

Schools, The Neighborhood Files

Regional Spelling Champion Prepares for National Competition: "It's Us Against the Words"

Two-time Tampa Bay regional spelling bee champion Tommy Foster is competing for another win

By [Deborah Bostock-Kelley](#) | [Email the author](#) | April 5, 2011



It's described as a spelling bee competition, but Carrollwood resident and two-time regional champion Tommy Foster knows the 2011 Scripps National Spelling Bee in June in Washington, D.C. is friendly.

When asked how the 12-year-old came to be Tampa Bay's two-time winner, his mom, Christine Foster explains, "We home school, and I saw this spelling bee mentioned on the home school forum. Tommy has always had a full vocabulary and he's always been a perfectionist."

Tommy interrupts to clarify.

"I used to say, 'How is this spelled? And you'd say, it doesn't matter. And I'd say, no. How-is-it-spelled, Mom?'"

That persistence was evident to his mother.

"You're supposed to encourage kids to write creatively by not worrying about their spelling," she said. "Everything would grind to halt. If it wasn't right, he wasn't continuing."

Tommy entered his first local competition and placed but didn't win. He chose a field trip over his second year competition.

"I was good at spelling when I younger. I didn't win in my competition, but it was a fun experience," he said. "Last year, I took another shot at regionals. My mom was like 'Don't expect to win, but it will be a good experience.' It turned out well."

The best part? "I won and then I won again."

Tommy practices up to an hour a day with his mother, and studies the roots of words. All contestants have a list to study from, so everyone has the chance to prepare equally.

"The true competition begins," say Christine, "when the judges go off the list."

Because of his age, this is his last year in the Scripps National Spelling Bee. He will be competing against 275 students from as far away as China, New Zealand, Ghana and Samoa for a place in finals, televised on ESPN on June 2 from 10 a.m. until 1 p.m.

"I think it's going to be better for him this year, being a year older," said Tommy's mother. "He was a little shy last year and one of the younger kids there. I'm looking forward to him interacting more this year. It's a very friendly atmosphere. They are there for a week, and (Scripps) shows them a good time."

A barbecue, tour of D.C. and a formal awards banquet are part of the fun, she said.

The 275 international contestants are narrowed down by a written test of 20 words, followed by an on-stage test with only two words.

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"They take the top 50 with the highest points. They're the ones who make it to further rounds and eventually get televised," explains Tommy. "It's not really that competitive. Yes, it's a competition, but it's friendly."

So friendly, says Tommy, that it feels more like a team than a group of competitors.

"We are rooting for each other," says Tommy. "It's us against the words. We're not competing against each other. Eventually it's one person against the words as we drop."

When he is not practicing for the upcoming spelling bee, Tommy is just an average kid playing video games and hanging with friends.

He is a Boy Scout Patrol leader, a mixed martial arts black belt, a Tae Quon Do black belt, a member of the First Lego League Lego Robotic team ...

Well, maybe not *average*.

But Tommy does have an Achilles' heel. It's a word that is still just a little too difficult to master, but he's working on it:

"Supercalifragilisticexpialidocious."
