

Bethesda

Busting Underage Drinkers

JULY/AUGUST 2006 \$3.95

MAGAZINE

all things **summer**

8 great places to
get wet

where to eat
crabs

the scoop on
country clubs

discovering the
Potomac

cool
summer buys

Columnist
Sarah Pekkanen can
relax poolside for
now, but a trip to
Disney World looms.
See page 90.

*****AUTO**5-DIGIT 20016
0001 000019 P000001 01:000320



IT'S ACADEMIC
WRC-TV4
4001 NEBRASKA AVE NW
WASHINGTON DC 20016-2733

PRSTD STD
US POSTAGE PD
STRASBURG, VA.
PERMIT NO. 44

Bethesda / Chevy Chase / Gaithersburg / Kensington / Potomac / Rockville / Silver Spring

THERE ARE CHEERLEADERS AND A
PEP BAND, AND THE COMPETITION IS FIERCE,
BUT FOR THE **WALTER JOHNSON HIGH SCHOOL**
"IT'S ACADEMIC" TEAM, IT'S BRAINS,
NOT BRAWN, THAT MAKE THEM ONE
OF THE BEST AROUND

BY MICHAEL S. GERBER

MIND GAMES

IT'S 10 ON THE MORNING

after his senior prom, and unlike many of his classmates, Adam Newman is awake. The Walter Johnson High School senior skipped the post-prom activities so he could get enough rest before today's championship match. But the school's No. 1 tennis player isn't wearing tennis whites or holding a racquet; instead, Newman wears a dark suit and a bright pink tie. For the second year in a row, Newman and the Walter Johnson Wildcats are facing off in the final round of "It's Academic," NBC4's Saturday morning high school quiz show.

Along with his coach and teammates, Newman waits for the show to begin in the studio's cafeteria, which serves as a green room. Senior Andre Joutz is giving classmate Alex Price a quick chemistry refresher. "Ionic is when electrons are not shared," he explains. The team's science guy, Joutz, will not be part of the squad for today's final. Since "It's Academic" allows only three players per squad, he and the fourth member of the WJ team rotate through

the third spot. Today, it's junior Tianhui Shen who will join Newman and Price.

The players and coaches from Rockville's Richard Montgomery and Washington's Gonzaga arrived earlier; some are going over practice questions, while others watch the television, which shows Walter Johnson's quarterfinal victory. After drawing for position—Walter Johnson will sit in the middle—the team heads to the hallway for a pep talk from its coach, Mark Whipple, a physics and astronomy teacher.

"It's no secret to you guys that the secret to this game is who gets in first on the buzzer," Whipple tells the four students huddled around him. Whipple's tweed blazer is accented by his green tie, worn in honor of the Wildcats' colors. "I am convinced we can beat these guys on speed."

"Remember to listen for that last syllable, and how much it can change your answer. Make sure you listen." He ends his pre-game talk with three words: "Focus, focus, focus."



Before the show's taping, Coach Mark Whipple, right, tells his team in the green room to "focus, focus, focus."

SPEED HAS BEEN

the Walter Johnson teams' strategy all year. After winning the "It's Academic" Washington area championship last year and then defeating the Baltimore and Central Virginia champions in the show's "Super Bowl," the team entered the season last fall wearing a target. They knew that other teams out there might be smarter, so they would simply have to be faster to the buzzer. Early in the year, Whipple began preparing his team to beat their main rival, Richard Montgomery. Knowing that Richard Montgomery, along with its captain, senior Chris Ray, probably had an edge in terms of knowledge, Whipple worked on improving his players' quickness. If they could get most of the questions that both teams knew, the Walter Johnson boys would win.

Calling the group of about a dozen students WJ's "It's Academic" team is a little misleading. While the televised tournament is one of the highlights of the year, the team participates in a tournament nearly every weekend and in the Montgomery Beltway Academic League. Add to that multiple practices during their lunch periods, and the academic competitors

have committed a large chunk of their high school careers to the team.

