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Portland State and the GE College Bowl

by Clarence Hein

“Match wits with the champions ... in America’s favorite question and answer game live from New York City ... the intercollegiate battle of brains ... the General Electric College Bowl!”

Those words, early Sunday evening, January 5, 1959, heralded a new nationally televised broadcast of a different kind of intercollegiate competition ... one far removed from campus football stadiums and basketball courts. It was a competition in which an institution’s size, history, athletic tradition or range of degree programs mattered less than the personal chemistry, training and determination of a four-student team.

The GE College Bowl, which ran for 12 seasons (“in living color”) on NBC television, brought some 300 four-member teams to New York from colleges and universities across America to a sort of intellectual Olympics. The operating idea of the contest was simple: Teams were bombarded with rapid-fire “toss up” questions from a spectrum of academic interests including the arts, sciences, history, geography, sociology and more. The first team to break in and answer correctly then was given a more detailed question, sometimes in multiple parts, with points awarded for correct answers. At the end of the half-hour the team with the most points was declared the winner and returned the next week to “defend its title.” Winning teams were awarded scholarship money each week and, if a team won five times in a row, they retired from the game, received the “College Bowl” trophy and an additional scholarship amount.

And it was this competition that focused a national spotlight on then unheralded Portland State College.

The team was back victorious, and Oregon was incredulous. Ol’ Portland State had won not the Class D Basketball crown or the Yukon curling final but television’s GE College Bowl quiz, breaking all records and mopping up \$10,500 in scholarships. With snap-snap-snap aplomb, the team had proved that it knew the word that means both monk and monkey (Capuchin), the doctor who pioneered the use of carbolic acid (Joseph Lister), the play that opens on the setting of the palace of Theseus in Athens (A Midsummer Night’s Dream), and 200 other facts. But what in tunket is Portland State College?

Time Magazine, March 26, 1965

“What in tunket,” indeed? In the spring of 1965 Portland State was preparing to honor only its tenth graduating class (700 Bachelor’s and 50 Master’s) having grown from an initial enrollment of 200 as an extension center in a WWII housing development to a downtown campus of more

than 7,000 students. Over the past 19 years the college had been nearly eliminated first by a devastating flood which wiped out the original campus, then by outright opposition to its establishment in Portland from older higher education institutions in the Willamette Valley.

By this time Portland State College was a bursting at the seams, occupying four blocks of new and existing buildings on Broadway on downtown Portland's southern edge, an area of mostly single family residences and small apartment buildings. It was not a typical college campus. In fact, thousands of people passed by each day not realizing there was a campus there. The fact that this relatively young and unknown school was on national television at all was remarkable enough but the eventual success of the PSC team was, to say the least, unexpected by most folks. None of this would have happened had it not been for the dogged efforts of one PSC student, Brian Fothergill.

Fothergill was a "typical" 1960s PSC student. That is, he was a good 20 years older than the average undergraduate and brought a good deal of life experience to campus. One thing he obviously had learned was persistence. He enjoyed watching the College Bowl program and thought PSC should try for it so, in late 1963, he contacted the producers on his own. According to the PSC team captain Jim Westwood, Fothergill initially was told, "Who?" However, Westwood says, "he persisted and finally wore them down and in the Spring of 1964 they said all right, we'll put you on the schedule as an alternate for the '64-'65 season and the only way you'll get on is if someone wins five times in a row and retires." Oddly enough, that is exactly what happened.

The acceptance by the College Bowl producers was announced in the May 15, 1964 *Portland State College Vanguard* along with a simple coupon announcing try-outs for the prospective team. Westwood remembers thinking, "Wow, I'm a nerd. I've been watching College Bowl and answering questions for years so I thought I'd give it a try." He joined about 50 other students who were divided into various teams and put through several quiz sessions moderated by Associate Speech Professor Ben Padrow, who had been selected as the team coach. Padrow used a set of questions and a "buzzer board" provided by Lewis & Clark College. They had appeared on the program in the spring of 1964 losing to eventual five-time winner Whitier College of California.

