

TV WEEK

DISTRICT OF COLUMBIA



HILLARY RODHAM CLINTON
First Lady of the United States



BOB RAE
Former Premier of Ontario



ANGUS S. KING
Governor of Maine



'It's Academic'

The Show's Teen Quiz Kids Who Won in Politics, Too

'Richard Wright: Black Boy': Struggle, Fame, Exile

'IT'S ACADEMIC'

Today's Categories

History, Politics, Famous Contestants

By Patricia Brennan
Washington Post Staff Writer



Above: a display of enthusiasm at a taping of "It's Academic." Left: "It's Academic" creator Sophie Altman and quiz show moderator Mac McGarry, who have worked on the series since its debut on WRC in 1961.

By and large, they were highly competitive people who went on to college and successful careers. But "It's Academic" left its mark on them: They still remember the question they missed.

And like people who have nightmares about facing exams for a class they never attended, some of them still get anxious when they think back.

Take Angus S. King, now governor of Maine. King moved to his adopted state in 1969, practiced law, went into business and became a millionaire, and, for 15 years, hosted a local news program called "MaineWatch."

But in 1961-62, Gus King was one of three students representing Francis Hammond High School in Alexandria. The team appeared 10 times, he said, defeating competitors in a playoff format, and he was nervous every time.

"I remember very vividly crossing over the bridge on our way to Nebraska Avenue [to WRC's studios, where the show is taped]," he said. "I dated a girl from one of the other teams, Walter Johnson—we beat them, by the way."

King has a tape of his appearances that he showed not long ago to his staff.

"A knot appeared in my stomach when I heard [moderator] Mac McGarry's voice," confessed the governor.

King, nephew of Alexandria Mayor

Patricia Ticer, might be amazed to know that McGarry clearly remembers him ("he had short blond hair") and his teammates George M. Williams and Sharon Maggio, who, King recalled, were an item socially as well. But King never had to face the nightmare of missing the crucial question that lost the game: "We won the whole shebang," he said.

That first year, with 55 schools signed up to compete, "It's Academic" staged two tournaments. The other one was won by

the St. Albans School team headed by Donald Graham, who went on to become publisher of The Washington Post.

That summer, when "It's Academic" also ran competitions in middle schools, Bobby Rae competed for Gordon Junior High in the District. Later, as a graduate of the University of Toronto and a Rhodes Scholar, he turned to politics and was elected premier of Ontario in 1990.

In 1965, Hillary Rodham was an alternate for Maine South High School in the Chicago-area competition. "If I'd known she was going to become First Lady," joked executive producer Sophie Altman, "I'd have made certain she wasn't just an alternate. But the teachers chose the team members."

From the early-1960s to the mid-1970s, the quiz show ran in 15 cities, each with its own local producer and host. Altman's daughter Susan still oversees "Academic Challenge" in Cleveland. And there are plans to expand to Philadelphia and its New Jersey and Delaware suburbs.

On Saturday, Sept. 23, with a 10 a.m. show pitting teams from High Point, Magruder and South Lakes high schools, "It's Academic" begins its 35th season of competition pitting 81 public, private and parochial schools from the District and



BY HARRY NALTCHAYAN—THE WASHINGTON POST

Mark Murphy, Mark Moseley and Rick Walker vs. LaVern "Torgy" Torgeson, Joe Gibbs and Charley Taylor vs. WRC's Scott Clark, George Michael and Mike Stone in a 1983 Redskins edition of the show.

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the Maryland and Virginia suburbs.

Montgomery Blair High School is the defending champion, having bested Holton-Arms and Eleanor Roosevelt High School, the 1994 winner. Thomas Jefferson High School for Science and Technology won in 1993 and 1992, Walt Whitman High School in 1991.

Giant Food has been the show's sponsor in Washington since 1967, in Baltimore since 1971 and in Central Virginia since 1987. Each of those areas sends its winning team to the "It's Academic Super Bowl." Giant pays for the air time and production, and awards scholarships to every participating school ranging from \$275 to \$2,750—more than \$2 million so far, Altman estimated.

McGarry has hosted the entire time, challenging more than 14,000 contestants with some 200,000 questions devised by Altman's coterie, which she calls "well-trained, even brilliant."

Susan Altman is now the show's producer. The staff includes senior editor Susan Lechner, who began writing questions for the program in 1963; associate producer Joel Kemelhor, once a contestant from Walt Whitman High School; and coordinator Florence Umstead. ABC correspondent Cokie

Roberts, once a part of the staff here, produced the Los Angeles show.

