



Episode 65

The Magnificent Sevens

Think of them all!

Seas. Deadly sins. Cardinal virtues. Voyages of Sindbad. Samurai. Cities of Gold. Days in May. Brides/Brothers. Slash Eleven. Days of Creation. Little Foys. Santini brothers. Robin's hoods. Seals. Heavens. Hills of Rome. Faces of Dr. Lao. Years until the Itch.

Is seven a popular number or what?

And now there are seven people in conference room 121 of Manhattan's Hunted Enchanters Motel. Two debaters, three judges, two observers. How simple. How elegant. It is high school academic achievement in its finest hour.

What a snake pit!

1 -- The Aff Robinski

The Aff Robinski stands at the front of the room, waiting for assurance that all the judges are ready. In his left hand he holds the folder with the printout of his case. In his right hand he holds his stopwatch; although he will not be the official timer, he will track every second of his own speeches himself, to insure perfect precision. A perfect debate -- and he seeks nothing less in

every round -- requires the skills of a Grand Central Terminal train dispatcher: one second off, and absolute chaos can result.

The Aff Robinski is wearing a straightforward charcoal suit that would feel at home on the frame of any faceless gray accountant in any deeply buried sub-basement office in any cog manufacturing corporation in America. One does not call attention to one's clothes: it's a good axiom for business, and it's a good axiom for debate. One's clothes are simply the platform from which to present oneself. Should the viewer notice the self, or the platform? The A. R. is a stern looking senior with much of his face hidden behind severe black glasses that make his eyes look like distorted, forlorn fish occasionally peering out the side of their bowl. Rumor has it that he smiled at a tournament once when he was a sophomore, but no one has ever been able to verify this fact.

The Aff Robinski twitches his nose. He is not pleased with his judging pool. When you visit Mount Olympus you expect gods, not the faceless mortals he sees before him now. He recognizes Tarnish Jutmoll, but perceives him as a mere provincial coach, probably incapable of appreciating national-level debate when he sees it. The other two are unknown to him, a pretty young woman who is probably an ex-debater, which is not intrinsically a bad thing, and a prepossessing but hard-to-figure black man who has a bag of pretzels next to his flow pad. There are also two observers, a middle-aged woman of no apparent consequence, and another high school kid. He puts them out of his mind. And finally there is his opponent, the Neg Robinski, whom he has debated a dozen times in their contemporaneous forensic careers. He has beaten her eight of those twelve rounds. Tonight he intends to take her in one bite, chew her to bits, and spit her out on the floor in little pieces. To the Aff Robinski, debate is not war -- it is hell, and he himself is Satan.

At the signal that the judges have their pens poised, waiting to note his every thought, the Aff Robinski clicks his stopwatch and begins.

2 -- Seth B. Obomash

Seth begins flowing as the Aff Robinski begins his case. To a debate demigod, policy division, flowing an LD round is a waste of skills akin to a heart surgeon treating a hangnail, but in LD Seth is in no way a demigod, nor even a hero, nor even one of those faceless Homeric soldiers, son of so-and-so, who exist like non-star Enterprise officers only to be killed within a moment of their first mention. He is a mere mortal. Less, if anyone is aware of his past.

When he walked into the classroom, the last of the seven to do so, everyone was ready and waiting. The two Robinskis glanced up at him, but there was no recognition in their eyes. Of course not. They are not Northeasterners, and not policy debaters. His fame, such as it is, either from his accomplishments or his fall from grace, would not have reached as far as they. But that could not be said of the others in the room.

Tarnish Jutmoll took Seth's arrival in stride, giving a small if surprised smile and nodding in greeting. That would be expected of Tarnish. He has always been a gentleman, in any situation. And he has his own past, as everyone knows. Who would he be to cast stones?

Lisa Torte's reaction was much colder. That too would be expected. The little twit had run to the Veil priests and cuted her way into his job before his desk had even cooled off. The thought of her taking over the Veil policicians makes Seth's blood curdle. She knows less about real debate than Bill Clinton knows about chastity.

