

Series 3, Episode 1

Let the Games Begin

It all comes down to this weekend.

Dearth Hannan pulls her ancient gray Toyota Corona into a parking space, switches off the engine and sits for a moment, breathing in the warm Kentucky air through her open window. It is the Friday morning before the first Saturday of May, the eve of the most important tournament on the high school debate circuit. Or at least Dearth considers it the most important. This afternoon, registration will open downtown at the Codswallop Hyatt, and continue until the last entrant has arrived late tonight. Tomorrow morning at seven thirty, the first pairings will emanate from the Horus-Pecan Building near the center of the State University, Codswallop, Ky., where Dearth is now gathering her backpack from the seat next to her. Debaters, coaches, assistant coaches, judges, scouts, camp followers and whatever other hoi polloi is around, will then scurry off to their rounds. Throughout Saturday and Sunday, the preliminary rounds will take place at HPB and various other buildings throughout the campus. On Monday, anyone left in the tournament will return to the Hyatt for the celebratory Brunch of the Battlers, followed by the elimination rounds at the hotel. And thus will conclude the 45th running of the annual Combat of Conquerors.

Dearth opens her door, steps out of the car and adjusts her pack over her shoulders, then begins walking to her office. Twenty-six years old, brown-skinned with long black flyaway hair and as bony as her nickname—Death—she is a veteran of uncountable culture wars, including those she has fought as the director of what some people think is the most important tournament on the high school debate circuit. Some people, on the other hand, consider it the source of all debate evil, the ultimate bully pulpit for competition at any cost over education, the root cause of the impending demise of high school forensics any day now. At this point in the season, Dearth doesn't give a damn one way or the other. All she cares about is getting through it in one piece.

The odds, if the past is any indication, are against it.

H.E. Horus-Pecan was the latest in a long line of Horus-Pecans, all of Codswallop, Kentucky. The first to settle in the area, Horace Horus-Pecan, was held by family tradition to have named the town, a dubious claim according to other accounts, which award that honor to Ezekiel Tospots, also an early settler and the patriarch

of a different local clan. Like most Kentuckians of their time, Horus-Pecan and Tospots were drawn by the rich farming land of the region. Both built up great agricultural dynasties lasting to the present day, and one cannot go far in Codswallop and not see a building or a statue or a plaque with either the name Horus-Pecan or Tospots proudly etched thereon. While maintaining the land-based sources of their fortunes, each family eventually spread out into other endeavors. The Tospots entered politics, while the Horus-Pecans favored the area of education. It was Magnus Philanderer Horus-Pecan who founded Codswallop College in 1823; H.E. Horus-Pecan's grandfather, Otis Redding Horus-Pecan, was the college's chancellor when it merged into the state university system roughly a hundred years later. H.E.'s father, Gladhand Horus-Pecan, was for his entire career a Professor of English literature at Codswallop, specializing in the works of Trollope because, as he often remarked, he liked to say the word Trollope. H.E. Horus-Pecan, the Horus-Pecan of interest to us, followed in his father's footsteps, teaching at Codswallop, but in his case as a Professor of Philosophy, the only job anyone who has ever majored in philosophy is prepared for that doesn't involve food preparation. As a professor, he earned a reasonable salary; as the present scion of the Horus-Pecan clan, his holdings in farmland and horse breeding earned him an unreasonable fortune. But his attentions went to his public teaching, and not to his private wealth, which was managed for him by the Horus-Pecan Holding Company. H.E. Horus-Pecan was a teacher, born and bred, and it was as a teacher that he made his real mark in the world.

