



All seventy-two Hoop Shoot finalists gathered for a photo before the competition began.

2006 Elks National Hoop Shoot Finals Engender Suspense; Participants Reap Rewards

MARK HAGLAND

IT was already after 2 p.m. local time, nearly four hours into the Elks National Hoop Shoot finals taking place inside the gymnasium of Western New England College in Springfield, Massachusetts, yet cliff-hanger contests for top finalist positions were still in play. Earlier in the day, six divisions of boys and girls ages 8 to 13 had taken their best shots in the annual best-of-twenty-five basketball free throw event sponsored by the Benevolent and Protective Order of Elks of the USA. But this year, both the Boys 12–13 Division and the Girls 12–13 Division were subject to five rounds of five-basket shoot-offs before the final results in

each division were known. Indeed, before the 2006 national finals were over, all three boys' divisions would require shoot-offs to determine the placement of winners—the Boys 8–9 Division required a four-way shoot-off for third place, and the Boys 10–11 Division required a two-way shoot-off for second place.

As families, friends, leaders of Elkdom, and other well-wishers alternately gasped and held their collective breath, youngsters from places as far-flung as Westerly, Rhode Island; Glenwood Springs, Colorado; Alpena, Arkansas; and Sedro Woolley, Washington, dribbled, aimed, and threw basketballs into hoops in an

effort to become national champions. Needless to say, with shoot-offs needed to decide the winners in both the oldest boys' and girls' divisions—not to mention shoot-offs in the other two boys' divisions as well—this was a suspenseful and exciting national finals, and the highlight of a weekend of activities and recognition all coordinated around the contest itself.

Star Performances

As always, the competition ended with sustained applause for the seventy-two contestants who had outperformed three million other youngsters nationwide in order to be flown with their families to Spring-

field, the cradle of basketball, for the finals of the thirty-fourth annual Elks National Hoop Shoot Free Throw Contest. Unique among sporting events in the United States, the Hoop Shoot finals bring together youngsters who have worked their way to the championship round by winning Hoop Shoot contests at their sponsoring Elks lodges and at district, state association, and regional competitions.

Along with the dramatic tie-breakers, this year saw some notable achievements. Among them were the final standings of two sisters from Brea, California, both representing the Fullerton, California, Lodge. Ten-year-old Karlie Samuelson shot a perfect twenty-five baskets in a row—the one perfect score at the 2006 national finals and the first since the 2002 finals—and thus received the Emile Brady Award for perfect score. Karlie also received the Getty Powell Award for the year's top female shooter. And her sister, 12-year-old Bonnie Samuelson, who in 2003–2004 and 2004–2005 was the national champion in the Girls 10–11 Division, placed third in the Girls 12–13 Division this year, marking an exceptional moment for one family during the same competition.

Bonnie Samuelson was also one of a number of high-achieving free shooters who were repeat national finalists. Indeed, twelve of the seventy-two national finalists this year were repeat national finalists, with Bonnie coming back for the fourth time, and Robert Lawler III, of Winchester, Virginia; Kenzie Church, of Fairmount, North Dakota; and Kristin Perry, of Olive Hill, Kentucky, all making their third national appearances—a remarkable feat considering

the number of youngsters who participate in the Hoop Shoot program each year.

Meanwhile, 9-year-old Nicholas Fortenberry, of Augusta, Georgia, not only shot twenty-three out of twenty-five baskets to become the national champion in the Boys 8–9 Division; he also bested the champions in the two older divisions, shooting a perfect five out of five baskets to

The Elks Hoop Shoot contest is unique among sporting events in the United States.

earn the 2005–2006 Getty Powell Award for boys.

Focus Impresses Families

But beyond the excitement of the moment, the youngsters going for their personal bests in the Elks National Hoop Shoot finals this year were participants in a uniquely important and high-profile Elks National Foundation program, one designed to encourage youth achievement and family solidarity. Says Hoop Shoot National Director Cam Cronk, “The program’s mission statement really encompasses its sense of purpose.” According to that mission statement, the program is “designed to provide character and

Getty Powell Award winners Nicholas Fortenberry (left), of Augusta, Georgia, and Karlie Samuelson, of Brea, California. Karlie, who shot a perfect twenty-five out of twenty-five baskets, also received the Emile Brady Award for perfect score. It was the first time the award had been given since 2002. ▼



▲ Family triumph: sisters Karlie (left) and Bonnie Samuelson represented the Fullerton, California, Lodge. Bonnie, a two-time past national champion, took third place in the Girls 12–13 Division.

