

May Madness! A Classroom Competition Merges Historical Research with Public Debate

“When I first was told about May Madness I wasn’t really sure what to expect. I thought that I wasn’t going to be able to get in front of a group of judges and speak about my historical figure.... I was also not sure what to ask during cross the examination. May Madness was more exciting than I expected. It brought out the competitive side of the students. The challenging part for me was deciding what exactly to choose from my characters’ accomplishments to show they took a stand and were influential.... Every time the judges gave us feedback, it gave us a chance to improve our speeches,” (2006 runner-up representing Katharine Graham).

Isaac Cosby Hunt III

Many Advanced Placement (AP) teachers may struggle, as I did, with what to do with their students after the national examinations in early May. My advice is to do as the musician Prince once suggested: “...Go Crazy!” While I’m not suggesting a dance party in the classroom, I am recommending a phenomenon of a different kind: my cure for the post-exam blues is the “May Madness” competition.

For our May Madness final project, my AP U.S. History students and I make a list of native-born or naturalized twentieth century Americans and place them into a bracket—much like the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) basketball tournaments. The students then debate, head-to-head, which historical figures were “more significant” until we have a Final Four and, eventually, a winner. By the end of the tournament, the class has determined the most significant American of the twentieth century.

Origins of the Madness

Somewhere along the line of my 12 years in education, I must have heard about a

“tournament of historical figures,” and, as all good educators do, I appropriated the idea, putting my own spin on it in the process. I also borrowed the name, May Madness, from the March Madness college basketball tournaments.

In the inaugural year of the tournament, the competition was not one, but several tournaments, in fact. The students had to create their own individual tournaments; each student wrote four essays, one for each of the four regions of competition: East, West, Midwest, and South—just like the NCAA basketball tournaments. In the beginning of their essays, each student had to “seed,” or rank, their historical figures—who the “favorites” and the “dark horses” were in that region—and explain why.

For the past four years, however, May Madness has gotten away from pencil and paper and moved to the podium. Instead of having the students write essays about their individual tournament decisions, we have a class tournament and have judges decide who advances. The decision to change the format was, in large part, a result of my participation

in the District of Columbia Urban Debate League (see www.dcdebate.org). As a debate coach in that extracurricular league, I have seen the powerful effect that structured debate has on young people’s thought patterns, research skills, and self-esteem; I wanted to engage my AP students in that type of dynamic activity. After spending most of the academic year expressing themselves on paper, May Madness gives my students the opportunity to showcase their verbal talents.

Setting up the Madness

During May Madness, I set aside my bowtie and pull out the referee shirt. Serving as the “tournament director,” my work is primarily focused on recruiting the judges. Every year in April, I send out an e-mail to just about every adult I know in the city. Some judges are three- or four-year veterans of the tournament; and the job of recruiting gets easier every year as past judges tell their friends, spouses, and colleagues about the activity. Judges represent a diversity of backgrounds and professions; for example, May

