

Origami Survivor: Japan

To be or not to be... TV CHAMPION!

It was an early Monday morning in late January when I got a call from June Sakamoto saying that a Japanese producer is offering me an all-expenses-paid trip to Japan to compete on an origami game show. “Cool! I replied groggily, “When?” She answered, “How about next week?” “Next week!?,” I exclaimed, “Can’t, I’m booked for the next two weekends.” “But how about after that?,” she inquired. “I could go then,” I replied. “Great!,” she exclaimed, “I’ll tell the producer...” So, three weeks later, I jumped on a plane to Tokyo with only a vague idea what I was in for.

The game show, which is called “TV Champion,” is an elimination-style reality show very much like the hit TV show, “Survivor,” but four times as old! Every week the show holds a competition between experts in a particular field, this time -- origami. It was the seventh time the show has focused on origami in its 12-year history. The origami contestants have always been chosen by Makoto Yamaguchi, who this year persuaded the producers to finally invite a foreign folder to compete.

Round I: The Transformation

The competition started out with five folders. In the first round we had to fold a model that transforms into another model and changes color. Everyone had had at least a week to design their models. My model, was a seemingly empty top hat, out from which suddenly popped a rabbit. To present the model to the judges, my translator, Mitsuhiro “Hiro” Yoshida, coached me into learning a few lines of Japanese, to the effect of “Watch while I blow life into this origami model...” Then I handwhistled a popular Japanese melody (which Hiro also taught me) and finally, after pulling the rabbit out of the hat, tried to mimic a famous Japanese comic’s quick pose resembling the Chinese written character meaning “life.” I did the whole act as coached, but when I came to the final pose, my mind went blank, and I did a completely different pose, which was perhaps even funnier because it was so far off. Regardless, I scored high enough with the judges to avoid being the weakest link thereby advancing to the second round. The folder that scored the highest was the four-time reigning champion, Kamiya, who folded a witch that transformed into a dragon.

Round II: Extreme Origami

The second round was certainly the most wild. We had to fold recognizable animals under various extreme conditions, one of which being that we were outdoors and it was just a couple of degrees above freezing. It was a folding race divided into three parts: Land, Air, and Water. The gun went off at the starting line, and the four of us raced to a pile of 25 envelopes each with the name of a land animal inside (written in English and Japanese) and an appropriate paper to fold it. I happened

Kamiya



Shafer



Tanaka



Nakai



Anzai



to choose “Squirrel” which was much to my relief because that was the animal I had spent the most time practicing. But the surprise extreme condition was that we had to fold our animals inside a cardboard box that had two holes for our hands and was open on the far side so that only a camera could see what we were folding. I ran with my brown 10-inch kami to my cardboard box but instead of putting the paper into the open end of the box, I tried putting it through the hand hole, and accidentally ripped the paper. As the other three folders continued, I frantically tried to communicate to the producers that I needed a new paper, which, after a minute of scrambling, they managed to provide me with. But despite the minute lost, I finished the squirrel before any of the others finished their animals, and as instructed, ran to the judges’ stand carrying the whole box. The judges were 12 five-year-olds from which we were to choose only one to try to identify our model. I chose the girl in the red jacket, who, to my delight, correctly identified my squirrel, thus sending me on to Air.

I had a much harder time “in the Air” than I did “on Land.” For the Air challenge we had to select an envelope as before, but this time the extreme condition was to jump onto stool, reach up to a piece of 10-inch kami clipped to a hanging string, and attempt to fold our flying animal. The first animal I selected was a “Bee,” which since I had never practiced and didn’t think I could make recognizable, decided to fold especially quickly, so that I could get the inevitable wrong guess over with and start again with a different animal. As I had expected, the selected judge had no idea what I had folded, but, to my frustration, deliberated for quite some time. “Just guess anything,” I pleaded politely. Finally the wrong answer was given and I got to choose a new envelope. I chose “Pelican” which once again I had no idea how to fold, and proceeded as before to fold something quick and unrecognizable. Next came “Mantis”... same story. Then came “Eagle,” which I had practiced and thought I had a chance, but my eagle was not recognized I think because I modeled it after the eagle on the U.S. dollar. Finally I got “Peacock” which the chosen judge had no problem recognizing, but after the whole ordeal of air, I headed for “Water” tied for last place....

So, there I was at the back of the pack heading for Water, the final part of Round 2. Awaiting us were two fish tanks each big enough to hold two snorkelers, which is exactly what we had to do -- fold our models from waterproof paper while snorkeling in the tank. I was fortunate to pick the easiest model possible, a frog, but when I got to the tank I realized I didn’t know how to use a snorkel, and hadn’t the slightest idea how to secure the weighted belt. Finally, after about

Round 1: Origami Transformers



Kamiya: Witch transforms into Dragon



Shafer: Empty Top Hat transforms into Rabbit-filled Top Hat.



Tanaka: Hippo transforms into Horse/Deer



Nakai: Clam transforms into hands folding a crane.



