



## Episode 54

### I'm Calm, I'm Calm, I'm Perfectly Calm

2:43 a.m.

Mr. Lo Pat's eyes slowly open to register the time on his clock radio.

2:44 a.m.

It is the hour at which the gods become mortal.

Having slept since ten o'clock, Mr. Lo Pat can at least be thankful that he has had some rest. But now he can sense the way the rest of this night will be going, and he is not pleased at the prospect. Insomnia he understands. He wrestles with it regularly, sometimes winning, sometimes losing. But the Insomnia of the Original Vaganza? That's another thing altogether.

As the Manhattan Lodestone tournament approaches, Mr. Lo Pat can see nothing but the unfolding of horrors. The fact that he has directed this tournament for over two decades means nothing. There are a thousand problems that can develop, some of them at least marginally predictable, some of them devastatingly new even to a debate god who's seen not only the annual unfolding of his own tournament but the playing out of myriad other tournaments as well. As Tolstoy might have put it, each happy tournament is more or less alike; each unhappy tournament is unhappy in its own way.

And Mr. Lo Pat does not want an unhappy tournament.

2:51 a.m.

He rolls over on his back.

The invitation went out two months ago. Each year the invitation says roughly the same thing, and in the same way. The point of an invitation is to alert schools to the date of the event, to the activities being planned, to the costs and registration deadlines, and to a tentative schedule. Since every major tournament has staked its claim on a particular weekend, it is never a surprise when a tournament will be scheduled, as much as it is an affirmation of the regularity of the forensic calendar. Mr. Lo Pat has not changed the registration costs of his tournament for a couple of years now, although he probably will do so next year. He brings in about four hundred students in one division each of Policy and LD, and he charges thirty dollars a head, plus a twenty-five dollar school registration fee. All these prices are arbitrary, and they vary from tournament to tournament. Thirty is marginally pricey for a high school event, but not unacceptable, especially when the COC Combat of Conqueror's qualification is in Octofinals. The Original Vaganza is the first major high school tournament of the year, and the second major event overall, following as it does swiftly on the heels of the Messerschmitt. Messerschmitt charges \$45 a head, making the Vaganza appear a veritable bargain.

3:02 a.m.

Registration closes Wednesday morning. Long ago Mr. Lo Pat had attempted to close registration a week earlier, but all that meant was that people kept making changes after the deadline. The coaches who book their teams' schedules are notoriously inept planners, and their teenaged charges are notoriously inept at sticking to their coaches' half-baked agendas.

3:05 a.m.

But there is a pre-registration. By now Mr. Lo Pat knows within half a dozen the numbers of participants the Vaganza will attract, and he has plenty of room for all of them in the cavernous halls of Manhattan Lodestone, so precise numbers are not a problem. But in the old days, before he mastered the planning process, a general idea of numbers was important, so he instituted the pre-registration. This was the requirement that any team planning to register give him a rough idea of the number of their entrants. In return, he would advise them of the special Vaganza LD topic exactly a month prior to the tournament. Even though he no longer needs this early information, and even though such venues as the LD listserver have rendered moot the selectiveness of the process in regard to distributing the topic, he keeps the tradition. Why? He doesn't know. Because it's a tradition. A forensic fiddler on the roof.

3:13 a.m.

He is unsure about this year's LD topic. "Resolved: that the U.S. should not restrict immigration." It is little more than a rewording of the policy topic, but the LDers will not address it as the politicians do. LD does not dig into news reports to provide evidence for its side of the arguments; instead, it looks to philosophical musings to provide underlying values for its positions. But the more Mr. Lo Pat thinks about it, the more policy this one sounds. Maybe he should have

come up with something entirely different. If it's a bad topic, it reflects badly on him. And Mr. Lo Pat does not like bad reflections.

3:21 a.m.

