

Episode 50

By George, I Think She's Got It

After a while, you start getting the hang of it. Or at least you feel like you're starting to get the hang of it.

Amnea Nutmilk has not judged many rounds in her short career coaching Bisonette Technical. In the beginning, she felt completely inadequate; at Messerschmitt, she kept expecting someone to come out of the tab room and put a hand on her shoulder in the middle of a round and whisper softly, "Come with me please," at which point she would be stripped of her judging credentials, such as they were, and be barred for all time from the realms of forensics.

But that was last week. And this is now. It is amazing how easily amateurs of any stripe can be accepted as judges.

It gives one pause...

The award ceremony at an NDL tournament -- that is, the Northeastern Debate League -- isn't much of a ceremony. Toulouse coach and tabmeister Dan Ryan has a handful of bargain-basement trophies, not all of which match, and none of which are engraved with any legends. He never knows how many people will show up at a given NDL tournament until they actually sign up, so he doesn't know in advance how many trophies to provide. Half the members of the NDL haven't paid their dues since 1976 anyhow, so they're entirely shoestring affairs, and everyone tacitly agrees to ignore the makeshift patches on the tournament's knees and elbows. The winners never seem to notice, because taking tin is taking tin no matter how you slice it, and unless your tin collection already reaches to the roof, in which case you are unlikely to be participating in an NDL in the first place, you never give it a second thought.

What happens at the end of an NDL is that Dan Ryan collects his mismatched trophies and hauls them off into the cafeteria of the venue at hand, and he ahems loudly a few times, and the card games come to a halt, and everybody looks over at him as he quickly and occasionally inaudibly runs through the winners. The key prizes, above and beyond the trophies, are the qualifications to compete in the New York State Forensic League Final Tournament at the end of the school year. It takes two qualifications to get there, and the math that determines how many qualifiers are awarded at a given tournament is beyond the reaches of the normal human cognitive process. No

two people do that math the same way, but fortunately no one at the New York State Forensic League can do it either, so as long as a coach claims his debaters are qualified, the league will believe the claim.

Debate, after all, is an honorable business.

So now Dan Ryan is standing at one end of the cafeteria, and everyone is watching him, expectant, hopeful. Not only is he awarding debate prizes, but since this is also a CFL speech tournament, there will be speech prizes as well. Ryan will have no part of these: Ryan is a debate man through and through. There is no speech at Toulouse, and there never will be, as long as Ryan is in charge.

At the Bisonette table, Amnea sits with her team, patiently applauding as Ryan commences with the one area of forensics that he considers the only area -- policy. The thing about policy awards is that not only do they acknowledge the team winners, but they also give speaker awards for individual achievement. Amnea has heard a few policy debates from doorways she has passed, and if that is speaking, it is news to her. If they talked any faster, there would be sonic booms coming from the rooms. Amnea is firmly convinced that no one understands a word these people are saying, but that everyone is doing an emperor's new clothes routine, and is too pusillanimous to admit it.

Eventually Dan Ryan works his way through the policy awards, and arrives at Lincoln-Douglas. At this point, Tarnish Jutmoll steps forward to help him give out the trophies.

Tarnish Jutmoll. Amnea considers the little white-haired man with the little beard and the pleasant expression on his face. It's not as if she's attracted to him -- how could anyone be attracted to a man who looks like a snow-covered mountain goat -- but there is something about him...

You're getting old, Amnea, she chides herself. Much too old, if you're starting to be drawn to the likes of him.

But he is sort of nice, she reminds herself. Unlike any of the other adults in this godforsaken forensics universe. And despite her professional position, she is not exactly dripping with offers. People in the publishing business are either afraid of her, in awe of her, or her sworn enemies. Which doesn't leave much room for a social life.

Oh my God, she thinks. Debate has become my social life.

The realization is painful.

There are six awards in both novice and junior varsity LD, and a trophy and a state qualification to go along with each of them. And this is where Amnea Nutmilk starts feeling like she's finally

getting the hang of things. She has judged three rounds of two flights each, which is a total of twelve debaters, a reasonable percentage of the overall field. Of those twelve debaters, she awarded wins to six of them. Of those six, four were pretty good while the other two were merely not as bad as their rivals. So now she gets the fun of playing "Spot the Winner." If her winners are the same as the trophy winners, that means that she wasn't alone in her evaluation of their skills. If none of her subjective winners become objective winners, then maybe she hasn't figured it out after all.

It is the moment of truth. And for Amnea Nutmilk, the truth proves pleasing. It actually is beginning to appear as if she knows what she is doing. She is getting the hang of it.

