

**Science Olympiad Alumni
Where Are They Now?
Stories of Scientific Achievement and Inspiration**



Exploring the World of Science

To celebrate the 20th anniversary of national competition in 2004, Science Olympiad organized an effort to track down its most illustrious alumni. We were specifically interested to discover if Science Olympiad had an impact on the choice of a career in science or technology. More than 80% of respondents answered with a resounding “Yes!”

**Kathleen Markiewicz
Teacher, Boston Public Schools**

Competed from 1998 to 2000

“It solidified my love for science. I enjoyed getting to learn about many areas of science in Science Olympiad, and I continue to be interested in lots of science disciplines. In particular, Science Olympiad showed me that I love chemistry and physics, which ultimately were my majors for my undergraduate degree. I am also coaching my own Science Olympiad team at the Boston Latin School, and it’s a great way to come full circle. My fiancé, who I met while on the Grand Haven High School Science Olympiad team, is also helping me coach.”

**Rich Radke
Assistant Professor, Department of Electrical, Computer and Systems Engineering
Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute**

Competed in the early 1990s

“I believe that Science Olympiad was very helpful in showing me that science could be interesting and fun, and that there were organizations that rewarded people for achievement in science and math,” said an 18-year-old Radke in 1993. Today, Radke is a celebrated researcher and the winner of the National Science Foundation’s Early Career Development Award for his work with networked cameras. Looking back on his involvement with Science Olympiad, Radke noted that events like Egg Drop and Metric Estimation forced him to “solve open-ended problems, which is really a gateway into engineering.”

**Allison Hess
Graduate Student, Case Western Reserve University**

Competed from 1996 to 2001

“Science Olympiad really gave me a love for science and engineering. The bonds I formed through Science Olympiad are stronger than I formed through any other organization I participated in due to the team size and the many hours spent together.”

**Neha Bhargava
Electrical Engineer, Orbital Sciences Corporation**

Competed from 1995 to 2001

“My participation in the Scrambler event in Science Olympiad strengthened my interest in a career in engineering. I graduated from MIT with a bachelor’s of science in Electrical Engineering and Computer Science and a minor in Mechanical Engineering.”

Ryan Neenan

Physics Teacher, Pocono Mountain School District

Competed from 1994 to 1997

“Science Olympiad helped to fortify my love for science, and physics in particular. It opened my eyes, as Feynman put it, to be ‘the pleasure of finding things out.’ As I graduated and went on to college, my memories of Science Olympiad only solidified my decision to major in physics and go into education. I am currently an assistant Science Olympiad coach at my school, where I helped start the team in 2002. Like so many others, Science Olympiad was one of the most meaningful and fun activities I participated in during high school. It brought me a new perspective, lasting friendships and fun memories that my friends and I still talk about to this day.”

Christopher Gellasch

Major, U.S. Army

Competed from 1985 to 1987

“My success in Science Olympiad helped me to decide on majoring in geology in college.”

Christina Spindler

Civil Engineer, Wyoming Department of Transportation

Competed from 1991 to 1993

“Science Olympiad helped foster an already strong interest in science that was augmented by providing a peer group along with opportunity.”

Justin Wollenburg

Assistant Director, Residential Life, SCSU

Competed from 1998 to 2002

“I started out in Science Olympiad when I was a freshman in high school. Like most people in high school, I really didn’t know what I wanted to do when I graduated. I ended up going to school for meteorology. While involved in the sciences, I became particularly interested in the computer science aspect.”

Dan Van Boxel

Researcher/Engineer

Competed from 2001 to 2004

“During my Science Olympiad career, I probably participated in every event at one point or another. My highlights were the earth science events and Mission Possible. Starting with a wee little box in 9th grade, we improved each year until we had it down to an exact science by the time we competed my senior year, where we took gold at nationals with a nearly perfect score. While I’ve always had a passing interest in technology, Science Olympiad truly gave me an outlet to explore this interest. Further, the environment under which I studied gave me the discipline to face head on the rigors of collegiate study. Science Olympiad was by far the most amazing experience of my high school career. One of its best assets is the diversity of science represented. Science Olympiad offers a wealth of experience and maintains events that offer many possible solutions to an engineering problem.”

