Count Down: Six Kids Vie for Glory at the World's Toughest Math Competition

Steve Olson
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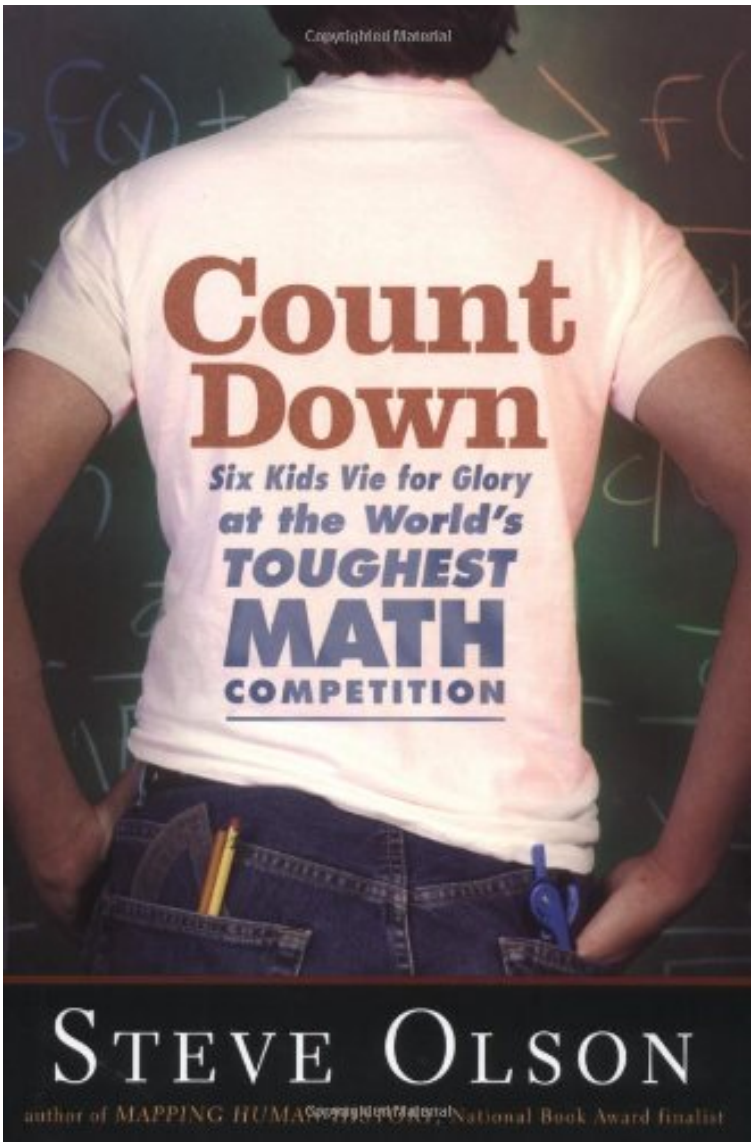

#1868101 in Books HOUGHTON MIFFLIN HARCOURT 2004-04-02Ingredients: Example IngredientsOriginal language:EnglishPDF # 1 8.25 x .63 x 5.50l, .90 #File Name: 0618251413256 pages | File size: 37.Mb

Steve Olson : Count Down: Six Kids Vie for Glory at the World's Toughest Math Competition before purchasing it in order to gage whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised Count Down: Six Kids Vie for Glory at the World's Toughest Math Competition:

4 of 5 people found the following review helpful. Mathletes extraordinaireBy Westley"Count Down" is the story of the

annual high school Olympiad of mathematics - a gathering of the best student mathematicians in the world. Participating countries field a team of six students, and over the two day contest, students attempt to solve six extremely difficult math problems. These math problems aren't your everyday geometry or algebra questions - they require a great deal of logic and creativity. Author Steve Olson followed the 2001 contest and got to know many of the students, focusing on the U.S. team.To better understand these students, Olson discusses some of the qualities they possess and that are hypothesized as necessary to excel at math. Each chapter covers a specific quality, such as 'creativity' or 'talent.' These chapters discuss psychological and educational research about how a factor is related to math performance and how it relates to particular U.S. teammates. Topics such as sex and ethnic differences in math abilities are also covered. In addition, each chapter discusses one of the six math problems featured in the Olympiad - examining how a member of the U.S. team solved it.Of course, many people feel intimidated by math and may therefore avoid this book. I think that one does not really need to be a math genius to appreciate what these kids do or to enjoy the book itself. The six problems from the exam are discussed in detail in the appendix, allowing those interested to revel in the minutiae, but a deep understanding of the problems isn't needed to understand the book.Overall, "Count Down is an interesting book on an interesting topic. However, in the end, I thought that the students and their stories were given somewhat short shrift. I didn't really feel as though I knew the students very well, and they are certainly the most engaging aspect of the book. In addition, the psychological and educational research that is presented is covered in a fairly cursory manner. People unfamiliar with research on intelligence and creativity may find this information of interest, but more knowledgeable audiences will likely hunger for a more in-depth analysis. In sum, despite a few flaws, "Count Down" is a solid read on a topic that certainly deserves more attention.0 of 0 people found the following review helpful. Wonderful book for math educationBy OrangeIt is a wonderful book for math education. If you want to know what the mathematician look like in k-12 school, you must read it.3 of 4 people found the following review helpful. enjoyable read = f(interesting, riveting, informative)By Larry Mark - Editor of MyJewishBooksDotComI once worked with a man who could look at a sheet of numbers and find an error within a few seconds. He said he could visualize the numbers and their patterns in his head. He was the adult version of the nearly 500,000 kids who annually tryout for the Math Olympiad. In 2002, SPELLBOUND, an extremely entertaining film hit the festival circuit, and followed eight boys and girls from regional spelling bees to the national spelling bee competition in Washington. In this book, Steve Olson changes the medium from film to paper, and the competition from spelling bees to mathematics, and the result is an entertaining, alluring, and riveting read about young men (of 119 U.S. team members, only 1 was female), math reasoning, and math problems in an international competition in Northern Virginia (don't worry, the six math solutions are in an appendix). Olson, who has written about genomics, genetics, and the state of science education in American schools, also adds covincing arguments in the book about the education systems' onerous failures to teach math properly, and he is uniquely qualified to discuss whether these kids are products of math nurturing or genetic nature. The key players in this book are the six immigrant-heavy members of the U.S. 2001 team: Oaz Nir (a poet who had already won a gold medal and is now at Duke); Gabriel Carroll (who also had won a gold medalist at a past competition and is now at Harvard); Tiankai Liu (still in high school); Ian Le (now at Harvard); David Shin (now at MIT); and Reid Barton (who had won 3 gold medals at past cometitions, now at MIT). Other key players in the book are the team's coach, Titu Andreescu, and Melanie Wood, the team guide. The book provided nto only an enjoyable read, but some very good insights into creative problem solving methods when time is crucial.

