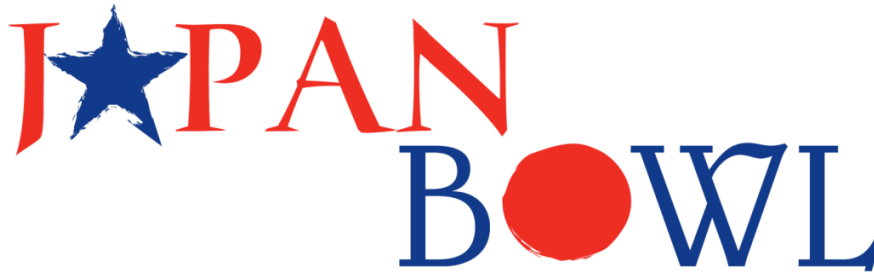


The Japan Bowl®
Part 1 -- Its Beginning and Its Growth



National Japanese Language & Culture Competition for High School Students

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by Ambassador John R. Malott

Every year, the winners of the National Japan Bowl® in Washington DC are awarded a study trip to Japan. In recent years, thanks to the KAKEHASHI program that Prime Minister Shinzo Abe started in 2013 to promote student exchange between Japan and the United States, over 150 Japan Bowl competitors -- the top high school Japanese language students in America -- have been able to visit Japan. For many of them, it is the first time that they have seen the country whose language they have been studying.

Over the years, many Japanese have heard of the Japan Bowl and met the students who visit their country, but they do not always have a clear understanding what the Japan Bowl really is.

What is the Japan Bowl?

The simple answer is that the Japan Bowl is an academic competition for high school students of Japanese language. It was created by the Japan-America Society of Washington DC in 1992. It tests not only students' knowledge of the Japanese language, but also their knowledge of Japan -- its culture, its daily life, its history, and its geography.

Including non-language topics is what makes the Japan Bowl unique. Those subjects have been included since the first competition. The reason is that Japan is the only country in the world where Japanese is spoken. That is different from English or French or Spanish or Chinese, which are spoken in many countries. So when students choose Japanese, they also choose Japan country. The Japan-America Society hopes that by studying for the Japan Bowl, students will come to know more about the country whose language they are learning.

The Japan Bowl also includes some unique aspects of the Japanese language, which are grouped in a category called "language enrichment." These are special phrases that the Japanese people use, like kotowaza and yojijukugo, and the many fun, repetitive words in Japanese, called kasane

kotoba/gitaigo/giongo. The Japan Bowl also includes common aisatsu phrases, and students need to know when to use them, and also how to respond when they hear them. These phrases and idioms usually are not taught in the classroom or included in textbooks. The language enrichment category also includes questions about common hand gestures in Japan, because "body language" also is a form of communication.

Like the inclusion of the non-language topics, this special language enrichment category makes the Japan Bowl unique.

About the Japan Bowl Name

The name "Japan Bowl" often confuses people.

The word "Bowl" has long been used in American football for the end-of-year games between the best US college football teams. (The word "bowl" is used because many large football stadiums are shaped like an oval bowl.) In Japan, the name "Japan Bowl" was used in the past for an All-Star American football game for Japanese colleges.

In America, the name "bowl" for an academic competition was popularized in the 1950s. That is when General Electric (GE), the famous American company that was started by Thomas Edison, began to sponsor a televised academic competition among university teams. It was called the "GE College Bowl" to signify that it was a team competition among schools. So that is why the "Japan Bowl" name came to be.

The Creator of the Japan Bowl

How did the Japan Bowl start? It began with a remarkable woman, Jean Morden. It would be easy to describe her simply as a local Washington DC area teacher of Japanese, but the story is more complicated -- and more interesting.

When World War II began, Morden Sensei was a student at Stanford University in California, majoring in French. The US Navy, fighting against Japan in the Pacific, desperately needed people who knew Japanese. Because she did well in her French studies, the Navy assumed that she could learn Japanese, even though the languages are very different.

So after she graduated, she joined the US Navy as an officer and studied Japanese at a special school in Colorado. She graduated first in her class. She then worked in US Naval Intelligence, translating intercepted Japanese radio messages. When the war ended, she was one of the first female officers who was sent to Japan, where she worked during the Occupation as a translator on General Douglas MacArthur's staff.

After her assignment ended, she returned to the US and became a high school French teacher, but her love and interest in Japan continued. She received a Master's degree in Japanese language and literature in 1955. Then, in 1974 she convinced the school leaders of Montgomery County, Maryland (just outside Washington DC) to begin a Japanese language program at the high school level. It was very unusual in those days to teach Japanese at the high school level. Most Americans learned it during college.

Morden Sensei served as the Japanese language teacher at Walt Whitman High School for many years. The school is well-known to the many Japanese diplomats and business people who have lived in Montgomery County during their Washington DC assignments. In 1987 the Crown Prince and Princess of Japan -- now the Emperor and Empress Heisei -- visited her classroom.

