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## To Fans, Mr. Bender Is the Woody Hayes Of 8th-Grade Science

After Years of Dominating National 'Olympiad,' His Kids Face a Crunch

By ELIZABETH HOLMES

VALPARAISO, Ind. -- Richard Bender is holed up in his classroom nearly every day with 21 young assistants. They are building self-propelled vehicles and bottle rockets, and boning up on genetics and aquatic ecology. He swears outsiders to secrecy, as if this were "Cold War technology development," he says.

He and his students are preparing -- after school, at night and on weekends -- for the Science Olympiad, an annual spring academic competition among 14,500 schools nationwide. Under Mr. Bender, an eighth-grade science teacher at Thomas Jefferson Middle School here, the team has won 15 state titles, seven consecutive top-four national rankings and two national titles.

The Indiana General Assembly passed a resolution praising Mr. Bender "for his dedication to increase student interest and academic

achievement in science." Some compare his winning record to that of legendary Ohio State football coach Woody Hayes. Says Gerard Putz, the Olympiad's president and co-founder: "He's one of those magical coaches."

But is the magic fading? Last season, the team's winning streak snapped when it came in 10th, and Mr. Bender's kids are feeling the heat. Says 13-year-old Jessie Bunchek: "It just kind of blew everybody away."

The Science Olympiad, launched in 1983, bills itself as an "academic track meet." Each level -- regional, state and national -- holds a daylong series of 23 events. Some require study, with students vying to become experts. In "Awesome Aquifer," for instance, students examine groundwater patterns and take a written exam. Flashier events ask students to build a device that accomplishes a task.

"Storm the Castle," for instance, requires students to build a trebuchet, a catapultlike contraption that launches a ball at a target.

Mr. Bender's longtime success has caused some resentment. Last year,

his team made technical mistakes in setting up a contraption in the "Junkyard Challenge" event, in which they built a device from scrap



John York, left, and Joe Galbiatti represented Thomas Jefferson Middle School in the "Mission Possible" event in the Science Olympiad Regionals last school year. They had to accomplish a series of tasks using a device made up of simple machines.

materials to make a cup of instant coffee. "Oh, look -- TJ failed!" taunted two students from a competing team, according to a TJ mother who was looking on.

Several of Mr. Bender's team members were goofing around with a video camera at a hotel during last year's state competition when a coach from a competing team accused them of spying. The students went to Mr. Bender in tears. He calls the accusations "totally false."

In Indiana, Mr. Bender's rivals simply concede him first place. "The big competition is seeing who's going to be second," says Ed Pulver, coach of a team from Kokomo.

Mr. Bender, 54, who is also Thomas Jefferson's athletic director, won his first

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**Rich Bender**

state title in 1990, four years after he first put together a team. In 1993, the school won its first national title. As the team's success grew, so did its audience. The building events, like "Bottle Rocket," where students launch a two-liter bottle using nothing other than

-- academically and personally. Mr. Bender has a laundry list of criteria. "Are they devoted? Are they consistent? Are they smart? Are they emotionally steady?" he says, adding, "I don't mean boring."

Unlike some rivals, Mr. Bender assigns his students events. He has a detailed game plan. In "Road Scholar," for example, two students demonstrate their navigation skills using an atlas and maps. Mr. Bender says he picks one student strong in math and another who is a good reader. Both have to be quick thinkers, and clear handwriting doesn't hurt.

Time commitment for team members is intense.

They practice after school for several months, but as the competition nears, they add practices at night and on weekends. "We didn't succeed because of some magic formula or because we were 'in' with the judges," says Andreas Shepard, a team member from 2002 to 2004. "It's because we pretty much outworked everybody else."

Their biggest rival is J.C. Booth Middle School, from Peachtree City, Ga. Uttering the name "Booth" to Mr. Bender's students elicits a kind of half-shudder. The two teams have repeatedly vied with each other for the big prize.

In 1996, the two schools shared the national title. Since then, Booth has bested Mr. Bender's team more

often than not. Carol Haller, an assistant coach at Thomas Jefferson, credits the Booth team's farm-system -- it has a sixth-grade team that practices a year before it is able to compete. Says Booth Coach Mary Wilde of Mr. Bender: "He's awesome."

Mr. Bender insists there's "no bad blood," but he says, "We don't give each other hugs." Last year, Booth won first place in the nationals, and Mr. Bender's team was a distant 10th.

"I feel really disappointed in myself," says eighth-grader Katherine Dalzotto, 13. "I took it as a personal thing," says Joe Galbiati, a freshman who will return to Mr. Bender's team for a third year.

With the new season approaching, Mr. Bender insists he won't change his tack. He is focusing on matching the best students to appropriate events. His returning team members say last year's debacle is motivating.



Students from Thomas Jefferson Middle School, in Valparaiso, Ind., compete in the 'Storm the Castle' event at the 2004 Indiana state competition for the Science Olympiad.

water and air pressure as a propellant, often drew a crowd.

Some students feel the stakes are especially high because the school's teams have been as successful as they have. Samantha Haller, now 16, says she was nervous just because "everyone knew you were TJ."

In 1993, Mr. Bender began using teacher recommendations in tryouts, along with achievement-test scores and his own exams testing hand-eye coordination and writing. He also stepped up his recruiting tactics. Tanav Popli, now a 17-year-old high-school senior, remembers Mr. Bender pitching the club to his sixth-grade science class.

"It was like applying to college," jokes Mr. Popli, a team member from 2002 to 2004. "I had to write an essay about why I liked science."

Teachers in all subject areas now readily point out exceptional students



Scott Dodson, left, and Kate Manning competed for Thomas Jefferson in the "wheeled vehicle" event last season.

"It's just going to come back to haunt us if we don't get rid of it," says Ms. Buncek, an eighth-grader. She thinks: "Do you want to place 10th this year or do you want to be a really good team?"