



Episode 19

It's a Debate World After All

There are many kinds of debate, progressing in a conceptual continuum from the local and unique to an accepted universal paradigm that does nonetheless comprise some separate geographic patterns. (While Speechies and Politicians may shake their heads in wonder over the previous sentence, the statement would actually be intelligible to a serious Lincoln Douglas debater, whose reading may include everyone from Plato to Derrida, a mélange of philosophies and styles that would turn the average brain into a tuna casserole. But intelligible or not, the statement is true, and we'll have to leave the parentheses to learn why.)

At the starting level of the continuum, the local and unique, we get the greatest variety. What we're talking about here is the maverick high school teacher who has no access to a bona fide forensics program, but nonetheless has an idea of what one should be, and acts on that idea. Where this idea might come from will vary with the experience of the teacher; maybe the teacher debated twenty years ago during his or her own high school career, and has a dim recollection of what that was, and wishes to replay it in the present circumstance. Perhaps the teacher participated in the major leagues, or even then was on the opposite end of the spectrum in yet another localized view of forensics, but in either case, the passage of time has done its work on the teacher's memory, and it is a shadow of that original experience that informs the present one, resulting in a simulacrum of debate. This simulacrum, however real or imagined, is, as we said, local. The teacher offers the odd unit in debating during the course of a year-long social studies class, or an English honors class, or a Criminal Justice class (some students do learn criminal justice in high school, but whether as instruction or a preventative is hard to tell). The distant memory of debating is described by the teacher to the students, who in turn translate that information into the aforementioned simulacrum. Maybe they use evidence, maybe they use philosophy, maybe it's one-on-one or two-person teams, or maybe it's a squamish game with 43 players on a side and rules that include the shouting of dirty limericks. In any case, this debating is so local that it never seeps through the bricks of its building's ivy-covered walls. No team from one school competes with another school, so there is no way to measure the meaning of the event. Except for one. In the students that compete, there is the memory of having done it, which may twenty years hence come to the fore when one of them is now a teacher, recapitulating the process, creating a simulacrum of a simulacrum, which in itself may have been a simulacrum of a simulacrum.

You get the picture.

Which brings us to level two. There are areas around the country where small localities have created intramural debating leagues. Schools in these localities, usually no more than half an hour or an hour away from one another, meet regularly for a round or two after classes or on a Saturday, and have at it in what would be recognizable as debate to the objective observer armed only with a copy of the rules of the National Forensic League. These teams will often argue the national topics, and perhaps the students are connected by modem to central debate sources, so they're not half bad. Sort of. Occasionally one of these teams will try their hand at a major debate not too far away, and the results are usually catastrophic. While the students in these parochial groups are every bit as smart and capable as their better-traveled counterparts who debate regularly at national-level tournaments, they lack the toughening that comes from steady forging in the crucible of high level competition. As a result, they get their heads handed to them on silver platters, and they go back to their own little universes sadder but wiser with tales to tell of the big-city types who lurk in the forensic bushes and eat country mice for breakfast in their first affirmative rebuttals.

And maybe some day twenty years from now they'll go into the simulacrum business.

Which brings us, at last, to the mainstream. But there are still divisions, and they must be addressed.

There are a certain number of major tournaments in various defined localities throughout the country during the year, at which most of the schools with heavily competitive teams in that area regularly compete: the Northeast, Texas, California, Florida, the Midwest, etc. Sometimes the locality can be defined as a state, sometimes it's broader. Within that locality, there tends to be a general style of debating: this area's LD is more practical while that area's is more philosophical, that area's policy is faster than the speed of sound while this area's is faster than the speed of light, etc., etc. The tournament schedule is positively grueling, filling every single weekend. Transportation is usually by bus, and the quality of the bus depends on the school's financial arrangements. Nighten Day School, for instance, is strictly school buses, the big yellow elephants designed by Torquemada for maximum torture. You can't sit facing forward, you can't sit facing sideways, in a miracle of uncontrolled climate it's simultaneously too hot and too cold, and the only show of life from the bus driver is the calling out of regular grunts that are usually interpreted as meaning, "Sit down and shut up." But at least these buses are free to the students. Other schools, like Farnsworth Catholic or Manhattan Lodestone in New York City, rent coach buses. These are fairly comfortable transportation, at least insofar as when you're finished sitting in them you don't need the aid of a chiropractor in making your exit. They have on-board bathrooms (usually little more than a mobile hole positioned over the highway below) and non-working VCRs (although there have been instances of VCRs working both wings of a round trap, these occurrences are rare enough to have been collected by both Ripley's and the Guinness people). But while these coach

buses are head and shoulders above their big yellow counterparts, there is a catch - the students have to pay for them. Rich students, like the Farnsworthians, pay little attention to the thirty-five to fifty dollar per head fee; for students of wealth ranging anywhere from Micawber to Gates, such as the Manhattan Lodestone kids, it's a different story, and while they may have the brains to move mountains, they may not have the moolah. But nonetheless they participate as steadily as they can, regardless of who pays. And the end result is a solid team.