Beating the Odds

MORE than three million boys and girls from across the country participated in an Elks Hoop Shoot Contest this year. Only seventy-two regional champions went on to compete in the 2006 Hoop Shoot national finals in Springfield, Massachusetts, April 22–23.

All seventy-two Hoop Shoot finalists received an achievement plaque. The six national winners each received a trophy, and their names will be inscribed on a permanent plaque at the Naismith Memorial Basketball Hall of Fame in Springfield.

Congratulations to all seventy-two contestants for beating the 1:45,169 odds!

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skill development, healthy, spirited athletic competition, social relationships, quality family time, camaraderie, and travel with minimal expense to families.” All Hoop Shoot participants who qualify for the regional and national finals have their travel and lodging expenses—and those of their families—paid by the foundation.

Families were impressed both by the hospitality that was shown to them as their children competed in the



▲ Zeke Light, a finalist in the Boys 12–13 Division, and his younger brother, a potential future national finalist, are from Salem, Illinois.



▲ The Flohr family of Glenwood Springs, Colorado, on their final trip to Springfield, watched Kevin Flohr (holding basketball) win second place in the Boys 12–13 Division. Pictured with Kevin are his parents, Linda and Kevin Sr., and brothers (back, from left) Sean and Michael. Sean won the Getty Powell Award in 1995–1996 and again in 1999–2000.

program, and by the atmosphere of achievement—not interpersonal competitiveness—that has been created and sustained each year. “The way they run this whole event is just wonderful,” said Lynette Adams, of Parowan, Utah, whose 9-year-old son, Tristan, competed in the youngest boys’ division. “It’s a great atmosphere for the kids and for the families.” She also enjoyed strolling in downtown Springfield, which, of course, is “nothing like Parowan,” a small town in southwestern Utah where Lynette and her husband, Mitch; Tristan; and two daughters, ages 12 and 6, make their home. And though the youngsters coming to the national finals

would certainly all love to win, Mitch Adams says of his family’s perspective on Tristan’s achievement, “We just had the attitude: do your best.”

Family members also said they welcomed the opportunity to meet other families from around the country. In the case of the Macks and the Grahams, that meant meeting families from other parts of their own state, West Virginia. With finalist Jaime Graham, of St. Marys, competing in the Girls 8–9 Division, and finalist Leslie Mack, of Princeton, competing in the Girls 12–13 Division, the two families quickly bonded and sat together at the reception for families on Friday evening, chatting

Rules for the Elks National Hoop Shoot Finals

TWELVE regions of the country send one child in each of six categories: Boys 8–9, Girls 8–9, Boys 10–11, Girls 10–11, Boys 12–13, and Girls 12–13.

Rules of Engagement

- Boys 8–9 and Girls 8–9 contestants may shoot from four feet inside the free throw line. All others must shoot from the free throw line.
- In each division, contestants shoot ten free throws in the first round, followed by a second round of fifteen, for a total of twenty-five shots. Ties for the top three spots in each division are broken by shoot-offs in which each contestant shoots five free throws per

round until winners for first, second, and third place emerge for each division.

- From the six first-place divisional winners, two overall champions, one boy and one girl, receive the Getty Powell Award. This award is given to those competitors who make the most baskets out of their original twenty-five shots and who win in their division. If there is a tie between age divisions, a shoot-off is held at the end of the Elks Hoop Shoot, with each competitor shooting five shots per round until a clear winner emerges.
- The Emile Brady Award is given to any competitor who scores a perfect twenty-five out of the initial twenty-five shots.

and sharing stories. Both girls have athletically inclined parents and siblings, and in fact, both Ken and Valerie Mack have coached girls' basketball in Princeton. Valerie Mack had only praise for the way the weekend event, as well as the Hoop Shoot program in general, is run. "It's so well organized, especially with this many people," she said. "And the atmosphere is really family oriented—it's great."