Three of her four debaters take home trophies. Two of them in fact take first and second place in the junior varsity division, but they are of no importance to our story, at least not yet. The third debater that Amnea Nutmilk picked up takes fourth place in the novice division... and for the first time, and in only his second debate tournament, Hamlet P. Buglaroni, Jr., takes tin.

Hamlet P. Buglaroni, Jr.

Yes, that Buglaroni.

Amnea does not realize the unlikelihood of this, as Buglaroni shakes hands with his bemused-looking coach -- Jutmoll the Goatman, as Amnea now thinks of him -- and accepts his trophy. Not that Amnea is blind to the uniqueness of young Buglaroni. You do not become the editor of Metro New York and remain unaware that the youth prattling in front of you is wearing two pairs of socks, and that his shoes and his pants cuffs are not on speaking terms, and that his tie has a subtle but nonetheless recognizable Yosemite Sam pattern. But that was not the point, was it? He did debate better than his opponent, and had a very strong and persuasive case, and Amnea felt that he was rather decent overall.

Hamlet P. Buglaroni. Junior.

Who'd a' thunk it?

On the other hand, despite the personal satisfaction of picking a few winners, Amnea is disappointed that no one on her own team takes home any awards. As the names of the novice winners are called, Binko feigns disinterest, but it is clear to Amnea that he wants to win. On the other hand, Gloria Fudless seems quite disappointed, which is even more of a surprise than that she and Binko showed up at all. As for Worm Padrewski, he has kept his silence for nearly the entire day, and it is impossible for her to imagine that he was able to open his mouth even during a round.

She will find out more about that in a few minutes.

After the LD awards, it is on to the speech awards. This could take forever, especially since Amnea, since her team is a done deal, is now ready to pack everyone back onto the bus. A woman

Dan Ryan introduces as Renate Screeds from Andrew Johnson High School announces this next rather endless batch of winners. To Amnea, the skeletal Ms. Screeds looks like the fifth horseman of the Apocalypse, with a sharp voice that attacks the core of the brain like a fish-scaling knife.

The parade of Speechies is meaningless to Amnea Nutmilk, but they are nonetheless a curious crew, different from both the politicians and the LDers. Where the policy kids were heavily into baseball caps, and the LDers looked like a Washington, D.C., justice department army of little gray lawyers, the Speechies have a panache all their own. They are, as a group, the best-looking. None of them wear hats, and all of them comb their hair. Amnea can imagine almost any of them in a couple of years as habitués of the latest city clubs, or fashion editors, or waiters. The future unemployed actors of America best sums up how she sees them. She recognizes a few from the trip to the Messerschmitt, where they all got together there too at the end for a single award ceremony. Amnea has always been a theatre buff, and she begins to wonder if it might not be fun to judge speech some day.

Yeah, right. As if LD wasn't taking up enough of her time.

After what seems forever, the last award is finally awarded, and with a whimper the NDL tournament comes to an end. Chesney makes some comment to Amnea about ballots, and disappears momentarily into a crush surrounding Dan Ryan. When he reappears, he is carrying a manila folder with the word **Bisonette** printed on it in big, bold marker letters.

Chesney leads the way out to the bus, which is just a small van. The driver opens the door, and Chesney enters, followed by his mother, and then the three novices.

And then the vultures strike.

"I've got your ballots here," Chesney says, holding up the manila envelope.

It is Binko who grabs the envelope and tears it open. Inside are carbons of the ballots the judges wrote for the rounds of the Bisonette Technical team, as well as the cumulative results for all the participants. On those ballots are the reasons for the wins and the losses, while the cumulative simply shows the number.

Amnea reads the cumulative. Worm went oh-three. Binko and Gloria both went two-one.

Will wonders never cease?

"He says I dropped vegetarianism," Binko moans, reading from a yellow sheet. "I never dropped vegetarianism."

Gloria Fudless follows suit. "Look at this! The judge that dropped me wasn't even taking notes, the son of a bitch. All he says is that the affirmative was more persuasive."

And finally the deliberate throaty whine of Worm Padrewski chimes in. "I got shafted."

Chesney leans over to his mother.

"No one ever loses a debate," he says softly as the bus pulls out of the Toulouse parking lot.
"People just get shafted by the judges."

Amnea smiles. All in all, the day has not been a bad one. She is getting a feel for debate judging, and two of her newcomers came away from their maiden event with winning records.

This debate business might not be so bad after all.

Is Amnea Nutmilk turning into a real debate coach?

Is Hamlet P. Buglaroni, Jr., turning into a real debater?

Is snow-boarding turning into a real Olympic event?

Is Scooter Libby a living Teapot Dome?

You might mistakenly think the answers are in our next episode: "Saddam Hussein: Mi casa es su casa, or Better Living through Chemical Ali?"