Anzai: Koala transforms into Seal on a Rock.

thirty seconds of confusion, I figured out the snorkel, but since I still couldn't secure the belt, I jumped into the tank without it, and instead pushed against the walls of the tank to stay submerged. After folding the frog, which took all of 15 seconds, I jumped out and, in soaking shoes, ran to the judges stand. I chose the same girl in red who had guessed the squirrel, but, to my dismay, she first guessed, "Turtle!" Luckily, as was the rule, she got a second guess, which to my relief was "Frog." I had finished Round Two just behind the first place Kamiya, and thereby advanced to the final round...



Who is this disguised as a swamp creature?

Round 2: Animal folding race



Part 1: Animals of the Land

Extreme condition: fold with hands in an enclosed box.



Part 1: Animals of the Air

Extreme condition: fold while balanced on stool with hands reaching into the air.



Part 1: Animals of the Sea

Extreme condition: fold while snorkeling in a fish tank.

Round III: The Diorama Marathon

Setting the scene...

For the final round, which was held three days after the second round, the three remaining contestants were to be given 12 hours in which to fold four dioramas: Winter, Spring, Summer and Fall. We all had been told two weeks before that the final round would be a 12-hour marathon, but the guidelines ended up getting changed so many times that planning ahead was almost useless.

The folder whose exhibit received the most votes was to win the grand prize of 500,000 Yen (about \$4000 dollars). The winning exhibit was to be photographed and made into a calendar, which was to be produced and sold by an origami supplies company. The judges were to be fifty employees of the company, each allotted one vote.

The day before, I went shopping around Tokyo with the two other remaining folders, Kamiya and Tanaka, to buy paper for our Round 3 exhibits.

On the morning of the final round, we met at the Gallery Origami House at 6:30 a.m. From there, Makoto Yamaguchi drove us to the set, which was a huge, semi-outdoor room of the origami supplies company, decorated with huge rolls of origami paper. It was snowing out when we got there, and so, in spite of the industrial kerosene heaters, it was still quite chilly in the room, at least for the first couple of hours.

The Clock Starts!

For my exhibit, I started by folding a modular tetrahedron skeleton out of cardstock (each edge measuring 2 feet). I then wrapped it up in a transparent plastic sheet, and made a stand, so that the final tetrahedron could balance on any of its four corners. Each side of the tetrahedron was to house one diorama. By the time I finished all this and actually started folding the models, almost three hours had elapsed!... I guess I should have practiced making it before.

The producers had requested that each of my dioramas illustrate a different part of the United States. So, for the

Winter diorama I chose Alaska, for the Spring, Berkeley, for the Summer, Hawaii and for the Fall, Colorado. The title I chose for my exhibit was Origami Oxymoron, which meant that in addition to sticking to the seasonal theme, I made as many of the models as I could be self-containing contradictions.

For the Alaskan Winter, I folded a Walking Igloo, a Skier on a Volcano, and a Snowman holding a Japanese Fan.

For the Berkeley Spring, I folded Two Tots on a Walking Teeter Totter, a Person on a 15' Unicycle, two California Golden Poppies -- but with green petals and orange stem, and Two Rackets Playing Ping Pong with the a Person (instead of a ball).

For the Hawaii Summer, I folded a Person Surfing on the Wing of a Crane, a Walking Mermaid, and a Person Stranded on top of a Deserted Metro Bus (palm tree included).

For the Colorado Fall, I folded a Walking Tree, a Flying Pig, and lots of other simple farm animals which I had designed especially for Round 2.

Finally, to tie together the dioramas, I folded a curvy dashed road that encircled the whole tetrahedron, changed color as it passed through each season, and ended by going into a cave, along with a bear, to hibernate for the winter. On top of the cave is where the winter road started.

Kamiya, the reigning champion, folded three colorful fish and an underwater dinosaur fossil for Spring, a bentobox containing an assortment of Japanese specialties for Summer, two Brontosauri and brown leaves for Fall and a Mammoth Elephant pulling Santa Claus and sleigh for Winter.

Tanaka, the other remaining competitor, folded an exhibit of crazy cranes -- four scenes filled with crane creatures of all sorts, but mostly the variety sporting four five-toed feet.

There was a frenzy of folding as the clock ticked down to zero and then POOF, the marathon was over. We were then each given 10 minutes to present our exhibits to the fifty judges. I believe I ended up with the most laughs from the crowd (via a translator), but it was the reigning champion Kamiya who got by far the most votes. The ball above him opened, spilling on to his head confetti and hundreds of tiny cranes. I placed second just ahead of Tanaka.

Conclusion

Looking back, I think my exhibit was perhaps a bit overambitious, but I certainly tried my best. Considering what I was up against -- four Japanese masters enjoying home-field advantage -- I'm happy to have made it as far as I did. More importantly I'm grateful for having been given the opportunity to travel to Japan and participate in a TV show that was both extremely well-put together and full of excitement and fun.

Round 3: Diorama Marathon



Shafer's Diorama: Origami Oxymoron



Origami Oxymoron: Alaskan Winter



Tanaka's Spring Diorama: Stegasaurus Crane



Kamiyas Winter Diorama: Wooly Mammoth pulling Neandrathal Santa Claus.