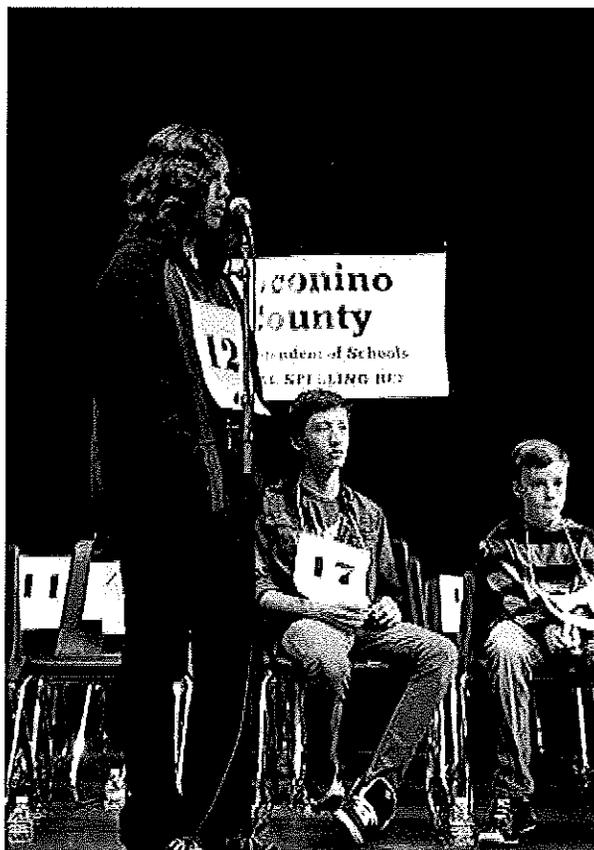


Sinagua middle schooler Orin Blankenship wins Coconino County spelling bee in 11 rounds



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Sinagua Middle School student Orin Blankenship was the winner of this year's Coconino County Spelling Bee.

The curly-haired eighth-grader did not miss a beat as he spelled out the winning word: "unfulfilled."

A toothy smile spread across his face as pronouncer James Hasapis announced he was correct. The audience exploded in applause.

"We have our winner!" Hasapis said.

Twenty-two home-schooled, charter school, public school, charter school and private school students from the elementary school and middle school levels competed at Coconino High School Saturday for the chance to advance to the state spelling bee next month.

Most of the contestants were knocked out in the first six rounds by tricky words like "periscope" and "knavery." By round seven, only three finalists remained.

Williams Elementary/Middle School sixth grader Cooper Heap, whose siblings have been in the top three in the county bee six times, stepped up to the microphone with confidence but forgot the first "R" in "infrared."

Heap participated in the county bee two years ago but did not make it to the top three that time. He was beaming after Saturday's competition.

"I feel good," Heap said.

And then there were two.

Blankenship and Page Middle School seventh-grader Patrick Kendall were neck and neck for the next two rounds. Blankenship confidently spelled "humidity" and "particle," while Kendall spelled "mediate" and "remedy" with ease.

Then, in round 10, Kendall appeared to lose confidence as he thought about the word "trapeze." He asked the pronouncer to use it in a sentence.

"The flying trapeze was first demonstrated in 19th century France by the aerialist Jules Léotard," Hasapis recited.

Kendall paused for several seconds as he gazed into the distance, trying to see the spelling of the word in his mind. Then he took his shot.

"T-R-A-P-E-E-Z," he said.

The judges rang the bell, letting him know that the spelling was incorrect.

Kendall had never competed in the Coconino County Spelling Bee before. He said he got all the way to second place by studying tricky words, memorizing the ones he did not know how to spell and practicing sounding them out.

"I'm kind of disappointed I didn't get first place, but second place is pretty good," Kendall said.

He hopes to come back next year to take another shot at the crown.

Blankenship, who also had never competed in the county bee before, was the last man standing after 11 rounds. His father was in the audience as he received his medal.

"I'm super proud of him," Donny Blankenship said.

Blankenship admitted he got a little nervous when he had to spell the word "hibachi" early in the competition, but said he was not too worried about the bee.

"Because there were elementary schoolers, it wasn't that hard," Blankenship said.

Blankenship did not learn to read until he was in first grade, but his father said he has been "inhaling" books ever since. His favorite book is "The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy" by Douglas Adams. He also loves fantasy novels.

"Right now, I'm reading "Wheel of Time" by Robert Jordan," Blankenship said.

In addition to a first-place medal, he won a \$250 prize donated by the Flagstaff Rotary Club. Blankenship said he planned to use his winnings to buy a tablet computer.

Kendall and Heap also received medals and monetary prizes for being the second- and third-place winners. The prizes were presented by the three spelling bee judges, who were members of the Flagstaff, Williams and Grand Canyon Rotary Clubs.

Cathleen Garrison of the Coconino County Education Service Agency organized the bee, which was sponsored by the Arizona Educational Foundation and promoted through the office of the Coconino County Superintendent of Schools. She said she was happy to see students from all over northern Arizona distributed in the top three.

"I love the fact that we have Flagstaff, Page and Williams represented," Garrison said. "This was truly a county bee."

Blankenship will advance to the Arizona Educational Foundation State Spelling Bee, which will take place on Saturday, March 29, at 1 p.m. at the studios of Eight/AZ PBS in downtown Phoenix. The winner of that competition will represent Arizona at the Scripps National Spelling Bee in Washington D.C. from May 25 through 31.

Michelle McManimon can be reached at MMcManimon@azdailysun.com or 556-2261.