

Robert Earle, host of popular TV quiz show ‘General Electric College Bowl,’ dies at 93

By [Matt Schudel](#)

June 8 at 7:06 PM

Robert Earle, the articulate and fast-talking host of one of television’s most challenging and popular quiz shows of the 1960s, “General Electric College Bowl,” died June 5 at a hospice facility in Ithaca, N.Y. He was 93.

The cause was cancer, said his son-in-law, Dave Maley.

“College Bowl” began on radio in the 1950s, then moved to television in 1959, as a clean-cut alternative to a game-show scandal exposed that year, when telegenic scholar [Charles Van Doren](#), who died in April, was revealed to have been given answers when he appeared on the show “[Twenty One](#).”

On “College Bowl,” two teams of four college students answered questions on science, history, philosophy, music, literature and other subjects. It combined elements of a team sport, high-speed oral examination and a football game.

Each contest began and ended with a whistle. The theme music resembled a fight song, and the break in the middle of the program was called halftime.

“Live from New York City,” an announcer intoned, “the intercollegiate battle of brains.”

Mr. Earle took over the show in 1962, when the original host, Allen Ludden, left to launch a new game show, “Password.” At the time, Mr. Earle, a onetime broadcaster and college professor, was working in public relations for GE’s corporate office.

For his audition, he taped an episode of “College Bowl,” then spliced in footage of himself as the host, reciting all of Ludden’s lines in exact time, as if he were interacting with the two panels.

He won the job and was the show’s host from 1962 until it left the air in 1970. “College Bowl” won an Emmy Award for best quiz show in 1963 and, at its peak, was seen by as many as 20 million viewers a week.

The game moved so quickly, with such demanding questions, that it makes modern-day “Jeopardy!” look like a leisurely game of checkers on the village square.

Colleges from all over the country were represented on the show, often taking shape through months of intramural competitions. A college could win five games in a row before it was declared an undefeated “College Bowl” champion. When Bowdoin College in Maine won five matches in 1964, it received so many applications that the admissions office ran out of forms.

Before the questions began on “College Bowl,” Mr. Earle spoke to the students, asking about their academic majors and long-term plans. He offered earnest advice to high school students, urging them to visit campuses: “Do some homework before you go. Study the catalogues. Jot down any questions you may want to ask. . . . Tell them a little about yourself, but keep it brief.”

Robert Earle was born Jan. 5, 1926, in Baldwin, N.Y. His father sold linoleum, and his mother was a homemaker.

After serving in the Navy in the Pacific theater during World War II, Mr. Earle attended Utica College, then a division of Syracuse University, in Upstate New York. He received a bachelor’s degree in English in 1951.

In college, he began working in radio and later in television. At a station in Utica, he mentored a young [Dick Clark](#), later the host of “American Bandstand.”

From 1953 to 1959, Mr. Earle chaired the television and radio department at Ithaca College, before joining GE.

After “College Bowl,” Mr. Earle did voice-over work for industrial films and commercials, including national campaigns for the Mercury Cougar and Liberty Mutual Insurance. He was vice president of marketing for a bank in Ithaca from 1971 to 1982.

Survivors include his wife of 71 years, the former Marion Hanna of Ithaca; four children, Mary Maley and R. Brian Earle, both of Ithaca, Mark Earle of Orlando and Thomas Earle of Ossining, N.Y.; 10 grandchildren; and five great-grandchildren.

It became apparent on “College Bowl” that public universities and small, little-known colleges often fared as well as more illustrious schools. Women’s colleges also did well, including one of the shows most dramatic contests, on [March 6, 1966](#), when Agnes Scott College in Decatur, Ga., challenged the defending champion, Princeton University.

A short film about Agnes Scott was narrated by one of the team’s members, Karen Gearreald, one of the college’s first blind students.

“I have very vivid memories of it,” Gearreald said Saturday in an interview. “Mr. Earle was not permitted to fraternize with the teams, but he was very warm and very gracious to all of us. He was the ideal quizmaster.”

With four women from Agnes Scott matched against four men from then-all-male Princeton, the game remained close throughout.

The Agnes Scott students correctly hummed the themes of five works of classical music, then Princeton answered a question on geology.

Agnes Scott guessed on “What European monarch set a record by reigning 72 years?” (It was Louis XIV, not Queen Victoria.)

“Here’s another toss-up,” Mr. Earle said. “Lavoisier laid the basis for the formulation for the law of the conservation of matter. For 10 points, who is said to have formulated the law of mass and energy?”

Agnes Scott rang in first, with the right answer: Einstein.

Then came the bonus question: “Bucephalus and Roan Barbary were steeds. For 20 points, what were Balmung and Durendal?”

“Swords,” Gearreald said, just as the final whistle blew.

“Yes,” Mr. Earle said. “Belonging to Siegfried and Roland. That’s it! Time’s up. The game is over.”

The Agnes Scott students began to hug one another when they realized they had toppled mighty Princeton, 220-215.

“Teams, what can I say?” Mr. Earle said. “Certainly one of the most exciting contests we’ve ever had here.”

A 2018 Slate article called the game “one of the biggest upsets in quiz history.”

Gearreald, who received a doctorate in English from Harvard and a law degree from Duke University and later worked in law, education and music, said Saturday that she could not see the clock ticking away the final seconds of the game.

“If I had known how much time there was left,” she said, “I would have been too nervous to answer.”

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Matt Schudel has been an obituary writer at The Washington Post since 2004. He previously worked for publications in Washington, New York, North Carolina and Florida. Follow 