Figure 1. MAY MADNESS 2004

| | <i>Leaders & Revolutionaries</i> | <i>Heroes & Icons</i> | <i>Builders & Titans</i> | <i>Great Minds</i> | <i>Artists & Entertainers</i> |
|----------------------|--------------------------------------|---------------------------|------------------------------|----------------------------|-----------------------------------|
| William A. | <i>Ronald Reagan</i> | Tupac Shakur | | <i>Steven Spielberg</i> | The Three Stooges |
| Martha A. | <i>Teddy Roosevelt</i> | Al Capone | | <i>Maya Lin</i> | Oprah Winfrey |
| John C. | <i>Marcus Garvey</i> | J. Edgar Hoover | | <i>Robert Oppenheimer</i> | James Brown |
| Poline D. | <i>Harry Truman</i> | Edward White | Bill Gates | <i>Sandra Day O'Connor</i> | |
| Kendra D. | Timothy McVeigh | | Ray Kroc | <i>Bob Moses</i> | <i>Elvis Presley</i> |
| Lakita E. | Huey Newton | <i>Marilyn Monroe</i> | CJ Walker | | <i>Martha Graham</i> |
| Tiffany G. | <i>Alice Paul</i> | Muhammad Ali | <i>JD Rockefeller</i> | Louis Farrakhan | |
| Nzinga K. | | <i>Helen Keller</i> | <i>Sam Walton</i> | Stan Williams | Stan Lee |
| Alta L. | <i>Paul Robeson</i> | | Barry Gordy | <i>J.K. Galbraith</i> | Lucille Ball |
| Concepcion M. | Rudy Giuliani | | <i>Estee Lauder</i> | Orville and Wilbur Wright | <i>Ed Sullivan</i> |
| Eduardo O. | <i>Dolores Huerta</i> | Ron Jeremy | L.B. Mayer | | <i>Keith Haring</i> |
| Michael P. | Hugh Hefner | Malcolm X | | <i>Robert McNamara</i> | <i>Dr. Seuss</i> |
| Kyurshawn R. | | Seabiscuit | <i>Henry Ford</i> | Stephen King | <i>Walt Disney</i> |
| LaShaun W. | <i>Eleanor Roosevelt</i> | Jackie Robinson | | <i>Margaret Meade</i> | Aretha Franklin |
| Portia W. | | Martin Luther King, Jr. | Donald Trump | <i>Philo Farnsworth</i> | <i>Billie Holiday</i> |
| Lorice Y. | Bill Clinton | <i>Leonard Peltier</i> | Russell Simmons | <i>Bob Woodward</i> | |

The author borrowed these categories from www.time.com/time/time100/. Historical figures in italics were teacher-selected.

Madness judges have included Eleanor Roosevelt’s goddaughter, National Archives staff, a member of the District of Columbia Board of Education, a D.C. Superior Court judge, a nationally syndicated journalist, and a former commissioner of the Securities and Exchange Commission. Outside judges provide an authentic audience, which spurs the students to put more effort into the project.

As tournament director, my job is to ensure the competition’s diversity; I try to make sure that a range of historical figures are included in the draw, so I reserve the right to assign certain figures to the students. *Time Magazine’s* categorization of historical figures has been very helpful in this regard (www.time.com/time/time100/). I require that each of the student’s four historical figures come from a different category. I assign two historical figures to the

students; one of their first homework assignments of the project is to choose two on their own. I try to assign students to historical figures based on what I have learned about the students during our year together; and I wait until the end of the tournament to ask the students why they believe I made those choices. Figure 1 provides a chart of the field in the 2004 tournament divided by category. The historical figures chosen by students are in roman type.

Once students have their four “players,” the next step is for the students to create some basic sketches of their historical figures. These sketches are called “skeleton sketches,” a concept I borrowed from Janet Allen’s book, *On the Same Page: Reading Beyond the Primary Grades*. I adapted the sketch into a text format (Figure 2, page 308). These sheets force students to see the need for both primary and secondary

sources on their characters. For some students, even those in an Advanced Placement class, May Madness provides the first impetus to visit and scour the local public library.

There are about two weeks (10 class periods) from the time I introduce the project until the beginning of round one. The students learn which individuals I have assigned them to on that first day, and they have until the end of the first week to make their own picks. I try to give each student at least one resource to aid them in their research, but for the most part, the research is all their own. For example, I assigned Katharine Graham, former owner of the *Washington Post*, to one of this year’s competitors. I happened to have a copy of Graham’s autobiography, *A Personal History*, which I lent to the student. Using that autobiography as well as a copy of *The Pentagon Papers*, that



The 2005 champion (left) holds trophies for winner and runner-up. She took both Lyndon B. Johnson and Bob Moses to the finals. The student to the right won the 2004 championship representing suffragist Alice Paul.

young woman took Katharine Graham, a figure she had never heard of before the tournament, all the way to the championship round.

Over the weekend I make the tournament draw. I tell the students up front that I will be seeding each historical figure—just as the NCAA tournament directors do with March Madness. To this extent, my own judgments as a history educator about which historical figures deserve which rank do affect the course (or at least the layout) of the tournament. One rationale I have for ranking is that we don't want to have a match-up of colossal historical figures like Franklin Delano Roosevelt and Martin Luther King Jr. in the first round. At the same time, seedings provide one of the most intriguing aspects of the tournament: “upsets.” Figure 3 shows the draw for the Midwest region in the 2004 tournament.

