

Let's get quizzical!

COVER STORY

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All roads lead to the City Amphitheatre tonight for the **Times of Oman Annual Quiz 2009**. As the participants gear up for the exciting finals, **AFTAB H. KOLA** tracks the history of the mega-event

It is time yet again to be a part of the excitement of Oman's most popular quiz show. The participants are all set to rack their brains to answer an avalanche of tricky posers by the seasoned quizmaster, Giri Bala Subramaniam, a.k.a. Pickbrain. The **Times of Oman Annual Quiz 2009** will roll out tonight at the city amphitheatre with much fanfare.

So be ready for those witty answers, wild guesses, intelligent hunches, hits, misses and more with the cheering brigade providing plenty of pep and sparkle. Enough reason to drive to the City Amphitheatre tonight!

The Times' Quiz, a mega event, has a special place in everyone's hearts. It all began in 1995, when Owen Bouche, then managing editor of Times of Oman, broached the idea with his relative Derek O'Brien, a seasoned quiz master.

He asked the quiz master, "Why can not the quizzing magic that you unleash on TV in

India be packaged and brought to Muscat?" O'Brien felt the idea was not at all bad. Anees Issa Zedjali, then managing director of *Times of Oman*, okayed the quiz by saying, "It was pre-ordained. It had to be."

On May 6, 1995, on the Sheraton Oman Hotel lawns, the first edition of the Times Quiz (then titled **Times of Oman Inter-School Quiz**) was conducted by celebrated quizmaster Derek O'Brien. The rest is history!

Writes Anees in the *Times of Oman* special souvenir for the quiz in 1999: "We did better than that. Much, much better. To an extent, that took everyone by surprise. No one had anticipated the sheer magnitude of the response. The single quiz that we planned became a series. We had unleashed a new wave." The crowd that throngs the quiz venue year after year is evidence of the massive popularity of the quiz show.

Reflecting about the first quiz show, Derek



RACK YOUR BRAINS: *Giri Balasubramaniam grilling teams at 2008 edition of Times' quiz show*

O' Brien writes: "I am told the organisers never expected the lawns of Sheraton Hotel to be so filled with so many people. The event caused Muscat's biggest traffic jam! I will never forget the silence that enveloped the venue when Muscat Private School finished ahead of Indian School Muscat. The capacity crowd, comprising 99 per cent Indians, could not believe it. I took a chance

with the Muscat head of Air India and asked, could we have three more tickets to send the team that came second as well (to the Bournvita Quiz Contest)? He nodded. ISM, too, were on their way."

Owen Bouche summed up thus: "What better way for a newspaper to add than to satiate the cerebral appetite of the majority of Times readers." Derek had enough

ammunition of his own to pull in the crowd. And he performed so well that for many weeks, Times' Quiz remained the talk of the town. Ashok Suvarna, then general manager of advertising, had played his part in pulling up his socks in getting sponsorships to patronise the event. Ashok writes in the special souvenir that was published in 1999: "The first show was a great success. We had



SETTING THE PACE: Derek O'Brien at the fourth edition of Times' Quiz (1998)



WINNERS TAKE IT ALL: Essa bin Mohammed Al Zedjali, Chairman and Editor-in-chief of Times of Oman giving away the Times trophy to ISG team in 1998

expected an audience of only 500 to 800 for the show, but ended up getting more than 2,500. We could achieve our goal of sending the school teams to India for the Bourvita Quiz contest, which was supported by our chairman Issa Mohammed Al Zedjali."

PN Devaya, then marketing manager of *Times of Oman*, writing about the phenomenal success of the quiz story in the Times Special Souvenir, avers, "It is a unique combination of various elements that are well mixed and have come together synergistically to create a bookmark in the Muscat calendar."

Nehal El Hadi and Nama Zarroug, students of Muscat Private School, were the proud winners of the first *Times of Oman Inter School Quiz*. This winning duo outshone 14 other brilliant contenders from Indian School Muscat, Indian School Ghubra, Indian School Wadi Al Kabir, Sri Lankan School and the American British Academy.

The second edition was held at the Oman Club grounds in Al Khuwair on April 5, 1996. Derek O'Brien continued his presence with an interesting format of the quiz, which was won by Indian School Wadi Al Kabir.

The big transformation came in the third edition, held on April 4, 1997, in the form of a change of venue. The city amphitheatre has its own ambience and the fully charged audience made the third edition even more fun. In closely fought finals, the Indian School Muscat finally outwitted Indian School Ghubra to clinch the trophy.



Once the event was shifted to City Amphitheatre the quiz show was transformed into an event of mega dimensions. Later, the quiz was converted into an open event from being limited only to school teams. The participation of school teams has its own excitement as students from the respective schools sit together to cheer their teams.

In the later years, Derek O'Brien was replaced by Giri Balasubramaniam, another young, talented quizmaster, who has been carrying on the show with great enthusiasm and zeal.

The 13th edition of *Times of Oman Annual Open Quiz Contest* will open tonight with a lot of ballyhoo. With an aim to take the quiz to a larger audience and give a fresh feel, the quiz contest is seeing a new concept, in which the preliminary

round has selected eight top school teams for the final instead of the normal two. Says Aziz K. Baker, advertising manager, *Times of Oman*, "In all, we have selected six top teams (as we always do) and also selected the top eight school teams (with a maximum of two teams per school in these eight) for the final." The final this year will begin with the quizmaster inviting the top eight teams on stage first. A fast-paced quiz will be conducted on the buzzer for these eight schools and the top two school teams will progress to the TOO open quiz final. These two school teams will be joined on stage by the six open teams (from the prelim) for the mega final of the open quiz (as it is held every year).

So, be there when it happens.