



Episode 70: How to Run the Perfect Tournament—A Hands-on Guide for Average Humans Wishing to Achieve Forensics Immortality

1. Precede Your Tournament with an Exclusive Round Robin

A hush falls over the room as Mr. Lo Pat rolls forward. In his hand is a list of the placements in the Manhattan Lodestone Original Vaganza Round Robin. After three nights of two double-flighted rounds per night, each debater has finally met every other debater. Each round has been heard by three judges. Tabulating the results was simple: the Round Robinski with the most ballots from his or her eleven rounds wins.

They are gathered in a small conference room in the Hunted Enchanters hotel. Aside from the Robinskis and their debate gods, there is only a smattering of the last night's judges who have bothered to hang around to hear the results. Given the fact that the Robinskis entirely comprise Masters of the Debate Universe, any one of them could conceivably win, and only an actual Robinski or supporting divinity would be likely to come up with much of a show of interest.

Mr. Lo Pat begins reading the results, starting with the person in fourth place. It would be unnecessarily embarrassing to begin by reading the name of the poor Robinski in twelfth, and last, place; besides, the full results will be released the minute the short ceremony is over, and at that point everyone will know to the last follicle how well they have done.

Until that time, the race is only to the victors, and only the top four debaters take tin at the Round Robin.

As each name is called, the proud Robinski walks up to accept the award, which is an exceptionally fine trophy incorporating the map of Manhattan, personally designed by Mr. Lo Pat twenty-two years ago, a model he has stuck with unwaveringly since that time. Why turn your back on perfection?

The room is completely silent as Mr. Lo Pat prepares to announce first place. Aside from the three who have already taken tin, it could be any Robinski in the room, and the cognoscenti know that the winning Robinski in the Round Robin has a nine-to-five chance of taking the Vaganza itself over the weekend (although, aside from the handful of Native Americans who haven't opened their own casino yet, no one has ever expressed interest in forming a parimutuel pool to bet on debate tournaments).

"And with a total of twenty-one out of a possible thirty-three ballots--" the lack of a strong win is normal at the Round Robin-- "in first place is--" And Mr. Lo Pat names a Floridian -- "Robinski Dan McGrew."

The victory is met with polite but not uproarious applause. The Sunshine State Robinski has, ilke every other Robinski in the room, won so many trophies that he no longer puts them on the overflowing shelves in his room, but just throws them into the basement when he arrives home after a tournament, letting them pile up undisturbed like tin compost, waiting for the once-a-year aeration that comes when the rest of his family is trying to find the ping pong table they know is down there somewhere.

2. Employ an Impeccable Tab-Room Team

The day of the Manhattan Lodestone OriginalVaganza (All Other Vaganzas are Extra) does not dawn brightly. A fierce wind began stirring to the south twenty-four hours ago, roiling over the ocean on its northern journey, pulling icy water into its mouth and shooting it back with an intensity that borders on the diabolical. As the storm has progressed, it has continued to grow more fierce, at last becoming a true nor'easter as it began to pummel the New Jersey shore some time in the hours of the early morning. It is now breaking into Manhattan, its severity unabated.

The sky is black as Mr. Lo Pat sits inside the front door of the Lodestone building, staring

out the glass doors. The howl of the wind is like a wild, wounded animal, pushing cold rain ahead of it. Whenever anyone comes through the doors they literally collapse inside the building, free at last from the storm, pulling off wet coats and shaking down thoroughly drenched umbrellas and wringing icy rivers out of soaked baseball caps.

"It's not a fit day out for man nor beast," the guard sitting behind the desk says to Mr. Lo Pat by way of mindless conversation.

But Mr. Lo Pat is not sitting here for mindless conversation.

"If this were snow, it would be the blizzard of the century," the guard continues.

"But it is *not* snow," Mr. Lo Pat says, whirring away from the desk, never taking his eyes off the storm on the other side of the doors.

Class is already in session, but the occasional late student or teacher or tradesman still comes through the doors, being ignored by and ignoring Mr. Lo Pat as they squeeze the water out of their essentials. Some of them offer a bland comment on the storm, others merely mutter at how nature has inconvenienced them, receiving in turn a similar meteorological comment from the guard.

