

Opening Salvo

If a storm is a good omen for a battle, then we're off to a great start. The International History Olympiad opened with a downpour and a two-hour exam that left half the room questioning why they never studied Australian history. Welcome to Paris.

The ceremony, held outdoors, featured national flags, awards, and the slow collective realization that no one had packed the right shoes. Teams sat shoulder-to-shoulder beneath umbrellas that created miniature waterfalls onto the person in front of them, trying to look proud and photogenic while slowly turning into papier-mâché versions of themselves.

Then came the Battery exam: 400 questions spanning the entirety of human civilization, with seemingly 399 of them about Australia— at least according to the survivors loitering outside the auditorium. “I didn’t realize I needed a PhD in Oceania Studies,” someone muttered.

Later, before the classical music history exam, one girl from Team Maryland sat beside me and said, “I’m the only girl on my team.” It’s her first year competing, and I get it. I remember being in her shoes, shocked by how few girls were in the room. These days, the most thought I’ve given it is a half-hearted “hidden figures ahh gender ratio” text to a friend. Talking to this lovely newbie has woken me up— this isn’t normal. Girls, join history bowl!

So, to summarize: the skies are gray, the exams are brutal, and the gender ratios are doing what gender ratios do. But the city is still Paris, the competitors are still brilliant, the discussions are unmatched, and the week is just beginning.

More from the Paris front lines tomorrow...