the late eighties before I even knew the program existed, Burlington Central High School (which is the school I now attend) sent 32 students to the Canadian National Championship: three full teams plus substitutes.

As a result, I feel very lucky that there was a team at my school for my first two years since I have at least had the chance to experience the thrill of working with my peers in the competition.

I first heard of the program in eighth grade when my mother showed me a newspaper article about the team from the high school I would begin attending the next fall that had traveled across Canada to British Columbia to compete in the Canadian National Academic Decathlon Championship. They had won the competition for the second year in a row.

That fall, during morning announcements, I wasn't listening for sports tryouts or for student council sign-up. I kept my ears open for "Any students interested in joining this year's Academic Decathlon team please come to a brief meeting..."

Finally the announcement came. The next day after school, I walked into room 211, across from Student Services, unaware I was about to be thrown into a crazy world of rubber chickens (our mascot) and red Jell-O (someone once went overboard and did a four-minute impromptu on why red Jell-O is the perfect food), not to mention math that was way over my head at the time, books and plays I probably never would have read otherwise, and the task of writing a four minute speech-without any idea of a possible topic. I only knew two other people in the room (a girl in my grade with whom I had gone to elementary school and not seen since and the daughter of my former Brownies leader). At the first meeting, we dove right into the work. The first thing I learned was the horror of impromptu speeches. In order to quiet us down, the coach picked one of the senior students and told him to stand up. I had no idea what was going on. The other seniors sat there with a 'thank-goodness-she-didn't-pick-me' look on their faces while our coach gave out the first practice-impromptu of the year. I forget what the topic was, but the speech only lasted about 30 seconds. I later found out that on the rare occasion that someone wouldn't settle down, they were required to answer, if not the worst, definitely the most embarrassing question in the world: "If you could be a member of the opposite sex for one day, what would you do and why<sup>26</sup>?"

The next week, I dragged two new friends I had made out to the meeting with me. One stayed the whole year and competed; the other vowed never to go within ten feet of that classroom again. Ever.

The further we got into the year, the more work we got. I never did memorize every country and its capital/GDP per year/population/location on a map/whatever else you can think of. I did end up reading *Julius Caesar* exactly one week before we competed, a little late, but my teammates helped me with some rather interesting ways to remember things.

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<sup>26</sup> This makes a good practice impromptu topic, though you certainly won't encounter it at competition. - Daniel

The week leading up to the competition was extremely hectic. My school was hosting the event, and I think I spent more time setting up tables, stapling programs and licking envelopes that week than studying. The Friday before competition, we had set up a day-trip to Niagara Falls for all of the teams. Not one person from my school went; instead we stayed at school, convinced our teachers to give us the day off, and crammed. It paid off: we won the competition and one student, who won a medal in Social Science, said he probably wouldn't have won that medal if not for the cram session.

So ended my first year on an AD team. If you would like to contact me, my email address is matilda\_wormwood@yahoo.com.

## **Victor Leung - And a Senior Shall Lead Them**

This will be my fourth year of involvement in Academic Decathlon—two as a competitor, one as an assistant coach, and this year as a DemiDec contributor. Each year, it has impacted me in a different way.

During my senior year, I understood the competition a little better and was able to enjoy it more than as a junior. Also, I was a returning member, so I was expected to take a leadership role, a role I was apprehensive of at first. I wasn't confident in my abilities. Leadership, however, became a role which I grew to enjoy very much—especially when I would surprise my teammates with calls during the evening making them practice their speeches over the phone, right then and there. And especially when this year, a teammate of mine (a junior then, a senior now) told me she learned almost everything she knew about leadership from me. I suspect she has lots, lots more to learn—as do I!—but that comment was very much appreciated nonetheless.

The Monday before regionals, on a freezing, Martin Luther King Day, the team decided to meet for a speech clinic. My speech was in the intensive care unit. Nothing seriously wrong with the script, but my delivery just plain... DemiDec Dan censored my choice of words here. At one point, one of my teammates (the best speaker among us) stood behind me and held on to my forearms. As I recited my speech for the umpteenth time, she waved my arms in an attempt to create gestures. As she was waving my arms, another teammate wrote down the words that coincided with that particular gesture. It was pretty amazing that she was able to do that, considering the fact she and the rest of the team were laughing hysterically at the sight. Another teammate videotaped the entire incident. I just kept saying my speech. After taking a couple of minutes to learn the gestures, I began anew. Sure, I remembered the gestures and the various voice inflections my teammates suggested, but another problem surfaced. My delivery had been altered so much that I had to constantly think about it, enough to make me forget the words to my speech. I just stood there gesturing wildly, waiting for my teammates to prompt me (which they did without a script themselves). They had heard it so many times that they probably knew it by heart. Anyway, having only three days to learn my speech over again, I said my speech like I've never said it before. At regionals, I was rewarded with a 900.

This past year taught me perhaps the most important lesson of all. Being an assistant coach, I saw things from a totally new perspective. Now, I fully understand how coaches can devote so many hours of their lives just for the benefit of the students. I understand the amount of planning and thinking involved and that nothing is ever left to chance. Sitting in the team room during the test

and in the stands during the oral super quiz was more nerve wracking for me as a coach rather than a competitor.

This year's team was the most star-crossed group I have ever been involved with. Things just happened to go wrong all the time. The sole returning member to the team was disqualified because she earned too many high school credits. An insane rule, I think. During the awards ceremony at regionals, the presenters of the awards had a little mix-up with the score sheets, missing the fact that we placed second. Fortunately, they corrected it after five minutes of discussion, which tested the patience of the restless audience. At dinner later that night, one of the coaches fell and broke her leg. If that's not star-crossed, I don't know what is.

