

National Spelling Bee co-champions include youngest ever

By Ben Nuckols
The Associated Press

OXON HILL, Md. — The words were tougher. The final rounds lasted longer. The result was the same.

The Scripps National Spelling Bee ended in a tie for the third consecutive year, with Jairam Hathwar and Nihar Janga declared co-champions after a roller-coaster finish.

Thirteen-year-old Jairam is the younger brother of the 2014 co-champion, Sriram Hathwar. Nihar, at age 11, is the youngest winner of the bee on record.

“I’m just speechless. I can’t say anything,” Nihar said as he hoisted the trophy. “I mean, I’m only in fifth grade!”

Scripps made the bee tougher after two consecutive ties, forcing the last two spellers to get through three times as many words as in years past.

Jairam, of Painted Post, New York, misspelled two words. But both times, Nihar, of Austin, Texas, followed up with a miss and the bee continued. Sriram also got a word wrong during his bee, but his eventual co-champion, Ansun Sujoe, flubbed his chance at the solo title.

“I thought it was over, because Nihar is so strong, such a great speller,” Sriram said.

Each will receive a trophy and \$45,000 in cash and prizes.

Nihar celebrated by imitating the touch-down dance of his favorite athlete, Dallas Cowboys receiver Dez Bryant, who sent a tweet congratulating the young speller. Jairam, meanwhile, took inspiration from golfer Jordan Spieth, particularly his ability to bounce back after bad shots.

“When I missed those two words, I didn’t let them get to my head, and I just focused on the next word,” Jairam said.

In another change, bee organizers didn’t stick to a predetermined list of “championship words” for the last two or three spellers. No one will know whether the bee had harder words in reserve, but former spellers said Jairam and Nihar nailed the toughest words in recent memory.

Because the best spellers become fluent in Latin and Greek roots, the bee went to words derived from trickier or more



THE FINAL WORD. Nihar Janga, 11, of Austin, Texas, and Jairam Hathwar, 13, of Painted Post, New York (top photo), hold up the trophy after being named co-champions at the 2016 Scripps National Spelling Bee in National Harbor, Maryland. The spelling bee ended in a tie for the third consecutive year, with Hathwar and Janga declared co-champions after a roller-coaster finish. In the bottom photo, Janga, center, and Hathwar, right, approach their siblings when they rushed the stage to celebrate with their brothers. (AP Photos/Jacquelyn Martin)

but he can’t compete again since he won. This was the 89th bee, and while Scripps’ records from early years are incomplete, the youngest known champion was Wendy Guey, who won 20 years ago at age 12. The last to win in his first attempt was Pratyush Buddiga in 2002.

Nihar said he didn’t feel pressure to become the youngest winner for two reasons. First, he never expected to win. Second, most of the crowd’s attention was on an even younger speller: six-year-old Akash Vukoti.

“He did pretty good for a first-grader,” Nihar said. “He’s going to go places.”

Nihar and Jairam have become close friends over the past year, but Nihar said he didn’t consider misspelling on purpose when he had chances to win. He just didn’t know the words.

“I wanted to win, but at the same time I felt really bad for Jairam,” Nihar said.

Nihar and Jairam’s parents are immigrants from south India, continuing a remarkable run of success for Indian-American spellers that began in 1999 with Nupur Lala’s victory, which was later featured in the documentary *Spellbound*. The bee has produced Indian-American champions for nine straight years and 14 out of the last 18.

Before 2014, the bee hadn’t declared co-champions in more than 50 years, but now, it seems little can be done to avoid it. The competition concluded shortly before 11:00pm, with the winners having spent seven hours on stage, and bee executive director Paige Kimble has said she wouldn’t consider forcing the final spellers to keep going indefinitely.

Snehaa Kumar of Folsom, California, finished third, and Sylvie Lamontagne of Lakewood, Colorado, was fourth. Both are 13-year-old eighth-graders, meaning this year was their last chance.

obscure languages, including Afrikaans, Danish, Irish Gaelic, Maori, and Mayan.

Jairam’s winning word was Feldenkrais, which is derived from a trademark and means a system of body movements intended to ease tension. Nihar won with *gesellschaft*, which means a mechanistic type of social relationship.

Among the words they got right:

Kjeldahl, Hohenzollern, juamave, groenedael, zindiq, and euchologion.

At his best, Nihar wowed the crowd by shouting out definitions immediately after the words were announced. He looked unbeatable. But given two chances to hold the trophy by himself, he stumbled.

Nihar was in his first bee and would have had three more years of eligibility,

Behind the wheel there is no such thing as a small distraction.

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