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Ray Duckler: Abhinav loves Disney World and indoor soccer, and he'll school you on the Middle East and robotics

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Matt Hicks, assistant head at Shaker Road School, pointed to a spot on the map, a capital in southern India, and the other four of us in the school's conference room nodded with blind faith.

Except Abhinav Govindaraju.

He knew better.

"That's the one in Pakistan," said Abhinav, who's in sixth grade. "The one in India is a little lower."

Hicks slid his finger down a few inches and found the other Hyderabad, the homeland of Abhinav's parents.

"That's the one," Abhinav said.

So we nodded again.

It's easy to learn things from Abhinav, an 11-year-old boy with worldly views far beyond his years. He won the New Hampshire National Geographic Bee earlier this month at Keene State College, beating 100 opponents from across the state.

That stamped his ticket to the National Geographic Bee Championship on May 23-25 at the National Geographic Society headquarters in Washington, D.C.

He's not sure what to expect, but in the coming weeks, Abhinav will study world maps with his mother, pinpointing rivers and lakes and boundaries and mountain ranges and capitals and anything else he might be asked in the competition.

"I'm not really that nervous," Abhinav said. "I've been on stage a couple of times before."

He's a wiry, dark-haired, bespectacled kid who does what most kids do at his age, namely playing indoor soccer, tennis and golf.

Then there's the other aspect to his personality, the one that paints a different picture from most grade-school kids, the part that's curious about the world and words and history and math.

"He has a very strong inclination toward learning geography," said his mother, Dr. Kalyani Govindaraju, a rheumatologist. "It's more the organizational part I help him with. He likes to be quizzed a lot.

"The amazing part is the way he remembers something," the doctor continued. "If we've discussed something six months ago, I would have forgotten and he remembers the facts."

He remembers words, too. Abhinav is a busy bee, competing in several spelling bees as well as this latest venture into a geographical challenge.

He's part of a family that spells education with a capital "E," with a doctor mother, who came to the United States from India in 2000, and an engineer father, Raghava Govindaraju, who's been here for nearly 20 years. There's also a younger sister, 7-year-old Advika.

"Education is a big priority in India," Abhinav said. "There's a huge population there, and my mom and dad are pretty smart people. If you want to come to this country, it helps if you're educated."

Abhinav wants to attend the Massachusetts Institute of Technology in Cambridge, Mass., a decision he made just a few months ago. A win in the nationals means a \$50,000 scholarship. He'd like to be a robotics engineer.

Doesn't everyone?

He won the schoolwide spelling bee this year, clinching the title when he spelled "postprandial," which refers to glucose levels after a meal.

Duh.

He was a member of the school's math team, which finished second at the MathCounts Regional Competition. He's rated as one of the state's top 50 chess players, for all ages, according to a press release from Shaker Road School. He likes LEGO robotics and competed in the First LEGO League Regional Tournament.

The list continues, with studying at a school on ecology in Saco, Maine, and a composting project.

"A lot of it is logic," Abhinav said, "so a lot of it is based on logic."

Sometimes, the young boy in Abhinav surfaces, such as when you learn he's traveled to China, Canada, the Bahamas and India, where his grandparents and other relatives still live.

His favorite destination thus far was a place in Orlando, Fla., a reminder that there's an 11-year-old wrapped around that sharp mind.

The place?

"Disney World," Abhinav said.

To win the state portion of the geo bee (that's what us insiders call it), Abhinav studied with mom, learning about "seven or eight countries per day and 100 facts per day about those countries," he said.

Then he nailed several questions to claim the title. He looked at a map of the United States, marked with dots signifying national parks, and was asked to point out Hot Springs National Park.

That's it, there.

And the state?

Arkansas.

Name the old capital of Australia, the most populous metro area in the country.

Auckland.

What country, adjacent to the Persian Gulf, borders both Oman and Saudi Arabia?

The United Arab Emirates.

Name the largest port city in Spain, which once hosted the Summer Olympics.

Here's where Abhinav showed his age, and made others in that conference room feel old.

"I knew it was a city that hosted either the Winter or Summer Olympics," Abhinav said. "I knew it was Barcelona, and I knew it some time in the 20th century."

The year was 1992.

"Wow, such a long time ago," Hicks, the assistant head at Shaker Road School,

joked.

It seemed that way, a long time ago, to Abhinav, of course.

But he knows his way around.

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