However, through all this chaos, the team was able to pull together and make a good showing at state. From all this, I learned that the most important part of decathlon is not how many medals or how much money one wins, but the people involved. There's something about a team event that can't be achieved or felt with an individual event. The bonds teammates form are special because they require total reliance and trust.

Each year I have been involved with decathlon, I feel that I have grown as a person, and that's one reason why I am looking forward to working with next year's team. Decathlon has been the most intellectually, materialistically, monetarily, and emotionally rewarding activity I have ever been involved in, and I hope your experience does the same for you.

That was my little decathlon story.

## **Chris Olsen - What Not To Do At Competition**

My team and I were on an Academic Decathlon trip to Erie, Pennsylvania toward the beginning of December. We left at the beginning of school on Friday, December 5<sup>th</sup>, and by 10:00 PM that night, twenty inches of snow had fallen.

Like all the other teams, upon arriving, we checked into our rooms and then headed for our coach's room to study. One of my teammates, whom we can call "Ben," asked for the keys to the van because all his materials were in it. Upon his return with a 3-inch binder stacked full of papers, our teacher asked for him to return the keys. As per team tradition, Ben refused to give them back. This was around 2 pm. At about 5 pm, with much heckling from our coach, Ben decided to give the keys back... sort of. He actually gave her his own car keys instead—and kept hers!

You can probably see where this is going.

Because of all the snow, our teacher did not want to drive out to dinner. We decided to call Papa John's Pizza and ask for them to deliver a pizza instead—nothing like Super Quiz to make you hungry. However, because of the snow, they weren't delivering at all.

That's when we realized, "Hey, we have the keys." With this in mind we called back Papa John's and placed a takeout order. Ben decided that he would drive because, after all, he was the leader of the team. I was the only who remembered where Papa John's was from the last trip, so naturally I went along to guide. This was around 9 PM.

The one-mile trip there took about 45 minutes. We could probably have walked it more quickly. Ben drove with extreme caution, and I don't think he broke the 15 MPH mark once. We finally arrived in one piece, paid for our pizzas, and began the perilous journey back to the hotel.

About halfway home, we were forced to stop on a hill due to traffic. When we attempted to start again, the tires turned furiously, but we remained stationary. By the time we got the tires gripping the road again...well, let's just say those tires had seen better days.

Apparently, our teacher had learned of our little escapade during our absence, for when we pulled into the parking lot, there she was, looking out the window at us. She didn't come out, however. To our amazement and relief, we were able to avoid her all night. Unfortunately, in the morning, she called us into her room, and we were subjugated to a stern, and deserved, lecture. She told us that she would have to tell the principal and that she was very disappointed in us.

We were called into the principal's office separately the next day. I received a three-day suspension during which time I was forced to outline 180 pages of Stephen Covey's "The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People." Ben was granted a ten-day suspension, and charges were pressed against him for unauthorized use of a vehicle. He later joined the DemiDec team, but DemiDec Dan didn't let him do any driving.

The moral of the story is: don't let the spontaneity of Decathlon lead you to do something you'll regret. Have fun, but keep good sense in mind, too. True, this particular escapade makes for a good memory—and made us momentarily famous in the local Decathlon community—but it also affected our college prospects. In the end, be fun, be spirited, and, most of all, *be careful with your coach's car.*

## **Karen Harman - Never Give Up**

When DemiDec Dan (my hero!) first approached me with the idea of writing an anecdote of my experiences in AD or giving some advice to future decathletes, a huge smile came over my face. So many ideas and topics, so little space to fit it all into! After all, my former team at the Collegiate Academy knows that I am not a woman of few words.

But, after I weeded through all of the abstract ideas associated with Academic Decathlon, there was only one piece of advice that I could give. It may sound cliché, or simply overused, but in the world of Academic Decathlon, your biggest challenge will be to *Never Give Up.*

This was the motto of our young team at Academy for the past four years. We were a new school, a charter/public school only in existence since 1997. I am a graduate of the first class of the Northwest Pennsylvania Collegiate Academy. The first year that we competed in Academic Decathlon (and in Academic Sports League, a smaller, local brand of Decathlon) we were all freshmen, because there were no upperclassmen at the school. We had to take the mentality of "never giving up" very seriously. We were untested and untried... just 25 novices going up against all the seniors and upperclassmen in ASL. The skeptics said we could never succeed; the skeptics were wrong. Our first year, we advanced to the state competition. True, we did not do too well, but it worked for us. We said to ourselves, "No matter what, we are not going to give up. We can make it to nationals. We can win it all. We are a team, we can do this." We worked and worked and persevered and pushed ourselves harder and harder. Slowly, the critics went away. Slowly, we gained respect.

Slowly, we started winning. At the third competition my junior year, we placed second, much to the surprise and joy of our coaches. We tasted victory, if only a little bit, and knew that it was where we wanted to be. We wanted to be on top of the mountain.

This past year was thus the culmination of four years of blood, sweat, and tears. We took first place in all three local competitions with point margins of victory ranging from 1,000 points to 5,000 points overall. We went on to the state level and learned that a certain team "was not worried about us." We beat them en route to the state championship and a trip to nationals in Anchorage, Alaska. There, we won Rookie of the Year in the third division and earned a fourth place finish. A teammate of mine, John Mushat, won the Kristen Caperton award for overcoming extreme difficulties in his life and finding a way to survive. He never gave up, no matter how much the odds were against him. He fought to win and did. He raised himself up from poverty and became a local hero. He is a role model for Academic Decathlon, and I am so proud to say that he was a teammate and friend to all of us.

