

## AIAA Greater Huntsville Section partners with teacher-run Alabama Scholastic Competition Association to save Alabama Quiz Bowl State Championships from cancellation amid COVID-19 pandemic

*By Robin Osborne*

The American Institute of Aeronautics and Astronautics Greater Huntsville Section (AIAA GHS) recently partnered with the Alabama Scholastic Competition Association (ASCA) to help save the State Championships for Alabama Academic Quiz Bowl from inevitable cancellation during the COVID-19 pandemic. AIAA GHS did this by hosting the two large, traditionally in-person tournaments – one for middle school and one for high school – through Zoom sessions and Buzzin.live, an online buzzer system. AIAA GHS, together with Jacobs Exploration Group (JSEG) and ERC, Inc., sponsored the tournaments by providing support in the form of funding, volunteers, technical expertise, and even a tournament director to handle all the logistics and coordination associated with live, online tournaments.



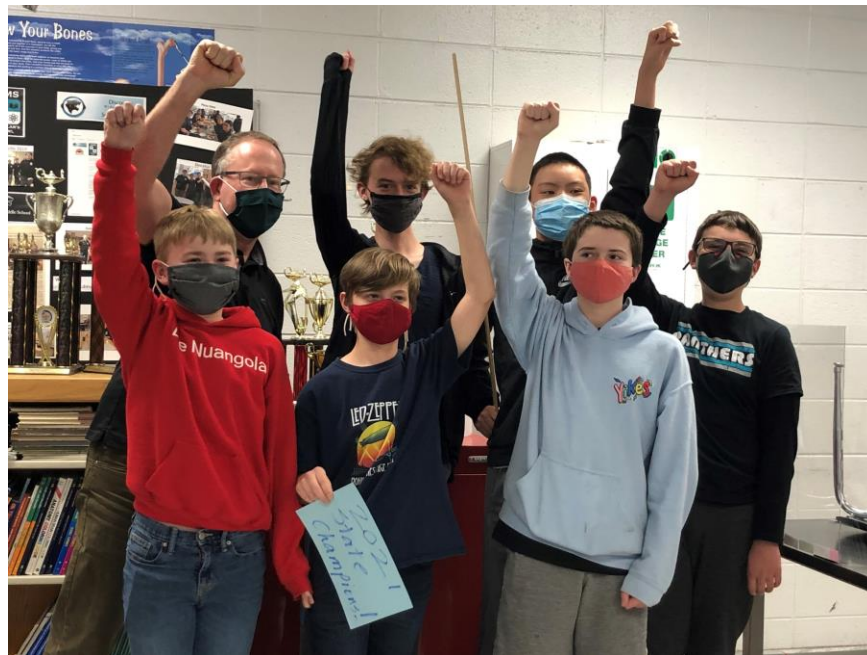
***The Hoover High School Scholars' Bowl team, coached by teachers Tim Caine and Anthony Hamley, went up against the team from Sparkman High School in the finals of the High School State Championship on May 15, 2021. Hoover won the state title, and the Sparkman team, coached by teacher Angela Silvey, was the runner-up.***

ASCA President Lee Henry wrote, "On behalf of ASCA, I sincerely thank all of the good people at AIAA GHS for their hard work in making sure that our tournaments took place this year. I also want to thank Jacobs and ERC for their generous sponsorships. This has been an incredibly difficult year, and we likely would not have been able to host our tournaments without this assistance. Because so many wonderful people stepped up to help, we were able to give our students the high-quality academic competition that they have worked for and deserve. It

was a pleasure working with everyone and I hope that this is the beginning of a long-lasting partnership!"

Eshan Pokhrel, a junior at Sparkman High School who has been active in Scholars' Bowl programs since 6th grade, commented, "After having our sophomore year and season cut short due to COVID-19, I was happy to see that ASCA and AIAA were able to find a way to keep the state engaged in quiz bowl, despite the challenge of hosting our state districts and championship online threatening participation. Without the help from an outside organization and the help it provided, I don't think that the state circuit would've gone as smoothly as it did, and it was by far the best and most efficiently-run tournament we attended this season."

The scholastic tournaments, which traditionally have been in person, challenged students from 56 schools across Alabama with detailed questions related to the disciplines of science, technology, engineering, and math (STEM), as well as other areas such as history, literature, fine arts, and pop culture. Teams of up to four students with two alternates competed against one another by answering tossup and bonus questions related to those subjects. Quiz bowl, also referred to as Scholars' Bowl, is akin to Jeopardy for students. The questions, provided by the National Academic Quiz Tournaments (NAQT) are often complex and advanced for students' current grade levels, and the top-performing teams, in many cases, studied for years in after-school sessions under the guidance and encouragement of dedicated teachers/coaches who have a passion for both the game and bringing out the best in their students.