Each summer six math whizzes selected from nearly a half-million American teens compete against the worlds best problem solvers at the International Mathematical Olympiad. Steve Olson followed the six 2001 contestants from the intense tryouts to the Olympiads nail-biting final rounds to discover not only what drives these extraordinary kids but what makes them both unique and typical. In the process he provides fascinating insights into the science of intelligence and learning and, finally, the nature of genius. Brilliant, but defying all the math-nerd stereotypes, these teens want to excel in whatever piques their curiosity, and they are curious about almost everything music, games, politics, sports, literature. One team member is ardent about both water polo and creative writing. Another plays four musical instruments. For fun and entertainment during breaks, the Olympians invent games of mind-boggling difficulty. Though driven by the glory of winning this ultimate math contest, they are in many ways not so different from other teenagers, finding pure joy in indulging their personal passions.Beyond the the Olympiad, Olson sheds light on many questions, from why Americans feel so queasy about math, to why so few girls compete in the subject, to whether or not talent is innate. Inside the cavernous gym where the competition takes place, Count Down uncovers a fascinating subculture and its engaging, driven inhabitants.

From Publishers WeeklyGeometric figures and equations are relatively few and far between, the nonmathematically inclined may be relieved to know, in this elegant, balanced survey of competitive high school math by science writer Olson (Mapping Human History), who chronicles the progress of the six-member American team that participated in the 2001 Olympiad held in Washington, D.C. In between character sketches, the author examines such issues as

whether "genius" is something you're born with (drawing parallels with musicians, he argues that it's those who practice the most who tend to do the best), why certain ethnic groups or nationalities do better than others (traditional rote problem-solving has handicapped U.S. students) and why girls are underrepresented in the field"though the book opens with an account of the impressive career of Melanie Wood, the only girl so far to make the U.S. team (twice, in 1998 and 1999). Six problems taken from the Olympiad will challenge math buffs, who will also appreciate a joke about the waitress with a surprising knowledge of calculus. Contrary to the nerd stereotype, Olson portrays the young math whizzes as normal, well-adjusted kids who enjoy other activities like playing the piano and Ultimate Frisbee. Aimed at the general reader, this uplifting book should also draw fans of more technical recent math titles such as John Derbyshire's Prime Obsession or David Foster Wallace's Everything and More.From School Library JournalAdult/High SchoolOlson has taken on an always-difficult task: discussing math in a manner interesting and understandable to a society full of math-o-phobics. He succeeds admirably by relegating most of the hard-core problems and solutions to an appendix, and by writing about much more than math. Structured around a chronicle of the United States team's participation in the International Mathematical Olympiad of 2001, the book focuses on such topics as the ambiguities of inspiration, insight, talent, and creativity; the cultural perception of mathematics; and various approaches to math education. The author introduces the key players: the six American teen contestants and their coaches. These portraits are spread out over the course of the volume, as are the problems offered at that year's Olympiad. This arrangement supports an engaging and mildly suspenseful read. Olson's user-friendly presentation of the problems serves to reinforce his argument that the United States is culturally averse to math compared with much of the rest of the world, and that American educators are definitely on the wrong path. The author does an excellent job of showcasing the better side of his subject. Unfortunately, many teens who would enjoy reading Count Down won't get past three words in the subtitle: "toughest math competition." Those who do will be rewarded.Robert Saunderson, Berkeley Public Library, CA From The New YorkerAt the Forty-second International Mathematical Olympiad, held in Virginia in 2001, nearly five hundred kids from eighty-three countries sat down to solve six math questions in the course of two days. This engaging study follows six American Olympians and investigates the nature of child genius, the role of gender differences in spatial perception, and Einstein's claim that he thought wordlessly. Along the way, Olson reveals cultural differences in teaching math: American classrooms emphasize racking up correct answers quickly; in Japan, students are encouraged to struggle through problems. The Olympians make for likable characters, playing Ultimate Frisbee and trying to psych out other countries' teams in the cafeteria. It turns out that speedy calculation will get you only so farvictory requires "sidelong attacks, inspired guesses, flights of mathematical fancy."