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

Steve Olson

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Each summer six math whizzes selected from nearly a half-million American teens compete against the world's best problem solvers at the International Mathematical Olympiad. Steve Olson followed the six 2001 contestants from the intense tryouts to the Olympiad's 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.

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