I also have a story to tell about never giving up. I could go into my personal life and recite for you my prepared speech from this year, but I won't. My experience in Academic Decathlon was one that might have inspired the Brothers Grimm to write a dark fairy tale. I was very much involved in AD. I would work and read the packets time and time again. I would go to all of the after school practices that our coaches would sponsor; I would work my butt off; I would do *anything* and everything I could to win an individual medal. Alas, for three years, all my efforts were for naught. It seemed no matter what I did, I just could not win a medal, nor could I accomplish that one extra thing that would qualify me to be on the regional or state teams (for the local competitions, I was allowed to compete because more than nine team members could attend; afterward, I would be cut.) For three years, I sat on the sidelines. I watched as our team grew into the powerhouse that it is today. I became discouraged and jealous. I wanted to be the one on stage during the pep rallies; I wanted to be the one on the bus studying with eight of my closest friends instead of sitting in class with my now ex-boyfriend wondering how the team was doing. At times I wanted to give up, but knew that I couldn't. I still had one more year, one more chance to achieve something special. I pushed myself, and then I pushed myself a little harder. I studied, and then I studied a little more. I read a page, and then I would read 5 more. I never lost hope that maybe one day I would be there on stage, receiving a medal and being part of my team for the long haul. And, it happened! I won a medal for music. Sure it was a bronze medal, and sure, my score was only 420, but it was still a medal, *my* medal. I never gave up because I wouldn't let myself give up. That year, I went on to win 14 more medals and join my team in a state championship. I went to Alaska and gained respect, and for the first time, people from my school wanted to be me! All because I never gave up—and became part of a team that never gave up.

In Academic Decathlon, you cannot let yourself be discouraged when it comes to studying or losing. Yes, there may be a powerhouse team in your area that makes winning appear to be a long shot. Yes, you may feel that others are more qualified than you to make the team. But as in life, you won't get anywhere in Decathlon, as a team or as an individual, if you just roll over and play dead. There is always the light at the end of the tunnel, but it is up to you to find it. No one can make you study or learn all those music terms. No one can make you draw those supply and demand curves. You have to do that yourself. It may be hard sometimes to learn, and you may from time to time lose sight of the bigger picture, but I can assure you that all of your efforts are well worth the time. It can be done, and new success stories are written every season in Academic Decathlon. It is all up

to you, if you decide to be a part of it, and if you decide to be that next story. Never give away your chance of winning, never give in, never give up, never, never NEVER give up...

## Anita Fowler - I Was A Crazy Kid

I was a crazy kid that wanted to know everything. I guess some things don't change. However, at the time when my story begins, I would soon be entering a bigger world of knowledge than I ever expected to explore. Academic Decathlon was not yet part of my vocabulary, and the things I was about to learn were beyond the comprehension of my feeble, freshman mind.

It all began way back when. I remember talking to my biology teacher after class towards the end of my first year at New Caney (I stayed after to retake a test; my varsity mannerisms were already beginning to manifest.) I was explaining to her how I would rather have started school sooner than later, even if it meant I would be out of place due to my age. Why? Because I wanted to know as much as I could before I died, so needed an early start. She smirked, without my knowing why, and then introduced me to a man that would be a large part of my future, although I knew nothing of it at the time. After I restated my desire to him, he also smiled and said, "Then I have the program for you."

That was when I received my first glimpse into the world of Academic Decathlon. When I came back the next year, the amount of information that was made available to me was awe-inspiring to my sheltered sophomore mind. The binders and binders of black ink on white pages, new terms like amygdala and pinocytosis, finding out that there are male and female forms of rhyme (what's that all about?!)—it was all dizzying, and I put off reading much of the material until it was too late.

Needless to say, I failed miserably my first year in the program, but I found that the learning was truly something amazing, so I decided to look deeper into it the following year. I started studying sooner in the summer and read the material as it came rather than as one huge, lump sum a month before the team was chosen. My junior year, I managed to make New Caney High School's team and had the privilege of being a part of the third-ranking 4A school at state. It was an exciting time, but there was one thing that stood in the way of real success.

The truth is that the idea of competition troubled me deeply. It was something of which I neither liked nor approved. This prompted many a discussion with my coach, Mr. Moore. However, after making the team my senior year, I began to see that Decathlon was more than a contest and more than a sea of knowledge in which to flounder. This competition brought together nine people with a common goal, circling knowledge, and somehow formed a team. My senior year was when I first realized I had become part of a group of people that wanted something and was willing to work for it, and when I say "work", I mean "work HARD." It started with reading, then moved to after-school study sessions, then to weekends of teammates getting together to go over information and test each other, then to groups staying up late, spending nights at one another's' homes to get in a little more study time before the competition. As all this materialized around me, it struck me that Academic Decathlon wasn't just about the mass of knowledge engulfed by the mind over the course of a year, stored somewhere deep within the cerebellum. No, it was much more. It was about using that knowledge as a team. It was about sharing ideas and goals. I had never experienced that kind of team before. I had never experienced a phone call from a concerned teammate if I went home sick or just to check up on me and make sure I was studying. I had never traded silly phrases with people in order to remember thirteen artists and their paintings before or

enjoyed sitting around, singing horrible-sounding sacred music from around the world. I thought that working with other people to learn and expand upon the knowledge given to us was the most extraordinary experience of my life. But joining them as a team on stage, earning recognition for our efforts, standing before our peers and parents as people who had done everything they could and eaten the elephant, made the experience even more extraordinary.

Because of this, I now know that I don't simply want to know everything before I die—that's impossible, and an extra year of school won't help. But to be able to explore a new realm of ideas and information with other people who also want to learn; that not only offers new knowledge: it also offers insight, a chance to share and a chance to change.