Mr. Lo Pat pays them no attention.

His eyes remain focussed on the outside world, and he sits impervious to the occasional blasts of frigid, wet air when the door is opened. His face is expressionless, until--

His eyes widen. To his right, the guard behind the desk senses that something is wrong, some unexplained rip in the normal fabric of existence. Without knowing why, the guard stands up, his hand on his nightstick. He wishes for a moment he were back in the Bronx, where they used to allow school guards to carry .45s. He senses that, if he had to use it, a nightstick would not be enough.

Even a .45 would not be enough.

The door swings open. One minute there is no one there, and the next minute four men in black hooded floor-length slickers are standing at the entrance. Little can be seen of their cowed faces, and none of them bother to show more of themselves than the red coals of their eyes. Each one is carrying a leather case.

"Excuse me, gentlemen," the guard begins.

They ignore him, turning instead to Mr. Lo Pat.

Mr. Lo Pat nods. If his four shrouded guests give any response, it is impossible to detect.

A flash of lightening suddenly electrifies the room, followed immediately by a powerful boom of thunder almost directly overhead.

"This way," Mr. Lo Pat says, turning from the door and whirring down the hallway.

The four shrouded guests follow him, none of them speaking, none of them making the slightest noise, not a rustling of raincoat, not a slap of a footstep, not even a drip of moisture falling to the school corridor floor. They remain hooded, a murder of black crows herding toward whatever carrion awaits them.

The guard expels a long held breath, and slowly sits back down behind his desk.

He does not know what he has seen, and he does not want to think about it.

3. Run Registration with an Iron Hand

At precisely one o'clock, Kalima Milak takes her place at a table directly inside the doors of Manhattan Lodestone. Peter Stallone sits beside her. The building guard sitting across from them stiffens slightly when Kalima arrives; there are certain students he feels he is not being paid enough to protect against.

"Here's the registrations," Kalima says, pulling a pile of computer printouts from her backpack and placing them on the table in front of Peter. "You check when they sign up, have them make sure all the names are correct, then pass the sheet to me. I'll collect the money."

Peter nods. They've gone over this before with Mr. Lo Pat.

"Hired judges go to Miss Torte," Kalima continues. "She'll have a table outside the judges' lounge."

Peter nods again.

A small knot of students -- obviously debaters -- is milling about a few feet away from the table. One of them breaks off.

"Is this the tournament registration?" he asks.

Kalima glares at him. "What does the sign say?" she asks.

"What sign?"

"Damn!" Kalima reaches into her backpack again and retrieves an eight-by-ten sheet of paper on which the word REGISTRATION is written in dark, bold letters. She tapes the paper directly behind her on the wall right above her head. "That sign!" she says, pointing.

"We're from Uranus. In Florida."

"Talk to him." She jerks her thumb toward Peter, and the debater takes a sidestep across the table and repeats himself to Peter."

"We're from Uranus," he says.

Peter nods, riffling through the registration papers. He finds the correct one and hands it to the debater. "Uranus High School. Are all these names correct?"

The debater reads the sheet over. "We've got one drop," he says.

"Who?"

"UranusPC." He hands the sheet back to Peter, who makes the correction on his master list, then passes the sheet to Kalima.

"Three hundred dollars," Kalima says.

The debater unfolds a well-traveled check from an inner pocket of his jacket. "It should be two forty, which is two seventy minus thirty, because of the drop."

Kalima breathes in deeply. "It's two seventy, because fees were fixed Wednesday, plus a thirty dollar penalty for the drop."

"That doesn't sound right."

"Read the invitation."

"My coach isn't here until tonight."

"And?"

"The check is made out for two forty. It's from the school." He timidly holds the check out in front of him. Kalima grabs it.

"Not enough," she tells him. "I can't register you."

"But we came all the way from Uranus. The coach will make up the difference tonight?"

"How do I know that? I can't let anyone in off the street to debate here, just because they say they have some imaginary coach coming at some point to pay the bill for them. This is not a charity drive."

