



## Series 2

### Episode 22

#### **Buglaroni Takes Command!**

Hamlet P. Buglaroni's next stop on his road to the mastery of running the two tournaments that were his new responsibility was, as advised by Tarnish Jutmoll, the firmguns.com website.

It was not a pretty sight. Or, for that matter, a pretty site. (We like to throw in things that only the readers of this series will understand, as compared to that great unwashed of listeners, to whom we say, go find your own jokes).

On the left side of the page there was a listing of various leagues around the country. Buglaroni wasn't quite sure which league Andrew Johnson was a member of. The Garden State League? The High School League? The Lollipop Guild? There were state leagues, county leagues, high school leagues, college leagues. The back end of forensics was, if this list were any indication, the Wild West on steroids.

Great.

In the middle of the page there was a welcome message. This message explained that the website ran on servers located in someplace called the Forbin Project, and utilized software created by the eponymous Dude Firmguns, but it gave no direct contact information about said dude, nor, for that matter, about the Forbin Project. If you had questions about the system, you were directed to write to [QuestionsAboutTheSystem@firmguns.com](mailto:QuestionsAboutTheSystem@firmguns.com) and to wait patiently for an answer while engaged in quiet prayer. Lots of quiet prayer.

On the right side of the page there was a list of upcoming tournaments, including, in addition to the Pup-a-Roni, the two tournaments at Andy J. Clicking these links brought Buglaroni to information pages for the Reconstruction Memorial and the Little Johnson, with the contact listed as, of course, Renate Screeds. Without logging in, he was told, that was as far as he was going to get.

Finally, at the very top of the page, were links to sign in or register. He would have simply done this, but he was afraid that creating a new account for Andy J would conflict with Renate Screeds's existing account, and that he would get nowhere with it, and perhaps even screw things up beyond recovery.

With that in mind, there wasn't much else he could do, so he settled on an email, which he addressed to the listed address, [QuestionsAboutTheSystem@firmguns.com](mailto:QuestionsAboutTheSystem@firmguns.com). He wrote from his school .edu account, to keep it official.

"Hey Dude [he wrote]. My name is Hamlet P. Buglaroni, the new coach from Andrew Johnson High School, where Renate Screeds used to coach during her lifetime, which this no longer is. I need to be able to access the Andrew Johnson Tournaments as tournament director, and I understand you can help me with this. Thank you."

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Here was the problem.

At some point in the run-up to a big tournament, in this case the Pup-a-Roni, Dude Firmguns went into isolation. For twenty-four hours, he did not eat or drink (although he no longer capped his fast with a high colonic as he had done when he had first begun directing tournaments, as he had found that process a bit of an oxymoron under the circumstances). During this retreat, he did not go anywhere near his computer, his television, his radio, or any other electronic device. He switched off his iPhone. He did not allow himself to read. And most importantly, he swore off women for the duration. He was, for all intents and purposes, a personally designated cloistered cleric obeying numerous vows of self-denial.

The trigger for Dude's isolation day was the total shutting down of the upcoming tournament's registration. At this point, all the shenanigans were dealt with, and no one could touch the data, except for Dude himself. His normal plan was to emerge from his retreat totally purged of worldly detritus and ready to address the weekend and the hundreds of people running off in every direction and the thousands of things that could and would go wrong,

as they always did at any tournament. It was only as an ascetic that he could do this successfully.

Dude had turned himself off from all society, and the Pup from all outside tampering, little more than an hour before Buglaroni had sent his message. Which meant that our struggling new coach would have to wait at least twenty-three hours for Dude Firmguns to rise from the ashes, but that would be at the point when Dude was firmly gunning the Pup to the exclusion of all else. Whether he had even a moment to spare for a tournament that wasn't happening this weekend, that he wasn't running himself, remained to be seen.

If only Renate Screeds had passed from this mortal coil a couple of days earlier, or a couple of days later, none of this would have been a problem.

What had she been thinking, to die so inconveniently?

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A substitute teacher's life is not to be envied. Most of the time, a sub takes over a class for a day or two, and is seen by the students as the human embodiment of a free period. A sub who has control of his or her temporary class is merely one who keeps the twenty or thirty adolescents in the room from going on a rampage throughout the school, eating the paint off the walls, terrorizing the custodians with ribald tales from Rabelais, and generally demonstrating life on earth after the Rapture. If the students stay in their room and make less noise than a 747 taking off at JFK, the sub is doing what is considered a good job.

Occasionally subs come into the room with lesson plans from the person they are replacing. This is tantamount to walking into a cobra farm with an out-of-tune flute: the snakes will rise from their baskets, but they won't like what they hear. The substitute snake-charmer's life, in those situations, isn't worth the rupees it is printed on.

Buglaroni, it seemed, would be taking over all of Renate Screeds's classes for the rest of the year, so in that situation he wasn't much different from any new teacher facing a new class at the beginning of a semester. It was still early in the year, and Renate had been, by all accounts, perceived of as average in the classroom, so there wasn't much love lost or gained on that account. Buglaroni would have his chance to prove himself, or not, over the next few weeks, entirely on his own merits. And if he succeeded, it could mean tenure, and bread on the table for Haagen and the twins, Ben and Jerry. If not...

