Math Problem Solving Team

Department Lounge

20 Oct 2005, 6:30–8:00

This week we'll look at some problems from the Putnam Competition. We'll look them over especially for strategies and heuristics that might help in their solutions. With a little luck and work we may be able make progress on a couple of them.

Anyone interested in mathematics is welcome to attend!

About the William Lowell Putnam Competition from The Mathematical Association of America's web page at `http://www.maa.org/awards/putnam.html`

The William Lowell Putnam Mathematical Competition is an annual contest for college students established in 1938 in memory of its namesake. Cash prizes for the top five teams in recent years ranged from 25, 000*to*5,000. Recent cash prizes for the top five individuals have been $2,500 each. Below the individual winners for each year are listed in alphabetical order. The Elizabeth Lowell Putnam Prize was established in 1992 to be "awarded periodically to a woman whose performance on the Competition has been deemed particularly meritorious". Recent winners of the Elizabeth Lowell Putnam prize have received $1,000. Over the years many of the winners of the Putnam competition have become distinguished mathematicians. A number of them have received the Fields Medal and several have won the Nobel Prize in Physics.

A–1 problems from the Putnam Competition, 1995–2004

1995. Let S be a set of real numbers which is closed under multiplication (that is, if a and b are in S, then so is ab). Let T and U be disjoint subsets of S whose union is S. Given that the product of any *three* (not necessarily distinct) elements of T is in T and that the product of any three elements of U is in U, show that at least one of the two subsets T, U is closed under multiplication.

1996. Find the least number A such that for any two squares of combined area 1, a rectangle of area A exists such that the two squares can be packed in the rectangle (without interior overlap). You may assume that the sides of the squares are parallel to the sides of the rectangle.

1997. A rectangle, $HOMF$, has sides $HO = 11$ and $OM = 5$. A triangle ABC has H as the intersection of the altitudes, O the center of the circumscribed circle, M the midpoint of BC, and F the foot of the altitude from A. What is the length of BC?

1998. A right circular cone has base of radius 1 and height 3. A cube is inscribed in the cone so that one face of the cube is contained in the base of the cone. What is the side-length of the cube?

1999. Find polynomials $f(x)$,$g(x)$, and $h(x)$, if they exist, such that for all x,

$$|f(x)| - |g(x)| + h(x) = \begin{cases} -1 & \text{if } x < -1 \\ 3x + 2 & \text{if } -1 \leq x \leq 0 \\ -2x + 2 & \text{if } x > 0. \end{cases}$$

2000. Let A be a positive real number. What are the possible values of $\sum_{j=0}^{\infty} x_j^2$, given that $x_0, x_1, \ldots$ are positive numbers for which $\sum_{j=0}^{\infty} x_j = A$?

2001. Consider a set S and a binary operation $*$, i.e., for each $a, b \in S$, $a * b \in S$. Assume $(a * b) * a = b$ for all $a, b \in S$. Prove that $a * (b * a) = b$ for all $a, b \in S$.

2002. Let k be a fixed positive integer. The n-th derivative of $\dfrac{1}{x^k - 1}$ has the form $\dfrac{P_n(x)}{(x^k - 1)^{n+1}}$ where $P_n(x)$ is a polynomial. Find $P_n(1)$.

2003. Let n be a fixed positive integer. How many ways are there to write n as a sum of positive integers, $n = a_1 + a_2 + \cdots + a_k$, with k an arbitrary positive integer and $a_1 \leq a_2 \leq \cdots \leq a_k \leq a_1 + 1$? For example, with $n = 4$ there are four ways: 4, 2+2, 1+1+2, 1+1+1+1.

2004. Basketball star Shanille O'Keal's team statistician keeps track of the number, $S(N)$, of successful free throws she has made in her first N attempts of the season. Early in the season, $S(N)$ was less than 80% of N, but by the end of the season, $S(N)$ was more than 80% of N. Was there necessarily a moment in between when $S(N)$ was exactly 80% of N?