

The Passion of Latin Lovers

When Virginia's all-star team of young scholars competes in a national quiz bowl, a dead language is very much alive.

By Catherine Price

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IT'S A BEAUTIFUL AFTERNOON, BUT MICHAEL VELCHIK, A RISING SENIOR AT ST. ALBANS SCHOOL IN WASHINGTON, ISN'T OUTSIDE ENJOYING THE SUN. Instead, he's sitting in a basement classroom at the University of Tennessee with a buzzer in one hand, resting his cheek on his desk as he and four other high school students answer questions about Latin.

His coach, Laurie Covington, looks up from the huge book of questions that she's been reading to her Virginia state team, notices Velchik, and stops mid-sentence.

"Are you putting your head down on the desk because of the agony of listening to me read the passage in a bad Southern accent?" she asks. Covington, 57, is wearing a T-shirt that says, "When Good Latin Goes Bad." Head of the Latin department at the Flint Hill School in Oakton, she has a slight accent that gives away her South Carolina roots and a sarcastic sense of humor that students love.

"No," says Velchik dryly, looking up at her sideways. "I'm doing it for a variety of reasons. Carry on."

She does, asking the team a question about the word "res," which means "thing" or "matter." After someone answers, Covington points out that "res" is also why we write "re" at the top of memos or e-mails -- short for "in re," which roughly translates as "in the matter of." She says it as an aside, but this gets Velchik's head off the desk.

"Really?" he says, sitting upright in his seat. "I always thought it was from 'reply.' Oh, that is awesome. I feel so enlightened."

Velchik isn't kidding; he really is excited. And he's not alone. He and his teammates are at the annual summer convention of the National Junior Classical League, which has drawn more than 1,500 students, teachers and chaperons to Knoxville, Tenn., for a week full of Greek- and Roman-themed activities and contests. Velchik and his Virginia teammates are there to compete in a game called certamen, but that's far from the only thing going on. There are Olympika games and academic competitions; there are "Virgilicious" T-shirts and "What would Julius Caesar do?" buttons. There are state cheers in Latin, a Rent-a-Roman fundraising auction and a final procession and banquet for which each student has packed a toga.

IN LATIN, THE WORD "CERTAMEN" (pronounced "kur-TAH-min") means "fight" or "struggle." It's an accurate description for many students' relationship with the language, which is often reviled for its declensions, verb conjugations and irritating gendered nouns. But for

Velchik and his teammates, certamen doesn't mean struggle. It means "competition," and it refers to a quiz-bowl-style contest, based on Roman literature, mythology, history and grammar, that is the Latin equivalent of the McDonald's All-American basketball games. This version of certamen requires speed, countless hours of preparation, and knowledge of grammatical intricacies and mythological details that most people have never heard of. There are local certamen matches through the year, and, in late spring, states hold tryouts for teams that will represent them at JCL's national championship. Certamen was invented in Virginia in 1971 by a Richmond teacher named Tony Ruffa; a year later, a Winchester teacher named Susan Schearer introduced the game at the national convention. She describes certamen like this: "To watch three advanced teams playing in the finals dumbfounds college professors who have been teaching for years. There are 12 kids onstage, each of whom knows more than anyone in [the professors'] department."

Virginia's upper-level team has six players -- a grammarian, a historian, a mythologist, an all-around player and two alternates. Its grammarian and captain is Erik Fredericksen, a tall, shaggy-haired rising senior at Flint Hill whose calm, easygoing demeanor belies the fact that he's one of the strongest certamen players in the country -- quick on the buzzer, with an astounding ability to translate, conjugate and decline on the spot.

In his life outside of certamen, Fredericksen isn't particularly competitive. He used to play soccer and lacrosse but stopped after his sophomore year when a thyroid problem weakened his bones to the point that he got a stress fracture in a femur. His bone density has since improved, but he hasn't gone back to sports. Instead, he's started doing theater and says he tries to balance "the Latin nerd thing" with having a "normal life."

"I can be intense and focused in certamen," he says, "but usually I'm pretty laid-back."

One of Fredericksen's good friends is Michael Velchik, the team's historian. Also tall, often ruddy-cheeked, Velchik is captain of the St. Albans math team, plays tennis and football, and competes in the local TV quiz game "It's Academic."

