

Toughest words aren't tough enough for two spelling bee champs

By Ben Nuckols
The Associated Press

OXON HILL, Md. — For the second straight year, the Scripps National Spelling Bee ended with co-champions each holding onto one side of the golden trophy while they were showered with confetti.

Vanya Shivashankar and Gokul Venkatachalam were the last two standing after exhausting the 25 words reserved for the final three spellers without stumbling. Before last year, there hadn't been a tie since 1962.

No one was surprised to see Vanya and Gokul duelling for the title. They came in with high expectations — Vanya, the longtime darling of the bee, a five-time competitor and the sister of the 2009 champion; and Gokul, who last year had the trophy nearly in his grasp.

But the tie shocked Paige Kimble, the bee's executive director and the 1981 champion, who had recently predicted that another half-century would go by before the bee would crown two winners. As impressive as Gokul and Vanya were, she couldn't believe they'd make it through.

"The most surprising words trip spellers up," Kimble said. "I thought something was going to surprise us here. But it never happened."

Vanya, 13, of Olathe, Kansas, was the picture of poise, smiling and nodding when she got a word she knew instantly — which was nearly every time. Her final word: "scherenschnitte," which means the art of cutting paper into decorative designs.

Then it was Gokul's turn. The 14-year-old from Chesterfield, Missouri, was told that one of two things would happen. He could get the word right and be a co-champion. Or he could get it wrong and Vanya would win.

"I wasn't nervous," he said.

The word: "nunatak." Gokul didn't even bother to ask the definition before spelling it. For the record, it means a hill or mountain completely surrounded by glacial ice.

"I knew it right away," he said. "I didn't want to keep everyone waiting."

Roughly 11 million spellers entered local bees, and 285 made it to the national bee, which is held at a convention center outside Washington and televised by ESPN. The ten finalists included several other bee veterans and crowd favorites.

One by one, they dropped. Third-place finisher Cole Shafer-Ray of Norman, Oklahoma, stumbled on his first championship-level word.

That left 18 words for Vanya and Gokul before the final two: bouquetière, caudillismo, thamakau, scytale, tantieme, cypseline, urgrund, filicite, myrmotherine, sprachgefühl, zimocca, nixtamal, hippocrepiform, paroemiology, scacchite, pipsissewa, Bruxellois, and pyrrhuloxia.

Vanya appeared to struggle only with the Fijian-derived "thamakau," which is a type of outrigger canoe. Gokul smirked and the crowd groaned when he got the German-derived "sprachgefühl," which means sensitivity to or conformance with the established usage of a language. But he knew it.

The former champions in the crowd were left to marvel at how far the bee has come, even in the past decade. Vanya is the first sibling of a past champion to win, but Kavya, now a student at Columbia University, said Vanya is a superior speller.

"I'm so, so proud and in awe of my sister," Kavya said.

"Every year, they get better and better," said Anamika Veeramani, who won in 2010 and is now a rising sophomore at Yale. "One thing that kind of surprised me was how often they were asking for roots. They never did that when I was competing."

Like many spellers, Vanya went through a routine: Ask for the definition and the language of origin. Confirm all the roots you can. Pretend to write the word down before spelling.

Gokul didn't ask many questions. He chugged through the letters like he had dinner plans.

Underneath his blue-and-white button-down shirt, Gokul wore the jersey of his idol, basketball star LeBron James. He hopes to attend Stanford and become an entrepreneur or stockbroker, but his immediate plans are to watch James and the Cleveland Cavaliers in the NBA



SENSATIONAL SPELLERS. Thirteen-year-old Vanya Shivashankar, left photo, second from left, and 14-year-old Gokul Venkatachalam, right, are greeted onstage by their families as co-champions after winning the finals of the Scripps National Spelling Bee in Oxon Hill, Maryland. In the photo on the right, Vanya, left, hugs her older sister, Kavya, the 2009 Spelling Bee champion. Before last year, there hadn't been a tie since 1962. (AP Photos/Andrew Harnik)

finals.

Vanya, an aspiring cardiac surgeon who dedicated her victory to her late grandmother, hopes to spend more time pursuing another passion, acting. She's also trying to talk her family into taking a Caribbean cruise this summer.

"It's definitely going to be weird not doing spelling in high school," she said.

The last 10 winners of the bee, and 14 of the past 18, have been Indian Americans, a run of dominance that began in 1999 with Nupur Lala's victory, which was later featured in the documentary *Spellbound*.

Vanya and Gokul each will receive more than \$37,000 in

cash and prizes, and while they held up the trophy together as they were being showered with confetti, each will get one to take home.

The winners don't have to worry about spelling anymore. But Kimble is left to ponder a future when the toughest words still aren't tough enough.

"I think it's time to consider that the bee may be entering a new era where the level of competition is so intense that we need to entertain this as a possibility every year," she said. "I think the popularity of the event drives up the competitive level and I think that's a good thing."

AP freelancer Meredith Somers contributed to this report.

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