In early October, with a few tournaments already under their belts, 10 teenagers hurried into Whipple's second-floor classroom. A few quickly set up the buzzers—they spread their sodas and sandwiches on the desks and settled in for their 40-minute lunch period. Whipple sat in the front of the room, questions in hand. In between bites of his tuna salad and crackers, the 51-year-old Dartmouth grad rifled questions at the students, topics ranging from "Buffy the Vampire Slayer" to ancient Greek literature. Someone nails the Greek literature question, while no one knows much about Buffy. These aren't typical high school kids.

With a year of experience on Whipple's A Team, senior Alex Price has a spot in the lineup wrapped up. But he still jumps in on nearly every question, and the frustration mounts when he gets one wrong—which happens quite often today. If anyone on the A Team is the risk-taker, it's Price. Usually the risk is good idea.

"Alex just knows a lot," says Newman, his co-captain. "He's well-rounded, and he studies a lot for [It's Academic]."

But sometimes, Price's confidence can backfire. "My weaknesses are I try to anticipate too much and I neg a lot," Price says, using the quiz bowl lingo for buzzing in first and answering incorrectly.

Whipple tallies the scores during each practice, so the players take them seriously—but they are not hyper-competitive with each other and usually each question is followed by an explanation from one player to another. Early in the year, Whipple can tell from the practices who his A Team will be, and which players will compete on the B Team—the "It's Academic" version of junior varsity—which competes in many of the same tournaments as the A Team, but not on television.

"After about a month, the numbers have real significance," he explains. "I try to take myself out of the decision that way."

Newman and Price, the only two with any experience in the televised matches, were locks from the beginning. But their classmate, Joutz, missed several practices and lost his spot early in the year to junior Shen. Eventually, Whipple decided to alternate the two players for the team's "It's Academic" tapings—most other tournaments had four players on a team, so both would be able to compete.

Whipple especially didn't want to give up on Joutz, since the coach had recruited him to the team. In eighth grade, Joutz appeared on a Fox television show "The Search for the Smartest Kid in America." Whipple recognized Joutz, whom he had coached in Little League baseball.

"I watched it and said 'Okay, I'm recruiting this kid big time,'" Whipple says. So Whipple stopped by his house and gave the family tickets to one of Walter Johnson's "It's Academic" tapings.

Recruiting players is not a common activity for Whipple, but obsessing over "It's Academic" certainly is, and is likely responsible for his graying hair. Whipple owns a van solely so he can drive the entire team to tournaments; he swears he



Mac McGarry, host of "It's Academic" since 1961, speaks to the team during the semifinal.

fast and didn't get home until nearly 5 a.m. "I feel like I got hit by a train," he says when he arrives, wearing the baseball cap that he seems to only take off for televised broadcasts and swim meets. Although at times his coach and his teammates have questioned his commitment, Joutz has stayed an integral part of the team. He joined the team as a freshman, but this is the first year that Joutz has played a role on the televised team—sometimes that inexperience shows, his teammates say. "Andre is a really smart kid," Newman says. "This is his first year on TV, so he's not as composed as I would like him to be."

Shen is also quiet. He doesn't answer many questions during a match, but when he does he is usually right. Shen is the go-to guy in subjects like mythology and the arts. As the junior on the team, he has the least amount of experience, but next year he will have to step up into the role of captain. The Shen-led team will probably look a lot different than the Newman-Price team. "We'll play by a different strategy," Shen predicts. "I don't think we'll play quite as fast."

For now, Shen listens to Newman describe what it felt like to win the championship last year. "That feeling, when you win that game, is something that you'll always have," he says. The four boys begin to walk toward the studio, serious expressions on all their faces. "We're gonna win this game," Newman tells his team.

The big news today is that Mac McGarry, the host whose name is synonymous with "It's Academic" in the Washington area, has the flu and won't be asking the questions. McGarry, has hosted the show since its inception in 1961, and according to one of the producers this is only the second time he has missed a taping—the last was in 1966. Dave Zahren, the host of the Baltimore "It's Academic," will be hosting instead. Along with McGarry, Sophie Altman, the show's creator and executive producer, is not in the studio today. But her

will sell it the day he quits coaching. He also co-coaches the Maryland state team, an all-star squad that traveled to Florida in June to compete against other state teams. The school pays him for 100 hours of work—he estimates that he put in more than 300 hours this year, his 13th season as coach at Walter Johnson.