Brent Summerlin

Assistant Professor of Chemistry, Southern Methodist University

Competed from 1992 to 1994

“I feel the guidance and enthusiasm I gained from the Science Olympiad had an incredibly direct and tangible effect on the accomplishments of the following years. The impact of the Science Olympiad on my resulting career path is nearly beyond words. The excitement of competing and excelling in an educational activity led me to choose science for my livelihood. I feel that one of the overlooked components of the Science Olympiad is the fact that its goals combine education and scientific learning with competition. The competitive aspect of science is pervasive and is one of the major driving forces of scientific advancement.”

Joanna Lowenstein

Researcher, Utah State University

Competed from 1986 to 1989

“Going to the state competition introduced me to the University of Illinois, which I decided to attend and have graduated from.”

Corinne Richards

Ph.D. Student, Ecology and Evolution, University of Michigan

Competed from 1994 to 1997

“I first learned about reptiles and amphibians through Science Olympiad. Now I am a Ph.D. student studying tropical amphibian conservation. Right now I am writing to you from Panama City, Panama, where I am on a weekend hiatus from fieldwork in a national park to preserve the Panamanian Golden Frog. I would tell anyone that Science Olympiad had a major impact on my career choice and turning me on to science. It is a great program.”

Mark Turre

Forensic DNA Analyst, Louisiana State Police Crime Lab

Competed from 1989 to 1994

“Science Olympiad focused my plans in college and life to science. I love science, and knew I would go that way throughout life. Science Olympiad allowed me to see a broad range of scientific fields at any given time and allowed me to hone in on what I truly liked — not to mention the friendships, relationships, and common bonds that I have for life with former teammates and coaches. Science Olympiad ranks as one of the top experiences in my life!”

Bradley Plaster

Particle Physicist, California Institute of Technology

Competed from 1990 to 1995

“Participating in Science Olympiad sparked my interest in mathematics and the sciences and was nothing but a completely positive experience. My junior high school and senior high school Science Olympiad coach, Dennis Friestad, of Valley City High School (Valley City, ND) had an enormous influence on my career. Perhaps, most importantly, Science Olympiad gave me the opportunity to pursue science beyond what was offered in my high school. My success at the national level as a 9th grader proved to me that someone from North Dakota could compete with students from large schools in states such as New York and California.”

Michael Barhorst

Pharmacist

Competed from 1989 to 1994

“Science Olympiad gave me the confidence and knowledge to pursue an education beyond high school. In addition, it helped give me the social skills needed to succeed in life. Without Science Olympiad I’m not sure I’d be in the great position I’m in today.”

Mark Rivard

Associate Professor, Medical Physicist, Tufts University

Competed in 1985

“Science Olympiad reinforced my love of science and bolstered my confidence to be proven successful in such a competition.”

Tova Peltz

Geotechnical Engineer, GRI

Competed from 1991 to 1995

“I developed an interest in geology in middle school, and competed in geology-oriented events at Science Olympiad. It was an opportunity to continue my geology studies. Learning to identify and classify 200+ rocks, minerals and fossils absolutely benefited me throughout college and graduate school in mineralogy courses, geology field courses, and in engineering with soil mechanics and rock and soil strength properties. I am still in touch with one of my Science Olympiad teammates from middle and high school who is working on a Ph.D. in Fluvial Geomorphology and Fish Passage through the University of Michigan civil engineering program. With some frequency we marvel at how our childhood geekiness has developed into amazing careers and so much passion for our chosen fields!”

Peter Lu

Graduate Student, Harvard University Department of Physics

Competed from 1990 to 1996

“Science Olympiad more than anything else was the beginning of my interest and expertise in the sciences. It is probably not unfair to say that, without the Olympiad, there is a good chance I would not be where I am today.” Peter recently published an article titled “Early Precision Compound Machine from Ancient China” in the June 11, 2004, issue of *Science* magazine and discussed his discoveries in Chinese jade rings on the New Scientist web site. (Peter was the Science Olympiad National Tournament Gold Medal winner in Rocks and Fossils in 1991, 1993, 1995 and 1996.) While his article was published nearly a decade after his Science Olympiad experience, he says: “the adventure really began with rocks and fossils in the early 1990s. What I learned in Science Olympiad was crucial to this paper.” Peter concludes by saying, “Science Olympiad was the only truly useful thing I ever did before college.”

Jocelyn Nelson

Research Engineer, Exxon/Mobil

Competed from 1992 to 1996

“Learning to work as a team and how to think under pressure most impacted my success in college and in my career. Not to mention the great friends that I made!”