And what was Invoice O'Connor doing there, sitting behind her like a little puppy dog? Watching an LD round? Had it come to this, that Torte was taking Seth's greatest debaters and turning them into LD wimps? Invoice's eyes had gone wide when he had seen Seth, perhaps the last person he expected to walk into the room this evening. Seeing Invoice immediately made Seth think of Tara Petskin. Poor Tara. His favorite. He knows how badly she has taken all of this.

And finally, there was that blowsy Nutmilk woman from Bisonette. She had greeted Seth with a glare of total detestation. The damned amateur. If there is one thing Seth hates more than any other in forensics it is the amateurs, the parents who come in and judge a few rounds and think they know everything and want to take over and end up just getting in the way of the professionals. They come and go every year, and they are one of the things that make LD the second-rate activity that it is. In policy, everyone is a pro. They have to be, from the coaches to the debaters to the judges. In LD, everyone is an amateur. From the coaches to the debaters to the judges.

Seth pops another pretzel into his mouth as he continues to flow his first LD round.

3 -- Tarnish Jutmoll

Tarnish Jutmoll's eyes are on the page of the flow pad on the desk in front of him, and he is doing his best to absorb the arguments of the Aff Robinski. Even the most experienced judge cannot for the slightest second allow his mind to wander, for fear of losing track of a complex argument, and therefore not doing the best one can to evaluate the round.

But Seth B. Obomash back in forensics? At the Original Vaganza? Judging the LD Round Robin? What next? Bill Gates becoming a Marxist?

Tarnish was shocked to see Obomash walk into the room, but he did his best to cover himself. But it is not so easy to maintain that level of disinterest for an entire round. He has to admit that after he absorbed the original shock of Seth's arrest and defrocking, so to speak, he hadn't given him much thought. He never really liked or disliked Seth, or ever even considered him in terms of liking or disliking. He was the policy guru of the district, firmly entrenched at Veil of Ignorance, and that was the end of it. The whole incident in Miami was just, well, incomprehensible. The idea of -- ugh! But he has to admit, despite its venality, it certainly didn't endanger Seth's team. They were firmly ensconced in the Enchanted Hunters motel, and one Obomash more or less wouldn't make much of a difference. Even if an emergency had ensued there were plenty of other responsible adults around to handle it. But then again, what if all the responsible adults suddenly became irresponsible, and went off to seek their pleasures with the ladies of the evening at the local fleshpot establishments.

The thought, for Jutmoll, reaches an impassable disconnect. He cannot understand it, on any level.

Welcome to the Bahamas.

Meanwhile, he continues to flow the Aff Robinski, a singularly unlikable fellow, with a complex case that isn't very helpful to Jutmoll for his own coaching purposes. He has been teaching his kids that the idea of US immigration ought to be an existing social group versus individuals who seek to become part of that group. What obligation does the group have to those individuals? If you're arguing anti-immigration, you can easily assert that there is no obligation whatsoever. But what about the higher obligation of the spirit of the founding of the U.S. in the first place? That, to Jutmoll, is the debate, positive versus negative obligations.

The Aff Robinski has a different idea, running a complex analysis of democracy and capitalism requiring a reintegration of culti-multicultural values. He even goes so far as to define culti-multiculturalism.

Jutmoll hasn't the slightest idea what this kid is talking about.

Culti-multiculturalism? That's a new one, even for T.J.

And meanwhile, there's Seth B. Obomash, scribbling away although appearing to pay no attention whatsoever, munching mindlessly on one pretzel after the other. And if that isn't bad enough, Jutmoll can feel the presence of Amnea Nutmilk behind him. She too is scratching away on her flow pad, trying to make sense of the Aff Robinski.

Thinking about Amnea Nutmilk was one thing. Even talking to her on the phone was one thing. Even winking at her good-naturedly was one thing.

Having her sit behind him, her warmth reaching out to him, the tiniest scent of her perfume, all that hair in every direction...

Concentrate, Tarnish. Concentrate. The Neg Robinski has jumped up to conduct her cross-examination.

What kind of old dawg acts this much like a newborn pup?

4 -- Amnea Nutmilk

Mes etoiles!

That was the first reaction of Amnea Nutmilk to the sight of Seth B. Obomash entering the room. It is an expression favored by Leo, her art director.

Mes etoiles!