A native of Westchester County, N.Y., Whipple competed on his high school and college gymnastics teams, although his first love was baseball. He first became interested in quiz bowls as a teacher at Wilde Lake High School in Howard County, attending some practices and competitions. At Walter Johnson, Whipple first found himself coaching sports—volleyball, baseball, gymnastics.

"I gave all that up because my [now] ex-wife didn't like [that I was] coaching," Whipple says. But when the "It's Academic" job opened up, Whipple took it. Four years after taking the job, Whipple and his wife split up. His current wife, Gaithersburg High School French teacher Renee Raffini, "is a big supporter... I think she recognizes how important [coaching the team is to me]," Whipple adds.

"I didn't realize I was going to have this

much success," he says. Walter Johnson hasn't lost a first round game on "It's Academic" during his tenure, and the team has had success in other competitions as well, including "Quizmaster Challenge," a tournament that airs throughout the year on Montgomery County Public Schools' cable channel, created and hosted by Blake High School journalism teacher Kevin Keegan.

"I think there are a lot of schools where the person who is the adult with the team can't figure out whether he's a sponsor or a coach," says Keegan, a former coach of Team Maryland. "Mark Whipple is definitely a coach. [Whipple's students are] better players than they would be if they didn't practice."

AFTER WHIPPLE'S pep talk before the final, the four Walter Johnson players gather in the hall outside the studio without their coach.

"We're the best team," Newman says. "We're so much faster."

"It's been a good four years," Price adds. Joutz, the alternate today, is quiet—unlike Newman, he went to the prom break-

MICHAEL VENTURA (2)

COMMON ACTIVITY FOR WHIPPLE, OVER "IT'S ACADEMIC" CERTAINLY IS.



In between cheers, the WJ cheerleaders sit tight, caught up in the action at the cliffhanger semifinal round.

family is well represented—two of her daughters, Susan and Nancy, serve as the show's producer and assistant producer. And four of Sophie's grandchildren, all of them Bethesda-area high school students, work as interns on the show.

"In my family we really prize academics," says Nancy, who first joined her mom on the set when she was 11 years old. A lawyer and former congressional aide, she plans on spending more time working on the family business in the future. "I'm the junior partner," she says.

The three teams enter the studio to applause from the audience, which includes parents, friends, family, teachers and even the Walter Johnson cheerleaders and pep band. The team places one of its lucky charms—a baseball with a Walter Johnson autograph printed on it—on the desk in front of them. Their classmate and national champion baton twirler Susan Garabedian is also in the room, ready to perform when the show returns from a commercial break. At a school like Walter Johnson, whose football and basketball

teams haven't had great success, the champion quiz bowl team is something to cheer about.

Host Zahren starts the game off with questions on women in government.

"Currently on the Supreme Court—" The buzzer interrupts Zahren and the light in front of Walter Johnson indicates that one of its players has buzzed in.

"Ginsburg," Newman answers, and the team has taken the lead. They miss the next question—they don't know the name of Louisiana Governor Kathleen Blanco—but time their buzzing perfectly on two more questions to take an early lead. Whipple looks pleased—his players are clearly on their game. A trace of relief appears on the faces of Newman, Price and Shen, but no smiles. The game is far from over.

At the end of the first round, the score is Walter Johnson 120, Richard Montgomery 110 and Gonzaga 90.

FROM THE beginning of the season, the defending champions expected to face Richard Montgomery in the

"It's Academic" final. But they came seconds away from not making it to the final—twice.