"My coach is not imaginary!"

"He is to me."

"It's a she."

"Oh, heavens. Forgive my ignorance."

The debater turns away and consults with his teammates over the situation while Kalima sits tapping her fingers on the table. Eventually the debater returns, with another debater beside him.

"What if we dropped another entry?" they ask her.

"Then it would be three thirty, thirty dollars more penalty for the second drop."

"So the fewer debaters we have, the more it will cost?"

"Exactly."

"And if none of us debate?"

"That would cost you five forty, the way I figure it."

The two debaters go back into the huddle. Hands go into pockets, bills are counted and recounted, and eventually the original debater returns to the table.

"Here's the sixty dollars," he says. "Plus the check. That's three hundred."

Kalima counts out the money. It is all ones and fives, wrinkled and well-worn. "There's fifty-nine here," she says after going through it twice.

The debater reaches into his pocket and comes up with two quarters, three dimes, two

nickels, and six pennies. He drops the coins on the table in front of Kalima. "There!"

Kalima counts them. "You're four cents light."

The Uranus debater looks up at the ceiling, then returns one last time to the huddle. A minute later he is back with the four pennies.

"All right?" he asks.

Kalima drops the check, the bills and the coins into a metal box, and hands the debater his receipt.

"You're all signed up," she says. "Welcome to the Vaganza!"

4. Maintain a Crack Judging Pool

There is always a period of approximately an hour between the end of registration and the beginning of a tournament. This is the time it takes, first, for the people who never show up on time for anything to arrive before it's too late, and second, for the tab room to make the final corrections before printing up the first schematics.

At the Vaganza, the students congregate in the first floor auditorium, a marvel of dysergonomics. The seats are hard wood, and designed for no determinable human frame. One can neither sit in them, across them, or over them, but all the students are doing their best to find the one way these torture devices can be utilized. The volume in the room is set at Spinal Tap Eleven: everyone seems to be shouting, simply because the acoustics are as dysfunctional as the seats. Everyone is filled with the edgy excitement of a pre-tournament. One greets one's old adversaries from other schools, some for the first time this year, others carrying on conversations begun at the Messerschmitt or at more local events. One sits with one's teammates, reading over cases for the last time, or thumbing through tubs of evidence trying to find the Gingrich-as-President disads. With roughly five hundred students, judges and coaches killing time before the main festivities, one might expect a variety of thoughts and conversations, and one would be correct.

Except for one thing.

The word has gone out. It was not that remarkable an event at the Round Robin, where

many of the participants were unaware of the circumstances surrounding the gentleman in question, but in the more parochial atmosphere of the Vaganza itself, even those who were previously unaware of the situation are quickly brought up to speed on it, and the word travels quickly.

"Seth B. Obomash is going to be here."

It is spoken once, twice, a dozen times, a hundred times. The room buzzes with it, the details of the magnitude of this occurrence are filled in, and often adorned, until those who know him are expecting a walking corpse from Night of the Living Dead while those who are only feasting on rumor are expecting a cross between Charlie Sheen and Jeffrey Dahmer. Some people still try to practice their 1AC or punch up their opening quotes, but everyone else is now caught up in anticipation.

Is he really going to show up? He's not here yet. Where is he? He's not coming; that's ridiculous. It's just a rumor. No it's not; it's a fact. They saw him at the Round Robin.

Nearly five hundred chickens pecking at the same bits of strewn corn -- make that a twelve on the Spinal Tap volume meter!

And then it happens.

Seth B. Obomash walks in through one of the rear doors of the auditorium. He is wearing a baseball hat pulled down over his eyes, and a tightly buttoned trench coat, and his attempt at an inconspicuous entrance is about as successful as Susan Lucci trying to win an Emmy award.

Every single sound in the auditorium, aside from Obomash's footsteps, disappears.

Absolute silence.

Minus one on the Spinal Tap scale.

Obomash stops.

Everyone stops.

Obomash looks left, then right. Then, in a grand gesture, he removes his cap and makes a broad, low bow.