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Velchik is president of Virginia's JCL chapter, which means that every night of the convention he has to run "fellowship," a state meeting that starts around 11:30 and doesn't end till after midnight. He also helps lead Virginia's cheers during the daily spirit competition -- 15 minutes of screaming deafening rounds of "Boom shaka-laka" and "Ecce Romani!" (the name of a textbook, it means "Behold the Romans") -- to try to win the convention's spirit award for the fifth year in a row, which would secure Virginia a coveted spot in the NJCL hall of fame. As a joke, he periodically broke into Latin as we talked.

Emma Leahy, who's going into the 10th grade, is the team's all-around player. Blond, serious and home-schooled (she takes Latin through the Classical Cottage School), Leahy is younger than the

other players, and probably the most intense -- she signed up for all but two of the convention's 15 academic tests and entered 14 projects into competitions, including an animated video of the myth of Echo and Narcissus set to Kelly Clarkson's "Walk Away." "When I talk to my friends I do Latin with, and we think, 'What did we do before we did Latin?' we can't remember," she says. "I think I'd probably be pretty bored."

That seems unlikely -- in addition to Latin, Leahy studies French, Italian, German, Spanish and ancient Greek; plays piano and viola; and hopes to someday be a veterinarian (her family has two dogs, two cats, four chickens and four goats). She's an only child. She's been taking Latin since fifth grade and playing certamen since sixth. And she's always been her teams' youngest player.

"I remember coming in one time in sixth grade and playing against guys with facial hair," she says. "People made fun of us because they said we were like babies."

"So, what'd you do?" I ask her.

"Well," she says, matter-of-factly, "we just beat them."

Leahy is also the only girl on Virginia's upper-level team (certamen teams are primarily male) except for an alternate, Becca Baird-Remba, a rising senior at Flint Hill whom Covington describes as one of the best mythology students "probably in the country."

This year, though, the team's mythologist spot went to Imran Husain, a rising senior at Park View High School in Loudoun County. Husain has been taking Latin only since ninth grade, and this is the first year he's competed with his upper-level teammates at the national level. In competition, Husain seems quiet and shy, always sitting at the end of the table and tensing up every time Covington comes onstage before the round to give each player a supportive shoulder squeeze. But, in fact, he's outgoing and extremely competitive -- not to mention well-rounded. He plays soccer, football and basketball, competes in debate and "It's Academic," and is a member of the National Honor Society and a math honor society. He goes to Loudoun's Academy of Science every other day, and is doing his senior project on parthenogenesis -- reproduction without fertilization.

I ask him why he looks so miserable at the beginning of every certamen round.

"Nervousness is a recurring theme for me," he says. "I'm always nervous, no matter how well prepared I am." Husain has compiled a study packet for himself that contains nearly every certamen question that he has ever gotten wrong, and he -- along with Velchik -- loves to talk strategy. As he puts it, "You can hustle people in certamen more than you can in pool."

Regardless of your hustling skills, though, if you want to be good at certamen, you have to study. Individual habits vary wildly -- Leahy has at least 10 bulging notebooks, and says that she'll occasionally study for entire days ("But only during the summer and on weekends," she assures me). Fredericksen, on the other hand, says he does most of his preparation during the bus rides to certamen matches.

Some states simply host certamen competitions during the academic year, but serious states, such as Virginia, Florida and Texas, also use the summer to prepare for nationals. (With 35 novice, intermediate or upper-level national championships, Virginia has the most certamen titles; its nearest rival, Florida, has 17.) Virginia's team meets for the two weeks preceding the convention in an optional training program known as *Castra Latina* -- Latin camp. For five hours a day, players and their coaches review facts, work on speed and learn how to play well as a team. That last part can be tough because, until that point, students have been playing for their schools, not for their states -- which means that they're used to competing against one another, not with one another. But this isn't much of a challenge for Virginia's upper-level team members. With the exception of Husain, they've been playing together at nationals for years.

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That's part of the reason why so much is at stake. Back in 2004, when Fredericksen and Velchik were rising ninth-graders and Leahy had just finished sixth grade, they played together on Virginia's novice team and won the national championship. Since then they haven't made it past the semifinals. In 2005, they got knocked out of the intermediate-level semis not by a traditional powerhouse such as Florida or Texas but by Oklahoma. (To put this in context, in the 36-year history of certamen, Oklahoma has reached the finals one other time -- in 1982.) The upset still has Virginia fans shaking their heads. This year, competing on the upper level, with three of the original four players still on the team, they're all eager to bring the championship back home.