The whole Round Robin is controversial enough. Oh yes, he knows the problem. He invites a dozen of the top LDers in the country to debate in a Round Robin starting on the Wednesday before the debate. They argue his special Vaganza resolution. In the RR each debater debates every other debater, which means that the top debaters in the country get eleven opportunities to polish their cases against the toughest competition, which means that when the regular Vaganza starts, the best and the brightest not only have their own bestness and brightness going for them, they also have a leg up as the only competitors having worked out this resolution in the forge of real life. Everyone who is not a Round Robinski knows that they are debating at a disadvantage. In a meritocracy, should the already advantaged be delegated additional advantages? That is the argument against the Vaganza's RR. Other tournaments have RRs, but they are always on the current national topic. Hence Manhattan Lodestone's RR is controversial.

Of course, Mr. Lo Pat has been listening to the controversy for years now. Yes, in the course of time the Round Robinskis have usually placed higher in the actual Vaganza than non-Robinskis, but was this because of this so-called advantage, or because they were already the best debaters? His answer has always been the latter.

So why the RR in the first place? Because it adds an extra aura of specialness to the Vaganza. Mr. Lo Pat wishes to attract the top competition, thus making his tournament that much more attractive in general. An RR insures that the top competitors will show up, not only the Robinskis themselves, but also their teammates. As a rule, Mr. Lo Pat only invites Robinskis from schools with teams moderated by debate gods like himself. Debate divinity goes a long way in insuring debate quality. Or at least, that's the way the gods perceive it.

3:38 a.m.

There are so many things to worry about with a tournament, big or small. And the Vaganza is big. At least he doesn't have to house all the participants; they all find hotel rooms in Manhattan, which is not a particularly difficult art. And he doesn't feed the participants either; they all find meals in Manhattan, which is also not a difficult art. The biggest hassle is tabbing the event. With this many debaters in two divisions, the potential for error is high, and with the self-proclaimed gravity of the stakes at hand -- winning the Vaganza -- errors cannot be tolerated. Mr. Lo Pat, as the director of the tournament, has too many other things on his mind to handle the tabbing himself, so he must delegate it to others. And even the most experienced others aren't him. There's gods and there's gods. But even a god can't do everything and be everywhere.

Well, at least not a debate god.

3:44 a.m.

The little things add up quickly. There are ballots to be printed up each year, enough reams of special OriginalVaganza ballots to cover an awful lot of rounds. There are seven preliminary rounds over two days, followed by elimination rounds on Sunday. For over a hundred participants in both Policy and LD.

That's a lot of ballots.

Then there are the trophies. You can't make a major tournament statement with standard or, heaven forbid, substandard trophies. So the Vaganza trophies are of the highest caliber, and they were ordered back in June. Double-octos and speaker awards for both divisions, a lot of polished brass, a lot of engraving, a lot of little Unispheres. It was Mr. Lo Pat himself who chose the Unisphere, the symbol of the 64-65 World's Fair, to grace his trophies. It is a globe circled by atomic elements. Very classy, if not necessarily recognized as the Unisphere by those who win it.

3:57 a.m.

It is not easy for Mr. Lo Pat to get around at the Vaganza. Lodestone may be handicapped accessible as far as the law is concerned, but for anyone in a wheelchair, accessibility takes on a personal perspective. It isn't easy whirring around through knots of teenagers blocking the hallways, or maneuvering around coaches who want to make political points at rubbing elbows with a debate divinity, or simply seeing what's happening on the six stories of the Lodestone building where the tournament takes place. Into the elevator, out of the elevator, into the tab room, into the judges' lounge, into here, into there. It is endless.

Mr. Lo Pat makes a mental note to keep an extra wheelchair battery charged at all times.

4:11 a.m.