## Cherry Miao - That's Not Cool

Almost no one in Massachusetts knows about AcaDec. When my boyfriend, Reggie, told his father that I was doing Academic Decathlon, his father responded, "Oh, really? So she rides horses and shoots arrows and all of that? That's so cool." Reggie, bewildered, replied, "No, Dad, *Academic Decathlon*," to which his father shot back, "Oh. That's not cool."

As a result of this state-wide ignorance, the Academic Decathlon program at my school, Acton-Boxborough Regional, runs small. I hadn't even heard about the team until I was physically led into the pre-summer meeting by my friend and future teammate, Vivien. There, I was given photocopied Music and Lang/Lit packets, a burned music CD, and was told that I should buy *Far from the Madding Crowd* if I wanted to compete during the year. I don't really remember what made me march into Barnes and Noble to buy the novel, but I did, to sporadic regret and permanent advantage.

In contrast with the other nationally competitive schools, A-B's approach to AcaDec seems almost amateurish. We didn't have a class, a broad support network of faculty, or even regular meetings. The members of our team had eccentric and frenetic lives that made little time for AcaDec. For the week or two before competition, the nine of us would buckle down, of course, but otherwise studying about Romantic music or Transcendentalist literature in ridiculous detail was far from priority number one.

But it was this improbable union of speech and debate champions, mathletes, artistic and musical wunderkinds, and political watchdogs that gave our tenuous little team its staying power and drive. Without the help of outside teachers, we turned to ourselves and each other. Over the course of a season, we turned from a well-rounded hodgepodge to a team of well-rounded individuals as political junkies crammed music theory and mathematicians drilled oratory.

Outside of the realm of competition, the benefits of AcaDec were less tangible than Scantron scores, but arguably more valuable. Our most reserved member proved to himself a wry wit and a discriminating mind once impromptu helped peel away his shyness. As for me, I saw the most difference when I went to art museums. While my companions could simply remark "Wow!" at the sublime beauty of Frederic Church's canvasses, I would share that his pieces were often exhibited in completely dark rooms and viewed with opera glasses and gas lights for even more effect. I had always loved art, but AcaDec taught me how to appreciate it by initiating me into the art world beyond Monet and van Gogh into the sphere of Rosa Bonheur and John Constable, an education that I had hungered for without knowing it until AcaDec spurred my appetite.



In the end, our haphazard crew of nine found its way to the 2004 national competition in Boise. There, we holed up in the accessible, affordable, but un-Aca-ordained Econolodge. We were nine seniors, each into the college of his or her choice, with nothing to prove—except to ourselves. For three days, we read, discussed, and reread information to, at, and for each other. On competition days, we headed out in battle clothes—power suits and dress shoes—united in confidence—at least in each other. We huddled together during breaks to rehash, reassure, and trade "Hey! Remember that?" Together, we filed into the awards ceremony and nervously herded amorphous pools of what had once been potato-shaped ice cream novelties as we cheered for our teammates and fellow competitors. We walked away that night having done better at Nationals than any other team in our school's history: third in Division I, with over 20 individual medals between us. Better yet, we finished our last Academic Decathlon event knowing we had achieved our success on our own terms with nothing for motivation but our own drive, knowing that we had reached beyond our own personal bests to shape a team—and an image of ourselves—that we had never thought possible.

And that was pretty darn cool.

## Melanie Goodman - Three Years Of Waiting

Three years of waiting came down to that night. It held so much possibility, so much opportunity, and promise. It was exciting.

I wanted to throw up. I wanted to scream. I wanted to break down and cry.

What if none of my efforts had been good enough? What if all my hopes and dreams would come to nothing? Sure, there was a lot of possibility, but that meant that the possibility existed for others too.

I was so uncertain. I wanted to know the results of the competition, once and for all. Yet, I also wanted to hide away for a few hours.

My family was there. My friends were there. I was surrounded by words of reassurance and comfort. I could scarcely hear them through the groans of my stomach and doubts running through my mind. Even with all of them present, I felt so alone in that gigantic auditorium.

A year before, I had wanted to give up. I had given Decathlon my all for two years, both times being conquered by my own anxiety and not making the team. My coach begged me to try again, just one more time. When I made it, I told myself I would stick it out, that it would be worth it this time. I told myself that I would be better, that I would show everyone, and, most importantly, myself, that putting me on the team had been the right choice.

In that one year, I worked hard and overcome so much. I was no longer the timid child I had been when I first started Deca. I began to discover what it was like to wake up to a new day and see sunshine rather than hiding promptly under the covers. My life became filled with meaning, purpose. No matter how much I was teased for it, Deca had become everything for me. I had at last grown confident in my abilities and felt ready to face anything, any challenge. Or so I thought.

That night, I wasn't so sure about myself anymore. When the time for awards came, all my fears came flooding back. All my insecurities rushed to the front of my mind. Suddenly, I was twelve

years old again. I was the loner that got picked on. I was the girl who tried hard but was never quite good enough. I had been let down so many times before, let myself down. How could I have won anything? What if the night would be just one more disappointment in my list of many? Perhaps the most painful question: what if I had let my team down?

However, the ceremony wouldn't wait for me to calm my anxiety. Greetings and well-wishes from people nobody knew or cared about were presented atop the ominous, black stage. Then came the first award of the evening. Medals were presented for the top decathletes in interview. My teammates and I watched the screens anxiously searching for our names. Surprisingly, I found mine.

