A tribute to John Capehart, MD, “Sooner proud” and 1961 National Spelling Bee champion

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Members of the Department of Thoracic and Cardiovascular Surgery, including allied health professionals and staff from transplant services, the anesthesia department, and the operating room, along with everyone at Baylor University Medical Center at Dallas, wish to honor John Capehart, MD, by congratulating him on the 50th anniversary of winning the National Spelling Bee. John was the first Oklahoman to claim this distinction, though his family very nearly dominated the contest for a decade. His brother in 1958 and his sister in 1964 were both finalists at the national competition.

Anyone who knows John enjoys his witty sense of humor and crisp intellect. The operating room staff has enjoyed interacting with him during a myriad of thoracic, cardiovascular, and transplantation surgical procedures.

John's distinction as spelling bee champion has commanded the utmost respect and admiration from his colleagues. The operating room staff regularly consults him regarding word etymology, origin, spelling, and appropriate usage. His uncanny ability to remember names, numbers, dates of birth of fellow surgeons, medical record numbers, as well as dates and details of surgery for transplant patients is unparalleled, and he has mastered a broad range of topics, from military history to sports and other historical events. It is these qualities that make John unique as a splendid and enchanting teller of tales—some of which are actually true.

DR. CAPEHART'S BACKGROUND

After graduating from high school in Tulsa, Oklahoma, Dr. Capehart embarked upon an undergraduate and postgraduate medical school education at his beloved University of Oklahoma. To say he is a very proud Sooner is an understatement. He completed his training at the University of Oklahoma Health Science Center in 1976, the Johns Hopkins Hospital in 1978, and the Medical College of Virginia Hospitals in 1982. He went on to complete fellowships in 1977 at the Institute of Neurology National Hospital for Nervous Disorders in the United Kingdom and in 1983 at the Medical College of Virginia Hospitals. While in Virginia, he was fortunate to train in cardiac and lung transplantation procedures under the guidance of Richard Lower, MD, who had contributed greatly in establishing the transplant program at Stanford University, working in tandem with the venerable Norman Shumway, MD.

Dr. Lower continued his research at the Medical College of Virginia (now Virginia Commonwealth University Health System), where he practiced from 1966 until 1989. Dr. Lower participated in the training of Christiaan Barnard, MD, who later performed the world's first heart transplant in Capetown, South Africa, in December 1967. Dr. Lower performed his first heart transplant (believed to be the ninth in the USA) in May 1968. He and his team (which included John Capehart) would eventually participate in almost 400 heart transplants, and in this period Dr. Lower trained many prominent heart surgeons in practice today.

BACKGROUND ON THE SPELLING BEE

Twenty-four spellers this year had at least one family member who had competed in previous national finals. The spellers' favorite words include *tchotchke* (an inexpensive showy trinket or young woman), *pneumonoultramicroscopicsilicovolcanokoniosis* (referring to lung disease from silica dust, a word coined in the 1930s with the purpose of being the longest word in the English dictionary), and *weissnichtwo* (an indefinite, unknown, or imaginary place).

The first round of the spelling bee consists of a 25-word written test; the remaining rounds are all oral, conducted in elimination rounds until one speller remains. There have been three ties in 1950, 1957, and 1962 and 46 female and 41 male champions. *Table 1* summarizes participants' characteristics.

A speller is given 2½ minutes to spell a word correctly. The first 2 minutes are “regular time”; the final 30 seconds are “finish time.” During regular time, a speller is allowed to ask the pronouncer information about the word:

- Definition
- Part of speech
- Use in a sentence
- Language(s) of origin (not the complete etymology, though some spellers call the language(s) of origin the etymology)
- Alternate pronunciations

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Table 1. Spelling bee participant characteristics*

- Spellers range in age from 8 to 15, with 82% between the ages of 12 and 14.
- Parents and family members serve as coaches.
- Recent gender trends indicate that 50.2% of participants are boys and 49.8% are girls.
- The competitors most frequently cite math as their favorite subject.

*From reference 1.

- Root (i.e., the speller may ask if a word comes from a particular root word, but must specify the root's language of origin and definition)

A chime signals when regular time has expired, and the judges inform the speller that finish time has begun. The speller may watch a clock counting down from 30 seconds; no timing devices are allowed on stage. At that point, the speller may make no more requests of the pronouncer and must begin spelling the word. Any speller who exceeds the time limit is automatically eliminated. Judges do not acknowledge letters spelled after the end of finish time. A speller is allowed to start over spelling a word, but if he or she changes the letters already stated, it counts as a misspelling and results in automatic elimination.

