

Of Mathletes and Math Whizzes: Embodied Experiences of High-Stakes Testing in U.S. News about the IMO

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The first International Mathematical Olympiad in the Western hemisphere – held in Washington, D.C. in 1981 – led to news coverage about the difficulty of reporting on international competition so different from the usual sports. Drawing on the comparison between the IMO and the Olympics, U.S. journalists joked about the relative silence and isolation of the event, emphasizing the way that the IMO’s actions brought together the educational actions of testing, grading, and problem-solving with the competitive goal of “winning gold.” Romanticizing written testing, as American educators had in the early twentieth century, U.S. news coverage of the 1980s and 1990s spent considerable time describing not only the IMO itself but also the U.S.A. Mathematical Olympiad, a large-scale testing scheme developed to find contestants to represent the nation. Writing about tests as an orderly way of finding talent in a large and varied country, U.S. journalists also reported on the competition’s connections to sports and speed, calling the national team “mathletes” or “math whizzes.” In doing so, U.S. news stories of the 1980s-1990s drew attention to words used to describe IMO components that might appear to defy description, supposedly silent and solitary, particularly the embodied experiences of high-stakes testing.