

My Acadec Family

BY NEHA SHABEER,
STUDENT WRITER, FRESHMAN,
ASHLAND HIGH SCHOOL

I didn't know much about the Academic Decathlon (Acadec) at the start of this year. All my prior knowledge of Decathlons stemmed from my Disney Channel years of watching Gabriella Montez (played by Vanessa Hudgens) in *High School Musical*.

My friend dragged me to the first Ashland High Acadec meeting, and the fact they were serving free ice cream at the meeting only made his case more convincing. At this meeting, I fell in love with the enthusiasm of the co-captains, Eric Zhou and Gahl Efroni!

What is Acadec?

Now, before you sell us off as the "nerd herd," Academic Decathlon is not for proving how smart you are; it is daring you to test your limits as a learner. There are 10 events in competitions: Art, Science, Interview, Language/Literature, Music, Mathematics, Social Science, Essay, Speech, and Economics—which is quite grueling to say the least. Although this sounds like extended school, it isn't. Acadec is for kids who *love* learning and aren't doing it for the sake of college applications. It is for the joy of learning and sharing that experience with the rest of your teammates. Acadec is 100 percent student-driven as we self-learn all of the topics. We are each other's teachers. Academic Decathlon classifies students into three levels: Honors (A students), Scholastic (B students), and Varsity (C students), using its specific GPA calculator. When competing for medals, to create an even playing field, students can only go against those at the same level. In fact, schools must have three students in each level on their competing team of nine people, otherwise they cannot participate.

The AHS Team

So now that I've educated your noggin with *what* Acadec is, I'm going to talk about our Ashland High team. I went into Acadec with a pretty fixed mindset. Sure, I was good in school, but I didn't know if I had what it takes to learn 10 completely unknown topics in two and a half months. In the environment



The victorious Acadec team after the November competition: (left to right) Richie Abbott, James Lee, Tom Rice, Wilson Lin, Arthur Wang, Gahl Efroni, Andrew Dunn, Alon Efroni, Swathi Gorantla, Neha Shabeer, Eric Zhou. (Photo/submitted)

of incredible, knowledgeable people, I switched into a growth mindset with a can-do attitude. I studied, I learned, I laughed, but I was right—I didn't have what it takes. I didn't learn all 10 subjects and, although I didn't completely tank at the competition like the Titanic, I was pretty close. But what led up to the competition day is what really counts.

Weekly meetings in Mrs. Bodell's room with presentations, improv games, yoga, Ted Talk marathons and debates planned by the incredible Eric Zhou gave Acadec a new light. On the weekends, we had printing/study parties (yes, I still cannot get over how incredibly lame it sounds), which were surprisingly fun. We got together in the basement of brave and willing souls where we mostly ate food, made PowerPoints, got off topic and watched SNL skits, and listened to Indian trap music. For Diwali, we even lit firecrackers (which might or might not have been legal) to embrace the Indian culture we are learning about. After two and a half months of rigorous but fun study, we were on the verge of

the first competition of the year. Luckily, the first Acadec competition only includes the seven core events of the Decathlon—eliminating the Essay, Interview and Speech rounds.

November 21. Competition day at Natick High School. And Ashland absolutely rocked it. Six students from Ashland took home 22 medals. High school senior Eric Zhou, captain of the Acadec team, won Silver and Gold medals in every subject but Literature, placing 1st overall in the Honors division. Co-captain, senior Gahl Efroni, won Silver and Gold medals in all seven subjects, placing 2nd overall in the Varsity division. Sophomore Arthur Wang won Silver and Bronze medals in Economics, Science, Literature and Art, placing 3rd overall in the Scholastics division while sophomore Richie Abbott won Silver and Bronze medals in Math, Economics and Social Science, placing 4th overall. Meanwhile, Swathi Gorantla was the first freshman in Acadec's history to win a medal: she and sophomore James Lee won their first Silver medal in

Music. Due to these amazing wracking up of points, Ashland won 1st place overall out of 23 other schools! To celebrate, we had dinner at the Mandarin Café in Natick (owned by the family of our teammate, Wilson Lin), which serves some of the best Chinese food in the area!

As we move forward to our February regional competition with personalized sweatshirts in sight, I'm going to work even harder for my Acadec family. I see a possible medal if I push myself a little harder to help the team reach Nationals in Alaska. We are truly a family, in which we have friendly competition but

support each other at the end of the day. I never feel jealous of my teammates' success because they always 100 percent deserve it with all their hard work, and it only pushes me to try harder. I would walk through fire for these wonderful nerds. Well if not fire, at least through a super-humid room. But not too humid because of my hair. You get my point.

So join Acadec, or try to learn something new, since you never know where it might take you. I sure didn't. For more about the happenings at Ashland High School, keep reading my monthly column :)



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