***Discovery Middle School's Scholars' Bowl team, with their Coach Dave Sippel, celebrates their newly-won title of Middle School State Champions immediately following the April 17 online tournament.***

When asked how Scholars' Bowl benefits students and teachers, Discovery Middle School Coach Dave Sippel responded, "The kids benefit by learning to work together as part of a team. The bonus questions allow them to collaborate and develop consensus-making skills. The broad range of topics provide a wide range of knowledge for these very talented students. As a coach, I get the opportunity to spend time with great kids and have the thrill of watching them develop and achieve." Coach Sippel's Discovery team placed 1st in the Middle School State Championship.

ASCA, mostly consisting of teachers, is the volunteer organization that organizes and hosts the annual State tournaments that are held during the spring semester. During the previous school year, in March 2020, the sudden outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic necessitated cancellation of the High School State Championship. The NAQT National Championships that were slated to be held in Chicago in April and May 2020 were also cancelled.



***The Madison Board of Education recognized the Discovery Middle School team for their 1st place win at its April 29 meeting. Discovery Coach Dave Sippel (left) stands with Dr. Edwin Nichols, Superintendent of Madison City Schools, Mrs. Kim Stewart, Principal of Discovery Middle School, and his team of students with their trophy.***

Fast forward a year later, and the restrictions in place in Alabama for large, in-person gatherings combined with NAQT's moratorium on their questions for in-person tournaments



meant that the 2021 Alabama State Championships would either need to be taken online or cancelled. AIAA GHS reached out to ASCA and offered to provide a tournament director and volunteers who would take the lead in planning, organizing, and executing the State Championships. With this support from the community, ASCA was able to take what would have been a Herculean task, especially during a pandemic when teachers were already under tremendous strain, and break it down into something manageable. ASCA was able to focus on working with their question provider, NAQT, to use NAQT's online Buzzword platform for District tournaments. The District tournaments were necessary to determine which teams advanced to the State Championships. Buzzword had never been used for Districts, but it allowed all teams to compete at their own schools, without the need for any interaction. An estimated 600 students from 111 schools in Alabama participated in the 2021 ASCA District Tournaments in early March. Of those 111 schools, 56 qualified for the State Championships.



***Other teams that placed in the Middle School State Championship included West Point Middle School (2nd place - photo not available), Monrovia Middle School, pictured with Coach Gene Cox (3rd place), and Arab Junior High School (4th place).***

While ASCA worked with NAQT on the logistics of using Buzzword for District tournaments, from early February to mid May AIAA GHS recruited and trained volunteers to serve as moderators and scorekeepers for the State Championships. In the end, 64 volunteers consisting of members of the Huntsville aerospace community, teachers and students from across Alabama, and quiz bowl alumni assisted. Volunteers ranged from middle school students to Ph.Ds. To prepare themselves, volunteers participated in 1 to 1.5 hour training sessions conducted over Zoom. Many volunteers also took part in “mock games” amongst themselves, taking turns in the roles of moderators, scorekeepers, and players in multiple Zoom sessions.

The organizations and companies represented by the 64 volunteers included AIAA GHS, JSEG, ERC, NASA Marshall Space Flight Center, ASCA, Qualis Corporation, Paragon TEC, Bastion Technologies, Boeing, GeoControl Systems, Aerodyne, ADTRAN, MTS, Inc., University of Alabama Huntsville, Naval Postgraduate School, Northwestern University, Hoover High

School, West Point High School, Loveless Academic Magnet Program High School, Bumpus Middle School, Monrovia Middle School, and Liberty Middle School.

AIAA GHS and JSEG provided the bulk of the volunteers, with the former providing 25 and the latter 24. Those numbers include some overlap, however, since many of the JSEG employees also serve as AIAA GHS members. Most of the other volunteers who work for aerospace organizations are also AIAA GHS members.

Nishanth Goli, AIAA GHS chairman, commented, "AIAA GHS members are usually enthusiastic for STEM volunteer events, but for the quiz bowl events, we received unprecedented enthusiasm. Members volunteered for 4-8 hours on the day of the middle school and high school events, and additional time was spent in the practice sessions beforehand. Our membership's passion for STEM is commendable and the GHS Council will keep their interests intact and remain actively involved with ASCA and quiz bowl. We are excited about this collaboration and helping shape the future of our community."

Nishanth, along with AIAA GHS Council Members April Potter (secretary), Nancy Donahoo (treasurer), and Naveen Vetcha (public policy) were all scorekeepers for the tournaments. The newly-elected pre-college outreach director, Robin Osborne, was the tournament director for both the middle school and high school tournaments. Tracie Prater, who was recently elected as vice-chairman for AIAA GHS and moderated for both tournaments, had this to say: "I played on academic teams from 4th through 12th grade and even in college, so it was a huge part of my life. It was very impactful in helping me apply skills I had learned in the classroom and to continue learning outside of it. The sense of teamwork and collaboration I got from academic competition is something that stays with me even today. Because I know how meaningful this competition is to students, I was excited to be able to help make it happen again this year, even amidst the pandemic."

