

Jacob Virgin is on the short list for academic greatness.

The Union City High School senior has put himself in the category of distinguished students across the nation, named today as a National Merit Scholar semifinalist.

Virgin is believed to be the first UCHS student to achieve that elite status in more than 20 years. Four Tornado graduates earned “commended” status since 1997, that designation essentially an honorable mention standing in the superlative category.

More than 1.6 million students across the country took the PSAT/NWSQT (Preliminary, Scholastic Aptitude Test/National Merit Scholar Qualifying Test). Virgin’s score was in the top 1 percent of that group.

The roughly 16,000 semifinalists will find out in February if they are finalists for the honor and significant scholarship money. Merit Scholar designees are selected on the basis of their skills, accomplishments and potential for success in rigorous college studies.

“It’s really a great honor. I’m happy,” the humble Virgin said. “I think it’s finally starting to sink in.

“When they called me to the office (to inform me), I couldn’t think of anything I’d done that they’d want me to come here for. I was a little bit in shock because it had been so long since I took the test.

“I really have Mrs. (Martha) Townes to thank. I originally didn’t sign up to take the test, but she encouraged me and thought it was a good idea.”

Townes, in her third year as guidance counselor at Union City High School, said the Merit Scholar test is different from the ACT. It is made up mostly of math and reading with some science applications. It is recommended at UCHS for those who take Honors and AP (Advanced Placement) classes.

“We usually do well on the ACT, but this is a different type exam,” Townes said. “We offer it to all juniors, and you can only take it once. We had about 20 people to take it last fall.

“Students are required to take the SAT afterward, basically to verify their score on the PSAT.”

Virgin has essentially aced each of those standardized tests.

He made 34 on the ACT (36 is the highest that can be achieved) and scored 1,520 (out of 1,600) on the SAT.

The son of Jenny Virgin and Chris Virgin, Jacob -- who is involved in Masquerade Theatre, the school’s Drama Club and is a volunteer at the library -- is essentially continuing a family tradition. His mother was a National Merit Scholar semifinalist at her high school in Texas.

“She was thrilled for me,” Jacob smiled. “And no, we haven’t had the conversation yet about who was smarter.”

Union City High School Principal Jacob Cross had glowing words for Virgin and his accomplishment.

“Jacob is the kind of student who comes to school every day and takes care of business. He takes every course seriously and strives for excellence in all he does,” the UC administrator said.

“When you combine that work ethic and his natural God-given intelligence, great accomplishments like this are bound to happen.”

Virgin is understandably hoping to be named one of 1,500 finalists for the NMSP – not only for the scholarship money, but also because he believes colleges put a lot of stock and give special status to Merit Scholar finalists.

He has yet to decide on his college of choice, but said MIT “is my dream school.” He also mentioned SCAD (Savannah College of Art and Design) and said he’d likely choose something in the computer science field.

“I’m probably going to start putting together a small list of schools and will start applying this weekend,” Virgin stated.

It’s likely – given his lofty academic standing – admission will be just a formality.