

# THE ORANGE COUNTY REGISTER

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ANDY TEMPLETON, FOR THE ORANGE COUNTY REGISTER

**AZTEC DRESS:** High school senior Sarah Herbst wore a San Diego State University shirt the second time she took the SAT.

## THE MORNING READ

### A spin on SAT edge

Students try out a test prep company's confidence techniques to raise their scores.

By **SAM MILLER**  
THE ORANGE COUNTY REGISTER

Listen up, high school students. Have I got a deal for you.

You've got to take the SAT to get into any good college, right? Not just take it – you've got to own it, dominate it, hammer it like it's a fat fastball and you're Babe Ruth. You got a 1,600? I'll get you to 1,800. Oh, you already got 1,800? I'll get you 2,000.

And here's the best part: You don't have to learn a single new fact.

Eat what you want and still lose the weight. Set it ... and forget it. Just follow us into the Test Zone.

What? You think it sounds like a get-rich-quick scheme?

For Revolution Prep, an upstart tutoring company that has

SEE STUDENTS • PAGE 2

News 2 | Friday, Nov. 23, 2007

FROM PAGE 1

The Orange County Register

## STUDENTS: SAT course enrollment skyrockets

FROM PAGE 1

quickly grown into one of the state's largest, it's common sense. About 15,000 California students will likely take their course this year, up from 89 students in 2002. In Orange County, a dozen classes are already scheduled in the first half of 2008.

It's not a scheme, and it's not quick. It's a new way of studying that may reshape the SAT experience for students such as Servite High School senior Jimmy Fay and help them get past what may be the test's biggest obstacle: themselves.

Jimmy took the SAT once. He was sick and coughing that day, and he wasn't used to testing with girls in the room – Servite is all boys.

What constitutes a great score is all relative. For some students, the difference between 1,700 and 1,800 could be enough for admission to a preferred state school. Others want a nudge toward a perfect 2,400.

For Jimmy, the 2,070 he got the first time was a good score. But to get into Cornell, his first choice, "I want a beautiful score."

So this fall he joined 16 other students in a Huntington Beach High School classroom for six weeks of three-hour sessions every Thursday night.

During this first session, a hip young teacher named Chris Zink directs them to Page 16 of a thick study book. Page 16 has just two sentences in huge, bold letters.

"The difference between a good day and a bad day can be 200 points. The Test Zone is about making sure you have a good day."

Two hundred points is Revolution Prep's guarantee to all kids in the class, or they can take the class again free. Zink promises to make them 200 points "smarter" by helping them overcome Scantron anxieties, preparing them for surprises, building up their endu-



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**GOOD NEIGHBORS:** On her second SAT try, "There wasn't anyone annoying around me," Sarah Herbst says.

rance and telling them which gum to chew.

He'll cover much of the same coursework that Kaplan and The Princeton Review, the two national titans in a rapidly growing SAT prep market, have taught for decades. He'll show how to eliminate wrong answers, untangle tricky phrasing and get used to the format. He'll give them four full-length practice tests.

She spent thousands of hours chasing good grades, but her GPA took a hit when she got sick and missed a few weeks of her junior year. But in just four hours, she can undo a lot of that damage.

Zink asks if she's a good test taker.

She groans. "Uh, no. I get

distracted."

On the other side of the room is Sarah Herbst, a Corona del Mar High School senior. Her grades are just shy of what she needs to get into her first-choice school, San Diego State University. She needs to ace this test, and that makes her nervous, and when she's nervous she's not in the Test Zone.

"When I take these practice tests, it really does fluctuate a lot. I can tell I had a bad day and it was low. Or someone around me was being distracting," she says. She can't risk that this time. "This is my shot."

Zink, 25, drinks a Rock Star energy drink and furiously clicks a pen as he paces the classroom, doling out advice related more to attitude than

a big box of it – a flavor they've never had before.

They laugh. He doesn't. He's serious about the Test Zone.

From the first practice test to the last, the 17 students in the class improve by an average of 298 points. One student improved by 600 points. The one with the least improvement still went up by 90 points.

But when it's time for the real test, things get tricky.

The Test Zone is about preparing them for the unexpected. But how does anybody know what the unexpected will be?

Kaitlin was stuck sitting in the front of the room, where the proctor's pacing distracted her. She didn't finish her essay in time, freaked out and dwelled on it for the rest of the exam. She forgot to chew her mint Orbitz SAT gum.

She improved by just 10 points, to 1870.

"I honestly don't even know why they have us take this test," she says now.

Sarah, on the other hand, was in the Test Zone. She went to bed early, wore her San Diego State T-shirt to pump herself up and wasn't nervous.

But her score barely improved – 1720, up from 1660 her first time.

"I think maybe they should have focused on the test itself," she says. "I learned all about the attitude and the Test Zone. I did all that, I was confident, and then I went in and didn't do so well."

But then there's Jimmy. This time, he saw the attractive girls sitting around him and used them as motivation. "Gotta impress these girls," he told himself.

It worked. He got his beautiful score: 2,200.

Was it the Test Zone? He says he doesn't know, and he doesn't care.

"I've got something to put on the front of my application," he says. "It's like: 'Yeah, I got a 2,200. I've obviously got potential.'"