Both active and retired employees from NASA volunteered their time to help. Education Specialists Catherine Shelton and John Eckhart, who work in NASA MSFC's Office of Education, served as a scorekeeper and moderator, respectively. John Dankanich, the Center Chief Technologist at NASA MSFC, was one of the moderators. Bill Anderson, who is retired from the Office of Education at NASA Headquarters, moderated from Tennessee. "It was my pleasure and honor to serve as a moderator for this year's Alabama Quiz Bowl State Championships," Bill stated. "The students were focused and prepared, and they clearly enjoyed putting their intellect to the test. Congratulations to all of them and to everyone who worked so hard to celebrate learning and to make Alabama Quiz Bowl a resounding success in a difficult time."

ASCA Board Members Lee Henry (president), Joshua Rutsky (past president), Rhonda Brewer (secretary), Kate Wilson (HS member), Jane Haithcock (MS member) and Claudette Smith (member-at-large) all supported the events and worked with the tournament director to help ensure they were successful. Christopher Arthur, ASCA president-elect, ADTRAN

software engineer, and a former quiz bowl player himself, was heavily involved with the training of the volunteers and moderated at both tournaments, including the finals.



***Pictured are some of the individual top scorers from the Middle School State Championship. Top row (l to r): Tate Osborne, MVP (Monrovia Middle School), Steven Pan (Discovery Middle School), Jackson Stephens (Buckhorn Middle School); Second row (l to r): Erik Wu (Liberty Middle School), Daniel Gill (St. Paul's Episcopal School), and Hampton Broders (Cottage Hill Christian Academy).***

Some of the volunteers came from within the same families. The husband/wife duos of Jason Pullias and Tracie Prater, Greg Joseph and Ellie Meyer, and Walker Gabriel and Jayme Gabriel volunteered. Siblings Sophia Liu and her younger brother Steven helped as a moderator and scorekeeper. Sophia is a Hoover High School alum (currently a student at Northwestern University) and Steven Liu is a student at Bumpus Middle School. Sophia was also a moderator for the NAQT Online National Championships that were held in the weeks following the



Alabama State Championships. Another set of siblings, Matthew and David Hitt, served as moderators. Tate Osborne, a student from Monrovia Middle School and the son of the tournament director, Robin Osborne, served as a scorekeeper for the high school tournament.

With the tournaments being held online, it offered the unique opportunity for volunteers outside of Alabama to assist. There were volunteers who ran their live game rooms from California, Massachusetts, and Tennessee.



***The team from Columbiana Middle School, (l) shown standing under a banner made by their classmates, and (r) competing from their school on the day of the tournament.***

Several of the Alabama teams and students who participated in the State Championships went on to compete in the NAQT Online National Championships. In the Middle School National Championship Tournament, Monrovia Middle School ranked 10th nationally out of 112 teams, with their team captain, 8th grader Tate Osborne, ranking 2nd place among individual scorers, which earned him a spot on the All-Star National Team. Brodie Henry, an 8th grader and team captain from West Point Middle School, also made the All-Star Team, ranking 17th individually. A total of 585 middle school students from across the country competed.

At the High School National Championship Tournament, Hoover High School ranked 19th out of 224 teams nationally. Will McCurley, a junior at Baker High School, ranked 2nd individually out of 1070 high school students, placing him near the top of the All-Star National Team. West Point High School placed 5th out of 40 teams in the Traditional Public Schools Division of the Small School National Championship Tournament, while Indian Springs School placed 11th out of 50 schools in the Open Division. Junior Andy Schwebel of Indian Springs placed 10th individually out of 256 students, which put him on the All-Star team for the Open Division.

A couple of Alabama students competed in NAQT's Individual Player National Tournament. Tate Osborne of Monrovia Middle School ranked 7th out of 50 middle school students, while Will McCurley of Baker High School ranked 13th and Kapil Nathan of Hoover High School ranked 29th out of 111 high school students.

By all measures, the online State Championships were a huge success and an example of how a professional organization such as AIAA GHS, with the support of industry partners and their employees, can become involved in a meaningful way with students throughout the state while also building relationships with educators. As part of these events, AIAA GHS was also able to reach out to students and teachers to encourage them to take advantage of free AIAA student and educator memberships and become more involved in future AIAA activities.

A special thank you goes to Jeff Haars, vice president and program manager for JSEG; Sandra Nall, education and public outreach liaison for JSEG; Ernie Wu, president and CEO of ERC, Inc.; and Michele Armstrong, charitable giving and community outreach coordinator for ERC, Inc., for their roles in the corporate sponsorships of this year's State Championships.

For information regarding the AIAA GHS - ASCA tournament websites and the tournament stats, please visit the websites below.

April 17, 2021 Middle School State Championship:

[Middle School Tournament Announcements](#)

[NAQT Stats for MS Championship](#)

[ASCA's Middle School State Tournament Page](#)

May 15, 2021 High School State Championship:

[High School Tournament Announcements](#)

[NAQT Stats for HS Championship](#)

[ASCA's High School State Tournament Page](#)