At a quarterfinal match taped in April, Walter Johnson faced Holton-Arms, the all-girls private school in Bethesda, and Washington's Woodrow Wilson High School. From the start, Holton-Arms and Walter Johnson attacked each other, jumping in early on questions. Wilson stayed close by staying off the buzzer and letting the other two miss, and at the end of two rounds the three teams were within 40 points of each other. Price and Newman lost the air of confidence they possessed in earlier rounds. During commercial breaks, Newman wasn't gesturing toward the audience or cracking jokes—the team was in for a fight.

When Woodrow Wilson jumped in to answer a few early questions in the last round, audience members began whispering to each other and leaning forward in the bleachers. With just a minute left, the Walter Johnson team members found themselves in last place, trailing both



The team's buzzer speed got them the lead in the final seconds of the semifinal round against Blake and Eleanor Roosevelt. Tianhui Shen, Adam Newman and Andre Joutz hug each other after their come-from-behind win.

Holton-Arms and Wilson by just 10 points. But they buzzed in first on the next three questions, answering Panama, Plato and Aida, and escaped with the win.

The team was just glad to be done with the game and in the next round. "My heart was hurting in my chest," Newman says.

"That was the ugliest win I've ever seen in my life," says Heidi Newman, Adam's mom. She's seen quite a few tapings—Adam's older brother, Eric, led the Walter Johnson team to the finals just a few years ago. Their father, Steven Newman—himself a competitor on "It's Academic" in the 1970s and a five-time "Jeopardy" champion in 1991—used to help Eric practice for the competitions, and Adam didn't want to be left out. "When my dad was asking my brother questions, [I] wanted to be a part of it," Newman says. "I kind of liked being asked questions."

Newman also thrives on the competition. "Because he was a nationally ranked tennis player, the pressure doesn't get to him," his mom says. Price, his classmate and teammate, agrees. "He's a very level-

headed captain," Price explains. "He's got a very good ability to know when we're about to give an answer that's just not right. He'll make sure we keep talking to give the right answer, so we don't answer an easy question wrong." Newman's timing is also his strength—he buzzes in on questions at the perfect moment, so that even if he doesn't know the answer, one of his teammates will.

But Newman doesn't spend his free time studying lists of presidents or maps of the world. When the team travels to tournaments, the conversation often turns to academic topics; Newman would rather be playing video games and fantasy sports with his friends. But he thrives on the competition. Before "It's Academic" tapings, he often listens to rap music on his iPod to help him "get his game face on." In an easy match, that game face quickly fades to a smile, and Newman even dances along to the pep bands in his seat during commercials. But when the game gets close, it's up to him to keep the team together—to keep Price from losing his cool after a few negs,

and Shen from shying away in the face of the two confident seniors.

Newman plans on following in the footsteps of his parents and brother at the University of Maryland next year, where he wants to study history or political science and go to law school—but he won't be representing the Terps at any college quiz bowl competitions. "It's sort of time-consuming, it's also a lot harder," Newman said of college academic competitions. "It's not the reason why I did 'It's Academic' in high school—there's no TV time, [and] not really as much school involvement."

THE FINAL against Richard Montgomery and Gonzaga is going as well as Whipple could have hoped. Walter Johnson comes out strong again in the third round, answering four of the eight questions correctly, and takes a 60-point lead heading into the final two rounds. But 60 points doesn't mean much, with questions in the final round worth 20 or 30 points. One or two wrong answers coupled with a right answer for their op-

"WE WERE DOWN BY 135 POINTS AT ONE TIME,

ponent will put Walter Johnson behind in less than a minute.

Whipple and his counterpart at Richard Montgomery, English teacher Daniel McKenna, stand next to each other in the back of the studio, too nervous to sit. Once the match starts, there is nothing the coach can do but watch and hope. There are no timeouts, no mid-match strategy sessions. There is more than school pride on the line—the winning team receives \$5,000 from sponsor Giant Food, with \$2,500 going to each of the other finalists. That prize-money makes it much easier for teams to purchase equipment, such as buzzers for practice, and to travel to national tournaments. George Washington University, which became a sponsor of the show this year, will contribute scholarship money to the schools as well.

