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Society

Math Girls Rule A Dutch success story

Mathematics according to the average Dutch: boring, uninteresting, unknown, unsexy, for nerds focusing on gaming, and most definitely not for girls. But out of the blue appeared an initiative that itself turned part of the tide: The Mathgirls blog.

During March 2006, the two Dutch female mathematics PhD students Jeanine Daems and Ionica Smeets started their 'mathgirls'-blog at www.wiskundemeisjes.nl. Who would have thought then that their original plan 'to just put up some of the titbits that we talk about over lunch in the math institute' would take off with such success? They tell stories of strange deaths of mathematicians, interview mathematicians about their favourite living colleagues, pick up movies and songs about mathematics from YouTube, tell jokes, give biographies and knitting instructions for Klein bottles, present puzzles and more. This irresistible potpourri of mathematics trivia — and not so trivia — has gained them national

fame: they appear as celebs on TV shows and their blog recently received two prizes. With a small crew of other students, they write enthusiastically about mathematics in newspapers, on websites, etc. And as they are so knowledgeable and irresistibly gossipy, their information tends to be correct and to-the-point. Add to that their talent for writing. If you ask around, many people think that they have been there for much longer than just two years: they seem to have become part of the landscape in no time at all.

As a matter of fact, I am sure they are hanging around at secm just now, so be aware: they might want to interview you for their next posting!

Their activity has significantly increased public awareness of mathematics (and even of the mere existence of mathematics, mathematicians and women in mathematics) throughout the country — as is shown by the comments to some of their posts.

The picture on the right shows the illustration on a T-shirt depicting the two ladies (schematically, that is) with their slogan 'Math Girls Rule' written across it. I have already successfully exported such a specimen to Japan. Many more colours and sizes are available on their web page, in addition to a neat poster with a similar design.

The blog itself is written in Dutch, so if this is not one of the languages that you have mastered, you'll have to create something similar yourself, I am afraid. ←

Weblog location: www.wiskundemeisjes.nl

