



## Episode 32

### Break, Rattle and Roll

There are two halves to every major tournament. The first half comprises the preliminary rounds, in which anyone who can come up with the registration fee participates -- you pay your money and you argue your cases. The second half comprises the break or elimination rounds, where only the imminent trophy-winners participate. Needless to say, the most anxiously awaited moment of any tournament is when the breakers are announced. Not that there isn't excitement of one sort or another at other moments, but this is the one where the excitement affects just about everybody.

And we definitely mean everybody.

Just about.

There are numerous fictions that fly through the air during the first half of a tournament, many of them seemingly indicative of given debater's not doing quite as well as his opponent. "You definitely won that round," one of the two LD debaters will almost inevitably announce as two opponents who have just faced each other walk back together to the cafeteria or the auditorium or wherever the staging area is. They almost fall over each other to be the first to say it, although neither seldom truly believes it. It is as if uttering the words is a talisman against its being true. In most speech events, where six or so participants are in the room together as each does his or her piece, the group version of this talisman is to point out how well whomever you're talking to did compared to how poorly you did. "You were really on." "That was really great." "I've never seen you do it that well." These are balanced against, "I just couldn't get it together." "I really blew that." "I, like, lost it completely in the middle." Of course, in the mind of the speaker, the situation is usually not quite as cut and dry, and usually it points in the other direction. As for extemporaneous speakers, who don't get to see their opponents (except in final rounds in the most major tournaments), they have nothing to go on but their own performance, so all they can say is

how the topics they picked sucked and how they couldn't really find any good research on it in their little tubs, which is nodded to and seconded by any extemp listener, who doesn't believe it for a minute and wishes he or she had said it first. The only exception to these polite fictions is in policy rounds, where the winner is usually disclosed immediately, followed by an oral critique. In these cases, everyone knows the results, and everyone knows the reasons the judge is offering for those results. So the consolation of telling your opponent "Good round" after the fact is laced with the precise knowledge by all just how good that round really was. There's no longer any need for the talisman of protection against a negative judgment, so a meaningless compliment usually never takes on any darker undercurrents.

So as the preliminary rounds progress, everyone -- with the exception of politicians -- congratulates everybody else on how well they're doing and bemoans how poorly they themselves are doing while believing exactly the opposite. There are no atheists in foxholes, and there are no losers in forensics tournaments before the breaks are announced. Until that moment of truth, everyone, no matter how lousy they might be, no matter how realistic it would be for them to expect that they've done no better this time than they usually do, no matter how clear it is that the competition is fierce and that even some top-drawer people aren't going to make it because there's only so many trophy slots, no matter what the reality, everyone -- EVERYONE -- harbors a hope, however tiny, that they will break. If they usually break week after week, they will expect to do so again, even though even the best don't make it on some days. If they occasionally break, then they're sure that today they'll do it again. And if they never break, they still think that maybe this time it will be different.

For all of them, the dream will end when the break rounds are announced. All of them, that is, except for the ones who actually do break, and it turns out not to have been a dream after all.

At the Miami Messerschmitt Mess O' Forensics, all the groups are still in their separate venues: Speech in the Claudius building, Policy in Marcus Aurelius, LD in Tiberius. We'll do them in that order, starting with Speech, and working our way through to LD.

In the Claudius building, there is not a unified group waiting as one to hear the results. Far from it; at the risk of laying out false stereotypes, it is probably nonetheless safe to say that, at the very least, the different speech activities stick together. The more theatrical Duo teams and the Interpreters are cut, to an extent, from the same cloth. They may do different things and they may do things differently, but they are as dissimilar and yet as similar as Laurence Olivier and Harpo Marx: they still all perform, and they still all market a performer's skills. They have something important in common, that marks them in this activity. And so they are congregated together, trying to appear brave, talking too loud, acting too carefree, hoping, praying.

It is the Duo postings that are the first to arrive, printed in big letters on poster boards brought into the room rolled up and carefully kept hidden until a Messerschmitt student climbs a ladder and tapes the board to the wall.

Sixteen octofinalists.

William Hand and David Brillig are among them. They high-five each other.

Yes!

The buzzing from these results has scarcely ceased before the Dramatic Interp results similarly are snuck into the room and banged onto the wall.

Sixteen octofinalists.

Cartier Diamond is not among them.

No!

"What?" she mutters under her breath. This cannot be. Cartier Diamond is a winner. She has broken at every tournament she entered last year. How can she not break again here?

Southern judges. It must be southern judges, she consoles herself. Molasses mouths. They hate New Yorkers because New Yorkers have what they'll never have, and they live where they'll never live, and they've forgotten more than these stupid southerners will ever learn from the sisters they'll marry before they turn thirteen. Brain-damaged, banjo-dueling troglodytes!

Cartier, in a word, is pissed. To her, breaking is an entitlement that she has been denied. She storms off, not even congratulating her teammates William and David. The hell with that. She has got to have a cigarette.

As she exits the hall, the excitement settles down momentarily, only to bubble up again as the Humorous Interp results are posted.

Sixteen octofinalists.

Nighten Day's Kumar Juvaswami, his fedora pulled down low across his forehead, is not among them. He smiles, and pats the student standing next to him, one who did break, on the back, and congratulates him.

And another one bites the dust.

Five minutes pass before the last posting, this time of the Extemp breakers.

Sixteen octofinalists.

Nighten Day's Mark and Noah are not among them. They exchange a glance that mixes surprise with anger. One of them, maybe. But both? How could that be?