THE CONVENTION'S FIRST CERTAMEN EVENT -- a mandatory orientation meeting for players-- conflicts with the pool party and evening dance, but it's still packed. In a large auditorium filled with students and coaches, teams wait to draw for their initial brackets and hear updates on the rules. Though certamen's structure is straightforward, it is nuanced enough to warrant a six-page document outlining 18 procedures and regulations. It is, as Laurie Covington whispers to me, "geek hell."

The first round of competitive certamen -- each round has 20 questions -- overlaps with the convention's ultimate Frisbee competition (part of the convention's "ludi," or "games") and the evening dance -- a hoedown with the tagline "Carpe Denim" -- but the auditorium is still crowded with spectators from each of the three competing states.

Virginia's upper-level team is facing Ohio and Wisconsin, and the players seem nervous. Velchik is frenetically tapping a foot. Though Husain is relatively expressionless, he later acknowledges that before each match he has to consciously try not to let his teammates know that he's "dying inside." Covington gets up from her seat and does her pregame ritual -- giving each player a little hug while muttering goading digs into their ears, such as "Get your hand off the damn buzzer" or "I love everyone on the team except you." And then the round begins.

Novice-level certamen players can anticipate questions by memorizing frequently cited facts (the dates for the founding of Rome, the eruption of Mount Vesuvius, etc.) or trying to predict the word that the moderator is about to say. But at the upper levels, it's all about reaction time. Cutting the moderator off mid-question is known as "hyperbuzzing," and it can be either a technique or a liability, depending on your timing. A quarter-second too soon and you won't have heard enough -- and thus will have forfeited your team's chance to answer the question. A quarter-second too late and another team will have buzzed in.

In this round, Fredericksen starts off eagerly, buzzes too early and loses the first question. But he and Leahy capture enough tossup questions for Virginia to win the round easily.

Their score puts them in fifth place out of 21 teams -- a good start. (For the first three rounds of certamen, it doesn't matter if a team wins or loses -- teams are ranked by cumulative points, and to make it to the semifinals, a team needs only to finish in the top nine.) Virginia's intermediate team has done even better, finishing first. But Virginia's novice players have a harder time. At the end of the night, they're in eighth place.

The next day is a long one. Not only does it include two rounds of certamen -- one in the morning, one at night -- but it's packed with other activities in which the certameners also want to participate: a Latin sight-reading contest, a JCL committee meeting that chapter president Velchik must attend (not to mention the daily spirit contest that he helps run), and an academic testing session for all five players. The session offers tests in Greek derivatives; ancient geography; mythology and mottoes; and quotations and abbreviations. Leahy takes all four -- and still manages to arrive with her best friend at the costume competition dressed as Peleus and Thetis, the father and mother of Achilles. They win first place.

Despite this exhausting schedule, all the Virginia teams are in good spirits after the evening's certamen, which is the third and final preliminary round. Both the upper-level and intermediate teams have finished in first place, and the novice team has pulled itself up to third. All three have made it to the semifinals. There's a chance, albeit a small one, they could sweep nationals. As each round ends, Virginia fans erupt into cheers, then swarm around the players to congratulate them. For a brief moment, being a stellar Latin student can make you the most popular person in the room.

LATIN HASN'T ALWAYS HAD IT THIS GOOD. In 1905, 56 percent of American public high school students studied Latin, but, as the century progressed and fewer colleges required Latin as a prerequisite, that percentage quickly declined. By 1948, only 7.9 percent of public high school students were studying Latin. When the political and social unrest of the 1960s and '70s

encouraged students to question and reject traditional curricula, the number dropped further. From 1962 to 1976, Latin public high school enrollment plummeted from 7.1 percent of students to 1.1 percent. Classicists began to realize something: If they didn't take action, Latin was at serious risk of dying out.

It was the beginning of what Ken Kitchell, former president of the American Classical League, refers to as "the great counteroffensive." Classicists began focusing on making Latin appealing to a wider range of students, especially those in elementary schools, on the theory that if you hook them young, you'll have them for life. Latin teachers started placing more emphasis on Roman history and culture in an attempt to get kids interested in the classics in middle school. To do so, they used a series of new textbooks designed to introduce Latin not just with grammatical exercises but with stories, plotlines and characters that students could relate to.

The result? As Kitchell puts it, "It's not your mom's and dad's Latin anymore." Publishers offer books and tapes of conversational Latin, trading cards featuring mythological characters, and Latin translations of books ranging from Dr. Seuss to Harry Potter. The number of American public high school students studying Latin hasn't skyrocketed, but it has remained steady, and now, nearly three decades after the counter-offensive began, classicists are facing a different problem: a shortage of Latin teachers. But all this doesn't answer the obvious question: Who cares? Why should people spend time studying and promoting a language and a culture that peaked almost two millennia ago?

