



Series 2

Episode 8: In which many more characters are introduced, without, in any way, shape or form, thickening the plot. *Formidable!*

Part 1 — Punx Phil Ex

Some forensics programs have long histories. Traditions. Legacies. And some do not.

Some programs aren't *Programs* at all.

Some people in forensics aren't connected to anyone. Not to debaters, not to judges, not to coaches. They're on their own. They appear where they wish to appear.

And it doesn't stop them for a second.

It would be impossible to chronicle all of the mavericks in the universe of high school forensics. There are national mavericks, regional mavericks, local mavericks—enough mavericks to create a herd of nothing but.

But knowledge of a few mavericks will give you a sense of the vast majority of them.

For instance...

Punxsutawney Phillips Exeter Academy is a good place to start.

There has always been an LD debater from Punx Phil Ex, as it is commonly known. One LD debater. Just one. It's not that the academy couldn't field a larger team if it wanted to, but it simply doesn't want to. Nor,

for that matter, does the debate community at large want them to. Punxsutawney, Pennsylvania, is not in the middle of nowhere, but it is definitely near the turnoff. If Punxsutawney seriously got into the activity, the next thing you know, they would want to have their own tournament, and people all over the northeast would be forced to bundle themselves up and head for deepest, darkest Pennsylvania, probably in the middle of winter during groundhog grilling season.

The prospects are frightening.

So the one debater from Punx Phil Ex goes to where the debate is rather than having the debate come to him, mostly throughout the northeast, but also to various major high-visibility national tournaments in Texas and California and Chicago. The Punx Phil Ex debater does this every week, week in and week out, month in and month out, throughout the debate season, which lasts the thirteen months from September to next October (and, often, back again). When does the Punx Phil Ex debater go to school? No one knows. The school doesn't seem to care if its one debater is never around, and apparently neither does its one debater. This, in fact, is the long history, the tradition, the legacy of Punxsutawney Phillips Exeter Academy, what you might call a "don't ask, don't tell" debate team. It's worked for almost twenty years.

The present-day Punx Phil Ex debater is a short, thin, serious looking senior named Ramchen Chowder. Last year, he managed to qualify for the Tournament of Champions, where he had a winning record, but not winning enough to make it to elimination rounds. His goal this year as a senior is to make it into those elims. The twenty or thirty tournaments he will enter along the way are merely a means to that end.

It is not easy for a debater to roam the world alone, but it is even less easy for a debater to coach himself. As a maverick debater, Ramchen solved this problem by hiring a maverick debate coach. Boner Corkzit was a junior at UPenn, or would have been a junior at UPenn if he hadn't decided to take a year off and travel the world. That was three years ago, and he had made it as far as Cincinnati before changing his mind and deciding to make a few dollars judging debate rounds while tinkering with this idea he had for a website that would make him a billionaire. Unfortunately, there were still some glitches in the software design, but he had been drawn back into high

school debate, a universe in which he himself had been a minor star. He liked bringing in new ideas to the activity, and was presently pushing Ramchen to work some neo-Italian post-culinary philosophy into his cases, an idea that Ramchen was beginning to find seductive. The capozzelli critique was especially intriguing.

Boner coached Ramchen mostly online, although they did regularly meet up at tournaments. This coming weekend, in fact, they were both heading down to Texas for the seasonal kickoff for the debate season at Claudio Monteverdi High School, not far from Dallas. This was where Ramchen hoped to achieve his first qualification of the year for the TOC. He would pay out of his parents' deep pockets all of Boner's expenses, plus a judging fee, plus a coaching fee. Which, as far as Boner was concerned, beat real work hands down.

Maybe Boner would head back to Philadelphia and school at the beginning of next semester. Maybe not. If Ramchen was on fire this season, it might mean that Boner had a chance to coach a TOC champion. Which was what he had always wanted to be himself. Not that he was living his old adolescent dream through Ramchen Chowder's real adolescent life, but... It would still be something.

They were quite a team, Ramchen Chowder and Boner Corkzit. They would be turning up everywhere this coming season. As a matter of fact, if you look behind you, they might be standing right there already.

Mavericks are like that. They come, they go, they are the will o' the wisps of forensics.

Part 2 — From...somewhere

Raga Dikeskroner came from...somewhere. And he, too, was certifiably a maverick.

Among other certifications.

This is how he answered a posting on Facebook. The posting was on a group page created by Dude Firmguns, dean of the northeast college circuit. The page was created as a clearing house for college types looking to make a few bucks over a weekend (not unlike the original motivating force behind Boner Corkzit's commitment to the activity, described above).The posting

read: “Wanted, judges for all events for the Pup-A-Roni. Please detail forensics experience.”

Raga Dikeskroner responded thus.

Hi. I've been judging LD on the chitlin' circuit for the last couple of years, before taking some time off for some personal business. Now I'm back and looking for maybe a coach position somewhere. Meanwhile, I would love to start judging again. I was a TOC debater twice back in high school.

This would look to be the perfect job applicant for the position of high school debate judge for the weekend. And perhaps even more.

But looks can be deceiving.