McGarry, who studied Latin, Greek and French at academically rigorous Regis High School and Fordham University, both Jesuit schools in New York, believes that scholars should be as well recognized as athletes. "We have a chance to put these kids out front where they belong," he said. "And this is a program that I very much enjoy doing."

Four games are taped in one day, with cheerleaders, pep bands and cheering sections of students from each school. Coaches—team sponsors who bring experience and continuity to the teams—sit anxiously in the stands.

"Being the coach of an 'It's Academic' team is not a job for the faint-hearted," said Sophie Altman. "You can't help but feel a great deal of admiration for teachers, who work long hours and have a great deal of pride in the teams."

Rebecca Carmichael retired last year after coaching the W.T. Woodson High School team in Fairfax for 28 years. James Biedron has coached Bethesda-Chevy Chase for 23; and John Glaze at Woodrow Wilson, Robert Tupper at Holton-Arms and Ronald Umbeck at Bishop Ireton each mark 22 years.

Most teams practice at least weekly, some every day and often during

summer and other vacations, she said. Coaches write practice questions, make sure the students know crucial areas of information, arrange practice competitions with other schools and sometimes drive the teams to tournaments.

About 15 years ago, at the request of the Montgomery County Public Schools superintendent, Altman helped create "It's Academic" clubs "so we could extend the benefits of 'It's Academic' to more students. They're flourishing in Baltimore and the Washington area."

The clubs operate contests within the schools, invite other schools' teams for round-robin competitions and often stage games against teachers and parents.

"It's based on the concept that a lot of people learn well through competition, that they focus better when it's a matter of competition," said Susan Altman. "Not everybody does, but many people do, and 'It's Academic' is a way of utilizing that."

"It's Academic" alumni have turned up on Alex Trebek's syndicated quiz show "Jeopardy!," often doing well because they're experienced in quick recall, rapid response and concentration. And Sophie Altman believes that Washington-area students have a distinct advantage.

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"In going around the country, we found that the students here know a lot more about what Congress is doing, what the White house is doing, about foreign visitors, because they read it in the papers here and get it on the television news. It comes from the environment here.

"And it's gotten tougher. The students know a tremendous amount. They have an almost encyclopedic knowledge of Civil War and colonial history. It's interesting, but names that were familiar in the '60s and '70s —Chubby Checker, John F. Kennedy, Watergate—are history, but sort of vague history, not like Civil War history that you study in school."

"Knowledge shifts," said Susan Altman. "The emphasis at one point was on Greco-Roman history, and now there's a lot more emphasis on Asian history, on African history. The range is much broader. People tend to think students don't know as much because they [students] don't know what those people know. But in fact, they know different things. The emphasis changes. The emphasis on who's really relevant in history changes."

As always, "It's Academic" members are devoted readers. That was true in an unusual tournament staged in Illinois in 1969 by the wardens of the state prisons. Chicago's NBC station, WMAQ, telecast the final game, featuring winning teams from Statesville, Joliet and Menard prisons, who competed before convicts at Statesville ("a captive audience," quipped Sophie Altman).

The original material that she sent for the tournament was judged too easy, she said. "I had to send tougher material. I made it more current events, more sports questions, Bible questions. It's amazing how well-versed in history they were."

There was no sponsor, and therefore no prizes ("and they didn't win a 'get out of jail free' card," joked Susan, who attended the tournament). But among the prisoners were carpenters, electricians and other craftsmen. "They made wonderful sets," recalled Sophie Altman.

Afterward, one contestant was paroled. When WMAQ re-aired the game, his employer realized his new employee had been a convict and fired him. (He got another, better job, he told Altman.)

Later, the warden of the federal prison at Terre Haute, Ind., asked for materials to stage a tournament there. The winning team included a former graduate student at the University of Texas who had been convicted of smuggling marijuana.

Altman has also set up celebrity shows. In 1975, the three teams represented Congress (all three players were senators), reporters (both print and television) and the field of sports. A 1979 show pitted Democrats, Republicans and reporters. Sen. Lowell Weicker (R-Conn.) and Washington Post reporter David Broder played in both games.

In 1983, when the Redskins won the Super Bowl, Altman staged a sports edition for coaches, WRC sportscasters and players, who won at the buzzer.

After the 20th season, "It's Academic" staged a reunion. The Altmans would like to do it again, perhaps at the end of this 35th season. Inevitably, former competitors will relive the crucial question that took their team out of competition.

"They never forget the question they missed," said Sophie Altman, with a smile.