

K. International spelling whiz wins Japan Times Bee

Hanna Yoshida of K. International School Tokyo managed to outlast her final opponent Saturday over the course of nine tense rounds by spelling “insubordinate” to secure victory at the ninth annual Japan Times Bee.

After misspelling a word in the final round, it appeared 14-year-old Yoshida would be destined for runner-up, but 12-year-old Preksha Prashanth of the Yokohama campus of India International School was unable to clinch victory with her final word as well, setting the stage for a dramatic finish at the headquarters of The Japan Times in Tokyo.

In the end, Yoshida managed to recover from her misstep, nailing “emulate,” “parsonage,” “intermission,” “execute” and her final word, “insubordinate,” which means defiant of authority, to beat her 40 rivals.

Yoshida, whose favorite word is fittingly “serendipity,” meaning the occurrence and development of events by chance in a happy or beneficial way, said she had never studied the word that brought her the win.

“My teacher gave me a list to study and I tried to just study the parts I am not as good at, like remembering the origin of the words,” she said, adding that reading books is an effective way of studying.

“She is always reading something, whether that is a book or magazine. She has liked books since she was young,” said her mother, Kazuyo Yoshida, who was surprised by the victory.

“Last week she had tests at school and was unable to study a lot. So I just wanted her to stay in the first couple rounds, but she ended up winning,” she said.

By winning, Yoshida also won a free trip to Washington to be Japan’s representative in the final contest of the Scripps National Spelling Bee in May, subscriptions to Merriam Webster’s online dictionary and The Japan Times’ website, and a set of coins from the United States Mint.

The runner-up, Prashanth, who appeared confident throughout the competition, was able to spell words such as sanctuary, obtuse and deficiency. Promising to return next year for another try, she said she studies around three hours a day with her dad’s help.

Ranging in age from 9 to 14, the 41 contenders hailed from a variety of public and international schools throughout Japan, including from as far away as Fukuoka and Okinawa.

The format is the same as in the United States.

Each student approaches the microphone, one at a time, where they are given a word to spell. They are then allowed to ask the judges for a definition, part of speech, language of origin and any alternative pronunciations. Failure to spell the given word results in elimination.

Their passion to win was on full display. Some students reacted with shock or tears when the judge's bell rang, signaling a misspelled word and their exit from competition.

The Japan Times Bee, which launched in 2010, is the only spelling contest in Japan endorsed by the Scripps National Spelling Bee, which dates back to 1925.

Operated by the E.W. Scripps Company, the competition has grown in popularity since the mid-1990s, when the U.S.-based cable TV channel ESPN began airing the final rounds of the competition.

Over the years, there have been many memorable moments in the final rounds in Washington, with some students screaming, fainting or going completely silent as they racked their brains to correctly spell obscure and challenging words.

The qualifying competitions are held throughout the U.S. and dozens of other countries, in a similar format.

This year's Japan Times Bee was sponsored by Costco Wholesale Japan Ltd., Nifco Inc., Benesse Corp., the University of Southern California and Yours Corp., with additional support from the U.S. Embassy in Tokyo, the American Chamber of Commerce in Japan and the New York Times International Edition.