

Episode 7

What It Don't Get, I Can't Use

Money talks. It also debates.

The average per-high-school-pupil spending in the United States is \$10,700. The range is from the high of \$19,818 in NY to the low of \$6,555 in Utah. Obviously, high school students in New York are going to way more debates than their Utahan cousins.

Doing the math is simple enough. There are 20 tournaments or so where a student can obtain a qualification to the COC at either the octafinals or quarterfinals level, i.e., 16 or 8 students respectively out of, usually, a hundred or so. That's a pretty good set of odds for a strong circuit debater. Some of these tournaments are on the same weekends, but most clench tightly to a weekend of their own. So realistically, there are about 15 major tournaments a bid-seeking student can attend.

And bid-seeking students will attend them. All of them.

Assume that 5 of these tournaments are within driving distance. That means that the only expense is ground travel, lodging, registration fees, and coaching/judging expenses. (We won't add in meals because the average bid-seeking student eats every day regardless of whether in attendance at a tournament or at home binge-watching *Breaking Bad*. In debate terms, that expense is "non-unique.") \$500 is a reasonable estimate of these expenses per student. Times 5 tournaments equals \$2500 per annum. The other 10 tournaments are that same \$500 plus airfare, both for the student and the coach/judge. It is generous, and easier mathematically, to peg this total for a travel tournament as \$1000 a pop. Times 10 equals \$10,000, plus the \$2500 for the other five non-travel tournaments, equals \$12,500. A student in Utah, if he or she is not a debater, can get his or her entire annual educational expenses twice over at that price. New Yorkers, on the other hand, theoretically still have a few dollars left over to employ a couple of educators back at the schools for the teaching of non-debate subjects, but most debaters on the bid hunt, since they are travelling every weekend, don't really place much truck in basic non-debate subjects. They don't have time for them.

In other words, circuit debate is not cheap. But let's not forget that no school is filled with circuit debaters. Most of the students at a given school are not spending \$12,500 on one particular extracurricular activity. Even at elite schools, it is only the most elite of the elite who are clocking up frequent flyer miles on Delta every weekend. And we're not even thinking about the annual expenses circuit debaters usually rack up attending debate summer camps, easily another \$1000 a week per person.

This is not to say that there is not reasonably priced debate available in America, no doubt even in tight-fisted Utah. There is plenty of debate, both in urban and rural areas, where no one travels very far, where no one gives up every weekend, where most people if they've even heard of the COC couldn't give the proverbial rodent's rear end about it. In fact, the majority of the people who call themselves debaters never really give much

thought to the COC, or any so-called national event, other than the Catholic Forensic League or the Non-Catholic Forensic League finals at the end of the year. Qualifying for those finals does not cost an arm and a leg, or usually much more than the price of a venti latte at Starbucks. That is the real world that most debaters live in.

But at that most elite level of the elite, the world comprises weekly flights to national circuit tournaments, mostly competing against other of the most elite who have also been clocking up frequent flyer miles and serious credit card bills. School is that thing they catch up on during the breaks from debating.

The curious thing is, people who live in this national circuit world are as ignorant of the other world as that other world is of them. Or if they are aware of it at all, it is as some second-rate, illegitimate, bogus, low-rent version of what they and their elite compatriots are doing. The non-circuit people are the rubes, the fly-overs, the great unwashed. To circuit people, investing vast amounts of money every year to participate on the circuit, where the elite meet to compete, only the circuit is “real” debate. Of course, if one spends that much money and energy doing something, one tends to identify it as special enough to be worth the doing. Without a solid reality distortion field, circuit debate wouldn’t exist.

Do we need to point out that this high-rent elite activity spends the vast majority of its time and energy arguing social equality? It is the notorious “one percent” applied to the debate world, and even though that world is probably far more diverse than the folks one usually thinks of as One Percenters, and even though some of them come from quantifiably, provably impoverished areas, the money has been spent and it has to have come from somewhere, and more to the point, it could have gone somewhere else.

Like Utah, maybe. They could use a few extra bucks.

Winnable Rugrot looks out his second story window at the Delaware River. The usual tugs and tankers and unappealing gray floating industrial boxes are navigating up and down in the bright noon light, but the effect is more of a foggy morning than midday. It is a colorless expanse, until one looks up and sees the downtown Philadelphia skyline, brightly reflecting the southern sun off its mix of old and new buildings. An amateur student of architecture, Rugrot prefers the classic old lines of the city, ranging from the Federalist to the Beaux Arts, to its later additions, although from here, one mostly sees the less interesting of both. Then again, Camden, New Jersey, is where Rugrot is taking in this view of his urban neighbor, and Camden isn’t exactly anything other than, well, Camden. But at least the rents are affordable. Which is why Rugrot is outside Philadelphia looking in, rather than the other way around. Then again, who would want a beautiful view of downtown Camden?