The hardest thing is keeping the team in line. Sure, they seem to be afraid of him. Every person under the age of thirty seems to be afraid of him. They always have. But the appearance of fear and trembling is not necessarily the reality. Despite the fact that he can yell at them in such a way that the blood runs out of their faces and even the Indian students and the African-Americans turn whiter than goat cheese, he knows that his grip on discipline is only marginal. He has no power over them other than force of personality, and of course the ability to restrict their debating, but they don't take that potential restriction too much to heart, because they know he likes to win, and his top debaters, no matter how much he browbeats them from day to day, will always compete if there are slots available to them. But his top debaters aren't really the problem; they are already serious enough to understand the ramifications of the Vaganza for the team as a whole. You come from Lodestone? Whoa! That means something, a psychological advantage for the big city debater representing the home of the Vaganza versus some string bean from Small-

ville High in Resume Speed, Iowa. It is Mr. Lo Pat's own string beans that are troublesome, his own second string who always seem to be in the wrong place at the wrong time.

There is one key ingredient in running a successful tournament, and that is keeping the rounds moving. On-time performance is the holy grail of success, and that on-time performance is only possible if the team members are dedicated to it. They must see that every ballot is handed out within minutes of the postings of the schematics, and they must immediately follow up with a verification that all the rounds are actually transpiring. Then, as the rounds near completion, the ballots must be collected before the ink is even dry on them so that the results can be input into the computer for the pairings for the next round. Missing even one single ballot can gum up a tournament beyond comprehension, and it is the team members who have to keep that from happening, running from room to room in such a way that they are even nicknamed runners, losing their own names for the duration of the event. "Runner!" you call out, and a runner appears as if by magic. If a runner doesn't appear, you've got trouble. Right here in Vaganza city.

4:31 a.m.

Mr. Lo Pat is now feeling completely exhausted. He has lost nearly two complete hours of sleep, and he hasn't yet worried about the unpredictable. He has classes tomorrow, he has the registrations coming in, meetings with the team. It is a busy day. He has to get in touch with Lisa Torte, too. He needs an assistant to run this tournament. Could she have picked a worse time to leave him? Doesn't she understand how much he needs her? Couldn't her own career have waited a few more weeks.

She did agree to help him. He knows that. And he will take her up on it. Veil of Ignorance be damned for another week.

It is all Seth Obomash's fault. The fool. There have been scandals in forensics before, Mr. Lo Pat knows well, but none as silly as this one. And the thing is, aside from the miserable timing of his unorthodox sexual proclivities, Seth B. Obomash is a damned good person. Or at least Mr. Lo Pat thinks so. Mr. Lo Pat is not quick to lose his loyalty to a one-time protege. All right. Seth made a mistake. Who hasn't? But how long will he have to suffer for it?

Then again, it has only been a little over a week. He'll probably have to suffer a bit longer than that. But Mr. Lo Pat plans to be there for Seth, when the time is right.

Hookers. Mr. Lo Pat can't even imagine it.

4:48 a.m.

Should he get up, or just continue lying here? Getting up is conceding defeat to the devil of sleeplessness. Continuing to lie here seems like a waste of valuable time that he could be spend-

ing... Doing what? There's five -- no, more like four -- whole days until the tournament. All the planning has long ago been done. Aside from entering the registrants' name into the computer, the board is set and the game is ready.

At least there's the Round Robin to break the ice. Although that isn't particularly complicated to run. It gets things started, and it gets his mind off the four hundred students, and the hundred or so judges and coaches that will be descending upon him Friday...

5:01 a.m.

Mr. Lo Pat has fallen asleep.

His alarm is set for 5:33 a.m.

Welcome to the Bahamas.

**Will the OriginalVaganza be a success?**

**Will the Round Robinskis gain an unfair advantage?**

**Will Seth B. Obomash rear his carnal little head again?**

**Are we still going to trust the Wall Street Journal under new management?**

**What *has* Al Gore been eating the last seven years?**

**The answers will not even be obliquely referenced in our next episode: "Leonardo: Renaissance Artist or a really good test of the fact that you haven't got a clue to who's hot in Hollywood these days?"**