In the bonus round, where each team is asked eight questions, Walter Johnson and Richard Montgomery answer all their questions correctly. One more round to go, and the score is Walter Johnson 445, Richard Montgomery 385 and Gonzaga 325.

JUST A WEEK after the ugly win over Holton-Arms and Woodrow Wilson, the team is back at the Channel 4 studios to tape the semifinals. This time, they expect their main competition to be Blake High School, although Prince George's County's Eleanor Roosevelt High School has also been one of the area's top teams over the years. Both schools have magnet programs, something Whipple is often quick to point out—when Walter Johnson won the championship last year, it was the first non-magnet public school to win the Washington area title since Rockville High School won in 1999 with Keegan as its coach.

In the semifinal, Walter Johnson struggled early, and with each round Blake's lead continued to grow. Heidi Newman had grabbed her purse so that she could make a quick exit, thinking there was no way her son's team could mount a comeback, especially with one of its best play-

ers on the bench.

A week before the semifinal, Whipple found out that Price's grades made him ineligible. He told Joutz and Shen that they would be joining Newman in the lineup. Just days later, the teacher corrected the grade, which had been an error—the teacher had yet to look at some of Price's assignments, and when the teacher finally looked at it, his grade was adjusted to reflect his work. Just days before the match, Whipple received an e-mail from the teacher explaining the mistake, and making Price once again eligible.

Whipple, who had already promised Price's spot to Joutz, struggled with the decision, but eventually chose to stick with Joutz.

Price and his parents both pushed for Whipple to change his mind—after dedicating so much of his high school years to the team, Price didn't want to miss one of the most important matches of his career.

"He really should [have been] playing," says Joyce Price, Alex's mom. "This was a mistake, this shouldn't have happened. It was a real sore point."

Price is the one who memorizes lists of information, who posts comments on online high school quiz message boards and designed the team's Web site, and who nearly single-handedly organized Walter Johnson's tournament earlier in the year. At his freshman orientation, when dozens of student groups set up booths to recruit new students, Price went straight to the "It's Academic" booth, wrote down the practice times, and told his mom he was ready to leave. Along with Joutz, Price watched old episodes of "It's Academic" the night before one of the tapings to get a better feel for the host's pace when reading questions.

"He basically runs the team," Whipple says. But Whipple chose to take his chances and leave him out for the big match against Blake and Eleanor Roosevelt.

"He really wanted to play, [but] there was a bigger issue here," Whipple explains. "I'm a teacher first, a coach second."

Watching the semifinal from the other side of the camera frustrated Price. "I just knew if we lost it wouldn't be good," he says. "Everybody on the team would've been pissed off at me and Whipple."

Whipple selects Price as captain of tournaments that focus more on knowledge than on speed, and those are the tournaments Price enjoys the most. But no matter which competition, he hates to lose. After Walter Johnson fell in the "Quizmaster Challenge" finals to Richard Montgomery earlier in the year, he looked sick as he quickly left the studio.

"I don't know why I take it the hardest," Price says. "A lot of times I just feel like we should win." Price plans on attending Emory University in Atlanta next year, and he'll probably find his way to a practice or two at some point, although he thinks taking a year off from the competition that has consumed so much of his high school career might be a good idea.

With Price sidelined, it was up to Newman and his two less experienced teammates to comeback from a deficit of more than a hundred points. "At that point, we needed a miracle," Whipple says. "Adam, my captain...just went postal." They mounted a steady charge, buzzing in at the right times and nailing question after question. With just seconds remaining, McGarry began asking a question about a densely packed country that declared its independence—that's about as far as he got. Newman cut him off with an early buzz, gave the answer—Bangladesh—and, for the first time all day, Walter Johnson took the lead. Seconds later, they won the game by just five points. Newman, Joutz and Shen jumped out of their chairs and hugged each other, tears coming to the captain's eyes.

"We were down by 135 points at one time, and that's when I thought it was over," Newman said after the thrilling comeback win that landed the team a spot in the finals. "Right now I just have this amazing feeling. I can only explain it by saying that when I've needed the most to step up in [various] areas of my life, I've

AND THAT'S WHEN I THOUGHT IT WAS OVER."

