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The Thrill of Victory in Welding, Baking and Bricklaying

In the world championships of vocational skills, contestants go for the gold in 51 unsung careers



Jordyn Baker of the U.S. competing during WorldSkills in Abu Dhabi this month. PHOTO: BILL SPINDLE/THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

By Bill Spindle

October 29, 2017

ABU DHABI—The finalists in the arena were ready for their starting signals.

On your marks. Get set. Weld!



And bake, dress hair, repair planes, lay tile, design clothes, code software and forward freight.

That's what 1,253 men and women aged 22 and under set off to do after their start signals at the 44th world championship of vocational skills earlier this month known as WorldSkills.

In a desert convention center, contestants from 59 countries and regions—a mix of vocational students and jobholders—vied for the gold in simultaneous competitions to test their skills in 51 job categories over four days.

"It's a dream to be able to go to this competition," said 22-year-old Omkar Virendra Savant of India, who qualified to represent his nation in welding.

Athletes have the Olympics. Actors have the Oscars. Why shouldn't bricklayers, cooks and florists have their own world crowns? Even more so, say the competition's organizers, because these unsung jobs are mainstays of the global economy.

"It creates enthusiasm around these skills," said Ranjan Choudhury, who oversees India's WorldSkills program, part of the country's National Skills Development

Corporation, “and the other thing it creates is role models.”

Mr. Savant, the welder, had trained two years for the starting signal that went off on the first day in Abu Dhabi. He dropped a protective mask over his face and fired up his welder. Sparks flew as he attacked his first task.



When
the

A welding competitor in Abu Dhabi. PHOTO: GIUSEPPE CACACE/AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE/GETTY IMAGES

contest started for Jordyn Baker, 19, a puff of flour dust rose around her as she dove into her first dough preparation. A student at a California culinary school, she was America's entrant in bread-baking.

Within hours, she would produce four braided-bread loaves, six focaccia, 10 basil-pesto rolls, 15 quiches and enough dough for a dozen rye-bread loaves and several of orange-cranberry bread.

Representing the Netherlands in the “visual merchandising” category was Pien Hoveling, 21, a design-school student and two-time pan-European visual-merchandising champion.

As her event began, she unpacked “mystery materials” for a store-window display she was to design over the next four days. The task: Build a handbag display aimed at women aged 20 to 40 with the theme “Trip to LA.”



Pien Hoveling of the Netherlands competing in 'visual merchandising' in Abu Dhabi. PHOTO: BILL SPINDLE/THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

These vocational games were the brainchild of a Spanish youth-group leader in the late 1940s. The first was in 1950 between Spain and Portugal. Today, the biennial event is organized by the private international WorldSkills committee and funded by governments, corporate sponsors and host countries. The 2015 championships were in São Paulo, Brazil. In 2019, the host will be Kazan, Russia.

The group's stated mission: “Advocate the need, value, and results of skilled work and professional training for young people so that industries, regions, and countries will thrive in the global economy.”

Winners get medals—gold, silver, bronze—and bragging rights. Some countries reward their winners with cash or scholarships for further training. Nearly all contestants get an edge in their professions, say contestants and country representatives.

For Mr. Savant from India, the goal was to beat his predecessor's sixth-place finish in Brazil and honorably represent his country and employer.

He emerged as a contender two years ago during an in-house competition at Mahindra Vehicle Manufacturers. A manager plucked him from the factory and put him into full-time training, Mahindra says.

For the past six months, he said, he has risen at 4:45 a.m. to run six kilometers and meditate before eight hours daily of welding different joints.

His tasks in Abu Dhabi would be an array of joints, ranging from perpendicular "fillets" to circular pipes to a "pressure vessel" welded from four positions that needed to hold 1,000 pounds of air pressure for a minute.

This year's contest was the largest so far, with about 10,000 people participating, including coaches, trainers, skill experts, government officials and corporate sponsors. Some 100,000 spectators—including busloads of school children—milled among competitions across the four days.

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Ms. Baker, the baker, qualified by winning the bakery crown of her state of Alaska and then the U.S. national title. She practiced nearly daily for more than six months on bread-making techniques including, when necessary, how to "crash-laminate" croissant dough—chilling it quickly when

one isn't able to do it slowly overnight.

That knowledge came in handy when she fell behind in Abu Dhabi. She "blast chilled" dough in an ultracold freezer to make up time while baking 15 croissants.

Like an Olympics star, she was under the close eye of her coach. "Did you hydrate the cranberries?" fretted her coach, Kellie Puff, during one task. "Don't worry," Ms. Baker replied, "they weren't too hard."

As the contest played out into its fourth day, tensions were high. For Ms. Hoveling, the store-window designer, it had been grueling. The materials for one task, secret from competitors until the start, included a plastic pear and mango, fake flowers and the products: a bright-red women's handbag and backpack.

Armed with paints, a step ladder, drills, hammer, screwdriver, rulers and an Apple computer, she set to work.

She had spent thousands of hours practicing the technical skills of window display. "She's fanatical," said her father, Alex Hoveling, watching from the sidelines.

Seventeen hours, 59 minutes and 50 seconds of competition later, Ms. Hoveling put final touches on her display as the crowd counted down along with a large timing clock on the wall: "...10...9...8..."

On went a heat-protection glove for an adjustment to the light. "...3...2..."

A last quick fiddle to smooth a wrinkle in the fabric runner, and she pulled back her hand as the clock hit zero. A crowd gathered around the competitors and erupted in cheers.

Teams of experts gathered through the evening to add up scores and determine winners.

Ms.



Beauty arts competition at WorldSkills in Abu Dhabi. PHOTO: BILL SPINDLE/THE WALL STREET JOURNAL



An aircraft-maintenance competition at WorldSkills in Abu Dhabi. PHOTO: GIUSEPPE CACACE/AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE/GETTY IMAGES

Hoveling's performance turned out to be good for gold. The next night on the podium, she accepted the medal, jumping up and down draped in the flag of the Netherlands.

"I'm so happy," she said in the winner's circle. The key to her victory: "Work very hard and believe in yourself."

Mr. Savant placed 24th of 34 in welding. Ms. Baker finished 12th of 34.

Despite the disappointment of seeing her bread centerpiece wilt in Abu Dhabi's climate—conditions she said she had never encountered baking in Alaska or California—Ms. Baker was thrilled to have taken part. "It was a mind blowing experience."

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Corrections & Amplifications

The WorldSkills competition in 2015 was held in São Paulo, Brazil. An earlier version of this article incorrectly stated it was in Rio de Janeiro. In addition, an earlier version of this article incorrectly stated 58 countries participated in the 2017 competition—but 59 countries and regions took part. (Oct. 30).

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