Dude Firmguns was among those deceived.

“Happy to hire you,” he responded to Dikeskroner via Facebook.

This would probably—no, definitely—not turn out well.

Part 3 — The man who loved women

Dude Firmguns was aptly named.

He was a dude.

And his guns were firm.

By day, Firmguns was a claims adjuster for a Hartford, Connecticut, insurance company. He would don his fedora and his trench coat, light a cigarette, and head in his Oldsmobile to the scene of what his company thought might be a crime.

It never was.

Walter Neff was never working a double indemnity scam with a peroxide blonde named Phyllis Dietrichson. No landlord ever found a torch for hire to set off an inferno in his downtown tenement building, killing eight homeless people in the process. No one had partially severed the brake lining of someone's Porsche so that it would fail at the top of the cliff, causing the car to career into oblivion. No homicides were staged to look like suicides, and no suicides were staged to look like homicides.

He should be so lucky.

Dude Firmguns mostly interviewed the surviving spouses of those who had passed away from the most mundane of natural causes. Usually they were in their eighth decade of life and were expecting little more from

their miserable term life insurance than enough to cover burial expenses. Which, if they were lucky, was what they got.

That was Dude Firmguns by day. In a job where being a dude with firm guns hardly mattered in the least. In fact, he was so bored by the proceedings that he had spent way too many hours at the office drawing on his computer science college major experience at Upper Schmegeggie Community to create a software package he called firmguns dot com, which would run a tournament from inception to the award ceremony. Registration, check-in, tabbing—firmguns.com did it all.

The reason Dude had dedicated the time to this project was that he had himself come up in forensics: in high school he had been a national-level extemper. If it was in the news, he could talk about it for seven minutes, with facts, figures, citations and analysis that would blow the judges away. You name the tournament, he had won it.

It had been for him—almost—glory days.

And he had retained his interest in the activity, which, combined with his skills as a manager and a programmer, originally had put him in demand as a tab room director, from which he branched out into a traveling tab room monster. He specialized in college tournaments. High schools didn't need him: they had access to their own usual suspects in the tabbing universe, the Tarnish Jutmolls of life, in other words. But colleges, with their ever-changing populations of debate students, in one year and graduated the next, had no institutional memory, so Firmguns provided that memory for them. A college with a forensics tournament, especially a tournament covering every aspect of speech and debate, a dozen different activities lasting at least three days, spread out across a campus five miles long, with almost but not quite enough rooms and no idea how to pull it off? Check in with firmguns.com. The website, and its creator, were the answer to your prayers.

Firmguns enjoyed the hunt of these college tournaments. He never complained about them, no matter how much their titularly in charge students screwed things up. In fact, Firmguns savored their screwups because that meant more need for him to unscrew them.

So every few weekends, when there was a hiatus between tournaments run by high schools, there were high school tournaments run by colleges, with Dude Firmguns firmly in control of them.

Which still doesn't explain either his Duality, or the firmness of his...guns. In which lay his true glory.

Think about it. A man like Firmguns, with a long, tedious day job plus a complex avocation of monitoring registration software and running college debate tournaments, wasn't likely to have what one might call a settled home life for the simple reason that, when he was home, which was fairly rare, he was up to his eyeballs in software maintenance.

Which meant, for the Duder, a need to express himself in yet another arena aside from settling claims on fender benders and making sure that there were enough judges to cover the varsity LD division. And that, in a word, was the highly competitive field of romance. In other words, women. Lots of them. All the time. Lined up and waiting to taxi on his runway like a herd of 747s trying to land at O'Hare at rush hour on a Saturday night.

Dude Firmguns was addicted to women.

The Dude from *The Big Lebowski*? Small potatoes. Tiny tubers. *Les petites frites*.

Dude Firmguns was the real thing. He had more notches on wherever someone like him puts notches than Asia has grains of rice.

When it came to women—big women, small women, round women, lean women, light women, dark women, English-speaking women, esperanto-speaking women, old women, young women (although high school graduates only need apply—let us not intimate that Dude was in any way unethical in his predilections: catholic, yes, blind, no)—the Dude was there. And for reasons unfathomable, when it came to the Dude, the women were there too.

Why was that?

Sure, he had the fedora and the trench coat and the cigarette and the Oldsmobile, but even in his elevator shoes he only stood five foot two.

But the women didn't seem to care. The Dude exuded what can only be called animal magnetism. If they could bottle it, few men alive wouldn't want to buy a few liters of it. And Dude Firmguns had it in spades.

And also, of course, there was the whole firm guns thing. But this is a family high school soap opera, so you'll have to imagine them for yourself.

Will Punx Phil Ex RC take tin at the Monteverdi?

Will Boner Corkzit coach a national champion?

Was Raga Dikeskroner really on the Chitlin' Circuit?

Is there really a Chitlin' Circuit?

Why do women follow Dude Firmguns around the way a cat follows the milkman?

You want the truth? You can't handle the truth, so we won't put any of it in our next episode: "Tiger Woods is back, so lock up your daughters, or, Augusta? I used to date a girl called Augusta once. But don't tell the wife."