The spelling bee is held in late May or early June of each year. It is open to students who have not yet completed the eighth grade or reached their 15th birthday, nor won a previous National Spelling Bee. An insect bee is featured prominently on the logo of the Scripps National Spelling Bee, despite the word *bee* being completely unrelated to the name of the insect. *Bee* refers to a gathering, where people join together in an activity. The origin of this sense of bee is related to the word “been” (1). Many scholars believe that this competition traces its roots to the United States.

The first National Spelling Bee was organized by *The Courier Journal* of Louisville, Kentucky, in 1925, and took place first locally and then in Washington, DC (1). The winner in the inaugural event was 11-year-old Frank Neuhauser from Louisville, Kentucky (Figure 1). The winning word was *gladiolus*. He won \$500 in gold (equal to about \$50,000 today) and enjoyed

Figure 1. The finalists in 1925 on the White House lawn; Neuhauser is front row center. Photo courtesy of Scripps National Spelling Bee Archives.

a trip to the White House to meet President Calvin Coolidge, a presidential tradition that continues today. Upon his return home to Louisville, a parade was organized in his honor, and much to his surprise, the attendees all donned gladioli in tribute to his win. Mr. Neuhauser went on to become a successful attorney and enjoyed a very long life. He passed away at age 97 on March 11, 2011.

JOHN CAPEHART AND THE 1961 SPELLING BEE

In 1961, Scripps Howard Newspapers and other daily and Sunday papers made the National Spelling Bee possible. The final two spellers that year were each 12 years old, John Capehart, contestant 66 from Tulsa, Oklahoma, and Mary Lukes, contestant 67 from Oxnard, California. As John entered the semifinial round, he nervously awaited the word to be announced to Ms. Lukes, *distichous* (an adjective in botany describing an arrangement in two vertical rows on opposite sides of an axis, as leaves, or in zoology meaning divided into two parts). When his opponent failed to spell the word correctly, John began “licking his chops,” so to speak, for he knew the word very well. To complete the endeavor of being crowned champion, he would have to spell one last word correctly; it was *smaragdine*, an adjective meaning “of or pertaining to emerald.”

“To the victor belong the spoils” (2–4). John happily hoisted the trophy (Figure 2), signaling a victorious end to a very grueling

Figure 2. John hoists the trophy alongside Mary Lukes, runner-up, and James H. Wagner of Scripps Newspapers, director of the National Spelling Bee. Photo courtesy of United Press International and Scripps National Spelling Bee Archives.

Table 2. Television broadcast history*

- 1946: The national finals were broadcast live on NBC.
- 1974 and 1977: The national finals were broadcast on PBS as a taped primetime special.
- 1994–2009: The national finals were broadcast live on ESPN.
- 2006–2010: The national finals were broadcast live on ABC.
- 2011: The national preliminaries, semifinals, and finals were broadcast live on ESPN.

*From reference 1.

contest requiring an extensive investment of time and study in orthography (the art or study of correct spelling according to established usage). As champion, he received not only the cash prize and a trip to the White House, but also an appearance on The Ed Sullivan Show.

CONCLUSION

The operating room families watch intently year after year now as the spelling bee competition is broadcast on national television (*Table 2*). Knowing the impact of this event on the lives of the participants, we all sit amazed at the extraordinary words they spell, the epitome of triumph, and, conversely, recognize the depth of disappointment when there is a misspelling. The 2011 competition's winning word, *cymotrichous* (having wavy hair), was spelled correctly by Sukanya Roy from Pennsylvania, who continues the trend of Indian American dominance.

Nine of the last 13 winners were from this demographic sector, which makes up <1% of the US population.

We congratulate (oops! congratulate) you, John, on a wonderful achievement. The thoracic and cardiovascular surgery staff at Baylor University Medical Center at Dallas thank you for being a part of our professional lives.

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1. Scripps National Spelling Bee. Website. Available at <http://www.spelling-bee.com>.
  2. The White House. Andrew Jackson [website]. Available at <http://www.whitehouse.gov/about/presidents/andrewjackson/>; retrieved September 5, 2010.
  3. Re: To the victor belong the after spoils. The Phrase Finder [website]. Available at http://www.phrases.org.uk/bulletin_board/32/messages/793.html; retrieved September 5, 2010.
  4. Platt S, ed. *Respectfully Quoted: A Dictionary of Quotations*. Washington, DC: Library of Congress, 1989.