For much of his career at Codswallop, H.E. coached the college's debate team. He had early on taken to the activity, and over the decades brought the team to national prominence. Part of their success was the community outreach of developing a team for the local high school, an endeavor that was also successful. H.E. did not coach that high school team, but his Codswallopians worked with those students and their young but eager social studies teaching advisor, and before long they were nearly as successful on the high school circuit as Codswallop was on the college circuit. Which is why, one night in October, H.E. Horus-Pecan was in a New York City hotel room on the Saturday night of that year's edition of the Manhattan Lodestone (a magnet school) Original Vaganza ("All other Vaganzas are extra") with Mr. Lo Pat, the coach of Lodestone, and Dan Ryan, the coach of the New York suburban Toulouse-Lautrec High School. They were all younger men back then. Additionally, Mr. Lo Pat was not of the dead persuasion at that time; his demise occurred many years later, following a bizarre murderous attack in Manhattan that ended his career and launched that of his immediate successor at Lodestone, Halefoil Cumcut. In that hotel room, on that night, Mr. Lo Pat and his colleagues were very much alive. They were also, coincidentally, very much drunk.

"Kentucky sour mash from the Horus-Pecan distillery," H.E. said, holding up the bottle and refilling everyone's glass. "We make only five or six cases of this a year, and not every year. We all it Old Gomorrah, Private Reserve. Hardly ever let a bottle out of sight of a family member. The best bourbon in the state, the best whiskey on the planet."

“You’re not a Scotch man, H.E.?” Dan Ryan asked.

“There’s Scots in our family tree,” H.E. replied. “But when they came over to settle in the colonies they found that it was time to move on. Legend has it that our first distillers thought that they were making the old uisge beatha, the water of life. But they experimented with corn, tasted the results, and never looked back.”

Mr. Lo Pat made a “Thhhppp thhhppp thhhppp thhhppp thhhppp” sound as he reverently began sipping down his refilled glass. “You need to come to the Lodestone tournament more often, H.E. With your Old Gomorrah, of course.”

H.E. smiled. “Of course, old friend.”

The hotel room was more than just Manhattan’s typical bed squeezed into the tightest space possible, with a television and a minibar. When H.E. traveled, he did not charge his expenses to the team, which meant that, drawing on his own funds, he could live in comfort. The suite was small by Kentucky standards but palatial by New York standards. The three men were in the sitting room, Mr. Lo Pat in his wheelchair, Dan Ryan stretched out on the couch, and H.E. settling himself down again in the wing chair next to the writing desk. It had been a long day for all of them, and it was approaching midnight. They’d be back tomorrow morning at the tournament as if tonight never happened. And it would probably be years before any of them realized that tonight they were going to make history.

“I’ve been thinkin’ about a new tournament,” H.E. began. His voice was rich and full of the accents of the South.

“You’re not satisfied with the Manhattan Lodestone as it is?” Mr. Lo Pat asked.

“No, no, it’s not that, Pat old boy. A new tournament altogether. A tournament at the end of the year for the best debaters in the country.” He called them “debate-uhs.”

“We already have the CFL and the NFL,” Dan Ryan said. “They seem to do the job all right.”

H.E. shook his head. “Not really,” he said. “How do people qualify for the CFL?”

“It depends on the diocese.”

“Exactly. In some dioceses, they have lots of teams and they all square off and have at each other, and the last six standing qualify. But in other dioceses, they can’t even find the six to fill the slate, so anyone who wants to go, gets to go. Which means that when you get to the national tournament, it’s a hodgepodge. And the judging! The tough debate dioceses send seasoned veterans, while the lightweights send... lightweights!”

“There’s not much you can do about that,” Mr. Lo Pat said. “Everything that happens at the CFL is decreed by the Pope. He’s infallible. You can’t argue with it. NFL is more fair.”

“More fair, yes,” H.E. agreed, “but objectively good? Not so. You have one tournament at which to qualify, so the best team or two that particular day gets to go to nationals. But what about a district where there’s five or ten teams of high

quality? Only two get to go because of geographic limits. And again, the judging pool is soft, and when debaters finally get to nationals they debate down to the least common judging denominator. We work with our kids for years, send them to camp, feed them the best ideas and the most progressive styles, but when it comes to national championships, they forget all that because they can't win with it." He paused and took a sip of Old Gomorrah. "What I see is a tournament that only the best people get to go to, the ones who have won over all the competition not just one day or one weekend but for an entire year. The bests of the best. The absolute conquerors. We have a tournament just for them."