"So we went at it," Westwood says, "and by the summer of '64 we were down to eight and nobody knew who was going to be on the team."

New York pedestrian to passing musician, "Pardon me mister, can you tell me how to get to Carnegie Hall?"

Musician, "Practice, practice, practice."

The origin of that old joke is unknown but the sentiment is keenly observed. But you might also add "good coaching" to the list. It is generally conceded that the extended practice sessions

designed by Coach Padrow, Assistant Coach Ronald Glossop, Assistant Professor of Philosophy, and Brian Fothergill gave the PSC team a significant leg up when they finally were called to appear. The team practiced regularly through the summer and fall of 1964, usually in the college's small television studio with live cameras and sometimes with a live audience. Two secretaries recorded each question and who provided the answer. Team members had to learn to channel their answers through the team captain, the team's spokesman, and to be comfortable in front of the camera. To condition them to "come from behind" in contests where they might be trailing, Coach Glossop would sometimes swap scores at half time or give one team the answers to some questions in advance. "Well," says Jim Westwood, "that was Ben Padrow. He never did anything half way."

In a *PSC Vanguard* interview following the team's successful run, Fothergill said, "we concluded that psychological conditioning should be the purpose of practice sessions." The coaches carefully watched the interactions between the eight team members and tried many team and seating arrangements. "It was through this research and development," Fothergill said, "that the final team and seating arrangement was made," although, according to Westwood, none of the eight students knew for certain who would be named to the "first team" and who would be alternates.

For several months through the Fall of 1964 and into January, 1965, the team practiced and on "game day," the day of the College Bowl broadcast, they would gather at the studios of KGW-TV (the NBC affiliate) to watch that week's contest. In September of 1964 the PSC team was on the verge of going. Arizona State University had won four games in a row. However, on October 18, ASU lost a nail-biter to Loyola University, 125 to 115. Over the next few weeks two other teams were two-time winners but each week the PSC team returned to its practices.

Then, in late December, a team from Lawrence University of Applton, Wisconsin, defeated a team from Virginia Military Institute. Games against Southwestern University, Sage College and Wilson College followed and, on January 17, Lawrence defeated the University of Bridgeport, 255 to 65, for its fifth victory.

Hurrah ... We're Going!

PSC Vanguard, January 22, 1965

"I remember this vividly," Jim Westwood says. "The eight of us were there (the KGW studio) with Ben Padrow. He said, 'OK, turn off the TV.' He took a paper out of his pocket – he was prepared. He said, 'Jim, you'll be the captain.' Then, he named Robin Freeman, Mike Smith and Larry Smith." That was to be the Portland State College team.

Jim Westwood (Captain) – 20 years old, a junior majoring in physics from Oregon City.

Mike Smith – 20, a junior majoring in psychology, from Salem.

Larry Smith -- 20, a junior in English from Gresham.

Robin Freeman – 24, a senior in Philosophy, who grew up in Vancouver, BC, was married and had a young son. A local newspaper reporter referred to him as, “a serial non-conformist.”

Westwood described the team’s special areas of knowledge this way. “Mine was US history and presidents, and science. Mike also knew science and just about anything other people didn’t know – a real “garbage can” of a mind. Larry Smith’s areas were the Bible, nursery rhymes and drama. Robin Freeman just seemed to know everything – music, literature, whatever.”

In discussing the team chemistry, Brian Fothergill later said, “Larry Smith and Robin Freeman work best together through Jim Westwood because Jim will volunteer whatever learning he has in the subject area and Larry and Robin will work from there. Mike Smith thinks much better if he sits by himself for a minute and thinks the answers through.”

Two weeks after watching Lawrence University retire as champions, the Portland State College team was headed to New York. The College Bowl program gave each team member and coach a First Class ticket and Padrow converted them to Coach, using the extra money to pay for a team alternate and another person to make the trip. Westwood remembers that trip well. “We got on a plane Friday morning in Portland. It was a jet plane. I had never been on one. I had never been East of Cour de Alene. This was a big deal for a kid from Oregon City. My life changed on that day.”