Shannon Beagle

Business Owner/Software Developer, Inquiry Databases

Competed from 1993 to 1995

“Science Olympiad led me to find friends who liked me for who I was. It was wonderful to be surrounded by people my age that loved science as much as I did. Science Olympiad helped me ‘fit in’ in high school and was one of the factors why I pursued a career in science.” Recently selected to join the Kansas City Teaching Fellows program, she plans to bring Science Olympiad into high-needs schools in the KC metro area. “I learned how fun and exciting science could be while I was a member of our SO team, and I know that I can convey that enthusiasm for science to my future students. In a couple of years, I hope to be coaching a Science Olympiad team of my own.”

Linsey Marr

Assistant Professor, Civil and Environmental Engineering, Virginia Tech

Competed from 1986 to 1992

While attending Harvard University eleven years ago, Marr, a gold medallist in Cell Biology at the national tournament, said, “After winning the event, I more seriously considered biology as a career. I grew to be more concerned about the direct social value of my work.” Today, Marr studies the effects of air pollution on the earth’s atmosphere, human health, agriculture and global climate. The fun she experienced while participating in tournaments translated to Marr’s current approach to college-level teaching. In the classroom at Virginia Tech, she brings the excitement of Science Olympiad to her students through hands-on activities like the ones in competition.

Marcus Brown

Design Engineer, Robotic Solutions

Competed from 1995 to 1999

“Science Olympiad has given me a drive for project excellence that carried through college and into my career. The national competitions were the most fun I had in high school.”

Belinda Butler-Veytia

Chemical Engineer, URS Corporation

Competed from 1994 to 1996

“Science Olympiad allowed me to get more excited about the method of chemistry and helped lead me to look towards a future in chemistry.”

Michael Del Corso

Enterprise Architecture Associate, Merck & Co.

Competed from 1995 to 1997

“My ability to think outside the box started with Science Olympiad! Now my favorite days of the year are when I’m volunteering at the tournaments.”

Nathan Lichon

Naval Nuclear Power Training Command, United States Navy

Competed from 1996 to 2000

“Science Olympiad is probably the greatest high school competition. Going to the state competition introduced me to the University of Illinois, which I attended and graduated from.”

Steve Gerst

Business Management, Six Sigma/3M

Competed from 1987 to 1989

“Science Olympiad definitely got me excused from chemistry class to practice and helped steer me toward chemistry in college!” As an employee for 3M, Gerst currently leads a corporate initiative in which small teams of people improve business and manufacturing processes using the scientific method. The main focus of the initiative, called Six Sigma, is to make data-driven decisions. “I certainly use the problem-solving skills I developed throughout my chemistry education. More important, however, is the ability to work on a team. Formal education tends to focus mainly on individual skills rather than people skills and leadership. Participation in team activities like Science Olympiad provides important training in these areas. When solid analytical skills are coupled with strong people skills, a person can achieve amazing results.”

Matthew Althoff

Pharmaceutical Sales, TAP Pharmaceuticals

Competed from 1988 to 1993

Seven-time letter winner in track/cross country at ND, NCAA championship competitor
Back in 1993, was quoted as saying, “I like the competitiveness of Science Olympiad. It makes science so much more fun. In fact, Science Olympiad makes a sport out of science without having the ‘jock’ atmosphere surrounding. Being an athlete as well, I sincerely appreciate this ‘other side’ to competition.” Now uses his chemistry background to assist with the technical and chemical aspects of his pharmaceutical business. “Science Olympiad was a major force in our family. I came from a family of 10 kids, and most of us did Science Olympiad. My 7th and 8th grade siblings are involved in Yankton, South Dakota now. My brother, Eric, competed for five years, got his Ph.D. in Chemical Biology from Columbia University and is now a professor at the University of Chicago. Although he was a football champion, my mother remembers that he took more pride in his Science Olympiad medals than the athletic awards.”

Eric Price

Software Developer

Competed from 1995 to 1999

“Science Olympiad gave me something to excel at in school that was both public and at a national level. Science Olympiad also taught me just how much knowledge there is outside of school books, both in information and practical how-to knowledge, especially in the ad hoc building events.”