In 2003, for example, Shirley Temple, a 16th seed, upset the Wright Brothers. I can hear some saying, “That’s outrageous—Shirley Temple does not have near the same historical significance as the Wright Brothers!” While most historians would agree, the young woman who represented

Shirley Temple did better research and proved to be the better debater. The class learned that Temple was not just a movie star: the student argued that her work with Al Jolson improved race relations, and she went on to become an ambassador. With these two arguments, the young debater argued Temple’s domestic and international significance. Not only had she researched her own figure well, but she had done what so many May Madness judges suggest: she had studied her opponent. She presented the judges with some of the controversies surrounding the Wright Brothers’ flight and made the point that every aspect of modern flight cannot be traced directly back to the brothers. The student representing the Wright Brothers had not done as much research and therefore suffered a surprising loss. This upset marked the first time I realized that May Madness was less about the consensus of historians and citizens on American history and much more about the individual effort, passion, and creativity of the students and their ability to make points effectively to a panel of judges.

Incorporating seeds also makes the job of creating a rubric (see figure 4)

easier. The rubric shows the students how many points each victory is worth, and they see that there are more points available for the victories by lesser known historical figures. One of this year’s competitors reflected on his first round loss to a lesser known historical figure:

My first match-up was a fight I’ll never [forget]: Russell Simmons and Rockefeller. With the Standard Oil Company on my side, I thought Def Jam [Records] had no chance against me; unluckily for me, a big time monopoly like Standard Oil was not very convincing for 2006 judges. (3rd place winner)

On the day before the competition begins, I model a match-up for the students. I represent one of my heroes, James Brown, and I recruit a colleague to represent a historical figure of his or her choice. This year my opponent chose Eleanor Roosevelt. The students become the judges—thus getting experience using the rubric by which they will be evaluated starting the next day. My students tell me that they have a greater understanding of what they will have to do once they have seen the model debate.

Figure 2.

MAY MADNESS "SKELETON SHEETS" (CHARACTER SKETCHES)

HISTORICAL FIGURE : _____

STUDENT : _____

WHAT S/HE SAID (primary source quotations)

| |
|----|
| 1. |
| 2. |
| 3. |

WHAT S/HE ACCOMPLISHED

| |
|----|
| 1. |
| 2. |
| 3. |

WHAT S/HE PLANNED OR TRIED TO DO (But failed or never finished)

| |
|----|
| 1. |
| 2. |
| 3. |

WHAT S/HE THOUGHT/FELT

| |
|----|
| 1. |
| 2. |
| 3. |

STRENGTHS

| |
|----|
| 1. |
| 2. |
| 3. |

WEAKNESSES

| |
|----|
| 1. |
| 2. |
| 3. |

Incorporating Themes.

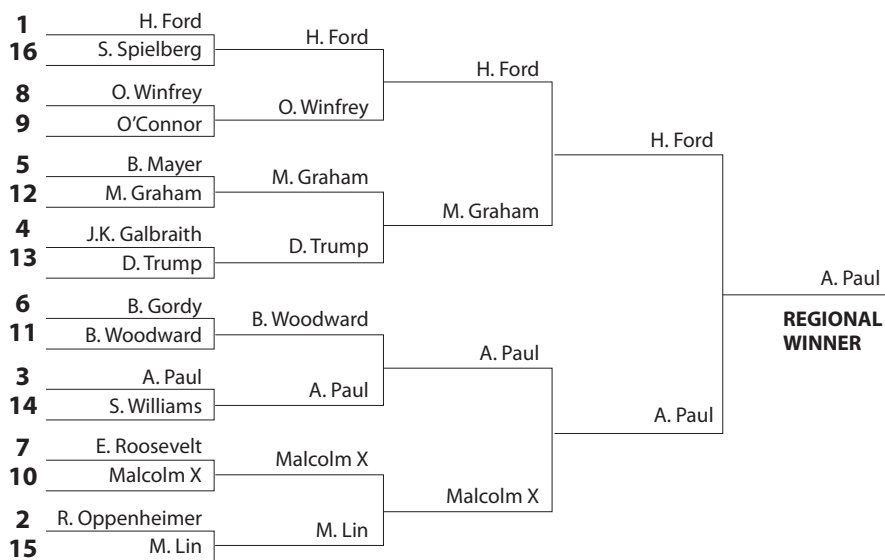
For the past two years, students have had to consider not only the overall significance of historical figures, but how those figures connect to certain themes in history. Those themes often determine the eventual winner of the contest. In 2005, the theme was “progress.” That year civil rights and mathematics pioneer Bob Moses won the title. In contrast, this year’s 2006 class took on the National History Day theme, “taking a stand,” and immigrants’ rights and social work champion Jane Addams was the winner.