"How do you make this happen?" Mr. Lo Pat asked.

H.E. leaned forward. "Simple," he said. "You rank every tournament by some objective criteria. Number of contestants. The number of states represented at the tournament. The number of rounds. The quality of the judging. Whatever. And then you set it up so that debaters have to win or at least make it into some level of elimination round at a number of these tournaments. Doing well at those tournaments earns them entry into this tournament."

"Sort of like a tournament of champions," Dan Ryan mused.

H.E. shook his head. "I don't like the sound of that," he said. "Makes me think of a box of Wheaties. No, I was thinking of calling it the Combat of Conquerors."

There was silence in the room.

"The Combat of Conquerors," H.E. repeated softly after a few minutes. "We'd limit it to seventy or so, whatever the right number is to get a perfect break of sixteen after six rounds. Or maybe seven rounds."

"The sweet sixteen," Dan Ryan said, still musing.

H.E. shook his head again. "Sounds like a party for a high school girl mallrat. I was thinking of calling them the Octa Giants."

There was another silence in the room.

"We make this the tournament that all the best debaters in the country spend their entire careers trying to qualify for. We do it at Codswallop because the college is neutral, and we do it in the spring, before people get all worked up about the NFL and the CFL. It'll be small and elite, but it will be the best tournament anyone ever goes to."

"You could guarantee enough space at the college?" Mr. Lo Pat asked.

"Say you have seventy-two teams. That's thirty-six rooms. We've got that much space in the Horus-Pecan building alone, and then some."

"You don't think it would grow bigger than that?"

"How could it? We only have the one kind of debate"—this was back when all high school debate was two-person team debate—"and it wouldn't be conquerors if we let just anybody in."

“Would people go?” Dan Ryan asked. “It would be travel, to a new tournament, off the beaten path for most people.”

“Would you go?” H.E. asked. “If your teams qualified?”

“Absolutely.”

“And you, Patty?”

“Absolutely. And we would definitely qualify.”

“Then you would be setting the stage,” H.E. said. “You’d be the example. If Lodestone’s teams were there and Toulouse’s teams, everybody else would want to debate them. In two or three years, the tournament would be established, as long as we can get a few other schools like yours to give it a try.”

“Sounds good,” Dan Ryan said, draining his glass.

“I agree,” Mr. Lo Pat said, draining off his glass.

H.E. Horus-Pecan stood and gave them both refills. “It’s worth giving it a try,” he said. “We can even start this year.”

The other two men nodded. And so was born the Combat of Conquerors.

The success of the Combat of Conquerors was beyond anyone’s imagination. For a certain population of high school debaters, the COC became their apotheosis. H.E. H-P, or Heppy as he eventually became known in the debate community, ruled this seemingly magic realm for decades, until inevitably age led him to pass it down to a worthy successor. In fact, over the years, he had passed it down to so many worthy successors that it became seen as something of the bottle imp of forensics, a granter of one’s heart’s desire that, before long, one is desperate—and hard-put—to be rid of. As for Dearth Hannan, she had started as a local high school debater and then argued for four years for good old SUCKy, finally taking over as team coach when she entered graduate school, working on her MA in English lit. Coaching qualified as a teaching assistantship, so it was a natural decision for her. With the responsibility for the Codswallopian team, although she had not been aware of this at the time, came the responsibility for the COC. Dearth was up to the task, however, on both counts, or so she had thought originally. The college team was now more winning-er than ever, and the tournament was more—

Well, you’ll have to find that out by reading on a little further.

Will Dearth Hannan make it alive out of this year’s COC?

Is the COC the apotheosis of high school debate?

Is the Pope still infallible?

Are there any bottles of Old Gomorrah left?

Does anyone know who killed Mr. Lo Pat?

Can anyone explain Donald Trump?

If you know anything about Nostrum, you know that you are unlikely to find the answers to any of these questions in our next episode: "Who Walloped the Cods, or, Do People Graduate from Codswallop with a Baccala-laureate?"