Throughout the room, some neckties are coming off while other neckties are being straightened, some taut nerves are loosening into an undesired relaxation while others are stretching even tighter across their owners' intestines, some bodies are sliding to the ground while others are puffing themselves into the last competitive stances. The trophy winners have been announced. From this point on, it's all position. The best in each category. Or at least the best for a few hours, on one day, in one place.

And for Nighten Day, only one speech team is left in the competition. But the Northeast is not otherwise entirely out of the running. In the middle of the room, the toweringly tall figure of Alida Devans stands surrounded by her Brooklyn Behemoth team. Over half of them are still in the tournament. When the break rounds are announced at any tournament, it is inevitable that half of Brooklyn Behemoth is still in it. By the end of the day, more than a few are usually still hanging in through the final rounds. And at least one first place trophy usually finds its way to Behemoth's wall of tin in their Prospect Park home.

But there is no smile on Alida Devans's face now as she addresses her team. For she is not congratulating the breakers on breaking; to the contrary, she is upbraiding the non-breakers for not breaking. Some coaches are like that. And Alida Devans more than any. It is not about learning, or even about competing.

For Alida Devans, it is all about winning.

But we are not ready to concentrate much on Ms. Devans at this point. Because the Messerschmitt is winding down, and we have other fish to fry. Like Tara Petskin, in the Marcus Aurelius building.

Among the policemen, the break is to octofinalists, in one fell swoop. Like the Speechies, the policemen are all gathered in one area, in this case outside of the building's computer lab, waiting for the results. The policemen are the least formal forensicians, and only half wear suits or ties or sports jackets or dresses. Hair is longer, and occasionally blue or orange or green. The ubiquitous evidence tubs are covered with bumper stickers displaying -- as well as prepared statements can -- the personalities of their owners. There are Republicans, Democrats, Libertarians, Phish phollowers, book banners, free lovers, feminists, gay rightists, WDW 25th Anniversary celebraters, Freehold Volunteer Firefighters -- you name it, they're all here, standing around, waiting, even though most of them already know their records and the likelihood of their breaking. There's still always that chance...

Bill O'Connor, the male half of Veil of Ignorance's A team, is sitting on a two-high pile of evidence tubs, staring out into space. Next to him on the floor is Veil's B team, similarly sitting on their tubs. And it is as if they are surrounded by a protective force field, because beyond them is a two yard buffer of air separating them from everyone else. The Veils have not sought isolation; it simply happened. No one has said a word to them about their coach and the events of the night before, and they have not said a word to anyone. Yet they might as well have been jabbering about it nonstop for the effect it has had on the room.

Tara Petskin has separated herself both from her teammates and her competition. She too is surrounded by an isolation zone, but hers is in a corner of the room. She is sitting on the floor, a biology text book on her lap and a pen in her hand. The page of the book has not been turned in half an hour. The pen has been flipping around her fingers nonstop. Thwipp! Thwipp! Thwipp!

Tara is grieving. She doesn't know it; all she feels is confusion. But it is grief, as sure as if there has been a death in her family. And its first stage is the inability to comprehend its reality. Denial will be around to visit shortly.

As far as the tournament goes, she knows that she and Bill are undefeated. They will go on and probably win a couple more, and maybe even go all the way to finals.

But Seth won't be here to see it. To cheer them on. To congratulate them. To punch through their arguments after each round to make them even better.

For Tara, it isn't policy that rules. It is Seth B. Obomash that rules.

And Seth has abdicated.

The pen she is twirling goes flying out of her fingers, landing five feet away from her under a radiator.

The final insult.

In the Tiberius building, the LD postings are at this moment being nailed to the wall. Double-octos, which means thirty-two breakers.

Jasmine Maru is on the list. So is Griot Goldbaum.

Had Fleece is not on the list.

When Jasmine sees her name, she knows that she beat Had in the fifth round, that Mrs. Nutmilk picked her up. She is only half-surprised. She is still mad at Had, and madder still at Cartier, except what more could she expect of Cartier than lies and evil and total disconcert for everyone but herself. But Had.... Jasmine could still like Had, if--

No. That's not true, she realizes. She does like Had, no matter what's happened between them, or between Had and Cartier. Jasmine looks around the room in time to see his back retreating out the door, and wonders if she'll ever be able to tell him how she feels.

As for the rest of the Northeast, LD is even worse than Speech, where at least the Behemoths are still in the running. Aside from Jasmine and Griot, only Farnsworth's Chip Dwindle has made it .

A lot of traveling, a lot of intestinal boogie, a lot of mental wear and tear on the students and coaches, and a marginal showing at best.

What is it about, anyhow? The learning? The competing? Or winning? Or something else altogether?

That is the question, isn't it.

And our answer is no better than anybody else's. But we do know one thing. It may not be about winning, but it's a hell of a lot better to win than to lose, and there's no two ways about that.

Education, schmeducation.

Most people are in it to take tin.

**Will Jasmine, Griot, Tara and Bill, William and David, Ziegfried and Roy, and all of Brooklyn Behemoth make it into finals?**

**Is it better to win than to lose, as long as you learn something along the way?**

**Will John Bolton be doing tab at Emory now that the UN job is off the table?**

**Does everybody else spend down time at tournaments trying to find the best homemade ice cream?**

**Are the novices that show up at the first meetings throughout the entire continental U.S. really as clueless as they look?**

**The answers to all these and more will not be revealed in our next episode: "Guinea Pigs: Pets or Meat?"**