At a Latin convention, those are fighting words.

I think it's extremely arrogant to say that we don't have to study this dead language because our culture is what's going on right now," says Fredericksen. "Their culture lasted much longer than ours has, so there's got to be something in it worth studying."

Some students like Latin because of Roman mythology and culture; others, believe it or not, love the grammar -- its consistency means that it's easier to master than modern English, and its strict rules can help students with their English language skills. "I think everyone in here will agree that they learn more English in Latin class than in English class," Husain says.

The most common reason students offer for studying Latin, though, has to do with the pervasive influence of ancient Rome on Western culture. "It's the foundation of our entire world," Fredericksen says. "Once you know the foundation, once you know where everything's coming from, you can better understand where it is and where it's going. It's the same argument for why you study history."

"And what more is history," Velchik asks dramatically, paraphrasing Petrarch, "other than praise of Rome?"

But even if you ignore (*from ignorare -- to not know, disregard*) the Romans' influence (*influere -- to flow in*) on our culture (*colere -- to foster, cultivate or respect*), architecture (*architectus, from the Greek arkhi -- chief + tekton -- builder, carpenter*), literature (*littera --*

letter), government (*gubernare* -- *navigate, pilot, govern*), military (*miles* -- *soldier*), legal (*lex* -- *the law*) and judicial (*iudex* -- *a judge*) systems and medicine (*medicus* -- *physician*), there's still the fact (*factum* -- *something done, a fact*) of Latin's presence (*praesentia* -- *presence*) in English itself. Estimates (*aestimare* -- *to appraise*) vary (*varius* -- *different*), but somewhere between 60 and 80 percent (*per centum* -- *per hundred*) of English vocabulary (*vocabulum* -- *word*) can be traced (*trahere* -- *to pull or draw*) back to the Romans' language (*lingua* -- *tongue*). Subliminally (*sub* + *limen* -- *under the threshold*), Latin is everywhere.

THE CERTAMEN SEMIFINALS ARE SCHEDULED FOR 8:30 A.M., and fans gather to watch the upper-level teams play. Virginia -- which is seeded first -- is pitted against California and Illinois (fifth and sixth, respectively), and, while confident, the Virginia players' nerves definitely show. Velchik sits half on his seat with one knee on the floor, buzzer in hand. When Covington makes her rounds, Husain looks even more uncomfortable than usual.

After a quick buzzer check, the round begins. The moderator, Mark Matthews, a teacher from Texas, reads the first question: Who killed Neleus, king of Pylos? Leahy is quick to answer (Hercules), and Virginia is off to a fast start. But Illinois and California are eager, too, and by the end of the fifth question, Illinois is 10 ahead of California and Virginia. By the 10th question, Virginia only has 35 points to California's 70 (and Illinois' 15).

Covington is nervous. When California proceeds to grab the tossup on the next two questions, she says, "We're in trouble." And indeed, it looks that way. After 15 questions, the score is: California 95, Illinois 55 and Virginia stuck at 35.

But Fredericksen snaps into gear and answers the next question -- "What early Christian writer wrote a dialogue called 'The Octavius,' where two friends argue for and against Christianity while the author himself acts as umpire?" (Minucius Felix). On the next question, Leahy correctly names Aglauros as the Athenian princess Ovid claims "was transformed into a statue for trying to prevent a god from lying with her sister." By Question 18, California is at 95, and Virginia is at 70, while Illinois stays steady at 55. There are three questions -- and 60 possible points -- left.

"Question 18: The noun 'robur' is often used in Roman literature as a meta --" Matthews begins. A buzzer sounds. It's California.

"Strength," says the player. And then, after a moment's hesitation he adds, "And oak tree

Matthews looks at the player. "Which one is your answer?" he asks.

Matthews is seeking clarification because "robur" literally means oak tree, but is often used as a metaphor for strength. Because the question -- which Matthews later finishes -- reads, "The noun 'robur' is often used in Roman literature as a metaphor for what physical trait?" strength, not oak tree, is correct.

By this time, the player has had a chance to make up his mind. "Strength," he says, confidently.

"Correct," says Matthews, who reads the bonus questions. California gets both, bringing its score up to 130 points and leaving Virginia with no chance to win.