Overwhelmed by emotion, I walked hesitantly to the stage to accept my medal along with a rush of other winners. I continued to wonder if maybe they had made a mistake. When the medal was hung around my neck, all worries eased, and it felt like everything in the world was just right. I was so thankful to get just that one medal. That was all I could have asked for. I was content to go back to my seat to wait through the ceremony and congratulate my friends on their accomplishments. After all, they were what mattered most. They were what got me through that year and taught me to believe.

Hours later, I returned to my seat again, this time with a fourth medal and an honorable mention certificate. The gold, silver, and bronze clinked together, creating perhaps the most beautiful music I had ever heard. Their shine illuminated the dimly lit room. Grinning from ear to ear, my lack of confidence was replaced with a sense of pride.

I had done what I set out to do. My teammates also held heaps of medals and honors. All that was left was to find out how we did as a team. The countdown for the top fifteen schools began. Granada had never made it past eleventh before, and when the number came and went, we breathed a sigh of relief. The counting continued. When the sixth school was called, we all began to wonder and worry again. Lined up in a row, we clasped hands and stopped breathing for just one instant until we heard, "In fifth place, Granada Hills Charter High School." Jumping up and screaming, nothing could contain our glee. The top seven or eight teams had been invited to the state competition, and for the first time in our school's history, we were one of them.

There was more hard work ahead. I would be lying if I said nothing else mattered after that, but regardless, I have never been as happy as I was that night. My personal achievements and the achievements of my best friends all came together to fuel the next month of work. It was a month of adrenaline that resulted in a fourth place finish at states, putting us at sixth in the nation.

How could I stop there? If I didn't give decathlon one last year, one last push to make the national competition, I knew that I would later regret it. Maybe this year, I can top that night. Maybe this time, I won't be so afraid.

## **Ryan Ruby - On Each Trophy, A Picture**

It is ten o'clock. While my peers are just finishing their homework and settling in to bed, I am trudging down the stairs that lead from the penthouse and heading towards the parking lot. Weighed down by pounds of testing material, I exit El Camino Real, followed by eight other

students (who are wondering how much homework is yet undone) and two fatigued teachers (who are wondering how many more papers there are left to grade.)

For the last six months this has been my lot in life: sleep deprivation, red eyes, rattled nerves, coffee black, coffee with sugar and cream, sugar and cream with no coffee, and can after can of Coca-Cola. For the last six months this has been my lot in life: Academic Decathlon. The compensatory factors are practice-test scantrons with no wrong answers, the view of the sunset from the penthouse, the novelty of parking across spaces rather than in them<sup>27</sup>, the hope of success, the eight other students, the two teachers, and unlimited restroom breaks<sup>28</sup>.

For a moment I forget about speech, or art, or science, or whatever it was I was just cramming into my brain, and my mind drifts to a May morning of yesteryear, when unfettered by my present concerns, I walked into Mrs. Owen's Journalism Class and was informed that I had been selected to be a member of the 2001 Decathlon Team. After over a week of testing against some of ECR's best and brightest, and then waiting with them to find out who would be chosen, the news was a relief. A leisurely summer came and went, and it was on a hot August day that my two new surrogate parents, Mrs. Owen and Mr. Cerone; my six new brothers, Aria, Dennis, Scott, Elan, Alan, and Walter; and my two new sisters, Samantha and Grace, began this grueling test of intellectual endurance we lovingly call Acadeca.

Nothing could prepare me for the complete upheaval of my previous life. New words entered my vocabulary. Old words began to take on new meanings. There was *DemiDec* (a company that writes study material for each of the ten Academic Decathlon subjects); *city, state* and *nationals* (the places a Decathlete goes if he or she has been a good boy or girl); *alternate* (the one honors, scholastic, and varsity student whose scores will not count towards the team's total, in other words, the one person no honors, scholastic, or varsity student wants to be); *clearly* (intended response to a difficult question, ex. "Clearly, the bird in that painting represents the futility of language"); *sleep* (suggested recreation for the weak); and *textbook* (pillow on which to execute said suggestion).

But all in all we have learned how to survive. Pool, chess, hearts, and bridge are some of the preferred methods of relaxation. When the stress seems unavoidable, laughter—provoked by any one of a thousand inside jokes wrought in the wee hours of the night—is often the best medicine. The group, including Mrs. Owen, has even been known to dance in a conga line to Barry Manilow's "Copa Cabana" to close out another day's work.

Such are the trials and tribulations, the agony and the ecstasy of being a member of a five-time city champion Academic Decathlon team. Expectation for success has never been higher, but somehow success, I realize as I write these words, has never meant so little. It seems that often, as people walk by the Acadeca trophy case, they believe that this is the ultimate representation of the Decathlon experience. What they fail to notice, is, that on each trophy there is a picture of a Decathlon team standing proudly together in their blue or black jackets. It is these pictures that are the true representations of what it is like to be a member of ECR's team. For, as I look at my lot in life, after these six months, I know it is the picture that makes the trophy, not the other way around.

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<sup>27</sup> Interesting – my team did this too. Must be a trend.

<sup>28</sup> No mention of his team studying in the bathroom, however.

## Siddharth Dangi – 1:31 PM

It was the Tuesday after the Orange County regional Academic Decathlon competition, and almost everyone on our Trabuco Hills High School team had given up hope. According to "OCAD" tradition, the winning team would be notified by phone on Monday morning so it could begin preparation for the state competition. At 1:30 PM on Tuesday, we still hadn't got the call, and the chance of getting it, if there still was a chance, seemed nonexistent.