Imagine it. A big school, like Farnsworth or Lodestone, where everyone is smart to begin with because they had to demonstrate a mastery of calculus at age four in order to get on the path to lead them to such a high school, and where debating is considered not only cool but cool with attitude. They sign up for the team by the dozens, and the coaches get to winnow down from the smartest, most self-driven students in America, every one of which believes that having debate on their resumes will make the difference between Ivy League and Bush League in a couple of years. They get straight As all week, and they leave themselves plenty of time to polish expert cases, and they're fast thinkers, and they debate week after week after week.

Of course they're good. (Although they may have some limitations. Which we'll get to eventually; we don't have to cover everything in one episode, now, do we?) The point is, there are schools like this everywhere. Sometimes they're magnet schools that attract the smartest kids, sometimes they're regular schools big enough to have a lot of smart kids combined with killer coaching, and sometimes they're fairly small schools with little or no coaching but in a specific locality, usually upper middle class, where every parent has been browbeating their kids to be superachievers for so long that it's become bred in the bone, and a small killer team develops on the sheer willpower of its students, fostered by the genetic predisposition to overweening ambition.

And every week they're out there, at all the local tournaments. And they're all tough competitors, and the tournaments are tough. And out of this crucible of debate come the Chip Dwindles and Had Fleeces and Tara Petskins of the world.

So the question becomes – and I know you're asking yourself this: if, in fact, the tougher competitors all seem to gravitate to the same debates, is there any other measure, perhaps something more objective than the perception of tough competition, to set apart these tournaments as more difficult than other tournaments?

And the answer is, of course. Enter the annual Combat of Conquerors, inevitably referred to as the COC. The COC is a tournament held at the end of each school year. An advisory board to the COC analyzes every tournament around the country by such criteria as the number of participants and the number of states from which these participants come, and jumbles it all together and comes up with the COC limbs: at certain points in a number of tournaments, perhaps at quarterfinals or semifinals, or at very big tournaments even at octofinals, COC limbs are granted. If you make it that far, you get a limb. If you earn enough limbs to stand on – usually two but some years three and some years only one if you have a ghost

limb or a wooden limb – then you are allowed to participate at the Combat of Conquerors. And not only do you get to participate, but you get to pay more to do so than any other tournament for the entire year!

What an honor. If you can afford it.

So the objective measure of a tournament's worth is the offering of qualifying COC limbs, and the participants at those tournaments are mostly the types of schools mentioned above. But let us not forget the mavericks, which would normally be represented by the Chesney Nutmilks of the world, if his mother wasn't in fact trying to establish a full-blown forensics team of her own. The Chesneys are the lone representatives of schools with no team other than the lone Chesneys, or at least no apparent teams. They are Lincoln-Douglas debaters who show up week after week, usually with a long-suffering parent whose lack of debate knowledge is in direct proportion to their child's success. While the debaters do pretty well, the parents spend their weekends judging other students, usually with bizarre results, embittering a whole new generation of teenagers to what can only be perceived as unadulterated grown-up obtuseness. Competitors grow to like the Chesneys while dreading the Chesney peres or meres; but let us not forget that our Chesney is not in this situation at all.

At least not yet.

So the regular, steady, week-after-week diet of one high school tournament after the other is the regular life of the debater, both LD and Policy. Speechies are somewhat less of the same; not that they don't work hard (and we'll see plenty of them firsthand before the Nostrum season is over), but it would be exaggeration to say that they work as hard as debaters. They simply don't have as many venues to demonstrate their skills. There are more high school tournaments for debate than for speech, even though there are more speechies than debaters. The reason for this may be as simple as the fact that most speechies do the same piece week after week, and how often can you perform the same thing over and over and over and over and over and over and over and over – you get the point. How does a Gielgud or an Burton do Hamlet on the stage every night over and over and over and over and over and over and over and over? Either you understand speechies or you don't. But we'll get to them, so bear with us.

But tournament life is not entirely high schools. There are a number of colleges – usually with their own college-level debate teams, for which they need to drum up funding – that also hold high school level tournaments. A few of them are like magnets, attracting students from around the country. There are only a handful of them, but major forensic players (by which is meant coaches whose entire lives revolve around the activity) would rather cut off their mothers' ears than miss one of these college tournaments. Some of these tournaments are imperative merely by virtue of their sheer existence; for example, Miami Messerschmitt, which for many is the inaugural Fall event (and which for Northeasterners, the Andrew Johnson was mere warm-up), or King Ivy in February. Some have traditions, like Southern Rebellion in January or the Combat of Conquerors in April. The college tournaments are all different, but they share one essential quality: for the students,

they are a total zoo.

The Miami Messerschmitt Mess o' Forensics is the first of these tournaments.

Don't say we didn't warn you.

Is this aimless bloviating going to go on forever, or will we eventually get back to some good old-fashioned story-telling?

For that matter, have any of the other 18 installments had anything to do with good old-fashioned story-telling?

How long do you have to spend in Baltimore before you get tired of the crab imagery?

Are you proud of yourself for demonstrating a herd mentality and going to see *Pirates of the Caribbean* even though you think Johnny Depp ruined *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory*?

Mother of Mercy, is this the end of Rico?

If you have to ask, then you're only deluding yourself that there will even be a next installment entitled: "Heroin Chic: Did it really come and go, and who do I thank for allowing me to miss it completely?"