Vanessa Rogers

Management Consultant, IBM

Competed from 1991 to 1996

“As a young girl, being on Science Olympiad with other girls created an important support group; together we discovered that women can succeed in the fields of engineering, math and science.”

Douglas McLemore

Chemistry Instructor, Front Range Community College

Competed from 1989 to 1991

“I would have been a musician but I ended up teaching chemistry and soon astronomy and geology at the college level. I had a lot of fun participating in Science Olympiad and feel that it helped me develop many connections that I still have today.”

Paul Shinn

Researcher/DNA Sequencing Coordinator, Salk Institute

Competed from 1987 to 1989

Was recently recognized with his research team in Washington, D.C. for completing the genome sequencing of the first flowering plant, *Arabidopsis thaliana*. “Science Olympiad brought other kids like me together to further enjoy and explore science which you just can’t get in school alone. It gave me and many of my friends a creative outlet to show off our talents at being little MacGuyvers rather than little Dennis the Menaces that only took apart toasters.” Relating his experience with Science Olympiad to his work at the Salk Institute, Shinn says, “At work I get to create and invent. What I have taken from Science Olympiad is that there is more than one way to skin a cat. Our project changes every year or so and with that comes a change in protocols and methods. It’s up to me to adapt to the situation with the tools we already have. It’s like that Science Olympiad challenge, drop an egg without breaking it. Well, it would have been great to have bubble wrap or a pillow and a week to finish. But all we’ve got are straws and tape and it needs to be done today and it has to be perfect? I guess I’ll have to make do. That’s what work is like sometimes and that’s what Science Olympiad taught me.”

Elinor Karlsson

Graduate Student, Computational Biology, Boston University/MIT

Competed from 1992 to 1994

“I studied molecular biology as an undergraduate, both because of the fun I had doing Science Olympiad and the influence of our team coach, my high school biology teacher. My fascination with genetics began when our volunteer event coaches from Brown University introduced me to this very cool field by tutoring us for the Designer Genes event and allowing us to participate in a freshman lab course at Brown. Since graduating with my bachelor degree, I’ve worked on the human, dog and mouse genome sequencing projects. Today, I am a graduate student at Boston University in computational biology, and I am doing my research, finding genes for canine and human diseases, at the Broad Institute at Harvard and MIT. Thank you so much for running this competition -- it had a very positive impact on my high school experience and, I believe, pushed me into the important genomics research I’m involved with today.”

Daniel Grech

Reporter, National Public Radio

Competed from 1993 to 1995

“Science Olympiad was one of the best social experiences I’ve ever had. Beyond the friendships, it is the highest level of success I have achieved in any national competition.”

Elaine Hayes

Ph.D. in Musicology/Music Historian, University of Pennsylvania

Competed from 1987 to 1991

“The things I remember and appreciate most about Science Olympiad were the teamwork-oriented problem solving — the opportunity to have a bunch of smart people work together, share ideas, and get excited about problem solving. There is a unique spark of energy that accompanies those kinds of situations which, in my experience, is hard to find. Another wonderful thing about Science Olympiad is that it brought together a bunch of pretty serious, studious kids and allowed us to have some fun and feel comfortable being big nerds. I am still friends with a handful of the people I did Science Olympiad with back in 1987. The problem solving skills and the intellectual curiosity that events such as Science Olympiad encouraged did play an important role in me wanting to pursue a graduate degree. When I think back on my Science Olympiad experiences I believe that they helped me become a more self confident and assertive young woman. It gave me an outlet to excel at science and math on an equal footing with the boys. I know that these skills and the belief in myself that it fostered have helped me in everything I have done since.”

Allison Gallaway
Public Affairs Officer, Smithsonian Institution

Competed from 1989 to 1991

“Science Olympiad made me less afraid to try new things and to venture into typically ‘male’ territory. It was an opportunity to learn about something unfamiliar, even intimidating, without the pressure of grades. The event that had the greatest effect on me was Write It Do It. I took something incredibly important away from the experience -- I learned that not everyone communicates the same way and that you can’t ‘win’ without good communication. My positive experience with Science Olympiad was due largely to the enthusiasm, encouragement and acceptance of my middle school science teachers. Of course they encouraged us to achieve and we all thought winning was fun, but my memory is that their primary objective was to foster a love of science. There is something in science for everyone. I think the point is that you don’t have to grow up to be a scientist to really benefit from Science Olympiad.”

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