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Putnam Competition

What do math majors think of the Putnam competition?

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Jessica Su, CS PhD student at Stanford

61 upvotes by Adam Merberg (Ph.D. student in mathematics at UC Berkeley), Quora User, Kamaru-Deen Lawal, (more)

I stopped thinking math contests were fun after high school.

In high school, competitions were a way of doing difficult, interesting problems. This was a novel experience because most homework in high school is not very hard. In college, every problem set is difficult and interesting, so contests in college lost much of their appeal. Plus you get a lot more time for the Putnam (6 hours for 12 problems), which removes the thrill of the clock.

I did take the Putnam twice and I remember it being quite difficult. There was a lot of calculus on it, which made it accessible to lower-division students, but you had to be clever about it and use the theorems in innovative ways. There were also a couple problems on upper-division topics such as algebra, which were fine by me because it meant I could skip them :)

I have a lot of respect for people who score well on that test. My highest score was a 21, which wasn't particularly good but put me in the top 500.

Written 1 Nov, 2012. 4,089 views.

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Qiaochu Yuan, Putnam 2009 Honorable Mention

51 upvotes by Sridhar Ramesh (Former Ph.D. student in mathematical logic, UC ... (more)), Jessica Su (CS PhD student at Stanford), Anurag Bishnoi (Ph.D. student in Mathematics at Ghent University.), (more)

It's fun sometimes (although people tell me last year's was less fun than usual). If you do well, some people will care and some won't.

It is not an accurate reflection of what research mathematics looks like.

Research mathematics takes place on the scale of weeks, months or years rather than hours. Research mathematics is also collaborative. And open-book.

Doing well on the Putnam doesn't mean you'd make a good mathematician (although it's not a bad sign), and doing poorly on the Putnam doesn't mean you wouldn't.

Written 25 Oct, 2012. 2,244 views.

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Kevin Lin, PhD Math

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 29 upvotes by Sridhar Ramesh (Former Ph.D. student in mathematical logic, UC ... (more)), Jessica Su (CS PhD student at Stanford), Quora User, (more)

I took the Putnam twice as an undergrad, in 2004 and 2005, if I recall correctly. I solved 2 problems and earned 20 points both times. At the time, these scores were pretty disappointing to me. I had hoped to do better.


I'll be honest -- I took the exam because of its prestige. My thinking at the time was very simple. I'm a bit embarrassed about it now, but at the time I wanted to do well mainly because I wanted the bragging rights. It's well known to be a very difficult exam (for example, there are many years where the median score is zero), and so to do well on the exam would be something to be proud of. And I mean, how cool would it be to be a Putnam fellow, to be on the same list as such mathematical luminaries as Richard Feynman, John Milnor, David Mumford, Don Zagier, Daniel Quillen, and Peter Shor???

Now that I'm older and wiser, I realize that Putnam problems, and math competition problems in general, are often more about tricks and cleverness than anything else. Having strong problem-solving abilities and being clever are definitely great qualities for any mathematician to have, but research mathematics involves a whole lot more than that.

Putnam problems are kind of like cute little riddles (albeit very tricky ones). They can be fun to play around with, and it's satisfying when you're able to figure out the trick that cracks it open. Whereas research mathematics is kind of like exploring a huge, vast, unknown landscape. It requires vision, deep understanding, and persistence on the scale of years (decades?? lifetimes??).

Written 2 Nov, 2012. 1,301 views.

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 **Matt Ginsberg**, computer scientist, run a couple of s... (more)
17 upvotes by Neville Fogarty (BS - W&L '10, PhD - University of Kentucky '16), Jessica Su (CS PhD student at Stanford), Quora User, (more)

I took the Putnam a depressingly long time ago (1972-73), and I thought it was great. I was a freshman/sophomore in college, and it was the closest to "real" mathematics that I could get. I didn't prepare; I just showed up, sat down, and beat my head against the wall for six hours. I did ok in 1972 and won it in 1973.


In 1974, my dad died suddenly about a week before the Putnam. I tried to take it anyway but was completely unable to. In 1975, I didn't even try; the 1974 experience had been pretty shattering.

But I think it's an absolutely great experience, if you're up to the challenge. I can imagine it being frustrating if you're going to score 0, though. But to anyone who thinks they can do better, go for it!

I can also say that as someone now running a software company, seeing the Putnam Exam on a resume always counts for a lot with me.

Written 12 Apr, 2013. 1,195 views.

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 **David Ash**, Mathematician--IMO gold medalist 1981... (more)
9 upvotes by Jessica Su (CS PhD student at Stanford), John Phileas, Quora User, (more)

I was a Putnam Fellow for 3 years from 1981-1983. It opened up some doors for me, some of which--such as the opportunity to work for a top NYC hedge fund--I pursued and others of which--such as the opportunity to do grad work in pure math at Harvard--I declined. The Putnam may have caused me to become too impatient with myself when it came to mathematical research. My success in the Putnam probably led me to expect greater research success at an earlier stage (ie as an undergrad) than I was ready for. The Putnam really doesn't test much beyond freshman mathematics so someone's success in the

Putnam doesn't really indicate much more than that they are among the best in North America at freshman mathematics--which at a certain point is no longer relevant. I found the Putnam to be much less "mathematically social" than earlier high school math contests. The high school math contests usually opened up opportunities to get to meet other enthusiastic young high school math students over a wide geographical area; by contrast I never directly met anyone through the Putnam except my university classmates, many of whom I saw every day anyways.

Written 21 Jan. 501 views.

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Neal King

4 upvotes by Jessica Su (CS PhD student at Stanford), Quora User, John Phileas, (more)

Putnam problems are generally not very "deep", but require a great deal of flexibility and cleverness: It is a matter of seeing the problem from the exact angle that makes it seem trivial. But doing well on the Putnam does not guarantee that one is going to be able to make it as a mathematician.

One fellow I knew as an undergraduate did in the top 5 for five straight years, including his senior year in high school; but he never really became a mathematician, although his knowledge of mathematics seemed literally encyclopedic.

Another fellow I knew at that time also did outstandingly well (although not as outstandingly well as the other guy); and he did go on to become a very respectable theoretical physicist.

Both these results are consistent with the impression I got about these guys from just kicking around talking math with them.

Written 22 Jan. 365 views.

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Bryan Taylor, I have an MS in math from Cal Berkele... (more)

6 upvotes by Jessica Su (CS PhD student at Stanford), Quora User, Ramit Das, (more)

I loved the Putnam exam. I think competition sharpens the wit.

Does success on it correlate with being a great mathematician? If you are a putnam fellow, probably. The several putnam fellows that I knew at Berkeley succeeded very well in graduate school.

I don't really see why it matters if it predicts mathematical research ability. The reality of it is that most people taking the exam are not going to be math professors. There are many times in my career where I've formulated hard problems that were somewhat technical (even if not "pure" math) and had to think deeply about approaches to take. Taking an exam like the putnam forces you to deal with problems in the "oh, crap -- I have NO IDEA" category, and it absolutely helps you have the right problem solving attitude. To be honest, I'd be hard pressed to say this isn't more valuable than mathematical research ability.

Written 19 Dec, 2012. 917 views.

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Quora User, math major

It's too early in the morning.

Written 20 Feb. 148 views.

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