The opportunity to interact with Elks leaders also gave family members a new awareness of the community-oriented and charitable activities of local lodges and of the Elks organization as a whole. Jim and Shirley Emler, of Gnadenhutten, Ohio, are grandparents of Connor Clark, of Dalton, Ohio, who competed in the Boys 8–9 Division. "Not having known much about the Elks previously," Shirley Emler said, "we'll now be more aware of them as they hold fundraisers or sponsor activities in our community. They do an awful lot that I did not know about." Jim Emler admitted that the Hoop Shoot finals, and everything he and Shirley learned about Elks activities during the weekend, completely changed his vague image of "the old way of [social gatherings] in smoky bars." The family focus of the competition gave the Emlers a very different view of the Elks organization.

Winning Attitudes

Meanwhile, the emphasis on encouraging all the finalists especially impressed Dan and Jody Mason, of Southampton, Massachusetts, whose 10-year-old son, Makai, competed in the Boys 10–11 Division. "It's wonderful the way it's all done," Dan Mason said. "The Elks do a wonderful job organizing it, and they also make everyone feel good. Everyone's a winner."

Mason, who played varsity basketball in high school, says he and his wife share a balanced view of their son's talents and interests. They want him to do well in everything and to enjoy everything he tries. "Makai is a very talented basketball player," Mason said, "and he does music, too; he plays trumpet." Of his son's achievements, Mason reflected, "I

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Top Contenders and Their Sponsoring Lodges in the 34th Annual Elks National Hoop Shoot Finals



The 2005–2006 national champions (from left): Kenzie Brader (Girls 12–13), Karlie Samuelson (Girls 10–11), Lakyn Boltz (Girls 8–9), Nicholas Fortenberry (Boys 8–9), Kaden King (Boys 10–11), Caleb Donnelly (Boys 12–13).

GIRLS		Score	Shoot-Off	BOYS		Score	Shoot-Off
AGES 8–9							
1st	Lakyn Boltz	24/25		1st	Nicholas Fortenberry*	23/25	
	Keokuk, Iowa				Augusta, Georgia		
	<i>Keokuk No. 106</i>				<i>Augusta No. 205</i>		
2nd	Autumn Whirley	23/25		2nd	Brandon Mejia	22/25	
	New Paris, Ohio				Del Rio, Texas		
	<i>Richmond, IN, No. 649</i>				<i>Del Rio No. 837</i>		
3rd	Katie McWilliams	22/25		3rd	Clayton Voss	21/25	24/25
	Salem, Oregon				Washington, Missouri		
	<i>Salem No. 336</i>				<i>Washington No. 1559</i>		
AGES 10–11							
1st	Karlle Samuelson*†	25/25		1st	Kaden King	23/25	
	Brea, California				Central Valley, Utah		
	<i>Fullerton No. 1993</i>				<i>Richfield No. 2420</i>		
2nd	Kelsey Keith	24/25		2nd	Gunnar Anderson	22/25	4/5
	Penokee, Kansas				International Falls, Minnesota		
	<i>Hill City No. 1995</i>				<i>International Falls No. 1599</i>		
3rd	Corrie Reese	22/25		3rd	Collin Parker	22/25	3/5
	Katy, Texas				Calhoun, Georgia		
	<i>Katy No. 2628</i>				<i>Calhoun No. 1883</i>		
AGES 12–13							
1st	Kenzie Brader	23/25		1st	Caleb Donnelly	23/25	4/5
	Altamont, Kansas				Hudson, New Hampshire		
	<i>Parsons No. 527</i>				<i>Nashua No. 720</i>		
2nd	Liz Cruso	22/25	25/25	2nd	Kevin Flohr	23/25	3/5
	Westerly, Rhode Island				Glenwood Springs, Colorado		
	<i>Westerly No. 678</i>				<i>Glenwood Springs No. 2286</i>		
3rd	Bonnie Samuelson	22/25	24/25	3rd	Isaac Bianchini	22/25	10/10
	Brea, California				Sedro Woolley, Washington		
	<i>Fullerton No. 1993</i>				<i>Mount Vernon No. 1604</i>		

*Getty Powell Award winner

†Emile Brady Award winner

Getty Powell Award winners and their families receive an all-expenses-paid trip to Orlando, Florida, for the Elks Grand Lodge Convention, July 9–13, 2006.

The Hoop Shoot program teaches the importance of focus and belief.



▲ Henry and Michelle Fortenberry, parents of Getty Powell Award winner Nicholas Fortenberry.