It had been a rough eight months leading up to the regional competition. At the first team meeting in August, enthusiasm was high. Our coach, Ms. Hooper, distributed the study materials and we set our deadlines together. After several years of narrowly losing the county title, we told ourselves that this was the year we would win first place. All seven of our returning decathletes, including me, had earned overall individual medals before, and our two new teammates looked just as promising. We seemed destined for success; we wouldn't accept anything less. The day before school started, we enjoyed one final night of fun. After winning a poker tournament and a game of Star Wars Monopoly, I lost horribly in the Super Smash Bros. contest. At 3:00 AM, we were exhausted, and I said to my teammates, "It's getting pretty early." The time for fun was over; now the preparation would begin.

Despite our initial enthusiasm during the summer, no one seemed willing to work once the school year began. We talked about getting first place, but by the end of October, none of us had even finished reading a resource guide yet. With only one month until the November scrimmage competition, I tried to motivate my team by creating a reading schedule and making practice tests. My questions were both complimented and criticized, but despite my efforts, no one took studying seriously. I excused my fellow honors decathletes, both of them seniors, since they were busy with college applications. But everyone else, especially the "C" students, didn't seem to react to the sense of urgency that was upon the rest of us. As a result, we performed poorly at the scrimmage – 13<sup>th</sup> among Orange County teams. I was severely disappointed – how could everyone be so indifferent this far into the year? Then I heard Sean Bernhoft, a senior varsity student, say something that I will never forget – "Guys, its crunch time."

Almost instantly, a transformation occurred.

Motivated by our failure at the scrimmage, we put our heart and soul into OCAD. With "college application season" over, the seniors could now focus solely on Decathlon. Similarly, with the juniors having adjusted to the junior-year homework load, we could now put in the extra hours that would be needed to pull through in the end. With the aid of our speech coach Ms. Nippie, our school's economics teacher Mr. Cox, and our coach's sister (whom we call "Hooper 2"), a retired English teacher that helped us in the Lang/Lit event, we prepared for the big day – January 29<sup>th</sup>, the first day of competition. After successful essays, speeches, and interviews, we took the seven written tests the next weekend. Then came the long wait.

By Tuesday afternoon, the phone call still hadn't come. The day before, we found out that Ms. Hooper, who had been plagued by health problems her entire life, had a severe leg infection – one that would keep her in the hospital and out of school for two months. On Monday night, I talked to her over the phone, and she said that she felt so sorry for us. She said we had tried our best and told me not to put my heart on it – I still had half my junior year ahead of me.

Then, at 1:31 PM on Tuesday afternoon, the phone rang.

When I heard the news, my first reaction was to punch the wooden cabinet next to me (something I later regretted doing). After five minutes of intense shouting, yelling, and hugging, we called our parents and told our teachers. LAX Marriott, here we come!

At the regional competition awards ceremony, all the returning members of the team won an overall individual award, and we won 51 medals in total. On a night that I will never forget for the rest of my life, I walked away with a few individual medals, along with a 3<sup>rd</sup> place in interview and a 5<sup>th</sup> place overall in the honors division – much more than I had hoped for. At the California State Finals one month later, we improved our team score by 1,000 points, but we hadn't come to LA to win. The state competition was only the icing on the cake; we had already accomplished our goal by winning the county title, and this was just for fun. Nevertheless, I earned individual medals in mathematics and interview, and my fellow honors decathletes, Captain Kyle Littler and senior Sherwin Doroudi, also each won a medal. The experience couldn't have been any better.

Whether it be winning a silver medal in interview at the state competition, experiencing zero-gravity in the Marriott elevators with my friend Kyle, or finding out that we had won first place in Orange County at 1:31 PM on Tuesday, March 8<sup>th</sup>, the countless memories from Academic Decathlon are ones that I will never forget. Our team from Trabuco Hills High wasn't an El Camino Real: we didn't win first at nationals or even make the top ten at the California state competition. All we did was win the Orange County regional competition. It may not seem like much, but it meant everything in the world to us.

## **Greta Baranowski - Work Like Mad**

As I write this, I have started reading Jack Kerouac's autobiographical novel *On the Road* for the fourth time—I have never once finished the book, but I have read the first fifty pages of it more than I have read nearly anything that was not a USAD resource. One moment from those oft-read pages of Kerouac has always stuck with me: When Dean, the wide-eyed manic kid, asks Sal, the narrator, to teach him to be a writer, Sal says with a shrug that he doesn't know anything about being a writer except that "you have to stick with it with the energy of a madman." Well, you AcDec version of Dean, I think that's all I, some sort of Sal, can really tell you—you have to stick with this like a madman, like a Girl Scout during cookie-selling season, like any vocation that requires inexhaustible energy.

Is that all there is to it? No, but that probably is a lot of it. All I know for sure is that, during my two years in Decathlon, I worked harder than I ever had before. The work never ended—there were always more resources to read again, more flashcards to memorize, more practice impromptus to stumble my way through. Hence, I will always think that one of the keys to success in this competition is just pure stubbornness—you have to keep going when you're tired, when you hate (insert any event here) more than anything else in the world, when you miss your significant other, when you're so sick you can hardly speak, or when you despise your team. Or, better yet, any combination of those. If you don't have that stubbornness when you start, trust me, you will after a season or two.

But more than that, I think Decathlon can show you that there is more to life than just what is happening to you right now. I have seen people unbelievably upset over an art score that was

twenty points too low for their goals, and all I could think of was that there will be other art tests—other opportunities to raise that score. If you're not happy with something, it can change. An interview response, a super quiz score, a voice inflection in a speech—all of these things can change. The trick is to keep moving, not to become fixated on past failures or successes. So what if one event, one question, one competition didn't go well? You can't let that keep you from fixing what went wrong and trying again... and again. Believe me, it's all too easy to become consumed by agonizings about what life would have been like if you had gotten one more math question, or if you had given a more eloquent interview answer to that question about your favorite of the art pieces. But if you think too much about those things that you can't do anything about, then you're going to miss out on the chance to fix what went so terribly, horribly wrong.