Incorporating themes forces the students to think outside the box. In the first round of this year’s tournament, J.D. Rockefeller, the 2004 runner-up, went down at the hands of hip hop producer Russell Simmons, in part because Simmons’s student advocate was able to articulate Simmons’s efforts to take a stand for urban youth through efforts like the “Vote or Die” campaign and the hip hop summits he has sponsored. Incorporating themes into the competition allows the students to see that ideas and impact—not dates—drive history and historical significance.

Debate Structure

Each match-up has a straightforward structure; and the activity runs itself once the judges and students are in place. My job becomes that of a referee, complete with a whistle (when time expires) and referee jersey. In any match-up (until the finals when the time limits are extended), each student gets a four-minute constructive (introductory) speech in which s/he lays out the basic arguments. Each of those speeches is followed by two minutes of cross-examination by her or his opponent. Next, each student has a two-minute closing statement; finally the judges have ten minutes (total) to ask the two students questions. At the end of that ten-minute period, the match-up is over. We applaud the two debaters, and I tell them that they are “very thirsty” and must make a trip to the water fountain outside the room. This water break gives

Figure 3. MIDWEST



the judges time to tally their score sheets in peace. Upon the students’ return, I offer my own analysis of the match-up before the judges offer theirs.

In my experience, judge feedback to the students is where the magic of May Madness happens. One of the frustrations of being a young adult is that often times older adults do not listen; in May Madness, listening is the primary job of the judges. At the conclusion of a match-up, my students are all ears as the judges dispense their feedback. The announcement of the point totals come *after* the feedback. I should note here that the judge decisions are *not* by consensus; thus odd-numbered judge panels are needed to avoid a tie in scoring. According to the scoring sheet (figure 5), the most a student can earn in an individual match-up is 40 points. Each judge tallies the points for each student/historical figure. Wise students take notes on what the judges are saying in order to improve their arguments for that or another historical figure down the road. This year’s champion was one student who paid attention to what the judges told him:

Going into my first round match-up I was very confident because I had done all of my work, including skeleton sheets, primary sources, secondary sources, and notecards. I was

very surprised by how the tournament unfolded. I didn’t think that [one of my first round opponents] would win so many first round match-ups and score so high with ease... Two useful pointers from judges: make more eye contact; [and] write a few main points about your person on your paper, [then] talk about those points instead of reading word for word.

Transforming the Madness

Just as I decided to change the focus of May Madness to the debate structure three years ago, this year I added a twist with regard to the judges. In years past, I had emphasized that the students each “know your opponent.” This year, I also required that the students “know your judges.” I asked each judge to write a one-paragraph bio of themselves before coming to judge the students. I passed those profiles to the students, who were to prepare arguments drawing on the background or interests of individual judges. After reading one of the judge’s bios, two students used that information to score points on the score sheet. In his constructive speech, one of the students appealed to the judge’s appreciation of visual arts. The other student appealed to the judge’s love of hip hop in her closing statement. (continues on page 311)

