

Brains suit up for Academic Decathlon

By John Burgeson
STAFF WRITER

TRUMBULL — If you're looking for notoriety as a high school student, you're usually better off hitting the basketball court than the books.

But an event Saturday at Yale University might help to change that.

Five high schools in Connecticut, including Trumbull and Oxford, will compete in the state finals of the U.S. Academic Decathlon. The winning team will travel to Omaha, Neb., for the 29th annual USAD national competition set for April 21-24.

"The kids have worked really hard on this," said Dan Pelligra, the faculty adviser to the Trumbull team. "This competition certainly is rigorous. They'll be going in and taking a series of tests. They begin at 8 in the morning and they will be there all day."

He said that there are 10 separate events, most of which are

2010 U.S. Academic Decathlon, state finals

- High schools competing: Trumbull, Oxford, Hamden Hall, New Fairfield and Montville
- Date: Saturday
- Time: 7:30 a.m. to 9 p.m.
- Place: Yale University's William L. Harkness Hall, 100 Wall St., New Haven
- Subjects covered: Mathematics, economics, language and literature, social science, music and art
- Prime subject: French Revolution

written tests. There are also two speeches that will have to be delivered — one planned, one extemporaneous.

"It's an amazing thing that these students have volunteered to give up what really is a weekend day in their vacation to spend an entire day on tests," Pelligra said.

The over-arching theme for the competition is the French Revolution, but there also will be questions on mathematics, the fine arts, music, science and literature.

There's also an essay that has to be written and another event called the "super quiz."

Students had to read Dickens' "A Tale of Two Cities," and had to study the art, music, literature, history and politics of France during the period beginning with France's crushing economic crisis of 1789 and culminating with the ascension of Napoleon in the coup d'état of 18 Brumaire 10 years later.

That won't be a wasted effort —

— the French Revolution will be the main testing topic at the Omaha nationals, too.

Not all of the contestants are straight-A types, organizers say. USAD rules state that only three of the nine can be honors-level or Advanced Placement students. The other six have to come from the lower rungs of the academic ladder. In fact, three of them have to be C-level students.

"But the funny thing is, once we get them together, after awhile, it's actually difficult to tell the honors students from the others," said Dan Neumann, who's the secretary and treasurer of the Trumbull Academic Challenge for Excellence, which describes itself as "a booster club for competitive academic teams throughout the town's public schools."

Heather Dahlin, 16, one of the nine THS competitors, said that she has been consumed with preparation for the competition.

"We had to write a speech. I did

that the other day," she said. "And the math that we're doing, it's really hard math, and I'm one of the only people who knows how to do the math. It's supposed to be pre-calculus, but it's really calculus."

She's also the captain of the THS math team.

As part of the gray-matter games, students will be asked to write an essay on the spot.

"They'll give us the topic, and we'll have to sit down and write an essay," Dahlin said. "It'll probably be on the French Revolution."

"Usually a high school from California ends up winning" the national competition, Pelligra said. "They've been doing this for a lot longer. Since this is our first year, it's hard to say where we will wind up, but no matter what happens it was a great experience for not only the contestants, but for the rest of the school, too."

"The whole school got behind this," he said.