But, more importantly, you'll also miss out on more intangible things like the joys of going to Denny's with your fellow Decathletes, or how awesome it feels to know that you really and truly belong with a group of people—your team. Decathlon is about so much more than oceanography or Plato's *Republic*. The things they can't score you on, like learning to push yourself and yet not to take it all too seriously, are far more important than any composer's birthdate ever could be. And they'll serve you far better in life than knowing how long it took Lewis and Clark to cross the Bitterroot Mountains.

## Jimmy Myatt – Old School

Thinking about my time spent in the Academic Decathlon takes a little bit of effort for me. It was close to twenty years ago that I competed.

Yes, the Decathlon was alive and well back then. As I wade through the memories of two tours of duty at university, the grand accomplishments and sweet mistakes I've made along the way, the fog of Grunge music and high times of the nineties, all the way back through the haze of Purple Rain and the bad hair of the eighties, I can barely see those days in 1986 and 1987 when a group of us formed the AcaDec team for U.S. Grant High School in Oklahoma City. However, with a little bit of work at dredging up the past, most of it came back to me.

If I recall correctly, U.S. Grant hadn't had a team before my first year competing. The idea was sort of a whim, and the first year there wasn't a great deal of interest in it. There were no tryouts, no tests to see who made the team. Truth be told, I came in late and had a friend of mine join after, just so we could field a team.

We didn't have study guides then, just the official subjects and a brochure of what would be covered. We were lucky enough to have semi-experts come in and help coach us. The science subject that year was aviation, and we had a pilot from the local air force base come in and tell us how planes fly. A museum employee volunteered and lectured us on Realism and the genius of Honore Daumier and Jaques Louis David for the art category. We basically studied the various subjects by asking, "Hey, does anyone know anything about .... (insert subject here)."

Actually, it was pretty cool that way.

We did fairly well, considering. We took home medals in nine categories at the city championships and placed pretty high at the state contest (forgive me for not remembering our finish order exactly, but I do remember that I won a few medals at the state competition – I still have the state silver

medal in Language arts, it's pinned to one of my oldest son's stuffed animals, General Snowflake). The results and success that we had were exciting at the time, but what I remember now was the process, the diverse collection of people on the team, and mostly – and this is important folks – what it taught me about life during high school and after.

If your high school was like mine then it was a divided place of cliques and factions. The jocks hung with the jocks, the band with the band, seniors with seniors, etc. Everyone had their own circles of reference and their own lunch tables, and there was very little straying from what was comfortable. The AcaDec team broke those rules, albeit without really trying. Eric and Allen were seniors, wicked smart, and largely thought to be the quintessential “geeks.” (By the way, I've always loved the term “geek.” I always think of the sideshow kind, the people that have way too much courage and daring for their own good. The kind of people that were looked at with disdain because they broke the rules or looked and acted different. I've long considered myself a “geek,” and wear the badge proudly.)

Kristin was the lovely, shy and quiet girl that didn't know her own beauty. She was also our best person in Fine Art and Economics. I'm sure she blossomed after high school and is now one of the most beautiful, sexy, and confident women around. Ron was a full-blooded Cherokee Indian and never let people get to know him. Richard was my friend that I brought in. He was grossly overweight and not really good at any of the subjects, although he ended up winning a medal in speech. Richard died of a heart attack six years ago.

And there was me. I played football and basketball, but also was a member of the drama group. I was smart at trivial stuff, but never made particularly good grades. I sort of fit in everywhere and nowhere, which was fine with me. We were six people brought together by fortune and a desire to learn things, and we ended up breaking down a lot of barriers.

I learned much from the others in my group. Sure, I learned a great deal of AcaDec information , but I also learned a lot about these different people. The six of us would never have been brought together outside of this competition. I learned that Eric, who was the valedictorian, was under constant pressure from his parents to be perfect. Alan wanted to be an astronaut and was working after school because his mom had cancer and had to quit her job. There were other stories, some funny and some I shouldn't mention. As the study groups mounted, I learned to appreciate these people as individuals and not as a stereotype.

After we did so well at the city meet, the school threw an assembly for us. We were all hesitant. I mean, come on, a spirit assembly for the smart team? Well, it worked out well. The students cheered and we felt pretty good about ourselves. We stayed friends throughout the rest of high school, and I'm sure that some of them remember those times as fondly as I do.

So, my advice to you as you prepare for the Decathlon. Well, it's twofold. First, have an open mind and study diligently. Use every resource you can find in addition to the very good study guides you now have. Go to a museum and ask about the artists you are studying. If you need to find out about anatomy, see if you can volunteer at a hospital for some instruction. Whatever the subject is, be creative in seeking information that will give you an advantage over the people that play things by the book.

Second, utilize your teammates. Sadly, none of us know everything. The people on your team each have different strengths. If you have a question about something, your teammate is the first place

you should go. Plus, you might have the rare experience of meeting someone you wouldn't have talked to otherwise and finding a port in the storm of your high school life.

## Daniel Berdichevsky - What Happens Afterwards

One summer, I was sitting with members of the El Camino Real Academic Decathlon team that had won the national competition in Providence. They were worried about losing touch with one another in college.

