

Statement From Joshua Alman – 4/12/13

My name is Joshua (“Josh”) Alman and I am a junior at MIT. I am issuing this statement because NAQT has accused me of cheating. I did not cheat, have never cheated and I would never cheat. NAQT’s accusations have now resulted in further false accusations in connection with a different competition (“Penn-ance”). All of these accusations are false and based only on circumstantial evidence. Here is the truth.

On February 8, 2013, in a statement on NAQT’s website entitled “2012 ICT: Unauthorized Question Access”, they accused me of cheating during two Quizbowl Tournaments (Regional and National) for which they stripped MIT’s championship titles. I did not comment previously, hoping to put this painful episode behind me since NAQT had written me a letter stating that “NAQT considers this matter now closed and currently plans no further actions or public statements.” However, NAQT was not true to their word, and my name has now become inextricably linked to the well-publicized accusations of cheating elsewhere, I feel that I now must speak out and explain what happened.

I started competing in Quizbowl just before I started college. I was thrilled to be able to join the MIT team with so little experience. I was not a very active member at first, preferring to learn from the more seasoned players in these Division 2 matches. During my sophomore year, I became more involved in Quizbowl, practicing hard, becoming a question writer and the team president. That year our team also moved up to Division 1 where the questions tested more in-depth knowledge of the topics.

In order to prepare for tournaments, my teammates and I looked at questions from previous tournaments. As a question writer for NAQT I had on-line access to these (NAQT encourages looking at past questions to study and even sells question sets for this purpose). Gathering the questions and answers was time consuming so I attempted to write a computer code to automate the process. I had never written a program to access the internet before and had many difficulties with it, repeatedly trying to fix it to get it to work. I accidentally inserted an

endless loop which soon overwhelmed my hard drive with undecipherable data. At that point I got frustrated and deleted the whole thing and forgot about it.

I was shocked and extremely hurt when, nine months later, NAQT sent me an email saying that I had cheated (while admitting that their proof was circumstantial), declaring me guilty without ever asking for an explanation. Even more shocking, they simultaneously contacted the other officers of my Quizbowl club proclaiming my guilt and asking for their “cooperation” in the matter so that they wouldn’t be “tainted” by this scandal.

NAQT’s assertions are apparently based on two things. First, their computer logs showed that my computer had accessed their questions page over 100 times prior to the tournaments in question, and second, my scores had gone up significantly from one year to the next. Both of those statements are correct, but as I explain at length below, neither means that I was cheating, and in fact I was not cheating.

Regarding the access, their logs show that most of the claimed occasions took place in fractions of a second, faster than a human could press a button let alone see anything. This had to have been the work of my unsuccessful program. Even the slightly longer accesses shown on the log were usually a matter of seconds and are likely due to the fact that their computer system is often overwhelmed and always slows down and even crashes during periods of heavy use (such as previous to a major tournament when new information is posted). As I stated previously, the purpose of my program was only to look at topics from past question sets, and I believed that there was no chance to look at current college level topics even accidentally since I presumed NAQT’s security would prevent it as my account was tagged as an active player. As it turned out, they had a security flaw, which they also admitted. This was also relevant in Harvard’s titles being stripped as well as with a few other schools which have not been as widely reported. In any case, I never saw any topics from upcoming games and had no knowledge of this supposed infraction until I received their email.

Regarding my increased scores, unlike many other players, I was new to Quizbowl my first year at MIT. It took some time for me to get used to

the format and the way the questions worked. Additionally, my team was extremely fortunate to have a top Quizbowl player so it was easy to learn from him while he carried the load for the team. In Division 2, the questions are more general, and did not specifically address my strengths. As I became more involved, including study and practice, I was able to be more active in answering questions. The switch to Division 1 made a big difference as the questions in each area were more difficult. My knowledge of certain areas now made me an expert in these areas with the ability to answer many questions quickly which earns bonus points. I answered questions primarily in math (I am a math major), science and computers (also related to my studies), the country where I grew up (not the US) and my religion (of which I had extensive studies) as well as a few on the video games and TV shows I play and watch. I did not answer questions in topics outside my areas of expertise, as supposedly happened in other cases.

What really hurt were the comments from a fellow MIT student, Stephen Eltinge. Stephen is a year behind me in school. He wasn't even there my first year to see how I performed or practiced and so – despite his assertions about my performance - really had no basis to compare either how I played or the greatly increased preparations that I went through in my sophomore year. My second year he was not on my team and didn't even compete in the same division (he was Division 2) so had no direct knowledge then either.

When NAQT contacted me by email, they chose not to consider any of this information. Instead, they were outraged that I didn't immediately admit to cheating when confronted. It seemed to me that they were trying to cover themselves rather than attempting to determine the truth. We tried to work with NAQT to issue a statement about what happened (in the interest of putting this behind me). We proposed a statement that they rejected, with their cover letter email including this telling statement: "The proposed text would also do irreparable and permanent damage to NAQT's reputation and integrity, which is simply not an option." Apparently, they feel it is better to damage my reputation.

In fact, NAQT has continued to act hypocritically through this process – demanding unquestioning compliance regardless of the facts,

unilaterally terminating discussions aimed at an amicable resolution and publishing a very damaging statement without letting us know what they were about to do. This all followed NAQT making public accusations without affording me a chance to respond, accusing me of threatening to sue them which is not the case (my parents did hire a lawyer to try to protect me given the seriousness of the charges but there was no law suit) and going on to make further statements about me even after they said they would not, etc.

As for Penn-ance, I note that my ex-teammates at MIT have decided to trash me for my efforts to be helpful in finding staff for the tournament, and have concluded (again without talking to me, and apparently without even talking to other key people) that I was cheating in Penn-ance as well based on my confusion about email addresses and the fact that I did well at that tournament. But even their accusatory forum posts are based on “suspicions” and even the “suspicions” do not make sense. They assert that by responding to a request to find staff, I must have been attempting to obtain questions in advance. Even their own accusations confirm that I provided a number of names of possible staffers (again, in response to their request) and my teammates knew me well enough to know that I’m often disorganized and forgetful about things like this. It is absurd to suggest that somehow I was devious enough to know which of the names I provided would be selected, and that I’d seeded my suggestions with a false email address in order to have questions sent there. Really, this is beyond silly. I just got confused about names and email addresses. And I did well because I worked hard and studied. Nothing more.

I need to say this again: I did not cheat. I would not jeopardize everything I have worked towards for the past 20 years. If I were trying to access the information intentionally, would I have used my own IP addresses and credentials? Apparently I am smart enough to bypass security but not smart enough to try to cover my tracks.

I do admit that the failed computer program caused a great deal of misunderstanding, and for that I am very sorry. I have learned a valuable lesson from this incident and will apply it throughout my life. But I did not intentionally access any questions, topics or answers that I

was not supposed to see and I never saw the questions or answers that NAQT claims that I did.

Having said all that, I certainly have no desire to have anything to do with NAQT for the rest of my life after the way they have mistreated me and smeared me. I am moving on. It would be nice if the people who have been spreading false accusations about me did likewise.