Three Portraits of Passion at the History Olympiad

At the History Olympiad, passion takes many forms. It can burst through the room like a wildfire, simmer quietly in the corners, or glow steady and bright through years of shared experience. After interviewing three very different top competitors—Bobby Wang, the unstoppable force; siblings Maya and Rajiv Pujara, the connected sibling duo; and Sean Pastalaniec, the silent enigma—I came away convinced that there's no single way to love history. Here are their stories.

Robert "Bobby" Wang

If you think being passionate about history is just memorizing dates and facts, then Bobby Wang will quickly change your mind. This guy lives history. He's got a "weird" search history, he says—like Mongolian throat singers—and he owns it with pride. His enthusiasm isn't just about knowing things; it's about loving the stories, the weird details, the kind of stuff that makes history feel alive and urgent.

Bobby's dedication really showed when he told me he wrote his entire symposium paper in just 10 days—pulling late nights, sacrificing sleep, and still lighting up the room upon arriving in Paris. The joy he got from seeing all that work come together? Pure passion. He took second place for that symposium, but more than the award, it's the process he values.

Another side of Bobby that stood out was his openness about mentors. He gave shout-outs to those who helped him along the way, showing that for him, this is a community as much as a competition. And while many people at IHO casually mention Ivy League schools like they're just part of everyday conversation, Bobby remains grounded, focused on what he loves: the cycle of learning that he'll continue at Columbia and his goal of becoming a history teacher. "I don't got that dog in me" to become an IHO admin, he joked; he wants to keep being that passionate student, then pass it on.

Talking with Bobby was energizing. Even when he said his head hurt, he was lively and wild-eyed about history. Honestly, after the interview, I texted my best friend that Bobby's passion was infectious. That kind of enthusiasm, especially when paired with smarts and humility, is rare. Bobby Wang is a reminder that dedication, humor, and genuine excitement can make any subject captivating.

Maya & Rajiv Pujara

Maya and Rajiv Pujara aren't just quizbowl teammates; they're siblings who have been traveling and competing together for years, creating their own rhythm and dynamic in the process. They've been to four Olympiads: Berlin, Princeton, Rome, and Paris. Of these, Paris clearly resonates with Maya, who loves art history

and calls the city “the cultural center of Europe.” For her, competing here isn’t just about answering questions; it’s about connecting with the art and culture around her.

Her favorite event is the Art History Bee, and she appreciates how the competition uses visuals, not just facts, which adds a richer layer to the challenge. Rajiv’s favorite event, on the other hand, is Knockout, a buzzer-style game that’s fun and spontaneous, more about playing with friends than high stakes.

Both siblings talked about how the IHO experience has shaped them beyond academics. Rajiv mentioned making friends from all over, inspiring him to study abroad and explore international relations or history more seriously. “I just want to explore the world more,” he said, which captures the spirit of what the competition gives participants — not just knowledge, but curiosity about the wider world.

Their sibling telepathy came through in the interview, too. Maya described moments where she leans back, knowing Rajiv will buzz in, or shared inside jokes that don’t need words. It’s clear they push each other and have a shared bond that adds to their performance.

Maya’s second-place finish in the Art History Bee, right behind Rajiv, shows that this isn’t just sibling rivalry, but mutual excellence. Rajiv’s plans to staff IAC events in New Hampshire after heading to Dartmouth adds a sense of continuity to their journey: they’re not just competitors but future contributors to the community.

Their interview was thoughtful and warm, showing two intellectuals who know how to work hard, enjoy what they do, and support each other. In a room full of competitors, Maya and Rajiv remind us that success is also about connection– to history, to art, and to the people beside you.

Sean Pastalaniec

Sean Pastalaniec isn’t the loudest voice in the room. In fact, he’s quite the opposite. If Bobby is the firecracker and the Pujaras the steady campfire, Sean is more like a quiet, steady flame. He’s calm, focused, or as many younger competitors may say, nonchalant.

Originally from Houston, Texas, Sean stands out not just for his quiet demeanor but for his interests, which lean into the niche. While most competitors bond over classic historical topics or buzzer-style competitions, Sean’s fascination is with Arctic history and exploration. That’s where he plans to focus in college, heading to the University of Newfoundland. It’s an unexpected pairing: a Texan drawn to the cold, remote edges of the world. But it fits him; there’s something deliberate and precise about his passion, not flashy but deeply rooted.

He mentioned a superstition he keeps with him: a silver coin from the 13th century, a family token his grandfather gave him. He carries it with him during

competitions for luck. It's a small but revealing detail, highlighting a grounded, personal side to a competitor who speaks relatively less. That coin is a quiet anchor amid the pressure of big tournaments.

Sean's approach to competition reflects his personality, and that silence sometimes works in his favor. Not showing frustration or emotion when he misses a question can be a strategic way to stay focused and maybe even unsettle opponents a little. There's a mental game in knowing what not to say as much as in answering fast.

Despite his low-key presence, Sean clearly takes the competitions seriously. His seriousness and focus may not be flashy, but they're genuine, and that's just as valuable in this field. In a competition full of extroverts and firebrands, Sean is a reminder that passion comes in many forms– sometimes in whispers, not shouts.