Except for one thing. There's a rule in certamen that says that if one part of an answer is wrong, the entire answer is incorrect. And, because the California player did say oak tree, and an oak tree cannot be considered a metaphor for a physical trait, one could argue that California's answer shouldn't count. Covington whispers that she should lodge a protest, but just as she starts to make a move, Husain raises his hand.

"Excuse me," he says politely. "But the question was asking for a metaphor and, uh, he said 'oak.' And that's not actually a physical trait."

Matthews wrinkles his forehead. "Let me think about that," he says, "and get back to you after Question 19."

Play continues. Leahy buzzes in quickly on the next question but gets it wrong. California grabs the tossup and gets one of the bonuses right. Matthews announces 15 more points for California.

Before starting Question 20, Matthews turns to Husain. "Just for the record," he says, "I would have upheld your objection to 18 if the score mattered -- but, in this case, it doesn't."

It turns out, though, that Matthews is wrong. California has 130, Virginia, 70. If California were to lose its points for Question 18, and if Virginia were to win all 20 points for both Question 20 and the redo of Question 18, then Virginia and California would be tied. Virginia still has a chance. When several people point this out to him, Matthews considers how to proceed.

"Okay," he says, after a moment. "Let's just do Question 20. Depending on what happens with that one, we'll see whether or not we have to redo 18."

The room falls silent.

"Translate the following sentence into English," says Matthews, glancing at the players. "*Quamvis magna sit expectatio, tamen eam vincam.*"

A buzzer sounds. It's Fredericksen. "Although the expectation is great," he says, carefully, mentally checking his answer as he speaks, "nevertheless, I shall conquer it."

"That is correct," says Matthews. The Virginia cheering section collectively exhales. "Here's your first bonus: Translate the following sentence into English. *Timeo ne omnes errores mei inventi sint.*"

Fredericksen consults quickly with his teammates, then turns back to Matthews. "I fear that all my errors have been found," he says. (When it comes to translations, certamen question writers seem to have a sense of humor.) "Correct," says Matthews. Fredericksen gets the next one as well.

Now Virginia has 90 points to California's 110, with 20 possible points left. What's more, because California's answer for Question 18 was disqualified, its team isn't allowed to buzz in on the substitute question. That leaves Virginia alone with Illinois, which has no chance of winning -- but its players are still leaning over their table, fingers poised above their buzzers.

"Okay," Matthews says. "Here's a makeup for Number 18. Quid Anglice significat, 'perperam'?"

It's a vocabulary question: What does "perperam" mean in English? Fredericksen tells me later that vocabulary questions are his least favorite type of grammar questions, because they rely on memorization rather than interpretation. What's more, certamen leaves no time for thought -- to get the chance to answer the question, you have to buzz in before the moderator is done speaking.

Sure enough, a buzzer sounds before Matthews has finished. It's Fredericksen.

"Surroundings?" Fredericksen says. It's clear from the way he says the word that he's not sure. All eyes are on Matthews. If Fredericksen is right, Virginia still has a chance to make it to the finals.

"I'm sorry," says Matthews. "That's incorrect." (Appropriately enough, "perperam" means mistakenly.)

A player from California puts his head on his teammate's shoulder in relief.

As the Virginia team walks out of the room, Covington tries to console the players, who are clearly frustrated. "Remember," she says. "It's only Latin."

AT THE CERTAMEN FINALS THE NEXT MORNING, Virginia's novice and intermediate teams fare much better. Both win national championships, and, as the players walk offstage, they're surrounded by fans.

Overall, the Virginia delegation is happy, especially after learning it has won the spirit competition. In addition, Leahy, who has been awarded 27 ribbons and five medals for her individual performances and projects, wins not only the sweepstakes for the highest cumulative points but also the Lillie B. Hamilton Award, which one teacher describes to me as being the JCL equivalent of best in show.

By this time, the upper-level team's players are all in much better moods; they're still disappointed about the previous day, but they know they'll have a chance next year to reclaim their novice-level glory. More than anything else, they seem relieved to have the pressure off. As they joke around, Velchik starts introducing himself in Latin, and Husain launches into a monologue about certamen techniques that can be used to intimidate other teams, such as wearing a do-rag. Then he turns more serious.

"One of my favorite lines of poetry is from Virgil in *The Aeneid*," he says, referencing a phrase that frequently appears on Latin students' high school yearbook pages. "I think it's very moving and powerful, and it just summarizes convention really well. It's 'Forsan et haec olim meminisse iuvabit,'" he says. "Perhaps one day it will be helpful to remember even these things."

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