On the other hand, while Renate Screeds was accepted if not worshiped as a teacher, she was indeed a religious figure in the debate universe. A bona fide debate god (in the non-sexist universe of debate, to call her a debate goddess would call down on you all manner of feminist dogma you just wouldn't want to have called down upon you), Renate had done wonders with team after team for decade after decade. Even as she had gotten roughly as old as the pyramids, she maintained her edge. As often as not, she hired assistant coaches ad hoc to work on case positions and the like, as the fashions of debate changed from year to year like couturiers' hemlines. She was wise both to her strengths and her weaknesses, and she didn't dilute the former or ignore the latter, and her students respected her for that.

And now Hamlet P. Buglaroni, Jr., a marginal debater in his own time at best, was taking over her debate team. As a substitute taking over her classes, his students were going to give him a chance, maybe a week or two. As a substitute taking over her debate team, they were also going to give him a chance: about one minute, give or take thirty seconds or so. After that, it was every Buglaroni for himself.

"Hi," Buglaroni said, facing the assembled team in the debate room after school. There were forty kids squeezed in. In keeping with the dress code of Andrew Johnson, which was nonexistent, for the most part they looked like reject backup dancers from a hip hop video. Those were the snappy, friendly ones, the LDers. The rest—the politicians—looked like permanent tenants on death row, right down to the prison tats on their overdeveloped biceps.

No one responded to his greeting.

Buglaroni stared at them for a minute. Which meant that his one minute grace period was up before he said another word.

"I'm going to be taking over the team," Buglaroni finally said, attempting a smile. He wrote his name on the blackboard. Or, actually, he wrote "Mr. Buglaroni." Which was maybe his father's name or his late grandfather's name, but not Buglaroni's name. He thought he'd take it for a test drive, however, and see how it handled the highway.

It didn't.

"Before we get started," he went on, "I have some questions about the tournaments next week."

"What about the tournament *this* week?" a girl in the front asked. There were five or six pins stuck into her nose that hurt Buglaroni just to look at them.

"This week?" he echoed.

“This week,” she repeated. “The Pup. What about the Pup?”

“What about it?” Buglaroni asked.

“Are we all set? Are we all registered?”

Buglaroni looked around the room. He couldn't imagine that all forty of them were registered, but without access to firmguns.com, he had no way of knowing for sure.

“I'll find out,” he said.

“It's Wednesday,” some leather-clad guy in the back said. “The tournament is Friday.”

“I said I'll find out,” Buglaroni repeated.

“Where are we staying?”

“Who are our judges?”

They were getting ugly. Truthfully, the first thing Buglaroni had thought when he saw them was that they were the ugliest group of teenagers he had ever seen, but that was before they began to snarl at him with their teeth bared. Now they made ugly look like a Disney Princess.

“Yo!” one of them called out. “What about the Palin disad? We need the A/T on that.”

Buglaroni had no trouble imaging that the question was about Sarah Palin. He vaguely remembered that in debate a disad was short for disadvantage, and therefore an argument containing disadvantages, and like any red-blooded American Democrat, he could think of maybe a hundred disadvantages to Sarah Palin coming and going. But what the hell was an A/T?

“I'll find out about that, too” he said, having no idea how.

“It's Wednesday,” his questioner repeated. “The tournament is Friday.”

“Right, right. Now, about the tournaments here, next week...”

The students continued to stare at him. Could they possibly be getting even uglier?

“I need to know which parents are doing what. You know, housing and food and judges' lounge. That sort of thing.”

Blank stares.

Buglaroni pulled a clipboard out of his backpack. “If you could just write your names on here, and your emails, and what your parents are doing at the tournament, and their emails...” He handed the clipboard to the student closest to him.

It worked! Their animus toward him notwithstanding, and regardless of their instinctive distrust of Buglaroni as a replacement for Renate Screeds, when someone passed around a clipboard and asked them for their

information, they were incapable of not complying. It was one of the few unshakeables in the unwritten code of the high school student. There was no reason for it, but it was true, and it had been one of the only thing Buglaroni had learned so far in his position as a substitute. Give a class a clipboard to fill out, and fill it out they will. If Pavlov's dogs had been high school students, instead of ringing a bell the great doctor would have simply asked them to fill out their names on the clipboard sheet. It was guaranteed, they would have started salivating.

But home truths about adolescents notwithstanding, one thing was clear. Not only did Buglaroni need to get information on the tournaments next week, he needed to get information on the tournament *this* week. And Dude Firmguns seemed to be the only one who could provide it.

For Hamlet P. Buglaroni, Jr., waiting for Dude Firmguns to end his retreat, it was going to be a long, long bunch of hours.

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***Will Dude Firmguns arise from his enforced period of asceticism full of enough beans to run the Pup-a-Roni?***

***Will Dude answer Buglaroni's email begging for help?***

***Will the Andrew Johnson team cut Hamlet P. Buglaroni into little pieces and eat him on toast?***

***Does the name Pavlov ring a bell?***

***Would you mind filling out your name and address on this sheet and then pass it around?***

**Dog only knows, as the dyslexic said about our next episode, "Isn't that Quasimodo banging his nose against the carillon, or, the name isn't familiar but the face rings a bell."**