— ADAM NEWMAN

always been able to. You just never give up until that [final] buzzer goes off."

THE LAST ROUND

at the championship starts off with two easy questions, but Gonzaga and Richard Montgomery jump in with early buzzes to narrow the gap. After Richard Montgomery nails another question, Walter Johnson finally buzzes in first. It's a visual question, worth 30 points, and the three teenagers have to identify the English monarch pictured on the screen in front of them. They guess Mary, the answer is Anne, and just like that they've lost their lead. Richard Montgomery goes up by 10.

Although Walter Johnson manages to regain the lead briefly, the momentum is clearly in the hands of Richard Montgomery's Ray. Walter Johnson feels the pressure and begins jumping in even earlier—

at one point, Price hears "Pozzo" when the host says "Pongo." He hits his buzzer and tells Newman to guess "Waiting for Godot" by Samuel Beckett; the answer is actually Orangutan. The disparity between his guess and the answer draw a laugh from the audience, but no one in the Walter Johnson camp is smiling. Richard Montgomery gets the next two right, and Whipple turns to shake McKenna's hand and congratulate him. Final score, Richard Montgomery 495, Walter Johnson 405, Gonzaga 345.

As the credits roll on the screens to the side of the stage, the audience rushes the winners and losers. Newman's girlfriend gives him a hug. Price's father tries to analyze the game. "We got a little trigger happy," he says, but is quickly corrected by his son.

"No, we got buzzer shy. We knew all the answers," the younger Price explains. A 60-

point lead can seem a lot bigger than it really is. "We were thinking about containing," he laments.

Although the team still has another tournament left—they are traveling to Chicago for a national tournament—thoughts are already turning to next year. Whipple has already seen next season's "It's Academic" bracket—his team would face Richard Montgomery in the semifinals if both teams make it that far. Shen will be the only player with any television experience, and he'll have to step up—in today's final, Price and Newman seemed to dominate. Shen is much quieter, both before the match and during competitions. But Montgomery is also losing its star player, Ray, to graduation.

While his two star players will be gone next year, Whipple will return for his 14th season as coach. "I enjoy it—it's something

I do well and something that serves such a purpose, getting these kids rewarded for being smart," he says.

"Every basketball game that gets played goes into the paper," adds Whipple, who is a huge sports fan and volunteers for the Bethesda Big Train baseball team. "We don't recognize [academics] like we recognize athletics."

And like athletes who realize their careers have ended just shy of the title, Walter Johnson's seniors will replay every question they missed in the finals over in their heads, convinced that the trophy should have been theirs. "It's going to be a tough day," says Price's mom as her son walks off the "It's Academic" set for the last time. **B**

Bethesda writer Michael S. Gerber captained his high school quiz bowl team, which would've been crushed by Walter Johnson. Courtney Darby contributed to this article.

RICHARD MONTGOMERY:

THE NEW NATIONAL CHAMPS

AFTER WINNING THE "It's Academic" championship, the members of the Richard Montgomery team had a combination of elation and relief on their faces. After all, they had expected to win last year, only to see Walter Johnson come from behind to beat them. That made the win that much sweeter for seniors Chris Ray and Chris Higgins and sophomore Jeffrey Siegel.

"Outstanding," is how Ray, the Richard Montgomery captain, described the feeling. But if Ray was feeling that way after winning the Washington-area championship—just imagine how he's feeling now. In early June, Ray and his Richard Montgomery teammates won the National Academic Quiz Tournament High School National Championship, held in Chicago, triumphing over 127 other teams. In August, the team will head to Tokyo to participate in a world quiz championship against teams from Japan and South Korea.

After that, Ray will be moving on to Arizona State University, where he hopes to study international studies and possibly religion or philosophy. Of course, he'll be continuing to impress others with his buzzer speed and knowledge of obscure topics as well—Arizona State has promised Ray funding to start the school's first quiz bowl team.