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For spellers at national bee, dorky's the new cool

McLEAN, Va. — Lauren Kirk had a hamburger in hand, a new friend by her side. On Monday afternoon, she was one of the cool kids.

The 14-year-old from Bloomington, Ind., with the lime-green headband and wild shoelaces wasn't about to skip the annual [Scripps National Spelling Bee](#) barbecue to pore over lists of obscure words for the weeklong spell-off.

Although a few did choose to hang out at the hotel to study — with the hope they'll be crowned champion Thursday on prime-time network television — the rest were in their element at a park in the Virginia suburbs, romping around, playing volleyball, trading autographs and singing karaoke. (ABBA seemed to be a favorite this year.)

"It's a lot more social than I thought it would be," said Lauren, who had a peace sign painted on her temple and a yellow-and-black bee on her leg. "It's really nice to be among people who actually get your jokes."

Only a dozen or so of the 293 spellers who descended on the nation's capital this week will make it to finals on ABC, and a handful more will get past the written test and appear on the ESPN-televised semifinals earlier Thursday. For most of the rest — who might stand out as a bit dorky back home — socialization trumps competition for the more than \$40,000 in cash and prizes.

"The competition is very important," said 13-year-old Kavya Shivashankar, a three-time finalist from Olathe, Kan., and one of the favorites to win this year. "But this is the time that I get to meet all my friends that I've met in the past years. We keep in touch over the year. It's so easy to make friends. Everyone shares the same interest."

This week, they are the cool crowd. Only at a spelling bee picnic could 12-year-old Kira Simpson of Bluff, Utah, wear a blue T-shirt that reads "I love nerds" and fit right in.

"It's kind of the same thing at MIT," said 19-year-old Jose Cabal of Miami, who finished 31st at the 2003 bee and is now a rising junior at the Massachusetts school. "It's like back home, I'm a nerd. Up there, everyone else is a nerd."

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But nerds also love to have fun. Those who stayed at the hotel to study might wish to note that last year's winner, Sameer Mishra, never missed the barbecue.

"Even though I was a bit too big, there was those jumpy inflatable things — I always had to go to that every single year," Sameer said in a telephone interview from his home in West Lafayette, Ind. "It was like the first thing I always did before I ate."

The serious spellers have memorized homemade lists of tens of thousands of words. Others were simply good enough to win their local bee and just being here is enough.

"I just want to come here and have fun," said Katlyn Bohrer of Bunker Hill, W.Va., who turns 13 on Friday. "All my friends are like, 'You should have a party if you win.' I'm like, 'There are other good spellers that have been studying since the beginning of the year.'"

Perhaps no one has a better understanding of the two perspectives than Helen Evans, mother of Matthew and Hannah Evans. Matthew was a five-year participant who drove himself hard and was tearful when he didn't win as one of the favorites last year. Now that Matthew's too old, 13-year-old sister Hannah won their local bee in New Mexico and is competing this year with a more mellow approach.

"With Matthew, it was kind of a lifestyle. It consumed him," Helen Evans said. "Hannah wasn't sure if she wanted to do it or not. We didn't push her. She knew how much work it was, so she didn't decide until late fall that she wanted to do it."

She has big brother to help. Matthew displayed a sheet of paper outlining a "spelling rewards program" he designed to motivate Hannah to learn more words. She can earn things such as iTunes downloads or drinks and desserts from Sonic "up to \$4 in value." Brotherly hugs, of course, are free.

"I don't know if I've learned as much as he did," Hannah said. "I definitely don't know as much, but I would like to make it past the written test."