And then the cheering starts. Maybe his old Veil of Ignorance team starts it, or maybe it's some team that doesn't know him from Adam, or maybe it's just a confluence of anonymous players who spontaneously erupt into joyous whoops for no reason whatsoever except for the chemistry of the moment. Whichever, the cheering is

contagious, and becomes a roar of welcome from the congregation assembled in the Manhattan Lodestone main auditorium.

Seth B. Obomash has returned with a vengeance.

At least for now.

5. Start With a Rousing Opening Ceremony

Mr. Lo Pat knows that his appearance in the auditorium will mean that the tournament is about to begin, so he has not been seen by anyone since registration began over two hours ago.

Part of successful showmanship is building anticipation. Unfortunately, part of successful forensics moderation, which certainly contains its level of showmanship, is also building bridges to the local school administrators. Even Manhattan Lodestone is not exempt from the bread and butter of local politics.

The whirring of Mr. Lo Pat onto the stage from behind the auditorium curtains is met with nearly immediate silence by the assembled horde, the members of which slip into their seats with a dispatch seldom seen among their age group.

"Welcome to the Manhattan Lodestone OriginalVaganza," Mr. Lo Pat begins.

A few students in the back of the auditorium, apparently exempt either from the charms of the Lodestone Divinity, or so naive as to be unaware the Divinity's literal divinity, are talking softly among themselves.

"If those people at the back of the room who are holding their own Council of Trent would please quiet down," Mr. Lo Pat says, his voice rising.

They continue talking.

Zeus never had to put up with this.

Mr. Lo Pat's voice rises from normal public-speaker volume to thirteen on the Spinal

Tapometer. "IF THOSE PEOPLE WHO REFUSE TO PAY ATTENTION THINK THEY CAN RUN MY TOURNAMENT ANY BETTER THAN I CAN, THEY ARE WELCOME TO TAKE OVER RIGHT NOW. OTHERWISE, I DO NOT EXPECT ANOTHER WORD OUT OF THEM!"

The volume cum sarcasm hits the back of the room like the first hot radioactive wave from an H-bomb explosion. The people in question are struck dumb.

"Thank you." Mr. Lo Pat's voice returns to normal. "I would like to introduce to you--"

But we won't go there. Mr. Lo Pat, who requires for his tournament the free use of the school and all its facilities, as well enormous amounts of extracurricular money to support his team throughout the year, including his own moderate but nonetheless useful stipend as coach, has no choice but to go there. He has to introduce the Superintendent of Schools (who always enjoys visiting one of his city high schools without having to bring a bodyguard, and who addresses the forensicians as if he were running for office, which he might do some day, if his relationship with the mayor remains cordial, which is bloody unlikely given the history of his position), the Principal of Manhattan Lodestone (who is new in his job and as afraid of Mr. Lo Pat as is any of Lodestone's novice policemen, and who gives a virtually unintelligible speech about competition and the glories of intelligible speaking) and finally, some woman who no one in the room catches her name or her position, but that doesn't stop her for droning on for over fifteen minutes about her own misspent youth in Marceline, Missouri.

But, as promised, we won't go there. We'll let these three do their oratorical bit for God and country and school district unaudited by us, thus preventing ourselves the fate of their auditors, which hovers on the nether line between bored beyond comprehension and sound asleep.

And finally, they are finished, and Mr. Lo Pat returns to the fore again.

"Schematics for LD will be distributed at the door to my left." He points. "Policy, to the right."

No one moves. They know better.

"Have a good tournament!" he calls out, spinning his wheelchair into reverse and off of the stage.

The Manhattan Lodestone OriginalVaganza ("All Other Vaganzas are Extra") will now begin.

Will Robinski Dan McGrew prove the railbirds right and take the Vaganza?

Didn't Mr. Lo Pat's tab team get sunk at the end of *Moby Dick*?

Will Seth B. Obomash remain triumphant?

Will the Vaganza be perfect, as Mr. Lo Pat expects it to be?

Will Jim Carrey ever make another movie as good as *The Truman Show*?

If we knew the answers, we'd keep them out of our next episode: "Pesto: Genovese pasta concoction or irritating Italian little brother?"