Figure 4. MAY MADNESS 2006: HEAD-TO-HEAD ON HISTORY

| First Round (Sweet Sixteen) Victory*: 25 points : #1, 2, or 3 Seeds: 35 points : #4 Seed | Criteria | Super High Five (exceeds expectations) | Pat On The Back (meets expectations) | Lukewarm (does not meet expectations) |
|--|--|--|--|---|
| Elite Eight Victory (regional winner!)* 35 points and the admiration of many Final Four Victory (going to the Finals!)*: 40 points and a shot at immortality The Championship (taking home the hardware)*: 50 points, a phat trophy, and a place of esteem in Bell Multicultural High School history | Historical Research, Evidence, and Point of View: Students collect, evaluate, and employ information from multiple primary and secondary sources and apply that information in oral and written presentations.** | The student earns 85+ or more points in head-to-head competition with other students.*** | The student earns 50-85 points in head-to-head competition with other students.*** | The student earns fewer than 50 points in head-to-head competition with other students. |

* 5-point bonus for a unanimous decision in your favor

** see the judges' ballots for further details

*** 10-point reduction for tardies on tournament days.

An absence is a forfeit, which is an automatic "Lukewarm." One earns no points for victory by forfeit.



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The Meaning of May Madness

It is my hope that other teachers will be able to take the idea of a tournament of historical figures and make it their own. This activity can be adapted to just about any content area, including areas outside the social studies realm. A colleague of mine at a local private school has adapted the activity to include world historical figures at the end of her AP U.S. History class; and my school district is considering taking this activity to the system-wide level and making it an inter-school competition.

Several judges have complimented the students on the depth of their research. For better or worse, some students work harder preparing for May Madness than they do preparing for the AP U.S. History exam. The students learn quickly that the only way to be successful in the competition is to use primary sources effectively. This year's tournament included excerpts from one of Jane Addams's books, song lyrics from Woody Guthrie, and derogatory notes written to Katharine Graham during the Watergate scandal. The reason for this extra effort, I believe, is the authentic audience and the element of competition involved in May Madness.

One of the most special moments of this year's competition was when we invited students from a local middle school to come and witness the semifinals: Frank Sinatra vs. Katharine Graham and Jane Addams vs. Muhammad Ali. We moved that round into the small auditorium at our school and put the debaters on the stage with judges in the first row.

After the match-ups were complete the judges asked the middle schoolers for their own thoughts. All of them had heard of Muhammad Ali, but some commented that they appreciated learning more about Jane Addams and Katharine Graham, women none of them had ever heard of before. Some were surprised to find themselves persuaded on Jane Addams's behalf based on the extensive research that the student representing her had made. The judges agreed: they voted for Jane Addams by a narrow margin in the semi-finals over Ali and unanimously in the finals over Graham—making Jane Addams the 2006 champion.

Figure 5 MAY MADNESS '06 JUDGE BALLOTS

Historical figure: _____

Student: _____

How well did the student make the case for the long-lasting, far-reaching impact (positive *or* negative) of this historical figure?

1* 2 3 4 5

How well did the student discuss the historical figure's connection to the class theme, *taking a stand*?

1 2 3 4 5

How well did the student use **evidence from primary sources** to strengthen her/his argument?

1 2 3 4 5

How well did the student use **evidence from secondary sources** to strengthen her/his argument?

1 2 3 4 5

How well did the student **appeal to the background and/or interests of the judges/audience**?

1 2 3 4 5

How well did the student **respond to her/his opponent's arguments and questions**?

1 2 3 4 5

To what extent did the student use **cross-examination questions to strengthen her/his presentation/arguments**?

1 2 3 4 5

How well did the student **respond to the judges' questions**?

1 2 3 4 5

Point Total:** _____

*1 = not very well at all; 5 = masterfully

** In case of a tie: which student produced a better skeleton sheet/historical head?

As a social studies teacher, one of my main objectives is to help my students become effective citizens. Effective citizens need to be able to stand up and make their voices heard when the occasion arises. At the end of the May Madness competition this year, the runner-up reflected: "May Madness is very unique. It helped me overcome my fear of standing up and speaking in front of strangers." That type of reflection reminded me that

this activity is one that results in different kinds of trophies—not just of the material kind. 🏆

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