

Mock trial lets students feel the thrill of the case 'It forces you to think, but at the same time it's fun to do'

By Kate Ramsayer / *The Bulletin*

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Central Oregon high school students and parents packed two Deschutes County courtrooms Saturday to hear the emotional — but fictional — case of Simon v. Swift and Eastside High School, which pitted the mother of a track star who died after taking steroids against the sprinter's coach and high school.

The attorneys arguing their points were all high school students themselves, participating in the Oregon Mock Trial Competition, which drew four teams from three Central Oregon schools.

The students handled all the different courtroom roles — plaintiff's lawyers, defense attorneys and witnesses — and after months studying affidavits and court strategies, they staged the trial three times on Saturday. Each team faced the three other competitors, switching off between representing the defendants and the plaintiff, and earning points from a judging panel.

"It gives you a thrill," said Katie Flowers, 14, a freshman at Summit High School, noting that while playing a witness she stumped someone on another team who was questioning her. "I want to try to do it all four years."

Megan Manion, 17, a junior at Summit, has competed in mock court for three years, and said it's a good experience.

"It forces you to think, but at the same time it's fun to do," she said, adding that participants have to think on their feet, poke holes in their opponents' arguments and make their case.

On Saturday afternoon, Manion presented the plaintiff's opening statement to the mock court, explaining why the judges should find that Jordan Simon's track coach and high school put too much pressure on her, causing her to take the steroids that killed her. The defendants had a duty to monitor for drug use, warn about the dangers and discourage steroid use, she said.

Sisters High School's Jordan Rudinsky, representing the school and the coach, opened with an opposing view, stating that the plaintiff's case is flawed and based on assumptions.



Pete Erickson / *The Bulletin*

La Pine High School junior Paige Milligan, 16, gives her closing argument during a mock trial competition at the Deschutes County courthouse on Saturday afternoon. The judges of the competition said she made a good presentation, but ultimately the team from Sisters High won the event.

Trenton Kropf, 15, a freshman from Sisters High, said a lot of practice went into the mock trial.

“We finally get to the point where we have our best questions,” he said. “I feel it’s gone good — our team is strong.”

And the Sisters High School team ended up winning the competition.

The team will go on to the state finals in Portland on March 13-14. Two teams from Summit and one from La Pine also participated on Saturday.

“I think it’s exhilarating for some of them,” said Mary Thomas, who teaches a social studies elective class at Sisters High School focusing on the mock trial. The students learn how to think critically, come up with questions and take initiative, she said.

Deschutes County Circuit Court Presiding Judge Michael Sullivan is the regional coordinator for the mock trial, and said it’s a competitive situation that allows kids to excel at activities beyond sports.

“What’s nice is kids get an opportunity to actually see if they’re interested in law as a profession,” Sullivan said. “They gain some experience and training in public speaking, and they learn how to advocate and think on their feet.”

Rachael Maguire, 14, a freshman at Summit, is leaning more toward a career in medicine, but said she likes getting to know the characters in the trial and presenting her team’s case.

“I’m very strong-willed, and like to argue my points,” she said.

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