Loosely translated as, Welcome to the Bahamas!

The man is a bona fide sex criminal. To Amnea, it is not so much the nature of the act and its innate reprehensibility, as it is the low-rent aspects of it all. Soliciting hookers in the middle of the night at a debate tournament. Talk about gauche! A parent imagines this activity as being conducted at the highest levels, intellectual intercourse led by pedagogic idealists of the highest order, leading their teams into a bright-eyed new millennium. You don't imagine a randy coach out tom-cattin' while the kids go into rut back in some sleazy Miami motel!

You're exaggerating, Amnea. You know better. You are a sophisticated editor of one of the most sophisticated magazines in the world. You are well aware that many people have sex lives that are less than appealing but not exactly unusual. One of the truisms of life is that everyone -- everyone -- is a sexual being. No matter how attractive mentally and physically a person may appear, one way or the other, sex is a factor in their existence. The grimmest trolls, the most reprehensible troglodytes, the oldest crone, the white-breadiest white-collared cleric with his unlined hands folded together in prayer -- all of them are sexual beings. And most of them even do something about it.

Sex. Aaaargh!

Sex?

You've been divorced too long, Amnea. You've forgotten what it is like to be a normal married woman, with a warm body of a husband to cuddle up with and --

Don't think about him!

You are divorced. You are finished with him. The agreement was mutual. Sex is no reason to prolong a marriage.

She looks at the back of Tarnish Jutmoll's neck. She does not know what is happening here. Tarnish is far from attractive, but for some reason she finds him comfortably cute. Even if he does look a little too much like a billy goat.

But wait, she does know what is happening here. As she carefully flows the case of the Neg Robinski -- where did the poor girl get that hideous dress -- she realizes that she is getting sucked into this activity. She likes it. Forget Chesney, and forget her duty as a mother. She is beginning to like forensics.

How could this be? Is there room for her in any activity that will accept Seth B. Obomash as its prodigal son?

If her colleagues at Metro New York could only see her now...

5 -- Lisa Torte

Holy God on a bicycle! Seth B. Obomash!

Of all the gin joints in all the cities in the world, he has to pick this one. Or words to that effect.

What the hell is he doing here? She's been at Veil exactly two days and now the patron saint of gutter coaches has to come back to judge the same round as she at the Vaganza Round Robin.

Could Mr. Lo Pat have planned this deliberately? She wouldn't put it past him. But no, the bionic coach is too self-centered to appreciate the irony of this situation; Mr. Lo Pat is relatively irony

free, which means that most people in dealing with him are forced to handle enough irony for both sides.

Seth B. Obomash. Well, at least he came in late, and they didn't have to talk. She'll wait until he's left the room before she leaves herself. She has come here tonight to do her best to bring Invoice O'Connor into the world of LD. The last thing she needs is Invoice's old coach to remind him of his salad days in Policy.

Lisa sits back in her chair as the Aff Robinski cross-examines the Neg Robinski. She always enjoys Round Robins. These are the kids who actually debate LD the way it is supposed to be debated, combining the framework of value and criterion into a philosophical support of their side of the resolution, all tied together like the neatest package of ideas and concepts. Tactically, they are impeccable. Strategically, they can be hit and miss, but these two are both right on, and she is enjoying every minute of it.

Except for the fact that Seth B. Obomash is sitting ten feet away from her. And if he's here now, he'll no doubt be here for the entire event. And she has agreed to honor her commitment to Mr. Lo Pat to assist him in running the damned thing.

Holy God on a bicycle.

6 -- Invoice O'Connor

Invoice could not believe his eyes. Seth B. Obomash? No. It couldn't be.

But it was. If Tara had only been here to see this.

He has to tell her.

But no, he's had enough of her.

But he owes her this.

But no, doesn't she owe him something, after all these years?

His head is starting to hurt, thinking of the ramifications. I mean, Seth was, like, chasing hookers through the streets of Miami. He probably, like, lived with hookers. Who knows what he was doing with the girls on his team?

Invoice stops himself. That is ludicrous. He knows better than that. There is no question in his mind about Seth trying to mess around with the girls on the team.

But even if he wasn't doing anything physically, what was he probably thinking about?

Yeeeechhhh!