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think he has ability to focus, and I think that helps him. He's a quiet competitor. He's very humble. He has a casual facade, but he's a real competitor underneath."

In a similar vein, Henry Fortenberry, father of Getty Powell Award winner Nicholas, said he and his wife, Michelle, have strongly encouraged Nicholas and his older sister in everything they pursue—whether in academics, athletics, or other areas. The emphasis on personal best and development of character in the Hoop Shoot program, Henry Fortenberry said, aligns perfectly with the type of encouragement he and his wife give their children. That Nicholas achieved what he did at the finals did not really surprise his father. "We practiced a great deal for the shoots," said Fortenberry. "It was very good discipline for Nicholas." And, although he described his son as naturally shy, Fortenberry added, "Nicholas told me right after he won the Getty Powell Award, 'I'll be back next year!'"

Hoop Dreams and Life Lessons

Organizers of the Elks Hoop Shoot Free Throw Contest are interested, of course, not only in what participants can achieve in a year, but in what they can achieve in their lifetimes. And lest anyone think that sounds a tad idealistic, they need to listen to the words of Kelly Lane Clauss, a two-time Hoop Shoot national champion at

the ages of 12 and 13 (1977–1978 and 1978–1979) who went on to play college basketball at Indiana State University-Evansville and Vincennes University before obtaining her BA from Indiana State University-Terre Haute and her master's degree from Indiana University-Indianapolis. Clauss credits much of her success in life to the Hoop Shoot program and to the important life lessons she learned as a Hoop Shoot participant. (Clauss' husband is a member of the Washington, Indiana, Lodge, and she continues to participate in the lodge's Hoop Shoot Contest every year.)

Speaking at the Saturday evening banquet that followed the competition, Clauss, who is now a physician practice manager for Memorial Hospital and Health Care Center in Washington, Indiana, told her audience that participating in the Hoop Shoot program "helped me set and reach goals. It taught me a lot about commitment and dedication.

"As most of you have probably done for the past five or six months," Clauss continued, speaking directly to the national finalists seated at tables in front of her, "I was practicing hundreds of free throws a day. But it taught me about commitment; that if something meant something to me, I'd better be committed to it."

Clauss also described how the Hoop Shoot program taught her the importance of focus and belief. "My dad used to say, 'Believe, and you will see. Before that ball leaves your hands, you have to know you're going to make that free throw. And you have to have that vision of that free throw going through that hoop.' That applies to so many things. You have to believe, you have to have that vision. And it taught me that anything, absolutely anything, is possible."

Interestingly, though, Clauss told the audience of national champions, finalists, families, and Elks leaders that her biggest lesson came not in the two years when she won national championships, but rather, a couple of years earlier, when she first participated in the free throw contest at the

national level in 1975–1976, and lost. "The first time I lost, I was the most shocked person," she recalled. "I participated as a 9-year-old and got fifth place, I think. And I was devastated, and my mom looked at me and said, 'That's the best lesson you will learn in life. It's about what you do when you lose, and who you are.'"

At the time, Clauss said, she didn't completely understand the importance of that statement, but she came to embrace it in her life. "Winning isn't everything," she emphasized to her audience. "It is the grace with which you 'lose' that defines who you are as a person."

Clauss also described the significance of her participation in the Hoop Shoot program for her college basketball career. "The impact that the Elks Hoop Shoot had even on my college recruitment was very important—not that they cared so much that I was a good free shooter, but that I had the commitment, and the grit, and could set and meet goals. As Cam and I have talked over the last couple of years, he said something to me that has stuck—that the Elks have a genuine interest in building character in responsible adults. We were in the same room in Kansas City when I was a 12- or 13-year-old, and Cam was a regional director then. Think of all the years he's spent doing this! But also, he's gotten to see the productive adults that many of these shooters have become."

Clauss' address captured well the spirit of Hoop Shoot, with its emphasis on character development and its encouragement of youngsters from all backgrounds. And her remarks were full of inspiration and praise for the national champions and finalists. "What a great achievement!" she congratulated them. She encouraged the participants to "dream big" and to expect only the best of themselves. And then she left them with these words: "This is a memory you will probably carry with you for the rest of your life. Because what you have done today will reflect in what you do with the rest of your life." ■