

Local student wins National championship at SkillsUSA competition

Written by George Browning
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MacKenzie Stephens put an exclamation point on his high school days at Prosser in 2013 by finishing fourth in the SkillsUSA Nationals Internetworking competition. While he was excited by that finish, it was trumped by his first time competing as a college student this summer when he won the gold medal and gave Prosser it's first-ever national champion.

Stephens admitted that his close finish, where one little mistake kept him from getting gold in 2013, was more than enough motivation to return and try again.

"Getting fourth last year, I really wanted another shot to see if I could get gold," he said.

Stephens remembered the mistake he made in the 2013 that cost him the competition and he said as he practiced leading up to this year's event, he made sure that mistake wouldn't cost him again.

"I made sure I was going to get that right and when I ran into it at the competition this year, I got a thumbs up from the judge and I knew I had done well," Stephens said.

He said when he saw the thumbs up, he figured he was a lock to finish in the top 10, but didn't know where in the top 10 he'd end up finishing.

While he was mindful of his 2013 mistake, he didn't let the pressure of possibly making another distract him.

"My mind-set going in was, 'If I win, I win and if I loose, I loose,'" he said. "Last year, I was nervous and wanted everything to be perfect and this year I was relaxed and decided if it's not perfect, but it works, I am going to move on. I had to let it go, push it away and move on to the next part. That allowed me to save time and time is a key to the competition and it allowed me to really push forward."

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Stephens said he was excited when he heard that he had won against 25 of the best internetworkers in the country, but admits that it still doesn't seem real.

"Winning is pretty cool," he said. "It still doesn't feel real to me. It's awesome to know that I was good enough to win, but I don't feel like I am any better at internetworking before I left for the competition."

Stephens, who is the son of Mary and Michael, said his celebration was mild because he was spent from competing but that didn't stop those who were with him from having their own celebration.

"My mom and my teacher and everyone who was there with us were really excited," he said. "I didn't have near as much energy as they did. I was really touched that they cared that much about me winning."

The gold medal isn't the only thing Stephens earned by winning. He also gets the prize of knowing he earned the attention of several major companies in the internetworking field.

He said Cisco, which is one of the top networking companies in the world asked for a copy of his resume to keep on file.

The competition also gave those companies who were there an opportunity to see how the competitors reacted under pressure and how they handled adversity.

"SkillsUSA is really growing and a lot more businesses are looking at it and donating time to see the field of people who are out there," Stephens said. "The businesses are the ones who put it on and they recruit right out of the competition."

Stephens posted a top four finish in 2013, a national championship in 2014 and as for 2015? He said he won't compete for himself, but instead plans to work with other young students at

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Prosser to help them take a shot at winning gold.

“I am not going back,” he said. “Next year I want to coach and help the next guys in line. There are a couple of guys who will be in the senior class at Prosser and I want to help them at the competition next year.

“If I was able to help a high school student get gold at the national competition that might even top winning gold myself.”

Stephens interest in computers started at his church. He said running the program and the sound at Pekin United Methodist Church served as an introduction to computers that led him to a computer class at Prosser. The rest as they say, is history.

As for what exactly internetworking is, he explained it in laymen’s terms.

“Internet-working is basically getting your data from point A to point B,” Stephens said. “When you turn on your computer and you connect to the internet, that’s what I am doing, I am that connection to the internet. When your internet service provider comes in to put the line in, I am the guy behind the scenes building up the infrastructure that makes sure your data gets from point A to point B as quick as possible.

“In business, that’s the infrastructure that keeps everything going. You can access any computer in the world from anywhere in the world, it’s the connection. That’s internet-working.”