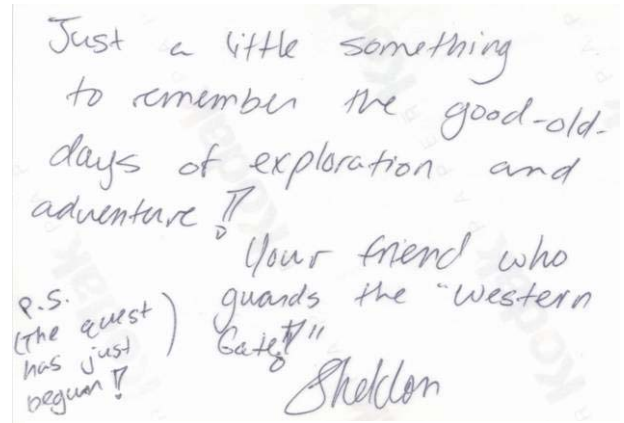
I assured them that this didn't need to happen—and provided an anecdote as evidence. "The week after your nationals," I said, "five of us from my old team reunited for a birthday party in Vancouver. We flew there together—still a team."

I didn't mention that while we were there, we learned the drawbacks of microwaving shoes, that some of us (no names will be mentioned) had never tried malted ice cream, and that our star varsity had watched *Rambo* a few too many times but never learned how to handle a sprained ankle. Those were incidental details.

One summer later, four of us ended up together in New Zealand, where we fought off pool sharks, rode helicopters and attended a very racist musical, and just last week as I write this paragraph, six of us gathered at a funeral, for our teammate Steve Shaw's father.

Now, another few years down the road, as I revise this primer with Kevin Teeling for the 2004 edition, three of us (Steve was busy playing poker) recently met up at a wedding. We looked as if we were about to give our speeches again<sup>29</sup>. And the beat goes on.

In short, some of your teammates may drift away, but if you so desire, the bulk of you will remain together for...well, I can vouch for ten years, at least, and while I make no guarantees, I know that for at least some of my team, the rest of our lives sounds about right.



Someday, your teammates, too, will send you messages from faraway places. This one is from Sheldon, soon after he returned from dancing professionally in the Caribbean.

<sup>29</sup> Interestingly, Jeff Copps, who had dropped out of Decathlon with me that first time to avoid having to write a speech, now delivered the best man's toast—and the wedding was for Ali, the last person cut from our team. Deca, Deca, everywhere...

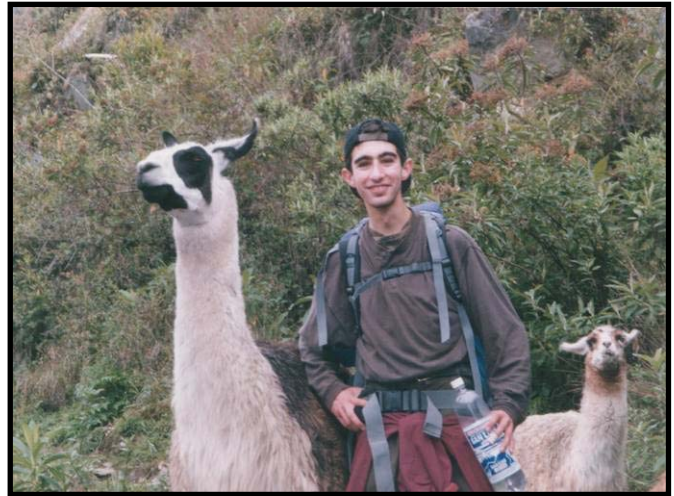


## About the Author

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Daniel Berdichevsky ([dan@demidec.com](mailto:dan@demidec.com)) founded DemiDec in 1994 after winning the national championship and receiving a very strategic jaywalking ticket.

Since then, he has taught bioethics at Stanford, led innovation efforts for CASIO, managed a persuasive technology lab, co-authored portions of a Disney-style musical, dwelled in a Chinese monastery, volunteered for (mostly losing) political campaigns, spoken on the steps of the Taiwanese legislature, distributed baby chickens in rural Mexico, served as a managing partner at a Silicon Valley venture fund, and consumed one too many hazelnut lattes<sup>30</sup>. He has also destroyed a gas station, though by accident.



*Daniel hikes the Inca Trail with honorary DemiDec teammates Alpaca I and Alpaca II.*

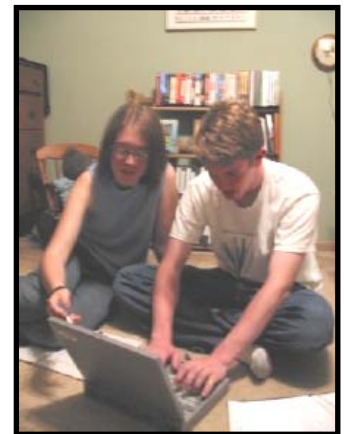
In 2004, Daniel made his debut as a pop star at the national competition in Boise, attempting a karaoke rendition of "Let it Be" with the teams from Utah and Nebraska. He followed this up with a valiant effort at dancing La Macarena after the Speech Showcase in Chicago—and is up for another go at it in San Antonio in 2006.

Daniel recently received his Master's and Bachelor's Degrees—belatedly, and in the wrong order—and is currently finishing the third year of a two-year fellowship at Harvard University's JFK School of Government.

## About the Lead Contributor

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According to his ex-teammate Greta Baranowski, **Kevin Teeling** pronounces "gestures" as "guess-tures" and "pumpkin" as "punkin"; he is in love with his corduroy pants; he wishes he could be as cool as Bob Dylan; he is on a crusade to make sure that the subjunctive tense is used correctly; he drives a 1994 Buick Century, which Greta's mom believes is in need of a new muffler; he thinks his cat is the most incredible creature ever; he has been photographed for the newspaper both sprawled on top of and curled up underneath desks; he is obsessed with music in (nearly) all of its incarnations and dreams of being a professional musician.




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<sup>30</sup> As a result, he now drinks tea.