Concentrate on the round, Invoice. He pushes himself to keep track of what is going on. He has to admit that he's enjoying it. He expected less from LD, and he is pleasantly surprised that these two Robinskis know very well how to respond to every point, how to provide reasonably analysis, how to turn the points to their advantage if at all possible. And the approach to the topic, while obviously lacking the evidentiary aspect of Policy, is nonetheless appealing to him. His own cases with Tara covered the concepts that are being presented in this round. The only real difference was the concentration. In Policy, the strategies arise from your evidence, while in LD, evidence is virtually non-existent, and what factual material there is merely supports your theoretical premises.

Not bad. Not bad at all. He is getting a sense not only of how the rounds are conducted, but what the topic is about from an LD perspective, and he is beginning to believe that he will have no difficulty writing a case and presenting it this Friday.

Whoa! Invoice O'Connor as an LDer. Will wonders never cease?

7 -- The Neg Robinski

I hate this bastard!

As she sits through his 2AR, the final speech of the round, she is beginning to believe that the Aff Robinski has beaten her once again. He practically owns her.

The bastard.

She has come a long way for this tournament. She has come from Alabama, her debate god on her knee, or vice versa. Yes, definitely vice versa. Her coach has had students in every round robin conducted in the contiguous forty-eight since Calvin Coolidge did not choose to run, and she wasn't going to miss this one. The Neg Robinski is her star debater, but the Neg Robinski knows damned well that she isn't all that good. Once again, she will probably come in twelfth in a Round Robin. She will kick ass in the regular tournament -- she always does, mowing her way through the northeast hacks who all think justice is the Swiss army knife of values, if they think of values at all -- but she never does well against the creme de la creme, the other Round Robinskis.

The bastards. All of them.

Why is she doing this, she has to ask herself every time she gives up another weekend and forces herself to make up practically another whole week of school. Why has she agreed to take on this life in the shadow of her aged coach who never shows her anything but disappointment at her poor showings? Why?

Does the word Harvard ring a bell?

The Neg Robinski's high school sends one kid to Harvard every year. One kid. Out of five hundred.

One kid.

And she is going to be that one.

Her early admission is already submitted. She is not the smartest kid in the school, but she has top grades and SATs to die for. Not perfect, but damned good. Good enough for Harvard, if only...

If only...

If only they're looking for a southerner with a debate career under her belt. They take plenty of southerners, but only one from her school. Only one.

And frequently it's a debater.

She is not unrealistic, however. She knows that the odds are merely okay that she will make it to Cambridge as a freshman next year. She can handle that. If not Harvard as an early admission, Yale or Duke or Chicago as a regular admission. Or Cornell or Columbia or Bowdoin or Bates or Amherst or Williams or Colgate or anywhere with clout that isn't in the south.

The goddamned south.

She knows she talks like a cracker. She knows she sounds as if she's got three dogs under the porch and two hand-wringer washing machines on top of it. She lives in a small town with small town people and she wants to get the hell out of there and into the real world where everybody is Italian or Japanese or Jewish or anything but Alabaman.

Alabaman.

Maybe she was adopted. Maybe she really is a New York Jew who was just mistakenly raised as a Baptist truck-driver's daughter. I mean, she loves her daddy, she really does, and her mama, and her two brothers and three sisters, but sometimes she feels like they're all one step away from your basic hurricane trailer trash.

The Aff Robinski finishes his second rebuttal, and the round is over. And not a moment too soon. Any more self-loathing, and the Neg Robinski would have had to go screaming out of the room.

She shakes the Aff Robinski's hand, gathers up her things, thanks the judges, and heads out the door.

For one and all, the Manhattan Lodestone (a magnet school) OriginalVaganza (All Other Vaganzas are Extra) is now in full swing.

Will the Aff Robinski take another one from the poor Alabaman Neg?

Will Seth B. Obomash get the hang of LD judging?

Will Invoice O'Connor be shamed back into LD?

Did Neanderthals talk with their mouths full?

Does anyone really believe that releasing Vista will allow PC users to achieve satori?

You'll get none of the answers next week, when we hear the Beaver ask the eternal question: "June: Graduation month, or the least understood Cleaver?"