In recognition of her work, she was awarded the Order of the Precious Crown, Apricot by the Emperor Heisei in 2004. She passed away on New Year's Day 2010 at the age of 86 and was buried in Arlington National Cemetery, next to her husband, who also was a US Navy officer.

The First Japan Bowl

Morden Sensei knew that compared to French, Japanese was a hard language for Americans to learn. She wondered if there was some way to make the study of Japanese more enjoyable, so the students would be happy with their choice of Japanese and continue learning the language.

She had the idea of creating a competition. But she did not want it to be a test, because as a teacher she knew that students never think that tests are fun! She knew that competitions are challenging, so she also wanted it to be enjoyable for the students. Finally, she did not want it to be like the typical speech contest, where students memorize what they say. The students would not know what the questions would be at the competition, so they needed to study and prepare.

There was one more important condition for her new competition. It would not just be about the Japanese language. Students would need to go beyond their language textbooks and learn about Japanese culture and history, and study Japan's geography and society. As a French teacher, she knew that French is widely spoken throughout the world; in fact, it is the official language of 29 countries. But because Japanese is spoken in only one country, it seemed logical to her that students should learn the country and not just the language, and to develop an overall appreciation for Japan.

Morden Sensei thought the answer was to model her proposal on a popular Washington DC television program called "It's Academic." It is a competition among high school teams, using a quiz format. Each week three high school teams compete to answer questions on academic subjects, and it is held in front of a live television audience. The emcee asks the questions orally,

and the students need to answer within a time limit. The students (and the viewers) also see many pictures on the television monitors that are related to the questions. That is the format that the Japan Bowl adopted. The most exciting part of "It's Academic" is the "toss-up round" at the end of the show, when the three teams compete to see who can answer first.

("It's Academic" began in 1961, and it is still broadcast today. It is the longest-running television quiz show in America.)

In 1992 Morden Sensei approached the Japan-America Society of Washington DC with her idea for this new competition. She called it the "Japan Bowl," and the Society agreed to organize it.

The first Japan Bowl was held in 1993 at George Mason University, a state university in northern Virginia. About 24 high school students from the Washington DC area attended. An old black and white video that was taken at the first Japan Bowl shows that the basic format of the competition has remained the same throughout the years:

- It is a team competition, with students representing their schools
- It uses a quiz bowl format
- The questions cover a wide range of subjects and not just the Japanese language
- It allows students to meet others who share their passion for studying Japanese
- It allows the teachers to meet each other and exchange ideas
- It provides cultural opportunities for the students to experience Japan

The Japan Bowl Grows

The video of the first Japan Bowl includes remarks by Ambassador Thomas P. Shoemith, who was then the President of the Japan-America Society of Washington. Amb. Shoemith expressed his hope that one day the Japan Bowl would attract teams from across the country and become a National Japan Bowl.

It did not take long for that to happen, Within a few years, teams from across the United States, from California to New York, gathered in Washington DC for the annual competition, which became a two-day event.

The National Japan Bowl later was held in different Washington DC hotels each year, because hotels could provide the competition rooms, food, and rooms for the students to stay, all in one location. But the hotels were expensive, and the students felt they could not relax in such "fancy" surroundings. The Japan-America Society did not always have the flexibility it needed to organize the space.

In 2009 the Japan Bowl moved to the National 4-H Center in the Maryland suburb of Chevy Chase. It is the former campus of a junior college, so there are meeting rooms, a 500-seat

auditorium, a dining hall, a dormitory, office space, an outdoor sports areas, and lots of parking. The students feel very comfortable in the setting, and the Japan-America Society is able to use the facility to meet the needs of the Japan Bowl.

The Role of the United States-Japan Foundation

Over the years, the Japan Bowl has received financial support from a number of sources, including the Japan Foundation, the Embassy of Japan, and Japanese companies. But the most important source for over 20 years has been the United States-Japan Foundation, which is based in New York City.

From its founding in 1980, USJF has provided grants for pre-college education (K-12) as one of its three core areas. It supports education projects that help young Americans and Japanese learn about each other's society, culture, and country as well as learn to work together on issues of common concern, and that develop and improve instruction in the Japanese language. The Japan Bowl clearly meets that goal, and over the years the Foundation has provided more support to the Japan Bowl than to any program in its history. The Japan Bowl could not have grown without the consistent support of the Foundation.

Expanding Across the United States

In 2011, thanks to a grant from the Japan Foundation's Center for Global Partnership, the Japan-America Society began a multi-year effort to create more Japan Bowls across the United States, so more students could experience the competition.

As of today, six official Japan Bowls have been created, and they have joined with the National Japan Bowl to provide a network across the United States -- in California (Los Angeles), the Pacific Northwest (Portland), Utah (Provo), Illinois (Chicago), Wisconsin (Milwaukee), and Ohio (Columbus). These regional Japan Bowls are all one-day competitions, but the format is the same as the National Japan Bowl. Many of the winners from the regional competitions come to Washington each spring to compete in the National Japan Bowl.