The team stayed at the Savoy Plaza Hotel at 59th and 5th, now the General Motors Building, three to a room. Saturday was a free day for team members to explore New York but, says Westwood, “On game day, it was all business.”

They would catch a cab from the hotel to Rockefeller Center, NBC’s headquarters. Team members would share lunch with the opposing team (the University of San Francisco) at the NBC restaurant next to the skating rink. “We were under orders from Ben Padrow,” Westwood says. “No carbonated beverages, no heavy food, no milk products.” Following lunch, the teams went into the broadcast studio and played some “practice” games.

“We didn’t win all the practice games,” Westwood says, “but we certainly held our own. That was the first inkling I had that maybe we actually could do something. We could win a game. I realized that we were answering more questions than they were.”

Westwood’s “inkling” proved correct. After falling behind 40 – 0 (USF answered the first “toss up” question, identifying a quote from Helen Keller, as well as the follow up question), the Portland State squad racked up 175 straight points on questions covering everything from WWII landing beaches to the speed of light, the Toy Symphony and a play by Ibsen. The final score was PSC 300, USF 155. “As we started to pull away,” Westwood says, “I thought, my God, we’re good.” They reached 300 points because Westwood buzzed in at the last second of the

show to answer a ten-point toss up: “This element (the symbol ‘i’) has the same symbol as the square root of minus one.” He correctly identified “iodine” as the element. “i” also is the symbol for “infinity,” the square root of minus one.

Their 300 point score was to be the lowest total of their five game run.

When the team returned to Portland later (about 1:30 a.m. Monday) they found a small group of people waiting to congratulate them on their win. It was a pattern repeated over their next four appearances with gradually increasing numbers and enthusiasm.

The following two contests, Park University of Missouri and Kent State of Ohio, were, in the words of Jim Westwood, “a bit of a walk-over.” Portland State outscored Park 350 – 25 and Kent State 315 – 35. Park failed to score a single point until the final 90 seconds of their game. “Padrow’s scheme,” Westwood says, “was that if we just seized the initiative, we could win.”

Watching those programs now it is obvious how effective that strategy was. Because the first team to break in with a correct answer to the “toss-up” questions then could score additional points with the bonus question, the advantage goes to the team that is quickest with the toss-up answers. During the contests with Park and Kent State there was a total of 36 toss-up questions asked. Of the 36, Portland State correctly answered 24, Park only one and Kent State two. Nine toss-ups were not answered correctly. It also is obvious how well the Portland State team played off each other and worked through their captain in arriving at answers.

The total scores from the first three contests were: Portland State, 965, opponents, 215. Clearly, something exciting was going on. The Sunday following the Kent State program saw the College Bowl pre-empted for a week. The next scheduled appearance was Sunday, February 28, against Coe College of Cedar Rapids, Iowa. It is no exaggeration to suggest that the majority of us at Portland State in the spring of 1965 had never heard of Coe College and if we had we probably couldn’t have said it was in Cedar Rapids, Iowa (the only thing we knew about Iowa was that it was home to the fictional Professor Harold Hill’s River City Boys Band). However, this Midwestern liberal arts college was about to hand Portland State its toughest challenge of the series. And, the most formidable member of the Coe team was a woman, the only female PSC would face during its run.

Allison Shepherd of Ames Iowa was the Captain of the Coe College team and within a few minutes it was obvious why. Jim Westwood remembers, “Allison Shepherd, the only woman we faced, was just on-on-on and we were down 90 to nothing before we knew it.” Of nine potential toss-up questions in the first half, Coe had been first on five and Shepherd had answered three of them. But the PSC team’s training kicked in and, by the end of the first half, they were ahead 120 to 90. The lead changed hands a couple times in the second half but PSC eventually pulled away to win 345 to 175, setting the stage for a fifth appearance and an opportunity to retire as undefeated champions. The final opponent for the PSC team would be Birmingham Southern College from Alabama.

“We had three goals: to win, to set the five-game point record, and to score more than 300 points in each game.”