Winnable Rugrot turns away from his window and looks back at his computer. He has just booted it up, and on the startup screen is the logo for his company, the Brotherly Love School for Highly Intelligent Teenagers. The image is of an armored unicorn in flight, wielding a flaming sword in its right fore hoof. Rugrot occasionally thinks he

should have held out for the centaur or the chimera, because the sword always looks a little wrong to him because, well, a horse can't hold a sword, much less a flaming sword, in its hoof. But it does have a certain appropriate fierceness, poised over the initials of the company, BLSHIT. That, too, looks a little wrong, as to be perfectly correct it should be BLSfHIT, but that looks even worse, and as with the unicorn, Rugrot settled for what he settled for, and there you are. Not to mention that the company is in Camden, New Jersey, and should really really be the Camden School for Highly Intelligent Teenagers, or CSfHIT, or if you must, CSHIT. But who would send their kid to Camden if they could send them to Philadelphia? It is the tiniest of deceptions, like forgetting that the New York Giants toss the old pigskin over in New Jersey. No one is harmed, nor, for that matter, deceived. It's common practice. Everybody does it. Not even the tiniest white lie, merely a generalization. You can't get any closer to Philadelphia than Camden, after all. And you can behold all of Philadelphia from practically any Camden vantage point. The distinction is a whole lot of pish tosh.

And Winnable Rugrot is a master of pish tosh.

He brings up his browser and plugs in a location. Stats McGillicuddy's debate tip sheet, "The Conqueror," appears on the screen. Rugrot quickly determines that it hasn't been updated since yesterday, so he brings up a different location, firmguns.com, and clicks on to the COC page. This too is unchanged from yesterday. Unless there's some late scratches or judge drops, not much will happen until the pairings are released tomorrow morning, but Rugrot is feeling edgy as the tournament approaches. After all, he plans to send it into total chaos at some point, and with that impending fustercluck looming in front of him, of course he's feeling a little edgy. Anyone would be.

He is tempted to check on the firmguns hack, but decides against it. It is ready to go whenever he wants. Staring at it now won't make it any more potent when the time comes. Besides, the hack isn't the only arrow in his quiver.

He clicks over to the Free Willy site. Staring back at him with a charming half smile is Willy Hubjut himself. Not that many people—not even Willy and Mama Hubjut—are aware of the main source of the finances that have supported their movement the last few months. Rugrot scrolls down and reads the latest entries on the open page. The Right to Debate people are lining up in droves, and more than a few of them are heading for Codswallop on their own dimes. These are the people like Willy who have no support for debate at their school, although unlike Willy, who has a team that has dumped him for cause, these folks usually have no team, but see this as no obstacle to their participating at tournaments, especially circuit tournaments. After all, The Article proved that debate would get them into a better college. Therefore they have to debate. A simple thing like not having a team or a coach should not be a hindrance. But the tournaments have not felt likewise. In fact, they responded exactly the opposite: no team, no entrance. The basic problem, from the tournaments' point of view, is liability. The minute a student enters, say, the Pup campus for the Pup tournament, the Pup by default takes on liability for that student, unless the student's school has already accepted liability. If the student has no school? Well, all liability descends on the Pup. Which the Pup, and every other tournament with a brain in its head, has said no to. The whole Tab Ularasa business of virtually blackballing young Mr. Hubjut is the perfect demonstration of this.

Which is where BLSHIT comes in. Because BLSHIT is not an actual school, but instead it is an afterschool tutoring program. It costs a lot of money to attend, and it promises to improve their attendees' chances at getting into a better college. Much as participation in debate is supposed to do, according to The Article. Never one to let an opportunity go by, a couple of years ago Rugrot added debate to his afterschool curriculum, and promised to train his students for the national debate circuit. Except, because BLSHIT is not really a high school, BLSHIT has found itself progressively excluded from more and more tournaments, up to and including the COC. If you can't attend a tournament as an official entry from a bona fide high school, the COC won't let you in.

Rugrot has fought against this with everything he has. He has written letters and emails and essays and shown up hither and yon, telling everyone that he works with bona fide high schools to start up their debate programs. He has been energetic in writing those letters and emails and essays, but not so energetic in working with any bona fide high schools to start up their debate programs. After all, there's only so many hours in the day.

In addition to the BLSHIT afterschool program, BLSHIT aggressively promotes summer camps for all sorts of debaters, as well as offering the general student math courses and English courses and the like, all at great cost to the consumer. Winnable Rugrot, the sole owner of the Brotherly Love School for Highly Intelligent Teenagers, has a substantial stake in getting his program accepted by the debate community. But at the point where the COC comes down against him, the match was, theoretically, game, set and lost.

But if Rugrot cannot have his students exercise their God-given Right to Debate, he can at least exact his revenge. He can finance the Free Willy webpage, and send a dozen or so picketers to Codswallop to protest the COC's unfairness. He can have his lawyer surreptitiously work with Mama Hubjut for their little surprise package later in the day. And if worse comes to worse, he can launch the firmguns hack and destroy the whole thing with just a couple of keystrokes.

If there is essential evil in high school forensics, its name is Winnable Rugrot.

Welcome to the Bahamas. On a really hot day.

Is everything else in Utah as bargain-basement as its state-funded education?

Do circuit debaters really travel around the country every weekend, when they could be home binge-watching "Breaking Bad"?

Is BLSHIT, when spoken aloud, really a string of initials?

Is Winnable Rugrot really the essential evil of high school forensics?

Isn't the person who comes up with those crappy PF resolutions the really really essentially evil person in high school forensics?

We expect nothing less than to learn none of the above in our next episode: "We may never have agreed with Scalia but we loved his brains and his sense of humor, or, The President wants to appoint a Supreme Court Justice—can you show me where it says that's okay in the Constitution????????!!!!!"