These regional competitions are organized by the local Japan-America Society or by the Association of Teachers of Japanese in each state. They are all held on college campuses, and they draw support from the local Japanese Consulates General and the Japanese business community.

In 2017 a group of parents and teachers, with the support of the Japan-America Society of Washington DC, created the Mid-Atlantic Junior Japan Bowl for elementary and middle school

students who are learning Japanese. As a result, the Japan Bowl program now covers all grades from 1 to 12.

The Japan Bowl Directors

The growth of the Japan Bowl over the past fifteen years was carried out by three young Japanese women who served successively as the Japan Bowl Director -- Yukiko Hino, Miho Tsuru, and Risa Kamio.

The National Japan Bowl is a complex project that requires a year of planning and preparation. Over 300 people attend -- students, teachers, and parents. There are about 50 volunteers. The Japan-America Society gave these young women the challenge of organizing this large undertaking, and they all achieved great results to make the Japan Bowl what it is today.

In addition to organizing the National Japan Bowl during the years that they were in charge, they each made additional and important contributions to its expansion. Yukiko Hino placed the Japan Bowl on a solid financial footing and promoted the National Japan Bowl widely throughout the United States. Miho Tsuru conducted the detailed research and financial planning that allowed the Japan Bowl to move to the National 4-H Center in 2009. Risa Kamio was responsible for "growing" the new Japan Bowls across the United States and later around the world, and during her ten years as the Director, the Japan Bowl came to be widely-recognized as the premier academic competition for Japanese language students in the United States.

The Japan Bowl Goes International

After creating more Japan Bowls across the United States, the Japan-America Society turned its attention overseas in 2014. Once again Risa Kamio led the effort, and today there are Japan Bowls in twelve countries outside the US -- Bulgaria, Canada (Toronto and Vancouver), China, Denmark, France, Italy, Japan, Kazakhstan, Mexico, Poland, Serbia, and the UK.

The international competitions also are based on the National Japan Bowl format, and the Japan-America Society has given the local organizers permission to use the Japan Bowl name and logo, which is a registered trademark. The organizers include universities, Japanese language teachers associations, and friendship societies such as the Japan Society of Canada and the Japan Society of the UK. Like the competitions in the United States, the international Japan Bowls receive support from the Japanese Embassy, the Japan Foundation, and the Japanese business community. The international Japan Bowls are either at the high school or the university level, depending on the situation in each country; in many countries Japanese is not taught at the high school level.

In order to promote the continued expansion of the Japan Bowl overseas, in 2019 the Japan-America Society of Washington DC signed an agreement with a new non-profit in Japan called Japan Global Education (JGE), which will be responsible for the international Japan Bowls. Its Honorary Chairman is Kenichiro Sasae, the former Japanese Ambassador to the US, and most of its trustees are business leaders who were assigned previously in Washington DC and are therefore very familiar with the Japan Bowl. JGE's Executive Director is Risa Kamio, who was the National Japan Bowl director for ten years.

The Future

The Japan Bowl began as a small competition for schools in the Washington DC area in 1993. Today there are 20 Japan Bowls that are held in 13 countries around the world. That is because the vision that Jean Morden had for the Japan Bowl had great appeal -- to be a challenging but also fun competition for the students, and to combine language and culture. It also is thanks to the continued growth of Japanese language education around the world. (In the United States, for example, there are more students learning Japanese today than at any time in history.) Finally, it is thanks to the many organizations that have supported it over the years: Friendship societies like the Japan-America Society, foundations, Japanese business groups, universities, Japanese language teachers associations, and the Japanese government. These are the "stakeholders" -- not only for the Japan Bowl, but also for Japanese language education as a whole. These are the groups that have an interest in ensuring that in the years ahead, there will be new generations of young people around the world who learn Japanese and develop a strong interest in Japan as a country.

About the author:

Ambassador John R. Malott served for 31 years as a diplomat in the US Department of State. He was the President of the Japan-America Society of Washington DC from 2006 to 2018.

Amb. Malott's career in the US Foreign Service and as a non-profit executive has focused on Asia and especially Japan. For the past twelve years he was President of the Japan-America Society of Washington DC, and he also served on the Board of the National Cherry Blossom Festival for eight years. During his 31-year career in the US Department of State, he served as US Consul General in Osaka, as an economic officer at the US Embassy in Tokyo, and as Director of the Office of Japanese Affairs in Washington. In 2017 the Emperor of Japan awarded him the Order of the Rising Sun with Gold Rays and Neck Ribbon for his contribution to US-Japan relations over the course of four decades.

Amb. Malott is fluent in Japanese and currently serves as adviser to J-LEARN, an advocacy group that supports Japanese language education in American public schools, and to J-LIVE, a Japanese language "speech contest for the 21st century," which is held at George Washington University each year.