Jim Westwood, March 8, 1965

The opening few minutes of Portland State’s fifth College Bowl appearance began in unremarkable fashion. Portland State got the first toss-up question (What food did the French King Henry IV insist on? Chicken every Sunday.), and jumped in front, 25 – 0. Birmingham Southern struck next, taking the lead, 30 – 25. Then, on the very next question (identifying a series of authors) Portland State seemed to catch fire. It was as if Birmingham’s buzzers had been disconnected and by half time, PSC was ahead 205 – 30 and, clearly, something else was happening. “The boys,” as Ben Padrow called them, were having fun.

At one point, Westwood rattled off three lines of Chaucer in the original Middle English, prompting announcer Robert Earle to laugh and say, “I only asked for two!” Later, in a question requiring identifying solo instruments in classical pieces, Robin Freeman was in top form answering within the first two or three seconds of each recording: “Harpsichord; Cello; English Horn”; and, as Robert Earle announced the fourth piece, “Harold in Italy” by Berlioz, Freeman turned and audibly whispered to Westwood, “Viola,” before the piece even was played. Westwood indicates they should wait for the audio and after the first note, Freeman shouts, “Viola.” Both Earle and the studio audience laughed.

By the end of the match, Portland State had answered 14 of the 20 toss-ups, Birmingham Southern only 3. Robin Freeman was later quoted, “Birmingham Southern team members were real gentlemen. They let us hit the buzzer first.” The final score, 415 – 60, marked only the second time a team had broken the 400 mark. Along the way to five straight wins, PSC set several College Bowl records: most total points scored in five games; most points scored in a single game; lowest total points scored by opponents; and most games in a row over 300. The producer of the GE College Bowl program told team members they had shown “the greatest team effort” he ever had witnessed during the more than 220 previous shows.

At the end of the broadcast, Robert Earle presented the team the College Bowl Trophy and congratulated the team on a job well done. Then, following the usual custom, the television camera panned across the applauding audience over the closing credits and there, clapping enthusiastically and grinning widely, was Brian Fothergill. The team had made room for him to accompany them to New York for the final game.

Remember, in education as in science and industry, at General Electric Progress is our most important product.

GE College Bowl tagline

“Progress” certainly was the byword for Portland State College in the 1960s. Within four years, the institution became Portland State University with its initial doctoral degree offerings. Enrollment grew rapidly, nearly doubling in the next decade and the physical campus grew rapidly to both the East and West with a new library building, science facilities, parking garages and more.

As for the College Bowl, the team returned to Portland following their fifth straight win to a series of receptions and recognitions from the PSC Student Senate to the Oregon Legislature. Local Chambers of Commerce honored the team as did the entire college at a special convocation. There were newspaper and television news stories and an invitation to ride the Boyd Coffee Company Rose Festival Float. There also was the routine of being students and completing degrees.

Robin Freeman later travelled to London for advanced education at the London School of Economics. Larry Smith earned a Master’s degree at Portland State and moved to the Oregon coast where he was active in teaching and volunteer activities. He died of a heart attack. Jim Westwood, following a stint as a local television meteorologist, went on to law school and returned to Portland and a successful legal career. He is active in Portland State University alumni activities.

Mike Smith continued at PSC as a graduate student. It was not widely known but he suffered from Cystic Fibrosis. Smith succumbed to the disease three years later at the age of 24. Smith Center on the PSU campus is named for him. At one point, just prior to the fourth College Bowl contest, he became very ill while in New York. Coach Ben Padrow visited him at the hotel. “Mike said he was going to play,” Padrow said, “and he did. He played the game every time. That was Mike Smith.”

Little record remains of Brian Fothergill and his life after College Bowl, although he was the one whose dedication and persistence made the whole adventure possible. What does remain is the sight of his grinning face in the enthusiastic audience cheering the Portland State College team after their record-setting fifth straight victory.

Material for this article was drawn from contemporary media accounts, including the PSC Vanguard where I served as editor in 1964-65, an interview with Jim Westwood and my own personal recollections.